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### Examining Researcher Identity Development within the Context of a Course on PAR: A Layered Narrative Approach

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## Examining Researcher Identity Development within the Context of a Course on PAR: A Layered Narrative Approach

### Abstract

In this paper we explore the ways in which a group of doctoral students grapples with the epistemology of participatory action research (PAR) in relation to their own personal and professional identities and research agendas while taking a course on PAR. As a professor of research methodology and two doctoral students, we examine the entangled and often hidden processes of teaching and learning PAR in order to identify experiences or events that seem to prompt or deepen novice scholars' understanding and foster confidence in their ability to enact the methodology themselves. Through analysis of participants' course journals as a type of reflexive researcher identity development record, we draw on narrative inquiry and Carspecken's concept of identity claims to systematically explore the participants' experiences and trace their journeys as they encounter concerns about ethics, power dynamics, and the logistics of a "messy" methodology.

### Keywords

Participatory Action Research, Narrative Analysis, Researcher Identity, Reflexivity, Positionality

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## Examining Researcher Identity Development within the Context of a Course on PAR: A Layered Narrative Approach

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*In this paper we explore the ways in which a group of doctoral students grapples with the epistemology of participatory action research (PAR) in relation to their own personal and professional identities and research agendas while taking a course on PAR. As a professor of research methodology and two doctoral students, we examine the entangled and often hidden processes of teaching and learning PAR in order to identify experiences or events that seem to prompt or deepen novice scholars' understanding and foster confidence in their ability to enact the methodology themselves. Through analysis of participants' course journals as a type of reflexive researcher identity development record, we draw on narrative inquiry and Carspecken's concept of identity claims to systematically explore the participants' experiences and trace their journeys as they encounter concerns about ethics, power dynamics, and the logistics of a "messy" methodology. Keywords: Participatory Action Research, Narrative Analysis, Researcher Identity, Reflexivity, Positionality*

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*"It's all about getting at that subjective (unique access) understanding and lived experience. Valuing voices not heard/people not seen." (Meagan, week 3)*

Participatory action research (PAR) challenges a positivist scientific paradigm through a practical approach to social inquiry that is embedded in real-world issues and solutions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Levin, 1999). While "PAR" references a family of diverse traditions, the approach sometimes referred to as critical participatory action research (CPAR) takes a distinctly critical, emancipatory stance toward research as it draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1970), Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), Martín Baró (1994) and, more recently, Michelle Fine (2017) and others in working toward the empowerment or liberation of marginalized individuals through engagement in knowledge creation. Three primary features distinguish this particular PAR approach (hereafter referred to as "PAR") from other methodological approaches: shared ownership of the research, collaborative knowledge production, and a change orientation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Because of the emphasis on action or activism as a goal of research, this approach is inherently political (Sandwick et al., 2018; Santos, 2015).

The actual practice of PAR can take many forms and depends on the input of all members of a research group, or *collective*, to determine data collection and analysis activities as well as preferred ways of disseminating results. Because of this, PAR is often characterized as an epistemological *stance* toward research rather than a method (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Santos, 2015), which "signals a larger commitment to challenging prevailing power inequities, within and beyond our research" (Sandwick et al., 2018, p. 475). Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), influential early PAR practitioners, warn that the action-oriented, epistemologically-motivated methodology risks being coopted if divorced from its commitment to the democratization of "ordinary people's knowledge" (Lind, 2008, p. 223). Authentic, critical PAR is a *vivencia*—a way of life—rather than a blueprint for inclusive

research or a panacea for the often exclusionary, marginalizing practices of more traditional forms of inquiry (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Sandwick et al., 2018).

This methodological way of life requires a reorientation to the ideology, purposes, and practices of research, decentering elite “experts” as the owners of knowledge and decision-making (Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1979) and instead prioritizing the experiences and expertise of those closest to the issues being studied and most affected by the decisions made (Fine & Torre, 2006). In practical terms, this requires a redistribution of power and positions the university-based researcher as a co-researcher alongside community-based researchers (Lind, 2008). This can be a disorienting and difficult shift for those socialized in traditional approaches to knowledge creation.

PAR epistemology also rejects the typical definition of research as the systematic extraction of data or a researcher-designed intervention, which can unintentionally entrench power hierarchies between researcher and subject (Curry, 2012). This type of research, like some others, cannot be fully designed in advance or kept to a pre-determined timeline; it requires flexible, evolving, and reflective planning in response to arising complexities and unanticipated dilemmas (Fine & Torre, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Knapp, 2016). Careful and critical consideration of a university-based researcher’s positionality in relation to her co-researchers, explicit negotiation of roles, and a continuous practice of reflexivity can help scholars recognize and ethically respond to difficulties in the project and unanticipated ethical dilemmas (Call-Cummings, 2017; Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, Byers, & Peden Mancuso, 2018; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In addition, it can be difficult to recognize the “action” component; the process of engaging in PAR itself can foster change in the form of an increased sense of empowerment and awareness or consciousness of one’s position in the world (Call-Cummings, 2015; Fine & Torre, 2006). Accordingly, this methodology is not easy to teach; researchers often learn how to “do” PAR in the field by working through challenges as they come, rather than sitting in a classroom reading about PAR work. Yet, as has been the case for Meagan, academic structures like how often classes meet, grading requirements, and semester calendars as well as expectations students have place constraints on how much instructors can innovate pedagogically to “teach” PAR in a way that matches its epistemological underpinnings.

In this paper we explore the process through which a group of doctoral students in the United States grapples with the epistemology of PAR in relation to their own research agendas. By documenting and examining this process, we seek to expose the difficulty of both teaching and learning this contested methodology. At the same time, we hope to encourage teachers and learners of methodology to take on the task, as it carries with it the potential to radically shift the gaze of novice researchers toward methodologies of social change, disruption, and resistance, which are so necessary in a time of gross injustice, dispossession, and abuse in many forms across the globe.

As a professor of research methodology and two doctoral students, one early in his program and the other in her dissertation stage, we seek to examine the entangled and often hidden processes of teaching and learning PAR in order to identify experiences or events that seem to prompt or deepen novice scholars’ understanding of PAR’s underlying epistemology and foster confidence in their ability to enact the methodology themselves. Through analysis of participants’ course journals as a type of reflexive researcher identity development narrative, we trace the journeys they travel as they interact with PAR literature, become co-participants in a class PAR project, and experience moments of understanding, which we term *critical identity events*. This draws on Carspecken’s (1996) concept of identity claims, in which actors explicitly or implicitly define themselves, often in reference to culturally accepted norms. We draw on narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) to systematically explore the participants’ experiences in this course on PAR, both those experiences that

occurred during the class and those recounted in their journals as important to their process of “becoming” researchers.

### **Study Context**

This PAR course took place in the context of a doctoral program in education at a large public research university in the suburbs of the United States capitol, Washington, DC. In this program, doctoral students are required to successfully complete five educational research methods courses, including one introducing approaches to research design, data collection, and analysis; one each on the basics of quantitative and qualitative methods; and two advanced courses in one of these “tracks,” which students select based on their methodological preferences and anticipated dissertation study design. The course described in this paper was offered as a new advanced qualitative methods option during the abbreviated eight-week summer 2017 semester.

### **Course Instructor**

The instructor, Meagan, was a second-year assistant professor of qualitative methodology in the graduate school of education who focuses on critical, participatory, and feminist methodologies. Meagan learned about PAR early in her doctoral education and engaged in critical PAR for her dissertation. A critical concept of participation has informed her pedagogy and scholarship since then; she seeks to enact an inclusive, student-centered, responsive, and discussion-based teaching style. Meagan regularly teaches the required introductory qualitative methods course; as a result, many of the students had taken that course with her and were familiar with her teaching style and critical orientation to research.

### **Course Participants**

The 10 students who enrolled in this course were primarily second- and third- year doctoral students anticipating designing a dissertation in the next few years and considering using qualitative methods, including PAR. Two additional students audited the course, one due to summer travel plans that conflicted with the class schedule; the other, Melissa, because she had worked for Meagan for the preceding two years as a graduate research assistant and was familiar with the methodology but wished to participate. Three of the students opted not to have their journals included as data in the reflective study, leaving nine who gave informed consent and from whom we have collected data<sup>1</sup>. This paper traces their development over the eight weeks as they discovered and grappled with the commitments and implications of participatory inquiry.

Of these students, all were either full- or part-time educators working as classroom teachers or administrators at the time of the course or having done so for extended periods in the past. They included teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages, special education, art, and science, and had taught at a range of levels, including elementary, middle, secondary, community college, and non-formal adult education. None of the students had engaged with PAR in the field, and only one student had read much PAR scholarship prior to the course. All of the students had taken at least an introductory qualitative methodology course and a few of the students were engaged in working for professors on qualitative research projects. As is common in education programs in the United States, the majority of the participants identified

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<sup>1</sup> We reference those who took the course as “students” and “course participants” and those whose data were collected and drawn on for this manuscript as “participants” throughout.

as white females; one identified as male and only one as non-white. Their identities as experienced teachers and as emerging researchers interacted in notable ways during the course, which we explore later in the paper.

### Course Design

The course traced the historical and theoretical foundations of participatory inquiry, core epistemological principles, ethical considerations, and common characteristics of PAR design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination methods. It required a significant amount of reading, and class sessions centered around discussions of assigned texts, with occasional activities, including Augusto Boal's (1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, to help students apply concepts or try out participatory data collection and analysis methods. Although doctoral courses in the program typically meet once per week for about two and a half hours over a 15-week semester, this condensed summer course met twice a week for two and a half hours over just eight weeks. This intensive structure meant that students spent twice as much time together as in their classes during the academic year but had much less time to complete readings and assignments.

In order to help the students process and apply the course concepts, Meagan assigned weekly reflective journals to be posted in an online discussion forum on the university's learning management system, Blackboard, providing prompts but not limiting responses to those questions. Students were also given the option to submit their journals privately to the instructor, but all students chose to share them with the class via Blackboard. In order to make these reflections participatory and interactive, students were encouraged to read and reply to other students' posts, which Meagan did as well. These journals and responses provide the data for this paper, as they trace the students' self-reported experiences of interacting with PAR principles and methods and their evolving thinking about PAR methodology in relation to their own work and future research. At the beginning of the course, several of the students submitted more formal, academic-style papers with citations of reading assignments, but they soon shifted to more informal, personal, reflective writing, which offers rich insights into their thinking processes and, in many cases, communicates strong reactions to course readings and activities.

Meagan originally planned for each student to conduct a small PAR project on a topic of personal interest, with the option to work in pairs or on a group project. Each student's chosen project would culminate in a publishable manuscript on "learning an aspect of PAR theory through practice" (syllabus, p. 5). Several students were able to pinpoint topics they would like to investigate either individually or as pairs. However, because PAR was new to most of the students, who were not experienced in conducting research using any method, let alone a rather unconventional approach like PAR, this prospect induced significant stress, particularly due to the short time frame. In response, Meagan modified the assignment through a participatory process; the class settled on conducting a simple PAR project themselves in which they gathered stories, their own and those of other doctoral students at their university, about their experiences in the doctoral program. This enabled the students to experience *becoming* co-researchers, based in a community of doctoral students in this Ph.D. program, which seemed to lead them to a fuller understanding of the methodology and greater confidence in the prospect of facilitating a PAR project in the future.

## **Methodology**

### **Author Positionalities**

We, the authors, approach this paper from three distinct vantage points. As mentioned above, Meagan instructed the course. Melissa is a fourth-year student in the Ph.D. program, focuses on adult learning and migration, and works as Meagan's research assistant. She audited the course, participating in most class sessions and learning activities. Giovanni is a first-year doctoral student specializing in research methodology, with a background in applied research and program evaluation focusing on international development, peacebuilding, and human rights initiatives. Meagan asked Giovanni to work on this paper because of his aptitude for and interest in critical qualitative methods, as evidenced by his work in an introductory research course. Giovanni was not involved in the PAR course and serves as a peer debriefer on the data analysis.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As mentioned previously, the data consist of weekly journal entries that each participant posted to an online discussion forum as well as responses written by Meagan and the other participants. This format allowed the students to reflect more deeply on the concepts they were encountering in the course material and in-class discussions and activities. As we, Meagan and Melissa, gathered and began reading through the data several months after the end of the course, we noticed distinct patterns emerging in the ways participants reacted to the course material, often reflecting a type of resonance with their personal experiences, as well as a few interesting cases of dissonance. We decided to take a narrative approach to examine the journey each participant traveled during the course in order to better understand the process of teaching and learning about PAR.

We layered two types of narrative analysis to identify and then explore themes and critical events in the data. First, Melissa conducted iterative thematic analysis of the journals using Tamboukou's (Riessman, 2008) document analysis approach, searching within and between students to identify in greater detail these common narratives as well as counterexamples. Although the method typically begins with the researcher familiarizing him/herself with the historical and social context in which the data was produced, Melissa had insider knowledge of the context as a student in the course and the doctoral program. She began with a nominal analysis, reading the data at a surface level and marking significant words and phrases related to the students' experiences of learning PAR. Melissa then re-read the data at a deeper level to identify categories and themes using MAXQDA12 qualitative analysis software, and then analyzed the journals a third time for counter-narratives and concepts contrasting with and complicating the emergent themes.

Meanwhile, Giovanni conducted a critical events analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007), which is intended to reveal the structures of important events in narrators' (here, students') experiences of phenomena. While the process intends to find tangible "events," instead, Giovanni located numerous points in the data where students described intangible moments of learning or understanding that reflected the structured critical events. These were often communicated as identity claims that were, at times, stagnant and at other times shifting and multiple (Carspecken, 1996). Typically, as a result of certain key reading assignments or interactions, participants expressed acute instances of resonance, dissonance, or resistance to the concepts or methods of PAR as reflected in their own identities as students, educators, parents, and so on. Several of these critical identity events are described later in the paper, and one student's narrative is examined in detail.

At this point we completed member checking of the analysis, with each of the three authors examining the thematic and critical events analysis. Our final step was to collectively synthesize the two analysis approaches, and by so doing we saw that moments of learning articulated by the students in the PAR course followed both “typical” and, in a few instances, counter-narrative<sup>2</sup> arcs. For the purposes of this paper, then, critical events analysis helped us to locate and tease out intangible moments of learning that either converge or diverge with the common themes or narratives that emerged from the students’ reflective data on learning the theory and methodology of PAR.

## Findings

The use of Tamboukou’s thematic document analysis approach (Riessman, 2008) and critical events analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007) represents a purposeful, layered, synthesized analysis of the data. We begin here by presenting the themes that emerged from our synthesized thematic/critical events analysis of the participants’ course journals (Riessman, 2008). First, we recount the “typical” narrative of the students’ experiences through the patterns that we observed in the data: the ways that many of the students’ thinking about PAR and about themselves as PAR practitioners evolved during the eight weeks of the course. The themes are presented in chronological order, as students’ reflections and realizations tended to group naturally into distinct themes during their time in the class, with a few important exceptions that are highlighted. Second, we present several counter-narratives; that is, themes that seemed to run counter to what many students expressed or experienced. By separating what we noticed as patterns into these two categories we hope to illustrate that, of course, students experience learning PAR in various ways. By understanding how students experience learning PAR and how those moments of learning often map onto the shifting and multiple identity claims we make about ourselves, instructors of PAR may be in a better position to approach their own pedagogies with greater insight.

The third section of findings presents an in-depth examination of one participant’s narrative. This narrative is presented as a vignette, as it is representative of the process of learning about PAR and becoming PAR co-researchers experienced by this group of doctoral students.

### Narratives of Learning PAR

**PAR is rooted in critical epistemology.** Many of the participants in the course expressed a deep resonance with the foundations of PAR in critical theory, which was introduced in the first week through the work of Freire (1998) and Fals-Borda and Rahman (Fals-Borda, 1987; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). These texts seemed to evoke powerful emotional reactions due to the participants’ experiences of oppression, either personally or on behalf of students in their own classrooms from marginalized groups, who included those receiving special education services and English language learners. For example, Lucy, a veteran teacher of secondary science, reflected on how her own life-long struggles with self-esteem helped her to identify with future participants from marginalized communities who “might not feel smart enough, strong enough or educated enough to make a difference” (week 2, para. 2).

Amber, a middle school reading specialist, wrote about how the assigned texts connected to her experience of growing up in poverty:

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<sup>2</sup> While we reference “counter-narratives” here and elsewhere in this manuscript we do not wish to confuse our findings of counter-narratives with the counter-narrative analytical approach.



Freire...WOW! I have not read anything written by Freire before. I soaked up every word I read from his article. His work really resonated with me. It truly bothers me when people take on an air of superiority over others because of wealth, race, or formal education. (week 1, para. 3)

Participants noted their discomfort with the typical hierarchy of knowledge in which experts serve as “power brokers” (Courtney, week 1, para. 3) who make decisions governing the lives of ordinary people. Lucy expressed frustration with the “constant power struggles” teachers face with school administration and boards as well as an awareness that teachers “sometimes wield our own power over parents and students” (week 1, para. 2). The participants saw potential for a different way of approaching knowledge production that honors the experiences of those without positions of influence, which Amber described as “respect for others...seeing beyond ourselves and valuing what others know and who they are as individuals” (week 1, para. 3). We see these excerpts as examples of the tensions participants expressed between the often oppressive structures of schooling in which they are in some ways complicit and their desires to counter this.

PAR’s emphasis on ordinary people as knowers and the collaborative creation of knowledge resonated with the participants’ values and aspirations as educators. In response to reading Freire’s fourth letter (1998), which describes the progressive teacher as humble, respectful, caring, courageous, and willing to learn from her own classroom students, Ellie, who teaches English to international university students and adult refugees and immigrants, shared:

...these are the qualities I seek to embody as an educator and a researcher, but this is no small task. I believe education should be an emancipatory process in which learners from marginalized and oppressed groups find their voices and those from privileged groups gain awareness of this privilege and learn to share power with others. (week 1, para. 3)

However, the participants acknowledged that these values were difficult to enact in reality, a theme that appeared throughout the data.

This concern translated into a discomfort with “traditional” research methods that tend to reinforce unequal power dynamics in society and schooling. A collaborative approach seemed to hold promise as more equitable, as Zoe, an instructor in the communications department of the local community college, reflected:

It is not enough for researchers to observe, engage with, and join the communities they are interested in—they literally must work with the others in that community as part of that community to engage in the research. That makes sense too—if the point is a redistribution of power so that it is equitable (and I do think that’s the point) then everyone involved has to have the same amount of power. (week 1, para. 3)

This provided an entry point for the students to understand that PAR must be firmly rooted in its epistemological foundations. Even Richard, a secondary science educator who initially clung to the familiarity of a more positivist approach, wrote towards the end of the course:

I think I finally understand it as a completely different way of orienting yourself to and understanding what research is. It of course comes back to knowledge

production, but it's a process by which we can specifically locate knowledge production in the domain of the people it actually affects. It becomes practical—useful, even—and beyond empowering people, it helps us to reframe issues as questions of action. What will we do with this knowledge? How will this change? What does change mean? (Richard week 5, para. 2)

From the earliest weeks of the course, most of the students enthusiastically endorsed PAR's approach to research as the empowerment of community members through awareness raising, collaborative learning, and working for change.

**PAR is difficult.** Although these epistemological commitments and honorable goals resonated with the students, they struggled to define PAR and worried about their ability to “get it right.” Several students expressed logistical concerns, such as recruiting co-researchers, navigating the institutional review board (ethics) process, identifying and agreeing on common goals, and managing the project timeline. In fact, while students' perspectives on PAR evolved throughout the course, many continued to yearn for a blueprint for enacting it rather than seeing it as a pluralistic way of questioning and approaching a problem. For example, Valerie, a former art teacher focusing on learning technologies design in the Ph.D. program, struggled early on to conceptualize the connection between theory and practice in PAR. She understood that it was a way of “making research accessible and understandable to everyone with the motivation to tackle a problem,” but seemed to want a formula for “determining specific methods to apply to a problem,” indicating that she thought of research as an intervention to solve a problem rather than a way of eliciting and honoring existing knowledge (week 1, para. 5). The lack of a defined method and outcome also caused some discomfort, as Zoe expressed:

I wonder if, in our attempt to make a complete break with tradition and build methodology from the ground up, we might be putting too large a burden on these projects...? It seems like the end question is always, “Right, but did you change anything?” And then if you don't...you are letting down whole communities. That's a hard thing. It makes me really hesitant to engage in this on my own... I really, really don't want to screw this up, and I don't want to “practice” on a community that is so close to me when I feel like I don't know what I'm doing. (week 1, para. 7)

Richard shared, on a similar note, that he was uncomfortable with the idea of starting a project without a distinct end point or personal ownership, and having to consider his level of commitment, time investment, and connection to the topic before becoming involved in PAR. Meredith, a teacher of middle school English language learners, saw this lack of researcher ownership as a benefit:

If done correctly, when it comes time for the researcher to leave the community, they will still continue to honor the realizations and transformations they have experienced and continue to improve their society. The community will be left with the tools, confidence, and voice to continue their fight for a better situation. (week 1, para. 4)

The participants wrestled with the challenge of facilitating a PAR project while relinquishing control to participants. As Zoe said, “I feel like, for better or for worse, I am ‘in charge.’ I don't want to be, but at the end of the day if anyone asks, people will look to me for answers and next steps (week 1, para. 12). Ellie remarked that “there is no right way to conduct PAR, certainly, but there are plenty of wrong ways” (week 1, para. 4). These concerns prompted the

participants to consider the importance of authentic engagement, commitment to the project despite the unknown outcome, and constant reflexivity about power relationships within the collective.

The participants also expressed concern about their abilities as novice researchers to navigate power dynamics and ethical dilemmas in an approach to research with so many “tricky opportunities for misstep” (Zoe, week 2, para. 5). Some feared that their positions as insiders or as holders of authority would make it difficult to genuinely share power with co-researchers. Zoe reflected on the tension between the epistemology of PAR and the authority afforded her based on her educational and professional background:

If the point is a redistribution of power so that it is equitable (and I do think that’s the point) then everyone involved has to have the same amount of power. This is never going to be fully possible because there will always be the privilege of the researcher that looms large over the project, but the idea is to strive for as much equity in this as possible. But here’s what I was thinking: off the bat, no matter how you dice this, we’re always going to start from a place of institutionalized research. We learned about PAR in school and it is from there that we will bring it to the community. And that’s tough, because it means that before we even get started there is a built-in inequity. (week 1, para. 5)

Similarly, Courtney saw her position as a special education teacher as a both an advantage and a source of tension in investigating services for students with disabilities (week 2, para. 4). She was concerned that her power as a teacher would influence students’ responses, but at the same time saw an opportunity for her own students’ voices to be heard rather than “be discounted based on ability, age, power, etc.” (week 3, para. 2). Despite these concerns, she appreciated the emphasis on “participant safety, choice, and anonymity,” (week 5, para. 1) noting that it was particularly important to her to protect her students.

Several students expressed concern that their own efforts at PAR would have lackluster results, or worse, would cause harm to their future co-researchers, as Ellie wrote, “I worry about doing it wrong, about causing emotional distress to vulnerable participants, crossing fuzzy ethical lines, or just wasting people’s time” (week 1, para. 4). Meredith saw potential in PAR, particularly visual methods like photovoice (see Wang, 1999), to communicate her students’ perspectives and life experiences while they were developing English proficiency. However, she wrestled with the ethical implications of “showing minors in marginalized settings” and stressed that it “would have to be done with extreme caution and purpose” to avoid exploiting students and reinforcing deficit narratives about English language learners in schools that “focus on their extreme academic gaps and see them as failing [mandated standardized test] numbers” (week 4, para. 1). These excerpts reveal an inherent and ongoing struggle in terms of reflexivity, which seemed to discourage the PAR course participants.

**PAR is personal.** These concerns appeared to spring both from the non-traditional nature of participatory research and from participants’ realization that this approach had the potential to be deeply personal. Meredith considered the ethical dilemma of “going into a community to show them or help them understand what the ‘problem’ is that exists,” wondering “will we always leave them feeling empowered, or could we leave them feeling worse and angry?” (Reply to Zoe’s week 3 post, para. 2). Ellie, who teaches many students from Muslim-majority countries and whose husband is Muslim, expressed similar concerns. She had hoped to focus her individual project on the experiences of Muslim women in the United States, who are often targeted for Islamophobic harassment or assault while wearing a headscarf. The idea had emerged from her own students’ stories of harassment and the recent brutal murder of Nabra Hassanani, a 17-year-old Muslim-American girl in a nearby town, where Ellie’s husband

worked and attended Friday prayers at the mosque that Nabra was leaving when she was abducted. Ellie felt that the project “could offer valuable insights to stakeholders or the general public,” but recognized its potential for harm to participants:

I’m afraid of upsetting them, bringing up concerns they already feel, or raising their awareness of potential dangers... I worry about drawing Muslim women’s attention to disturbing trends, hateful rhetoric, and acts of violence targeting women very much like themselves.... It makes me question how safe we are—my family, my Muslim friends, and my students—and reminds me of the importance of bringing to light the concerns of Muslim women in our campus community and needs for support. Yet how can I justify raising these fears among the population most vulnerable to such hate crimes? (week 2, para. 3)

The deeply personal nature of the project idea heightened Ellie’s apprehension about her abilities to manage the PAR process ethically, and she expressed relief that the class had decided to conduct a project together instead. Even in the class project there were concerns, though; Lucy worried about losing the respect or friendship of colleagues in the Ph.D. program because of her involvement in the project, or of making others feel hurt, exposed, or vulnerable. Ultimately, the participants seemed concerned about engaging in PAR specifically *because* they believed in its unwieldy, disruptive power, as Ellie asserted, “it is powerful because it is driven by deeply held convictions and it must be malleable to the goals and interests of the participants and the needs of the local context” (week 1, para. 4).

**PAR is political.** As participants came to understand the political nature of PAR, they began reflecting on the potential dangers of engaging in it, particularly in “raising awareness about provocative topics and working with vulnerable participants” (Ellie week 2, para. 2). Several worried about the potential of PAR to invite backlash on already marginalized individuals, as Meredith stated, “This is a very powerful form of research that has the potential to disrupt or benefit an entire community” (week 1, para. 2). As the project shifted to a class effort to give voice to their own frustrations with their doctoral program and those of their peers, the participants wondered about the possibility of repercussions from program administration:

We’re asking people to share personal experiences in a rather public way that has the potential to either expose or support individuals who—despite indisputable privilege—are vulnerable in very real ways. Maybe not as vulnerable as, say, undocumented teens, but still vulnerable. (Ellie, week 8, para. 2)

As the students’ understanding of PAR’s potential for both “empowerment” and harm developed, they began to reflect more deeply on ways to navigate the process ethically. They emphasized the importance of showing vulnerability and building trust with co-researchers but acknowledged the difficulty of doing so. This reflects their ongoing attempts to navigate the ethical dilemmas of PAR.

### **PAR Requires a Becoming**

The class project provided an opportunity for the course participants to experience PAR and work through some of these concerns in practice. Once they had identified the broad topic of doctoral student life, they began informally sharing stories in class. Several common themes of frustrating experiences with the program structure and leadership emerged, and they decided

to collect the stories anonymously and in writing to further explore these themes. Many found sharing their stories about their lives as doctoral students and reading others' stories validating and even therapeutic, although Courtney considered the potential for this to become a venue for venting rather than meaningful sharing. The students worked through the process of selecting data collection methods and determining the goal of the project, hoping that highlighting the challenges doctoral students experienced as well as supportive aspects would "lead toward the creation of a more empowering Ph.D. program" (Amber, week 3, para. 7).

Valerie, an instructional designer by profession, took the lead in creating a website where the stories were collected, starting with the course participants' own experiences in the program and then inviting other doctoral students at the university to share. As the project developed, Valerie's reflections focused increasingly on the logistics of building the website and repeatedly elicited her classmates' feedback, reflecting her attempts to apply PAR epistemology to the technical aspects over which she could have had unfettered control. She wanted to share decision-making with the group, as she expresses in this excerpt from the midpoint of the course:

...As I am putting rubber to road to build [the website] without the class around, I get nervous about whether I am making the right choices, using the right words, and/or letting the class down when there is a technical snafu... I was sensitive though that in making this decision as an initial set up (obv it can be changed back) meant I was exerting the power of being the technical manager of the site currently. I went ahead and did it anyway since I felt the class authorized that sort of decision making when I was told go forth and build, but I want to make sure everyone approves! (week 4, para. 1)

Similarly, Valerie noted that intentionally sharing power during a collaborative coding session in week six of the eight-week course was challenging but ultimately beneficial. Overall, trying out the methodology as a class seemed to help the participants put PAR epistemology into practice and to navigate the challenges of a non-traditional approach to research, as Ellie reflected, "Conducting this project as a class has turned out to be a supportive, low-risk way to learn how to do PAR, and it will most certainly help prepare me to do my own project in the future" (week 5, para. 1).

## **Counter-Narratives**

**Research is intervention and extraction.** Two of the PAR students struggled to reconcile PAR's critical, democratic orientation to research with their epistemologies, which were closely tied to their backgrounds as science educators. Lucy reflected on how the course, along with her other experiences in the doctoral program, was challenging her personal onto-epistemological views and her related orientation to research:

I have always believed that I approach knowledge from a Post-Positive perspective. I was trained as a scientist and that has influenced the way I see the world. The classes...I have taken thus far in the PhD program have influenced my way of thinking but have not entirely changed my worldview... I am caught in this kind of epistemological conundrum. Have I changed my views on how we know the world around us? Is that even possible? (week 4, para. 1)

Richard seemed to retain positivist ideas about research, consistently describing PAR as a way that a researcher can *transfer* power and gain privileged access in order to “capture data” (week 4, para. 2). He shared that he had intended to learn about PAR as a way to enhance the “social validity” of his intended dissertation project, which he described as a single subject intervention on game-based learning. However, he realized that PAR epistemology was not compatible with this style of research:

Through my research, I will be pushing down an intervention on others that won't have a voice as to its neededness [*sic*] for them. I will be the one saying this is what you need and try it to see if it will improve your learning experience within the science classroom. If I was to approach my intervention in a true PAR experience, I would meet with the participants, find out what they felt needed to be changed and then work with them to make that change a reality for them... What I think is the right change may not be what they think the change should be. (week 5, para. 1)

Although he saw the value in a PAR approach and stated that he would like to use it in the future to improve his teaching and research, he admitted that it would take longer than he could afford to devote to his dissertation project. Regardless, Richard recognized that this shift to wanting to incorporate PAR in his future work was “a big jump for me who started the program rooted in a quantitative mode and couldn't understand how the touchy feely world of qualitative research could ever have a place in my own research” (week 5, para. 1). In the end, though, Richard seemed to return to his initial perspective and adapt PAR methodology to more traditional research purposes: “I have decided that I can use a hybrid of PAR and interviews to get the information I want from my participants for my social validity” (week 7, para. 1).

**Am I oppressed?** As the focus shifted from individual PAR projects to a participatory investigation of the course participants' own experiences, the students struggled to reconcile their positions of relative privilege with PAR's emancipatory epistemology. Lucy reasoned, “Surely we are not oppressed? We are not marginalized. It seems strange to consider ourselves as the participants of this study” (week 3, para. 3). Yet as the class began collecting stories of barriers they had experienced during their doctoral studies, Lucy shared:

I think I am starting to realize the benefits of PAR in many aspects of our lives. Don't get me wrong; I also believe that we should concentrate on helping the most vulnerable in our society. However, at another level, it could be used to help anyone who feels oppressed by a dominating power. The very idea that we can help make a transformation in a community to balance power gives me hope for future studies. (week 3, para. 5)

Similarly, Ellie noted:

While many of us do have privilege due to aspects of our identities, many of us have also overcome oppression of various types: gender inequality, ideological conditioning, domestic or peer abuse, and even—indirectly—the injustice our students experience in an educational system that perpetuates inequity on numerous levels. Yes, we have privilege and a certain amount of cultural and economic capital to afford doctorate degrees, but some of us are working multiple jobs, making sacrifices, and putting other priorities on hold (such as having children or spending more time with our children) in order to be here. (week 3, para. 4)

The act of becoming co-researchers helped the students recognize PAR's potential for challenging injustice in varied forms and to reconcile its critical epistemology with its practical application. Furthermore, they saw how their own privilege could be leveraged to "foster critical consciousness about an issue among those who have the power to do something about it" (Ellie week 3, para. 5).

**Maybe PAR isn't for me.** However, as the co-researchers experienced conducting PAR for the first time and encountered ethical and practical dilemmas, some began to doubt that it was something they would use for their own research. There were concerns about the accuracy and validity of personal perceptions and experiences, and a tension emerged between PAR's epistemological principle of shared power, which resonated strongly with most students, and the difficulties of a flexible, democratic approach to research. As Amber put it:

I love the idea of PAR, but I am not sure it is something I want to do as a researcher. I like getting my work done and knowing exactly where I am and where I am going with my research. With PAR, I am finding that it isn't as structured as I need it to be. (week 5, para. 1)

However, some students found this flexibility appealing. Courtney expressed the tension this way: "In terms of data collection the "sky's the limit" outlook is a little daunting still—but I think deep down is what I find so attractive about [PAR]" (week 5, para. 1).

### **My Researcher Identity Development: Amber**

In this section, we present an example of the journey of one participant—Amber—during this course. We chose Amber's experience because it stuck out among the other students' experiences as starkly candid. In Amber's written reflections she did not try to sugarcoat how she felt or what she was experiencing. She did not seem worried about how her doubting or questioning might influence or affect her relationship with the instructor, Meagan. Power dynamics seemed like less of a salient issue than other students might have experienced. Therefore, we highlight the structure of Amber's experience (or "critical identity event") as a point of triangulation, illustrating and tracing the evolution of her development as a researcher in this course.. To outline the structure of this protracted learning event, we note moments where she reacted positively or negatively to learning (about) PAR and the ways in which she did or did not incorporate its tenets into her own onto-epistemological stance during this eight-week period.

Amber began the course with a positive view of PAR. As noted within the thematic analysis and identity claims in Amber's weekly journals, she mentioned how growing up in poverty affected her perspective and interest in participatory inquiry. Although she identified as a doctoral student and an aspiring scholar, she felt that her upbringing helped her to understand how those in poverty may feel as disconnected or objectified, marginalized research subjects. In this first journal reflection, Amber expressed a reaction of awe to the work of Freire (1998), as she had not been exposed to his writing until it was assigned for this class. In reflecting on Freire's work, she focused on the concepts of "courage, self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others (Freire, 1998, p. 39)" (week 1, para. 2). It seems that this last quality (i.e., respect for others) leaves a lasting mark on Amber's understanding of PAR. In her first journal, it appeared that she did not feel that university-based researchers always value what *others* say, and that they may often identify as superior to research participants. After this first reflection, Amber expressed her excitement to learn more about PAR, and stated her intention of using PAR in the future, as it is "a powerful way to research" (week 1, para. 5).

By weeks two and three, Amber's initial excitement gave way to periods of identity dissonance. Like many of the other students in the PAR course, Amber began to point out concerns around validity that are in line with a more traditional post-positivistic socialization toward research. These concerns included the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient number of participants or representing "the truth" (i.e., unbiased and objective findings). Drawing from this notion of small sample sizes, she expresses concern that change is predicated on having an adequate number of participants. Here, Amber's reactions, marking a notable shift from her previous enthusiasm for PAR principles and an important point in her ongoing critical identity event, are representative of nearly all participants in the course. However, this is likely a thought that crosses the minds of many researchers: *What type of impact will my research have?* Amber and her classmates seemed to express the same thought: If we are asked to work closely with communities, then we should have an impact and make it worth their time. This notion of impact or change emanating from PAR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) can seem unwieldy, especially if change is identified as broader policy reform.

While Amber spoke of her desire to create an impact, this seemed an arduous task given the eight-week timeframe of the summer course. Along with many of the other course participants, she seemed to equate the transformative nature of a PAR project with wide-sweeping social or political change, rather than notions of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) or communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1985). Although the course was intentionally designed to familiarize students with the foundational tenets of PAR, and some of the students reference notions of critical consciousness in their weekly reflections, the idea of broader policy change tended to take precedence over consciousness. Given the course participants' narratives, this may illustrate larger implications for those interested in teaching PAR. If doctoral students are interested in creating sweeping policy change, it is important to emphasize that an increased sense of empowerment or raising critical consciousness (Call-Cummings, 2015; Fine & Torre, 2006) is still a significant outcome when engaging in PAR.

Amber and her classmates' oscillating assessments of PAR each week—back and forth from excitement to reservation—illustrates a consideration and a challenge for those teaching PAR to doctoral students. The foundational literature surrounding critical and emancipatory forms of inquiry (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970) resonated with Amber and her peers. However, as the course progressed, nearly all of the participants struggled to reconcile the fundamental tenets of PAR with the realities of a doctoral program and traditional university-based research, causing dissonance in their learning process. Amber—who considered herself new to PAR—found it difficult to fully divest herself of earlier positivist socialization and training as well as current expectations of faculty members who are in control of her movement toward doctoral candidacy and graduation. While it is necessary for doctoral students to question the foundational tenets of various methodologies, for those in this course, the thought of engaging in a PAR study seemed challenging, as it did not fit within the guidelines of advisors who are responsible for signing off on research projects. For Amber—much like other course participants—the thought of beginning a PAR study seemed to induce a sense of anxiety, as it would not fit within the timeframes they had set for their doctoral studies, and potentially conflicted with work and family responsibilities.

After participating in Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985) and collaborative data analysis during class hours, Amber mentioned her interest in using these methods in her future research. By week five of the eight-week course, this sentiment seemed to illustrate how the demands placed on doctoral students may push them to seek out methods that are *feasible* rather than ideal. Amber and her classmates, like many students in traditional doctoral programs, will be asked to select methods courses they intend to use for their dissertation research. However, this has negative implications for the instruction of and deep engagement with methodology, especially for one such as PAR that is so heavily rooted in its onto-epistemological framing.



This traditional course structure may cause students to see PAR as represented by particular methods (e.g., Theatre of the Oppressed), rather than its foundational tenets. This thought is not exclusive to Amber, as most of her classmates expressed a similar interest in employing Theatre of the Oppressed and collaborative data analysis; this seems to illustrate the path of many doctoral students. As aspiring scholars, doctoral students may develop their researcher identity by grasping onto particular methods that fit within the demands placed on them. Much like her classmates, Amber explicitly states that PAR provides a useful framing as it calls on researchers to include communities, yet this thought is met with equal apprehension regarding the time commitments inherent to PAR. For instructors, it is then necessary to understand how students may perceive PAR, which has implications on how courses and learning activities are structured. While doctoral students may view the onto-epistemological tenets of PAR favorably, they may see that the time- and labor-intensive nature of the approach is a challenge given the other demands they experience, including the expectations of advisors who may promote traditional assumptions of what constitutes valid research.

Amber, along with her classmates, seems to reach a tipping point in her learning when she begins to see how much time is involved in conducting a PAR study. In line with Webster and Mertova (2007), we identified this tipping point as the critical event in these students' identity development as novice researchers. Amber began the course in awe of Freire's work and was drawn to the critical stance of PAR, but toward the end of the course she expressed reservations about the unstructured nature of PAR, which seemed to produce tension between her proclaimed identity and the constraints of academia.

Throughout the weekly journals, Amber and her classmates describe how PAR affects how a researcher thinks and positions himself or herself. With regard to the concept of praxis (Freire, 1970), however, Amber and most of her classmates feel a general apprehension when they think of how one would apply or practice the theories of PAR in their research. This protracted critical event seemed to be rooted in several underlying themes, including the strength of post-positivist assumptions of validity as well as the intense engagement of PAR, which may not align with the demands placed on researchers, especially aspiring scholars, doctoral students, or pre-tenure faculty who are beholden to the demands of university protocols (e.g., dissertations, department guidelines, or publication rates).

## **Discussion**

While the PAR course lasted only eight weeks, all participants seemed to experience periods of identity resonance and dissonance with respect to PAR, which were observed irrespective of the participant's initial onto-epistemological commitments. Several participants self-identifying as constructivist or critical researchers at the beginning of the course expressed intense agreement with the principles of PAR; however, they experienced periods of apparent disillusionment due to what they saw as methodological challenges before ending their weekly reflections in agreement once again. On the other hand, the initial apprehension that participants identifying as positivist or post-positivist experienced moved to periods of agreement with regard to the legitimacy of involving research participants or subjects as co-researchers. However, many of these students returned to their initial onto-epistemological commitments due to what they saw as practical concerns regarding the time and resources necessary in navigating a PAR study.

These challenges call into question a number of considerations for those interested in teaching PAR or developing the field of participatory inquiry. As is possible to see from Amber's narrative, an aspiring researcher can reach an onto-epistemological point of no return, halting their development or movement toward participatory inquiry. For instructors of participatory inquiry, it then becomes imperative to engage in pedagogically appropriate

techniques, ensuring that students see the strong commitments to action and activism, critical consciousness, and reciprocity among co-researchers. It is also crucial to ensure that the methods often employed within PAR studies (e.g., Theatre of the Oppressed; Boal, 1985) are not separated from their onto-epistemological roots.

While it is not expected that all aspiring researchers will become practitioners or proponents of PAR, instructors of participatory inquiry have an obligation to understand that the approach may seem unnatural or unwieldy to many students. Post-positivist socialization, traditional doctoral program guidelines, and time commitments in and outside of one's studies can all propel a student to the tipping point that Amber and some of her classmates experienced. Thus, it becomes necessary for instructors to nurture the development of aspiring researchers, while also providing a balanced assessment of what participatory inquiry is and is not. Although PAR may contribute to policy reform and social change, for example, it is important to note that it is no panacea.

These findings have broader implications for instructors of critical and decolonizing methodologies writ large. As educators, our goal is often to help students on their path toward discovering, formulating, and laying claim to their own onto-epistemological commitments. We encourage them to think and engage boldly, and, while often tempering their visions of changing the world, we do hope they may accomplish that in some way. It is important specifically for instructors of critical and decolonizing methodologies to understand the mental oscillation that occurs among novice researchers as they work on this onto-epistemological discovery so that we can help them navigate the institutional and social structures that can make them feel as if wholehearted adoption of and engagement with these methodologies is impossible in the current environments found in many universities and global contexts.

We close with a few insights based on our findings to support instructors of critical and participatory pedagogies in guiding novice scholars through the types of epistemological journeys that we traced in this group of doctoral students. Our pedagogical suggestions pertain to ways of introducing students to the principles, possibilities, and practice of PAR.

Although scholarly texts were not the only—or even primary—way in which the participants came to know PAR's epistemological principles and incorporate them into their budding researcher identities, several seminal pieces did play an important role. Along with Fals-Borda and Rahman's work (Fals-Borda, 1987; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991), Freire's (1998) letter to the progressive teacher caused particularly meaningful resonance with this group of doctoral students because of their own backgrounds as classroom teachers and their personal experiences of oppression and solidarity with students who had been marginalized due to ethnicity, language proficiency, ability, or other categories. Introducing students to PAR's core principles through similarly accessible yet evocative pieces that connect to their professional or personal backgrounds is a promising starting point. Within the context of a supportive and low-risk classroom environment—both in person and online—students can discuss, reflect, and apply the concepts from the texts to their own experiences and research interests.

Our participants then explored the possibilities of PAR while at the same time grappling with its tricky practicalities by reading a variety of studies and trying out a sampling of techniques. We suggest that class time dedicated to such activities would be well spent. For example, Boal's (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed offered the students in our study a hands-on way to put PAR epistemology into action by embodying the possibilities for change and helped them to gain confidence in their ability to use such methods in the future. Collaborative data analysis also proved crucial as a practical enactment of the difficult but invaluable process of shared decision-making among the collective. These types of experiences, embedded in a rich syllabus of readings from various fields and displaying diverse methods of data collection and

outcomes, can prompt novice scholars to think about the purpose and practice of research differently.

Finally, becoming participants in a PAR project helped this group of doctoral students to put these concepts into practice. Although many of the participants were intimidated by the idea of leading their own projects as Meagan initially intended, the experience of collaboratively making decisions about the focus, methods, and dissemination of the class project with relatively limited interference from the instructor was an idea way for them to understand and envision the potential for its use in their future research. We believe that by strategically and intentionally guiding students through key readings, authentic reflection, candid discussion, hands-on activities, and the actual enactment of PAR, instructors can introduce the power and mitigate some of the doubts about this radical approach to knowledge production.

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