**PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

**GROW THE RELATIONSHIP: *Stay in Touch***

   

This guide is for faculty members interested in establishing Participatory Action Research (PAR) community engagements. These engagements could be structured into an engaged-course or they could be established as an independent research project. The field of PAR is increasingly large and complex, with key divergences in approach. For instance, recently criticism has noted that participatory engagements are increasingly “used by development organizations and leaders to “extract local knowledge and legitimate abuses of power.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Maintaining a commitment to high-level engagement work, we describe tips for conducting critical PAR projects using Maria Torre’s definition. Torre defines PAR as:

An approach to research committed to democratic principles of justice and equality. It is an inclusive practice of research defined both by participation and a determination to produce knowledge in the interest of social change. While often regarded as simply a method, PAR is actually an epistemological stance that values knowledge produced from lived experience as equal to that produced in the academy*.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Background on Critical PAR**

Citing Arjun Appadurai, Torre describes that critical PAR also helps legitimize more inclusive notions of “expertise” and “researcher.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This can happen by: privileging multiple ways of knowing—knowledge, experience, and analytical frames produced in communities—and flipping those often seen as “the researched” (historically oppressed and marginalized communities) to the position of researcher. Co-researchers from communities are then collaborators in designing “research questions, methods, analyses, interpretations, and products.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Example: PAR evaluation projects led by youth[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Participatory evaluation projects have been shown to be especially dynamic and effective in evaluating program effectiveness. Three scholars at the Public Science Project researched the effectiveness of five PAR projects conducted at Community-based organizations (CBO) that serve youth. In interviews, staff at these organizations described their process:

We all worked together for 25 hours a week for five weeks. We started off with a research camp kind of curriculum, combined with some curriculum on anti-oppression, work on sexism, racism, things like that.… We did school mapping …with some guided questions, and one was “Where do you feel least safe or where do you feel most safe?” [We] prepped [research camp participants] a lot on interviews. They also interviewed each other a lot to hone in what our first round of interview questions would be.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another CBO staff member said:

We were very much focused on always being mindful of our relationship with the participants, and the first day beginning with a very broad question about what is research and who is a researcher…. We were very explicit about opportunities for participation, always looking for ways the young people could [participate] … or anything that we could do to get away from [the adults doing the] talking….[[7]](#footnote-7)

This level of intentionality and attention to who has decision-making power and control over the research is at the heart of PAR. The researchers evaluating these PAR projects found that not only did PAR methods lead to better research outcomes, but they also: increased youth engagement and leadership, deepened adult-youth partnerships, and increased participatory practices across the organization.

**Questions to Ask before Establishing a PAR Project**

Torre offers practitioners of PAR a series of questions they should work through with co-researchers in order to ensure critical PAR engagements. These questions include:

1. What is the purpose of the research (critical PAR projects should always engage issues of justice)?
2. Where will the data live during the project and after it’s over?
3. What impact might the results have—positive and negative?
   1. How might the research “betray individuals or communities either as a result of misuse, cooptation, or in the reproduction of oppressive conditions”?[[8]](#footnote-8)

**PAR Projects, Step by Step[[9]](#footnote-9)**

1. Organize a research team or research collective and consider the following:
   1. How should research collectives be organized? Who should be included? The formation of PAR collectives is an opportunity to intentionally design to address unjust issues of power and privilege in research.
   2. What types of expertise, knowledge, experience, and points of view should you bring together?
   3. Where are the non-traditional places you might find knowledge and expertise?
   4. When should you plan to have separate spaces for marginalized groups to research together?
   5. When are projects that bring together those with significantly more and significantly less power productive and when should they be avoided?
2. Organize orientations to establish shared practices. Discuss the following:
   1. How will the diverse sets of knowledge and expertise be shared?
   2. How will participation be structured?
   3. What needs to be in place for co-researchers to participate as equally as desired?
   4. What constraints are there?
   5. Consider these orientation tips:
      1. Find a comfortable space to hold the training
      2. Provide food and drink
      3. Take frequent, short breaks
      4. Structure the space for interaction and movement (e.g. chairs in a circle, activities spread around the room)
      5. Differentiate presentations and discussions for different learning styles
      6. Use the training to build relationships, get to know one another, and come up with shared values
3. Determine what research questions your collective will answer
   1. What theoretical and policy/organizing history is the research connected to?
   2. What questions should be asked?
   3. “Are there dominant analyses that serve oppressive power arrangements that should be reframed?”[[10]](#footnote-10)
   4. How might the research support local organizing campaigns?
4. Plan and structure the research
   1. How can you structure data collection and analyses methods to be shared with the community to build capacity?
   2. How do you ensure that “action” becomes an ongoing part of the research process?
   3. How might the research lead to individual and collective transformation?
   4. Who is responsible for what?
   5. How and by whom will information be analyzed?
   6. When, how, and with whom will the findings be shared?
5. Carry out the work
   1. Building relationships and trust is an ongoing process and will need continual thought and attention
   2. An action research group, like any other, experiences internal and external conflict. There will need to be a shared set of agreements about how these will be dealt with (See guide to Conflict Resolution).
6. Prepare and present findings
7. Work with community partner to bring about action based on findings
8. Follow up

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The Public Science Project and [The Critical PAR Institutes](http://publicscienceproject.org/critical-par-institutes/).

Data Center, Research for Justice, [Community Driven Research.](http://www.datacenter.org/services-offered/)

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1. Cooke, B., & Kothari, U, *Participation: The new Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001). Qtd. In Torre, Maria Elena, “Participatory Action Research,” in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology, ed.* T. Teo (New York: Springer, 2014), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Torre, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arjun Appadurai. “The Right to Research,” *Globalisation, Societies, and Education*, 4(2) 2006, 167–177. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Torre, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See: Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz Proto, and Torre, “A Youth Development Approach to Evaluation,” Accessed August 3, 2017, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083955.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Zeller-Berkman et. al., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zeller-Berkman et. al., 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Torre, 3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Adapted from Torre, “Participatory Action Research.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Torre, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)