Reflections of a Doctoral Social Work Student using Participatory Action Research with Deported Men in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) presents academics with a possibility, through research, to engage marginalized groups of people in uncovering authentic knowledge and action towards social change. This paper discusses my doctoral social work experiences conducting PAR with deported men in Trinidad and Tobago. The data is presented from an autoethnographic analysis of my own field notes during the PAR project. The paper provides insight into my motivations, the challenges encountered and the outcomes of using PAR for my doctoral research. I contend that, despite the challenges encountered, PAR is suited as a viable option for doctoral social work research students.

Keywords: participatory action research, doctoral student, PhD, social work.

Introduction

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is gaining acceptability in many academic disciplines in universities throughout the world (Bryant-Lukosius & DiCenso, 2004; Kelly, 2005). There has been an increasing call to universities to both engage with communities in conducting research (Wakeford & Rodriguez, 2018) and to engage in alternative forms of research methodologies that encourage collaboration (Klocker, 2012).

PAR is an iterative research process which seeks to situate power within groups or with individuals most affected by the phenomenon under study. The aim of PAR is to collaborate with participants as equal partners in the research (Boyle, 2012). Wadsworth (2011) explains that PAR involves researchers and participants joining as co-researchers to explore a phenomenon and then work together to create actions which lead to social change. PAR claims an emancipatory or transformative approach to social work research as it focuses primarily upon power-building with persons who are disenfranchised (Kemmis & McTaggert, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007) in ways which lead to change.

Despite this growing acceptance, there have been many doubts and hesitancies amongst doctoral students in selecting PAR. This is partly because of the limited literature describing the

experiences of students as they negotiate the process of PAR. Despite the apparent "good fit" of PAR as a viable research methodology in the academy, much of the literature on doctoral students' experiences with PAR highlight the unique challenges with gaining academic acceptability (Klocker, 2011). In some cases, doctoral students are warned that doing PAR will cause challenges that other students may not encounter (Klocker, 2011). This paper attempts to add to the body of literature on doctoral students' experiences in conducting PAR and highlights some of the challenges encountered in the process as well as some of the positive outcomes of the process.

Understanding Participatory Action Research

Moore (2004) describes PAR as academic research which involve the participants as co-researchers (the participatory component) working towards social change to improve their living conditions (action) in ways that promote social learning and critical examination of the phenomenon under study (research). PAR is viewed as an epistemology focused on uncovering knowledge. In traditional research paradigms, research expertise is held by the university researcher who collects and analyses data on the experiences of vulnerable groups. However, the PAR paradigm includes members of the community under study, in designing the research processes at each step in the project (Fine et al., 2007). The PAR process involves an iterative process that promotes critical inquiry through reflection, planning and action. The process includes co-researchers identifying the issue(s) affecting them, collecting and analyzing data and then implementing collective action (McTaggart, 1997) to address the issue(s) in a reflective, iterative process.

Motivations for Conducting PAR Research with Deported Men

As a doctoral student, it is important to understand the main motivations for conducting participatory research. In my case, I served as a youth development worker in Trinidad and Tobago for 17 years. In May of 2009, I noticed that I had an increasing clientele of young, deported men who would come into my office seeking social support. The phenomenon referred to as *deportation* is the "act of banishing a foreigner from a country, usually to their country of origin" (Ong Hing, 2006, p. 54). My social work colleagues also talked about the growing number of deported persons who sought assistance from governmental and non-governmental agencies. Alongside the increasing number of deportations were current affairs programmes in the local media which attributed the rising crime trends to the return of deported nationals. Highly publicized research sought to measure the correlation between deportation and crime, concluding that deportation threatened the social fabric of the Caribbean. From a practitioner's position, I reflected that I did not hear responses from the voices of people who were deported.

As my own awareness of dominant discourses and the works of Gramsci and Freire developed, I learnt about hegemony and how state apparatuses worked towards creating a "culture of silence" of oppressed people. I wondered whether this was in fact the case with the deportation issue. I became interested in works which showed the possibilities of how the "repressed" voices of people could be foregrounded via research. My own research during my Masters of Science in Social Work studies focused on the reintegration of *deportees*, a name used commonly in national discourses to describe people who were deported. I blindly adopted the use of this term, not understanding that this was a

label, my own "captive mind" not thinking critically on what doing this meant to those having to live with the label.

In 2010, I built my masters' research on deported nationals. The epistemology and methodology guiding my research were steeped in traditional dominant Euro-Western ideologies. As my reading of conflict theories increased, I realized that my previous work did little to make a difference in the lives of those who experienced deportation. It also became apparent that the position of deported nationals did not improve because of my research.

When I started my doctoral studies, I started to ask questions about social work's responsibility towards people affected by immigration and return migration issues. My academic autobiography began to be churned by the writings of Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire. I understood how discipline and punishment were sometimes connected to unfair discourses. Paulo Freire's writings in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sought to excite possibilities for marginalized groups to pursue action which solves challenges facing them through a process of "conscientization." These readings, and indeed, movements of thought were previously alien in my social work discourses.

There were growing international discussions on the responsibility that social work professionals held towards working with marginalized groups. The debates sought to put emphasis on the need for the discipline of social work to take a more critical stance on social issues and lean towards social justice and transformation agendas as opposed to focusing on individual rehabilitation and restoration. I found other voices proclaiming the sentiments that social work accepted a conservative stance on policy and in some cases social work became an agent in propagating unfair and unjust state policies (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2012; Humphries, 2004; Mullaly 2010). This opened possibilities in my own mind about the direction social work research in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean could be taking. I recognized that there was a need for a more collaborative approach to research with this population of men and my journey into finding that approach led me to conducting a participatory action research project.

Background to the Project

The research project involved participatory action research with 18 deported men in Trinidad and Tobago. Data was collected from learning circles which allowed the co-researchers to critically discuss and analyse their experiences of deportation and re-integration. Participants were men 18 years and older, who had been deported based on conviction for a criminal activity in the deporting country. Co-researchers previously held immigration statuses ranging from being undocumented to having permanent resident status.

The men were recruited via posters which invited their participation in the research project. In keeping with the design of PAR, the deported migrants were invited to "inform" how the study was to be designed and conducted. Three deported men who were participants in my Masters of Science research project were contacted via telephone. These persons were briefed on the project and accepted the invitation to join in the project. In keeping with PAR protocols, from the beginning, the participants were referred to as "co-researchers", transforming them from merely "informants" or "participants" in research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Moore, 2004). They suggested that other participants could be recruited by doing a walkthrough of the areas they know were frequented by

other male deportees. Two weeks later we did a walkthrough handing out flyers and putting posters in the central areas that were frequented by deported men. After another week, the project assembled a team of 18 men who volunteered and became co-researchers in the inquiry. The recruitment took place in January 2015 and the co-researchers would hold learning circle meetings on Saturday mornings to plan, map and take action in the project.

Learning circles were first proposed by Paulo Freire who described them as dynamic spaces of knowledge exchange (Souto-Manning, 2010). The learning circles in this study promoted the co-researchers' participation towards developing or constructing collective experiences which are committed to transform knowledge. Learning circles offered members a chance for healing and learning. Freire grounded the formation of learning circles as a site for education through social thinking (Wiggins, 2011), acknowledging that behaviour and experiences were inherent to meeting people's emotional needs.

Thus, the four values of using learning circles in this research can be summed up as:
1. Learning circles offers an opportunity for politicization and social action
2. The potential for emotional healing
3. Provide space for collective knowledge construction
4. Promote actor-oriented change

Potential of Participatory Action Research

As a doctoral student, I recognise the potential of PAR for transformation. The possibilities included the following:

1. Promoting an Opportunity for Shared Ownership of Research

The fundamental attribute of PAR is its commitment to full participation by members of the community. By engaging local people who experience a phenomenon in research, there is a possibility of constructing new or amplifying previously silent information (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1997). PAR is also participatory because it recognises that people can conduct action research on issues which affect them, whether the issue is experienced individually or collectively.

2. Promoting Community-based Analysis of Social Problems

PAR is also committed to engaging people in examining their own social issues. It involves a cyclical process in which people engage in critical analysis of their experiences to reveal the disempowerment and injustice created from dominant structures in society and to take account the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity. A great part of the analysis of social problems in PAR involves the critical examination of how constraints and barriers to certain groups of people are presented in the social media through which they interact.

3. Involving Community Members towards Community Action towards Transformation

PAR is emancipatory in that it is focused on helping people to overcome their negative situation(s) and exploring ways in which they can themselves plan and take part in action that transform

unjust and unsatisfying social structures. According to Moore (2004), the use of participatory methods is a way of countering the power dynamics between the researcher and the research.

There are several values and assumptions of action research including ethical fairness; democratization of knowledge; appreciation for humans to reflect, learn and change; and a commitment to social change. As such, the PAR approach endorses strategies that are consensual, democratic and participatory which encourage people to examine reflectively on particular issues and formulate plans and actions that may assist in resolving these issues.

PAR also uses many different data gathering strategies. There is not one definition of Participatory Research/PAR nor one generalizable methodological model. Primarily, the aim of PAR is to support people's freedom from oppression, and to recognise that people hold legitimate knowledge that can be used to lead to changes in their situation (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). The language and dissemination of PAR research is also different as it uses simple and non-complex ways of describing the content, making the project comprehensible by both technical researchers and lay people alike.

Challenges in Using Participatory Action Research in Doctoral Work

I entered this research project with naivety and enthusiasm. The ideals articulated in PAR research excited me as I saw the potential for PAR to uncover newness in understanding the issues confronting deported men. I was also excited by the potential for PAR to address issues of social injustice. Although I lacked experience in conducting PAR projects, I held on to the commitment that PAR promotes transformational opportunities and counters power imbalances. Since there were numerous guides towards helping doctoral students navigate quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, I was a bit off-put when my quest for reading material to help navigate PAR uncovered limited material. Many of the reading material focused on the history, values and ideals of PAR. Very few offered students insight into "how to" navigate a PAR project (Moore, 2004).

Another challenge surrounded the time commitment that researchers are required to invest in conducting PAR projects. Literature warned doctoral students that PAR contained time-intensive activities that act as blocks to the research process and timely completion of doctoral studies (McCormack, 2004). In my journals throughout the PAR project, a few key tensions surfaced, including questioning the timelines involved. The PAR process began with my desire to position the participants/ co-researchers as experts (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009). However, most of the PAR readings I undertook emphasized that PAR projects required more time in the field and more time to complete, as opposed to other types of research. I noted my own anxieties about this process:

As I begin this journey, I am wondering whether this is taking on too much? I know this journey can be long, but I do not exactly know the duration of this process in terms of days and months. Will the academy be willing to wait on my research outcomes, or will I be made to stick strictly to the traditional timelines? I am embarking on a journey that I have very little control over, and while I am anxious, I am hopeful that this journey will bear the fruits I envisage. I hope that I can listen and not lead in a way that I control the process (field notes, 1/1/2015)

My own anxieties, rather than become barriers to the process, became a way of using reflection to ensure that the process was moving along the guidelines of PAR. I questioned what I was doing at

every step of the way, answering the sometimes-difficult question as to "why I was doing what I did" (field notes, 3/7/2015). I recognized that the extended time investments facilitated in allowing the co-researchers to insightfully analyze and form a critical perspective on their experiences of deportation. At the end, I submitted my dissertation in four years, without asking for extensions or having any delays.

Building Trust and Entering into the Field

Building an atmosphere of trust became a central challenge for me. As noted by Greene-Moton et al. (2006), it is essential to build an environment of trust in PAR. Although engagement is a critical step of the social work process, my assumption that building trust with the co-researchers would be straightforward was totally shattered very soon in the process. I became acutely aware that the co-researchers perceived me as a university academic researcher within the walls of the "ivory tower."

As an academic, I represented the many academics who "researched them", "taking their stories" and "gaining in their own way" (field notes, 12/02/2015). As a university-based researcher, I recognized the importance of understanding the micropolitics of their settings, which is the context in which they operated, such as their dilemmas, social construction in society and resources.

During the initial engagement sessions, it became difficult for me to introduce myself and my work. The usually rehearsed introductions I would do in academia, about qualifications and pursuits seemed worthless to a group of people whose micropolitics focused on survival and whose mistrust of institutions framed the way they saw "people like me" (field notes, 13/02/2015). Oftentimes when introducing myself to academics and justifying the work, I would claim my aim of "helping" the community I researched. When standing in front of the co-researchers, using that phrase of helping seemed condescending and against the PAR traditions of power-building.

Even though I was able to build a team of co-researchers, a major struggle came because of trying to motivate co-researchers to attend the sessions. A small number of co-researchers were struggling to attend sessions.

> The tenuous nature of people who are deported, and their need to "hustle" for menial jobs, require them to take jobs sometimes when we have meetings, and have challenges in attending sessions continuously (field notes, 22/09/2015).

I became reminded that PAR demands time, insights into the community, and understanding of the participants' agendas (MacDonald, 2012).

Managing Conflict and the Micropolitics of Access

Gaining access to the community of deported men meant meeting them where they were at. I believed I gained access to them as a singular entity. While I had conceived PAR in an "egalitarian manner" (field notes, 14/02/2015) I failed to remember that the research was taking place within a context of other bodies and institutions. My lack of insight into the micropolitics of their lives posed serious threats to their participation. As a result of the deportation experiences in Trinidad and Tobago, many of the men were homeless and living at a shelter. Thus, our initial meeting point became the public carpark space next to the shelter, a place where residents of the shelter engaged with one another and a place where the co-researchers felt comfortable. Three conflicts emerged as a result.

The first conflict arose from a perception by the other residents that those engaging in the project as co-researchers were privileged. The co-researchers in the project came to be perceived as receiving special treatment, engaging with a university academic and discussing serious issues. This conflict came to an apex one day when verbal condemnations were shared by two factions- the co-researchers and the other residents. The resolution came from mediation initiatives undertaken in the carpark.

The second conflict, though less confrontational, came from not engaging with the managers and other staff members of the shelter. This failure to engage on my part, led to conflict which resulted in us temporarily losing our meeting place. The solution to this challenge rested on me engaging with the agency, recognizing their positions as gatekeepers, and resolving the issue. Resolution centered on discussions showing the nature and aims of the project, without breaking confidentiality protocols. This process reminded me of the PAR founding principles of participation and power sharing. Eventually, gaining the support of the agency staff became an important task in the research process.

Conflict also emerged within the research group itself. Conflict is a natural component of inter-personal relationships. At the start of the project, conflict became one of the central issues I had to navigate. There were three verbal conflicts during the first three months of the research group meetings. Disagreements about the ways persons perceived their situations, their views of the deporting countries and of each other sometimes brought the research proceedings to a halt. As a "newbie" PAR researcher, I became culpable, as my naiveté made opaque the human condition of differences. I had entered the world of PAR, with rose-coloured glasses, only to realize that my naivete created a number of distressing situations for which I was inadequately prepared (field notes, 2/07/2015). I learnt through this process, that "issues of power imbalances and the establishment of egalitarian relationships must be celebrated addressed prior to initiating PAR research and continued throughout the process" (MacDonald, 2012, p.40).

Negotiating Institutional Expectations

A major challenge arose in convincing my doctoral committee to pass my proposal. Since there are few PAR practitioners within academia, I needed to convince my supervisors (traditional research-based) that my research was valid. Since I could not have anticipated all the rudiments of the methodological approaches to be used, it may have appeared to committee members that there were gaps in the research proposal. There were also few academics in the Caribbean who were PAR researchers. This resulted in less guidance, training and support readily available to me. As Herr and Anderson (2005) noted, there are few capable academics who provide supervision of a PAR dissertation and in some cases those academics are not present in specific universities. My solution to the challenge emerged from a student grant which allowed me to access training abroad, from seasoned PAR academic researchers and subsequent networking with PAR academics online.

The specifics of PAR projects are often conceptualized and shaped as co-researchers engage in the iterative process. O'Brien (2001) stated that decisions on the direction of PAR and potential actions are collective. This means, that as a doctoral candidate, I had limited insight into the actual methods and actions to be taken from the start of the project (field notes, 17/ 01/2015). Not knowing how the project may unfold is a major challenge to doctoral students who engage in PAR as this affects

several of the steps in the academic processes of conducting doctoral research (Herr & Anderson, 2005). At this stage, having knowledge myself of similar PAR projects helped me to justify those gaps and the need for the co-researchers' power and voices to help to make those determinations.

Another major tension I encountered occurred during my seminar presentations to my academic supervisors. I felt that my examiners and supervisors assessed my research according to the standards and rigor of traditional research. The positivist orientations of my supervisors were not as facilitative of action research which focuses on social action and subjectivity. This experience is shared by Moore (2004) who recognized this as a major challenge to graduate students who engage in PAR for their doctoral research.

The need to get Campus Ethics Committee or Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is also often a challenge to doctoral students involved in PAR research. The main purpose of IRB scrutiny is to ensure that research does not expose participants to unfair harm or risks. Cahill (2007) argues that the IRB's top-down approach which requires application, peer review and informed consent is sometimes not "appropriate for the social sciences and behavioural sciences paradigm" (p. 261). In some cases, even completing the application presented problems to me, as PAR research proposals allowed for areas of uncertainty that are frowned upon by traditional researchers. In order to overcome this obstacle during the research and action project involving the deported men, I sought informed consent from co-researchers at every step of the process, including the training sessions, data collection, data analysis, reflection and action.

Outcomes

This article has thus far defined and contextualised the background and benefits of conducting PAR research, presented the motivations I held for working with deported men using PAR, and the main challenges I encountered and how I overcame them during the process. If the article is to end here, then doctoral students may be tempted to pursue more traditional forms of research. However, the outcomes of the project did, in fact, meet significant aspects of my motivations for doing this type of research. At the end of the project, the men critically discussed their experiences of deportation. Additionally, they organised themselves into a support group called "A Heart for the People" to assist other deported men.

They also engaged in political action to "speak back" to the negative ways they were socially constructed in the media. They did this by highlighting their experiences in a newspaper article and completing a public service video which they circulated on social media. The material highlighted in the newspaper article and the public service advertisement came from different findings from the research process itself and were promoted by the participants. The ways the co-researchers problematized their experiences influenced further action. While early in the research the narratives centred on uncovering the authentic experiences of men who were deported to Trinidad and Tobago, as the men problematized their experiences, they moved to identify one particular structure to which their action would be directed. The decision made was to target the media who they viewed as the system which influenced the public's perceptions of deported migrants and the stereotyping and discrimination which resulted.

The meaning of the phrase the "personal is political" in feminist literature has often eluded me for years. However, this work with the men has helped me to gain a greater understanding of this term. This is because I have seen through the PAR, how people's concerns have become a basis of social action towards change.

By naming their experiences of deportation as a social justice issue, the men in this study collectively focused their change effort towards speaking back to the systems they identified as unjust. This represented a movement away from theorising about social injustice and towards action to improve and change their lives.

Political action also took the form of "speaking back" to the dominant structures the men had identified as influencing their status and images in society. The speaking back offered an opportunity for the men to disrupt the stereotyped profiles which placed them at the margins in society. As a practitioner, I started to see the way the learning circle became a site for knowledge production, affective regulation and movement towards action (field notes, 10/10/14).

The more we held learning circle meetings, the more it became clear to me that the PAR approach meshes critical inquiry and action in a way that was unpredictable (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

I can see the power of PAR as we go along our process. The men's critical insight into structures which are barriers to them is amazing. Once again, as social workers we sometimes assume that the men are unaware of how their lives are 'controlled' by outside forces. Not these men, they are aware. More amazing that that is the way they have clung to their hopes of doing something about it. They are propelled to action- happy that they feel they can act to change their situation. Things are happening all at once. On one trajectory, the men are uncovering new ways of understanding their deportation which is connected to the larger structural causes and influences that shaped their deportation. On another trajectory, the men are planning action, talking about the proposed support group and about doing the docu-video project. They are affecting each other's' lives (field notes, 02/10/2015).

Recommendations and Conclusion

This article has attempted to reduce the anxieties of doctoral students who may have uncertainties about engaging in PAR projects. I have successfully completed my PhD using a PAR approach in my research and entered the professional life of an academic. As a social work educator and academic, I now hold the commitment towards supporting other students who wish to engage in PAR. Supporting students in a PAR journey requires raising awareness of the legitimacy of PAR and engaging with institutional bodies such as the IRB to increase their perception of the legitimacy of PAR (Klocker, 2012). I also believe it is necessary to integrate PAR into the research curriculum of Caribbean universities and provide opportunities for students to work in other PAR projects so that they can get hands on experience and learn the process. The narrative surrounding the "challenges" of doing PAR at the doctoral level needs to also be toned down and seem less combative, as this may deter students from conducting PAR research. As in all PhD research, there are complications, tensions and hurdles to overcome, those associated with PAR are just different.

This article demonstrates that doctoral students can successfully use a PAR approach in their doctoral research. The outcomes of the PAR project with the deported men highlighted the potential

of research to amplify the voices of the excluded in naming their issues and in taking action to shape their positions. This paper provides other students who are interested in PAR, with insights into the motivations, opportunities, challenges, and outcomes of using PAR in a doctoral research project. Although a doctoral social work student may encounter some challenges in conducting PAR, it is a worthwhile approach for any student who wants to promote social change and action. However, the success of the PAR approach lies in understanding the principles and limitations of PAR and ensuring that these are used to facilitate the research process.

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