

Are Academics Irrelevant?

Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research

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Interest in participatory research has exploded over the past decade. Academics seem to follow three approaches in participatory research: the initiator, the consultant, and the collaborator. After discussing the approaches, this article argues that doing the research is not a goal in itself but only a means. Participatory research is actually part of a larger community change project that is dependent on four roles: "animator," community organizer, popular educator, and participatory researcher. Determining how the academic will fit in the project (as initiator, consultant, or collaborator) requires addressing three questions: What is the project trying to do? What are the academic's skills? and How much participation does the community need or want? The answers to these questions will vary according to how organized the community is.

The word "academic" is a synonym for irrelevant.

—Alinsky (1946/1969, p. ix)

I remember the moment my academic career changed. I was a graduate student, sitting in the Cedar-Riverside Project Area Committee (PAC) office to interview Tim Mungavan about this amazing Minneapolis neighborhood that had instituted a radically grassroots community-controlled redevelopment program. Tim, the group's architect/organizer, leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on his desk, and looked me sternly in the eye. He said,

We have students and reporters coming through all the time, asking neighborhood people to give their time and answer their questions. And we don't get so much as a copy of a paper from them. If I agree to talk with you, then I want you to agree that you'll give us a copy of the paper you write. (Stoecker, 1994, p. 25)

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Tim tells the story of how I then tried to make myself relevant, and he set me to work cleaning the PAC's storeroom, thinking that if I stuck with it after that I might really mean it. I stuck, at least partly because the storeroom was a treasure trove of neighborhood information. My relationship with the neighborhood continues now 15 years later.

When I got my first academic job at the University of Toledo, I met Dave Beckwith—a community organizer with the Center for Community Change and the University of Toledo Urban Affairs Center. Dave handed me a list of community-generated research needs almost the day I arrived. I negotiated with him and other activists to do a resource and needs assessment of Toledo's community-based organizations. This project, involving neighborhood activists throughout, built a coalition that brought over \$2 million to support those groups. As time went on, however, I found myself working with bankers, foundation officials, and large nonprofits who did not share my desire to transform all power structures to participatory democracies and community-controlled economies. I consequently became involved in a factional power struggle that destroyed the coalition built by that first project (Stoecker, 1997). Then I was in two very different participatory research projects in 1996. The first project I initiated. It began with academics, never made the transition to community control, and died. The second began with community members, and I became involved as one of many. This project is thriving (Stoecker & Stuber, 1997).

These experiences bring me to this article and to the haunting question of how I, as an academic, can become relevant.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

What is this thing called participatory research, or participatory action research, or action research, or community research, or community-based research, or any one of a number of other labels? I will focus on *participatory research* or *PR* as distinguished from the *participatory action research* label popularized by William Foote Whyte (1991), whose perspective I and others (Hall, 1992) see as less oriented to social change and closer to a more conservative action research model (Brown & Tandon, 1983).

I see the two most basic characteristics of PR to be increasing participation in the research process and making social change (Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992).

Increasing participation means democratizing the knowledge process (Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992). This involves legitimizing forms of knowledge, such as folk culture, not normally seen as valid (de Roux 1991, pp. 38, 44; Fals-Borda, 1991). In addition, those normally restricted to roles as only "research subjects" also participate throughout the research process. There is a concern, however, that participation may be promoted unreflectively, seen as an empowerment strategy that powerful outsiders provide for powerless insiders (Bowes, 1996; Long & Long, 1992), or used to cover up structural inequality (Nyoni,

1991, p. 112). Real participation requires a “cogenerative dialogue” (Fear & Edwards, 1995) where researcher knowledge, drawing and abstracting from multiple contexts, is combined with insider knowledge rich in experience and detailed understanding of a specific setting (Gaventa, 1993). Participation must not be about “advising” the researcher but actually controlling the decision-making process.

Participation is part of a broader social change strategy. For Rahman (1991b), “Domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production but also over the means of knowledge production. . . . These two gaps should be attacked simultaneously wherever feasible” (p. 14). Likewise, “Involving research subjects as partners in the entire research process also increases the potential to distribute the benefits of the research process more equitably” (Maguire, 1987, pp. 38-39). The research process must increasingly shift the power and control of decision making into the hands of community members. This is very important for women, who are often left out of PR by male-centered language, women’s unequal access to participation, too little attention to obstacles of participation, women’s unequal access to project benefits, and an absence of feminist theory and gender issues (Maguire, 1987, p. 46).

In addition to changing the social structure of the knowledge process, PR maintains a view of social change that emphasizes the centrality of social conflict and collective action and the necessity of changing social structures (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Comstock & Fox, 1993). PR is about people producing knowledge that is normally hidden to develop their own consciousness and further their social change struggles (Gaventa, 1991). The real goal, then, is for community members to become self-sufficient researchers and activists, which of course creates problems for academics like myself who would like to make a career out of PR.

VARIATIONS IN PR AND OPTIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC

If PR is really revolutionary, and if academics are relatively privileged members of society, do we help or hurt the cause?

However well-intentioned and zealous the efforts of individual faculty who have brought participatory research into the academic arena, one can only question by what compromises such researchers are likely to survive. . . . Having made our work acceptable in academic terms, we see that work now being incorporated into academic curricula. Our papers have become required readings for professional researchers who are expected to master the theory and methods of participatory research. It is not difficult to imagine the day when Third World governments and community organizations will hire only professional participatory researchers trained and certified by graduate institutions. (Heaney, 1993, pp. 43-44)

Participatory researchers seem to do increasingly well in the university (Cancian, 1993; Gedicks, 1996). But there are often compromises. Programs like service learning that try to bring students into a kind of PR practice may reduce the community to just another laboratory (Beckwith, 1996; Marullo, 1996). Graduate students trying to do PR are still forced to take control of the research in order to get credit to graduate (Heaney, 1993). The reward system of universities discourages collaboration, and community members have to make time and even monetary sacrifices to collaborate in research, whereas academics get rewards (Hall, 1993). And in many institutions, community research/organizing is still seen as a kind of "community housework" that is not socially valued, and thus, does not receive much attention (Hubbard, 1996).

So what are the options for the academic? Today, academics seem to adopt three approaches in PR: the initiator, the consultant, and the collaborator.

THE INITIATOR

One of the things that most distinguishes PR from action research is the belief that the research question should be generated by the community, not the researcher (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Deshler & Ewert, 1995). However, Reason (1994) notes that "paradoxically, many PAR [participatory action research] projects would not occur without the initiative of someone with time, skill, and commitment, someone who will almost inevitably be a member of a privileged and educated group" (p. 334). Researchers usually initiate contact with community organizations, even if they do consequently respond to requests coming from the community (Maguire, 1987, pp. 40, 43).

Some also see the researcher as an educator/leader who helps the community overcome its false consciousness. This is tricky, however, because "in order for the alternative ideology to result from a collective effort throughout the research process, all forms of indoctrination and ideological imposition had to be ruled out" (de Roux, 1991, p. 50). Rahman (1991b) accuses some PAR practitioners of placing themselves in a vanguard role. And Stringer (1996) cautions,

When we try to "get" people to do anything, insist that they "must" or "should" do something, or try to "stop" them from engaging in some activity, we are working from an authoritative position that is likely to generate resistance. (p. 43)

Can an academic adopt an initiator approach that is truly empowering? Brydon-Miller (1993) describes how her initial research led to a "Community Accessibility Committee" that began taking action on its own. In this case, the research process strengthened people's awareness of their own skills and resources, requiring the researcher to take on more of a process-facilitating role and less of a product-producing role. On the other hand, in a PR project I initiated, we were never able to switch control over to the community, as too many of

our academic members were not skilled at community organizing and process facilitating (Stoecker & Stuber, 1997).

THE CONSULTANT

In the strictest sense, the PR model says that community members should do the research themselves. However, in many cases, academics find themselves consulting with community groups. The Trinity Center for Neighborhoods, described in this issue, does this (Channels & Zannoni, 1999). The community commissions the research, and the academic carries it out while being held accountable to the community. In some cases, the accountability process can be intense, with the researcher getting community input at each stage of the research project. I have used the consultant approach regularly, at the community's request. To ask already overburdened community members to do the research when they could be doing other more important things contradicts the social change goal of PR. A community group armed with a Ph.D.-authored study may also be more influential than a group with research authored by someone not seen as following scientific standards (Beckwith, 1996).

John Gaventa (1993), however, critiques both the initiator and the consultant approaches. Because not just material wealth, but also intellectual knowledge, is power, we need to change material relations and knowledge relations. Consequently,

To the extent that the research still remains in the hands of the researcher, a real transfer of ownership of knowledge may not have occurred. The dichotomy between those who produce knowledge and those who are most affected by it still exists. . . . Eventually, the researcher may decide to leave, taking the skills, experience, and newly acquired knowledge along with him or her. (pp. 33-34)

THE COLLABORATOR

The Policy Research Action Group or PRAG (1997) in Chicago has pioneered the practice of "collaborative research" (Mayfield, Hellwig, & Banks, 1999 [this issue]; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997). In this approach,

It is recognized that the researcher may have certain technical expertise and the community leader may have knowledge of community needs and perspectives. Rather than either side using these resources to gain control in a research relationship, they need to be combined to provide a more unitary approach to research. (Nyden & Wiewal, 1992, p. 45)

In contrast to those who fear that PR practitioners might further disempower the community, the PRAG model wonders if PR sometimes makes the researcher subservient to the community and thus less useful than the researcher otherwise might be.

But collaboration is hard. Rahman (1991b) worries that “it is not easy to establish a truly subject-subject relation at the very outset with people who are traditionally victims of a dominating structure” (p. 17). Community members are not used to the “talk” world of academics, and they are often skeptical of it. And real collaboration takes a lot of time—for meetings, for accountability processes, for working through the inevitable conflicts—that may be in especially short supply for community group members. The collaborative approach may be less efficient than the consultant approach, asking community members to participate in ways that they are not interested in or do not have time for. Maguire (1987) reminds us that “while researchers may be able to invest their total work time in a PR project, participants continue their regular life activities” (p. 46). On the other hand, does collaborative participation go far enough in changing existing knowledge relations? If the collaboration generates new knowledge and understanding for both community members and academics then perhaps so, but if the collaboration is just each doing what they do best then maybe not.

PR IN CONTEXT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACADEMICS

The three PR approaches available to academics—the initiator, the consultant, and the collaborator—seem unsatisfactory and fraught with tensions. The problem, however, is not with the approaches but with a conception that PR is a research project. It is not. It is a community organizing and/or development project of which the research is only one piece. As such, it has three goals:

- learning knowledge and skills relevant to the task at hand,
- developing relationships of solidarity, and
- engaging in action that wins victories and builds self-sufficiency.

Doing research is not, in itself, a goal. Research is only a method to achieve these broader goals. And that is where the crux of the issue lies. In real social change, the researcher role is only one of many, and we need to consider the other roles that make for successful PR.

ROLES IN PR

Achieving the goals above requires that four roles be fulfilled: “animator,” community organizer, popular educator, and participatory researcher.

Part translator, part facilitator, part self-esteem builder, the animator may be the most general and combines parts of the other roles but, in essence, helps people develop a sense that they and their issues are important. For Rahman (1991a), the animator has

a sense of commitment and a desire to live and work in the villages; innovativeness in work and a willingness to experiment with new approaches; communication skills, in particular the ability to dialogue, discuss and listen to the people; flexibility and a readiness to learn from one's own and others' experiences; and intellectual ability and emotional maturity. (p. 96)

The community organizer, a role many associate with Saul Alinsky (1946/1969, 1971; see also Beckwith & Lopez, 1997), is often confused with the researcher's role in PR, devaluing the importance of organizer skills and misleading academics as to what the real tasks are. Two important PR authors describe researchers in ways that better fit the organizer's role. Ernie Stringer (1996) portrays the researcher as a catalyst who stimulates people rather than imposes on them, emphasizes process over product, enables people to do it themselves, starts where people are, helps people plan and act and evaluate rather than advocates for them, and focuses on human development as well as solutions to problems. Peter Park (1993) says that a community's

sense of the problem may not always be externalized as a consensually derived and objectified target of attack in the community, although there may be suffering, a sense of malaise and frustration, and anger. For this reason, the situation characteristically requires outside intervention in the guise of a researcher . . . to help formulate an identifiable problem to be tackled. (p. 8)

The tragedy of conflating the organizer and researcher roles, which I have painfully learned, is that only a few academics are good organizers. Those trained in the 1960s social movements have real organizing skills. Those of us not trained in active mobilizations know *how* to do research. But we only know *about* organizing. I am among the latter group—too young to have gotten on-the-job training and too geographically isolated from the good organizing efforts out there today. My most successful PR experiences, then, have been working with those who are good organizers (Stoecker & Beckwith, 1992).

The popular educator, discussed earlier, facilitates the learning process. This is not a teacher who is assumed to have knowledge that he or she gives to people who are assumed to be ignorant. Rather, it is a facilitator who helps people discover for themselves what they already know and create new knowledge (Freire, 1970; M. Horton & Freire, 1990; Williams, 1996). As a consequence, people develop greater self-confidence along with greater knowledge. Ideally, in such a setting, the expert knowledge of the educator combines with the experiential knowledge of community members, creating entirely new ways of thinking about issues (Fear & Edwards, 1995).

Finally, the participatory researcher knows how to find the references quickly, can construct a survey blindfolded, and can create a research process either with strong guidance from community members or in collaboration with them. The concept of participatory researcher in this context is stripped of the other tasks of the initiator approach and is limited to conducting the research.

But this role is about more than being technically skilled. It is also about being committed to transforming the social relations of knowledge production and to democratic participation in the research process.

One person can occupy multiple roles. For example, a researcher who is a good organizer can be an initiator. Multiple people can also occupy the same role, especially in the research process where there might be a variety of people collectively making research decisions.

GUIDEPOSTS FOR THE ACADEMIC

We should ask three questions whenever we enter a PR situation to help us determine which of the approaches (initiator, consultant, collaborator) fits the community best. The answers will vary depending on whether one is working with an organized community or an unorganized community (Maguire, 1993, pp. 161-162).

1. What Is this PR Project Trying to Do?

Some PR projects begin in disorganized communities and are actually community-organizing projects—using the research to bring people together and build skills and relationships. The Appalachian Alliance conducted a massive 80-county, six-state study that continues to inform communizing efforts (B. D. Horton, 1993). Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens, fighting toxic industrial waste polluting their water, found that doing their own health survey

gave them a reason and an incentive to call at every household along the fourteen-mile length of the creek, and sit down and discuss with them the problems they were experiencing. . . . [It also] broadened and strengthened the leadership within the group. The prime activists in the health survey were women who became better informed and more vocal and confident through their work with the survey. . . . Now, you have to remember that none of us were trained health scientists, and some of the people who were doing this research had not graduated from high school. (Merrifield, 1993, pp. 78, 80)

If you are entering a disorganized low-resource community, they may not have filled the animator, organizer, educator, and researcher roles. If that is the case, then please see Question 2, “What are Your Skills?” Because depending on which roles are filled, and which can be filled by others, you may find yourself occupying the rest. Disorganized communities, when they lack members who can fill the roles of animator, educator, organizer, and researcher, need an initiator researcher. These situations are the most difficult for the academic to enter because they require so many skills beyond simply doing research.

Some projects create special difficulties. A coalition, in its early stages, is no different from any other unorganized community, even if its individual member organizations are stable. Complications also arise with service organizations. If

the research project is to “study” the service population, but the only people making decisions are service providers, it violates the most fundamental characteristic of PR—that the people affected help control the research.

Other PR projects may come from already organized communities that realize they need research to help achieve their goals. As I was writing this article, a neighborhood group phoned me. This group is concerned about outside landlords’ and realtors’ attempts to transform their neighborhood from one of homeowners to student renters; the group wants to document how many rental houses there are. They did the research themselves, and only wanted technical advice on their research process. In this situation, the consultant researcher approach fits well, as they do not need ongoing assistance.

2. What Are Your Skills?

Researchers with good organizing skills can potentially walk into any community so long as they are aware of the basic issues confronting any organizer, such as insider/outsider status, being sponsored/invited, understanding the pre-existing community members’ skills and leaders, and so on. Researchers with organizer skills can practice an initiator approach in disorganized communities, helping people define their needs and organizing action research projects to fill those needs.

If those are not your skills, however, be critical of yourself and the community, and ask,

- How organized is this community?
- To what extent are the functional roles of animator, organizer, educator, and researcher filled?
- To what extent can the unfilled roles be filled by others?
- Which of the unfilled roles can I play?

If you are only comfortable researching, then you are probably limited to a consultant approach and are thus limited to working only with well-organized communities. Be wary of communities with lots of internal conflict or weak organizational structures unless there are others who are effective at filling the other roles (Simonson & Bushaw, 1993). If you are not good at facilitating discussion in the classroom, you will not be good at this on the streets either. Communicating abstract academic ideas so that people think about their practical implications, discussing research in a way that helps people organize action, and helping people build confidence in their own knowledge are special skills indeed.

If you are comfortable with the animator and popular educator roles, then you may use the collaboration approach. Here also be wary of disorganized groups because all groups need some degree of organization to collaborate. Interpreting and communicating with a diverse membership is also central to the collaborator

approach. True collaboration may even mean dramatically altering the character of the research, as tastes for research differ, and you may find yourself doing theater, storytelling, and other forms of creative education (Comstock & Fox, 1993).

There are other skill issues to be aware of. First, are there some kinds of research you are good at and others that you are not? PR has a habit of changing midstream, sometimes requiring dramatic shifts in the research process. When I began researching Toledo philanthropic foundations for a neighborhood coalition, I expected to do interviews but found myself copying numbers from poorly microfiched foundation tax returns. Second, how are your writing skills? Academics are often asked to write, both because a Ph.D. author is still seen as having credibility in some quarters and because academics are seen as having time and writing skills. But if your writing looks like a journal article, no one will read it, and no one will use it. In a participatory evaluation project I recently facilitated, I wrote the group's final report using framed sidebars, varied fonts, graphics, and other magazine-like qualities. They told me it helped them actually read the report.

Third, what are your time constraints? Deadlines in the real world are not like those in academia. Missing a deadline means missing a grant opportunity, missing a government hearing, missing a legislative vote. You cannot make up those kinds of misses and you cannot get extensions. And just like in Alinsky's (1971, p. 128) rules of community organizing, a PR project that drags on is a drag. Find out ahead of time what the group's deadlines are, and either commit to them or stay out of the project. And remember, there is no spring break in the real world.

3. How Much Research Participation Does the Community Need and Want?

This may be the most contentious issue in PR today. Rahman's (1991b) and Gaventa's (1993) concern that we change both the social relations of material production and of knowledge production must be heeded. At the same time, we must worry that overemphasizing participation can undermine the need to act quickly and forcefully.

For organized communities with a sense of empowerment that are moving on an issue, participation in every aspect of the research may not make sense. These groups could do their own research, but have more important things to do. Having an outside researcher facilitate and even do the research does not hinder them from learning any new skills and does not maintain knowledge inequality. In these cases, a consultant approach may be perfectly acceptable. In cases in which the research will be ongoing, a collaborator approach may be more desirable. An initiator approach will likely not work because an outsider academic pushing an agenda will be seen as attempting to undermine the community.

With less organized communities, the research process is also a community-organizing process. In these cases, participation must be organized and

maximized. If there are no organizers available and the researcher has organizer skills, the initiator researcher approach may be appropriate. It is extremely important, however, that the initiator researcher strictly follow good organizer practice that builds community control as the project progresses and makes the research serve the community organizing.

There are mixed cases, however, where it is less clear what to do. Those difficult middle cases, where there is some degree of organization and a looming deadline, often require a tradeoff between efficiency and democracy, which is no different than the tension between democracy and efficiency that afflicts any community organizing/development project (Stoecker, 1994). We have found this in our latest PR project, building a community network in Toledo (Stoecker & Stuber, 1997). As the grant deadline approached, we had to decide whether to fill in some blanks with less participation than we wanted or miss the deadline. We chose to fill in the blanks, building in opportunities for later participation in the event the grant arrived. There is another even more difficult case in which the researcher does most of the project when the target population cannot participate. This is especially the case with undocumented populations who have no rights of assembly to meet or attend demonstrations and who cannot be safely identified in the research process (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1993).

The most important thing is for communities to consciously choose which decisional points to control and which to let a researcher control. These decisional points are

- defining the research question,
- designing the research,
- implementing the research design,
- analyzing the research data,
- reporting the research results, and
- acting on the research results.

The community must always define the research question. The academic can use an initiator approach to help develop the question, perhaps by surveying the community's information needs, but should not choose the question itself.

The academic can design the research, but community involvement in this step can prevent many a foolish decision. When we developed an eight-page survey for community groups as part of an Internet access study (Urban University and Neighborhood Network, 1996), our community participants pointed out that anything over two pages would be ignored.

Community involvement in implementing the design will only serve two specific objectives—to help individuals build specific skills and relationships with each other. If the research process will not also be a community-organizing process, it may be more effective for the researcher to do the research. Also, beware that community involvement in implementing the design can significantly lengthen how long it takes to collect data because those carrying out the

research may need extensive training. The only failed PR project I was involved in was one where community members did the interviews. We were working with a neighborhood whose members predominantly spoke Spanish, and neither of us researchers were effective Spanish speakers, so we used our miniscule grant to pay community members to interview each other. We were unprepared for the social stresses that prevented them from completing the interviews quickly and for the problems created by lack of training.

Analyzing the data, if it cannot be done collaboratively, should at least be done with strict accountability to the community. One method is to present or show rough drafts of the analysis to community members, who can then modify the findings and interject new data. Even in my graduate school research of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, I quickly learned that I got more information from people's reactions to my written reports than I did from the original interviews.

Who should take responsibility for reporting the results is another tricky issue. There may be a strategic purpose, as I have noted, for having the "Ph.D." on the cover of the report. But many communities are also very concerned that academics not use community research to enhance their own careers. Some communities demand ownership of the data and the results. Others could care less. But you should at least talk with the community about this in case they have not thought about it. Do not try to publish an article from the research without the community's permission.

Organizing action is often the weakest part of a PR project, often because the researcher sees the project as research rather than as community organizing, and the roles of animator, educator, and organizer have been neglected. But this phase is also the most important part of the project, and another one where community control is paramount. A researcher who is a good organizer can help the community think about what possible strategies and tactics might be, but the community has to make strategic and tactical choices based on what its members can and are willing to do.

CONCLUSION

There are cases in which the academic is irrelevant, and where we can do no good. But also do not sell yourself short. Even where the academic is not needed, you may be able to help by documenting the struggle so that others may learn from it. As a graduate student academic in Cedar-Riverside, when community members first got me thinking about PR, I was of little use to them. I had no expert knowledge in anything that they did not have more of. How I ended up being relevant was in documenting the neighborhood's struggle and spreading the word of what happened so that the neighborhood could remember itself and others could adapt their model.

Finally, this article is an academic speaking mostly to other academics. Dave Beckwith (1996) offers an organizer's perspective on recommendations for academics who want to help:

- be quick,
- listen,
- do not just listen, participate,
- know the sources,
- use your priestly power for good,
- be creative,
- use people,
- help us get ahead of the curve,
- look to all your work for opportunities to help, and
- *Pecca Fortiter!* Sin bravely!

The last may be the most important. We academics, so concerned with doing the right thing, and so trained to evaluate everything from every angle before we act, often end up paralyzed. If we have real respect for the communities we work with, we will understand that they will tell us when we screw up, and they will not let us lead them astray. My recommendations come from my successes and mistakes, and may or may not make sense in the abstract. My main advice is to think about the possibilities, give it a shot, and learn from it.

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