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Brushed under the carpet: Examining the complexities of participatory research (PR)

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Abstract

Participatory research (PR) is sometimes difficult and risky, but there is a paucity of opportunities—and some reluctance—to reflect on its challenging aspects. In this article, we present subjective accounts of our everyday experiences of conducting PR as women researchers. We focus on four themes from our combined research experiences to explore some of the frustrations we encounter in PR. We argue that it is crucial to identify, reflect upon and address such aspects in academic outputs to broaden debates and scholarly discussions. We offer these reflections, and related strategies, as a contribution to critical debates on PR practice.

Keywords

Gendered fieldwork; co-research; reflexivity; negotiating roles; practice frameworks; power differentials.

Key learning points

- There are challenging aspects to participatory research (PR) that are seldom addressed in academic publications, making it difficult to reflect on and learn from risky and difficult research experiences.
- This paper synthesises a number of field-related issues from subjective perspectives to contribute to critical discussions on PR practice and support new and established researchers.

- We share our subjective experiences on the risky and difficult aspects of PR as a provocation to others across disciplines and geographical locations to similarly share their challenges and strategies.

Introduction

Participatory Research (PR) is a process whereby people with lived experiences of the topic of study are co-creators of knowledge (Abma et al., 2019; Cook, Boote, Buckley, Vougioukalou and Wright, 2017; Lenette, 2017; Nunn, 2017). It involves people with direct experiences of, or interest in, the topic of study in all or some aspects of the research process including research design, data collection, analysing findings, and reporting and dissemination. PR begins from a social, ethical and moral commitment not to treat people as objects of research but rather, to recognise and value the differing and diverse experiences and knowledge of all those involved (see for instance, Southby, 2017). We subscribe to the view that irrespective of discipline, PR can be used to challenge one or several socio-political inequities (Mayan and Daum, 2016). This article emerges from collaborative discussions among a group of women researchers on the lack of opportunities to reflect on the gendered, and sometimes risky, aspects of PR. As a group of researchers who use PR approaches, we find that we are often reluctant to openly discuss difficulties associated with PR for fear of discrediting the approach. In other words, discussing the challenges presented by PR can be perceived to create suspicion about the quality of knowledge produced. While PR is a useful and sometimes empowering approach, we know that not all experiences or elements of PR are positive. As Foster (2016: 68) comments, in practice, implementing PR models takes “a great deal of time and energy to work through, and extensive emotional labour in terms of forging and maintaining meaningful relationships. This is not always recognised in research

accounts”. As such, this important topic warrants a reflexive writing process that attends to PR’s more demanding aspects from women academic researchers’ perspectives.

In this article, we explore PR collaborations between university-based researchers like us, and non-academic community-based researchers to ‘co-create’ knowledge. While there are clear benefits to PR such as the creation of a meaningful research space where genuine collaborative research is possible (Lenette, Brough and Cox, 2013; Nunn, 2017), and despite our best efforts to ensure that risks are minimised in the field, unforeseen events can lead to increased risks or ethical dilemmas both for community-based and academic researchers.

The relative paucity of discussions of sensitive topics linked to the methodology can inhibit debate about key challenges in PR. In this paper, we critically reflect on incidents, anxieties, decisions, and dilemmas that most of us either intentionally repressed or *had not dared to mention in our publications* until we came together as a group to share our experiences. These issues are not new per se (see, for instance, Banks et al., 2013; Durham Community Research Team, 2011; Southby, 2017) but the limited literature and reflexive discussions on these difficult topics suggests that we might productively contribute gender-specific perspectives on such issues. As we collectively reflected on our research experiences, it was impossible to ignore the gendered aspect of these issues. As women researchers, we are called upon, or expected, to conduct ‘emotional labour’, and so from our perspective, PR has a distinct gendered dimension.

We draw on our combined research knowledge to discuss institutional, intellectual and relational risks openly, using our subjective experiences of PR to highlight aspects that are usually ‘brushed under the carpet’—perhaps as a result of institutional pressures or self-censorship—and seldom addressed in academic publications (including our own). Having a space to candidly reflect on these difficult elements is an exercise in reflexivity, which is integral to ethical research practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), and particularly relevant

for proponents of PR. The purpose of this paper is not to discourage the use of PR—in fact, our discussions have reinforced our commitment to such approaches and affirmed the benefits for knowledge production and social justice when projects are conducted in ethical, respectful, and mutually beneficial ways. Rather, we want to acknowledge the “joys and risks of balancing together on a trampoline” (Rumbold, 2004: 10), which is what some PR collaborations feel like. We echo Wright et al.’s (2012: 44) observation that “the realities of our work together [i.e. collaborative work] are much more complex; sometimes they are fragile or confusing, and often they involve unexpected turns”. We seek to present subjective accounts of our everyday, real-life PR work that focus specifically on the particularities of conducting PR, that builds on reflective work on this approach. We hope to broaden critical discussions on PR approaches and to support new and established PR practitioners.

Approach

In November 2017, we met as a group of women researchers from diverse disciplines and settings in Durham in North East England to discuss some of the complex experiences, difficulties and risks we had experienced in PR. Our commonalities were that we all use PR in our core research practice focused on social justice issues. We used a participatory process in our discussions and collaborative writing. Caroline documented our reflections and responses to examples from practice each of us provided into four non-prescriptive categories (the themes discussed here) to guide the writing phase. To ensure that our diverse and subjective experiences transpired in our collaborative writing, we were committed to avoid homogenising our many voices, as reflected in our different writing styles when describing the themes. The brief was to focus on difficulties encountered rather than recount our research projects in detail, but we refer to contextual specificities wherever possible.

We comprise a mix of early, mid- and late-career academic researcher-practitioners. We all undertake PR in one (or more) of three locations, namely Australia, the UK, and Hong Kong. Because we are at different career stages, some of us have already published on this topic, while for others, this is the first opportunity to critically reflect on the PR process. We acknowledge the importance of our individuality and sociocultural frames of reference in discussing and writing about these issues, particularly from our positions as women researchers from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds.

We also have diverse understandings of what PR means and different PR practices. Yet, we identified common experiences, irrespective of discipline, career stage, background, and geographical location. We acknowledge that the term ‘participatory research’ is used in many different ways and has many strands and histories (see Abma et al., 2019). The extent to which community-based researchers co-create all elements of the research design, process and outcomes also varies, with some projects initiated as community-university partnerships, while others may be initiated by academics and have elements of participatory methods. We also acknowledge the complex and problematic notion of ‘community’ (see Weston and Lenette, 2016). A distinction is often made between PR as a holistic approach based within a participatory paradigm, and the use of participatory methods (such as photovoice or participatory mapping) in more traditional research projects (see Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019: 17). Often, the use of participatory methods may lead to a piece of research or a research partnership becoming more participatory in other respects.

We present a discussion of four themes representing key difficulties and risks we encounter in PR: (1) PR as a gendered field; (2) navigating the ‘grey’ zone; (3) complex relationships among co-researchers; and (4) negotiating frameworks for practice. We then turn to the literature on two broader research issues, namely the exclusion of content on

complex research *processes* in academic publications, and navigating the intricacies of power differentials, to position our reflections in relation to current debates.

Theme 1: PR as a gendered field

Our reflections on PR as a research methodology and our past experiences prompted the observation that a high proportion of researchers who undertake PR are women. PR is often seen to require more work (see Pain, 2004), is more emotionally taxing (Alexandra, 2017), and can at times involve more risky situations (i.e. with potential to compromise researchers' wellbeing) than non-participatory methods (Dickens and Butcher, 2016), so why are PR researchers disproportionately women? We are not alone in pondering on this state of affairs; Pain (2004: 659) for instance, concludes: "That the practice of PR is gendered is at the heart of this [marginalisation of PR approaches]; women and feminist geographers predominate".

PR as a sensitive and appropriate tool to uncover gendered perspectives in collaboration with community-based researchers is discussed at length in the literature (Lenette, 2017; McIntyre, 2003), but implications surrounding the impact of the gender of researchers themselves is less well documented. From personal observations and anecdotal evidence, we came to the realisation that the fields in which PR tends to dominate (such as cultural geography, education, disability, social movements, and migration studies) are themselves gendered. Furthermore, community-based researchers who tend to gravitate towards PR methods are also disproportionately women. As Fields (2016: 32) notes, the "embodied experiences" of race, gender, sexuality, and class mark the research process at every stage, especially in PR where the construction of meaningful relationships is at the heart of projects", and so this lack of consideration of the gendered nature of the field is striking. Relatedly, Caretta and Riaño (2016: 260) noted that in PR, the "'co' of co-production, co-determination, and collaboration can engender friction and strain".

Women researchers (both academic and community-based) in PR projects face challenges related to gender and sexuality. Several of us reflected that research relationships featured complex and nuanced interactions where we tried to balance friendships, research, and collaboration amidst gendered and sexualised interactions. For instance, one co-author reflected on her decision to accompany a community-based researcher, a young male asylum seeker, on an excursion late at night: what expectations might he bring to the situation? While all of us take seriously the discomfort and potential danger in terms of physical safety of such situations (particularly as lone women academic researchers), these tense moments can also become important empirical vantage points to gather evidence from experiences for further reflection on our approach. But it can be difficult to consider the implications of expressing that discomfort candidly to community-based researchers without feeling that the research relationship might be jeopardised. This raises very different issues in comparison with traditional qualitative researchers' relationships with their research 'informants', with whom they might expect to have a more protective role.

Thus, the gendered nature of PR not only creates new avenues for risk and reflection, but also orientates the outcomes of research in particular ways. Researchers have noted the alignment between PR and feminist research goals prioritising care, empowerment, and social justice (Maguire, 2001) even as participatory researchers themselves do not always articulate such connections directly (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000). Yet, the *reparative impulse* guiding much PR is itself gendered, often emerging from personal relationships forged between academic and community-based researchers. For example, this reparative impulse underscored Alexandra's (2017: 340) reflections in her field notes on a particular incident in the context of a media production project with community-based researchers who were newly arrived people seeking asylum in Ireland:

I am also worried. I want to hug Ahmad – to hug someone in pain, someone who I have come to know and respect, seems the “right” response... Of course, I am not Ahmad’s friend in the traditional sense of the word, but I have come to know him, and I do not know what to do. I feel responsible, and implicated in this practice.

The porous boundaries described in this reflection from a woman academic researcher in relation to a male community-based researcher encompass worry, affection, empathy and feeling responsible and implicated. The drive to conduct PR that “lays bare and learns from moments of difficulty” involves greater emotional risks for all involved” (Fields, 2016: 37).

We note from experience the extent to which our research has put us at greater risk of exposure to harm. One co-author intervened in a situation of domestic violence where a community-based researcher, a young woman fearing for her life, asked for help while in a very precarious situation. She was welcomed at the co-author’s home overnight, and shared details of her distressing circumstances (noting that the research topic was not domestic violence). The author believed that such interventions were ‘normal’ in the context of developing trust as a participatory researcher, and that welcoming this young woman in her home was more important than thinking about the implications for the author’s own safety. When the young woman decided to return to her home and subsequently never mentioned this incident again, it became very difficult for the researcher to simply ‘forget’ the safety issues and continue with the research. Both parties decided to cease their collaboration. As a result of this incident, the co-author suffered emotionally and physically from vicarious trauma. Such situations also arise in traditional qualitative research, where research informants may be in danger.

Especially because of its gendered dimensions, institutions and disciplinary conventions do not always value PR. Mountz et al. (2015: 1242) conclude that academic work focused on topics such as care, social justice, and social reproduction or using participatory

research methods has typically been feminised and undervalued. PR projects that are “ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically grounded in emancipatory goals” continue to “create friction with a social science that continues to be dominated by a positivist, conservative scientific paradigm” (Duckett and Pratt, 2001: 832). As measurements of impact dominate evaluation of scholarship in Australia and the UK, the uncertain or subjective outcomes, processual nature of work, and difficulty in measuring impact undercut the potential value of PR approaches in many disciplines. The perception of reparative work as ‘feminine’ must also be understood as part of the devaluing of PR approaches (Mountz et al., 2015). Consequently, researchers should take up every opportunity to discuss the gendered nature of PR so that it remains central to debates about what counts as legitimate or important academic practice and knowledge.

Theme 2: Navigating the ‘grey’ zone

The dynamic and relational nature of PR means that there is seldom a ‘right’ way of proceeding. Frequently, we are navigating shifting—and competing—opportunities, risks and agendas, with ramifications for both the research and collaborators. While other researchers, notably ethnographers (Murphy and Dingwell, 2007) often work in a similarly grey zone (i.e., spaces where processes and relations are not always clear-cut), these challenges are complicated in PR by the complex nature of research relationships, where community-based researchers may sometimes be seen as both ‘informants’ and ‘collaborators’ from academic researchers’ perspectives. Unpacking the experiences of two co-authors, we explore dimensions of this grey zone, namely ‘mapping the boundaries of the research’ and ‘negotiating democracy in cultural hierarchy’.

Mapping the boundaries of the research

With academic and community-based researchers engaging in a range of formal and informal encounters—often engendering a sense of trust and intimacy—agreeing on what constitutes data can be challenging. Inevitably, we come to ‘know’ more than we can capture, but how do we decide what *should* be captured? And who decides? In an arts-based study involving a co-author, the boundary was rendered visible in one instance when a community-based researcher shared information with an artist-researcher on the explicit proviso that it was not recorded in her field notes or shared with the academic researcher. For another co-author, ‘out-group’ disclosures that offered insights for solving ‘in-group’ problems in a project required the renegotiation of disclosure and anonymity to secure trust and maintain confidentiality. Both scenarios demonstrate the porosity of research boundaries and the challenges this presents for negotiating if and how data is to be captured and used. While the boundaries may initially be established in collaboration agreements and consent processes, even the most flexible and iterative of these are not malleable enough to adjust to the multiple shifts in relations, contexts, and foci that can occur during PR. Approaches to managing this may include:

1. *Setting firm boundaries that exclude certain forms or sites of encounter* (for example, communication outside of formal sessions). This might be a useful guideline for community-based researchers, or conversely, lead them to second-guess whether they can or should share uncomfortable but important information outside of ‘research time’. Academic researchers, on the other hand, may miss opportunities to uncover valuable information and insights.
2. *Capturing everything*, on the proviso that consent has been granted. However, this approach risks perceived breaches of trust and potential regret where information is shared in moments of forgetfulness where a sense of intimacy transcends the research relationship (Mayam and Daum 2016).

3. *Negotiating on a case-by-case basis*, either on the spot or prior to use in analysis/publication, where reciprocal benefits are clear for community-based and academic researchers.

Nonetheless, such negotiations risk including/excluding data based on levels of trust established at particular points in the project, and on community-based researchers' understandings of the research process and outcomes, which inevitably develop over time. These issues are relevant to all forms of research but pertinent to PR given the strong agenda of knowledge co-creation. Seeking additional consent to incorporate information communicated outside the project 'boundaries', either through field notes or by introducing the topic into the formal project space, is one way to address this tension. In such cases, however, additional caveats relating to anonymity and/or audience may be required. In particular, community-based researchers are often more open to sharing sensitive material with academic researchers than within their own networks, where the personal stakes are perceived to be much higher. To paraphrase a community-based researcher's reflection in one project: 'I want you to know, but don't tell my community'. Where consent is not gained to incorporate relevant information, a different challenge emerges: the challenge of *unknowing*. Yet, such unknowing is inevitably limited, and this information may still—consciously or unconsciously—inform data analysis and selection of material for publication (see Hugman, Bartolomei and Pittaway, 2011, for their discussion of this as an intentional process).

Negotiating democracy in cultural hierarchy through partnership

PR attempts to promote democracy and equality among everyone involved in carrying out the research (Kara, 2017). But the literature frequently overlooks the intricacies of relationships among co-researchers (i.e., academic and community-based) in the co-creation of knowledge, despite how "muddled" (Mayan and Daum, 2016: 69) such relationships can become in PR

projects. Because these notions are themselves culturally-informed, practicing PR in cultures where hierarchical collectivism prevails inevitably highlights the need for cultural negotiation (Brannelly and Boulton, 2017), especially when community-based researchers have pre-established hierarchical relationships among themselves before they participate in research projects, as illustrated in the examples below.

In a co-author's participatory action research project in Hong Kong with participants from Chinese ethnicities, democratic practices promoted within the inquiry group disrupted pre-existing and culturally valued familial hierarchy (see Ho, Jackson and Kong, 2018). Referring to friends and neighbours as 'sister/brother' or 'mother/father' can legitimise care obligations towards each other, particularly from junior to senior persons in the hierarchy. Promoting egalitarian communication or relations among community-based researchers who are situated in familial hierarchy can create threats to their sense of moral integrity (Ho et al., 2018). For example, disagreeing with a mother figure in the inquiry group can be considered a violation of the Chinese virtue of 'filial piety', and conveys a lack of gratitude (Kong, 2014; Kong and Hooper, 2018). However, without transforming the pre-established hierarchy, community-based researchers who are 'junior' in the hierarchy could be prohibited from speaking up in the group. These experiences question the Eurocentric understanding of 'democracy' (Ho et al., 2018), and point to the need to make sense of how 'democracy' could be understood and negotiated in the everyday life practices of people, in this case a Chinese community, which may emphasise 'hierarchical harmony' over 'non-hierarchical dialogue' (Ho, Kong and Huang, 2018).

Intersectionality of culture and gender adds another layer of complexity to navigating the cultural space for democratic practices. Another co-author experienced similar issues in her PR project, in relation to cultural gender norms. When researching alongside refugee youth recently settled in the UK, she came to understand that culturally embedded gender

roles and relations had been mediating the form and content of interactions and contributions. In this participatory arts-based research, the co-author encountered male dominance within the cohort due to emerging gender politics in the young people's ethnic community. It became increasingly clear to the researcher that the young women were circumscribing their own involvement in aspects of the project. While outspoken and creatively brave in the project space, they were unwilling to enact this publicly, notably electing not to sing the songs they had created in front of an audience. This was due to concerns about how male adult community members would respond, and the implications for their own and their parents' reputations.

Ultimately, the challenge that participatory researchers face is the displacement of the centrality of traditional 'western-influenced' ways of constructing knowledge in their research encounters. Barnes et al. (2017) suggest that we should translate the cultural, social and spiritual concerns into methodological approaches for capturing 'non-western' ways of knowing. They emphasise the importance of partnerships for acknowledging each other's cultural positionality, which can transcend the 'your/my culture' dichotomy to creatively find ways to incorporate both. Partnerships in PR are also processes of mutual inquiry into each other's cultural practices, revealing the multiplicity of cultures that each person values and avoiding cultural essentialism. The notion of partnership speaks to the importance of the ethics of care (Banks et al., 2013; Brannelly and Boulton, 2017) and dialogue (Feyerabend, 1996) in PR as useful tools to navigate issues like those raised above. In the examples outlined above, negotiating democracy in cultural hierarchy was achieved by cultivating a family-like community of practice that retained the filial piety valued in Chinese culture, valuing disagreements among community-based researchers, supporting the women to chart their own course through the complexities of self-expression and community politics, and by fostering equitable and respectful relations among young people within the research project

space. Instead of imposing a unilateral notion of democracy on community-based researchers, creating spaces for confronting differences and disagreement in a ‘careful’ way (Kara, 2017) seems to be more sensitive and effective in meaningfully localising democratic practices.

Theme 3: Complex relationships among co-researchers

In an increasingly restricted funding landscape, partnerships between university and community-based researchers can facilitate embodied situated knowledge production as well as create pathways for public engagement and social change. As Facer and Enright (2016: 64) note, such partnerships face “complex webs of accountability” driven by multiple, not always shared, goals. Embracing ethical principles, a shared vision and understanding of research aims and objectives, and clear organisational frameworks and processes are necessary prerequisites for ethical PR (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action & National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2012). The examples below highlight two such dimensions, namely ‘negotiating partnerships’, and ‘everyday ethical dilemmas’.

Negotiating partnerships

Issues of power imbalances and the importance of establishing equitable relationships have been addressed by many researchers collaborating with community-based researchers and partners. Strategies for academic researchers to gain access via gatekeepers as well as issues of positionality have also been examined extensively (Clark and Sinclair, 2008; Corra and Willer, 2002; Yancey, Ortega and Kumanyika, 2006; Yu, 2009). Nevertheless, as McAreavey and Das (2013: 114) point out, there has been limited literature on “real life ethical dilemmas” encountered in PR when engaging with community-based researchers and partners on an everyday level, although this is now changing (see Banks et al., 2013; Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019; Lenette et al., 2013). A key issue is that community gatekeepers acquire an

important role in social research as they hold power to allow or deny access to a particular community or institution (de Laine, 2000). As Clark (2011) reminds us, research processes can become complex as gatekeepers often serve as cultural mediators or ‘brokers’, vouching for academic researchers’ credibility and consequently influencing recruitment and retention (see also Oka and Shaw, 2000; de Laine, 2000).

Furthermore, working in partnership with organisations and communities involves establishing long-term communication avenues that allow dialogue and knowledge-exchange, and are transparent. According to Banks et al. (2013), working in partnership adds further complexity when considering ownership of data and findings for dissemination, suggesting that partnership is an ongoing process that is constantly under review. As such, all members of a research team must be attuned and responsive to varying degrees of leadership required during different research stages (Gillis and Jackson, 2002). Despite PR’s image as a more egalitarian model of research, power hierarchies are inherent to research processes and academic researchers in particular may often find themselves in a matrix of competing hierarchies and expectations (e.g., stemming from the community, co-researchers and colleagues, the institutions, or themselves) when working in this way.

Everyday ethical dilemmas

Drawing from personal experiences of PR, two co-authors share their experiences of having to negotiate different perspectives, interests and power imbalances in two distinct studies in the UK. One experienced co-author recalled how she wielded power reluctantly to enforce a contract between two parties:

I worked with a small local community organisation and larger national NGO in a community-university research partnership on a funded two-year action research project. We knew each other from previous work together, co-designed the research

project and submitted the funding bid as partners. We had a partnership agreement, which outlined the responsibilities and funding allocated to each partner. The University was the fund-holder and I was the ‘principal investigator’, hence ultimately responsible for reporting progress and ensuring the project kept on track. The community organisation survived through short-term grants to undertake specific pieces of work, and so the research grant was vital to maintain the salary of the existing community organiser. We started the project before recruiting a university researcher, as the community organisation needed the money to keep the staff member in post. During the first few months of the project, the community organiser did little work on the project, instead working on other pieces of short-term funded work. The national NGO worker also played a minimal role in co-managing the project. After several meetings and unmet promises to undertake more work, I reluctantly decided to use my power to ask the University finance department to notify our partners that they could not claim the next quarter’s funding until they had delivered more of the promised work. At this point, I was glad about the University’s requirement to set up a detailed agreement specifying the work to be done by each partner, even though at the time it seemed too tying for PR. I felt bad about initiating what was, in fact, a threat to withhold funding. But I realised I was being exploited—having to pick up much of the extra work myself.

In another case, an early career academic researcher explains how she had no choice but to challenge a community partner’s wishes to proceed with her project:

In an arts-based participatory ethnographic study in the UK, I found myself in the precarious position of having to manage expectations beyond the research outcomes, as the potential community partner requested that part of the project’s audio-visual data should be used as online marketing material for the organisation’s website.

Negotiating partnership with this organisation was a multi-phased process as, initially, the organisation agreed to be involved in the project and then contacted me with 'recommendations' on producing video testimonials, which resulted in a six-month email exchange and delayed start-date. I found myself in a critical position, having to decide between 'jeopardising' community access by declining to adopt the partner organisation's suggestions, or sacrificing the project's academic integrity. As an alternative, I collaborated directly with community-based researchers, making contacts through snowball methods, to ensure they could decide the project's arts-based activities and outputs.

Our role and competency as participatory researchers rest on our networks and relationships with community-based researchers, communities and partners, and so our investment in projects and our relationships with community members who are often ignored and marginalised does not always allow space for 'pushing back'. As these examples highlight, we agree with McAreavey and Das (2013) that PR inherently involves a "delicate balancing act" to negotiate specific partnership rules, while safeguarding the integrity and academic rigour of the research.

Theme 4: Negotiating frameworks for practice

The context within which we work, including institutions, organisations and community networks, are not value-free. Each is driven by their own set of values and nested in wider 'ecosystems'. Whether those wider ecosystems reflect the same values or not will necessarily impact on communities. PR is an explicitly value-driven approach, and so navigating various systems for funding and supporting research can present a number of challenges. To find a route through the various systems we tend to work on two fronts: (i) to foster improved recognition and understandings of PR, which includes working towards having the quality,

purpose and processes of our work explicitly recognised (Cook, 2012; International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research, 2013); and (ii) more pragmatically, ‘camouflaging’ our work under the mantle of other value systems. In safe places, such as in meetings with other participatory researchers, we discuss the challenges we encounter and confess our ‘guilty secrets’ (Cook, 1998) that this range of challenges sometimes leads to us struggle with the very essence of our work.

1. The hierarchy of methodology, method, and research funding

In health research for example, there is a common ‘mantra’ about research of ‘gold standard’. This is not, as we might think, the best research of its kind, but research that adheres to linear models that achieve predicted outcomes within certain, predetermined contexts (particularly in randomised controlled trials). Our challenges as participatory researchers are how to get research funded if we are honest; if we say we know the general issue to be researched but not yet what the specific question might be until we begin the critical reflection inherent to our research process; if we say we are not sure what the best methods are as yet as this will emerge as we develop our work together; that we are all researchers so ‘participants’ is not a relevant concept; and while we have some hopes and expectations for outcomes, others will be generated as the research process develops. Consequently, the processes of collaboration, and the way research evolves in PR are in danger of being categorised negatively. The recursive, relational approach to generating and validating forms of knowing that have an impact on the community of practice involved are not universally recognised as ‘method’. For many of us, our ‘guilty secret’ is that we use *illusory* consensus as a screen. For instance, to make our case for funding more acceptable, we might use accepted methodological terminology and name the communicative spaces in our research ‘focus groups’ and in that way, we can fly under the radar and secure funding. We can, and do, do this, but we carry the

burden of that artifice. Our burden is not that we believe we are being unethical, carrying out research that lacks rigour, or failing to understand what is needed, but rather the knowledge that what we are doing is ethical, rigorous and methodologically sound. We have not been able to articulate that, however, within the confines of another framework (i.e., institutional) for scrutiny. Our ‘guilty secret’ is then that, to get funding, we have denied our discipline the right to be judged on its own merits, since we suspect that because of the framework for that scrutiny, this would jeopardise its chances of being funded.

2. Recognising the effects of the ‘impact agenda’

In recent years, there has been increased awareness of the need for applied research to go beyond being predominantly a tool for knowledge collection, to make a difference to communities, i.e., to have impact (while often difficult to measure in PR, ‘impact’ is now central to many universities’ metrics of success). In this context, we might expect that research such as PR that has an explicit intention for transformative action would be valued for this. While impact here can be conceptualised as the beneficial changes that happen in communities as a consequence of participation in research, common impact metrics privilege the tangible, quantifiable and global, rather than the subjective, qualitative and local changes that may be more subtle, complex and difficult to capture and articulate. The issue is summarised by Pain et al. (2015: 4):

the attempt to measure “impact” as a concrete, visible phenomenon that is fixed in time and space, that one party does to another party...whereas deep co-production is a process often involving a gradual, porous and diffuse series of changes undertaken collaboratively that may be demonstrable but not always measurable.

We recognise that when we define the impact of PR within current university frameworks, the fundamental embedded, transformational process and changes that emanate from PR are at best under-valued, and most likely lost, in reports of our research.

3. The impact of institutional requirements on participatory researchers

If we are to reach audiences beyond academia, we need to write in practitioner journals, local newsletters and social media. Such outlets are not, however, routinely valued in terms of academic impact measurements. In the UK for example, there is a set of standards for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions determined by a process known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (see <http://www.ref.ac.uk>). One measure used in this process is the number of publications in refereed journals, preferably with high impact factors (i.e. a measure of the frequency of citations for an average journal article in a particular year). To publish in journals with lower (or no) impact factors leaves academic researchers open to institutional pressures that can affect our status in terms of performance measures, career opportunities, and wellbeing. Academic researchers can thus be torn between project requirements and university commercial imperatives that determine how our time is allocated and how the use of our time is judged.

The timeframes for PR research can also challenge institutional expectations and requirements. The “long time involved in conducting community-based research presents challenges not only in working with funding agencies, but also with the shorter-term expectations typical of...universities” (Israel et al., 1998: 192). Short timeframes for research can disadvantage PR approaches that start from the gradual building of relationships. This is especially so where people experience social marginalisation and might need longer to become involved in any form of research. A consequence of the lack of time is that PR academic researchers often use their own time to develop research (Abma et al., 2019).

Despite such a personal commitment to building research possibilities, those of us who work in academic institutions have found that our research remains marginalised, as PR challenges predominant frameworks about what constitutes ‘quality’ in research (Cook, 2012). We find it is less likely to fit the REF measures in the UK, and the associated institutional standards created in line with perceptions of what is needed for REF. An example of this is how academics in the UK and Australia are being judged by the amount of research money they successfully bid for; the scale of their research (with large, multisite, international research being more highly valued than locally transformative long-term engagements); and how many citations are recorded per ‘output’ (Chubb et al., 2017). Commissioned to review the UK REF, Lord Stern (2016: 14) noted how it can drive researchers “towards safe topics and short-termism, and a reluctance to engage in risky or multidisciplinary projects, in order to ensure reliable, high quality publication within the REF period”, and that it “may be discouraging innovative thinking and risk taking. This has obvious implications for PR.

These research frameworks and metrics create barriers to building local PR programs especially with people who are marginalised. The lack of recognition of co-researcher models is both a methodological and a social justice issue. It is therefore vital that the research community overall revisits, re-examines, and revises the marginalisation of PR and its proponents, or what Sushama et al. (2018, p. 6) termed “[t]he traditional scientific conventions that bound [studies] in terms of time, money and scope”. This needs to be done with recognition of the purposes, processes and quality of PR forms, and those who are in a position to do so, should speak out about the methodology. Only if all aspects of our work are honestly revealed can these be explored and collated to support the development of a body of knowledge in relation to the emancipatory impact of participation and the opportunities for creating knowledge for change.

Discussion

The themes discussed here are by no means the only issues emerging from our PR experiences and discussions, but they are prominent issues through which we hope to launch an open discussion on the topic, so that others will continue to build on our findings and contribute reflections on their own experiences, dilemmas, and strategies to the literature. Through our writing, we want to reach out to other academic researchers, particularly those who may feel frustrated, guilty, or confused about PR's problematic aspects, and invite them to engage in a reflexive process. When talking about ethical issues in research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 265) comment that “[w]e need both a language to articulate and understand...ethical issues and an approach that assists us to deal with these issues when they arise”. We share our strategies as part of the reflections that may assist academic researchers to tackle some of the challenges of PR, while resisting the temptation to offer definitive ‘solutions’ that might constrain its heuristic endeavour.

We value PR as a mode of inquiry that focuses on gaining knowledge through action-based processes that use a ‘bottom-up approach’ to challenge conventional hierarchical structures of research environments (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). We subscribe to the view that PR can be used to challenge one or several socio-political inequities (Mayan and Daum, 2016). Our understanding is that “we work closely with one another, as equals, by negotiating roles, paying attention to reciprocity, and working to develop trust” (Mayan and Daum, 2016: 72; see also Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2012; Banks et al., 2013). As such, PR methods promote multi-vocality and are invested in supporting the democratisation of knowledge production through working with community-based researchers (both individuals and organisations) to create a safe and inclusive research environment that addresses community needs and involves both individual and collective voices in the interpretive process (Wallwork, 2003).

We identified two key issues that frame our reflections in relation to current debates. The first concerns our un/conscious decisions to exclude content on research processes, especially the more problematic or difficult to articulate themes. The second relates to how we manage a range of sociocultural complexities in our research practice, but particularly the intricacies of power differentials.

Exclusion of content on PR research processes in academic publications

Our experience of getting our work published has been mixed. Attempting to publish in journals based on subject area as opposed to social research methods can prove difficult. Journals, like research funders, have historical frameworks for recognising rigour based on particular paradigmatic understandings. Knowing this, many of us publish in journals where our approach to research has been championed or at least accepted. This limits our reach and impact and creates a ‘preaching to the converted’ effect. Impact that occurs indirectly through non-linear mechanisms thus remains under-represented in published accounts of research evidence (Greenhalgh and Fahy, 2015).

Furthermore, the literature acknowledges that research involving deep relationships of trust with community-based researchers needs to be managed carefully and can be challenging and distressing at times for all concerned (Cook, 2012; Carter et al., 2013; Foster, 2016; Rasool, 2018). Yet, the more textured and difficult aspects of PR may be deliberately excluded—usually through self-censorship—from traditional avenues like peer-reviewed academic journals, due to perceptions that the focus should be solely on disseminating positive findings and ‘victory narratives’ (Owen et al. 2005: 339) rather than on reflexive research practice where difficulties are highlighted. Wright et al. (2012: 45) also agree that “the ‘‘behind-the-scenes’’ emotional work of preparing for research, building relationships and rapport with others, thinking, conversing, and representing is typically removed from

conventional academic accounts”. The ‘hierarchy’ of content that authors are supposed to include/exclude privileges the more straightforward ‘steps’ undertaken in PR, for example, methodology, findings, discussion and implications, to the detriment of content on emotionally challenging or risky aspects of the research like the examples we have shared in this paper. As such, when boundaries become blurred in the field and impact decision-making, there is a lack of space to discuss such tensions openly. For instance, when academic researchers feel obliged to engage in a range of activities or obligations that resemble ‘close’ friendships, like lending money, driving community members, or taking calls on weekends (see MacFarlane et al., 2018; Mayan and Daum, 2016), or when research relationships come to an end and feelings of guilt and frustration emerge (Cox et al., 2014), academic researchers may be reticent to discuss such issues openly in publications. We argue that it is in fact *crucial* to identify, reflect upon and address such issues at interpersonal and broader levels in traditional and creative academic outputs to broaden debates and scholarly discussions on the realities of fieldwork and research frameworks more generally.

Power differentials

The diffusion of power differentials is an intrinsic aim of PR, which aims to prompt equitable participation and dialogues among co-researchers (Kara, 2017). Unsurprisingly, this issue emerged through our accounts as a key tension to navigate, as academic “researchers must grapple with power and vulnerability—both those of other people as well as their own” (Dodson et al., 2007: 822). To reduce power imbalances between ‘powerful’ academics and ‘vulnerable’ community-based researchers, institutional ethics clearance procedures aim to limit the potential for abuse of power. But in the face of unforeseen dilemmas and risks in PR, academic researchers are often ‘on their own’ when deciding on the best course of action (Lenette, Botfield, Boydell, Haire, Newman and Zwi, 2018; Blake, 2007). In this context,

collaboratively balancing expectations and requests without compromising one's academic integrity is not unusual, reflecting the 'emotional labor' (Foster, 2016) involved in PR. Conversely, as we explore in our reflections, virtues of care, compassion and equality upheld by many PR academic researchers can also become their 'burdens', sometimes even putting them in 'dangerous situations' where they can get hurt (Carter et al., 2013; Kara, 2017). Thus, we argue that telling stories about how academic researchers navigate intricate power differentials in the field and in the broader context of research with varying degrees of success, and acknowledging situations where lack of reflexivity may have resulted in detrimental outcomes, would further enrich discussions on PR.

Conclusion

Our group discussion on the risky aspects of PR has reinvigorated our commitment to the approach rather than dampened it. We concur with Mayan and Daum (2016: 74) that "if achieving great things means living in a more equitable and just society, we must take the risks that come with engaging in CBPR [community-based participatory research]". We engage in this type of research precisely because of shared concerns for socioeconomic inequities and our wish to challenge such situations through PR, and our commitment to democratising research spaces and knowledge. We value the work of others in this space such as the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (see ICPHR, 2013), and scholars like Walmsley and Johnson (2003) and Nind (2014) on inclusive research approaches.

We must continue to promote meaningful engagement and collaborations in our PR practice, and opening up a space for candid, honest conversations about difficult and risky aspects can contribute to achieving this aim. We remain acutely aware that PR is not 'magical' just because it is participatory, nor is it appropriate in all contexts and in all

collaborations. Our aim is not to state that our distinct approaches are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Rather, what brings us together as an alliance of PR researchers is our common experience of navigating moments of complexity, crisis and doubt with few (academic) resources to guide us.

We offer these reflections, and related strategies, as a contribution to critical debates on PR practice, and as a provocation to others across disciplines and geographical locations to similarly share their challenges and strategies. We do so in the hope of fostering further interdisciplinary debates across contexts so that others will join us and add their own experiences, frustrations and strategies to this conversation. Difficulties and risks are contextually specific and take many forms, and so we would welcome the opportunity of extending our own knowledge on how these can manifest in others’ research practices. We invite academic and community-based researchers to engage in reflections on the difficult and risky aspects of PR with trusted colleagues and using meaningful processes, and to share unique perspectives with us and others to keep this conversation and reflexive endeavour alive. We hope that in so doing, the plurality of perspectives that can be documented and debated will further enrich our understanding of PR as a distinctive approach.

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