

# **Practical, Epistemological, and Ethical Challenges of Participatory Action Research: A Cross-Disciplinary Literature Review**

Danielle Lake and Joel Wendland

## **Abstract**

This article extends recent discussions on the practical, epistemological, and ethical challenges of participatory action research (PAR) for community-engaged scholars through a cross-disciplinary literature review. It focuses on how practitioners across fields define power, engage with conventional research approval processes, and manage risk. The review demonstrates that PAR can be a valuable research approach for community-engaged scholars, but problematic practices and disparities must be addressed. For instance, although PAR practitioners consistently articulate a commitment to empowering the community and shifting structures of oppression, contradictions around how to define and respond to power, engage with standard IRB practices, and cope with high levels of risk are prevalent. We conclude by offering a set of recommendations, highlighting the need for more transparent and self-reflexive methods; transdisciplinary practices; metrics designed to assess risk, inclusion, and power-sharing; ongoing dialogues across disciplinary and institutional divides; and inclusive authorship and open-access publishing practices.

*Keywords:* participatory action research, ethical challenges, interdisciplinarity, institutional review board, community-engaged scholarship

## **Introduction**

This article explores the potential merit as well as the practical and ethical challenges of participatory action research (PAR) for community-engaged scholars through a cross-disciplinary literature review of PAR practices. In particular, it focuses on the overarching narrative and framework behind various PAR practices, highlighting how practitioners across fields define power, engage with conventional research approval processes, and manage risk. Our review demonstrates that PAR advocates across disciplines articulate a core commitment to social justice, ethical relationships with coparticipants, democratic and inclusive practices, and altering unjust and inequitable systems, while also showing that divergent and contradictory recommendations emerge between fields, places, and experiences. The expli-

tion of these tensions and challenges led us to a set of recommendations for community-engaged scholars interested in pursuing PAR practices. We suggest, for instance, that community-engaged scholars pursue more transparent and self-reflexive methods of engagement around the risks and challenges of this work; operate as boundary spanners by pursuing intentional, ongoing dialogues across disciplinary and institutional divides; integrate transdisciplinary planning methods, tools, and assessment metrics designed to reduce risk and assess power dynamics; and commit to more inclusive authorship and open-access publishing practices. Such an analysis is proving timely: Community-engaged scholars have recently called for a more inclusive, flexible approach to research (Shumer, 2015), and PAR practitioners have noted a gap in the literature around the skills this work requires and the challenges it involves (Flicker, Travers, Guta, McDonald, & Meager, 2007; Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 590).

We define PAR broadly as the attempt to *collaboratively* generate knowledge (i.e., as a participatory process) for the purpose of both using that knowledge (i.e., acting upon it) and sharing potentially valuable lessons with others (i.e., disseminating the findings). This potentially productive link between collaboration, action, and transformation proves especially attractive for community engagement practitioners who value socially just responses to complex social problems, aligning with critical service-learning and community-based action research.

Before exploring the practical, epistemological, and ethical challenges involved in PAR practices, we begin by highlighting why community-engaged scholars may want to pursue PAR. We then provide a brief overview, documenting the general framework from which PAR has emerged and the variety of fields engaged in these practices. We next analyze its critique of the academy and conventional research practices, noting how it has been characterized as a response to, but also co-opted by, historically dominant research practices and institutions. This discussion ultimately leads to a review of how practitioners characterize and respond to issues of power, navigate the practical ethical challenges, and address the high levels of risk inherent in PAR.

### **Why Pursue Participatory Action Research?**

Conventional research approaches are often insufficient for community-engaged research endeavors, since such approaches are rarely inclusive and often fail to yield sustained change (Flicker

*et al.*, 2007). Although such research practices have been essential in our quest for understanding and solving many complex challenges (e.g., space travel, antibiotics), some of the most pressing social problems we face in the world today often require inclusive, coordinated efforts across institutional, regional, and political boundaries. Think of the long-standing issues surrounding poverty and religious intolerance. Indeed, the more place-based, responsive, and inclusive the approach to research is, the more likely it will yield desirable outcomes (*Huutoniemi, 2015; Rahman, 1993*). Given the status of our public crises, “we cannot afford to wait decades more for universities to provide infrastructure and foster the culture needed to turn ideas into action. If we want science to serve society and the planet . . . we [researchers] must take responsibility” (*Keeler, 2017, p. 2*). This commitment to practice scholarship with greater potential for collaborative impact is something engaged scholars have also been advocating for (*Stanton, 2007*). Participatory and active research practices attempt to do this by (1) *aligning* the resources being consumed on research with actual communal needs, (2) *moving* the production of that information more immediately and seamlessly into use, and (3) increasing the *capacity* of public participants to collaboratively, courageously, and creatively address shared challenges in the future. In pursuing PAR, community-engaged practitioners and researchers can both seek to become and help to train resilient agents of change: those with the capacity, flexibility, and courage to engage in self-authorship (*Magolda, 2004*).

## Framing PAR

### Spanning the Disciplines

Our review spans a wide range of fields and disciplines, demonstrating that PAR has been used to address a plethora of issues and location sites. It also shows that PAR is influenced by a host of theories and methods, engaged by interdisciplinary teams of researchers. PAR emerges from vast geographical, political, and epistemological points. Engaged scholarship has been mapped across a range of similar fields (*Holland, Powell, Eng, & Drew, 2010*). The breadth and range of philosophies, processes, and applications of PAR have led many practitioners to describe PAR as a general orientation toward social change in place of a method or theory (*Leavy, 2017, p. 229; Lykes & Mallona, 2013*). Figure 1 lists the traditional and applied disciplines and/or academic departments identified with the authors of the literature included in this review.

**Figure 1. Disciplinary Topics and Dissemination**

adolescent health research	international studies/development studies
anthropology	leadership/organizational development
area studies	legal studies
critical studies	management/business
education research	marketing
educational leadership	nursing
environmental studies	philosophy/bioethics
feminism/women, gender, and sexuality studies	psychiatry
geography/urban planning	psychology
health research	social policy research
human rights (political science)	sociology
indigenous studies	

The literature reviewed largely emerges from publications completed over the past two decades published in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Analysis began through both a review of the seminal texts within the field, like the *Handbook of Action Research* (Bradbury-Huang & Reason, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Key themes from the literature around the ethical and practical challenges of PAR, engagement with issues of power and risk, the project's approach to IRB approval processes, and evidence of community voice were examined. To promote consistency the authors shared their findings, discussing any differences in interpretations to ensure alignment. PAR projects within the literature were seeking to address a wide range of challenges, including housing in Zimbabwe; rural development in Bangladesh; migrant experiences in the United States; educational experiences of youth in Canada and the United Kingdom; workers' rights issues in Europe; indigenous experiences in Australia, the United States, and Latin America; higher education issues in South Africa; and consumer and management concerns in Sub-Saharan Africa or the United States. Home institutions of most of the researchers, however, were in European, North American, and Australian settings. A handful of scholars based in Mexico, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Chile, Jamaica, Uganda, and South Africa are cited. Coresearchers and participants included youth, members of disability communities, refugees, indigenous youth, public school teachers and administrators, undergraduate and graduate students, precarious workers, unauthorized migrants, and community members, as well as activist leaders, consumers and managers, univer-

sity employees, health care practitioners and patients, city planners, and others from disparate social positions and statuses. Most of the projects cited in this review were initiated by the university-based researchers themselves.

## Core Commitments

Across projects, institutions, and fields, there is a consistent commitment to the “improvement of human life” (*Noffke, 1995, p. 4*) through collaborative research aimed at social transformation. In addition, we found a core commitment to address pressing issues of social justice through collectively examining and changing unjust structures across the literature (*Lundy & McGovern, 2006*). According to *Burns (2007)*, “the whole point . . . is to get to grips with messy, complex, difficult issues,” to work on real, intractable social injustices (*p. 170*). For example, *Yanar, Fazli, Rahman, and Farthing (2016)* used PAR to address the challenges of political participation of ethnically diverse youth in East London. Although the academic researchers began the project with a focus on how youth use space, the recruitment of youth as coresearchers resulted in a renegotiation of the research question, methods of data collection, and analysis of the data. As coauthors of the final project, the high school-aged coresearchers learned the methods for conducting professional research, the avenues for academic dissemination, and new ways to win recognition for the specific challenges they faced as a result of their social status. The project clearly implemented PAR practices, since it sought to fully engage members of the community in the design and development of the research, and addressed the concrete needs of participants. It demonstrated how PAR values and tries to center all forms of knowledge and experience and is thus inherently emergent and cotransformative. Although PAR does not always live up to this goal, a move toward more democratic research processes can be valuable for achieving more inclusive social change (*Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003*). Thus, PAR gives primacy to research practices that redress unjust social structures by centering the health of a community, empowering diverse perspectives, and shifting hierarchical power structures (*Grant et al., 2013*).

Social and structural transformation through action is a core commitment catalyzing PAR (*Maguire, 2001, p. 59; Reason & Marshall, 2001*). Indeed, impact under this frame should not equate to the readership of the scholar’s journal article within their field, but rather the impact researchers can make “on the ground” by working in and with the community. As *Fenge (2010)* argued, PAR methods

should be measured by the production of “valid knowledge,” which in turn is measured by who “controls the production of knowledge” and whether that knowledge “produces action and change” (p. 880). Assessment of the research, then, must move toward assessing the recommendations, actions, and consequences that unfold from the study in collaboration with the community. PAR requires that researchers expand the framework under which they operate and acknowledge a responsibility to those beyond their department or discipline, a responsibility to a larger community; it has even been described as an orientation and paradigm for one’s approach to research. A host of similarly positioned approaches share these foundational commitments, including community-based action research and systemic action research.

## Foundations

Paulo Freire’s body of work is largely seen as the vision from which PAR practices emerged in the 1970s. Whereas Freire’s work is referenced as the philosophic frame for PAR, Orlando Fals Borda is referenced as one of the first to define and enact this approach to research (*Huizer, 1983; Rahman, 1993, p. 81; Rahnama, 1990; Vakil, 1994*). Over the past half century, the PAR movement has undergone rapid growth, emerging as an oppositional and somewhat marginalized response to formal institutional research practices and evolving into a “legitimate” approach to the work of social scientists, activists, and educators within large research universities and organizations in both the private and public sectors (*Lykes & Mallona, 2013, p. 106*). The legitimization of PAR within large, structured institutions has created its own set of “contradictions and challenges” (*Lykes & Mallona, 2013, p. 114*). Working within these structures provides consistent opportunities to shift exclusionary practices while it also constrains efforts toward radical transformation.

Although PAR practices emerge in part from social justice origins, aspects of its origins as an academic practice have earned it much criticism. Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt (2014) warned against the academy’s desire for an “impact agenda” that outweighs a commitment to the authentic needs of local populations (in their case Indigenous peoples), with the (perhaps) unintended consequence of replicating colonizing practices (p. 847). Rahman (1993), who is an advocate of PAR, nonetheless has characterized it as the interaction of two dissimilar class and ideological formations: (1) intellectuals with institutional, state, and corporate affiliations and (2) the poor and marginalized with less access to institutional forms of power. These different positionalities create “tensions,”

since the interests of the two “do not necessarily converge” (p. 92). Leal (2007) linked its present incarnation as an institutionalized project to neoliberal policies that more closely tie research practices to dominant political and economic agendas—both locally and globally. We suggest that the contradictions identified by these and other scholars remain in the practice, and our discussion below reflects how some PAR researchers have been more successful than others in addressing these tensions.

## General Requirements

Given that PAR is problem-driven research, researchers cannot expect to rely solely on their own training and academic experiences to design and conduct projects driven by real-world challenges. Instead, they need to locate “literature in multiple relevant fields.” They must “immerse themselves in those literatures, learning their language, and [seek] the expertise of others as needed” (Leavy, 2017, p. 229). Researchers also need to pursue fluency in “culturally sensitive” terms, definitions, and vernacular to gain insight from “community understanding of relevant concepts” (p. 229).

To this we add that multiple epistemological standpoints, collaborative engagement practices (Longo & Gibson, 2016), and systems thinking are essential (Watson & Watson, 2013). For example, in their health research with Aboriginal youth, Riecken, Strong-Wilson, Conibear, Michael, and Riecken (2005) grounded their work in a Bakhtinian analysis of voice and dialogue and a Freirean understanding of dialogue as a radical “method of action” (p. 3; see also *Rahnema* 1990, pp. 207–208). Jackson’s (2013) “indigenous research” concept calls for use of postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, historicity of imperialism, and critical Whiteness studies (pp. 24–25, 30). Gustafson and Brunger (2014) insisted on a “woman-centered” feminist participatory action research approach (p. 999) that shapes the design of the project and requires reflexive, discussion-based methodologies. Collins (2004) adopted a systems theory concept, which he called “ecological ethics,” to name a practice of seeing “the world, environments, or communities . . . as unified systems” (p. 349). Overall, these methodologies entail a shift from descriptive positivist empiricism to action-based social and systemic change-oriented aims (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). According to Khanlou and Peter, PAR practitioners “[draw] from sociology, economics, political science, and individual and group theory, [and] often emphasize community and social structure” (p. 2335). Billies, Francisco, Krueger, and Linville (2010) added that “critical scholars [who founded PAR methods] began questioning the concept of

objectivity and expert knowledge in favor of learning from those in oppressed positions in society who have experiential knowledge of survival in difficult conditions” (p. 278).

As this brief summarization shows, PAR practitioners need to be prepared to move beyond the borders of their disciplines for new conceptual frameworks, scholarly languages, and ethical practices. In addition, they should be prepared to examine in context and systematically the subjects and objects of study in ways their disciplines may not normally center. Still further, they should be prepared to move outside the boundaries of the department or the institution itself to regroup themselves in a new community that will define the problems and the research design, and from there to negotiate the analysis and meaning of any findings produced. Such practices, however, increase the risks, challenges, and barriers of conducting research, requiring far more time, outreach, and additional training. In effect, PAR requires community engagement, confronting researchers with the serious limitations of their own disciplinary expertise and requiring them to operate as boundary spanners. As we show next, within the current structures of higher education, this approach offers challenges.

### **Situating PAR With Standard Academic and Research Models**

With the goal to *change* the world, not simply *study* it (Stanley, 1990, p. 15), participatory action research is characterized by many practitioners as a reaction to—and rejection of—traditional, hierarchical Western models of the academy, the disciplines, research standards, and formalized expertise. This rejection of standard approaches is shared by many community engagement practitioners and emerges in part from the recognition that conventional teaching and research approaches tend to see others as objects of study and recipients of benevolent aid rather than as partners. Indeed, disciplinary-bound research and an “isolated impact approach” cannot address many of our interconnected, time-sensitive social crises (Kania & Kramer, 2011). To address such challenges, we need a coordinated approach (McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, & Fitzgerald, 2015). PAR positions itself as an alternative to traditional models “for research and action focused on local and regional problems involving emancipatory educational, cultural, and political processes” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 27). Aligned with community-engaged scholarship, PAR practitioners must consider how their work is problem-focused and context-sensitive. For instance, a PAR approach to female genital mutilation in Kenya



would reject attempts to conduct “research on” or “rescue” Kenyan girls. It would recognize the historical, cultural, political, and economic factors, work alongside stakeholders in the design, process, and analysis of the research, and seek interventions that recognize the potential impact (*Burns, 2007, p. 25*).

PAR practitioners and community-engaged scholars identify the problems emerging from research practices within the academy as both infrastructural (emerging from the way funding, access, time, resources, promotion, etc. are allocated) and cultural (expectations and often unstated assumptions by fellow researchers and administrators regarding what counts; *Brydon-Miller, 2013; Giles, 2012*). Across the literature, PAR is seen as a countermeasure to still-prominent standards that focus on short-term, quantitative research that too rarely finds its way back to the community being studied. Further, PAR practitioners are concerned that traditional research can develop through narrowly constructed boundaries, creating at times “highly spurious results” that ignore the impact of complex, interconnected issues (*Burns, 2007, p. 167*). Research from one disciplinary or institutional lens can easily fail to recognize factors impacting complex social problems from other positions. When confronting complex, interconnected issues it can be helpful and prudent to “build a systemic picture of the dynamics of the situation” through practices within PAR (*Burns, 2007, p. 26*).

Advocates argue we must try to “flatten” (*Maguire, 2001, p. 65*) and stretch what counts as knowledge and expertise. We begin to do so by seeking out and working with a wider array of knowledge cultures (*Pyrch & Castillo, 2001, p. 379*). This requires that researchers reimagine and—in collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders—design and enact research practices that emerge from and respond to situations as defined by all those involved (*Maguire, 2001*). PAR demands that all stakeholders have a say in how knowledge is generated, research funded, findings applied, and outcomes disseminated. It also asks collaborators to consider who owns—and who should own—the research (*Brydon-Miller, 2013*). Jackson (*2013*) argues that within this research practice “the agency of local participants should be an ultimate consideration in terms of what can now be done with the product of the research . . . and how it can extend and strengthen the power of participants” (*p. 32*).

In many ways this approach to research enacts collaborative engagement best practices (*Longo & Gibson, 2016*) while challenging a long list of standard higher educational practices and procedures, tending to confound conventional approaches to copyright and ownership of data, IRB approval processes, and standards for

scholarly practice. Because PAR tries to disrupt “monopolies of knowledge” (*Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p. 70*) and to “shake up the tardy, tedious, and departmentalized disciplinary world” (*Fals Borda, 2001, p. 32*), these efforts are challenged by the current structures and processes of the academy. For instance, “academically-based researchers . . . must be ever cognizant of the demands of reappointment, promotion, and tenure committees in order to secure ongoing employment through presentations and publications considered legitimate within the academic sphere” (*Brydon-Miller, 2013, p. 204*). Journal article word count limitations and discipline-specific peer review expectations impede efforts to represent PAR practices more fully and share the outcomes from all perspectives (*Viswanathan et al., 2004*).

This is why it is necessary to position the need to meet conventional academic metrics of impact through formally validated research and peer-reviewed publications within the current structures of the academy. By contextualizing the institution-bound researcher’s work in this way, the concerned critic of PAR more fully illuminates inherent tensions (and at times contradictions) between PAR’s commitment to both empowerment through inclusive participation and impact through concrete and collective action with a culture and set of institutional structures that reward traditional metrics of scholarly impact and neoliberal economic gains (*Giles, 2012*). Indeed, research shows that scholars perceive heavy obstacles to PAR-type practices and community-based scholarship. Academics generally believe this work is risky within the current tenure and promotion process (*Orr, 2011*). And these perceptions easily feed into conclusions that this work is nonideal, that those who do it lack rigor, and thus that we should be suspicious of their work. Thus, ironically, public education—as an agency meant to serve public needs—often makes the work of participatory action research more difficult to accomplish. Indeed, the heavy barriers and risks involved in trying to engage in PAR through higher education institutions have led quite a few practitioners to operate outside the academy.

On the other hand, other prominent PAR practitioners recommend responding to these barriers and risks by working more closely with their institution. Practitioners can, for instance, engage in dialogue with their university human subjects review committees to foster awareness about these challenges, ultimately developing a shared vision, language, and set of practices that are likely to facilitate the review process (*Brydon-Miller, 2013; Collins, 2004; Wolf, 2010*). They also recommend that researchers reflect carefully on how the

various institutions and players hold different forms and levels of power and influence as well as how their research reflects and rejects basic ethical principles as defined by these players (Brydon-Miller, 2013; Hamm, 2015, p. 29; Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011, p. 57).

The tensions between PAR and traditional academic research practices in part hinge on a key question: Is the academy interested in generating and sustaining space for the *cocreation and application* of knowledge on shared problems? Although practitioners argue that “good research is research conducted *with* people rather than *on* people” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179; Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014, p. 286), standard review processes do not easily recognize such an approach. PAR requires that scholars more broadly consider the most effective means of generating and disseminating findings (Brydon-Miller, 2013, p. 204). It also requires that the academy reconsider its approach to assessment and impact, from enrollment numbers, graduation rates, grant funding, and the readership of closed-access journal articles to what actions result and what differences are made on the ground.

### **Power: Definitions and Methods of Engagement**

Many PAR practitioners clearly and consistently characterize PAR as a response to hierarchical and unjust power structures, processes, and relationships. For example, practitioners routinely critique how traditional research structures and practices encourage researchers to speak *for* and *on behalf of* others instead of empowering others to speak for themselves. On the other hand, our review shows that practitioners vary in their definitions, engage along different scales, and respond differently to issues of power. Comparing two PAR projects illustrates this point. In a study of the transnational experiences of unauthorized migrants in the United States, Brabeck, Lykes, Sibley, and Kene (2015) jointly designed a project with a community organization that provides social and legal services for migrant communities. Although the project retains important PAR components by originating with the organization and centering on the material and ethical concerns of the “vulnerable population” under study, the unauthorized migrant participants themselves serve more as informants than as codesigners of the project. By contrast, Krueger (2011) described a research project on the school-to-prison pipeline that included 10 high school students in the schools being studied as coresearchers. As coresearchers, these students helped to shape the research question and design, analyze the data, and disseminate the findings. Although the participants in the migration project provided valu-

able insights about the experience of transnational migrant communities, and the findings appeared to identify solutions to their real-world problems, the study on the school-to-prison pipeline demonstrates a more thorough reconstruction of the conventional power/knowledge cultures within Western research.

In general, the literature recognizes that power resides not only in how knowledge is produced, but also in the ability and capacity to act, in the role/position one has within the system, as well as in and through relationships and networks (Burns, 2007; Chambers, 1997; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). “Power,” according to Kesby (2005), is a “ubiquitous force acting everywhere because it comes from everywhere” (p. 2040). PAR seeks to shift who controls the production of knowledge and what counts as knowledge, noting that the ability to participate in creating knowledge shapes our thinking and our goals (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Engagement work can benefit from PAR’s commitment to a more careful and explicit analysis of power.

Burns (2007) suggested that practitioners should seek to foster equitable relationships while simultaneously acknowledging the inherent “unevenness of power and ownership within the research process,” saying it is, perhaps, the best one can do (p.138). Stacey (2002) similarly wrote that “as soon as we enter into a relationship with anyone we are being constrained by them and we are constraining them at the same time. And, paradoxically, at the same time, we are enabling and being enabled” (p. 31). Power as relational seeks to transform power-over others into power-within connection, seeing here a potential for such transformations to yield collaborative and ameliorative change (Grant et al., 2013, p. 592). Across the board, PAR values the power within relationships and its potential to foster networks for action designed to rework the boundaries that affect one’s life. Pyrch and Castillo (2001) called on researchers to recognize not only the power within relationships, but also how such collaborative learning and action opportunities can increase the capacity for future efforts by generating “power-from-within” (p. 379). This means PAR seeks to legitimize and empower community involvement. It aims to mobilize “the relatively powerless to act upon their grievances and to participate in public affairs” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p. 71), thereby committing to capacity-building work that moves beyond service and toward collaboration.

Practitioners do not all agree on what PAR can *actually do* to address pervasive problems of power. Although some advocates suggest PAR dismantles and recreates more equitable power structures and relations (Maguire, 2001), other advocates take a more

humble and ameliorative stance, concluding that power structures can be reduced only by participatory strategies and tools (Boser, 2006; Burns, 2007). Despite efforts to flatten and distribute power, facilitators of PAR still end up wielding a significant amount of power because of their location within the process and thus their awareness of the overall “learning system.” This gives them “considerable power in steering, prioritizing, and even interpreting” what is happening (Burns, 2007, p. 168). Although Burns concludes that “the best we can do is to be aware of power and hold on to a set of core intentions” (p. 170), Brydon-Miller (2013) recommends advocates carefully weigh their work against Arnstein’s (1969) well-known ladder of citizen participation. Are engaged researchers yielding control, delegating power, and partnering, or are they placating, consulting, informing, or even manipulating? Recognizing that some efforts to engage the public provide only a semblance of collaboration and ultimately yield almost no real participation and that other efforts offer only tokenistic power, PAR practitioners have developed several scales and metrics for judging levels and kinds of participation (Peek et al., 2016). Although they do not specifically address PAR, Cannella and Lincoln (2007) share similar self-reflexive approaches to research ethics (p. 316).

In order to address these issues, some PAR practitioners leverage strategies for revealing, intervening with, deconstructing, and recreating power from feminist models of engagement (Reid & Frisby, 2013), critical service-learning (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009), and community leadership (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Nevertheless, some researchers express critical skepticism about the ongoing role of PAR. For example, Hamm (2015) suggested that PAR methods can be used to “regulate” communities and manage their demands for social change. The “participation” in PAR might mean “contributing to some predefined economic or governmental projects, while partaking in actual decision-making is bracketed out” (p. 22). In line with Hamm’s critique, Rahnema (1990) and Leal (2007) showed, in fact, that PAR was adopted by neoliberal developmentalists in major global economic organizations as a means of ensuring local consent to interventionist and sometimes exploitative projects (Rahnema, 1990, pp. 201–203). Rahnema argued that it has been used to define localized problems and establish solutions that mirror the interests, goals, or processes prioritized outside the local. Cannella and Lincoln (2007) argued that neoliberalism—loosely defined as the sum of social relations that define “all human activity as economic,” seek to commodify all human cultural and intellectual knowledges, and valorize capitalist market and profit

necessities—produces particular challenges to the notion of “innocent scholarship” by seeking to commodify and regulate research for its own purposes and within its own logic (pp. 316–318). Leal (2007) argued that the borrowing of “catch-phrases” such as “sustainable development,” “capacity building,” and “results based” by neoliberal technocrats in the 1980s and 1990s in their policy language reflects this cooptational move (p. 539). Additionally, Leal connected that cooptation to the emergence of an ascendancy in universities in North America and Europe of PAR projects and approaches.

Some PAR practitioners, especially in marketing and management fields, regard the process as a means of conducting more profitable business while deploying social justice concepts. For example, although Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008) located their understanding of PAR in liberationist concepts and histories, their work focused on how such research practices can aid businesses in more fully understanding consumer wants and needs (p. 436). Perhaps more cynical is the suggestion that “indigenous research,” a term with potential parallels to PAR (Jackson, 2013), could be used to tap into local management practices to gain a “comparative advantage” in marketplaces at the periphery of capitalist processes (p. 15). In general, institutions pressing for an “impact agenda” can easily coopt the language of PAR to reinforce uneven power relations, generating unsustainable and unjust change (Pain, Kesby, & Askins, 2011). Similar practices can be seen in the cooptation of other emancipatory philosophies, processes, and movements. For example, there are criticisms that the uptake of intersectionality and the implementation of “surface level” social justice centers within higher education do not reflect the commitments from which these practices emerged.

In either case, PAR holds potential mechanisms to help practitioners cope with the complex challenges of unequal power. One of the most valuable is that of self-reflexivity, the practice of critically reflecting on how one’s own identity, experiences, and positionality contribute to systems of power and oppression. This approach begins with the recognition that research is inherently personal, emerging not only from our professional, but also from our social and political lives (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Maguire, 2001; Reason & Marshall, 2001, p. 413). Self-reflexivity is intended to help us as researchers to “articulate our own value systems, our multiple identities and locations of power and privilege, and the ways in which these understandings influence our interactions with others and our research practices” (Brydon-Miller, 2013, p. 204). It acknowledges

researchers' responsibility toward understanding and conveying their own values and power (*Grant et al., 2013, p. 590*). It also opens spaces for considering how one might shift structures and processes of power, explore new roles, and negotiate other ways of being with others (*Goerisch, 2017*). One way to approach the call for self-reflexivity is through autoethnography—through researching, writing, and narrative framing around one's methods. Such an approach helps to explore the multiple dimensions of our work from new angles, to return to our experiences, and to reimagine more equitable and inclusive opportunities for moving forward (*Tilley-Lubbs, 2009*).

In general, PAR encourages community-engaged scholars to reconsider their approach and think more carefully about their positionality. Researchers interested in this approach should explicitly seek to measure how their work is empowering equitable and just contributions and results. For instance, PAR practitioners have modified Arnstein's rubric, creating more nuanced models that acknowledge various degrees of participation (*Shier, 2001*), including typologies that encompass positionality, developmental readiness, and capacity (*Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010*). These analyses ensure a stronger connection with PAR's liberatory roots. PAR also confronts practitioners with a series of *practical* ethical challenges. These are explored next.

## **Practical Ethical Concerns: PAR and Standard Review Practices**

### **The Disconnect**

Transforming community engagement work into scholarship requires IRB approval. Traditional approval processes from such boards and other public agencies, however, do not easily accommodate the messier, more emergent, and collaborative nature of engagement endeavors and PAR projects. As several PAR practitioners have noted, standard independent review processes raise a number of practical concerns, problems, and roadblocks (*Kuriloff et al., 2011*). This disconnect makes effectively communicating projects necessary and navigating IRB processes especially challenging. In PAR, community participants may be operating simultaneously as informants, data collectors, and data analyzers, creating conflicts of interest, reducing scientific validity, and posing significant challenges to the notion of informed consent and anonymity (*Wolf, 2010, p. 78*). In addition, Burns (2007) pointed out that “many research

ethics committees assert that material generated prior to the formal start date of the research cannot be used . . . yet if the researcher is part of the research then it is impossible for them not to bring in their past, because their whole history is part of the research” (p. 165). Because PAR depends on interactions and interventions with human subjects and participants throughout every stage of the research process, it is imperative that researchers and public agencies responsible for oversight of research be able to discuss the research goals and practices throughout the project.

## **A Range of Responses**

PAR practitioner responses to these challenges vary. Given PAR’s “ethical underpinnings,” some researchers suggest that independent review of their work can be an unnecessary hassle (*Yanar et al., 2016, p. 123*); others argue that traditional requirements of research ethics boards limit their ability to fully apply the method (*Burns, 2007; Gustafson & Brunger, 2014, p. 998; Peek et al., 2016*); and yet others suggest that these challenges are prime opportunities for working closely with review boards in order to fruitfully shift current practices (*Boser, 2006; Guta, Nixon, Gahagan, & Fielden, 2012*).

## **Challenges of Community Collaboration, “Vulnerable” Populations, and Uneven Power**

One set of concerns derives from the participatory and emergent nature and process of PAR, which contrasts in important ways with the traditional sequence of designing a research project involving human subjects and gaining IRB approval for it. For example, IRBs usually want to approve research questions and protocols prior to beginning the project. However, as mentioned, PAR resists the notion that participatory research projects should be determined prior to engaging with the community. The process requires the development of hypotheses, questions, methods, and protocols only after the project—from the perspective of the institution—has begun (*Yanar, 2016, p. 123*). Glass and Kaufert (2007) noted that their work with Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations communities elicited a demand by those communities to be active, trained participants who codesigned and conducted research projects, requiring university IRBs and other institutional ethics committees to negotiate alternative practices that honored the right of these stakeholders to be cocontributors and researchers (pp. 29–30). Perhaps the starkest example of how these concerns emerge is exemplified in the research with youth and their political



agency conducted by Yanar et al. (2016). As the researchers sought approval to conduct PAR that included “young participants” in the design of the project, recruitment of participants, collection and analysis of data, and the interpretation of findings, standard IRB processes created tensions.

The reflections offered by practitioners who have conducted PAR with youth, people with disabilities, and potentially unauthorized migrants reveal another set of practical ethical dilemmas that are further exacerbated by the nontraditional approval process required and the inherent vulnerabilities linked with these populations. The involvement of multiple stakeholders with varying degrees of power within a particular setting can inhibit the ability to design a project that minimizes the potential for conflict and social or psychological risks. In addition, the participatory nature of PAR decreases the likelihood of confidentiality and/or privacy. For example, two studies conducted in schools (Chabot, Shoveller, Spencer, & Johnson, 2012; Kuriloff et al., 2011) show that when researchers brought together teachers, administrators, staff, and minor-aged students, conflicts related to workplace issues, confidentiality, and trust sparked disagreement and even emotional conflict (Chabot et al., 2012, p. 25; Kuriloff et al., 2011, p. 55). In one incident, teachers, who are typically subordinate to administrators, sought confidentiality of their statements and roles from their supervisors, who were also supposed to be welcomed as participant researchers. The insistence on this barrier among participants led to hurt feelings and difficulties in communication over the design of the project (Kuriloff et al., 2011, p. 55).

In both instances, the inclusion of minor-aged participants evoked concerns. Our review found that PAR involving “vulnerable” populations tends to generate similar practical problems (Krueger, 2011; Yanar et al., 2016). Primarily, U.S. federal as well as local public agencies with legal responsibility for overseeing ethical research objected to research projects begun without carefully defined protocols enumerated before approval. In one instance the researcher characterized interactions with Department of Education officials as a “battle” that ultimately resulted in being “forced to violate some parts of the ethical contract I had made with PAR and with my co-researchers” (Krueger, 2011, pp. 423–424). In this reflection, ethical practice is primarily defined as adhering to a research design instead of making concessions to independent review.

While recognizing that “[t]he ethics review process has an important role to play in ensuring that all kinds of research, espe-

cially for those projects working with humans, is conducted in such a way to minimize harm or suffering to participants” (Blake, 2007, p. 413), our review of the literature suggests that PAR practitioners often view the current structures and procedures of third party oversight as a barrier to the project rather than a reasonable practice. Given that these practices were designed to prevent the worst abuses researchers historically have inflicted on unsuspecting populations, the characterization of review boards is at times troubling. Two tendencies appear to emerge: In contrast to traditional research processes and methods, some PAR practitioner descriptions of their research approach and methods leave the reader to conclude that (1) they see their work as beyond the ethical reproach of standard review board processes, and (2) they emphasize the agency of their research participants/copractitioners to such a degree that they appear to deny the possibility that their work could be exploitative.

For example, Krueger (2011, p. 421) critiqued her interactions with the Department of Education ethics reviewer as “bureaucratic” and suggested their role forced a compromise of her ethical principles related to PAR practices. In addition, Yanar et al. (2016), Kuriloff et al. (2011), Gustafson and Brunger (2014), and Chabot et al. (2012) failed to address adequately issues of risk for traditionally conceived vulnerable populations with whom they conduct research. In their studies with minor-aged youth and disability communities, researchers tended to emphasize the agency of their coresearchers while acknowledging traditional recognition of such populations as vulnerable. Chabot et al., for example, sought to conduct research on the sexual health of youth, and when public agencies sought parental consent for the research, the researchers described this claim to oversight as a “violation of the youth’s right to personhood” (p. 26).

Similarly, Gustafson and Brunger (2014) argued that “labeling the disability community as vulnerable assumes incorrectly that all members are similarly positioned and therefore disadvantaged, at risk, or in need of protection based on a single category of difference” (p. 1001). Yanar et al. (2016) dismissed IRB oversight of their project working with minor-aged children as “well-meaning paternalism” (p. 124) that undermined the agency of youth. In most of the above situations, careful interactions with IRBs resulted in flexible approval, mitigating such claims. However, Chabot et al. (2012) admitted they simply circumvented directly seeking coresearchers from institutions for which public agencies held oversight authority (p. 26). Although recognizing the agency of populations

traditionally deemed vulnerable is important, as discussed above, differentials of power may (and have historically) set harmful limits on that agency—necessitating third party assessment of the research process. PAR practitioners have begun to respond to these concerns, developing procedures and metrics designed to acknowledge a range of developmental needs and mitigate challenges to participation (Peek et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2010).

## **An Opportunity for Generating More Flexible Review Processes**

Numerous researchers highlight this challenge and seek greater flexibility and understanding from the IRB about sequencing the approval process. Notably, some scholars described the approval process as combative, even emotionally charged (Chabot et al., 2012; Krueger, 2011; Yanar et al., 2016), and others described negotiation and the development of practical steps for achieving third party approval as a burden (Blake, 2007; Davison et al., 2013; Kuriloff et al., 2011; Wolf, 2010, p. 82). For example, Kuriloff et al. (2011), referencing their PAR project studying the impact of university–school programs designed to improve the quality of educational experiences, wrote, “Because questions and methods can evolve and alter rapidly over the school year it can be difficult to prepare a university institutional board application in a timely manner” (p. 50). Similarly, Gustafson and Brunger (2014) noted that standard IRB sequential approaches to research approval processes violate the principles of PAR. They wrote, “Initial engagement with the community to design research is, in itself, an essential component of the research project” (p. 998). Absent this ability for institutional researchers and community participants to design the project, develop the questions to be researched, and negotiate the outcomes, the practical and epistemological benefits of PAR cannot be realized. In other words, a traditional IRB process prevented “initial input into the research objectives, the question, or the research design” (p. 998). In addition, review processes that do not capture the risks involved for the community are failing to adequately prepare teams (Flicker et al., 2007). With this in mind, more flexible and responsive processes and systems than those found in traditional research approval practices are needed.

Writing on the work of tribal IRBs, Ketchum and Meyers (2018) recommended incentivizing and legitimizing the right of community members to create their own review policies, procedures, and boards. According to Ketchum and Meyers, we can move forward in this work by recognizing others’ sovereignty and adjusting our

approach in order to honor their “authority in the governance of data” (*para. 1*). Community IRBs could, for instance, have authority over “regulating the implications of research on their community” (*para. 5*). Indigenous IRBs help to ensure that the “terminology of ‘collaboration’ holds meaning to the Native people involved, instead of being empty verbiage spouted by researchers” (*para. 10*). They also foster self-determination, the right to data governance, and decisions on the use of the “communities’ cultural information” (*para. 7*).

## **Advocacy Can Shift Practices**

PAR practitioners have worked with IRB committees to create alternative procedures for addressing these practical ethical challenges. For example, one researcher suggested a “negotiated consent” process as an alternative to the traditional “informed consent” process. This revised practice notifies participants of their right to withdraw from the research project at any time, but an informed consent document is discussed and signed after the research (interviews, focus groups, or other forms of data collection) has begun (*Blake, 2007, p. 418*). Another alternative to the traditional consent procedure involves viewing community participants through the lens of a “collective identity” for which the aim of research is action and social transformation (*Collins, 2004, pp. 349–350*). Such examples show that a flexible working relationship with the IRB can yield important procedural changes and produce inclusive and responsive research.

## **Challenges Necessitate a Greater Attention to Risk**

Community-engaged scholars pursuing PAR should be aware of a wide range of risks. Given the emergent and participatory nature of PAR, the complex, high-stakes social problems it aims to address, and its action orientation, researchers, community participants, and institutions often face significant risks. For instance, standard research ethics require assessing risk along physical, psychological, and social dimensions (which includes economic, legal, and political risks; *Brabeck et al., 2015, pp. 25–26; Creswell, 2014, p. 95; Gray, 2014, p. 73; Khanlou & Peter, 2005, p. 2336*); however, risks in PAR also arise from conflicts of interest connected to disparate social positions or funding streams, time and labor constraints and potential abuses, emotional challenges, disputes over ownership of data or authorship of dissemination, an increased likelihood of social

or political consequences because of public critique and/or efforts to change existing processes, and the potential for public exposure of social or legal status of individuals or groups. Practitioners and review boards should, before beginning—and consistently throughout—the research process, attend to the potential risks in these categories. They should seek out support for such assessments, reflecting collaboratively with community participants, risk analysts, and other researchers on how the project can best address the ethical challenges involved. Such conversations have the potential not only to reduce risk, but also to increase awareness of the challenges inherent to PAR and to shift the procedures of the review board. Metrics and procedures should be modified so they best protect all participants. All parties should work toward a favorable risk–benefit ratio throughout the project. If all parties are not comfortable with the risks, the project should be halted until agreement about the ethical challenges has been reached.

### **Bridging the IRB and PAR Divide**

As Guta et al. (2012) show in their unique study with about two dozen IRB committee members, ethics reviewers sometimes fear that PAR practitioners view IRBs as “bureaucratic and oppressive” (p. 18). This view, which much of the literature cited in this review suggests is based in PAR’s epistemological, philosophical, and political differences from how conventional research review is conducted, can produce what ethics practitioners have characterized as an “impasse” between the two sides (p. 17). Some of the participants in that study indicated they thought PAR researchers saw themselves as ethically and professionally above the need for independent review, indicating to the IRB that it should “just trust” them with their project without much detail about its goals or without returning to the IRB as the project proceeded to develop. Guta et al. (2012) suggested their findings show that because of these stated epistemological differences, PAR researchers may reduce the relation between themselves and the IRB as a “binary” of “we are good and they are bad” (p. 18). By way of example, instead of welcoming independent review to ensure her ethical practices, Krueger (2011) wrote that her research design based in interaction with school children “*had* [emphasis added] to be approved” and that the process to achieve that approval was a “battle” (p. 411). One takeaway from reading this research seems to be that the researcher’s conflict with independent reviewers—when it threatened to stall or limit her project and thus her Ph.D. progress—seemed significantly

more important than the assessment of risks presented to the participants in the project.

The IRB members interviewed in the Guta et al. (2012) study, for their part, insisted they prefer ongoing discussions and negotiations toward understanding the nature of the project; they want to demonstrate flexibility in helping nontraditional research projects like PAR to pass review and succeed. The danger in this approach is that it can leave ethical challenges unexplored, risks unassessed, and key features of the research design unarticulated. In the end, Guta et al. showed that many IRBs have some knowledge about PAR practices and do favor flexible relations between themselves and faculty, but their role is to provide “ethical guidance” and to ensure that researchers, regardless of their methodologies and ethical stances, articulate potential risks and the measures they plan to take to ensure a more favorable risk–benefit ratio.

### **Practices and Tools for Explicating and Reducing the Ethical Challenges and Risks**

Although risk assessment on complex and evolving social challenges is fraught with a host of unknowns and shifting variables, its multitudinous aspects must be collectively reflected on in advance of the project and continuously addressed at each stage of the process. This is essential even when the researchers claim a social justice orientation or emphasize epistemological or methodological differences with traditional research practices or IRB processes. For instance, PAR methodology justifiably objects to standard models of risk assessment that use content experts to “quantify” the potential for harm, “objectively” evaluate the acceptability of the dangers, and then—often in private—advise policymakers on how best to manage the risk. Such mechanisms assume that risks can always be known, quantified objectively, and responded to without ever engaging the public in the decision-making process. Standard models of risk assessment do not capture the nuances and concerns of many social problems, and desires for quantifying risk are often in tension with the realities of our evolving, interdependent social messes; however, this does not mean PAR practitioners can or should avoid engaging with the full array of stakeholders in grappling honestly with the risks inherent to their own project. Thus, we recommend that community-engaged scholars pursuing PAR be prepared to revisit the IRB approval process with new risk assessments as the project design takes shape, participants are added to the work, and emergent design requires additional activities (Brabeck et al., 2015; Guta et al., 2012). Additionally, assess-

ments should include a discussion of participant roles, working to identify when they act as researchers and when they act as human subjects. If they operate as informants who provide data or other insights about research subjects, they have rights, and IRBs “both have a legal and ethical obligation to protect the rights and welfare of those human beings” (Wolff, 2010, p. 78). This caveat applies even if the assessment process is complex, requiring multiple meetings with the IRB or other review agency.

Collins (2004), Khanlou and Peter (2005), Guta et al. (2012), and Davison et al. (2013) offered some recommendations for those interested in pursuing PAR methods while still carefully assessing risk and articulating their research design for independent review. Collins, for instance, advocated for “ecological ethics,” which insists on a deeper form of risk assessment. Ecological ethics regards a community as a collection of individuals where “[e]ach member . . . is an integral part of a co-evolving whole.” Given this, “it is not enough to make discrete judgments of the morality of specific actions or decisions.” Rather, assessment of risk must be regarded as an “ongoing process of negotiating power structures to maximize the inclusion of all [members of the community]” (p. 349). Although Collins suggested that a code of ethics holds limited value for PAR projects because they tend to produce “unpredictable, complex and unique surprises” (p. 349), his notion of a complex ecology of individuals and social structures demands at least an interdisciplinary, ongoing assessment of risk. Davison et al. (2013) and Guta et al. (2012) share the general “relational” concept at the heart of Collins’s argument. In Davison et al., the idea of a “relational autonomy” (p. 59) and a “relational solidarity” (p. 60), and in Guta et al., the idea of “feminist relational ethics” (p. 19) held by PAR researchers, reveal a deeper, more complex set of ethical dilemmas and, thus, higher standards for ethical practices that must be articulated for independent review.

Khanlou and Peter (2005) offered some important advice about how to connect PAR methods to traditional ethical research practices. They noted that ethical research commonly has seven requirements, including social and/or scientific value, validity, fair subject selection, favorable risk–benefit ratio, independent review, informed consent, and respect for participants (p. 2335). Because of the emergent, collaborative nature of PAR methods, modifications and additions to these standards are necessary. For example, in addition to the sort of scientific validity expected among social sciences, they called for being able to assess and articulate “the social validity from a community perspective.” In other words,

the goals established jointly by the participants in the beginning of the project are met, at least to some degree, by the end of the project. The latter in their view may be more important than producing empirical results (p. 2336). In terms of risk assessment, in addition to modified forms of traditional models of informed consent, anonymity, and privacy (which as discussed above produces complex problems in PAR research), Khanlou and Peter argued for the articulation of fair workloads, discussion of how the project leads to self-determination of the communities and/or participants involved, explanation of how existing risks are outweighed by potential benefits, careful enumeration of why participants are selected (in terms of who “counts” as community members), and availability of these details for independent review.

Thus, informed consent becomes an evolving process. Khanlou and Peter (2005) emphasized that it is “incumbent upon the initiator of the research to begin a process of information exchange that, in the broadest sense, would constitute informed consent” (pp. 2337). This sort of conversation would be ongoing, might include members of the IRB, and would be accounted for by the researchers responsible for gaining ethical oversight. To further ensure respectful treatment of participants, researchers should also address issues related to joint authorship, ownership of data, and methods of dissemination. These negotiations would need to account for the right of participants to withdraw and to have their identities held confidentially (if needed or if possible). As the project develops, new risks are likely to emerge, need assessment, and require critical oversight from independent reviewers (pp. 2336–2337). This process creates new layers of work for researchers and, for the IRB, offers the challenge of maintaining flexibility toward accepting an emergent design that articulates the most careful measures to protect the rights of participants.

### **Conclusion: Discussion and Recommendations**

This review of PAR demonstrates both its potential value for community-engaged scholars seeking best practices and the challenges such an approach is likely to pose. Aligned with Boyer’s (1990) call in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, PAR’s strong commitment to the pursuit of more democratic and inclusive research practices aimed at addressing tangible social problems makes it incredibly alluring to community-engaged scholars. In addition, its historical, philosophical, and political commitment to shifting unjust and inequitable systems, including conventional academic systems and research review processes, makes it valuable for com-



munity-engaged scholars committed to a decolonizing, bicultural critical approach to community engagement (*Hernandez, 2016*). On the other hand, the review demonstrates that PAR's burgeoning popularity over the years has led large, formal, and powerful institutional bodies to adopt the practice. This widespread legitimization of PAR has increased concerns about the agenda behind PAR projects and the legitimacy of its actual practices: Who is really defining the project? Advocating for change? Funding the work? And to what end?

Conversely, this very same positioning of PAR historically, politically, and philosophically—as a response to (and at times a rejection of) standard academic research practices—makes it particularly susceptible to what can be characterized as a potentially dangerous and at times arrogant rejection of the ethical and legal oversight of external review. Although PAR often offers important critiques of the way in which conventional research practices operate to exclude, we conclude that researchers must beware of how such a stance might yield dangerous assumptions about the inherent merit of their own projects as beyond the purview of independent assessment. Such a stance is counter to the commitments of collaborative engagement and forecloses opportunities to fruitfully adjust such practices, whereas consistent engagement with review boards can yield transformations valuable to other participatory projects. Many PAR practitioners are themselves already quite cognizant of this critique and have been seeking to work within these systems to foster better working relationships with their IRBs.

The review clearly demonstrates a divergence among PAR practitioners in how they define and engage with issues of power and risk as well as the practical ethical challenges involved. PAR practitioners have been defining these critiques and designing countermeasures by, for instance, enacting and advocating for more self-reflexivity and measuring how the project empowers co-ownership and action. We conclude that these concerns can be ameliorated in part by ensuring that one works closely both with review boards and with the community more broadly, engages in sustained dialogue, and considers how practices should be adjusted.

The review has also generated a series of questions and concerns about positionality and authorship. Our review found that very few research results were coauthored with community participants. Only rarely were such participants listed as cocontributors. A sometimes simultaneous lack of specificity about what the community gained through the research, combined with a lack of com-

munity voice, left us wondering about the supposedly collaborative nature of the project. This same problem is endemic to the community engagement literature as well (*Harman, 2015*). Is it participatory if publication requirements exclude the voices of community participants in the publications that emerge from this work? Why are other participants not included? We wonder to what extent the requirements to speak in academic and disciplinary languages prevent a shift in practices? To what extent is the impetus for this research emerging from within the university, the departments, or other institutionalized spaces?

With these findings in mind, we offer community-engaged scholars interested in pursuing PAR the following recommendations:

- Engage in more consistent and more public practices of self-reflexivity about the risks, challenges, and failures.
- Explore how PAR is relevant and appropriate for the collaborative project.
- Operate as a boundary spanner: Move outside the boundaries of your department and institution.
- Leverage transdisciplinary planning theories, methods, and tools (*Pohl, Krütli, & Stauffacher 2017*); seek out multiple epistemological standpoints (*Brown & Lambert, 2013*); and engage in systems thinking (*Watson & Watson, 2013*).
- Engage in inclusive and consistent dialogue about risk assessment, concerns, and contextual issues with all stakeholders.
- Review a range of IRB practices. If or when one's own IRB is unprepared for or unaware of the challenges of this approach to research, review different models.
- Ensure careful evaluation of how the project fosters inclusion, distributes power, and moves toward more just outcomes from all stakeholder perspectives. Design and employ metrics to assess how the project empowers equitable and just contributions.
- Advocate for procedural and institutional change. PAR opens opportunities for building relationships across difference, shifting exclusionary, supposedly objective, and value-neutral research practices and policies.
- Make the nature of the collaboration transparent by pursuing coauthorship practices, ensuring formal

acknowledgement of all PAR participants, and detailing contributions.

- Publish in openly accessible platforms so the project's outreach and impact can grow.

In the end, such measures help to ensure that PAR functions as a democratic, inclusive, equitable, and just process that emerges from and responds to the needs of all participants.

## References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224.
- Billies, M., Francisco, V., Krueger, P., & Linville, D. (2010). Participatory action research: Our methodological roots. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 3(3), 277–286.
- Blake, M. (2007). Formality and friendship: Research ethics review and participatory action research. *ACME: An International E-journal for Critical Geographies*, 6(3), 411–421.
- Boser, S. (2006). Ethics and power in community–campus partnerships for research. *Action Research*, 4(1), 9–21.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Brabeck, K., Lykes, M. B., Sibley, E., & Kene, P. (2015). Ethical ambiguities in participatory action research with unauthorized migrants. *Ethics and Behavior*, 25(1), 21–36.
- Bradbury-Huang, H., & Reason, P. (Eds.). (2013). *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.
- Brown, V. A., & Lambert, J. A. (2013). *Collective learning for transformational change: A guide to collaborative action*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brydon-Miller, M. (2013). Ethics and action research: Deepening our commitment to principles of social justice and redefining systems of democratic practice. In H. Bradbury-Huang & P. Reason (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.; pp. 199–210). London, England: Sage.
- Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., & Maguire, P. (2003). Why action research? *Action Research*, 1(1), 9–28. doi:10.1177/14767503030011002
- Burns, D. (2007). *Systemic action research: A strategy for whole system change*. Bristol, Great Britain: Policy Press.
- Cannella, G. S., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2007). Predatory vs. dialogic ethics: Constructing an illusion or ethical practice as the core of research methods. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(3), 315–335.
- Chabot, C., Shoveller, J. A., Spencer, G., & Johnson, J. L. (2012). Ethical and epistemological insights: A case study of participatory action research with young people. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 7(2), 20–33.

- Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*. London, England: Intermediate Technology.
- Chandler, D., & Torbert, W. R. (2003). Transforming inquiry and action by interweaving 27 flavors of action research. *Action Research, 1*(2), 133–152.
- Collins, S. (2004). Ecology and ethics in participatory collaborative action research: An argument for the authentic participation of students in educational research. *Educational Action Research, 12*(3), 347–362.
- Coombes, B., Johnson, J. T., & Howitt, R. (2014). Indigenous geographies III: Methodological innovation and the unsettling of participatory research. *Progress in Human Geography, 38*(6), 845–854.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Davison, C. M., Kahwa, E., Edwards, N., Atkinson, U., Roelofs, S., Hepburn-Brown, C., . . . MacFarlane, D. (2013). Ethical challenges and opportunities for nurses in HIV and AIDS community-based participatory research in Jamaica. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 8*(1), 55–67.
- Fals Borda, O. (2001). Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 27–37). London, England: Sage.
- Fenge, L. (2010). Striving towards inclusive research: An example of participatory action research with older lesbians and gay men. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(3), 878–894.
- Flicker, S., Travers, R., Guta, A., McDonald, S., & Meagher, A. (2007). Ethical dilemmas in community-based participatory research: Recommendations for institutional review boards. *Journal of Urban Health, 84*(4), 478–493.
- Gaventa, J., & Cornwall, A. (2001). Power and knowledge. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 70–80). London, England: Sage.
- Giles, H. (2012). Negotiating the boundary between the academy and the community. In D. W. Butin & S. Seider (Eds.), *The engaged campus: Certificates, minors, and majors as the new community engagement* (pp. 49–68). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Glass, K. G., & Kaufert, J. (2007). Research ethics review and Aboriginal community values: Can the two be reconciled? *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics: An International Journal, 2*(2), 25–40.
- Goerisch, D. (2017). “Doing good work”: Feminist dilemmas of volunteering in the field. *The Professional Geographer, 69*(2), 307–313.
- Grant, J., Nelson, G., & Mitchell, T. (2013). Negotiating the challenges of participatory action research: Relationships, power, participation, change, and credibility. In H. Bradbury-Huang & P. Reason (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.; pp. 589–601). London, England: Sage.
- Gray, D. E. (2014). *Doing research in the real world* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- Gustafson, D., & Brunger, F. (2014). Ethics, “vulnerability,” and feminist participatory action research with a disability community. *Qualitative Health Research, 24*(7), 997–1005.
- Guta, A., Nixon, S., Gahagan, J., & Fielden, S. (2012). “Walking along beside the researcher”: How Canadian REBs/IRBs are responding to the needs of community-based participatory research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 7*(1), 15–25.
- Hamm, M. (2015). Understanding urban social movements in cognitive capitalism: Methodological reflections on participatory and ethnographic research. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures, 24*(2), 16–33.
- Harman, E. (2015). Community partners critique. Jagla, V. M., Furco, A., & Strait, J. R. (Eds.). *Service learning pedagogy: how does it measure up?* Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>.
- Hernandez, K. (2016). *Service and learning for whom? Toward a critical decolonizing bicultural service learning pedagogy* (Doctoral dissertation). Loyola Marymount University. Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest.
- Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2001). The practice of co-operative inquiry: Research “with” rather than “on” people. *Handbook of action research, 1*, 179–189.
- Holland, H., Powell, D., Eng, E., & Drew, G. (2010). Models of engaged scholarship: An interdisciplinary discussion. *Collaborative Anthropologies, 3*, 1–36.
- Huizer, G. (1983). The politics of rural development in Latin America: Constraints on cooperatives and popular participation. *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, No. 35*, pp. 3–20.
- Huutoniemi, K. (2015). Interdisciplinarity as academic accountability: Prospects for quality control across disciplinary boundaries. *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy, 30*(2): 163–185. doi:10.1080/02691728.2015.1015061
- Jackson, T. (2013). Reconstructing the indigenous in African management research: Implications for international management studies in a globalized world. *Management International Review, 53*(1), 13–38.
- Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review, 9*(1), 36–41.
- Keeler, B. L. (2017, July 18). Society is ready for a new kind of science: Is academia? [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://blog.oup.com/2017/07/society-ready-for-new-kind-science-academia/>
- Kesby, M. (2005). Rethorizing empowerment-through-participation as a performance in space: Beyond tyranny to transformation. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30*(4), 2037–2065.
- Ketchum, S., & Meyers, R. (2018, July 11). *Recognizing and respecting tribal IRBs*. Retrieved from <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2018/07/11/recognizing-and-respecting-tribal-irbs/>
- Khanlou, N., & Peter, E. (2005). Participatory action research: Considerations for ethical review. *Social Science and Medicine, 60*(10), 2333–2340.
- Krueger, P. (2011). Activating memories of endurance: Participatory action research of school safety practices and institutional codes of research ethics. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 3*(4), 411–432.

- Kuriloff, P. J., Andrus, S. H., & Ravitch, S. M. (2011). Messy ethics: Conducting moral participatory action research in the crucible of university–school relations. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 5(2), 49–62.
- Leal, P. F. (2007). Participation: The ascendancy of a buzzword in the neo-liberal era. *Development in Practice*, 17(4/5), 539–548.
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Livingstone, A.-M., Celemencki, J., & Calixte, M. (2014). Youth participatory action research and school improvement: The missing voices of Black youth in Montreal. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 37(1), 283–307.
- Longo, N., & Gibson, C. M. (2016). Collaborative engagement: The future of teaching and learning in higher education. In M. Post, E. Ward, N. Longo, & J. Saltmarsh (Eds.), *Publicly engaged scholars: Next generation engagement and the future of higher education* (pp. 61–75). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Lundy, P., & McGovern, A. (2006). Participation, truth, and partiality. *Participatory action research, community-based truth-telling and post-conflict transition in Northern Ireland*, 40(1), 71–88.
- Lykes, M. B., & Mallona, A. (2013). Towards transformational liberation: Participatory action research and praxis. In H. Bradbury-Huang & P. Reason (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.; pp.106–120). London, England: Sage.
- Magolda, B. B. (2004). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Maguire, P. (2001). Uneven ground: Feminisms and action research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 59–69). London, England: Sage.
- McNall, M. A., Barnes-Najor, J., Brown, R., Doberneck, D., & Fitzgerald, H. (2015). Systemic engagement: Universities as partners in systemic approaches to community change. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 19(1), 1–26.
- Noffke, S. E. (1995). Action research and democratic schooling: Problems and potentials. In S. E. Noffke & R. B. Stevenson (Eds.), *Educational action research: Becoming practically critical* (pp. 1–10). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Orr, C. M. (2011). *Women's studies as civic engagement: Research and recommendations*. Retrieved from [https://www.nwsa.org/Files/Resources/WomensStudiesasCivicEngagement2011Revised\\_Finalpdf-1.pdf](https://www.nwsa.org/Files/Resources/WomensStudiesasCivicEngagement2011Revised_Finalpdf-1.pdf)
- Ozanne, J. L., & Saatcioglu, B. (2008). Participatory action research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(3), 423–439.
- Pain, R., Kesby, M., & Askins, K. (2011). Geographies of impact: Power, participation and potential. *Area*, 43(2), 183–188.
- Peek, L., Tobin-Gurley, J., Cox, R., Scannell, L., Fletcher, S., & Heykoop, C. (2016). Engaging youth in post-disaster research: Lessons learned from a creative methods approach. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research & Engagement*, 9(1): 89–112.

- Pohl, C., Krütli, P., & Stauffacher, M. (2017). Ten reflective steps for rendering research societally relevant. *GAIA*, 26(1), 43–51. doi:10.14512/gaia.26.1.10
- Pyrch, T., & Castillo, M. T. (2001). The sights and sounds of indigenous knowledge. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 379–385). London, England: Sage.
- Rahman, A. (1993). *People's self-development: Perspectives on participatory action research: A journey through experience*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Rahnema, M. (1990). Participatory action research: The “Last Temptation of Saint” development. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 15(2), 199–226.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London, England: Sage.
- Reason, P., & Marshall, J. (2001). On working with graduate research students. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 413–419). London, England: Sage.
- Reid, C., & Frisby, W. (2013). Continuing the journey: Articulating dimensions of feminist participatory research (FPAR). In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.; pp. 93–105). London, England: Sage.
- Riecken, T., Strong-Wilson, T., Conibear, F., Michael, C., & Riecken, J. (2005). Connecting, speaking, listening: Towards an ethics of voice with/in participatory action research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(1), Art. 26. Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0501260>
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117. doi:10.1002/chi.617
- Shumer, R. (2015). Invited retrospective: The future of service-learning and community engagement research is mixed [methods]. In V. M. Jagla, A. Furco, & J. R. Strait (Eds.), *Service-learning pedagogy: How does it measure up?* (pp. 365–382). Charlotte, NC: Information Age. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Stacey, R. D. (2002). Research perspective: Organizations as complex responsive processes of relating. *Journal of Innovative Management*, 8(2), 27–39.
- Stanley, L. (1990). Feminist praxis and academic mode of production: An editorial introduction. In L. Stanley (Ed.), *Feminist praxis: Research, theory, and epistemology in feminist sociology* (pp. 3–19). London, England: Routledge.
- Stanton, T. (2007). *New times demand new scholarship II: Research universities and civic engagement: Opportunities and challenges*. Retrieved from [https://kdp0143vw6z2dlw631ifc5-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/initiatives/research\\_universities/Civic\\_Engagement.pdf](https://kdp0143vw6z2dlw631ifc5-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/initiatives/research_universities/Civic_Engagement.pdf)

- Tilley-Lubbs, G. A. (2009). Good intentions pave the way to hierarchy: A retrospective autoethnographic approach. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16(1), 59–68.
- Vakil, A. C. (1994). Of designs and disappointments: Some limits to participatory research in a third world context. *American Sociologist*, 25(3), 4–19.
- Viswanathan, M., Ammerman, A., Eng, E., Garlehner, G., Lohr, K., Griffith, D., . . . Whitener, L. (2004). *Community-based participatory research: Assessing the evidence: Summary* (Evidence Report/Technology Assessment No. 99; AHRQ Publication No. 04-E0222-1). Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11852/>
- Watson, W. R., & Watson, S. L. (2013). Exploding the ivory tower: Systemic change for higher education. *TechTrends*, 57(5), 42–46.
- Wolf, L. E. (2010). The research ethics committee is not the enemy: Oversight of community-based participatory research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics: An International Journal*, 5(4), 77–86.
- Wong, N., Zimmerman, M., & Parker, E. (2010). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1–2), 100–114. doi:10.1007/s10464-010-9330-0
- Yanar, Z. M., Fazli, M., Rahman, J., & Farthing, R. (2016). Research ethics committees and participatory action research with young people: The politics of voice. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 11(2), 122–128.

## About the Authors

**Danielle Lake** is an assistant professor in the Liberal Studies Department and coordinator of the Accelerated Leadership Program at Grand Valley State University. Her research explores various approaches to addressing social challenges, including pragmatist feminism, philosophic activism, and democratic engagement. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy at Michigan State University.

**Joel Wendland** is an associate professor of liberal studies at Grand Valley State University. His current research centers on a historical study of racial formation in Michigan. He earned his Ph. D in American Studies at Washington State University.