

# Introduction: Activist Scholarship— Possibilities and Constraints of Participatory Action Research

Shabnam Koirala-Azad and Emma Fuentes\*

**T**HIS SPECIAL ISSUE REFLECTS THE RESEARCH AND VOICES OF SCHOLARS WHO ARE concerned with issues of power and representation in academic scholarship. In their works, they have attempted to address and break down some of the existing hierarchies and power dynamics in social science research, creating new possibilities for research in the academy while building on the works of others who have attempted to do the same. As global discourse on democracy and the democratization of peoples, systems, and processes expands, contributors to this special issue attempt to extend this discourse to the realm of academia and the “ivory tower.” In so doing, they not only try to link the idea of democracy to research and scholarship, but also attempt to problematize commonly used notions of democracy and democratic practices through a deeper analysis of their own studies. Is it possible to authentically bridge the gap between the community and the academy? Can we truly engage with community in the creation of new knowledge? On the one hand, by using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodology, ideology, and a commitment, these scholars grapple with creating authentic, trusting, and mutually beneficial ties with the community. On the other hand, they continue the ongoing struggle to find space, recognition, and legitimacy for this type of scholarship within the academy. By sharing their works, this issue will attempt to address the possibilities and constraints for activist scholarship.

## A Brief Overview of Participatory Action Research

At the heart of Participatory Action Research is a deliberate attempt to include the “investigated” in the process of investigation itself. It starts with the notion that given the proper tools, the people most affected by a problem are not only capable of better understanding their realities, but are also the best equipped to address their struggles. It further asserts that through a constant process of dialogue and reflection, any group of people can devise relevant and appropriate actions as solutions to their problems. This process involves “coming to terms with the roots of your oppression as you come into your subjecthood” (Freire, 2000: 31) and subsequently

---

\* **SHABNAM KOIRALA-AZAD**, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco (e-mail: skoirala@usfca.edu). **EMMA FUENTES**, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco (e-mail: ehfuentes@usfca.edu). Both are members of the *Social Justice* Editorial Board.

engaging in a “learning process that provides knowledge about the social injustices negatively influencing life circumstances” (Cammarota and Fine, 2008: 5).

PAR is rooted in grassroots and international liberationist, feminist, antiracist, activist, social justice movements (Freire, 2000; Fals Borda, 1979; Smith, 1999; Bell, 2001; Fine et al., 2000). In most cases, PAR has been used to bring the realities, voices, struggles, and triumphs of the oppressed to mainstream discourse around social issues. It has also been referred to as “the democratic practice of freedom,” a way to break down hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nation *collectively*. The ability of people to exercise their free agency and choose in an informed and participatory way (Sen, 2001) is a “necessary condition for democracy” (Torre and Fine, 2006: 268). In this way, PAR might be understood as a sort of “free space” for processing social inequities and reflecting critically upon the contradictions of our everyday lives (Weis and Fine, 2000), as well as a process for ““practicing” citizenship (Cahill et al., 2008: 90).

Beyond being a strategic tool for investigation, PAR provides an epistemological challenge to the social sciences, drawing urgent attention to the topic of where knowledge resides. Thus, PAR attempts to redefine what counts as valid and relevant knowledge. In so doing, it demystifies the role and definition of the “expert.” Instead, it transfers the power to create and use new knowledge to those who have been systematically abandoned or denied access to what has traditionally been accepted as legitimate spaces for knowledge acquisition and production.

The process of PAR teaches that the conditions of injustice are not natural, but are produced and designed to privilege certain groups over others and conversely to oppress. Because they are not natural, they are both challengeable and changeable (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). In this way, it provides a hope for change that traditional research and scholarship often lacks. By the same token, although PAR does not claim to always bring about immediate and tangible changes, it does “provoke ripples of social change” over time through the commitment and diligence of a community of like-minded and committed people (*Ibid.*: 2). For individuals involved in the process, it further provides the acquisition of knowledge and skills for bringing about change. A youth co-researcher in a participatory research project best describes this process in her own reflection:

Knowledge truly is power. Historically, the winner of the war has determined the telling of its own history and that of the loser. Those of us that have been living under the thumb of oppression have mainly suffered from a lack of information, a lack of access, and a lack of inspiration; we are not taught to ask “Why?”—we are not allowed to ask the questions that lead to a stronger mind. Participatory action research is one of the most potent weapons against oppression; it offers an opportunity to gain both skills and knowledge, to conduct an investigation that roots out both the questions and the answers that expose injustice. In the process of simply

learning how to ask questions, researchers are able to find themselves at the heart of those questions (Annisia, a Fed Up Honeys researcher, in Cammarota and Fine, 2008: 89).

The contributors to this special issue attest to the fact that the process of PAR can involve transformation at the individual level as well. This can be seen “as a process of ‘opening’ our own eyes and seeing the world through ‘different eyes,’ coupled with a desire to open others’ eyes (Cahill et al., 2008: 90). For each researcher, part of the personal transformation is the realization that engaging with a PAR project is a commitment not only to the ideals of the process, but also to the individuals involved. Therefore, there is generally an emphasis on process, a commitment to research, “giving back” to community collaborators, and a recognition of the power of knowledge produced in collaboration and action (Breitbart, 2003; Pain, 2004; Kesby et al., 2008).

Although PAR does provide a glimmer of hope to those disheartened by the top-down and overly objectified nature of traditional social science research, it does have its limitations. Maguire (1987) identifies and highlights some of these commonly known difficulties and limitations:

1. The tendency for PAR researchers to imply that this is the *only* method that can lead to transformation.
2. The commitment involved in the adoption of this methodology and the demands it places on the researcher or activist. For instance, it not only involves organizing and facilitating a group effort, but also transferring “technical and analytical skills to other participants.”
3. The challenge of collaborating with people who may have little or less of a commitment to power sharing and engaging in democratic processes.
4. The issue of time. A process that involves relationship and trust building, authentic dialogue, reflection, and, eventually, emancipation takes time and other resources that can easily run out due to external demands.

For the researchers in this issue, however, the possibilities of engaging in activist scholarship far outweigh the constraints. The articles in this special issue highlight both the positive outcomes of engaging in PAR projects and the challenges of doing PAR across diverse contexts. Some of these include the complexities of negotiating inter-group power relations, conflicts, and competing agendas. Taken together, this issue explores what is gained (and sacrificed) when engaged scholarship, collaboration with “subjects,” and social change activism are blurred in a single process.

### **Legitimizing PAR in the Academy**

One of the binding threads for many of the contributors to this issue is their involvement in the creation and development of a research center that grew out of the Social and Cultural Studies Program in the Graduate School of Education at the

University of California, Berkeley. In a course on Popular Education and Participatory Action Research, guided by Dr. John Hurst's expertise, we were allowed the freedom to develop a project that resonated with our personal and political commitments to our communities. In the process of conceptualizing potential research projects, there was a collective realization of the need for a supportive space for activist research, which led to the creation of the Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research (CPEPR). Establishing CPEPR as one of the many research centers within the School of Education was not without challenges. For one, the fact that CPEPR emphasized the bridging of the academy and community posed a big challenge to those holding traditional notions of social science research, in which the involvement of "non-academics" raised questions of validity.

However, due in large part to supporters from within the university and a substantial grant from the Irvine Foundation, CPEPR not only became an official "research center," but also started to operationalize some of its objectives. Aside from organizing an annual conference that drew a diverse group of people involved in PAR at the local, national, and international levels, it was also able to offer mini-grants for new PAR initiatives in communities, led by students and members of the community.

For us, CPEPR offered a stimulating and supportive intellectual community that led to the creation and implementation of some of the PAR projects highlighted in this issue of *Social Justice*. A further accomplishment of the center was the creation of a sense of accountability and academic rigor that carried us beyond the graduate school experience into tenure-track positions in a range of academic institutions, where the discourse and practice of PAR are being continued and analyzed with more complexity. The creation of this special issue has been a wonderful intellectual reunification of some of the co-founders of CPEPR.

We would like to dedicate this special issue to Dr. John Hurst, who inspired us to think about issues of power and representation in the research process and allowed us the space to create the vision for CPEPR. His unwavering support, extensive knowledge, and loving encouragement were critical in the formation of many of the works showcased in this special issue. We would also like to thank Dr. Julio Cammarota for his contributions to the growing body of knowledge on PAR and for thoughtfully situating the articles in this issue within the socio-historical and activist scholarship perspectives. Finally, we thank Jessica Blundell, a doctoral student in the International and Multicultural Education program at the University of San Francisco for her assistance in the final stages of this issue.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, E.  
2001 "Infusing Race into the U.S. Discourse on Action Research." P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds.), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage

- Breitbart, Myrna  
2003 "Participatory Research." Nicholas Clifford and Gill Valentine (eds.), *Methods in Geography*. London: Sage.
- Cahill, C., I. Rios-Moore, and T. Threatts  
2008 "Different Eyes/Open Eyes: Community-Based Participatory Action Research." J. Cammarota and M. Fine (eds.), *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. New York: Routledge: 89–124.
- Cammarota, Julio and Michelle Fine  
2008 *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Action*. New York: Routledge.
- Fals Borda, O.  
1979 "Investigating Reality in Order to Transform It: The Colombian Experience." *Dialectical Anthropology* 4 (March): 33–55.
- Fals Borda, Orlando and Anisur Rahman  
1991 *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research*. New York: Apex Press.
- Fine, Michelle et al.  
2000 "For Whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities." Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. City: Sage.
- Freire, Paulo  
2000 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Kesby, M., S. Kindon, and R. Pain  
2008 "Participation as a Form of Power: Rethorising Empowerment and Spatialising Participatory Action Research." In *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. New York: Routledge.
- Maguire, Patricia  
1987 *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst, MA: International Center for Global Education.
- Pain, R.  
2004 "Social Geography: Participatory Research." *Progress in Human Geography* 28.5: 652–663.
- Sen, Amartya  
2001 *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai  
1999 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Torre, Maria Elena and Michelle Fine  
2006 "Researching and Resisting: Democratic Policy Research by and for Youth." S. Ginwright, J. Cammarota, and P. Noguera (eds.), *Beyond Resistance: Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Policy and Practice for America's Youth*. New York: Routledge: 269–285.
- Weis, Lois and Michelle Fine  
2000 *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender Among Urban Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.