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SOCIAL INNOVATION AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH:

A way to research community?

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ABSTRACT

Civil society actors gathered in so-called 'community' initiatives generate a particular impetus for low carbon transitions. This paper seeks to outline a methodological approach that can be used in order to help understand such movements, and more fundamentally, the role of community in Social Innovation (SI). The article offers an overview of Participative Action Research (PAR), and outlines its strengths and weaknesses in studying community-based social innovation, in this case the Transition movement. PAR is not an 'off the shelf' kit, or a 'conforming of methodological standards', but rather a series of approaches that ought to inform research. The paper argues that these approaches, rather than techniques, are essential to get right if the intangible, granular, and incidental-but-fundamental aspects of community are to be grasped by researchers. Given the small-scale nature of community low carbon transitions a granular analysis is preferred to a more surface, superficial overview of such processes. Qualitative research is preferred to quantitative aggregation of initiatives, due to the need to understand the everyday, more phenomenological aspects of community, and the specific tacit relations and subjectivities enacted through their capacity to cut carbon. Despite challenges with using PAR for SI, the Transition Research Network offers an active guide to achieving this.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the methodological challenge of understanding the Transition movement, a key expression of 'citizen led experimentation (i.e. innovation)' (Longhurst, 2015: 5). Transition are a form of community-led social innovation (SI), founded in response to pressing environmental challenges. Crucial to Transition is their mobilisation of, acting as a, and pursuing the desired end of, community. In their case a resilient relocalised community. Their central claim highlights this importance: "*If we wait for governments it'll be too little, too late; if we act as* *individuals, it'll be too little; but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time"* (Hopkins, 2011). Academically too, for all the proliferating literature on Transition, community is regularly recognized as their central concern, way of operating and ultimate destination (Aiken, 2012; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012).

For all the ubiquity of the word, term and concept, 'community' is a social entity that requires careful approaching. Community is often defined as local, place-based, or small-scale. Sometimes community is more of a feeling—close, familiar, and secure, or stifling and suffocating in its conformity. Often community is approached from a distance, used to allocate and contain populations by states. But from the inside, community movements can be empowering, creative spaces where the ability of act together enables one to achieve more than they otherwise could alone. It is this internal experience of community that lies at the heart of its claimed importance as a context for social innovation (SI). This article then takes on this challenge directly. Using the case study of designing a research project on the Transition movement, it looks to the prevalent use and praising of community as a vehicle for social innovation, and seeks to ask how can we design appropriate methods to approach such a concept.

The article suggests that Participative Action Research (PAR) is one such 'way in' to grasping the crucial community component of many SI initiatives. PAR, as the article outlines, is not a merely descriptive methodology – only documenting social realities, however accurately and reflexively achieved. Cameron and Graham (2005a, p. 321) outline how PAR comprises three factors; first, documenting reality, second, contextualizing that reality and, third, working towards changing it. Given social innovations have inherent propulsion towards such a change, the article argues that the harmonies between SI and PAR are many. However many caveats exist here, and these are also addressed in turn.

The article is structured as follows. Immediately next, the role of community as a form of social innovation is outlined. Following this, section three lays out the particular challenges of approaching the type of community outlined here. Section four outlines PAR more fully, including some of its drawbacks. The final section weaves each of these awarenesses together by reflecting on a research project designed to investigate community as a form of social innovation in the Transition movement.

2. Community and Social Innovation

Edwards-Schachter and Tams (2013) outline how community is both a means and end of Social Innovation (SI). Community is 'central to mobilizing the creativity and synergies of people' (2013: 2): community is a means for SI. Concurrently, community is what results from the tackling of social challenges: community is an end of SI. Many examples of the forms this community-as-SI takes have been offered: community housing and organizing (Mulgan, 2006), community as a grassroots niche (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2016), time banks (Avelino et al. 2014), community energy innovations (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Mulugetta et al., 2010) and also the Transition movement (North and Longhurst, 2013; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). In each of these community is simultaneously the tool for the task, what is doing the innovating, or creating new opportunities, practices and arrangements. Community is also the result of these activities too; community is both an ingredient for and an outcome of (social) innovation.

Avelino et al. follow Franz et al. in arguing that the ‘decisive characteristic of social innovation’ is the ‘fact that people do things differently due to this innovation, alone or *together*. What changes with social innovation is social practice, the way[s] how people decide, act and behave, alone or *together* (Franz, 2012, p. 5 emphasis added)’ (Avelino et al., 2014: 16). Of interest here is the collective (re)producing of practices, particularly the social condition of togetherness that goes under the name of community. Deciding, acting or behaving in consort, or in aggregation, is a key aspect of SI, but grasping what this collective subjectivity feels like is not at all straightforward. Intriguingly, of the two examples Avelino et al. (2014) then develop, one is also the main empirical example of this article: the Transition movement.

Often SI and community are seen in a very positive and uncritical light (Gibson and Cameron, 2001). The subtitle of Goldsmith’s book is symptomatic here: *The Power of Social Innovation: How Civic Entrepreneurs Ignite Community Networks for Good* (2010). Despite the lavish use of the terms community and social innovation in this paper, these are by no means held uncritically. (For a critical overview of this trajectory and tendency in community, and potential theoretical tools in overcoming this see (Taylor Aiken, 2016)) However it is invoked though, community is seen as a site, context and scale where social innovation occurs—alongside a product of SI. However, this raises crucial questions for methodology. In order to critically assess what role community plays in social innovation, or even to question the assumption that community is crucial, we need to have access to this community.

3. Researching Community in Transition

Researching community as the site of social innovation requires certain methodological approaches in order to grasp what is going on *within* these groups. The first is a *small-scale* approach, the second a way to grasp the *experience* of community.

Wider and larger scale approaches can survey and tabulate the size, scope and trajectory of community initiatives. However these approaches—such as surveying, GIS-type modeling, interviews or questionnaires—work in aggregate, through zooming out for big-picture, broad-brush understandings and patterns in the data. Each initiative, or ‘community’, is useful insofar as it forms a pixel or point within this wider pattern. Smaller scale, minimalist approaches on the other hand attempt to see what being *within* these communities entails for participants, and sees the backdrop and wider patterns as context for this focus. The small-scale focus remains the specific where, why, and with whom, any social innovation takes place.

Many articles now provides an overview of the Transition movement as a whole, showing growth and increasing impact (Feola and Butt, 2015; Feola and Him, 2016; Feola and Nunes, 2014; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Schwanen considers much of this proliferating research on Transition ‘additive’ (2017, p. 10), not so much in the sense that they add to an established story of the Transition phenomenon, more so of theory-building of transitioning and Transition Studies. Such narratives often rely on specific numbers. The Transition story goes along the lines of being founded in 2005; and have 1,120 initiatives in 43 countries by 2013. Such numbers paint a picture, but miss what it *feels like* to be a part of any of these initiatives. While powerful in explaining wider patterns this can skirt over the specificities or nuances of any given community initiative. More often than not it is the small-scale specificities that motivate and involve individuals in these initiatives (Longhurst, 2012). Zooming in on the pixel is required to get to grips with why anyone might want to join such an community or SI, what do they want the initiative/SI to become, and what it feels like to 'be there'.

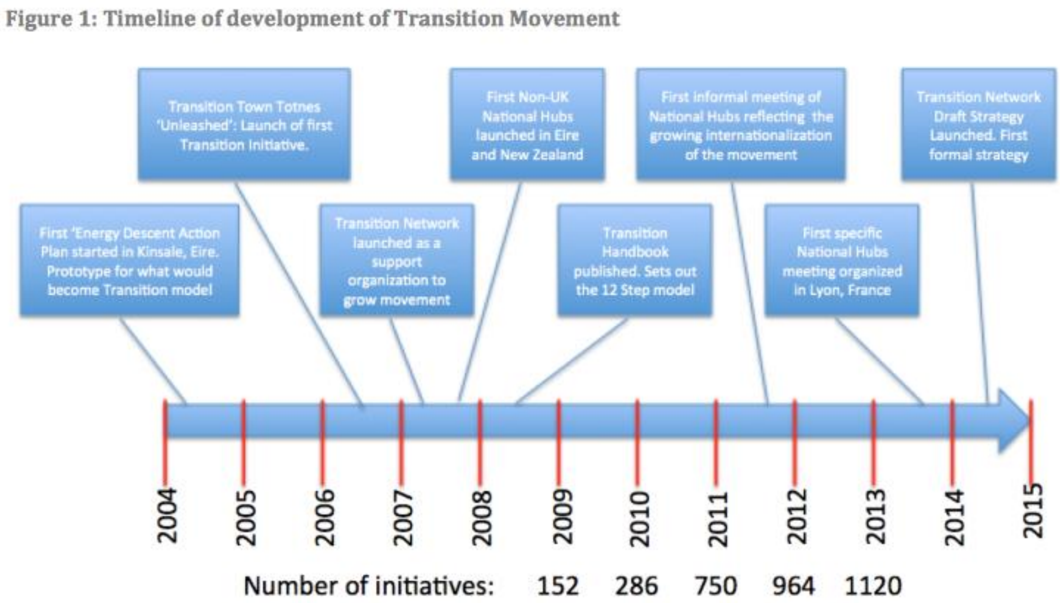

Fig. 1. Timeline of development of Transition Movement, from Longhurst (2015).

So, researching community needs to take account of the *experience* of what it is like to be inside one of these community initiatives. The small-scale approach is required to access the level on which crucial aspects of community take place, but merely watching, or paying attention to this level is not enough to grasp what it feels like to belong to, act as, and be within such a social arrangement. Researchers of some social innovations—such as *Uber* or more market-orientated examples—might not need to pay such attention to the experience of being within a social arrangement. For community through, social relations are regularly drawn together and sustained through personal, intersubjective ties to one another. Without these, the community could fall apart, and cease to be. If a community initiative is to be socially innovative, to grasp that one must have access to what the crucial community dimension is and does. For Transition, they specifically claim that their community component is what makes them genuinely grassroots (community-led), and focused on meeting social needs (towards a resilient relocalised community) (Hopkins, 2013, 2011, 2008). In order to pay attention to this community aspect then, researchers of social innovation need not only to set the aperture to focus on the correct scale (the community scale), but also to be going through the same *experience* as those in the innovation. We cannot just be in a tangle of social ties watching an intersubjective bond develop between others around us, all the while remaining detached, observant, unaffected, and 'neutral'. We need ourselves to have access to what that bond feels like, and why (or why not) it motivates one to behave, participate or act in certain ways. Researchers need to be within the community, not just amongst it.

Understanding community then needs an insider rather than outsider point of view. Many perspectives exist to grasp this experience, rather than allocation, of community. Ethnography, auto-ethnography, and participant observation all to some extent allow researchers to grasp the phenomena that is community, avoiding a large-scale, set-apart, or objective trap. Each too, can be an important *part* of PAR. Yet, we can go further and argue that grasping what it is like to act as and belong to specific types of intentional and active communities requires not just participation, but also action.

Community again is a many and varied thing. On the one hand it can be settled and static. The commonality of community defined by place of residence, ethnicity, or an identity-based definer. To pick three overlapping nearby examples these could respectively be the community of the city of Esch in Luxembourg, the Portuguese community of this area, or the community of fans of Benfica football club. However community also exists as a movement: community action. Here, groups get together in order to 'do something' of interest to them. The Transition movement in Esch[1] also forms a community—loosely affiliated to the social and cultural character of the city. Here, participants are so moved by environmental plight that they opt-in to an intentional community of activity and action. All communities are characterised to some extend by (perceived) togetherness, a shared understanding of 'we'. Here, for Transition, the 'we' is defined, at least in part, by action and activity. Acting on the urgent need to 'do something' about the environmental challenges facing society (and even humanity). In order to grasp this intentional and active social entity then, any research needs to not only be an internal observer of those acting, but a participant actor. For community as a social innovation, community that is actively attempting to act on things in the word, community that wants to 'do something' new or useful, grasping an *experience of this action* is fundamental to understanding what is really going on in this group or movement. To experience acting, one must act.

As Law has argued, method does not just describe reality, but methods make reality (Law, 2007). Methodology makes some aspects more visible, and others less so. This awareness allows us to see that varying the methods also varies not only the data collected, but also what data we even believe is there, or could be there. It also allows us to see that approaching community as an entity, an already existing coherent whole, a social 'thing', prescribes what kinds of community this research then finds: often set apart, objective, or a word linked to semantic meaning. Unless this research starts with community then, it will not ever get to community. At least community as it is known from within: a constitutive experience, a common cause, a feeling of togetherness. Here, under a participatory perspective, we can say that research *with* rather than *on* community is not only preferable from a research ethics point of view. We can go further and say that research only *on* community is not researching community. At least community as it is known, felt, and lived from within.

4. Participatory Action Research

'Nothing about us without us is for us'

On the surface then, adopting a Participatory Action Research methodology, would be the perfect solution. PAR being the perfectly fitting glove, on the hand of needing to access the action-experiences of community as a SI. PAR though, is far from a silver bullet, and also brings with it its' own challenges. This section outlines PAR, homing in on three characteristics—power, ethics and praxis—before examining some of the many challenges that must be reflectively thought-through when adopting this methodology.

[1] https://www.transition-minett.lu Accessed 1 May 2017

4.1 Power

While many forms of PAR exist, each assumes a flat hierarchy of power relations, particularly between researcher and researched, science and society. 'The most basic and distinguishing principle of participatory research is *sustained dialogue* between community and external researchers.' (Breitbart, 2010, p. 144 original emphasis). PAR is thus based on an equal and fair exchanging of ideas, feelings, values, goals and (descriptions of one's own) motivations. Undergirding all this is the development of relationships between researcher(s) and those researched (Pain, 2004). Kindon states: 'a PAR researcher does not conduct research *on* a group but works *with* them to achieve change that *they* desire.' (Kindon, 2010, p. 260 original emphasis). PAR departs from other forms of social research where 'the *means* by which data is co-generated' is centrally tied up with the ends, which are also collaboratively developed (Breitbart, 2010, p. 142). There is a curious link here with community—regularly community is both means and end, as outlined above. The same close relationship between means and end exists with PAR.

PAR was developed in response to 'an exploitative agenda' (Breitbart, 2010, p. 143), and this still conditions the approach. PAR's intellectual heritage more recently encompasses liberationary (Freire, 2014, 1996; Freire and Freire, 2004), feminist (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Pain, 2003), and scholar-activist/activist-scholar (Chatterton, 2008, 2006) contributions in this direction. PAR largely departs from the grounding work on action research, and the spiral of planning, action, research and reflection developed by Kurt Lewin. PAR is about sharing power, unfolding from a commitment to see that community members have a voice, and whatever they want to set as an outcome they have a right to both say it and a space within which to say it. This focus on power, and relationships, has led Breitbart to claim that PAR is a 'more democratic' approach (Breitbart, 2010, p. 141). By this Breitbart means studying any issue has the 'full engagement' of those affected by it: 'communities are often treated as laboratories, provided no role in the research process and benefit little from the results of studies' (Breitbart, 2010, p. 141). PAR has a focus on challenging or deconstructing uneven relationships of power. Breitbart links the democratisation of research with its demystification—research results becoming more readily utilizable, understandable and with greater 'impact'. PAR's claim to far greater 'relevance' reflects the old activist slogan: 'nothing about us without us is for us'.

It is often mentioned in PAR literature that PAR is better suited to research with groups who are in some way marginalised, or disadvantaged. For example, Cameron and Gibson mention that PAR often uses 'feelings of discontent, resentment and anger' as 'an important impetus for raising people's political consciousness and generating collective political action' (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a, p. 320). Here, one key driver of SI—the collective demand to do something about any given situation—emerges emotionally. Community as a social fabric is often constructed affectively too, and where community is adopted as a site of SI, access to these affects and affective drivers is necessary to fully comprehend what is going on. This also points to a limitation of the applicability of PAR: when researching elites. Not only do elites need no empowerment, finding a flatter hierarchy and collaborative space has challenges in overcoming power relations from the opposite direction.

While Cameron and Gibson (2005a) outline that PAR is often related to 'an archetypal modernist political project concerned with liberating marginalised and exploited subjects' they outline the close fit between poststructuralism and PAR. Wittmayer and Schäpke (2014: 485) also recognise the potential for PAR approaches in this understanding. Rather than a boundary between science (knowledge creators, or discoverers) and society, they see science and society as overlapping. Together addressing problems, generating knowledge and forging solutions. PAR then sits in this boundary zone, not between science and society, but encompassing both of them.

4.2 Ethics

Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods have recently gained more exposure in research on social innovations (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2001), sustainability transitions (Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014) and work with ‘hard to reach’ groups (Cahill, 2007a, 2007b; Mason, 2015; Pain et al., 2013). A key part of this is the perception that PAR is somehow a ‘more ethical’ or just form of research. PAR centrally claims that it can address some of the failings of mainstream academic research on social groups (Kindon et al., 2007), where research is ‘extractive’, taking up participants’ time and energy, giving little or nothing in return (Blackstock et al., 2015; Cameron and Gibson, 2005b; Lahiri-Dutt, 2004; Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014; Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). Or, more normatively, PAR can utilise researchers skills and social capital to help ‘build a better world’ (Chatterton, 2008) or ‘make a difference’ (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004). Such claims rest on the assumptions above that PAR is a more democratic approach, with a fairer take on power relations.

Participative and action-orientated approaches are often weaved together in calls for researchers to ‘recognise and accept’ their social responsibility (Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014, p. 483). At this point, the ethical justification for PAR folds together with instrumental reasons. It is ‘not only ethically desirable to give something back to participants; promising to do so also pays off, encouraging potential beneficiaries to invest time and energy in the research’ (Phillips and Johns, 2012, p. 71). That this longer-term commitment to a participative approach is ‘not only ethically but also practically desirable’ (Phillips and Johns, 2012, p. 71), shows the double dividend of PAR approaches. For the effort, time and energy—not to mention care and concern with the research design—put into a project, PAR researchers can not only feel they are ‘giving something back’, or avoiding extractive techniques. They also get better data. That is, their data is richer, more in-depth, substantial, and emotionally nuanced. For any research that seeks to get to the heart of community—particularly the intersubjective, affective bonds that suture this social form of togetherness, such commitment and engagement, while time-consuming, would appear to be a ‘no brainer’.

Kindon (2010) links PAR as particularly useful for studying community groups. Wittmayer et al. (2014) paraphrase action research founder Kurt Lewin by saying that it is through ‘trying to change the local situation that we gain a deeper understanding’ of it. ‘By looking at specific interactions, practices, social relations and ideas through the magnifying glass of action research, they are made explicit and can thereby become objects and mechanisms of change’ (Wittmayer et al., 2014, p. 481). Thus PAR is research that is both intrinsically and instrumentally ethical. Participants will open up more when they feel part of the process, rather than only being there—or used—as a tool or (re)source for researchers. For all the ethical reasons for adopting PAR, there remains the awareness that it also produces richer, more in-depth and accurate data.

4.3 Praxis

Third, PAR is an approach characterised by praxis. That is, it is a methodology that can only be fully understood set of ideas and practices, concurrently. Textbooks or articles can only approach a definition of what doing a PAR project is fully like. Rather, getting involved, stuck in, and doing it for oneself is how this research approach can be grasped. There is then both an irony and congruity when discussing PAR in the light of understanding community as a form of social innovation. The irony is that however fulsome, this article would never be able to capture the essence of PAR in textual form. The congruity is that, as outlined above, community also has this quality. One can only fully understand or grasp community from the inside.

Aside from the ethical, or instrumental, reasons for adopting a participatory approach, there is an open question of how any social research—particularly research on community—could ever possibly not be either active or participative. Kearns treats it as axiomatic that 'ultimately all observation [for research] is a form of participant observation' (Kearns, 2010, p. 241). The observer effect implies that any observation of a social setting cannot ever be fully detached from the presence of the researcher. Thus, research within or on a given community must account for presence of a researcher and the possible effects this may have. Even at a minimal level, all research on community then has a participative and active component. The PAR approach raises this awareness, and encourages reflection on the manner of how this action and participation takes place. The choice for researchers of community as a social innovation is not *whether* to be active and participant, but *how* to be so (Phillips and Johns, 2012, p. 166). Building on the position of Law, ending section 3, this meta-methodology has it that: 'social research is an explicitly political intervention that not only represents, but constitutes reality' (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a, p. 316; Gibson-Graham, 1994).

Cahill (2007b) characterises this as grasping PAR through a 'learning by doing' approach. Action research is particularly well suited, as process-orientated methodologies are required to grasp community in its process-orientated forms, not as a settled and static substitute for neighbourhood: community action rather than community of residence. Wittmayer and Schäpke examine 'process-orientated approaches to sustainability', without which, they argue, researchers are left 'without the appropriate vocabulary to explain and navigate the tensions and potentials' that research encounters (Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014, p. 484). PAR is not content to 'simply document the situation' (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a, p. 316) but rather push beyond towards making a 'tangible difference' (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a, p. 317), beyond description to active involvement. To paraphrase the oft-repeated quote from music journalism—'writing about music is like dancing about architecture' (variously attributed)—we can say here that 'writing (or reading) about PAR is like dancing about architecture'. The best way to understand it is to practice it yourself.

4.4 Reflexively Engaging PAR

PAR then has characteristics that leave it particularly well suited to grasping community as a form of social innovation. However to effectively and appropriatly use any tool, knowing its limits, what they cannot do, is as important as knowing capabilities. This section then discusses the disadvantages, and potential pitfalls of adopting PAR for SI. There are a range of critiques levelled against PAR. After introducing some of these, the section then homes in on two: the claimed coercive character of PAR, and, related to it, the elitist/hands-off spectrum developed by Kindon (below).

Literature on PAR is far from uncritical on the role of academics, intellectuals or researchers entering into, or emerging from, research with particular groups. The problems that can emerge are variously and *inter alia*: failure to find common ground between research and practice (Chatterton, 2006), researchers ‘going native’ (Fuller, 1999), unrealistically raised participant expectations about what the research can achieve for them (Breitbart, 2010), the tendency for PAR to be co-opted by more coercive agendas—for instance ‘impact’ in the UK (Pain et al., 2012, 2011), or, more worryingly, stalling emergent energy for change from practitioners with over-reflection and critique (Mason et al., 2012).

There are also technical difficulties to establishing a genuinely collaborative project. Researchers tend to have a higher skill level in standardised data collection techniques, whether semi-structured interviewing, mapping, or setting research questions. Different degrees of participation are perhaps inevitable within any given community too. Not every member of a group will participate to the same degree, raising issues of representation. Also, only some academics can pursue this technique. PAR is very difficult for students, not fitting the semester model. The long-term commitment required can also often rule out early-career researchers, or those precariously employed too. The role of funding looms large here, whether for extra sums required in order to train community members in data collection techniques, facilitating a large enough project to get round a narrow and potentially unrepresentative sample size, and also to free up research time to dedicate to the project. The role of ethics committees can also be problematic, where bureaucracy can help to sediment unequal power relationships, being wary of anything too innovative or less established (Khanlou and Peter, 2005). Not to mention that funders often require a hypothesis, research questions, and expected outcomes before releasing funds—with PAR these all emerge during the research process, not in advance of it.

These are challenges in degree, of the depth of PAR pursued. Others have identified problems with PAR itself. As PAR has become mainstream and more regularly used, some have seen it as a cover for asymmetrical power relations, or extractive research done under the veneer of PAR. One of the main barriers to PAR can also be academics themselves. PAR is a deeply humbling process, setting aside scholar’s cultural expectations of authority and privilege. Here, deeply sedimented academic expectations and pride become as much a barrier for academics as for other participants, or any logistical issue. Conversely, as PAR becomes more legitimized, any expectation that PAR is ‘better’ can lead to a veneer of PAR, PAR in name but not style. Discussing this Marres and Lezaun find that the standardization of PAR presents a warning flag: ‘When governments and powerful non-governmental organizations adopt an explicitly participatory agenda, a generic commitment to the principle of 'public engagement' no longer suffices. 'Ready-made' concepts of public engagement need probing’ (Marres and Lezaun, 2011, p. 497). So the challenge in reflexively adopting PAR research methodologies is to avoid any ‘ready-made’, or ‘off the shelf’ model. Here the commitments to relationships, dialogue and sustained engagement between researcher and researched takes on full significance.

The Importance of Attitudes to Relationships within PAR Box 13.1

Attitude of researcher and example of attitude reflected in what researcher might say to researched group (RG)	*Relationship between researcher and researched group (RG)*	*Mode of participation*	*Relationship between research and researched group (RG)*
Elitist *'Trust and leave it to me. I know best.'*	Researcher designs and carries out research; RG representatives chosen but largely uninvolved; no real power-sharing.	Co-option	ON
Patronizing *'Work with me. I know how to help.'* (i.e., I know best.)	Researcher decides on agenda and directs the research; tasks are assigned to RG representatives with incentives; no real power-sharing.	Compliance	ON/FOR
Well-meaning *'Tell me what you think, then I'll analyze the information and give you recommendations.'* (i.e., I know best.)	Researcher seeks RG opinions but then analyzes and decides on best course of action independently; limited power-sharing.	Consultation	FOR/WITH
Respectful *'What is important to you in the research? How about we do it together? Here's my suggestion about how we might go about this.'*	Researcher and RG determine priorities, but responsibility rests with researcher to direct the process; some power-sharing.	Cooperation	WITH
Facilitative *'What does this mean for you? How might we do the research together? How can I support you to change your situation?'*	Researcher and RG share knowledge, create new understandings, and work together to form action plans; power-sharing.	Co-learning	WITH/BY
Hands-off *'Let me know if and how you need me.'*	RG sets their own agenda and carries it out with or without researcher; some power-sharing.	Collective action	BY

Source: Adapted from Parkes and Panelli 2001.

Fig. 2. Kindon's (2010, p. 262) PAR model, adapted from Parkes and Panelli (2001).

Kindon's (2010, p. 262) PAR model, adapted from Parkes and Panelli (2001), shows increasing levels of control and power (dominance) from researcher(s) towards participant(s). Her modes of participation run progressively through: co-option, compliance, consultation, cooperation, co-learning to collective action. Power and autonomy increasingly shift from researcher(s) to participant(s) through this list. For example, under the 'elitist' researcher attitude, participants are co-opted into the researcher's agenda and plan of work. At the other extreme—labeled 'hands-off'—the researcher is only called upon as and when participants feel they require academic expertise. The assumption in this model is that power hierarchy operates on a continuum, from researcher to practitioner dominance. These schemas are helpful in thinking through the different forms of PAR available, however they are not in themselves sufficient in designing a PAR project. To fully investigate that we need to outline an example of one research project examining the Transition movement.

5. Transition Research Network

Transition Research Network (TRN)[2] developed out of the huge attention researchers have paid to the Transition movement since its inception a decade ago. This attention has had a number of factors. Research has realized the potential impact, innovative make-up, and necessity for the types of activities Transition has been carrying out (Barr and Pollard, 2016; North, 2010; Taylor Aiken, 2017). Also, research has been alive to where and when critique of these can and should emerge (Grossmann and Creamer, 2017; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017). Conversely, Transition themselves are conscious of the use and potential untapped resource this phalanx of interested researchers could provide them. In short, much as for

[2] http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org Accessed 1 May 2017.

PAR in general, Transition research and practice has much to offer one another (Audet and Guyonnaud, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2013; Merritt and Stubbs, 2012; North, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2014). In reality however, this potential has not been realised. Transition groups often report being overwhelmed by researchers asking questions, taking up time, getting in the way, and not giving anything back. Many of these researchers are undergraduate or masters students, and, however well intentioned, can cause more problems than they solve, in large part due to course requirements and limitations.

Out of this context then, emerged the Transition Research Network, a 'self-organising peer group of academics and community activists', who aim:

- To help advance understanding and practice in Transition;
- To support Transition groups to address their research needs;
- To help transform the crisis in our universities into an opportunity for positive change in research culture, making research relevant, fulfilling, and fun. (Bastian et al., 2012: 2)

TRN runs a number of facilities to meet these aims: an online bibliography of all research carried out on Transition[3] to avoid repeated research; an e-mailing list; a directory of completed and ongoing research projects directly on, or of interest to, the Transition movement; and an online forum, partly envisioned to act as a 'swop shop' where activists and researchers can come together to exchange needs, wants and find common cause. In designing a research proposal investigating Transition then, both the resources and guidelines developed by TRN, and the techniques and methods associated with PAR are both very useful.

5.1 Adapting PAR for use

This final section offers a reflection of TRN as an example of adapting PAR to study SI. Given the Transition Research Network guidelines, this article argues that in enacting these, the underlying desires and assumptions of PAR should of course be present: to be useful, to contribute something of worth (defined in collaboration) to those being 'studied', and to help aid some lasting change beyond the academy. This is research that fits *both* Kindon's 'elitist' and 'hands-off' categories though. It is firmly elitist is that the academic standards are not necessarily compromised. Academic rigour, critical reflection and ambitiousness of target journals can be the same as if the research was carried out with a different, non-participatory model. The manner in which the papers are written up, and more presentational issues like how to anonymise data, are not exclusive or elitist in any pejorative sense, but the highest standards of academic rigour are kept. Yet this 'elitism' only occurs outside data collection, and in pursuit of pre-given academic targets. While 'in the field', researcher time is fully taken up with being directed, deployed and tasked by participants. Participants may well wish to utilise a project team's experience of researching similar groups navigating similar struggles before. Yet the mechanics of how this is written up for a specific journal is done as one of Kindon's 'elites', subject to the strictest ethical considerations of course, and acknowledged up front clearly and fairly. In short, in the field the research model is hands-off and collective; outside, when back at a university desk, the model is one of co-option and elitist, however problematic these terms are.

PAR's advantages are akin to triple bottom-line accountancy procedures. The base assumptions of what make for sound accountancy and business practice does not change, but the imperatives (profit motive in this analogy) exist alongside accounting for ecological externalities. In

[3] http://www.citeulike.org/group/15407 Accessed 1 May 2017.

TRN research projects, the pre-existing academic requirements of research do not change, but are supplemented with specific goals or ambitions that participants develop. All outcomes are jointly agreed upon, and emerge through a consensus decision-making model. This can be more or less tightly defined (the remit of what is being researched, alongside who or what is included in that researched). Within the research process it is fair to expect agreement on the 'what', 'how' and 'when' the research will take place. The 'why' may well remain contested. It should also be stated that power hierarchies within any potential collaboration should not go unacknowledged. From the researcher's point of view these include, perhaps, taken for granted assumptions and abilities (eloquence, language, access to gatekeepers, perception of having a legitimate voice, and many more).

Due to PAR's open-ended approach, tightly proscribing the specific research process or directly foreseeing research results is not possible. However this research does not start from a blank slate. It starts, first, from researchers own previous experience, and immersion within the literature. Also, the 'research subject' will inevitably flavour and raise into relevance varying thematic interests and research trajectories.

Addressing and reflecting on the design of one research project gives an insight to the PAR process from the outset. From both a literature point of view and practitioner standpoint PAR allows an insight into crucial aspects of community as a social innovation. Within SI and PAR literature, adopting a PAR approach can grasp the parts that other research techniques cannot quite reach. Namely, the constitutive experience of community, the affective bonds and drivers that provoke or forestall action, and what any such community action is like, from the inside. Yet also from the practitioner or activist point of view, there is much to be gained by following this framework, as outlined in the TRN guidelines. As Transition have reflected upon, while flattering, research interest can overwhelm small groups. Therefore being clear at the outset about what groups expect—and do not expect, or want—from researchers is profoundly helpful.

Finally, and fitting with the somewhat poststructuralist flavour of PAR outlined in this paper, each and every research encounter will look different. Models, such as Kindon's, while useful heuristics and departure points, ought not become ready made templates. Sticking with the attitude of PAR, rather than the specificities of it, will mean each research experience itself being unique, and ultimately unreplicable. It is for these reasons that the emphasis of dialogue, and continually clearing the ground for facilitating space and time for genuine, open and honest reflection on research is such a crucial component to PAR.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to bring together one empirical phenomenon (the Transition movement) with one methodology (Participative Action Research). Both inform the Transition Research Network guidelines, a great example of taking a PAR approach to social innovations in action. The paper argues that the existing Transition Research Network guidelines are a focused, comprehensive, and useful resource for any and all research on the Transition movement. Fully grasping this resource though requires an understanding of the trajectory of the Transition movement, why they are of such interest to researchers, and how, why and in what ways they have been bruised by previous encounters with researchers. The paper argues that by drawing attention to the crucial community component of social innovations such as Transition allows us to see in sharp focus the both instrumental and intrinsic reasons why a PAR approach is preferable to other research techniques—particularly traditional ‘extractive’ approaches. This ‘pay off’ is for both researcher and researched. PAR is not entirely win-win, and accompanies costs from the researcher, in terms of a time-commitment, a humble and generous spirit and a de-centering of the ego and positions of power and privilege. However, despite these costs, the gains are well worth it.

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