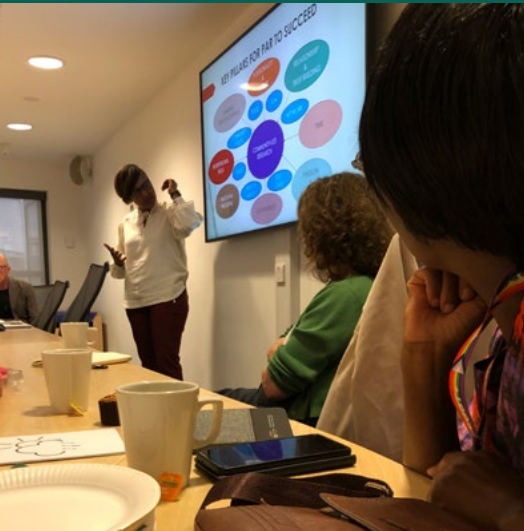


Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit

June 2023





PREFACE

Participatory Action Research (PAR) attempts to move away from identifying and theorising the problems of 'others' towards engaging communities in co-producing their own knowledge to bring about social action (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; Askins and Pain, 2011; Lloyd-Evans, 2016; Askins, 2018). Based on ideas of equal power, collaboration, and community action, it centres on the notion that communities themselves have the skills and expertise to best understand local needs through their lived experiences.

PAR seeks to disrupt traditional power relations between researchers and the researched by locating knowledge generation at the local level and enabling communities to explore and action issues that matter most to them. The use of participatory methods helps to break down barriers between communities and services providers and it is this community-centred approach that creates and strengthens the relationships and trust that are foundational to lasting social change. This hopefully gives more control to the people who are actually living the experience, and their engagement with pinpointing problems and finding solutions ensures that projects and their impact are relevant and hopefully sustainable into the long term. Participatory methodologies are becoming increasingly popular in addressing social justice issues as they attempt to democratise the research process, bring new voices to the table and challenge traditional power relations.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, policymakers and research funders are increasingly advocating the use of co-produced and participatory methods, but there is a lack of understanding of what it takes to do this research and the challenges that different partners and participants might face. As a result, local organisations, communities, and academic researchers are calling for some reflection on the lived experiences of 'doing PAR' that highlights the challenges as well as the opportunities.

In March 2022, Professor Adrian Bell, Research Dean for Prosperity & Resilience, and the University Committee for Research and Innovation at the University of Reading, provided funds to assemble the learning and lived experiences of community researchers, local organisations, postgraduate students and academics on using Participatory Action Research and co-produce a toolkit with pilot training materials.

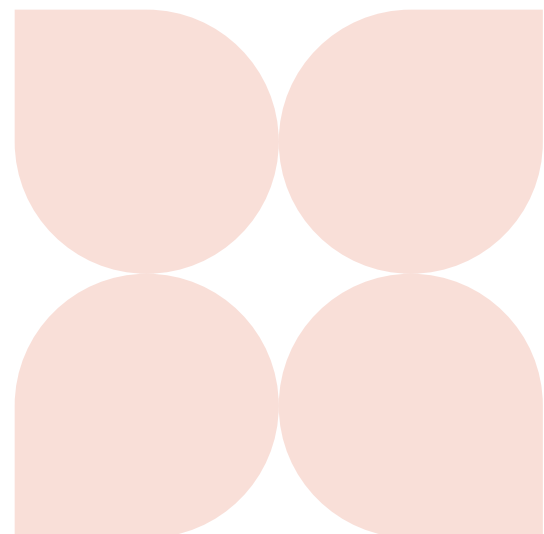
What we learned from this journey was that rather than producing another 'how to' guide on PAR, there was a real need for some critical reflection and understanding of the principles and everyday practices that could assist community researchers, local organisations, students, and academic researchers in making decisions about why and how they might facilitate a PAR project.

As a result, our toolkit offers a unique collection of diverse perspectives and reflections around building community research teams and using PAR to understand local issues. It centres the voices and lived experiences of community researchers, local organisations and some academic staff who have been engaged in PAR projects in collaboration with the University of Reading.

We hope that it opens up much needed conversations around issues such as equity, trust, power and relationship building that will lead to better participatory research training and knowledge sharing between the University and our local communities, in order to make change happen.

Dr Sally Lloyd-Evans

Public Engagement with Community Research Fellow and Associate Professor in Human Geography



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A note on dates

The PAR Toolkit was developed between March 2022 and November 2022 and first published in June 2023.

Online Toolkit

An online version of this toolkit, including videos, will be available at <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research>.



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1. INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THE PAR TOOLKIT

This toolkit is for community researchers, community organisations, students and academics who want to reflect on and better understand:

- The principles and everyday practices of PAR
- Building community research teams
- Using PAR to understand local issues.

This **introduction** outlines the methodology for creating the PAR Toolkit and sets out reasons for taking the PAR approach.

Section 2, **the 8 stages of Participatory Action Research**, presents a step-by-step guide through a PAR journey from the perspective of community researchers and academics. The 8 Stages of PAR sets out reflections on process and practical considerations, including: how to choose research topics geared to social change, interactive and creative research methods, recruiting participants, building relationships and agreement, collecting and analysing data, presenting findings, feeding back to participants, and taking action for social transformation.

In Section 3, our **Participatory Action Research Wheel** provides an A to Z of words that meaningfully represent PAR. The PAR Wheel is designed to start conversations about the benefits and challenges of the PAR process and what is needed to carry out PAR well.

Section 4 contains a list of **references and resources**.

METHODOLOGY

Academic researchers who use Participatory Action Research are seeking knowledge with social impact. Any kind of social impact or change within a geographical area essentially involves a personally considered engagement to change among the members of that community. Change also involves the community's supporting institutions and organisations, without which change lacks traction (Mackenbach, 2011). With academics, community members and supportive organisations all taking the journey together, impactful research is far more likely to ensue.

Thus, in the spirit of PAR, these reflections have been put forward by community researchers, representatives of community organisations and academics who are interested in championing the voices of the community. All of those contributing have been involved in participatory research projects linked to the University of Reading.

Multiple PAR projects linked to the University of Reading were represented, including projects in Whitley (and the Whitley Researchers), Southcote, Oxford Road, and the Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) 2021–2022 which explored healthcare inequalities faced by minority ethnic communities throughout Reading. More information about PAR projects in Reading can be found at: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research>.

Lead Academic Researcher: Sally Lloyd-Evans

Project Coordinator: Esther Oenga

Core group members included a mix of community researchers, academics, and representatives from community organisations. These members contributed to the data collection as well as to the facilitation, planning, and delivery of the project outputs.

The core members were: Marion Oveson, Alice Mpofu-Coles, Tariq Gomma, Evangeline Karanja, Sonia Duval, Lorna Zischka, Robyn Woronka, Molli Cleaver, and the artist, Kasia Tatys. Community researchers consulted in addition to those in the core group included Pat Watson, Liz Ashcroft, Sandra Clare, Jessica Acquah, Hema Sundhararajan, Donna Ma, and Krishna Neupane.

Compiling the PAR toolkit from the many documented reflections: Esther Oenga, Robyn Woronka, and Lorna Zischka.

Interviews, meetings, and informal discussions were undertaken with University of Reading academics, staff and students; representatives of local community organisations and institutions; and community researchers. The data was collected in multiple ways:

- One-on-one structured interviews (14 academics, 5 students, 9 representatives of community organisations, 2 community researchers).
- 6 community researchers reflected between themselves on their research journey and recorded the stages the journey involved.
- Multiple community researcher group discussions/reflections were held in person on the topic of PAR, and notes were taken to reinforce the community perspective in this toolkit.
- Some reflections were gleaned from conversations in the process of multiple core group planning meetings (mostly online).
- 22 individuals submitted written responses to a set of guidance questions. 19 (over half of whom were community researchers and the remainder from the University of Reading or other facilitating organisations) selected their top training priorities from an extensive list of alternative themes.

WHY TAKE THE PAR APPROACH?

"PAR is not only about investigating the local issues ... but it is about finding solutions/actions to the issues that are being investigated."

Community involvement and voices are at the heart of participatory research methods. The approach recognises and values the knowledge as well as the capacity to effect positive change that exists in every community. To make the most of these qualities, as much emphasis is put on the process of research as its product, with two outcomes being sought:

- **More accurate information about issues that need to be addressed.** This is achieved by drawing on the lived experiences of community members themselves and being steered by their own priorities and research agendas.
- **Greater impact through increasing levels of self-determination.** Community mobilisation and self-determination increase as individuals are drawn into supportive social networks, as their skills are recognised and enhanced, and as a capacity for reflection, self-regulation and cooperative action expands with practice.

So, the approach not only seeks to generate accurate information that leads to change; it also expects to leave all involved (and indeed, the community as a collective, however incrementally) in a different place from that found at the beginning of the project.

Following up every action or activity with critical reflection reinforces the degree of knowledge creation, its local assimilation, and the capacity for self-determination. According to Cahill (2007) this is a dynamic process: new understandings shift our engagement with the world, this changes our social environment, and then we need to reflect again with new understanding.

The methods are powerful, so important to the outcomes is the question of who wields that power and to what ends (for whose benefit?). Instead of extracting information for academic pursuits and leaving the community untouched, academics should keep in sight the goal of enhancing self-determination (power) within the community, and particularly among the marginalised of that community.

PAR raises awareness within the community of what needs to change, how it might change, and, beyond describing reality, mobilises solidarity and collaboration to help effect that change. Thus, PAR not only describes and interprets reality, it also seeks social justice and transformation (Chatterton et al., 2007; Kindon, 2016), and aims to foster a more equitable, diverse and inclusive research process (Lenette, 2022).



Participatory Action Research, community-based research, action research and other participatory approaches to research are theoretically united in these aims, despite the differences in emphasis that their names imply. The actual practice of participatory methods and how 'community-led' they are from start to finish differs widely, however, with much depending on who is involved, their personal agendas, and the enormous pressures of circumstance.

PAR HAS IMPACT

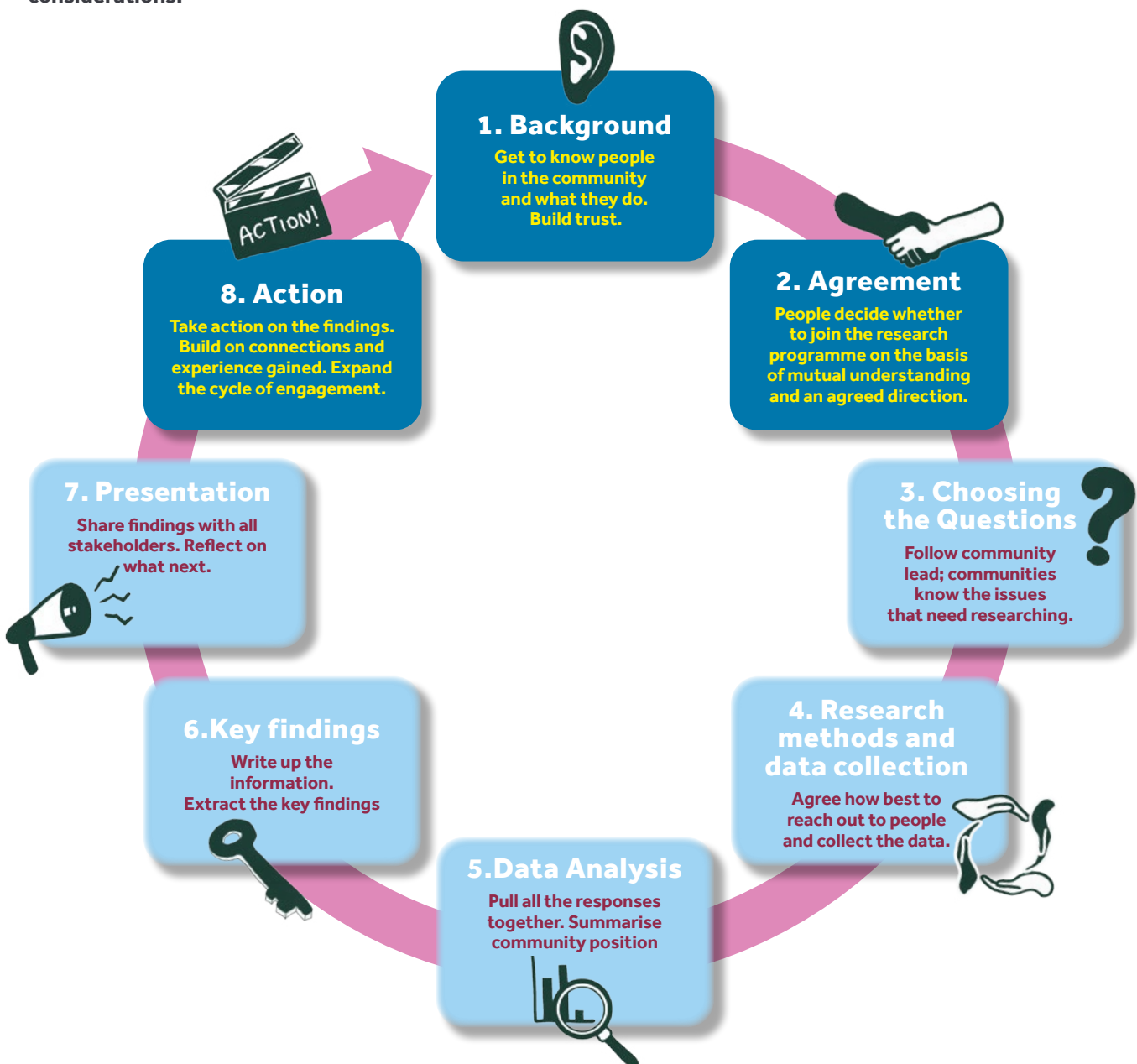
Participatory methods ensure the *subjects* of the research are involved and to some extent control the research, although PAR is also subject to power struggles (Amauchi et al, 2022). The reason why this has more impact than research conducted more completely under the control of so-called 'experts' is detailed in the sections that follow this one, but 'impact' could, to some extent, be regarded as the overarching advantage of all that follows, and the points relating to impact are worth summarising here:

- Involvement in PAR makes a difference to people and every positive change for an individual also impacts the community that the individual is part of. The change may only be marginal but can be magnified through a community's social networks and institutions.
- Mobilisation, making voices heard and providing an alternative to top-down decision making is empowering to marginalised groups and helps with making society more equal. However, PAR can also be used as a form of governance so a critical approach is always required (Kesby et al, 2007).
- Involvement of community researchers helps to ensure that the research addresses 'real' issues; relieving actual stresses on the people concerned. Many respondents in this study distinguished 'real' issues from issues that academics are primarily concerned with; knowledge is generated for the purpose of social justice and impact, not for its own sake. PAR is flexible enough to accommodate the requirements of the community.
- Changes do not stick unless internalised. Thus, the role of reflection during the process of knowledge creation is powerful. As one community researcher pointed out, "People already know the needs", and yet the process of doing this research focuses minds and thereafter the collaborative capacity of everyone concerned on a particular point for change.
- Academic research uses terminology and language that is often inaccessible to the people that the research concerns, raising barriers to reflection, internalisation, and community engagement with any new programme. The PAR approach addresses the various barriers between stakeholders throughout the entire research journey. This is essential to impactful knowledge assimilation, although the extra time this takes needs to be recognised.
- Mobilising the community and building collaborative connections to outside services and resources contributes to change by bringing all the relevant players together and on the same page ready for action. Connections are established which help community members to access services. The approach also helps to build trust within the community and between the various stakeholders, and trust is essential to any cooperative endeavour.
- PAR recognises and draws out community talents – the knowledge, skills and experience that is already there. It gives people with a passion for change a way to make it happen and add new skills. The process is confidence-building and stigma-busting. All involved can learn from the journey.



2. THE 8 STAGES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

A step-by-step guide through a PAR journey from the perspective of community researchers and academics, setting out reflections on the process and practical considerations.



The 8 Stages of Participatory Action Research

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"We owned the research from beginning to end."

The community researchers emphasised that 'participatory' is not 'zoom in and zoom out'; it is a process that takes time and needs to be understood well. They advised against trying 'short cut' or 'fast track' methods. Nor is PAR like a DIY model to assemble following the given instructions.

Rather, PAR is slow and depends on trust and relationship building, as outlined in Stage 1 below.

The community researchers noted that despite differences in prior experience, all participants were supported through the research process, and this motivated them for ongoing endeavours.

In addition to differences in ownership, the groundwork stages of building relationships and community mobilisation (Stages 1 and 2), and the action stage (8) are points of departure from other research approaches. But, as the community researchers emphasise, every stage of this cycle is important.

1. BACKGROUND

Get to know people in the community and what they do. Build trust.



Starting to build relationships – connections, trust and understanding – is what community researchers called 'the entry point'. All the stakeholders need to be included. Researchers highlight several points to consider in the first stage:

- Share information creatively via flyers, posters, and social media, and involve all equally.
- Collaborate with trusted members of the community – remember people do not immediately open up to new acquaintances.
- Have honest and transparent dialogue and physical meetings. Understand what people are thinking and address concerns and misunderstandings. Create an enabling environment.
- Invest time to discuss what the project involves, timelines, and the benefits of taking part.
- The starting point needs to be clear. The process needs to be easy to understand, transparent and engaging.
- The whole project needs to take a people-matter, community-centred approach.

The importance of building relationships and trust and an atmosphere of genuine cooperation was emphasised by community researchers and academics. The investment is costly in terms of time and emotional energy, but this is what it takes to gain engagement and impact.



2. AGREEMENT

People decide whether to join the research programme on the basis of mutual understanding and an agreed direction.



This is a decision-making stage where members of the community decide whether to get involved. Community researchers suggested that it is helpful and inspiring to explore different motivations for all stakeholders in engaging in research. Their own motivations for taking part included:

- benefits to the community
- benefits to themselves
- a sense of connection with others taking part
- interest in the subject
- ethical considerations.

Some community researchers mentioned feeling scared or worried at first. Even the term 'research' was unfamiliar. A confidence builder can be connecting with other prospective community researchers and realising: "I am not alone in this journey of research". Support from facilitators likewise helps to reassure and build confidence.

Clear information and helping people through what the research process is likely to involve is essential. Some academics recommend setting up a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to avoid problems later.

Expectations need to be upfront and realistic. Ethical considerations – like who owns the data and honouring participatory processes – need to be clear (Kinson, 2016; Blazek et al, 2015). Community researchers recommend that facilitators work with communities to:

- Establish a common goal/direction and common purposes.
- Develop a plan: What is involved? Who is going to work on what aspects? Consider roles, responsibilities, and resources.
- Enable active discussion, participation, and sense of ownership: "The right approach to any given topic has got to be 'What can we do?' rather than 'Here is what we can do!'".
- Ensure the research funding includes an action stage.
- Ensure that the time community researchers invest is paid. It has value.

3. CHOOSING QUESTIONS

Follow community lead. Communities know the issues which need researching.



"The researchers have direct engagement with a network or a community. They have opportunities to observe and listen to people's stories. They want to have a significant topic that can solve some problems in real life."

While many research projects start with choosing questions, the community researchers emphasise that this is the third stage of PAR and not the first stage!

Community researchers and other stakeholders need to brainstorm ideas and explore together what needs researching, identifying key issues to focus on. The direction of research needs to originate from the community, even if in accordance with an overarching theme or agreed research goal. This helps to keep the research relevant and engaging.

Although the focus and the decisions are made by community researchers, support is welcome from outsiders and the topic can be tested with the wider community and other community stakeholders. Through this process, the issues can be narrowed down, and conclusions drawn on what research questions need to be focused on.

Community researchers agreed that "there is need for the right topic, a topic of passion, a relevant topic, a problem topic or a community topic that is geared to social change and wider transformation rather than to writing a paper which is a focus of traditional research".

4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

Agree how best to reach out to people and collect the data.



This stage covers the ways of reaching out to people and gathering data. The research methodology needs to be co-developed. Community researchers need training in research methods to understand the pros and cons of quantitative and qualitative approaches and how to go about these. Creative approaches may be customised to various groups within the community. Community researchers need to decide how they feel they can get the best results in their locality.

Creative approaches

A mixed approach can be helpful. This includes quick, tick box questions that can be put to many people for a breadth of understanding, as well as free flowing interviews, focus groups, and/or case studies. It might involve building deeper relationships with people to observe and understand what they are dealing with.

Issues might also be explored through creative activities like drama and role play – expressing reality and envisioning alternatives. Arts and crafts, photography, and creating maps and diagrams to explore how things relate to one another can be used, partly to establish rapport but also for information. All research tools can be tested out and refined within a small circle prior to the main rollout. Language and interpretation need to be considered, for equitable participation.

Research ethics

It is very important that the community researchers are aware of research ethics: informed consent, confidentiality, storing data and data ownership, staying safe, respect for participants and ensuring that they are benefited rather than harmed by participating, unbiased framing of questions and recording of responses. Adhering to good practice helps to promote trust and engagement.

“We just said to people that they didn’t have to answer if they’d felt uncomfortable, if they didn’t want to – there was always that option. Because when you’re talking about people’s finances, or how they cook the family food, you know, they’re personal questions aren’t they? And they’re delicate things.”

Using questionnaires

Although participatory methods tend to focus on interactive and creative activities, questionnaires can be an important tool, particularly during training or initial stages and community researchers gave some useful feedback on these:

- Community researchers can try a set of questions out on each other to check that they make sense, that they can only be understood in the way intended, that they do not cause offense, that the framing is not biased, that they flow well, and that responses genuinely inform the research question (avoiding questions which do not need to be asked).
- It is essential that questionnaires are the correct length. Some community researchers do not like questionnaires that do not fit on two sides of A4. This is because potential respondents are put off by sheets of paper and won’t engage. But nor should questionnaires be so short that the objective of the research is diluted. Sticking to a single subject can help maintain focus and engagement.
- Using paper rather than electronic means helps some people: “I feel it’s more personal. I think it puts people at ease as well. I feel sometimes technology just puts people off. Face to face is better, you know”.
- One community researcher noted that questionnaires need to look good and to include formal logos.
- Sticking to set questions means you get comparable data from different people. Straightforward questions with yes/no answers or scale responses are especially easy to analyse (see Stage 5). However, it was also noted that stories and asides are important to capture, enriching or changing the focus of the study, and that these are often noted down besides the direct answers to a questionnaire. Open ended questions are important for depth and to capture lived experiences.
- Interactive and creative activities go much further in terms of engaging participants and self-representation, enabling them to be in control of the discussion, conducting on-the-spot analysis and interpretation and critical reflection on the direction forward. Reflective methodologies have added value in terms of benefiting the participants.

Finding participants

Recruiting participants in the research can be done together. Consider research venues – where to meet and how to connect with people, for example: through friends, workplaces, community centres, churches, outside shops, door to door, in person or via other media. Responses depend on a friendly approach, a venue or place-based community hub where people feel safe, and face-to-face contact.

Contacting the community and starting conversations is helped by the existing relationship or point of connection between the researcher and the community. Some community researchers said they would tell people that the project is to “help our community” and this also encouraged people to engage.

Identifying community researchers with wider backing helps other community members to feel that the work is worth engaging in and will be taken seriously. The use of ID badges, letters of introduction and logos of organisations involved might help.

Support and training for community researchers

The researcher’s understanding of what someone is saying needs to be checked back with the person doing the talking (especially if translation is involved). Community researchers noted that a lot of people weren’t comfortable with being recorded, so being able to take down notes quickly was an important skill for them to cultivate. Community researchers could be offered training in skills such as active listening (knowing how to listen and how to prompt).

Opportunities to reflect on the research process and the experiences of the research team is important – researchers can use verbal, written, visual or audio tools that suit their needs.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Pull all the responses together. Summarise community position.

Data analysis is the process of pulling together the findings and getting an idea of how the community has responded to each of the research questions.

Community researchers vary in their level of experience with data analysis (both with quantitative and qualitative approaches, with some having no experience at all) so “It can be tough at the beginning if you have no prior knowledge or experience”. The amount of data collected once people start sharing their experiences can also be quite overwhelming: “In gathering the experiences there is loads of data that needs to be analysed into themes. This can be a real challenge”.

It is therefore important from the planning stages to be clear on how researchers can be supported through this stage and offered training in data analysis and IT skills. Some community researchers noted that an understanding of the analysis stage would have helped them during the methodology stage. Here, the advantage of repeat PAR cycles can be noted – people learn by doing!

How the analysis is done depends on the data, but the following areas may be considered:

- Questionnaire responses can be inputted into an Excel spreadsheet.
- Some of the data may need to be cleaned, standardised, translated and/or transcribed. These steps require time and planning.
- Open-ended responses may need coding – identifying groups of participants sharing similar ideas or answers and pulling out key themes. Thematic analysis of qualitative data can be done collaboratively with participants.
- Tick box responses can be more straightforward to analyse. The percentage of people responding in the various ways can be compared. Pivot tables may be used to see whether there are differences in responses under varying conditions.
- The summary findings for each question may be presented in tables, in words or in charts. It is important, when summarising data, that the original meaning is not lost sight of. Illustrative quotes, photos, film, and stories are very powerful.

Data analysis is time consuming, particularly when co-learning with community researchers. External support may be required, but not at the expense of losing community researcher engagement. One community researcher noted that “working in a team has an advantage as you can share skills”.





6. KEY FINDINGS

Write up the information. Extract the key findings.



The amount of information collected is generally huge, but huge amounts of information are indigestible, and must be narrowed down in order to pass on. Writing up a full report is important for evidencing the conclusions, but the key findings need to be clear and concise.

Key findings should summarise what difficulties people are facing, what they need, and clear points of action that might improve the situation.

The process of identifying key findings often involves a combination of direct answers, observation, the data analysis and reflection (discussing how findings resonate with personal experience, published research or policy debates, and possibly considering further research as new themes or underlying issues emerge).

It is important, when summarising or interpreting information to put a point across, that the original meaning of what the participants were saying is retained. As the community researchers put it: "Don't mix your feelings and views with participant's views when it comes to delivering the key findings".

Narrowing down the findings to communicate a clear message while retaining accuracy can be challenging, especially given the ever-present time constraints. Community researchers felt that the final report should include:

- A short, attractive title of the research work.
- Acknowledgements and references.
- Background to the topic (justifying what is being researched and why).
- A summary of the research methods employed (and why).
- The research findings (how people responded to the research questions).
- A reflection on any unanswered questions that the research raised.
- Key findings and recommendations.
- Annexes with extra detail relating to the methodology.

Besides a comprehensive write-up, different reports/ outputs could be produced for different groups of people. It is possible to get very creative, including flyers, film, photography, performance and easy-to-read key cards. In all publications and presentations, care must be taken that confidentiality agreements are not breached.

7. PRESENTATION

**Share findings with all the stakeholders.
Reflect on what next.**



The presentation and dissemination stage, according to one community researcher, is a happy stage: there are findings to share and celebrations of all that the community researchers have achieved.

Presentations and workshops make the research visible, and they provide a platform for stakeholders and external partners to connect with the target communities. Issues to be considered include:

- Keep stakeholders in touch with progress and findings as you go along. This fosters their engagement with the project. Do not neglect the participants and the community – usually a forgotten group to feed back to.
- Report back in different ways to different audiences, for example: community events, showcase events, leaflets, posters, film, social media, performance, written reports and papers. Try and reach and influence a wide audience.
- Community researchers need to agree how they want to be represented and portrayed to others. Organisations may mean well when they represent a local situation in a negative light to attract funding, but re-enforcing stigmatising stereotypes can be harmful.
- Impact can be improved by making publications attractive and readable with quotes, stories and facts that are difficult to ignore. The way action points and challenges are framed makes a lot of difference to whether change is considered or rejected (for example, telling people not to do something is less effective than challenging them to meet their felt needs in less harmful ways, weighing the consequences of possible alternatives (Kindon et al., 2007).
- Be concise and clear.
- In-person events are powerful in terms of aiding connection between partners and the target community. They were also motivating for the community researchers for ongoing engagement.
- Encourage reflection on the findings with a view to action.

Presentation skills of community researchers improve with repetition. For some, it might be their first time using PowerPoint. Training in how to put a message across clearly is needed.

Others mentioned the challenges of managing nerves and avoiding trying to read too much into audience reactions. Remember: research is a team effort and responsibilities can always be divided within the community team according to experience and inclination.

Tokens of appreciation for the community researchers are appropriate and valued. For example, following one in-person event, the community researchers expressed how they felt on being presented with certificates by a University professor: “Today, we the researchers felt like VIPs, presenting to professors, and being presented with certificates of achievement, taking photos as well as interacting and socialising with professors”.

Presentations are also opportunities for reflection within the community and among all stakeholders, leading into the vital question: ‘what next?’. Follow-up actions, solutions or interventions are required promptly, before the research is archived or forgotten about.



8. ACTION

Take action on the findings. Build on connections and experiences gained. Expand the cycle of engagement.



The eighth stage in the research process, translating findings into action, has a lot of meaning to the community researchers. Frustration, de-motivation, and even a sense of communal trust betrayed (which will have long-term impact) can arise when the action is not delivered.

"If what you actually find out with the research is not implemented, I always feel like, what was the whole purpose then?"

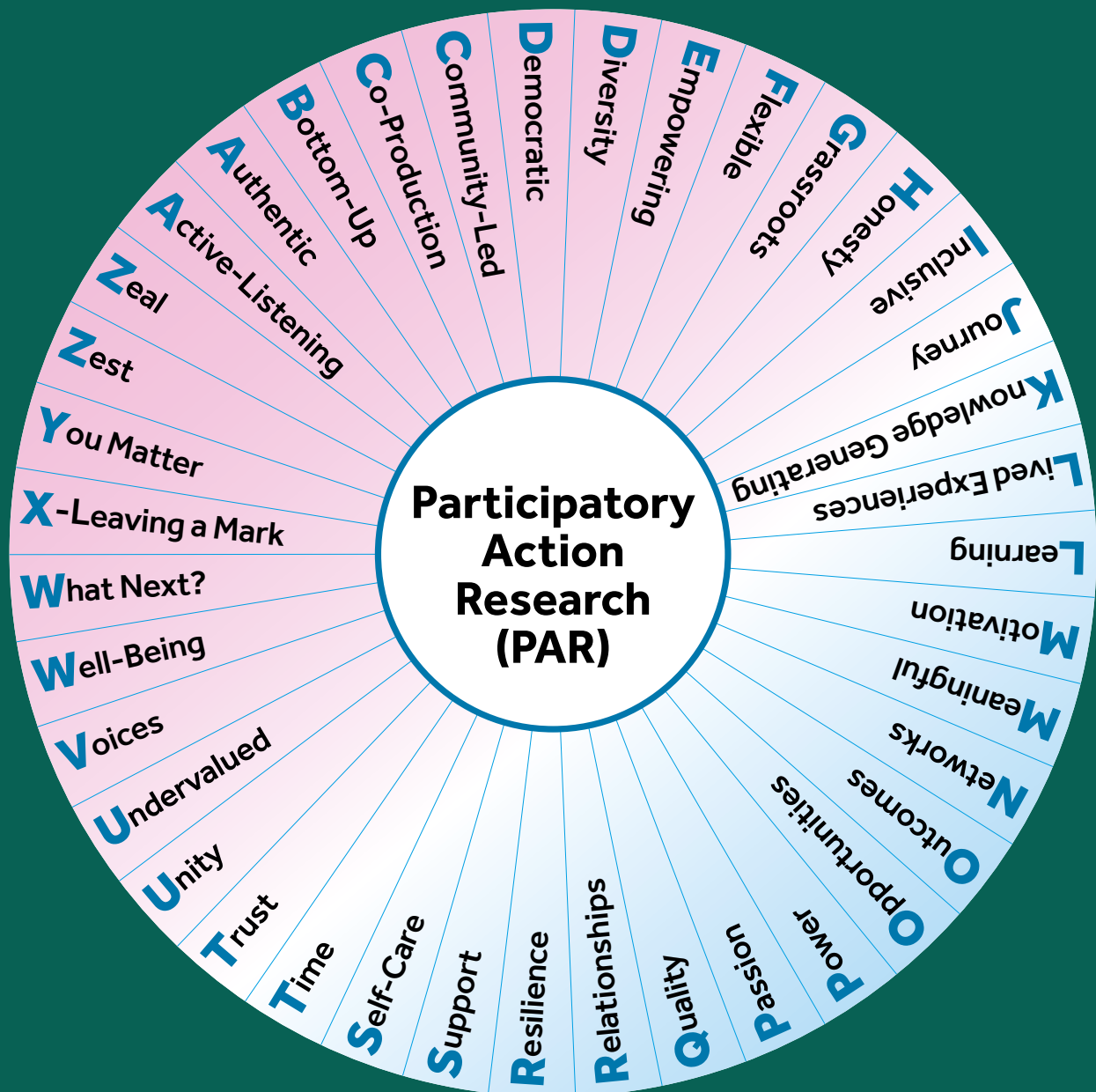
"If you're going to dedicate money to research, dedicate money to solutions as well".

In terms of taking action and building on experiences, the following points may be considered:

- There should be no pre-determined outcomes; local voices need to be heard. The whole project is built around their priorities.
- The action stage requires time and funding for the community to be invested at the outset.
- Use the results to bring change (solutions/ improvements) to those being researched. The community itself (with its charities and institutions), service providers, funding bodies and policy makers may all have a part to play.
- Actions may be short and long term (some change may take years). Consider What? Who? When? How?
- Following any action, there should be reflection on how effective it was and what further changes need to be made.
- Include reflection as well as action throughout the project. Reflection internalises information and assists personal change and development. One community researcher noted: "We were given opportunities to reflect, and now I see things differently". The PAR Wheel in Section 3 is one reflective output produced during this project, the core team having selected and discussed words that meaningfully represent PAR.
- Celebrate and reflect on the experiences and achievements of the community researchers – these are already project outcomes. Community researchers commented on the feel-good factor of achievement multiple times.
- Consider issues of self-care and wellbeing. Consider 'what next?' for community researchers. Build on connections and experiences gained where possible, repeating the cycle and expanding the networks of trusted/trusting contacts through which to get things done.
- Update participants within the community and all stakeholders: where community researchers can feed back actions taken, trust is built and motivation for further engagement increases.



3. THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WHEEL: AN A TO Z OF WORDS THAT MEANINGFULLY REPRESENT PAR



The Participatory Action Research (PAR) Wheel

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A

ACTIVE LISTENING

PAR is, in the words of one community researcher, a “people-matter approach” – people from the community and their views are central to the process. The comments of community researchers highlight the value of academics having a respectful attitude, being prepared to really listen and take on board what people say, and being flexible enough to respond to what they are passionate about. Underlying this listening and respectful attitude is believing in people and what they can achieve for themselves. It also involves relating to people as equals, acknowledging that views and priorities that differ from our own are just as valid. Active listening skills were identified as a top learning priority for everyone involved in PAR. Being ready to really listen encourages people to speak up. Time is needed to let people tell their stories, and there is power in these stories.

“Let them tell their story; let them tell anything to you, in any they want to deliver it. That is how you get the most authentic data. And don’t assume, which means don’t take someone’s story and interpret it your way.”

AUTHENTIC

PAR is engaging and can yield authentic and impactful information. Community researchers tend to be experts on the subjects under discussion, and in their knowledge of the area and context. When community researchers talk to others in their own community, they can also understand and relate to what is being said. This helps community members to open up and say what they really feel. As one student put it, the methodology “creates safer spaces for those to talk about their experiences leading to truer reflections and deeper understanding of research”.

“They are going to tell me because I know what they are going through. If you ask them the same question they are not gonna tell you the same thing, because the trust is not there. ... We got into this research ... because of our relationship with the community. We did it with the people we know. That information we translated into a report. We can communicate between our people and whoever wants to listen to us.”

Community researchers have talked of interviewing “friends, and friends of friends”. The use of already established connections fosters community trust and engagement with the research, and a demographic can be reached that academics have no other access to. It’s important to be aware that being an ‘insider’ can also produce challenges for researchers and change their own identities within communities (Cahill, 2007a).

B

BOTTOM-UP

PAR is a bottom-up approach where the community make decisions about what matters to them. Instead of trying to ‘fix’ a community’s deficiencies, the PAR approach recognises the knowledge and capacity for positive change that exists in every community. Giving everyone equal voice, respect, and access to resources and power, helps to unshackle those capacities and has impact. The way that PAR challenges unequal power structures and contributes to community empowerment and development came up very frequently among respondents.

Stigma is a particularly disheartening condition to live with (Lloyd-Evans and the Whitley Researchers, 2021). It is something that many of the community researchers felt passionately about and strongly wanted to address. They see the ‘bottom-up’ approach – having a voice that is valued and responded to – as an essential step to addressing this pressing problem, and it inspired them to engage.

C

CO-PRODUCTION

Co-producing PAR projects means facilitating connection and trust between partners:

- Trusted leaders can link the various stakeholders. These links are personal, and the character of the person matters (respectful, caring, trustworthy, approachable...).
- Start with getting to know the community and its leaders. Understand its strengths, taboos and aspirations before presenting any research agenda. Get to know people on more than one level – this is humanising and helps to create points of connection and trust. Identify common goals – differing parties can draw together over the goals they agree on.
- Involve all the right people – change takes teamwork. Include community researchers who represent their own community, local charities, organisations and authorities, and any other stakeholders or supporting organisations, including people from the University. Build teams involving multiple stakeholders that last over time. Where trust is established, progressively greater cooperative endeavours can be achieved.
- Ensure that the balance of power in the team is fair and shared. Who is in charge? Is the community empowered to determine its own outcomes? Trust and cooperation is compromised wherever power issues frustrate a person’s ability to pursue their own interests.

COMMUNITY-LED

PAR is a collaborative enterprise between academics, community members and other stakeholders whereby local people from the community are recruited to steer the research process and interact with other members of their community. A co-creative, collaborative approach is taken to setting the research agenda, shaping the instruments used in the research, identifying needs, and devising action that addresses that need. Diverse voices have equal footing.

“The research questions and the research motivation are driven by the community themselves, not by outsiders.”

“PAR is also about strengthening and expanding networks, collaborations, partnerships. It is about building relationships, learning, and understanding issues collaboratively.”

The research helps to connect people who would not otherwise communicate. Not only within the community, but also connecting individuals to community organisations, authorities, charities and services. Involving multiple stakeholders takes a lot of communication but can add impetus to change. Not all connections are positive, but the best kind channel services, information, negotiated opportunities and support. Mutually beneficial and supportive connections (characterised by trust) are the basis for ongoing cooperative endeavour and solidarity.

D

DEMOCRATIC

Systems and the use of resources need to be fair to all parties, transparent and reliable, with working sanction systems that all parties are subject to. Conflicts of interest may arise where the empowerment of one group reduces the resources and control that another had previously monopolised. Where interests clash, negotiation of fair terms is needed. Some community researcher comments relating to PAR suggest that they have previously experienced their voices being put down.

“Every part of the community needs to be visible, recognised, and given rights and the freedom to choose. At the moment they just have to take the services that are given – they have no voice.”

Check for a balanced control of the process and ownership and responsibility. Check that everyone has an equal voice with no predetermined outcomes. Academics can sometimes overlook the fact that they operate from a position of privilege and may wittingly or unwittingly dominate, extract information or reinforce power inequalities (increase their own power) by a semi-participatory approach. (Kindon, 2016; Kindon et al., 2007; Chatterton et al., 2007). Instead, the process should be transforming inequalities in knowledge production.

One community organisation warned of not having a pre-conceived plan or hidden agenda, but a blank canvas so that people have real power and a chance to influence the direction of action. Research agendas, actions, reflective co-learning and recommendations need to be worked out by all stakeholders on equal terms if equitable and sustainable outcomes are to follow. Power should be deliberately channelled into collaborative endeavours rather than used for individualistic agendas. The interests of more marginalised people should be given special consideration, and oppressive structures (including within academic spaces) deliberately challenged and dismantled.



DIVERSITY

Getting the right people in the room is important to making things happen: “Having a broader team of stakeholders who believe in the project is what made the project work well.” The right people include:

- **Community researchers:** These are people with connections within their own community. Community researchers said they wanted to be a part of breaking down barriers and linking a wider range of people into discussions “so that everyone has the opportunity to put their perspective in.” “There are a lot of barriers – fear and suspicion of the University, and fear of rejection. This is something that researchers can help to address. They can help to break down the barriers.” It is the community’s concerns which need to be researched, and little change is likely to occur without their collaboration.
- **Local charities:** Firstly, local charities have relational networks within the community, and can be very important for helping University leads to identify researchers in the first place. As one academic testified, “It was so difficult for us academics to connect with the community members until we linked up with the trusted networker in the community and access to the community was possible.” Secondly, charities were seen to add to the power of the community. They have organisational capacity, resources, networks, influence, and recognition within the community such that change can gain traction. They can help to implement the actions arising from the research.
- **External institutions:** External funding bodies, authorities, charities, and businesses can help to make changes in the way that services are delivered. It can be difficult for them to adjust to community-led approaches and to relinquishing control so good communication, trust and close relational networks are essential to build up.
- **Networkers/facilitators:** Academics are particularly useful in terms of influence and quality assurance. They provide assurance to all parties that the research is credible. They can also aid with ‘translation’ such that the voice of particular social groups is able to reach the highest levels. Trusted personal connections and ability to relate to multiple parties, are essential to keeping the various stakeholders working together. A community researcher noted, “The University needs to establish a visible network into the community. The community can’t make the first move, but the University can.”

People are not all the same – listening and understanding the differences is necessary to ensure that marginalised groups are being heard. As one community researcher said: “It is not one community but communities with sub-groups. But are they all getting equal benefits rights? If not, why not? We need to really find out the causes behind, which starts with understanding them and exposing the issues. Then we can invest in all and not just some”.

Moreover, understanding people’s differences also helps make the most of collaboration – everyone brings something different, and it all adds to the richness of collaboration. Transparent discussions around equity, diversity and inclusion are an important part of this process. Being part of a team was a highlight for nearly all those interviewed in relation to participatory research. All this builds trust as well as getting to the right information.

E

EMPOWERING

Connecting with others is empowering, since people who work in cooperation with others – pooling their different skills and resources – are better able to get things done and can achieve more significant outcomes (Halpern, 2005; Putnam et al., 1993).

“The relationship between the researchers and the Uni is a very important one, and can be very empowering to the researchers.”

“When you get the right people in the room, things happen.”

The PAR approach has tangible impact – not only in helping to steer decision-making, but also via the process of doing research. When done well, the process facilitates social connection and trust (which means it improves our society’s wellbeing and capacity for collaboration); it upskills and empowers; it harnesses the passion and potential of local communities, and it yields authentic and impactful information that is accessible to community members as well as to academics.

F

FLEXIBLE

The flexibility of the PAR approach means that it is accessible to community participants, which means that projects have the following advantages:

“They are interesting and fun, helping to involve people in the subject whilst also upskilling people in research techniques and improving their job prospects. They are not intimidating and help people to build self-confidence. They help people to understand the perspectives of others. They can help people to analyse complex situations. Outcomes are often documented during the process and do not depend on jargon. They are memorable. Lessons learnt can be brought back to local communities or organisations.”

G

GRASSROOTS

Kindon et al. (2007) describe how hard it is to change top-down policy making and the disconnect between decision-makers and grassroots communities. People with vested interests may resist collaboration or not understand or have no vision for change, wittingly or unwittingly entrenching inequalities (Mason, 2015). Even when things are going well, collaborations are easily brought to nothing with personnel changes and having to start all over again with new people. One academic noted that projects can claim to be community-led without really engaging with the power implications.

“The overarching thrust of the project is still coming from the elite institution of the University: the knowledge, the knowledge owner, and the knowledge broker that we have in society. So, I think that one of the major challenges is trying to make this distinction between what is really community led, community driven, community-oriented work, and high level work that is leveraging the community towards its own objectives.”

If successful, self-representation and self-mobilisation will result in shifts in the power balance, and this may be resisted by/could require some concessions from those invested in the status quo or maintaining structural inequalities. The team needs to be prepared to face and manage conflicts of interest, and invest in building dialogue, relationships, and trust between those concerned wherever possible.

Academics also need to consider the ethical challenges of the PAR approach and their duty of care towards community researchers and towards the welfare of the community they engage with (Lenette et al, 2019). More than avoiding harm, academics need to consider whether their intervention is bringing positive social change, especially towards those who have opened themselves up to investing in relationships. Community researchers make themselves vulnerable in multiple ways by getting involved. The risks need to be recognised and ethical guidelines, safeguarding measures and support needs to be put in place. Academics become accountable to the community as well as to the University.

H

HONESTY

Communicate clearly and simply – people need to know what is going on, where they fit in and what they are supposed to be doing. Likewise, rules and sanctions need to be clear, fair to all parties and enforceable (that is, trustworthy) so that people can engage without fear of being taken advantage of. Complicated instructions and uncertainty sap confidence, whilst clear and transparent information and process helps a person to be in control of a situation and make informed decisions based on expected outcomes.

Academic-speak is confusing. Few people feel trusting and cooperative when they do not really know what is going on and what they should be doing, and they need to understand for themselves what the project is about before they can explain it to others.

Academics talked of the importance of keeping people informed and managing expectations. Being honest and transparent helps to avoid unrealistic expectations and disappointment. For example:

“Setting expectations; what is their time, commitment, responsibilities, and what the outcomes? It’s very important to be upfront because people have varying expectations.”

“Just to be honest and transparent with what is happening. You don’t have to promise – you tell people, we’re just going to apply, and this is not within our control.”



I

INCLUSIVE

Community researchers, academics and community organisation representatives all agree on the importance of making meetings accessible (easy for everyone to take part) and maintaining flexibility. Consider:

- **Timing:** For example, a community organisation representative said: "The timing was great after school run and other school commitments." Academics warn that many meetings take place outside of office hours.
- **Location:** For example, a community researcher said: "I like a combination of methods. Some meetings at the University, some online, some locally ... Informal meetings can sometimes bring good discussion and Zooms can be more efficient." Academics gave counterbalancing suggestions: "What facilitates the relationships are things like real life contact in a place that makes your collaborators comfortable and not trying to immediately place everything in a University context" and "People should be free to come onto campus. They should have passes to use the library. They should be much more part of the University". It is known that where people meet (the space, the context) influences how freely they speak and the kind of information revealed (Kindon, 2016).
- **Atmosphere and a relaxing set up:** Be welcoming, inclusive, seating in small circles, food and drink with chat and laughter, everyone's participation encouraged.
- **Language and literacy and IT barriers:** Factor in needs for translation. Ensure team members are available who can help each other out. Overcome varying levels of literacy. Use multiple means of communication and ensure that everyone has equal access and voice.
- **Responsiveness to any other barriers people may face:** For example, one community researcher said: "If I've required anything I've obviously gone to X [project lead] and she's arranged it for me." Childcare barriers or the working around other jobs also needs to be considered.
- **Flexibility:** Meeting times need to be responsive and flexible, changing locations, times/days and formality levels to suit different needs and preferences: For example, a community researcher said: "If we wanted to meet up, if we didn't want to meet up, if we want to do Zoom, if we don't want to do Zoom, ... she doesn't say there's a meeting at four o'clock and I want you there. It was more... There's a meeting at four o'clock, you know, it'd be lovely to see you all. And if you can make it, you can, and if you can't, you can't. ... it was like – no pressure at all. She understands if we're tired on a Friday afternoon, and we can't make it. She never takes it personally that we just don't want to go, she understands there's a reason for it."

An academic summed up: "Include people when they want to be included and make changes to increase people's inclusion."

J

JOURNEY

PAR is a journey that the local community and other stakeholders take together – no one should be left unchanged by it. The quality of the relationships built is key to its success. The positive impacts of PAR and its contribution to social justice make it an attractive option, but there needs to be more awareness of the challenges and limitations of this approach. PAR is not always possible and poor practice can be harmful to local communities and researchers. There is growing interest in learning about PAR in current policy and research circles, but this needs to be underpinned by greater understanding and reflection.

K

KNOWLEDGE GENERATING

The knowledge generated using participatory methods is not only accessible to elites who are outsiders to the community; it is built within the community and even apart from the more formal outputs, critical reflection on the knowledge obtained can have a direct impact on the people it concerned and on their lifestyle.

"I've never felt like knowledge creation should reside wholesale at universities. I've always felt like knowledge creation is what goes on across the board and in a huge number of different ways and that it's much better if a University is a sort of open space that is facilitating that knowledge creation, rather than a closed one."

Community members are more likely to share their stories with people they connect with (Edwards and Alexander, 2011) and exposing the truth is powerful, helping to focus change on areas most relevant to the community and where it really counts. The importance of having community researchers pick the research topics came up multiple times – solutions are likely to be far more effective when the issues are identified by the people who are experiencing them.

The approach is applicable across disciplines, and it recognises knowledge outside of academia. Reflection on findings and feelings helps to build knowledge within the community. "It's got a sort of capabilities aspect to it where you're improving people's ability to think about and possibly expand the universe of agency and ways of acting in the world." "It's not so much about the generation of academic knowledge ... it's about generating knowledge and action that helps those people who are involved as participants." "It has to do with the processes and practices of co-learning ... together we are co-creating knowledge and understanding".

L

LIVED EXPERIENCES

“PAR is not about formal reports but rather it is about lived experiences and real stories. It is all about change; making a difference. It is about investigating the issues that matter to the community and finding solutions to those problems together and ensuring solutions are found. The implementation of recommendations leaves the community feeling good, empowered and wanting to engage more in other projects.”

This has important implications for academics (or other stakeholders) considering the PAR approach. While its impact can be great, it also demands a completely different level of investment to other forms of research, particularly in the areas of trust building within the community, and facilitating collaborative connection between community members and other stakeholders.

LEARNING

Consideration should be given to how the research process is benefiting the participants at every stage of the journey. Academics were quick to emphasise that reflective learning, critical thinking and being self-aware make an important contribution to wellbeing and personal development. Cultivating these qualities can be personally enlightening and an aid to self-determination. Likewise, community researchers said: “Doing this research has made me think about [the subject]. Why do I do this? It’s like opening a door.” Another picked ‘learning’ as a key word to describe her PAR journey saying: “Going through what we have done helps learning.” Reflection helps to inform the next group activity or action step, as well as one’s personal journey.

Stuttaford and Coe (2007) claim that consciousness of one’s situation is a prerequisite to taking action to change it. These authors note that it cannot be assumed that learning is taking place; there needs to be a deliberate decision not to rush on to the next stage of research before reflecting together on the last. They add that becoming a reflective learner involves a clear understanding on why research and learning is going to help, followed by a conscious testing and modification of knowledge, and assuming responsibility for choices made on the basis of that knowledge.

Different learning styles appeal to different people. It also needs to be accepted that everyone is at a different stage of their journey and may draw different conclusions from what they observe. Creating diverse learning opportunities, valuing all contributions, reflecting alone but also sharing those reflections can all help to turn learning to appropriate action. People are most likely to respond to knowledge that relates directly and practically to their own lives/experience and context (Stuttaford and Coe, 2007; Cahill, 2007b). Genuine engagement with and ownership of discussion, having accurate information and then thinking through the consequences of alternative paths is likely to have a bigger impact on behaviour than simply being told what to do (Kindon et al., 2007).

M

MOTIVATION

Focusing on common goals which everyone can agree on has the effect of drawing people together, even people who might not otherwise connect. It gives differing parties some sense of common identity and purpose. All this is key to building trust. Find out what these common goals are then and begin to build mutual understanding and a sense of shared commitment.

Community researchers said: “We need a common objective; a common goal – to build a better society. To make communities and society better” and “We need to align goals. It takes funding, so diverse parties need to be involved”.



MEANINGFUL

“When something comes from within and you allow people to identify what the issues are, you have given respect to that community because they know what’s important to them, and meaningful change will happen if they know it’s important.”

PAR is a people-matter approach owned by the local community. Instead of academics identifying what a community lacks and needs, it locates knowledge generation at a local level. This gives more control to the people who are actually living the experience, and their engagement with pinpointing problems, finding solutions and being involved in the process of change ensures that projects and their impact are relevant and sustainable into the long term.

The approach moves away from defining a community by its deficiencies. Instead, it recognises and builds on its own assets and knowledge base. This challenges power inequalities and impacts the way the community is viewed, including the way residents feel about themselves and the control they exert over their own future.

The use of participatory methods helps to break down barriers between people. Relationships between people essentially affect a community’s ability to collaborate and to bring about meaningful change, and so a people-centred approach that creates and strengthens those relationships over the long-term is foundational to lasting change.

N

NETWORKS

Networkers provide a trusted personal link between various stakeholders. An academic lead needs to have networks everywhere, both inside and outside of the community. These can be called on to rally around the research effort and community action (bringing in people, opportunities, and resources). Mobilising this network demands an ability to communicate to people on all levels. It takes time to make the connections and to invest in the individual relationships that hold it together.

Leaders/networkers/project facilitators are especially important where existing connections are few and trust levels low (Black et al., 2018; Krishna, 2002). They help connect people who would not otherwise meet and talk within the community. They also help people communicate with groups outside of their own community: as one academic said: “We are a bridge – a translator”.

O

OUTCOMES

Ensure that what people say counts, and research leads to action and impact. Communities want actions, not words. Seeing that getting involved can help to make a difference builds trust and encourages further engagement. As one academic noted, people “need to know that the time they’re giving and the effort that they’re giving is worthwhile.”

The links between research and action need to be very clear – even from the outset with the funders (what is the research question and how is answering it expected to influence the way things are going to be done?). Also partnering from the beginning with outside support structures who will support change. There are also interesting debates around the extent to which academics should be involved in activism.

However, it is important to note that community researchers were not only interested in external changes, they were also interested in the impact their engagement had on them personally and on the ability of the approach to mobilise their community and give them a voice, respect and recognition. Perhaps these variables should be included in our measures of success.



OPPORTUNITIES

Involvement with PAR opens up opportunities for community researchers. Interpersonal relationships make people feel good. They have intrinsic value and add to wellbeing (Science of Generosity, n.d.; Jackson, 2009). Through personal connections, people can gain access to resources and support (Krishna, 2002).

"I enjoy taking part in my community with the things that matter to me and my neighbours."

"I've got some good friends out of it and knowing people will be there for me when I need it."

"I went to a job interview, and they love it that I'm interested in community research because the lady herself is interested in community. If you are doing something that someone else connects with, then you have got an interest. I think it got me the job."

PAR's process of repeated activity and reflection can help community participants to build self-determination and agency. Many community researchers themselves pointed out different ways in which the research has helped them to take a step forward personally.

"It teaches us one step to get our voice heard and our services delivered. I learned a lot – how to communicate and how to translate that."

"I have a problem I want to express [mental health struggles]. Engaging with others, I forgot my own issues."

P

POWER

The way that PAR challenges unequal power structures and can contribute to community empowerment and development came up frequently in the context of collaborative endeavour. PAR should not be an extractive process (extracting information from the community). Nor is it about academic researchers coming in with a fixed agenda which they impose on passive participants (as if a rescue operation). It even goes beyond mere collaboration; it is intended to empower communities to take ownership: "by the community, for the community" and "bottom up, rather than top down". It is about communities exposing inequalities, conceptualising change and determining their own direction. It challenges unequal power relations and increases social justice, having a levelling up effect for community members who were previously marginalised. Their voices are made predominant in the issues that concern them, and the methodology builds agency. One academic suggested that PAR is "much more than a method, it's an entire lens ...". The community ends up leading the investigation with the support of outsiders, rather than the other way around; equal partners working together to find solutions.

University researchers can also overlook the fact that they operate from a position of privilege and sometimes reinforce power inequalities by a semi-participatory approach. Instead, the process should be focused on transforming inequalities in knowledge production and dismantling oppressive structures. At times, this means challenging unfair and inequitable ways of researching, particularly around decolonisation and equality, diversity and inclusion, and this can be emotionally demanding.

A community-centred/relational approach is complex, time consuming and personally demanding. Time frames need to be longer, and flexibility is required within the academic framework and funding systems to allow for more diverse methodologies and outputs. The need for (and potential resistance to) shifting power balances needs to be recognised and managed well. The whole research culture needs to shift from extractive to inclusive, allowing durable collaborative partnerships with the community to be established. Continuity and the progression of research into action is integral to PAR, and yet it can be difficult to obtain/maintain adequate funding and partner engagement. The PAR approach and its outputs need to be better understood, valued and invested in.

PASSION

Passion about the topics being researched and about the changes desired for the community motivated multiple community researchers to become involved and to stay involved. Some even said that this was key to PAR's success. Community researchers were passionate (they really cared) because it is their community and topics that they know are important. Passion was felt to be an attractive and transmittable force, giving zest to communications and helping to engage/mobilise wider community interest and also external interest.

Passion was felt to be a pre-requisite to action and change. One academic said that you need a big team of "the right people who actually care". The PAR approach is helpful in mobilising passionate people and being flexible enough for project focus to be directed/redirected into areas the community really is passionate about. PAR helps people to channel their passions into action.



QUALITY

Facilitating community researchers to use research tools effectively and to produce quality research can be challenging. Some felt bad about their lack of knowledge and experience, resulting in "time wasted learning basic things". They spoke of the challenges of keeping notes and transforming raw information into a report. Language barriers and translations can be challenging. Ethical standards need to be deliberated, monitored, and maintained. Data collection needs to be done in such a way that the findings are comparable and accurate conclusions can be drawn.

Although an element of community researcher learning and support can be built into the project, time for this needs to be factored in. To some extent the tools can also change, rather than the community researchers: keeping things simple is engaging, and engagement is priority when it comes to revealing valuable information.

Another potential challenge is that the information gathered is influenced by who the community researchers are. The scope of their research is limited to the circle of people that they are in touch with, and it is difficult for them to find ways of getting in touch with people outside of that circle. This means that the data gathered is unlikely to be a random and representative sample; it may not be representative of the views of the whole geographical area, and any conclusions have to be drawn with care. One community researcher expressed the need for a more diverse community researcher team so as to reach a wider variety of people.

It must be recognised that the community does not speak with a single voice; there are many sub-communities/ social groups within one geographical location and issues that arise will depend on the participants involved. Community researchers should be chosen with care, with consideration to appropriate diversity. Attending to sample size and other research quality standards are issues the facilitator and research team need to work through together, balancing time considerations with the desirability of bigger sample sizes.



R

RELATIONSHIPS

Being informed and prepared links to Stage 1 of the PAR cycle as outlined in Section 2. It involves exploring the community, its charities and its interests, not just going in to promote your research project. Academics talked of “openness and exploration”. And the importance of “listening, absorbing a sense of surroundings, interpersonal skills, and volunteering to gain trust”. One described how relationships and trust earned with community organisations outside of University hours was critical to later accessing the community to set up PAR partnerships.

Getting to know a person on more than one level is humanising and validating. It helps to create points of connection and common ground from which trust and collaboration can grow. Various ways can be found to create a good atmosphere. It was generally agreed that drinks and snacks and humour help. Food in particular is a link: “Food and fun make a whole difference in terms of PAR success”. An academic noted how much people relax when you get to know them informally:

“We have had quite a lot of conversations with local [participants] that have just been a conversation like I would have with someone completely outside of work ... And so, you’re just talking to one human being as another human being, without kind of thinking, where’s my data and are they going to come to a focus group and just talking to somebody. I know from talking to other people that they’ve said: you know, these [participants] were very nervous about meeting you. They weren’t sure what you were after, but then you had a coffee and you talked, and they can see you’re just a normal person. I think that’s the way to do it to, you know, we’re all humans before whatever our job is, aren’t we? You have to connect on a human level.”

RESILIENCE

PAR is a dynamic process of repeated action and reflection (learning from experiences) that addresses ‘real world’ challenges and builds local resilience. A participatory action research cycle would not be complete until appropriate follow-up actions have been identified, negotiated (also with external funders, charities, and service providers), and implemented. Starting with small, attainable goals and building towards greater endeavours over time was advised, giving people time to progress in confidence, skills and experience.

S

SUPPORT

Community organisations as well as academics noted how difficult it is to find funding that is not tailored to specific outcomes. Funders are looking to fund specific projects that meet a set criterion; it is difficult for them to commit to an undefined action that will arise at an uncertain point in the future out of a community investigation managed by the community and that they have little control over.

Progressing research into action depends on the ongoing participation and engagement of the community. Assuming some delay between the research and action, “It can be difficult to regroup the same people”. The trust, interest and goodwill of local charities and other stakeholders needs to be maintained as well as the commitment of the community researchers.

Organising practicalities, like paying community researchers, can be challenging: “The University doesn’t have a structure which really enables you to funnel money directly to communities”. Another said: “The procurement system and the administration and the bureaucracy and the health and safety – it’s completely cumbersome; terrible. You end up buying everything out of your own pocket; the sweets to give out to people or the food to give because you can’t pay for it in any other way”.

With regard to writing funding applications, it is difficult to define the outputs or even details about the research questions in advance. Informal solutions to administrative problems might be found but, academics said: “we rely too much on goodwill”. Some academics felt that University commitment to the PAR approach should be expressed in setting up a dedicated support team at the University and ensuring that administration systems and funding systems are flexible enough to accommodate participatory methods under community control.

SELF-CARE

Building a relational network and then a willingness to engage in PAR is not only time consuming, but it also demands high personal and emotional investment, which can be quite draining. Friendship and professional lines can become quite blurred. The challenges of emotional toil, fatigue, frustrations, and the need for self-care is confirmed by academics and community organisation representatives.

"It's very exhausting isn't it. You are getting involved with your participants; you're trying to help them. My phone is always on. You are always providing that support. This is a workload, not an add on."

Academics noted that participatory projects often depend on one or two key people. The workload associated with caring for others can become overwhelming, putting the whole project at risk. It was suggested that developing a team to share the practical and emotional labour is more sustainable. It was also suggested that every academic involved in PAR have a manager to check in with regarding workload. Care also needs to be taken to put appropriate boundaries in place. "You can be asked a lot of you and sometimes you don't know when to say 'No!' It is good to have someone there to make sure you are functioning ok so that you can work to the best of your ability".

T

TIME

Academics and community partners all agreed that the PAR approach is slow and time consuming. Working through all the stages outlined in Section 2 takes time, and even before the research kicks off, time is needed to build relationships and trust with the community and with other research partners (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Mason, 2021).

Again and again, it was emphasised inclusivity (the essential ingredient of PAR) is impossible without building relationships, and that relationship building takes "longer than you think" – and especially when the parties are very different from each other. It takes time to understand where partners are coming from, how different organisations operate, and to reach a common understanding.

"I didn't understand how long it would take ... we've spent the last year now ... just talking to people and now I realise that we probably need another year".

Time is money, so the understanding, flexibility and support of others is essential. Community partners also need to be prepared to invest time: they need to understand and commit to the PAR process. Community researchers are not always able to drop everything at the convenience of academic time frames. They may also feel pressed for time within the research process. Time is needed to support community researchers through the research process, working through problems with them, coaching and upskilling, reflecting and learning.

It takes time to find appropriate tools for exploring community concerns in depth (effective tools that community researchers are or can become comfortable with). Language and cultural barriers were also noted as potential barriers to participatory approaches, barriers which take time to work around.

TRUST

Trust is essential to working together efficiently – cooperative endeavours for community benefit almost certainly break down without it (Svendsen, 2014). Fair and reliable rules along with equitable power balances play a vital part in maintaining trust. This has implications for how we should operate as a collective, although it is important to note that even official, organisational connections are mediated through real people, and trust is affected by how those individuals treat each other one-on-one.

The PAR approach helps people to forge trusting connections, both within the community and between the community and external partners. As participants become familiar with new groups of people, they become practiced in communicating with one another, they can learn to overcome conflict and cooperate, they experience being respected and having their voices heard and responded to, and the trust which builds up because of all these things facilitates further cooperation. Trust is often low in communities who have faced neglect, injury, or marginalisation, so beginning a relationship that feeds back positive outcomes can kick off a life-changing chain of events.

Many academics talked about relationship-building/trust-building characteristics of PAR, and the central role that inclusivity, listening, understanding and response has in this. There must be a genuine desire for collaboration in the process of social change; it is not just about extracting information and moving on. But this takes time and emotional investment; the building of real relationships is integral to building trust! The cost is considerable, but the results/impact is significant.

Community service providers who had been involved in PAR initiatives spoke of significantly improved levels of trust that had not been gained with other approaches, as the process revealed “shared experiences, shared understanding, shared culture”. Another community service provider spoke of how rewarding it was for their team to work directly with people rooted in their communities instead of going via middle organisations. “When we first talked about it, we weren’t sure it was going to work, so it was a real success for us.” New, trusted connections had been forged.

Likewise, in conversation with a community researcher it became clear that the community researcher team was mirroring the communication skills of the project facilitator, with the PAR process contributing to improving relationships within the community and towards people outside. Community researchers mentioned having learned, different perspectives, the power of collaboration, others skills, active listening skills, and “the ability to discuss and share ideas in a group”. One reported, “I feel committed to the people in the team and to X [the project lead] and what might be ahead”. To sum up in the words of a community researcher: “[PAR] builds trust between different organisations and communities”.

U

UNITY

Project participants are on different journeys and will disagree. It is a complex world without one, find-it-and-fix-it solution, and yet improvements depend on people working together. They still need to learn to respect one another and come up with a unified output.

“Not giving up on people. Being forgiving/ understanding/prepared to give the benefit of the doubt. Being able to help calm situations down. Being willing to work through conflict. Being prepared to take people’s complaints or difficulties seriously and work through to mutually acceptable solutions. Working through disagreements between people takes a lot of time and sensitivity but needs to be prioritised as conflict destroys the ability to work together and the momentum of the project is dissipated.”

Kindness and support also need to be expressed in very practical terms through training, reflection time, financial compensation, and regard for wellbeing, ethics and safeguarding. Engagement and trust will be lost if community researchers feel overwhelmed, and adequate support needs to be assured.

UNDERVALUED

Academics and community partners both expressed their concerns about how the PAR approach is undervalued. This is partly because the outputs are not purely for academic benefit: "It's producing things that are accessible and work for the community, for the participants. It's not just for writing papers". It is also difficult to fit PAR into the current academic framework in terms of methods: the time it takes, the uncertainty of it due to it being participatory, the different power dynamics/power sharing (it's not the institutions which are in control of the process – they have to share power with communities), and because some forms of knowledge are valued more highly than others.

One academic claimed that "the work - the outputs don't count". Some of these outputs relate to change/impact in the lives of community participants. The impact might be "quite localised in one or two neighbourhoods ... but that doesn't mean it's not valuable". An academic also talked of sharing knowledge beyond academic papers using blogs and social media. To some extent these forms of dissemination are recognised and yet, "ultimately, if you apply for a job and you and they look at your publications list and it's not very long, but you got all these other things, they're still going to say, where's the academic publication?" It was noted that PAR "has no place in careers".

An academic also noted, "Most of the academics who do this are women – there is a gendered aspect here". Indeed, there are strong links between participatory approaches and feminist theories. Both recognise that the accepted way of doing things is not the only valid way, both challenge existing power structures and advocate self-mobilisation, both respect the voice of ordinary people as expert with respect to their own lives (Kendon et al., 2007). However, we need to be critical of gendered and racialised dynamics of PAR within communities and academic institutions and finds ways of promoting equity and solidarity through our practices (Fine and Torre, 2019).

It was felt to be challenging to convey to universities and funding institutions the value of this work, managing partners' expectations and allowing the participatory process the full time it needs. There is a need to put more value on the mutual benefits that University–community collaborations can bring to all partners. Partnerships with community organisations need investing in.

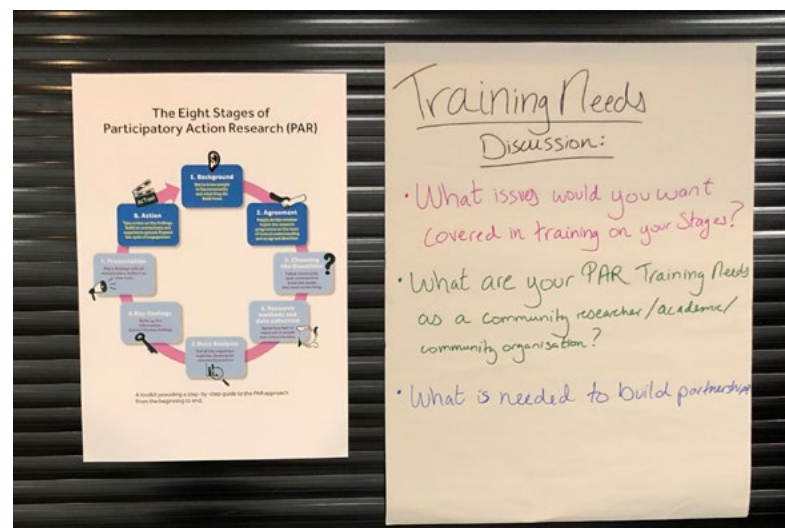
V

VOICES

Through PAR, diverse voices are heard, and not just the interpretations of those in power. The value of community knowledge is recognised and tapped into. This is not only fairer, but produces richer insights.

"[The approach] provides deeper insight and it's also more respectful. Instead of seeing people as kind of research subjects that are studied, you see people as human beings who have a lot of insight and knowledge that you don't have. You are actually privileged to be hearing about their experience because that will make you a better researcher and because it gives you a better understanding. So, I think that understanding goes much deeper when you work with communities."

"Community based research is the voice of real people unfiltered by professional interpretation, and not as a plea but a grounded and authentic demand or revelation backed by evidence."



W

WELLBEING

An ethic of care underpins the PAR approach (Evans, 2016; Amauchi et al, 2022). Care needs to be taken of researchers in all moments of vulnerability. The researchers are vulnerable at the beginning of the project when they lack confidence and a sense of integration. Motivated community researchers are key to PAR and to impact, and a sense of wellbeing and motivation is closely linked to a sense of being valued.

Community researchers are also vulnerable when they engage with the communities on difficult issues, and especially if the issues are close to them. They might be put into uncomfortable roles or have trauma triggering conversations. Racism is encountered repeatedly. Physical and emotional risks need to be considered and safety precautions taken. Community researchers need training in how to handle difficult conversations, they need to be familiar with ethical and safeguarding principles, and they may need emotional support after some instances. Many so called 'marginalised' communities want their stories to be told but on their own terms. Ownership and being taken seriously is validating. Academics can lend credibility by ensuring methodological rigour and supporting information.

Community researchers can become fatigued by their intense involvement or when outsiders suddenly want to engage with them/use them. As one academic said: they can be "exploited for publicity reasons". Another noted how important it is to show appreciation for what community researchers give into the project and to express gratitude. Safeguarding needs to be considered because community researcher involvement might be controversial and expose them to hostility within their community. Some information might bring negative repercussions onto the community or give a handle for powerful people to use against them.

Community researchers are also vulnerable at the end of the project when they are let go. They may need help through this transition. It is particularly distressing for them at the end of the project if actions are not implemented. It is important to reach the action stage but it is also important to avoid raising unrealistic expectations. As Kindon et al. write, expect/embrace complexity and partial solutions. Persist in believing that ordinary people pulling together on an issue make a difference. Keep it real and value what the community values, including the camaraderie, an increasing sense of common interest and vision for change.

WHAT NEXT?

A cross-disciplinary centre within the University is recommended, especially dedicated to PAR. This centre should:

- Have dedicated staff, funding and admin support structures, understanding what PAR requires (in terms of collaborative structures, ethics and funding) and being flexible enough to cater for community engagement, community researchers, and for the production of outputs acceptable to the community as well as to the University.
- Ensure University staff are adequately resourced to work in this way (factoring in the central role of relationships and associated workload). Build PAR teams who can support one another with the physical and emotional workload.
- Establish durable collaborative partnerships with community organisations – authorities, charities, businesses etc, and also with community researchers and other facilitators who can be financed through University channels and who feel welcomed on campus and an integral part of the learning community. Allocate resources to maintain these relationships between projects.
- Take a more activist stance on addressing power inequalities and help to shift the whole research culture from extractive to inclusive. Resistance to shifting power balances can be expected, but wherever connection and trust is established, progressively greater cooperative endeavours can be achieved.
- Promote PAR methodology, values and ethos more generally. Become a training/coaching centre for academics and non-academics alike. Creating a network of PAR projects and sharing experiences will help all participants to learn from each other.
- Enable students, academics, and community partners to engage with one another strategically. Collaborating on change increases impact.
- Value and showcase every output. PAR research impacts the community in multiple ways, including relationship building and an increased capacity for collaboration. All outputs should count in the measures of 'success'.
- Recognise PAR research and its various measures of impact in staff promotion and performance criteria and career paths.

X

X – LEAVING A MARK

We include some notes on measuring the positive impact of community-led research – outcomes which imply that the research outputs and the way the research methodology mobilises and enriches communities both have value. Can all these variables be counted as valid outputs when it comes to funding?

- **Connection:** any action which brings people together for constructive dialogue (between one another and also linking people across socio-economic divides) is a step in the right direction (improving wellbeing and increasing the capacity for cooperation). Have new people been drawn into these connections? Have new links been forged between stakeholders? Have individuals mobilised/rallied to a common cause?
- **Investment in people:** Have any new leaders emerged? Have existing community leaders been supported in their role? Has anyone grown in knowledge, skill or confidence as a result of the process? Has anyone been inspired to take a positive life-step.
- **Better access to desired services:** Is there any change to resource flows because of the project? Any improvement in access to services? Any changes to the system and the way things are done? Any systematic change to the way decisions are made that empowers the marginalised? Have controls been introduced on community leaders that abuse their power?
- **The cohesive, cooperative nature of community relationships:** Has bringing people together for the research action had any effect on the ability to cooperate in terms of building trust, goodwill, and increased consideration for one another's interests? For example, is there any evidence of new ways in which community members are supporting one another (evidencing goodwill)? Has there been any voluntary action, provision, or giving towards a person, activity, or for the common good? Have any conflicts been overcome? Any evidence of new engagement and assumption of responsibility?

Y

YOU MATTER

Support and care for one another on the job. This includes the training/coaching and upskilling of community researchers. Encourage reflective learning and self-awareness (self-determination).

Ensure everyone receives financial compensation for their time. Generosity, kindness, support and encouragement go a long way in building trust and confidence. Support people emotionally, especially following difficult conversations. Support those in working through conflict and provide training and professional help. Ethics and safeguarding must underpin all actions. Academics have a duty of care towards community researchers and their wellbeing, not only avoiding harm and protecting from exploitation, but ensuring that participation leaves people better off.

In terms of ethics, Manzo and Brightbill (2007) list the three main guidelines upheld by academic institutions and then add some extra considerations that are specific to PAR:

- **Respect for autonomy** – people need to be informed, not forced to participate, give their consent to what information is shared and have their anonymity protected. The issue of anonymity requires special consideration in PAR where community members know each other well. Moreover, in the blurred lines of formal and informal relationships and chat, what is sharable information and what is not needs to be constantly checked with participants.
- **Benefice is about bringing benefit rather than harm to participants.** It may be argued that observing distress without taking action or getting involved is harmful to communities, violating this ethical principle. Starting to build relationships only to drop them once academic objectives are met could also be damaging. Therefore, universities who wish to take a PAR approach must carefully consider their ongoing commitments and duty of care to those they are building relationships with and to the wider community.
- **Justice concerns equity, avoiding exploitations, and sharing both risk and benefits.** Power inequalities (information extraction instead of facilitating self-representation) are easy to overlook. Has enough time been factored in to allow true participation? And are people enabled to tell their stories on their own terms? Do they have an equal say in how they and their lives and circumstances are portrayed to the world? The risks to community partners of sharing information also need to be carefully considered and discussed with researchers.

Will sharing views and stories get anyone into trouble or add to stigma? Universities want to approve ethics in advance of any research project, but this is difficult with PAR as the research questions cannot be known in advance and power relations are not fixed. More flexibility is required, perhaps allowing phased ethical submissions or a set of ethical procedures tailored specifically to PAR. These ethics need to be deliberated with all participants, not just the academic community, and participants may wish to change the rules as the research unfolds. As Kindon et al. (2007), emphasise everyone should be developing a critical point of view, coherent values, and a wish to do the right thing.

Z

ZEST AND ZEAL

PAR ensures a person's point of view is listened to and valued. The following quotes from community researchers illustrate the impact that PAR has had on how people feel about themselves and their contribution.

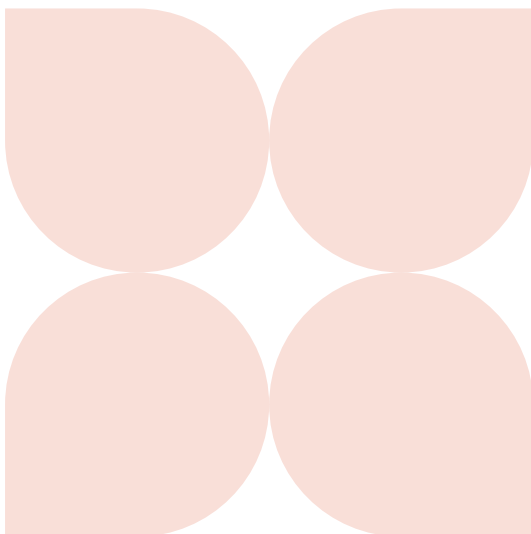
"I like [big service provider named] recognising this work ... I like taking the findings and going to the planners to have the recommendations implemented."

"Gathering in what people think is a buzz in itself for me. What do you really think? I really enjoyed doing the one about aspiration in this community – it really interested me because I'm interested in it."

"It is a privilege to work for the University and be able to do research projects."

"Every day is unforgettable. I am proud of ourselves as a group, starting from scratch. We have made presentations at the University. People are looking at us. We have become something from nothing. We get recognition due to the work that was undertaken – we are recognised on the street, and people say 'Hi' as you walk along. Coming together after Covid and spreading the message has given us new hope and something to be proud of."

"I feel like I'm being heard – that makes me feel valued. I want to spread the love, spread this feeling of being heard and valued. That's what we all want and need."



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Notes

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: A TOOLKIT

This toolkit is for community researchers, community organisations, students, and academics who want to reflect on and better understand the principles and everyday practices of Participatory Action Research (PAR), how to build community research teams, and how to use PAR to understand local issues.

The PAR Toolkit sets out reasons for taking the PAR approach and two practical tools:

- The *8 stages of Participatory Action Research* presents a step-by-step guide through a PAR journey from the perspective of community researchers and academics. The 8 Stages of PAR sets out reflections on process and practical considerations, including: how to choose research topics geared to social change, interactive and creative research methods, recruiting participants, building relationships and agreement, collecting and analysing data, presenting findings, feeding back to participants, and taking action for social transformation.
- The *Participatory Action Research Wheel* provides an A to Z of words that meaningfully represent PAR. The PAR Wheel is designed to start conversations about the benefits and challenges of the PAR process and what is needed to carry out PAR well.

More information about PAR projects in Reading can be found at: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research>.



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Design: Wendy Lewis

2023