

## Research Brief

### Participatory action research in the social sciences

Glasses. A lab coat. Unruly hair. Perhaps holding a clipboard and silently writing notes behind a two-way mirror or desk, maintaining distance in the name of scientific objectivity. This is often the image conjured when a person is asked what a researcher looks like. Though some of these characteristics may apply to those of us in the academy (in my case certainly the glasses and unruly hair), this description holds certain assumptions about what research does as well as who has the authority to undertake it. The assumptions underlying this view for me were challenged upon learning about participatory action research (PAR).

PAR is a research stance, rather than a singular method, that assumes “knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action” (Torre and Fine, 2005). Often associated with qualitative social science research because of commonalities in theoretical commitments, PAR approaches can involve both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. It’s an approach that assumes knowledge is co-constructed within socio-cultural and political contexts; that those most impacted by the research can have valuable insight and expertise in the areas of their lives and should therefore be part of the research process; that the outcome of the research involves not only knowledge production but action application. With PAR, research subjects are framed as potential research partners, meaning that individuals from the community of participants under study are part of the research team, working collaboratively towards problem-posing, data collection, analysis and action. This framing interrupts notions of expertise as middle or high school

students, community members, women in prison, can be co-researchers of the issues that affect them (Public Science Project).

I have been fortunate to work on various PAR projects over the years, primarily with high school students, K-12 teachers and undergraduates. The starting points have differed, as have degrees of community participation. With the NJ Urban Youth Research Initiative, we began with an issue, the changing high school graduation requirements in NJ, and built a collective with other community organizations and high schools to study this policy change. In contrast, the Chilltown project focused on working with an existing community, a group of high school students and a guidance counselor, to research an education issue of their choosing. Research methods across these two collectives varied, including focus groups, interviews, surveys, photovoice, archival analysis and equipment inventories. In addition to traditional academic outcomes, such as co-presenting in professional conferences, in the two different collectives we decided on different actions and products—such as public presentations, post-cards, video, skits, websites and policy reports of the findings and recommendations to school boards, faculty and administrators, and policy makers. Most recently, I initiated a collective of students at Saint Peter's as part of a grant, naming ourselves ROLE (Researchers of Latin@ Education), to work on a project we formulated over the summer.

This work is not without its set of challenges and critiques. Such collaborative endeavours can be time consuming relative to the projects we work on individually, since decision-making is shared. When we work as faculty with students on participatory projects, there is a negotiation of roles and relative control and power within the collective. For example,

I have to remind myself: It's not for or about students, it's with them; it's not just our project with them helping out; it's not just us assigning tasks. It is an understanding that we all come to the table with a set of knowledges and skills that we use and share with each other, and have a stake in the process and the outcome as members of a collective. Many on campus are already doing this work, but perhaps not naming it as such. Perhaps we would like to, but feel constrained by lack of funding or time (with our teaching loads).

From Lewin to liberation psychologists, like Jesuit priest Martin-Baro, PAR can claim ancestries through the Americas, both northern and southern hemisphere. Like applied research, the aim is towards an immediate need, steeped in local context. PAR lives between frameworks; there is a pedagogy to it, as research team members teach and learn from each other, including a common language of research; the science of systematically collecting and analyzing data; social justice and action because the findings inform an immediate social need; psychology and group dynamics as group members share in decision making and learn to work as a collective with and through intellect and emotion. Piercings, earphones, and fresh ink. On the street holding markers, iphones and bilingual protest signs. We add to the image of social research/ers and holding what are sometimes viewed as conflicting commitments. "Refusing the distinctions between theoretical and applied, and science and advocacy; critical participatory action research commits at once to human rights, social justice, and scientific validity" (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p.25); a set of commitments I see as in line with our mission at Saint Peters.

