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***EDUCATION, PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH, AND  
SOCIAL CHANGE: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES.***

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**Dip Kapoor and Steven Jordan (Eds.). (2009). *Education, Participatory Action Research, and Social Change: International Perspectives.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.**

There is a veritable ocean of books on participatory research, participatory action research (PAR) and action research. This new, wide-ranging, eclectic collection is a welcome addition to this literature, diving into some often-overlooked practical, political and philosophical tensions and challenges of conducting PAR in diverse contexts.

In their chapter, McTaggart and Curro contend that “more than a research methodology [PAR] brings people together to reflect and act on their own social practices to make them more coherent, just, rational, informed, satisfying and sustainable” (p.89). PAR is a broad umbrella. Jordan notes that PAR is itself “a blend of a broad range of research approaches and epistemologies that include participatory research, action research, feminist praxis, critical ethnography, aboriginal research methodologies, transformative education, critical and eco-pedagogies, and popular and community education” (p.16).

Equally broad is the range of authors and contexts which Jordan, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, and Kapoor, Associate Professor in the University of Alberta’s Department of Educational Policy Studies, bring together from across the world. Comprised of 18 chapters, the book encompasses contributions which arise from research with street-involved youth in Edmonton, Canada, to rural communities in Zimbabwe and Bangladesh to northern Chile, to the streets of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, and participatory research among Ngai Tahu Maori in the South Island of Aotearoa (New Zealand). Some contributions focus explicitly on the role of research in and for struggles for community control over resources, and for justice and dignity in the context of neoliberal onslaughts, from Adivasi/Dalit mobilizations in Orissa, India contesting state/corporate-driven “development” (Kapoor), to the shack dwellers movement struggles for housing in contemporary South Africa (Walsh), and mining-displaced communities in Ghana (Kwai Pun).

In this collection, comprised of more theoretical pieces, narratives and empirical accounts, some contributors attend more to the texture, warp and weft of the case studies and contexts they discuss, which, while sometimes less theoretical-analytical in approach, give the reader helpful insights into the challenges of the actual *doing* of various forms of participatory research.

Yet what distinguishes this book from many other works is its critical stance towards the celebratory triumphalism which often accompanies all things “participatory.” The book’s division into four main issue areas gives a sense of the questions which underpin the collection’s intended orientation. These are, namely, co-optation and assimilation of PAR; knowledge creation and critique of mainstream social sciences; social movement learning and PAR; Indigenous Peoples and PAR.

Jordan and Kapoor orient the reader towards approaching PAR with caution and critical attention to the interests it may serve. Indeed, it seems that we are often invited to suspend critical inquiry into the interests behind activities labeled “participatory” As an activist, researcher and organizer for many years, I have long noted the ways in which claims of participatory process/research have been mobilized in the interests of political and economic elites rather than the communities which they claim to serve or give voice to. These include various versions of “participatory development,” non-government organization (NGO)-imposed participatory rapid appraisal, (criticized by Barua, in the Bangladeshi context, in this volume) as well as participatory research conducted or commissioned by a range of state agencies, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and international NGOs. Associated with this trend is a depoliticization and detachment of critical, grassroots-driven and accountable research for social change and a cooptation of the language and framing of participation. Jordan argues that “the discourse of participation within capitalist democracies has been appropriated and recontextualized by neoliberalism, which in turn has had profoundly negative effects on the possibilities for participatory research” (p.25). Arguably, the use of seemingly progressive terminology to claim community involvement or ownership of research conducted by, or with academic researchers who claim to employ participatory research methodologies can often fall far short of the kinds of emancipatory orientations and promise frequently associated with PAR’s more politically engaged heritage (e.g., Fals-Borda, 1987) and can indeed serve to obfuscate rather than illuminate existing power relations.

Kapoor’s distinction between what he calls “par”—participatory academic research—and “People’s PAR” helps explicate the knowledge and power politics inherent in participatory action research in which a university-located academic researcher is principal investigator. For Kapoor,

People’s PAR relies on reflection (including various academic conceptions of the theoretical) that emerges from, returns to, and emerges from lived realities in a specific context of engagement. Versions of “par,” on the other hand, often rely

on academic theoretical constructions in terms of a priori usage and or emergent usage in conjunction with data collection and analysis as linked processes or postpiori, in the search for grounded theorizations for instance, that are still contained, referenced, and/or influenced by a theoretical address in the academic repositories of accumulated socio-educational knowledge (p.38).

However, Kapoor also argues that academics with a critical social agenda who employ “par” can also play a role in democratizing research relationships “as movement actors build on ‘par’ conversations and resource supports in the interests of continuing to make their history” (p.43).

Along with Kapoor, Chambers and Balanoff highlight ways in which external constraints such as research funding protocols and other conventions impact participatory, community-directed research activity. As Chambers and Balanoff ask, in relation to their research in remote indigenous communities in the far north of Canada: “Who has the brains?” They question the insistence of some funding agencies that professionals/academics provide the intellectual direction for research and the production of its outcomes: “If inadequate and improper allocation of resources constrains the capacity of a project to be participatory, research institutions also constrain the capacity of indigenous groups to self-develop and to self-determine in the context of social science research” (p.83).

While the critical approach to PAR, and the challenges and critical questions which Kapoor and Jordan separately raise in their chapters are not taken up by all the contributors, many share their concerns. For example, in their chapter on women’s movements in Arica, Chile, Chovanec and Gonzalez, proffer one criticism of participatory research: “Participatory approaches create the illusion of participation while the research process continues to be an imperialist exercise with outside experts manipulating knowledge, ignoring power relationships, and treating groups as homogeneous entities” (p.234).

Notwithstanding the wide range of research approaches and techniques that can seemingly fit under PAR’s umbrella, the breadth of the collection tends at times to overextend the concept. Some of the more engaging and engaged chapters—such as Walsh’s—do not necessarily fall within the (albeit broad) framework of PAR. Others, like Te Aika and Greenwood, and Shizha mount a case for seeing loose parallels between PAR and indigenous research epistemologies and practices. Shizha’s chapter, in particular, talks back to academic “par” to remind us of longstanding research traditions outside of the western qualitative research canon which mobilize community/indigenous knowledge(s) to lead to collective action, for example, on conservation, and disaster prevention.

Although the editors and many contributors are located in education departments, this volume is strongly interdisciplinary and lends itself to use in a range of courses and disciplines. Beyond the academy, some chapters, particularly those of Jordan and Kapoor, might be of interest to researchers located in community organizations and NGOs, since they directly address and challenge uncritical celebrations of “participation” in ways that are highly relevant to community/NGO

activists and research practitioners, as well as those from within marginalized communities who might take part in such research. While I rather tend to agree with institutional ethnographers, Campbell and Gregor (2002) that “participation is itself not an answer to the exercise of power in research” and that “being participatory does not necessarily equalize research relations” (p.68), this book suggests possibilities to address power relations between researcher and the researched and to produce knowledge collaboratively through a participatory process to bring about social change, while also helpfully paving the way towards much-needed further critical discussion and research on these issues and practices.

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