

Chapter 13

**PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH – AN EMPOWERING
METHODOLOGY WITH MARGINALIZED
POPULATIONS**

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SITUATING THE KNOWERS: THE WRITING STORY

We come to participatory research (PR) from the areas of drama/theatre, drama/theatre education and educational research with a shared interest in popular or applied theatre as a method for education, community development and activism with marginalized populations. Popular Theatre (PT) is “a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied” (Prentki & Selman, 2000: 8). In addition to teaching drama education at secondary and post-secondary levels, we have completed graduate level coursework and community training in PT facilitation, including workshops with Brazilian *Theatre of the Oppressed* founder Augusto Boal. We have also been involved as participants and facilitators in numerous PT projects. In undertaking research in drama education for our doctoral degrees we discovered, through the works of Canadian educators such as Ross Kidd and Budd Hall, close historical, philosophical and methodological ties among popular education, PT and PR.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory research (PR), as we develop it here, draws on the underlying principles common to popular education, popular theatre (PT) and other popular arts approaches. We describe the methodology with examples from our six-month study in 2003 with a group of incarcerated adolescent boys at a young offender facility in Alberta, Canada.

While we cannot claim to have enacted an ideal PR model, we did draw on the philosophical and methodological principles of PR via our work in PT to engage the youth in a process that valued them as producers of knowledge. Our work advocates on behalf of the youth by sharing their perspectives. *The Universal Mosaic of Drama and Theatre: The International Drama Education Association 2004 Dialogue*, includes an account of the process written as a performance script entitled “Arresting Change: Popular Theatre with Young Offenders”.

Although as Park notes “no single [PR] project is expected to faithfully follow [PR ideals] in practice” (1993: 2), we set this as our goal in all of our ongoing work with incarcerated youth, street youth, inner-city students and drama education students.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

First conceptualized in the 1960s & 70s, this “new paradigm” approach to community-based research is viewed as a means of producing knowledge, a tool for community dialogue, education, raising consciousness, mobilizing for action, and amplifying needs, demands and critiques from the “margins” (hooks, 1984). PR entails “transformative praxis” (Fals-Borda, 1991), the shared ownership and community analysis of issues with an orientation towards action. As a democratic process, grounded in a participatory worldview, PR brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, and develops practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes and practical solutions to pressing community issues (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PR does not generate knowledge for the sake of knowledge, nor seek universal laws or scientific principles, rather, it produces reflective knowledge that helps people to “name,” and, consequently, to change their world (Beder, 1991).

As research “for,” “with” and “by” the people rather than “on” the people, PR revisions the distinction between the researcher and researched – the subject/object relationship of traditional research – establishing in its place a subject/subject relationship (Fals-Borda, 1991). Ideally, participants are involved in the research process from beginning to end. Together they set the research agenda, pose questions for inquiry, participate in the collection and analysis of “data,” and decide the outcomes of the process – how the research will be used. PR accentuates the inherent human capacity to create knowledge based on experience. The group generates, analyzes and reaffirms or criticizes popular knowledge, in the process fleshing out local problems, examining their contexts, seeking and enacting solutions (Fals-Borda, 1991).

Participatory research is both a method and a philosophy – of research and of life (Salazar, 1991) – that seeks to break unjust power relations and work towards achieving a more equitable society. By emphasizing emotions, personal experience and action rather than rational thinking alone, the group process ceases to convey isolated opinions, becoming instead a springboard for collective reasoning. The knowledge produced is socially heard, legitimized and added to the people’s collective knowledge, empowering group members to solve their shared problems (Fals-Borda, 1991).

In our research we employed PT methods grounded in the work of Brazilian dramaturge Augusto Boal. Inspired by Brecht’s (1964) theatrical methods and Freire’s (1970) popular

education movement, Boal developed his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) techniques to engage oppressed groups in preparing them to change their social reality – as a rehearsal for future action.

HISTORY OF PR

PR has its roots in “action research.” Seeking to close the gap between social action and social theory Lewin first introduced action research as a methodology that would both solve practical problems and discover “general laws of group life” (1948: 204). Research, he said, must begin with a situation or a problem rather than a theory, include the people involved in collaborative investigation, and incorporate action designed to address the matters under investigation (Lewin, 1948).

PR emerged in the 1960s and 70s within the contexts of community development (particularly in the “developing” world – Africa, Asia, and Latin America) and popular education as an alternative to dominant research traditions. Prevailing research practices promoted the myths of neutrality, objectivity and empiricism (Tandon, 1988) and positioned the university-trained researcher as the expert – the only one capable of producing knowledge. In contrast, PR acknowledges representational, reflective and relational forms of knowledge (Park, 2001), and experiential, presentational and practical ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997).

Influenced by the popular education movement of the 1960s and 70s, PR abides by three key principles of Frierean philosophy: popular education is community education, improving communities through cooperative study and action; popular education is political education, creating collectively a more equitable and democratic society; and popular education is people’s education empowering communities that have been excluded or marginalized by the dominant society (Hurst, 1995). Participants in popular education engage in participatory, creative, and empowering methods of educational practice, employing critical analysis in order to identify and transform oppressive structures (Arnold et al., 1991). Popular educators promote “conscientization,” Friere’s (1973) term for the process by which people, as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of both the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality. The dynamic of reflection and action, or praxis, is central to both transformational education and PR approaches (Freire, 1973; Horton, 1990; Arnold et al., 1991; Shor, 1992).

As PR was founded on work begun in developing countries, consideration should be given to the relevance of PR to “first world,” “developed” or “Western” regions, especially within institutional contexts. Since “developing” situations and marginalized populations exist even in highly developed countries, PR can have relevance there.

PR AND RELATED RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The terms “participatory research,” (PR) “action research,” (AR) and “participatory action research” (PAR) – often used interchangeably – describe related methodological approaches with common roots. Fals-Borda (2001), acknowledging the early work of Lewin

(1946) and others in the area of AR, uses the terms “participatory action-research” (Fals-Borada & Rahman, 1991) and “participatory (action) research” (Fals-Borda, 2001) to highlight both the participatory nature of the research and its action orientation. Others use the term PAR to describe a methodology which, at times, more closely resembles AR (McTaggart 1997; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and, at other times, PR (Fine, et al. 2001).

Although related, these methodologies differ in terms of objectives and methods. Some focus on the investigation of “practice” for the purpose of improving “practice” (for example, see Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). These professionalize the research by positioning participants as professional or semi-professional practitioners. Conversely, grassroots or community-based research focuses not on “practice” (for example see Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Park et al, 1993) but on improving participants’ life circumstances. Although PR, AR, and PAR all take “action” as their aim, each defines “action” differently. Action may refer to the specific steps that participants take to change their own practices (see Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), or to the direct social action that participants take as a result of the research process (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Park et al, 1993). Furthermore, some approaches advocate prescribed, highly technical methods – such as the characteristic action research spiral, a conscious and deliberate cycle of action and reflection (see Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), while others (typically more grassroots approaches) employ emergent methods based on the needs of the community (see Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Park et al, 1993).

Some methodologies alternately referred to as PR, AR or PAR apply liberal approaches that work for incremental change within existing power structures, whereas other more radical approaches rooted in critical theory, aim at overcoming power imbalances (O’Brien, 1998). At times, AR assumes a highly technical attitude, which is contrary to our PT practice. PT aligns itself with the research methodology more commonly referred to as simply PR (e.g. Kidd & Byram, 1978; Kraai, MacKenzie & Youngman, 1979; Hall, 1981; Gaventa, 1988; Tandon, 1988; Kassam & Mustafa, 1982; Park et al., 1993). Other methodologies that share the same historical roots and philosophical foundations include socially critical action research (Tripp, 1990), transformative research (Deshler & Selener, 1991; Westwood, 1991), community-based (Israel et al., 1998) or collaborative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997), feminist research (hooks, 1984; Maguire, 1987), anti-oppressive research (Brown & Strega, 2005) and long-standing indigenous approaches (Smith, 1999; Castellano, 1986).

In undertaking PR, we caution practitioners to be wary for as Jordan (2003) points out, neo-liberal agencies are busily co-opting the notion of participation in research in developing countries as a strategy for getting the people to buy into a capitalist market economy, adverse to the research aims of PR.

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Ideally, the impetus for conducting PR comes from within the community itself. By drawing upon community knowledge and resources people are able to conduct their own research. Though perhaps not identified as “research,” there have always been community-driven efforts to investigate problems and determine solutions for action. This is how

communities have survived day-to-day struggles and adapted to meet needs over time. It is important to acknowledge that communities do have the capacity to re-search their worlds – ordinary people everywhere are capable of researching, understanding and transforming their realities.

Since populations that are marginalized and powerless (Park, 1993; Liamputtong, 2005) typically lack the time, resources, and experience necessary for both initiating and conducting research, however, outside researchers – university or agency-based – possessing the interest, knowledge and experience necessary for facilitating community-based research often initiate formal PR. Individual researchers, of course, are frequently compelled to address the concerns of those communities to which they themselves belong or with which they have an established connection.

Regardless of who initiates the research – the community or outside researchers – the process generally begins with a problem. Members of the community must collectively experience the problem (though not necessarily identify or articulate its ramifications) and desire a solution. Ideally, participants control the process from the outset (Park, 1993).

While the youth in our research study did not specifically identify incarceration or the behaviours that lead to incarceration as a problem, we presumed that none of them experienced incarceration as a desirable condition. Hence, a viable topic for participatory inquiry became the kinds of behaviours that lead to incarceration and a search for alternatives.

THE ROLE OF “RESEARCHERS” AND “PARTICIPANTS” IN PR

PR aims to contribute to individual and community-based efforts by integrating research, education and action. To achieve this, the barriers between researcher and participant and between academic and popular knowledge, must be broken down and the traditional hierarchy of those relationships reversed (Mellor, 1988). Yet, at the outset of any PR project, particularly one involving outside researchers working with marginalized populations, a power imbalance between “researchers” and “participants” invariably exists. This is particularly true in relation to the matter of choice since it is the researcher who chooses to participate and retains a greater range of options. As a PR process unfolds, relationships must be carefully and constantly negotiated to meet the demands of the research. These negotiations must be sensitive to the skills, competencies and various positionings of all the individuals involved, the particularities of the research context and the nature of the knowledge sought. Researcher accountability to the research community via open and ongoing dialogue serves as a mechanism for ensuring this (Mellor, 1988).

As researchers and drama facilitators in our PT project with incarcerated youth, we tried to mitigate the power imbalances between the youth and ourselves by fostering open communication within a caring and safe environment. We encouraged the boys to contribute to the process as much as they were willing and able to do so. Roles were assumed by those most able to fulfill them. Although we were committed to lessening the power imbalance between the inmates and ourselves, we had choices that the boys did not: we could always leave.

Researchers must be aware of the issues of relationship and participation within the changing context of each unique research setting or project.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: DOING PR

PR comprises, not a single method, but a set of principles that guide the way of interacting in the process of constructing knowledge. According to Budd Hall, “there is no single method of participatory research” (1988: 7). PR is not a set of methods or techniques for conducting research, but a methodology that offers an alternative approach to knowledge production (Tandon, 1988). The PR process is neither prescribed nor pre-determined. In general, the community, in collaboration with the researchers, decides how to investigate the problem – what information to seek, methods to employ, information-gathering procedures to follow, and techniques of analysis to apply – as well as how to use the knowledge gained and determine the actions to be taken (Park et al., 1993). Dialogue is an essential aspect of any participatory process. In an ongoing and open fashion, the research community dialogues around such issues as project objectives, the nature of each member’s participation, roles and responsibilities, existing power structures, ethical concerns, and strategies for action.

Conventional quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires, though sometimes applied, are steeped in positivist values (Jordan, 2003) and so typically antithetical to the goals of PR. Qualitative research methods such as archival studies, document analysis, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and field notes offer more holistic perspectives and are therefore better suited to understanding the complex social issues under investigation in PR. Striving to end the monopoly of the written word, participatory research also commonly incorporates alternative methods such as oral traditions, cultural art forms that are already part of community life such as storytelling or songs, and other popular arts forms including documentation of life stories, photography or photo/voice projects, radio, poetry, music, myths, drawing, sculpture, puppetry, drama and PT (see Kidd & Byram, 1978; Lykes, 2001). These alternative forms become meeting spaces for cultural exchange (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Park et al., 1993; Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001; Liamputtong, 2005 for example). They offer exciting possibilities for engaging people in expressing and investigating their realities, and for generating knowledge and disseminating research. The arts are a particularly effective means of eliciting responses from groups, including marginalized groups who do not necessarily concede to or appreciate the dominance of the written word (Liamputtong, 2005).

Our work with incarcerated youth used PT to this end. We employed PT activities to engage the boys in exploring their collective experiences, both prior to and during incarceration, and in envisioning goals for the future. We examined and questioned motivations for their behaviour, explored their social contexts, and looked for alternatives. While many of these activities took the form of games and improvisations, image theater and forum theatre work (Boal, 1979) also provided opportunities for exploring and discussing alternate realities. By sculpting themselves and others and acting out characters like themselves in situations like their own, the boys used their own past and present experiences to enter into a dialogue with the researchers about life as they saw it.

In PT facilitation as in drama education, the teacher/facilitator commonly introduces drama-based activities to incite exploration. The techniques provide the form, which participants then imbue with content, drawing on issues and experiences that they deem relevant. The fictionalized form provides a forum for exploration while establishing a safe distance that permits participants to contribute only what they choose. We included in the process activities based upon relevant and popular cultural forms such as graffiti writing/drawing and hip-hop music. As facilitators of the process we kept detailed field notes and reflective journals describing the drama process as it evolved. We also collected and/or documented any artifacts that emerged from the work.

As a result of a new paradigm appreciation for the arts, researchers now recognize art as a method for critical pedagogy (Garoian, 1999) and activism (Kester, 1997). Similarly, arts-based research (Finley, 2003) is emerging as a methodology with commitments and aspirations congruent with PR.

ANALYSIS/INTERPRETATION

Analysis in PR is an emergent process. One must read critically, sort data, identify connections, formulate judgments and make sense of the complexities of the project. Researchers must immerse themselves in the information, applying intuition and experience as they draw on knowledge that is reflective, interpretive, relational, and affective (Park, 2001) in order to find the generative themes that have meaning for participants and serve the purposes of the research. In our project, we began with a thematic analysis of field notes, journal reflections, and drama-process artifacts, drawing out recurring themes, salient moments, and incidents representative of the work.

After several months of facilitating drama workshops with the boys, we became aware of a recurring theme, arising, so we thought, from a clash between the boys' anxieties regarding their identities as young men and the institutional realities of the prison context. The boys drew the following image during a graffiti writing/drawing activity exploring their experiences of incarceration. It depicts a strip search, a common reality in prison, we were told.

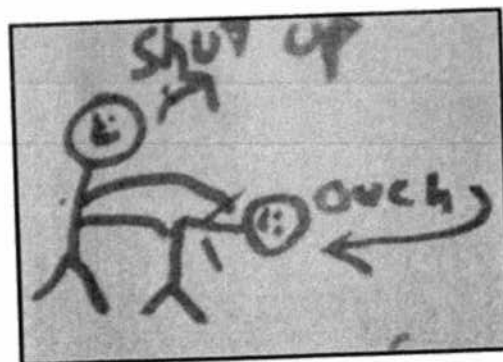


Figure 1.

The following excerpt from the final performance script further elucidates this theme, which we titled “Recti‘fuck’ation”.

Researcher 1: Have you noticed all these . . . are they homo-erotic images and stories that keep coming up?

Researcher 2: Yes. They’re hard to miss . . . the gay characters, the pick-up lines, male prostitutes, bum fucking jokes all mixed up together with talk of hiding things up there – “hooping it,” strip search and references to rape.

Researcher 1: I wonder if this kind of stuff actually goes on in here. Janice?

Researcher 2 takes on the role of Janice.

Janice: (staff person) I’m surprised at all the sexual references too. They keep coming back to it. But you know, there’s never been a case of sexual abuse or rape reported in here . . . Although of course they are subject to a strip search at any given moment. If there’s even a suspicion of anything gone missing, like a nail from the shop or something, the whole unit is strip-searched. Or if they’ve had a visitor that is suspicious.

Researcher 1: We read that rape is a real threat in adult prisons. With all the jokes and rumours that the boys hear, we wondered if it was the boys’ fears that something like this could happen to them made them bring up all these images.

Researcher 2: We imagined how we would feel if we knew we could be strip-searched at any moment, even if we hadn’t done anything wrong.

(Campbell & Conrad, 2006: 384)

Conformity was expected and structured into the boys’ daily lives by means of strictly defined rules (dos and don’ts), a points system based on behaviour that awarded or revoked privileges, regular pat downs, the risk of dorm confinement for bad behaviour, and the ever present threat of strip search. But aside from this, we identified an undercurrent that we felt went beyond security measures.

The boys’ persistent homosexual innuendo, steeped in nervous laughter, suggested discomfort with the jokes and rumours they told us they had heard from police and guards, as well as other inmates, about homosexual relationships in prison and prison rape. We speculated that these jokes and rumours incited their homophobic fears, which became identified with the common prison practice of strip search. In our analysis of this theme, the constant threat of strip search with its attendant humiliation, posed an insidious threat to the young males’ processes of identity construction. Even if, as our staff person assured us, homosexual relationships and rape did not occur in the youth prison, strip search was commonplace. We had never experienced the indignity of being strip-searched; nonetheless, we could empathize with the feelings of humiliation it engenders and understand the boys’ conflation of strip search and violation.

The Alberta Office of the Solicitor General assured us that role of the youth prison was to rehabilitate, not to discipline and punish; yet we wondered, how does humiliation contribute to an agenda of rehabilitation? Is it necessary to humiliate to establish the conformity required to ensure security? Can humiliation be avoided in a prison context? We raised these questions in the search for justice for youth in the context of incarceration.

DISSEMINATION OF PR

Given its action-oriented objectives, the outcome of PR should take some form of social action. In a sense, participatory research is a social action in itself – a site for speaking out in resistance and struggle. However, outcomes can take any form deemed appropriate to the objectives of the project. Ideally, research results are disseminated in both academic and popular contexts. In addition to academic articles and conference presentations, outcomes might take the form of action-oriented activities such as establishing links with existing social movements, forming advocacy groups or co-operatives to continue work for change, making appeals to government in the hope of influencing policy decisions, and publishing popular educational resources or reports in the form of newsletters, flyers or comic books for public consumption. Arts-based methods might yield public performances of music, poetry readings or plays that tour communities (Liamputtong, 2005).

Since the participants' perspectives formed the basis for our report, they were involved only indirectly in the dissemination stage of the research. The legal system does not allow interaction with, or identification of, young offenders after they leave custody. Following our six months of work at the facility, when we were in a position to do something with the "data," the youth with whom we had worked were long gone from the system. With their best interests in mind, we made use of what knowledge we – researchers and youth – had created collectively through the drama process to develop an alternative means of research dissemination.

Keeping true to our drama-based process, we disseminated our research in the form of a performed ethnography or ethnodrama (Turner & Turner, 1982; Conquergood, 1985, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Saldaña, 2003) in which we depicted the PT work with the boys. This ethnodrama focussed on the themes and issues raised by participants, the theatrical process that transpired, and the researchers' experiences of facilitating the project. The text examined the perceptions of the young offenders in relation to the institutional context and the perspectives of the researchers, raising questions about the PT experience. We endeavoured to meet the commitments for quality in new paradigm and arts-based research (see Denzin, 2003; Finley, 2003) by allowing the voices of participants to be heard, making the research useful to participants and the community, fighting oppressive structures in everyday life, being creative, passionate, visceral and kinetic, experimenting with form, producing an open text with multiple meanings and raising questions rather than formulating conclusions.

The script depicts the PT work – games, improvisational activities, images and fictionalized scenarios – and reconstructs discussions about the drama. The characters and incidents incorporate what the boys revealed to us as shaped by our perspectives – sympathetic to the predicament of the youth and optimistic for positive change. We included roles for ourselves as researchers addressing the audience about the research process. We also assumed the roles of boys to reenact the dramas that they had created. At times, we took on the roles of staff, guards and police officers interacting with the boys or addressing the audience about the issues under investigation. Our performance included projected images of the boys' graffiti writing/drawing and a musical selection that they had identified as relevant.

The performance text is a self-conscious construction or fictionalized re-presentation of what happened, inherently subjective and partial, but also open to multiple interpretations. It

portrays the spirit of the creative process, depicting, through expressive, evocative, non-discursive representations, the researchers' struggles to make sense of the process as well as the participants' dramatic expressions.

We rehearsed our performance, presented it at several conferences, and published the script (Campbell & Conrad, 2006). We also gave copies of the script to the Centre's administration and to the Alberta Office of the Solicitor General (the authority to whom we were ultimately accountable). When the Centre's Program Director (our immediate contact person throughout the research process) was utterly scandalized by our report, we concluded that our work had, indeed, hit upon significant issues. Ongoing discussions ensued, both with him and higher authorities, regarding issues that the boys had raised with us. Through the performance text, we attempted to advocate on behalf of the boys, making known to others what they had told us. In this sense, the project may have had some positive impact on the community of participants.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

PR has at its core the notion of ethical engagement, so questions of ethical practice must always be foremost in the minds of the researchers. Ethical considerations go beyond concerns of informed consent and confidentiality common to ethics review boards. PR practitioners must be accountable for all decisions made, whether they pertain to roles and expectations, how the research will proceed or to what use it will be put. Moreover, the ethical response encompasses an ethic of personal relationship, human interaction and community engagement. As Mellor suggests, "the structure of the [PR] project draws us much closer to our participants than do traditional research models" (1988: 78). PR practitioners must become personally involved in both the struggles and achievements of the community. When sensitive issues arise, they must respond with care and concern for everyone's best interests. Yet as much as we might wish otherwise, we still exist within structures of inequality and injustice. Power imbalances will continue to exist; hence, it behooves the PR practitioner to use the power that comes with a university or agency position to benefit research participants. While we may never achieve our ideals, we "must continue to strive to make ethical practice manifest in every micro-decision in the work we do" (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Eikeland, 2006: 129).

The particularities of the research context (high turnover amongst participants and policy prohibiting us from following-up with youth upon their release) prevented participants from responding to our interpretation of the research. Nevertheless, we intended that the research remain true to the boys' perspectives and in some way benefit them or those who would come after them. The "Recti'fuck'ation" theme in our research presentation caused a stir amongst the prison authorities; yet, it also opened a space for dialogue with authorities, allowing us to raise the issue of strip search, and inmates' perception of it as humiliating institutionalized violence. Whether this had any direct effect on practice remains uncertain; but at the very least, it has problematized the issue for some.

ASSESSMENT OF PR

We must assess PR's accomplishments according to how well it has addressed the unique challenges of a specific project. Since one can not expect a single project to exemplify all of the ideals of PR (Parks, 1993), we need not assess it in terms of how closely it has adhered to PR principles. Rather, one must assess each project according to the particularities of its own context, considering what might be realistically accomplished in the research project over a limited span of time. We must also keep in mind that in doing PR "we work within the constraints of the society as we find it" (Mellor, 1988: 80).

In our PT project, we came to question how truly participatory the process was, given that we provided the impetus for the work and the interpretation that ultimately determined the outcome of the research. Yet, as Fine et al. conclude in relation to their PR work with women in a prison context,

All research is collaborative and participatory, even though not all researchers acknowledge the co-construction of knowledge. Instead, most researchers engage in ventriloquism and plagiarism as the norm. Material gathered from, with and on any community – including a prison – constitutes a participatory process. More typically, respondents are given code names, perhaps thanked, rarely acknowledged as co-authors (Fine et al., 2001: par 108)

In this sense, we celebrate the participation of the incarcerated boys with whom we worked.

We must also reconsider the nature of quality and validity when doing this type of research. Reason and Bradbury call for a shift from the positivist focus on "truth," to "a concern for engagement, dialogue, pragmatic outcomes and an emergent, reflexive sense of what is important" (2006: 341). They offer a series of questions that evaluate the process in terms of the outcomes and significance of the research, the relational quality of the practice, and the different ways of knowing that were attended to. With these in mind, we formulated the following questions in order to assess our own work: Were the relationships between participants respectful and ethical? Were the methods used appropriate to the context? Have the values of PR been actualized in practice? Were the outcomes of the research meaningful to participants? Do the outcomes contribute to enhancing the lives of participants? Were there implications for positive change in the larger social context?

The context of incarceration provided little opportunity to involve the boys in meaningful decision-making. In this regard, our claim to having conducted PR remains open to debate; yet, given the denial of basic rights and freedoms within the youth prison context, perhaps this was the best for which we could hope. Even with the cachet of the university, we had limited control over our actions in this highly institutionalized setting. Working directly with the boys only became possible after carefully negotiating our entry into the facility and the parameters of our study with the Centre's administration. We were permitted approximately one hour per week with the boys' working within an existing program and under the guidance of a willing staff person. We had no say in who could participate and never knew from one week to the next which boys would be present. The boys themselves had limited control over

whether or not they were permitted to attend from week to week: on any given day, entire dorm units were commonly confined in response to various disruptions.

The administration's edict that we should not allow the boys to create drama that glorified or promoted criminal behaviour, including the use of foul language or references to gang activity, severely censored our work. Yet, within these constraints, we managed to provide an opportunity for the boys to share their experiences and understandings, to make sense of their realities and consider alternatives. In this sense, the boys did guide the content of the work, and we were vigilant in presenting their perspectives as best we could. We are satisfied that we provided an opportunity for the boys' voices to be heard around relevant issues in a way that would not have been available otherwise.

PR can make small contributions to the process of social change, but as Tandon (1988) notes, we should not expect too much, since social transformation requires various types of interventions besides research.

CHALLENGES OF PR

We are thankful to PR founders and practitioners around the world who, over the past four decades, have worked and written to develop, theorize and legitimize PR; however, many challenges remain.

While PR attempts to break down distinctions between university-trained researchers and community participants, power differences do exist and can never be eradicated. University credentials and/or agency employment bring power and privilege. Rather than denying this, PR practitioners must seek creative ways of using their power and privilege so as to benefit the participants and meet the needs of the PR process. In our case, the power affixed to us as university-trained researchers opened the way for discussions with Alberta corrections officials that would not otherwise have occurred.

Working within institutional settings – universities, agencies, schools, hospitals, and prisons – presents its own set of challenges. Negotiating institutional bureaucracy specifically, hierarchical leadership, complex organizational structures and procedural policies, can be overwhelmingly challenging and frustrating. Meeting university expectations can, at times, be paralyzing. While new paradigm research is gaining legitimacy in the social sciences, some disciplines are more reluctant to part with positivist research approaches than others. Although many areas of the Health Sciences have a vested interest in human inquiry, they tend to adhere to the demand for quantifiable outcomes. Ethics review processes at many universities can pose major obstacles for PR. Ethics review boards often require that researchers specify research details well in advance of the project; they do not commonly endorse emergent research designs. Consequently, PR practitioners must present to boards strong arguments in support of alternative paradigm research approaches. Researchers must remain vigilant to ensure that all-consuming institutional demands do not cause neglect of ethical responsibilities that address the needs of research participants. Accountability to participants is of primary importance.

The frustrations involved in struggling for social change are undeniable for both community-based and university/agency-based activist-researchers. This work demands patience and persistence. In fact, following completion of our initial project, one of the

authors spent two full years re-negotiating entry to the young offender facility to conduct further PT-based research. Furthermore, those conducting research with associated institutions, agencies or other organizations must ensure that the research is not co-opted for neo-liberal ends (Jordan, 2003), compelling accommodation to existing power structures, but rather, that it promotes radical social change.

CONCLUSION

PR has existed for over four decades, albeit on the margins of social sciences research, making significant contributions in communities throughout the world on issues as diverse as indigenous land claims, the rights of workers, community development initiatives, environmental health concerns and gender matters. With the growing interest in and acceptance of new paradigm approaches to social sciences research (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Denzin, 1997, 2003; Finley, 2003; Brown & Strega, 2005), including research that is openly ideological, interpretive and arts-based, PR too is gaining legitimacy in mainstream circles. Our hope is that, as more and more university trained and/or community-based researchers come together to engage in PR projects, “popular” knowledge will come to have an ever-greater impact on processes of social transformation.

NOTE

Figure 1 was reprinted here with permission from *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, was originally published with an article by Diane Conrad entitled "Justice for youth versus a curriculum of conformity in schools and prisons" in JCACS Volume 4, Number 2, Winter 2006 - Available Online at http://www.csse.ca/CACS/JCACS/V4N2/PDFContent/1._conrad_4.2_jcacs_formatted.pdf.

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