



The Qualitative Report

Volume 19 | Number 36

Article 2

9-8-2014

Collective Voices: Engagement of Hartford Community Residents through Participatory Action Research

Kenneth M. Williamson
Kennesaw State University

Karen Brown
University of Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Williamson, K. M., & Brown, K. (2014). Collective Voices: Engagement of Hartford Community Residents through Participatory Action Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(36), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss36/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Collective Voices: Engagement of Hartford Community Residents through Participatory Action Research

Abstract

The article details a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project that partnered Latino and African and Caribbean American residents with research educators from the Institute for Community Research in Hartford, CT. PAR has been used to engage marginalized people in the process of knowledge production and take action to change the oppressive structures affecting them. Project participants worked together to design research projects on economic opportunities and trainings for Spanish speaking residents, the social, environmental and physical conditions of neighborhoods, and the educational outcomes for Hartford schoolchildren; together they conducted research, analyzed and disseminated the results, and planned and implemented action strategies. This article discusses the process of developing a PAR project with different groups over a sustained period of time, reviews the results of from the overall project, and examines the impact of PAR for the participants. The analyzed and disseminated the results, and planned and implemented action strategies. This article discusses the process of developing a PAR project with different groups over a sustained period of time, reviews the results of from the overall project, and examines the impact of PAR for the participants. The critical results were the development of individual and collective voice, cross-neighborhood understanding and collaboration, and capacity building at individual and collective levels, as well as research and action results by residents.

Keywords

Participatory Action Research, Collaboration, Collective Voice

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



Collective Voices: Engagement of Hartford Community Residents through Participatory Action Research

Kenneth M. Williamson

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA

Karen Brown

University of Connecticut, West Hartford, Connecticut, USA

The article details a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project that partnered Latino and African and Caribbean American residents with research educators from the Institute for Community Research in Hartford, CT. PAR has been used to engage marginalized people in the process of knowledge production and take action to change the oppressive structures affecting them. Project participants worked together to design research projects on economic opportunities and trainings for Spanish speaking residents, the social, environmental and physical conditions of neighborhoods, and the educational outcomes for Hartford schoolchildren; together they conducted research, analyzed and disseminated the results, and planned and implemented action strategies. This article discusses the process of developing a PAR project with different groups over a sustained period of time, reviews the results of from the overall project, and examines the impact of PAR for the participants. The critical results were the development of individual and collective voice, cross-neighborhood understanding and collaboration, and capacity building at individual and collective levels, as well as research and action results by residents. Keywords: Participatory Action Research, Collaboration, Collective Voice

This article details a 3-year Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project in which Latino and African and Caribbean American residents partnered with research educators (REs) from the Institute for Community Research (ICR) in Hartford, CT.¹ Four different groups of residents researchers (RRs) began by meeting with REs once a week, for 16 weeks, to select an issue, receive training in research methods, conduct research, analyze and disseminate the results and design action strategies. Throughout the project, groups continued to meet with researchers and work on their issues. Project participants worked together to design research projects on economic opportunities and trainings for Spanish speaking residents, the social, environmental and physical conditions of neighborhoods, and the educational outcomes for Hartford schoolchildren.

Once one of the richest cities, Hartford ranked as one the poorest cities in the nation with a population of over one hundred thousand. Surrounded by fairly white, wealthy towns, Hartford has a population that is forty-four percent Latino, thirty-eight percent African American and Caribbean American, and roughly eighteen percent white. Though increasingly Latinos have been moving into the African American North End of the city, and African Americans have moved into the Latino South End, the perception is still of the North End as

¹ We call researchers from the Institute for Community Research REs, or research educators, to distinguish them from resident researchers (RRs); though we were all partners and collaborators, there are critical differences in our respective subject positions.

African American and Caribbean American and the South End as Latino, predominantly Puerto Rican. Both African Americans and Latinos perceive each other as more organized and able to gain more in city investments than the other, leading to deepening mistrust between the groups. These misperceptions lead to increasing distrust between Latinos and African Americans in the city; in reality they are both marginalized and share similar issues. Huge public investments are made in downtown luxury housing to lure young, primarily white middle-class professionals and divestments in public affordable housing continued across the city. Overcoming misperceptions, bringing groups from different ends of the city together for discussion and focusing on identifying structural factors were also objectives of the project.

This article discusses the process of developing a PAR project with different groups over a sustained period of time, reviews the results of from the overall project, and the impact of PAR on the participants. In addition to engaging residents and taking action to change their communities, the project also had critical impacts on the development of individual and collective voices of residents. The increased popularity of PAR has led to the name being co-opted and used in ways that fail to address the structures that oppress and marginalize people (Fals-Borda, 2006; Reason, 1994). The article refocuses the utilization of PAR to address issues of inequality and oppression on behalf of marginalized groups, through the work of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, who were instrumental spreading PAR to international audiences.

Literature Review

By placing research and methods in the hands of those most directly affected, PAR attempts to democratize knowledge production and utilization in addressing and attempting to change local problems (Appadurai, 2006; Fals-Borda & World Congress of Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, 1998; Fals-Borda, 1987; McTaggart, 1991, 1997; Schensul, Berg, Schensul, & Sydlo, 2004; Schensul, Berg, & Williamson, 2008). The roots of PAR go back to social scientists seeking alternative approaches to traditional social science approaches and ways to create change through action research (Lewin, 1946; McTaggart, 1997). In the traditional model, the objective researcher conducts research on subjects in communities and returns to the university to reap benefits by publishing research in obscure journals, while the research subjects would neither read, hear about, nor benefit from the research (Blakey, 1999). In Participatory Action Research, participation expands throughout the entire research process and the knowledge production becomes democratized; the theoretical influences of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals-Borda and other social scientists remain critical to Participatory Action Research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 2001, 2004; Minkler, 2000).

Freire tied pedagogy to the development of political consciousness and critical reflection about structures of oppression and domination; instead of the banking model of education that was used to disempower, Freire utilized pedagogy for liberation (Freire, 2001). While others have critiqued the class basis of Freire's political consciousness, Freire later acknowledged the sexism within his work and argued for the elimination of all forms of oppression (Collins, 1998; Freire, 2004). Freire's pedagogy of liberation centers on critical reflection, problem-posing education, and the investigation reality in order to transform it; popular education shares with Participatory Action Research the commitment to create change by directly involving those affected by issues through critical readings and understanding of oppressive conditions and actions to change those conditions (Reason, 1994).

PAR has been used particularly within education to examine and address inequalities. Education researchers have critiqued the way that schools function within Western societies function to maintain and reproduce class inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983). Yet and still in these early critiques of education, the role of

students themselves were largely absent from the works (Levinson & Holland, 1996; Willis, 1977). Other researchers extended analysis of cultural production of student resistance and social and cultural reproduction through critical race and intersectionality theory, examining the multiple ways in which oppression, privilege and disadvantage are reproduced across race, gender and class, locally and globally (Bourgois, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991; Fine, 1991; Foley, 1990; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Levinson et al., 1996; Willis, 1977).

Utilizing the same theoretical critique of education, another group of scholars extended their critical analysis by utilizing participatory action research to actively engage students—particularly marginalized, urban poor youth of color—in changing their schools and communities (Camarota & Fine, 2008a; Schensul et al., 2004). Bringing Freire's critique of the banking model of education and the utilization of literacy to inform the critical consciousness of the structures that maintain inequalities in the lives of poor, illiterate people, these scholars utilized Participatory Action Research as the tool to engage youth in investigating their reality in order to change it (Fals-Borda, 1979; Freire, 2001).

Fals-Borda initiated early international promotion of PAR projects that moved beyond Lewin's articulation with a radical critique of objectivity in science (Fals-Borda, 2006; Haraway, 1988; Rahman, 2008). Fals-Borda (2001) led a group of scholars in organizing the spread of PAR through the organization of the first World Symposium for Action Research and subsequent other meetings that globalized PAR theory and practice. PAR increased in popularity and Fals-Borda warned of co-optation of PAR by development projects and others (Fals-Borda, 2006; Reason, 1994).

Fals-Borda (1979) advocated sustained commitment on the part of PAR researchers. Since 1988, the Institute for Community Research has had a long history of and commitment to Participatory Action Research. Two of the initial projects were the Urban Women's Development Project and the Urban Women Against Substance Abuse (UWASA) project, which resulted in the curriculum *Empowered Voices: A Participatory Action Research Approach Curriculum for Girls*. Various PAR projects involved working directly with youth: the Summer Youth Research Institute: the Teen Action Research Institute: the Sexual Minority Youth Action Research Project: Youth Action Research for Prevention: Diffusing Youth-Based Participatory Action Research for Prevention. ICR's history of over twenty-five years conducting community-based research with various partners of residents and community organizations—with PAR as one of the main avenues—helped facilitate the current project by building upon past connections and relationships, even as new relationships needed to be formed with new partners (Schensul et al., 2004; Schensul et al., 2008).

Despite challenges to creating radical, structural change, PAR, situated in particular social contexts, remains critical to emancipatory social science (Schensul et al., 2008). The popularity of community participation in research has spread across academic disciplines and funding agencies as well. In part, this growth also stems from community resistance to particular interventions in their communities in which they did not have active participation. The growth in PAR is in line with the growth in other community based research approaches such as Participatory Research, Action Research, Community-Based Participatory Research, Community Based Appraisal, and Community Based Evaluation (Zubaida et al. 2007). We argue that PAR is dedicated to work with oppressed and disenfranchised people, to lead to critical understandings of the world, and to the highest degree possible to include participation in research design, collection, analysis, dissemination and action (Reason, 1994).

In our model, residents engaged in all aspects of research process: selecting issues that affect them, choosing appropriate methods, collecting data, conducting analysis, disseminating results and designing action strategies. Research educators acted as facilitators—adding knowledge of research methods and data analysis—as part of the group's collective decision-making process and co-construction of knowledge. PAR, then, is an approach to research, a

process and a goal. The methods of research are still qualitative and quantitative methods, though negotiation and adaptation of methods occur; the approach emphasizes active participation and shared control of throughout all stages of research (Schensul et al., 2008).

Role of Researchers

Critical to the development of PAR project is the establishment of relationships between research educators and community residents. REs initially began to form these relationships—as well as increase their own understandings of community dynamics—through exploratory ethnography. While one of the research educators, a Latina, had grown up in Hartford and had an educator and counseling background, she had not worked as a researcher previously.² The other research educator, an African American, was new to Hartford but a graduate student in anthropology. The REs took lead roles in different ends of the city, with the North End being traditionally African American and Caribbean American and the South End being Latino, predominately Puerto Rican. REs walked the streets of particular neighborhoods, mapped key institutions, and interviewed leaders of the community and of neighborhood organizations. This served as an introduction of the REs and the project to neighborhood leaders and provided background information on key neighborhood issues, as well as generated some support for the project locally. Additionally, these leaders were often contacted later by residents seeking additional information or assistance with their issues.

Equally important to the project was the history of collaboration that ICR developed with various community partners over the years, which demonstrated a commitment to participation, community empowerment, capacity building of neighborhood institutions and the development of local knowledge. Additionally ICR's Institutional Review Board members had deep roots in the city. This history leveled some mistrust of research in the community but not totally; new groups of residents had themselves not worked directly with ICR, and their trust had to be developed through their relationships with the research educators; this continued engagement and collaboration with residents, organizations and communities led to greater internal validity, rigor and trustworthiness of findings (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012).

Methods

Following the work of PAR theorists Freire (Freire, 2001) and Fals-Borda (1979), the groups “read” the world around them—through existing local knowledge and new knowledge produced through data collection and analysis—identified the ways in which they were disadvantaged or oppressed, and sought ways to alleviate problems for themselves and for their community.

Various research methods were used to investigate issues: interviews, surveys, focus groups, pilesorting, mapping, photography, and secondary data collection. The methods employed depended upon the issue and the skills and interests of the group. Resident researchers selected the issues to investigate and came up with many of the questions to pursue.

One of the challenges in participation was to be open to individuals with various skills and literacy levels—to be as democratic as possible—but also to include some people already connected to local institutions, in order to develop other linkages of support for developing projects. Beyond this loose desire for a group with mixed skills levels, there was no other expectation for participation other than a desire or interest in creating change in their

² For the third year of the project, the Latina RE left the project. Her replacement was a Latino male with local community organizing experience.

communities. Everyone participated in the construction, development, and conduct of the research project, including data analysis, even with differences in skill levels.

There were four different groups of resident researchers (RRs). The first South End group had 8 RRs, the second South End group had 12 RRs, the first North End group had 10 RRs, and the second North End group had 15 RRs. The resident researchers were recruited primarily through two different methods: through referrals by agencies in the community such as the Family Resource Centers—run by a local non-profit organization—located within two elementary schools or contacted directly by the REs.

The first South End group of RR were all Puerto Rican, with some invited through referrals from interviews by the REs with key informants from community organizations or social service agencies, while others came through REs participating in local community health fairs and events; this group was primarily in their late 20s-early 30s, several with some college and mostly bilingual, and most of this group had not been active in the community. The first North End group, primarily African American, was also invited through a combination of referrals from community organizations and neighborhood leaders, as well as from presentations at community events and block clubs. This second group tended to be an older group, with four members in their 30s and 6 over 50, and had been active in community organizing in their neighborhood. Karen Brown, the co-author, was a member of this group and the rest of the group was split between those who had a high school diploma and those with some college. Several in this group owned their homes, so they were economically secure.

The third and fourth groups were both invited through Family Resource Centers within neighborhood elementary schools, with very different results. The third group was a primarily monolingual Spanish-speaking group, with greater diversity than the primarily Puerto Rican first group, with many of the residents being immigrants from various Latin American countries; they were all parents in the 20s-30s with young schoolchildren and were less educated, with many not having a high school degree, less connected to community agencies, and economically poorer. The fourth group was also a fairly younger group, all parents in the 20s-30s with young schoolchildren, primarily African American and Caribbean American, most with high school degrees and more connected to two elementary schools; they were a group who realized that their previous parental involvement led to greater opportunities and better education and treatment for their children within the schools and who had just begun to think about advocating for and organizing other parents.

Through consultations with participants, the research educators arranged meeting spaces at schools or other key institutions in the community. Meeting for three hours, one night per week, over the course of sixteen weeks, participants discussed issues affecting their communities, integrated their personal histories with histories of communities and migration, selected research issues, created research models, received trainings in research methods, collected data on their issue, analyzed the results and designed action strategies.

The research models outlined the variables affecting the research issue and served as ground level theory to guide the research project (Schensul & Lecompte, 2012). Meetings began with dinner catered by a local restaurant or a local agency working with people in recovery. After dinner, children were taken to a separate room with a childcare worker provided by the project, while adults worked together.

The first South End Cohort of mostly young Puerto Ricans included six members who either worked for local agencies or had some experience in activism. Of the eight total residents, only two were monolingual Spanish speakers and the rest were bilingual. The group selected student outcomes for public school students as their issue, and in particular focused on how school resources and parental involvement affected student performance and outcomes. They conducted two focus groups, one in Spanish and one in English, with parents from the elementary school about parental involvement and school resources. They also conducted

pilesorting to refine their research model and to determine the cognitive models for resources and whose responsibility it is to provide them: families, schools, or government. They examined school district inequities through secondary data sources from the State Department of Education. Research educators transcribed the recordings of the focus groups and explained the process of coding data with resident researchers. RRs then color coded data, utilizing their research models as an initial coding scheme to which they added as they went along.

The first North End cohort, which included some older African American activists, chose to investigate how homeownership and involvement affected the physical and social conditions of the neighborhood. They observed, photographed and mapped the social and physical conditions on four blocks and combined the mapping data with secondary data from the city's assessor's files to determine owner-occupied houses. Resident researchers interviewed block residents on their perspectives of the block, relationships with neighbors, and feelings about ownership and involvement on the block and in the community. RRs and REs created a large map on which they overlaid data, which included photos of houses, the observation notes of the houses, interviews from residents, and data on owner-occupied houses from the City's Assessor's files.

The second South End cohort was predominantly monolingual Spanish speakers, with much less formal schooling than the first South End group. Many were unemployed, with children attending the local school where we met. Despite the presence of their children at the school, the group selected how the quality and quantity of trainings available in Spanish affects the economic conditions of community residents. The group conducted a survey of parents of the school to determine the types of trainings people desired, a map of key institutions that offer programs and trainings in the neighborhood, and interviewed key informants who identified the school as a key resource that could be developed further into a community school. The survey instrument was developed in Spanish by the RRs and REs, and the RRs surveyed parents before and after school. The REs explained the data entry process to RRs, who assisted in imputing data in SPSS. Together the group ran calculations for the survey results, with the REs providing translations of data into English.³

The second North End group, similar to the first South End cohort, focused on how family involvement affected student achievement. They worked to increase families' access to and knowledge about resources as a way to increase family involvement. The group conducted 25 individual interviews and a survey of parents. The research educators transcribed the individual interviews and explained coding to the resident researchers. RRs and REs then color coded the interviews, utilizing the research models as an initial coding tree, to which they then added as they coded. Codes were then analyzed for particular themes. Similarly, REs explained SPSS to RRs, who helped input data into SPSS.

Additionally, several times during the projects, groups from the North and South Ends came together to share information of their respective research projects. Individuals across groups also began to form friendships and connections through these meetings. The idea was to build PAR groups working in particular neighborhoods but also to create PAR networks across neighborhoods through the city.

Results

The results of Participatory Action Research extend far beyond the research results. PAR is also process for raising the consciousness of oppressed people and then taking action to address inequalities (Fals-Borda, 1979; Freire, 2001). The results of the PAR project

³ The majority of the residents who participated in the project were women, despite numerous invitations to male residents to participate by the REs. Males who stayed connected to the projected generally participated alongside their female partners.

included the development of cross-neighborhood understanding and collaboration, individual and collective voice, capacity building at individual collective levels, as well as action results by residents that emerged from their data analysis. PAR is a cyclical process involving reflection, research, and action.

The first South End conducted two focus groups, one in English and one in Spanish, with 28 parents of one elementary school in Hartford, CT. The focus group questions centered on two of the main independent variables, parental involvement and school resources, from the groups' research model. RRs recruited participants for the focus group, developed the questions and facilitated the focus group discussion. REs provided logistical support and child care for focus group participants and RRs.

Rrs analyzed the transcripts from the focus groups and discovered the ways in which parents felt the school's climate discouraged parental involvement, as well as the additional services and resources parents felt the school should provide. The parents detailed stories of miscommunication between parents and teachers and staff at the school, the lack of trust between parents and the school, and the cultural conflict between predominantly Latino parents and the school, all of which impacted the level of parental involvement. The focus group also indicated the ways that parents felt that the school was under-resourced, in terms of tutoring, transportation and services, which were confirmed using secondary data for the State Department of Education. As the themes began to emerge the group also began to think about action strategies they would use based upon the data they collected.

The first North End group observed, photographed and mapped the social and physical conditions on four blocks and conducted interviews with 16 residents' perspectives of the block, relationships with neighbors, and feelings about ownership and involvement on the block. RRs conducted and recorded the interviews in the homes' of block residents, REs did the majority of the transcriptions of the interviews, and RRs and REs together color coded and analyzed the interview transcripts; the research models again served as an initial coding tree to which they added as they went along.

Surprisingly the First North End group found through analyzing the interview data that several residents felt positively about the connections between neighbors on the block—though they also expressed that the block had lost some of its neighborliness. Many people knew their neighbors, spoke to them regularly, and visited them. Several had been involved in block club activities before and perceived that people were less unified today. The residents who were homeowners felt that renters were not as committed to maintaining property and were less involved. However, the group discovered that renters were more involved in the local community, only their involvement was with the local neighborhood schools as opposed to the block activities. The group confirmed through observations, photography and mapping that owner-occupied homes were better maintained physically.

Based upon these results, the group also began to examine ways to encourage greater neighborhood involvement and improve conditions on the block. At meetings with city of Hartford officials, the group argued for street level improvements for neighborhoods after documenting the physical and environmental conditions of their neighborhoods and block parties to promote social bonds on their blocks. They applied for and received a block improvement grant from the City from Hartford.

The second South End group conducted interviews with key informants and surveyed 149 parents of one elementary school about levels of English proficiency and the effect of the quality and quantity of training affect the economic conditions of parents at the school. They discovered found that a majority of parents were young (26-35), spoke little or no English, were unemployed, felt they missed job opportunities because of their inability to understand English and would prefer to attend trainings conducted in Spanish. There was a wide variety of classes that people were willing to take to improve their possibilities for employment, with

mechanics/electrical work and culinary arts ranking highest. The group discovered that while most parents recognized that the lack of English was a barrier to employment, they also wanted to improve their skills while they were learning English.

Building upon this discovery, one resident took the lead and applied for received a small grant to offer culinary classes in Spanish. The group continued to advocate in Hartford, with the support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, for full service community schools that would offer trainings and services to families after school hours.

The second North End group, through their analysis of interviews with 25 parents, found that previous experiences with teachers and school staff negatively affected parents' involvement in the school. Only one of the twenty five parents interviewed had positive experience with school administration. Parents felt cut off and rushed in meetings and felt that teachers and school staff were uncooperative. As one parent added, "It's the attitude of the staff. I feel they do not even want me in the building." This sentiment was also confirmed through surveys, where 45% of parents indicated that negative experiences with school staff and teachers had diminished their involvement in the school.

For their action strategies the group wanted to encourage more parental involvement by having parents view the school as more of a resource for parents. The group identified resources available for children and families in the community and prepared a resource packet for parents. The group organized meetings for parents where they discussed issues that parents had with the school and detailed and distributed resource packets. The group also confirmed that parents who were more involved in the school or community were more aware of and took advantage of extracurricular programs available for children.

Based upon their research, the second North End group formed a school store at an elementary school. The store—run by parent and student volunteers—increased the level of parental involvement in the school and became a vehicle for funding other school activities and increasing resources available to parents.

Each group produced new knowledge through their research, presented the results of their research in the local community, and designed and conducted action strategies. "Here comes another group wanting to research our neighborhood," one resident initially responded, echoing the general consensus of the cohort groups in the North End of the city. The residents expressed frustration over how several organizations, both locally and nationally, came into the neighborhood over the years conducting surveys and interviews with residents about neighborhood conditions, the effect of community based organizations (CBOs) on resident involvement, and resident opinions on various issues and projects. Residents were left with nothing to show for their participation: no data, no reports, articles and no positive change. These experiences contributed to the initial suspicion of North End residents about the project.

A key component in working with the residents on this project was developing trust and assurance that their work and efforts would be heard. The REs constantly repeated to residents that this effort was resident-driven and that they were only facilitators who provided technical assistance in this project. Setting up the weekly meetings in a warm atmosphere in the neighborhood where resident researchers lived helped the residents engage with each other and assisted in forging relationships that would continue after the initial work of the project was completed. Having dinner together at every meeting helped to reinforce that the project was a team effort and gave a sense that people were sharing a common, yet unique experience together.

Over time, resident researchers and research educators developed close, supportive relationships. They celebrated birthdays, graduations, and visited each other's homes, as well as supported each other through job losses and illnesses. The unfolding of relationships beyond the research project was pivotal to overcoming mistrust of research, as well as continued commitment to the research projects beyond sixteen weeks. The close collaboration between

REs and RRs led to greater internal validity, rigor and trustworthiness of the findings (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012).

As part of the project, the research educators facilitated cross-neighborhood meetings between North and South End resident researchers. Alternating Spanish and English, RRs came together to share their issues and were surprised to discover that they shared concerns for many of the same issues: academic achievement, neighborhood conditions, parental involvement, and resources for parents, children and schools. At one of these meetings, RRs together constructed a banner that had images and stories of children and families, culture, neighborhoods, and involvement. In other joint meetings, RRs presented and discussed issues that they were working on and explored ways that the groups could support each other.

The striking moments in these cross-neighborhood sessions were the discoveries of similarities in the issues that people were facing; RRs repeatedly expressed surprise over this fact. Each one saw the other as having a more organized community and more capable of handling issues because of the high degree of organization. North and South End cohorts strongly identified the education of students, parental involvement and resources for schoolchildren and parents as a high priority. While both, to varying degrees, saw the structural problems facing their communities in urban education—inadequate funding, greater staff turnover, more substitute teachers, a curriculum designed to score higher on standardized tests, and high numbers of suspensions, dropouts and children in special education—they also knew that parental involvement in neighborhood schools meant better treatment from school staff for children, more accurate placement, and better access to resources and knowledge that would help their children and ultimately lead to a better education. The residents found common ground and communicated even though some of the residents from the South End were monolingual Spanish speakers only and the North End residents were mostly monolingual English speakers.

One of the incredible results of PAR are the particular changes that one witnesses throughout the process, in finding individual and collective voice, moving towards an understanding of the research process and building capacity in individuals, groups and community organizations. The difficulty of quantifying these results for reports to funders remains a challenge for the expansion of PAR projects. We want to attempt to qualitatively highlight these positive changes that do not often go into reports.

Mrs. Rose, an older resident and already an established leader who had been involved in community organizing and demanding accountability from local officials talked about one the impacts that came out of their research project.

I never thought I could do research. But we did it. And I was in a meeting, and someone was talking about their research. I asked 'who did the research, how many people did you talk to, what questions did you ask, how did you get people, how did you ask the questions', and I thought about it, and it was all that I learned from doing research. Now whenever someone comes into our neighborhood trying to do something, I ask them about their research.

Previously, the presentation of research results was a form of knowledge she felt she could not question. She could still question them on her own knowledge and experience, but now she could also question on research knowledge grounds.

The use and abuse of research on minority populations has a long and storied history. Even today, most decisions about the future of communities are made outside of those communities, and research plays a part in those discussions. And while power influences and shapes knowledge (or ignores it entirely), one of the positive developments of researchers committed to doing community-based research, as well as researchers continually coming into

communities in traditional ways, is the familiarity that distressed communities can develop in relation to researchers, in understanding research, as well as the politics of research (Blakey, 1999). Communities and individuals can and do demand further exchange and community benefits through the process, as well as question the process and results of the research. The individual and collective sense of power is real.

Jammie was not as adept as Mrs. Rose at public speaking and, in fact, was terrified of addressing audiences. The combination of speaking in public and speaking as an authority on her concern about parental involvement in education, while frightening, was critical to her, particularly in her not native English. And for many, events where they presented their research to families, other parents and community residents, as well as representatives from public schools, service agencies and community organizations, were their first times speaking as authorities in this country. For those who never finished high school, this was a particular powerful moment because not only had each gone through a process of seeing their individual self as an actor, but they also came to see themselves together as actors who organized and advocated on behalf of others, who were silent and oppressed.

Even for people who were somewhat active in their communities, these were particularly powerful moments. The residents in the North End cohort who performed research by mapping were amazed at how much fun they had observing homes in the neighborhood and could appreciate the beautiful architecture of the homes, the majority of them being built in the 1920s and 1930s. The biggest surprise to them was that their data collection disputed citywide data, which stated that twenty-five percent of the homes in this neighborhood were owner-occupied. After doing their research, they discovered that the percentage of owner-occupied properties on their blocks was significantly higher, fifty-one percent. While they could not identify the reason for the discrepancy, they continued to advocate for increased City resources for the poorer neighborhoods, and not simply downtown.

The process of building and establishing trust and relationships, caring, concern and commitment, time and emotional investment to each other extended beyond the life of the project. The process was transformative in the ability to create small scale social change. Individual transformation and new networks formed. Resident researchers began to see themselves as change agents and ambassadors for their neighborhoods. They began to form alliances and networks with providers in the community. For one cohort, as a result of their weekly meetings at an area dance school, a couple of the elder participants were invited by the school leaders to participate in the school's annual "rites of passage" program as recognized community elders. The networks that were formed with the participants in the groups were invaluable.

Social movement theorists often talk of the varied activisms and networks of individuals, as people move around and between New Social Movements—peace, environmental, feminist and racial justice movements (Escobar & Alvarez, 1992). Similarly, for those whose activism began in the PAR project, several expanded into other areas. One couple began to get involved deeply in local environmental organization, with one eventually becoming a board member of the organization. Informally, members of one cohort formed their own mutual aid society, with each member contributing some form of assistance to those in need. Several expanded their involvement with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections efforts in the city, serving as member of various committees, well beyond the support for our PAR project. Three became editors of a local community newsletter, and one of them continued and helped expand a pilot small grants program that began at ICR.

Each group felt that the completed a research project was an enormous success. Resident educators discovered more about issues central to them, attained new skills and had their voices heard; for residents with limited English or formal education this was particularly important.

After participating in this project, residents felt that they did have the power to make changes in their community. They were able to better scrutinize research efforts presented by others and had more confidence in asking questions about the process. Several of the residents involved in this project went on to participate in other community research projects, and some had the opportunity to participate further in MC's Resident Leadership Participation training.

At the group level, residents saw themselves together as advocates for others who were silenced and oppressed in their communities. While a few already saw themselves as advocates, for many it was their first experience. Additionally, through the process, the different groups of Latino and African American/Caribbean residents saw that issues such as quality education for school children, and neighborhood conditions and economic opportunities unified their respective communities. They drew upon each other to bridge traditional divisions in the city to support efforts across the Latino and African American/Caribbean communities.

Resident researchers identified critical community problems—quantity and quality of trainings for Spanish speaking residents, the social, environmental and physical conditions of neighborhoods, and the educational outcomes for schoolchildren—and took actions to provide more trainings and increase the resources to their schools and neighborhoods. Both resident researchers and research educators would have liked to further project ideas by increasing their scale and partnering with effective coalitions to support residents' ideas. The project succeeded in creating individual and group level change, as well as achieving projects with community impact. Individuals became actors in their communities and increased their own skill levels and their capacity for conducting and understanding research. Residents expanded their own networks and participated in various other efforts in their communities. Residents saw themselves and acted as advocates for other residents. Both the processes and products of PAR were critical to the successes of the project.

Discussion

The process of conducting PAR, as well as the tangible products or outcomes from PAR, are critical at individual, group and wider community levels. At the individual level, the poorer, less educated residents, who often did not speak English, saw themselves as actors and change agents in their communities for the first time. They stood before audiences of school administrators and other officials and advocated for others in their community. The process of PAR allowed for the integration of residents' existing knowledge and skills with new knowledge and skills they gained through participating in inquiry and action. To shift from being silenced and battered by the world to believing that one can, together with others, change the world and attempting to do so is a tremendous feat. Even greater still is the ability to advocate not solely for your own interests, but seeing yourself as one of many, and advocating on behalf of others as well.

Even for more experienced residents, who had been active in their communities previously, the process of research became demystified for them as they conducted their research projects (Appadurai, 2006; Borda, 1979; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Schensul et al., 2004; Schensul et al., 2008). Their research contributions, together with their own existing knowledge of their communities, provided a more authoritative platform to speak about issues affecting their communities and propose and enact action strategies for changing their communities. Most critically, PAR was useful for engaging residents, no matter their levels of English, education or activism.

While the results of PAR projects are not generalizable in the manner of probabilistic sampling techniques, PAR has the ability to engage residents across various intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, education, language, age and neighborhood (Crenshaw, 1991; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Schensul & LeCompte, 2012; van der Meulen, 2011). These results are

consistent with PAR projects that focus on education, on health, and other issues (Cahill, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008a, 2008b; Fals-Borda & World Congress of Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, 1998; Fals-Borda, 1979, 1987; Faridi, Grunbaum, Sajor Gray, Franks, & Simoes, 2007; McTaggart, 1997; Minkler, 2000; Schensul et al., 2004; Schensul et al., 2008).

The implications of the PAR project suggest continued support and commitment on behalf of academically trained researchers, universities and funders to the expand democratic participation in research and the production of knowledge (Appadurai, 2006; Fals-Borda, 2006; Reason, 1994; van der Meulen, 2011). This version of PAR encourages higher degrees of participation, longer term funding and support for PAR projects, and a sustained focus on oppressed people critically investigating the world in order to change it.

References

- Appadurai, A. (2006). The right to research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 4, 167-177.
- Blakey, M. (1999). Beyond European enlightenment: Toward a critical and humanistic human biology. In A. H. Goodman & T. L. Leatherman (Eds.), *Building a new biocultural synthesis* (pp. 379-405). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Borda, O. F. (1979). Investigating reality in order to transform it: The Colombian experience. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 4, 33-55.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bourgois, P. I. (2003). *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Cahill, C. (2007). The personal is political: Developing new subjectivities through participatory action research. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14, 267-292.
- Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2008a). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2008b). Youth participatory action research: A pedagogy for transformational resistance. In J. Cammarota & M. Fine (Eds.), *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, D. E. (1998). Review essay: From oppression to hope: Freire's journey toward utopia. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 29, 115-124.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241-1299.
- Escobar, A., & Alvarez, S. E. (1992). *The making of social movements in Latin America: Identity, strategy, and democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fals-Borda, O. (1979). Investigating reality in order to transform it: The Colombian experience. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 4, 33-55.
- Fals-Borda, O. (1987). The application of participatory action-research in Latin America. *International Sociology*, 2, 329-347.
- Fals-Borda, O. (2006). Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges. *Handbook of Action Research: Concise Paperback Edition*, 27-37.
- Fals-Borda, O., & Rahman, M. A. (1991). *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. New York, NY: Apex Press.

- Fals-Borda, O., & World Congress of Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, S. (1998). *People's participation: Challenges ahead*. New York, NY: Apex Press.
- Faridi, Z., Grunbaum, J. A., Sajor Gray, B., Franks, A., & Simoes, E. (2007). Community-based participatory research: Necessary next steps. *Preventing Chronic Disease, 4*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1955426/>
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Foley, D. E. (1990). *Learning capitalist culture: Deep in the heart of Texas*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Freire, P. (2001). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. *Harvard Educational Review, 53*, 257–93.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 14*, 575–599.
- Holland, D. C., & Eisenhart, M. (1990). *Educated in romance: Women, achievement, and college culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Levinson, B. A., Foley, & Holland, D. C. (1996). *The cultural production of the educated person critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Levinson, B. A., & Holland, D. C. (1996). The cultural production of the educated person: An introduction. In B. A. Levinson, D. E. Foley, & D. C. Holland (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice* (pp. 1–54). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues, 2*, 34–46.
- McTaggart, R. (1991). Principles for participatory action research. *Adult Education Quarterly, 41*, 168–187.
- McTaggart, R. (1997). *Participatory action research international contexts and consequences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Minkler, M. (2000). Using participatory action research to build healthy communities. *Public Health Reports, 115*, 191–197.
- Rahman, M. A. (2008). Some trends in the praxis of participatory action research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research* (pp. 49–62). London: SAGE Publications.
- Reason, P. (1994). Three approaches to participatory inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 324–339). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2006). *Handbook of action research: Concise paperback edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schensul, J., Berg, M., Schensul, D., & Sydlo, S. (2004). Core elements of participatory action research for educational empowerment and risk prevention with urban youth. *Practicing Anthropology, 26*, 5–9.
- Schensul, J. J., Berg, M. J., & Williamson, K. M. (2008). Challenging hegemonies: Advancing collaboration in community-based participatory action research. *Collaborative Anthropologies, 1*, 102–137.
- Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (2012). *Essential ethnographic methods: A mixed methods approach*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Van der Meulen, E. (2011). Participatory and action-oriented dissertations: The challenges and importance of community-engaged graduate research. *The Qualitative Report, 16*, 1291–1303. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-5/vandermeulen.pdf>

Willis, P. E. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Author Note

Kenneth M. Williamson is currently an Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Geography and Anthropology and the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at Kennesaw State University. Correspondence for this manuscript can be made to Kenneth M. Williamson, PhD at the following: Department of Geography and Anthropology, Interdisciplinary Studies Department, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA 30144.

Karen Brown is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut.

This project was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, through their Making Connections Initiative.

Marlene J. Berg served as director of this project. Kenneth Williamson, Nelba Marquez-Greene and Reinaldo Rojas served as the principal REs on the project. Karen Brown was one of the RRs and served in various levels of the Annie E Casey Initiative. Federico Cintrón-Moscoso, Robert Rooks, Franklin Torres, Bildade Augustin and Maritza Lopez provided critical support and insight into the project.

Copyright 2014: Kenneth M. Williamson, Karen Brown, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Williamson, K. M., & Brown, K. (2014). Collective voices: Engagement of Hartford community residents through participatory action research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(72), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/williamson72.pdf>
