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## ***PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH***

Practitioners of PAR engage in a variety of research projects, in a variety of contexts, using a wide range of research practices that are related to an equally wide range of political ideologies. Yet there are underlying tenets that are specific to the field of PAR and that inform the majority of PAR projects: (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process.

These aims are achieved through a cyclical process of exploration, knowledge construction, and action at different moments throughout the research process. As participants engage in PAR, they simultaneously address integral aspects of the research process—for example, the question of who benefits from a PAR project; what constitutes data; how will decision making be implemented; and how, and to whom, will the information generated within the PAR project be disseminated? As the PAR process evolves, these and other questions are re-problematized in the light of critical reflection and dialogue between and among participating actors. It is by actively engaging in critical dialogue and collective reflection that the participants of PAR recognize that they have a stake in the overall project. Thus, PAR becomes a living dialectical process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act (McTaggart, 1997a).

The originators of the principles, methodologies, epistemologies, and characterizations that inform PAR projects are worldwide and span many decades. In the late 1970s and 1980s, for example, Tandon (1981) and Kanhare (1980) initiated PAR projects in India that addressed adult education and women's development, respectively. In Columbia, Fals-Borda (1985, 1987) and his colleagues engaged in PAR projects aimed at increasing adult literacy. In neighboring Peru, de Wit and Gianotten (1980)

participated in a training program for rural farmers. In Chile, Vio Grossi (1982) worked with local communities to address agrarian reform. Swantz (1982) and Mbilinyi (1982) engaged in PAR processes to improve education for peasant women and other residents of Tanzania. In that same country, Mduma (1982) participated in a PAR project with local Tanzanians to develop agricultural technology.

Elsewhere in the world, Einar Thorsrud engaged in a PAR process that restructured work relations within the shipbuilding industry in Europe (Walton & Gaffney, 1989). In Canada, Jackson and McKay (1982) engaged with local people to improve water sanitation practices in Big Trout Lake. Hall (1977) addressed adult education in a variety of contexts in the United States, and in New Mexico, Maguire (1987) participated in a PAR project addressing male-to-female violence. At the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, Gaventa and Horton (1981) developed participatory strategies of reflection, action, and social change with various groups of people addressing a host of social and community issues.

Since then, many of the above researchers, as well as their counterparts in different regions of the globe, have increased the visibility of participatory action research. Similarly, they have re-demonstrated the wide range of issues that can be explored and acted upon in PAR, as well as the variety of contexts where PAR can be conducted. Greenwood and González accompanied industrial cooperatives in the Spanish Basque country as they learned research skills to organize and sustain the cooperatives' goals (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). Maglajlic (2004) engaged in PAR with university-based teams to develop strategies for the prevention of HIV/AIDS in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Hong Kong, Siu and Kwok (2004) carried out a PAR project to generate strategies for improving integrated services for children and youth. In South Africa, Marincowitz (2003) engaged in a PAR project aimed at improving primary care for terminally ill patients. In Guatemala, Lykes (1997, 2001) addressed mental health in the context of state-sponsored violence. In the United States, McIntyre (1997) explored the meaning of whiteness with White teachers, and Brydon-Miller (1993) engaged in a PAR project with disabled persons advocating rights for the disabled. Fine and her colleagues (2003) collaborated in a PAR project with women inmates documenting the effects of prison-based college programs on current and postrelease prisoners.

A closer reading of the above projects, as well as a review of many others not listed here, reveals the context-specificity of participatory action research. Owing to that specificity, there is no fixed formula for designing, practicing, and implementing PAR projects. Nor is there one overriding

theoretical framework that underpins PAR processes. Rather, there is malleability in how PAR processes are framed and carried out. In part, that is owing to the fact that practitioners of PAR, some of whom are community insiders and others who come from outside the community, draw from a variety of theoretical and ideological perspectives that inform their practice. Some researchers borrow from Marx's position that local people need to engage in critical reflection about the structural power of dominant classes in order to take action against oppression. Similarly, Gramsci's participation in class struggles and his belief that economic and self- and collective actualization can alleviate the uneven distribution of power in society have contributed to the belief among practitioners of PAR that people themselves are, and can be, catalysts for change (Hall, 1981).

Critical theory has also contributed to PAR since it suggests that researchers attend to how power in social, political, cultural, and economic contexts informs the ways in which people act in everyday situations (Collins, 1998; Kemmis, 2001). In addition, Bell (2001) argues that race must not be overlooked in research projects since the projects themselves are embedded in the theories and research practices that inform them—theories and practices that are themselves mediated by race.

Another major influence in the field of PAR is the work of the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1985). Freire's theory of conscientization, his belief in critical reflection as essential for individual and social change, and his commitment to the democratic dialectical unification of theory and practice have contributed significantly to the field of participatory action research. Similarly, Freire's development of counterhegemonic approaches to knowledge construction within oppressed communities has informed many of the strategies practitioners use in PAR projects.

As important, feminism has been a key contributor to the scholarship of participatory action research. Feminist theories (see, e.g., hooks, 2000; Collins, 1998; Morawski, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; Stewart, 1994; Wilkinson, 1996) have enhanced the field of PAR with perspectives that have evolved out of a refusal to accept theory, research, and ethical perspectives that ignore, devalue, and erase women's lives, experiences, and contributions to social science research. Beginning in the 1980s, Kanhare (1980), Lykes (1989), Maguire (1987), Mbilinyi (1982), Swantz, (1982), and Wadsworth (1984) demonstrated and articulated how feminist PAR could be implemented across a variety of contexts. They, and other researchers, continue that tradition today by providing clear frameworks about how feminist-infused PAR projects are "[m]aking the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, [and] putting the spotlight

on women as competent actors” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 248) in the life of the everyday (see, e.g., Brydon-Miller, Maguire, & McIntyre, 2004; Chataway, 1997; Chrisp, 2004; Fine et al., 2003; Greenwood, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Lykes, 2001; Maguire, 2004; McIntyre, 2000, 2004; Wadsworth, 2001).

There is also a cross-fertilization of research traditions that characterize PAR, each having distinct geohistorical roots. Rapid rural appraisal (Mikkelsen 2001), critical action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), community-based participatory research (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003), and participatory community research (Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004) are all variants of PAR that traditionally focus on systemic investigations that lead to a reconfiguration of power structures, however those structures are organized in a particular community.

Some practitioners of PAR follow the tradition of action research—a research approach developed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s that focuses on group dynamics and the belief that as people examine their realities, they will organize themselves to improve their conditions (McTaggart, 1991). The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London and the Work Research Institute in Oslo expanded Lewin’s work exploring the notion of team building as an essential factor in improving organizational behavior and structure (Boog, 2003). In addition, variants of action research like cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1988; Reason & Rowan, 1981) and action science (Argyris & Schön, 1989) have contributed to a better understanding of the relationship between theory building and processes of change within organizations and local communities.

Variants of PAR also exist within educational settings. Action research (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Elliott, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Hollingsworth, 1997; Noffke & Somekh, 2005; and Zeichner, 2001), teacher research (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Mills, 2006; and Kincheloe, 2003), reflective practice-research (Evans, 2002; McDonald, 1992; and Schön, 1983), and community service-learning (Kay, 2003; Wade & Anderson, 1996; and Zeichner & Melnick, 1996) have contributed significantly to the development of more democratic teaching practices that are linked to students’ and teachers’ everyday lives.

To varying degrees, practitioners of the various research approaches listed above have underlying epistemological, methodological, and ideological differences. Similarly, they have different visions of social research, of the scientific method, and of the political and ethical commitments associated with different research approaches (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). For example, many action researchers are trained in management and organizational theory, where the emphasis is on individual and interpersonal levels of

action and analysis (Brown & Tandon, 1983). On the other hand, many practitioners of community-based PAR are trained in community development, sociology, education, and political science, where the focus is on communities and social structures (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). The latter approach includes an emphasis on equity, oppression, and access to resources for research participants—factors that are not always present in other forms of action-based research.

Although it is important to highlight the particularities that exist between and among participatory, action-based research approaches, it is unwise to overemphasize their similarities and differences. As Brown (1982) suggests, “Similarities provide a foundation for communication and trust; differences offer possibilities for mutual learning and development” (p. 206). When explored, addressed, and critiqued, both the similarities and differences, as well as the gray areas in between, benefit the field of PAR, assisting practitioners in developing authentic and effective strategies for collaborating with people in improving their lives, effecting social change, and reconstituting the meaning and value of knowledge.

In this book, I use the term PAR to describe an approach to exploring the processes by which participants engage in collaborative, action-based projects that reflect their knowledge and mobilize their desires (Vio Grossi, 1980). I base my approach on the combined beliefs of Paulo Freire and feminist practitioners of PAR—an approach characterized by the active participation of researchers and participants in the coconstruction of knowledge; the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and an emphasis on a colearning process where researchers and participants plan, implement, and establish a process for disseminating information gathered in the research project.

### **PAR: A BRAIDED PROCESS OF EXPLORATION, REFLECTION, AND ACTION**

In addition to the traditions and ideologies that frame and contextualize a PAR project, each project is tailored to the desires of the research participants. Out of those desires, participants decide to act on particular topics that are generated in the PAR process. Participant-generated actions can range from changing public policy, to making recommendations to government agencies, to making informal changes in the community that benefit the people living there, to organizing a local event, to simply increasing awareness about an issue native to a particular locale. Ultimately, the

actions that participants decide to take regarding their current circumstances are the result of the questions they pose, examine, and address within the overall research process.

The two projects discussed in this book were framed by initial questions that moved us along in various directions. Those directions provided opportunities for us to develop new ways of thinking about the issues raised in the group sessions. In addition, each new direction resulted in new ideas for how to address specific issues that warranted the participants' attention.

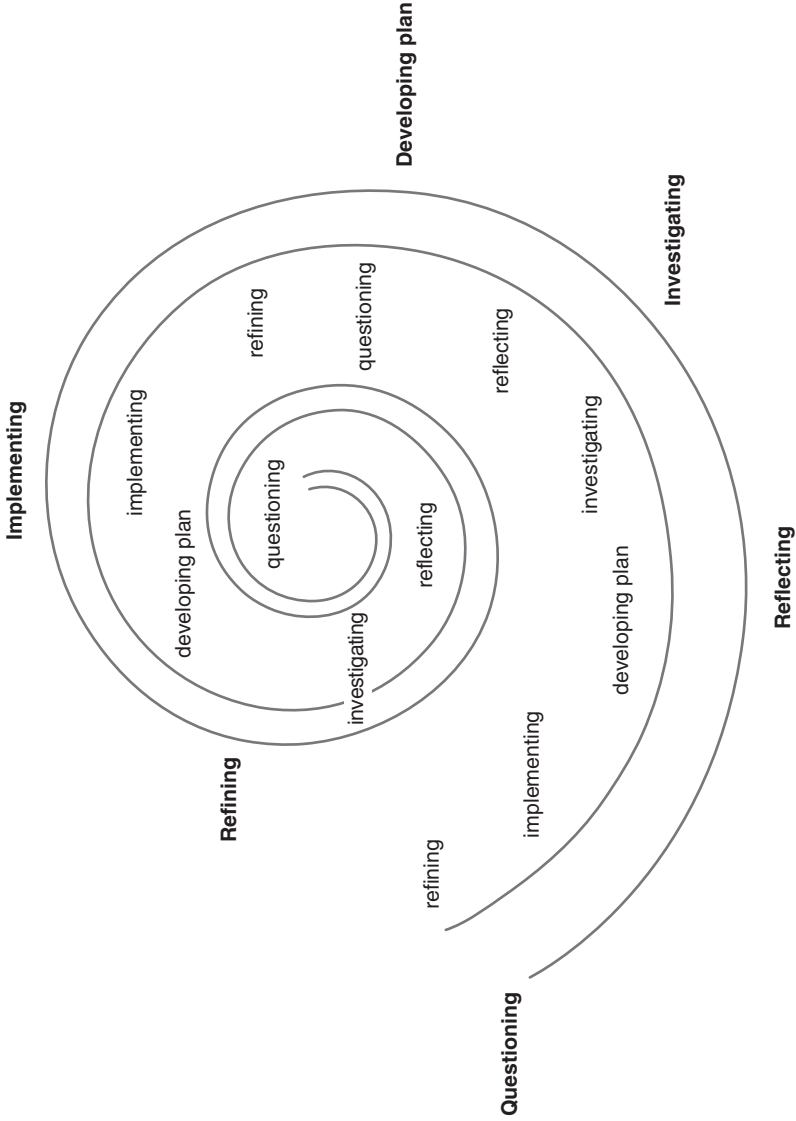
The initial questions that framed the projects led to other questions that emerged as the research processes evolved. Those questions then became points of entry into further reflection and dialogue that again led to new and different ways of perceiving the issues that were generated in both groups. Sometimes, the insight gained from reflection and dialogue prompted the participants to develop a plan of action. Other times, the participants reflected on a certain issue, discussed various perspectives about it, and ultimately decided that the item under discussion was not worth their time or attention.

This process of questioning, reflecting, dialoguing, and decision making resists linearity. Instead, PAR is a recursive process that involves a spiral of adaptable steps that include the following:

- Questioning a particular issue
- Reflecting upon and investigating the issue
- Developing an action plan
- Implementing and refining said plan

Figure 1.1 represents how various aspects of the PAR process are fluidly braided within one another in a spiral of reflection, investigation, and action. In the projects described herein, these steps were also linked to a set of activities (e.g., painting, sculpting, storytelling, collage-making, and photography) in which each group of participants engaged. Those activities, in turn, became entry points into yet more questions, more opportunities for reflecting and investigating issues, and more ideas about how to implement action plans that benefited those involved.

In the following chapters, I illustrate how the young people in Bridgeport and the women in Belfast engaged in the recursive process of participatory action research. Their experiences reveal the richness, complexity, and divergent perspectives that existed among them all. Similarly, their experiences demonstrate how participating in processes of critical scrutiny can result in thoughtful actions that reflect participants' interests and goals.



**Figure 1.1** The Recursive Process of PAR

## ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS AND LOCAL PARTICIPANTS WITHIN PAR

A recurring question in PAR is whether a researcher needs to be requested as a resource by a community or group, or whether a researcher can approach a particular group inviting them to explore a particular issue (McIntyre, 2000). In many cases, the latter experience is the norm, particularly when the researcher is a college/university student or faculty member.

In both the Bridgeport and Belfast projects, I entered the sites as both a practitioner of PAR and an academic—a situation that raises a set of challenges that differ from those generated in PAR projects facilitated by persons unrelated to the academy. As I write elsewhere, there are distinctive challenges that emerge out of and through actual PAR experiences when they are linked to institutions of higher education (McIntyre, 1997; 2000). How academics who are also practitioners of PAR engage those challenges is dependent on the type of institution where they work, the positions they hold, and the multiple identities they carry. It is my experience that academics who engage in PAR need to make decisions about how they negotiate their respective roles in the academy and in the communities where they engage in PAR with caution and common sense. It also helps to hold the belief that, in their own ways, in their own time, and in the contexts in which they live and work, academic practitioners of PAR can shift the perception of the academy as an exclusive space for thinking and theorizing, to a site for collaborative experiences with local, national, and global communities.

### Learning to Listen and Listening to Learn

An integral factor in how I negotiate my role as an academic practitioner of PAR in the communities in which I work is engaging in reflexivity, which I define as a dialectical process that occurs within the context of the social relationships that exist between research practitioners and participants (see, e.g., Chataway, 2001; Fine, 1994; Lykes, 1989; McIntyre & Lykes, 2004; Morawaski, 1994; Stewart, 1994). Reflexivity provides me with the opportunity to attend to how my personal biography informs my ability to listen, question, synthesize, analyze, and interpret knowledge throughout the PAR process.

In the Bridgeport project, it was essential for me to remember that the participants were 12- and 13-year-old inner-city adolescents of color, participating in a project with a shifting population of predominantly White, middle- and upper-middle-class graduate students, and me: a White, female



university professor–researcher. Thus, the most salient issues that informed the relationships between and among the young people, me, and the other members of the university-based team were related to race, age, educational status, and social class.

I have a history of antiracist work and thus entered the Bridgeport project from a different position than the members of the university-based team, many of whom had never addressed racism in themselves or in their workplaces. That is not to suggest that I was not challenged by my own whiteness and racism during the course of the project. I was. Yet I have been addressing issues of whiteness and racism, both personally and professionally, for many years. Thus, I had a set of strategies in place to assist me as I negotiated race-related issues within the research process.

The team members entered the project differently. They came to the research process with an accumulation of stereotypical beliefs about Bridgeport. For example, Vonnie stated that “it is full of violence, drugs, and crime.” Sarah, another member of the research team, stated that she had grown up “in an affluent White community that borders Bridgeport. I learned growing up that Bridgeport was a dangerous place and had some seedy sections that were to be avoided at all costs” (McIntyre, 2000, p. 30).

These kinds of stereotypes kept the members of the research team from developing relationships with the young people that were untainted by prejudice, fear, and uncertainty. Like Sarah, the majority of the team members grew up in well-resourced, mainly White communities and attended predominantly White educational institutions. Until they joined the PAR project, they had little experience addressing racism or working with young people of color. Thus, the team members often found themselves struggling with how to relate to the young people as co-collaborators in a research process.

The team members and I had multiple, sometimes heated discussions about whiteness, racism, and our experiences with both. Those discussions were highly significant in that they challenged the team members to rethink their prior beliefs about Bridgeport, about people of color, and about themselves as Whites. Rethinking their beliefs led the team members to rethink their actions. By changing their actions, they became more confident in themselves and in their abilities to be proactive in their positions as collaborators with the young people in the project.

The team members and I did not eliminate all the stereotypes and false beliefs that we brought to the PAR project. Yet by continually reflecting on our personal histories and by working to eliminate stereotypical beliefs about ourselves and others, the team members learned how to listen to the participants *so as to learn from them*—a valuable and important skill in participatory action research (see McIntyre, 2003).

Just as the members of the research team and I engaged in ongoing discussions about how we addressed our experiences with racism and whiteness, the young people also discussed the ways in which racism and whiteness structured *their* lives. Many times during the project, the participants discussed what it is like for them to be African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican, to live in an urban community, and to attend an urban school. They told stories about being asked to leave stores in a wealthy town adjacent to Bridgeport because they were Black or Brown; how “Teachers won’t come to our school ’cause there’s drugs and weapons in the school, and they think all the kids are lazy and stupid” (Collin); and how some of them “sneak out of the house at night ’cause when you live in the projects, your mother never wants to let you out” (Blood).

In addition, the young people articulated their perspectives about what it was like to “hang out with White people” (Tee).

*Melinda:* There are some White people who are OK. Like you people from the university. You’re OK White people. But then there are White people like the ones that came to help us with the cleanup project. They act like we don’t know what we’re doin’. Like they’re the smart ones ’cause they’re White.

*Rebecca:* Yeah, then there’s other White people, ya know, the ones who think they got it goin’ on. Like they just make me sick. Thinkin’ they all that.

*Tee:* Yeah, and then there’s the rest of the Whites who are always just dissin’ us all the way around.

The young people’s willingness to explore issues of race throughout the research process affirmed for me the possibilities that exist in PAR to create spaces for rich and critical dialogue between youth of color and “OK White people”—dialogue that contributed to the building of trusting and respectful relationships between the participants, me, and the rest of the university-based team.

In the Belfast project, the women and I shared gender, racial, and social class identities. Although I was the only one to hold a doctoral degree, some of the women were college graduates, and two of the women were enrolled in master’s programs. Thus, though significant, issues of race, social class, age, and educational status did not cause friction between the women and me. Rather, they provided a sense of shared experience that helped us to forge relationships as women, friends, and researchers.

The women and I *did* grapple with other issues, though, as we engaged the PAR project. Sometimes my status as a researcher, a foreigner, an outsider, and someone who had not shared many of the life experiences that shaped the women's lives resulted in moments of disconnection between the women and me. During those times, the women focused on my role as an academic, as the one who "knew" what to do and how to do it (see Chapter Two).

I repeatedly informed the women that they were the "real knowers" of their lives and that I had complete confidence in them and in their abilities to make decisions that reflected the goals they had for themselves and for the project. Many times, they responded to my compliments with humor and a few choice words about how they did not "know much about all that much" (Michelle). Yet as the project evolved and as the women concretized aspects of the project, they became more confident in claiming what they knew and in using their knowledge to make change. They, like the young people, transformed dialogue into action and contributed to developing a collaborative process of reflection and change that reflected their desires and fulfilled many of their research goals.

### **Ethical Challenges in Participatory Action Research**

How participants and practitioners view their responsibilities within a PAR project is linked to a number of ethical questions that arise during collaborative processes of change. Given the particularities of PAR, the sites where projects take place, the people involved, the issues under investigation, and the unique features that characterize specific projects, it is impossible to address all of them here. Some, like issues of authority, access to resources, and defining the issue to be examined, are self-evident at the beginning of many PAR processes. Others, like relationship building, addressing research questions, and deciding who will participate, who will speak for whom, who "owns" the data generated in a PAR project, what actions will be taken, and how information will be disseminated to outsiders, usually materialize as the process evolves.

Those issues, as well as others, are not unique to participatory action research. Over many decades, a number of professional organizations across a number of disciplines have provided guidelines and codes of behavior that guide particular types of community-based research (Trimble & Fisher, 2005). Aspects of those guidelines framed the two PAR projects described herein. I present them as points of entry into thinking through some of the issues that may arise in participatory processes of reflection and action. They are not the only guidelines, nor may they be the most

salient ones for each PAR project. Yet they are the ones that provided me with a structure for framing principled and trustworthy research processes in Belfast and Bridgeport.

Ethical considerations in PAR:

1. Participants engage in *all* aspects of the project.
2. Practitioners have an appreciation of the capacity for individuals to work together to effect change.
3. Practitioners participate *with* participants in the overall PAR process, contributing resources and knowledge when necessary.
4. Attention is given to reducing barriers between participants and practitioners of participatory action research. That includes coconstruction of consent procedures, documentation of data, and ensuring that the language used in the research project is understood by participants.
5. Participants are encouraged to learn about research methods that are appropriate to the project.
6. Practitioners make a distinction between professional ethical considerations and contextually specific ethical considerations, which can be negotiated and modified to best serve the participants.
7. Practitioners take every precaution to protect the confidentiality, privacy, and identity of participants.
8. Practitioners do not disseminate any research data without the explicit consent of those involved.
9. Practitioners are trustworthy; scrupulous in their efforts to give primacy to participants' goals; responsible for the well-being of all involved; fair, just, and willing to relinquish their agendas if they conflict with participants' desires.

It is my belief that practitioners of PAR must take the first step in openly addressing the ethical challenges that occur in PAR projects. It is up to them to ensure that participants are not left in situations that compromise their safety and/or that leave them vulnerable and at risk. In addition, practitioners of PAR must do more than simply follow a set of ethical guidelines; they must *be* ethical, honest, and forthright people. If not, their presence will be seen by the group of people they hope to work with as an intrusion; as just another researcher engaged in a "drive-by" research project that benefits the researcher and leaves the participants with nothing.

It is also up to practitioners to give primacy to the participants' perspectives, realities, and truths within the research process. That is not to suggest that local actors' realities and narratives about those realities are less characterized by issues of power, authority, and community status. It *is* to suggest that many participants of PAR projects have not had the opportunity to speak their truths into public life and therefore must be provided with space to do so.

There is no *one* way to engage in PAR that alleviates the many ethical issues and inherent risks that are threaded throughout PAR projects. Nor does simply acknowledging those issues and risks in published accounts assuage the unintended consequences that accompany reflection/action-based projects. Rather, addressing power, authority, the interrelationship of race, gender, social class, level of education, and ability, as well as a host of issues noted in this book, requires a deep commitment by researchers and participants to work together to provide equity, safety, and parity in resources within the PAR process.

Wadsworth (1998) argues that PAR “involves an imaginative leap from a world of ‘as it is’ to a glimpse of the world ‘as it could be’” (p. 6). In our quest to take that leap, it is incumbent upon practitioners of PAR to take seriously the realities of “what is” for local actors in PAR projects. In addition, we need to take seriously what “could be” in PAR projects and do so by maintaining an ethical and transparent stance that engenders trust and reciprocity with the people who invite us into their lives.