A Pragmatist's Approach to Participatory Action Research (PAR)

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Participatory Action Research is based on three overarching tenets:

Participation: To involve research participants in each step of the research process as decision-makers and knowledge producers, in collaboration with "formal" researchers;

Education*:* To promote shared learning through dialogue and exchange of ideas between researchers and members of the research population;

Action*:* To fairly distribute the benefits of the study between researchers and members of the research populations; and to also use the research project to promote broader social and political change.

While these values sound great in theory, PAR can be very challenging to implement. Some challenges that PAR researchers face include:

- Few relationships with the research population
- Distrust by the research community towards researchers
- Researchers has too many other demands to have time for the PAR elements of the project
- A mismatch between what the researcher wants to study and what the research community believes is important
- Challenges recruiting members of the research community
- Difficulty finding funding to compensate community members
- Project over-relies on participation from powerful members of a community (i.e. directors of non-profit organizations, people from the community with higher ed degrees, etc)
- Despite every effort by researchers to level inequities on the team, unequal power dynamics continue to impact relationships, leadership, and the distribution of benefits of the project

Thinking pragmatically about PAR

Given these challenges, the most realistic and pragmatic approach to conducting PAR is to start with this basic principle: do what you can with what you have. Although researchers may have many more privileges than members of our research community , we also have our own constraints. These include the pressure to publish, little access to grants for community-engaged work, time constraints, a lack of mentorship or peer support for PAR work, and pressure to prioritize some research projects over others. Within these limitations, what does it mean, in practice, to be a PAR scholar? It is not easy to figure out the best way to start doing in PAR if you've never done it before

and never had any mentorship or training. Below are some suggestions for how to get started implementing a participatory approach, even if you have little time and few resources:

1. **Learn about PAR.** There are many excellent handbooks and articles about PAR or other types of participatory methods, such as CBPR (community-based participatory research). Some research institutes offer courses on PAR, and you can also reach out to PAR scholars whose work you've read. Getting familiar with PAR, reading and learning about how other researchers have used PAR, and ensuring that you have a solid foundation on the political and research objectives of PAR is critical to developing a solid plan for how to implement PAR in your next project.

2. **Get your participants' input on what types of research questions to examine.** Ask them what topics are of interest to them and why. Be especially interested in the perspectives of your most vulnerable participants, who are often the least likely to be consulted as people with knowledge. You will probably get lots of different answers and you cannot possibly research all of them. But you could choose your topic based on which are most popular, which best lend themselves to research, and which are also compelling to a scholarly audience or potential funders. PAR projects are most effective when they are funded and fulfill your professional needs, so pick something that lies at the intersection of your participants' interests and yours.

3. **Treat your participants as people, not research subjects.** We often expect our participants to be extremely forthcoming with very private information, but researchers rarely reciprocate. It is often believed that sharing personal information can bias our study, violate boundaries, etc. But the purpose of PAR is not to produce unbiased data, it is to strengthen knowledge through dialogue with participants. Reciprocity is extremely important for establishing the kind of trusting relationships you will need to co-create knowledge with community members. Become comfortable acting more like a person and less like a researcher. This does not mean you should pretend that you aren't a researcher or share extremely private details about your life, but be willing to expose your human side, to share some personal information, and to develop friendships with community members. Only expect from them what you are willing to give in return.

4. **Treat your participants as consultants.** Throughout the research process, tell your participants about some of your findings (of course, protecting individual participants' anonymity) and invite them to analyze the data and brainstorm possible hypotheses or arguments with you. If their viewpoint is different than yours, be excited! You've now been presented with the greatest gem in research: an alternate idea. Listen carefully, ask more questions, dialogue, and consider where their perspective might improve your own. If you disagree with them, don't condescend. Instead, push back (kindly and respectfully, of course). Make it a conversation like you would have with a colleague you respect. While you

may not always agree with your colleague, the best analyses begin with differences in perspectives. It is through the dialogue that you hash out together what might account for a phenomenon. And your participants will likely feel great satisfaction in knowing that you, a trained scholar, value their input on research and social theory. Over time, they may become more invested in the project and in helping you make sense of it.

5. **Share your final arguments and publications with them.** This needs to be done in a format that caters to your participants' interests and concerns, recognizing that there is also great diversity of learning styles within any given community. Sending them a copy of your published journal article may be of interest to only a select few, so try to think of other formats that they would enjoy more: an informal conversation over coffee? A more formal presentation? A shorter and simpler version of your paper, translated into whatever language is most accessible to them? And if you aren't sure, ask them! And make sure you don't just ask one participant, you should have these conversations with different people so you have a good sense of what different people want and need. Ideally, you should present your data before you put together the final draft so they have the opportunity offer feedback and suggest changes. And be thoughtful about how to best welcome their feedback: a group discussion? A one-on-one? An online form they can fill out? Decide this based on what they want and what is actually feasible to you.

6. **Be honest with your participants about your constraints.** Because we are so aware of inequalities between researcher and participants, we tend to think we have endless resources (which we don't) and feel guilty when we can't single-handedly address all of the barriers that our participants face. But neither we nor they can reverse centuries of inequality, and it is important for your participants to understand your own constraints. In my experience, being honest about how the world of academia works, how we are judged, how resources actually get distributed, and what we must produce for the job market/tenure/funders/etc can help your participants better understand you and your limitations and build empathy for you as an individual. Once they understand what you are up against, they might have some great ideas about how to get both your and their needs met. Again, the more they are treated as collaborators rather than subjects, the more you can work together to address obstacles.

7. **Look for ways to share the benefits of your research with participants.** This does not mean winning the lottery and giving every one of your 100+ participants a hefty sum that will lift them and all their relatives out of poverty forever. This is not possible and this should not be a standard we aspire to. You just need to do *something*. Here are a few suggestions:

- Volunteer at an organization that serves your research community
- Donate book royalties or cash prizes from academic awards

- Co-author publications with community members interested in writing/academia/college/ grad school
- Get your friends to donate or provide pro bono services
- Write recommendation letters for community members who assisted with the project
- Collect data that community-based organizations and activists can use in their campaigns, funding applications, and social movements.
- Be creative! We all have much more to give than just money.

Don't promise anything you can't deliver. Sometimes in our enthusiasm we want to promise our participants that we will include them in everything, do lots of things for them, save their world, etc. Some of your participants may believe you—especially if you are a privileged scholar in a very marginalized community—but this is neither realistic nor good for your relationships. Promise something small, deliver it, then make a plan for the next thing. For instance, it is reasonable to tell them you are very interested in their input about the research questions/analysis/argument etc. But do not promise you will change your perspective just to accommodate theirs, because you might, ultimately, disagree with them. If you promise and don't deliver, you will likely end up with even less credibility than a researcher who never promised them anything to begin with. If your participants seem to expect more than you can deliver, have a frank conversation with them about your constraints and what you can and cannot reasonably offer. Enlist their help in your efforts to make lemonade from whatever lemons you have: make problem-solving a collective process. Again, treat them like peers rather than subjects.

8. **Do not put your participants before your basic needs as a human being.** As I have told many students, we are always human beings first, and academics second (or third or fourth). If we are not well in mind, body and soul, we will not be able to be good at our jobs. The same goes for doing PAR work. While you should do things for your research community, do not put your own well-being at risk. We are people, we need to pay our bills, spend time with our families, exercise, eat healthy food, and, sometimes, sit on a beach and rekindle our spirits. PAR scholars, however, are usually very cognizant of the fact that our own research participants may not have the luxury of meeting their own basic necessities, and our guilt can lead us to forego our own well-being to help them. DO give whatever extra you have, but never at the cost of your own humanity. If you are depressed, unemployed, having grave conflicts at home or at work, you will not be of much use to your participants. It is not always easy to know where to find this balance, so trust your instincts. If you are suddenly getting sick from stress or cannot afford your bills because you have tried to do too much or give too much to your research community, take a step back, re-evaluate, and let your participants know that you might have to rest and recharge before you can get back to your project. You are human, they are human, and PAR thrives when you can connect at this most basic level.

9. **Mentor and support other PAR scholars and students.** PAR is not popular and, in some circles, it is looked down on. There are few people available to support and mentor students or scholars who wish to engage in this type of research. So, even if you are in a place in your career in which you cannot give much to your research participants, you can still be an invaluable resource to your academic peers. Put PAR on your bio so students from other universities can find you. Offer to teach a PAR course in your department. Add it to your list of research methods and to your personal website. Make it known and help make it acceptable and highly regarded. Many of us hide our PAR research because it may hinder our job or promotion prospects. The only way to address this is for each of us—especially those with job security!—to make this a visible and respected approach to research.

10. **Publish and present about PAR.** In many disciplines and organizations, PAR remains uncommon and poorly understood. In some cases, PAR scholarship is viewed as less rigorous or prestigious than traditional research methods. However, there are also many scholars who would love to use a PAR approach if they knew more about it. Once you've begun doing PAR, tell others about your work. Educate your colleagues and students and normalize this practice. Help create an environment in which PAR is not only an acceptable practice, but a respectable and common one. These efforts will help us move towards more democratic, inclusive and anti-racist research methods.