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STUDIES?

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## CAN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS IN ADULT EDUCATION STUDIES?

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### Abstract

*Participatory action research (PAR), as a research methodology, challenges conventional, positivist, and scientific approaches. Recent adult education studies on PAR have explored how to develop PAR to enhance research practice and further the "democratizing aims of adult education" (Joyappa & Martin, 1996). Historically, as a part of adult education movements, PAR has been developed for social justice and social change (Glassman, Erdem, & Bartholomew, 2013). Yet while conducting PAR in adult education with the commitment of empowering the oppressed, researchers sometimes overlook unequal social and power relations behind PAR, restrictions from institutional power, and tensions between local practice and currents of global neo-liberalization. This reflective paper adopts a Marxist-feminist theoretical framework to review the historical development of PAR in adult education, and analyzes the limitations of PAR in empowering adult participants. I argue that PAR should be understood as a praxis that could be used to mobilize social transformations. Researchers should be aware of separations between the commitment of empowerment and actual practices that reproduce unequal social relations.*

### Résumé

*À titre de méthodologie de recherche, la recherche-action participative (RAP) conteste les approches scientifiques positivistes et traditionnelles. De récentes recherches sur la RAP dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes explorent comment créer des RAP de manière à enrichir la pratique de recherche et à faire avancer les « objectifs de démocratisation de l'éducation des adultes » (Joyappa et Martin, 1996, traduction libre). Historiquement, la RAP est employée au sein des mouvements de l'éducation des adultes pour favoriser la justice sociale et le changement social (Glassman, Erdem et Bartholomew, 2013). Malgré ceci, les recherches en éducation des adultes qui mobilisent la RAP dans l'objectif d'autonomiser les populations opprimées négligent parfois l'inégalité des relations sociales et de pouvoir qui façonnent la RAP, les restrictions qu'impose le pouvoir institutionnel et les tensions qui existent entre la pratique locale et les tendances mondiales de néolibéralisation.*

*Les réflexions dans le présent article adoptent un cadre théorique marxiste féministe pour examiner l'évolution historique de la RAP dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes et analysent les limites de la RAP pour favoriser l'autonomie des adultes qui y participent. Je soutiens que la RAP doit être comprise comme une praxis pouvant être utilisée pour mobiliser la transformation sociale. Les recherches doivent tenir compte des différences entre l'engagement envers l'autonomisation et les pratiques réelles qui reproduisent l'inégalité au sein des relations sociales.*

Participatory action research (PAR), as a research methodology, challenges conventional, positivist, and scientific approaches. Many researchers and teachers in adult education have taken PAR as an approach for exploring knowledge from socially marginalized groups, challenging authoritative power, and empowering the expression of marginalized voices (Gouin, Cocq, & McGravin, 2011; Paradis, 2000). Recent PAR and adult education studies have explored how to develop PAR to enhance research practice and further the "democratizing aims of adult education" (Joyappa & Martin, 1996). Historically, as a part of adult education movements, PAR has been developed for social justice and social change (Glassman, Erdem, & Bartholomew, 2013).

However, as a Marxist-feminist sociologist and adult educator, I find a gap between PAR's passionate commitment to social justice and its actual practice by researchers and participants. I argue that researchers, as privileged, highly educated, and professionally trained individuals, sometimes reproduce inequalities between themselves and participants. The researchers' practice of doing PAR is largely affected by their knowledge and ways of knowing, their diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, institutional regulations, hierarchical ruling relations in knowledge production, and the larger context of globalized neo-liberalization. Researchers, as social actors, may fail to practise the principles of PAR. They may reproduce unequal social and power relations, such as race, gender, and class relations between themselves and participants within the social institution and a larger global and neo-liberal context. PAR does not sufficiently empower adult participants while power relations persist between researchers as "objective observers" and participants as "data providers" (Paradis, 2000).

In this paper, I explore the limitations of PAR in adult education through a Marxist-feminist perspective to find an effective way forward for the practice of PAR in adult education studies. I begin with these broad questions: How do researchers with varied social and cultural backgrounds affect the collective understanding, practice, and development of PAR in adult education studies? How do institutional restrictions impact knowledge production among adult educators, researchers, and participants while doing PAR? How are socio-political ideologies in the global and neo-liberal contexts reproduced within PAR? How does such reproduction, in turn, prevent the process of empowerment? I trace the historical roots of PAR and adult education and revisit the historical development of PAR as a research methodology contributing to adult education studies. I introduce a Marxist-feminist theoretical framework and discuss how "empowerment" became an ideology affecting PAR. Finally, I explore three limitations of PAR in adult education: power relations between researcher and participants, institutional restrictions, and the impact of globalized neo-liberalization.

### Participatory Action Research in Adult Education

In the past two decades, PAR has been used as a methodology in adult education studies. Participatory research first emerged in the 1970s in support of the resistance to positivist research (Joyappa & Martin, 1996). Since the 1990s, participatory research has been widely used by researchers and adult educators in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Researchers have used PAR as a research methodology because it challenged the subjectivity of the participants and the power of knowledge. PAR was first used by adult educators as a pedagogical tool for inspiring studies in “literacy training, health education and community development” (Mulenga, 1994, p. 4). Deeply rooted in feminist theories, PAR has quickly developed as a feminist methodology for deconstructing the power and tensions between men and women and between oppressed and oppressor (Maguire, 1987). As a result, PAR has been developed as a feminist approach for empowering marginalized or racialized women and girls.

Many adult educators and scholars have used PAR as a tool for empowering women (e.g., Aziz, Shams, & Khan, 2011; Hanson, 2015). “Empowerment” as a concept has been defined as involving “people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power” (Inglis, 1997, p. 4). Women’s empowerment, while extending the commitment of challenging power structures, is a process that enables women “to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination” (Aziz et al., 2011; Keller & Mbwewe, 1991). Both PAR and adult education share the commitment of empowerment and emphasize the significance of knowledge for marginalized people.

Scholars of PAR and adult education have both emphasized raising consciousness by reflecting on the experience, knowledge, and voices of the oppressed for liberation (Freire, 1970). As Freire (1970) said:

Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans—deposits) in the name of liberation. (p. 79)

While adult education has a goal of developing a transformative pedagogy for liberation, PAR offers us an opportunity to combine research and action and develop an empowerment-oriented approach to the research process, thus providing us the courage to change a world we have intimately known and lead a transformative practice for social change. Theoretically, PAR challenges the hierarchical power relations between the researched and researcher and helps to generate knowledge both of and for marginalized groups, rather than from the dominant groups. In addition, both PAR and adult education have the same commitment to social change (Joyappa & Martin, 1996, p. 12). Scholars in PAR and adult education (e.g., MacDonald, 2012; Maguire, 1987; Selenger, 1997) have pointed out that PAR and adult education share similar perspectives, including:

1) the radical and reformist approaches to international economic development assistance; 2) the view of adult education as an empowering alternative to traditional approaches to education; and 3) the ongoing debate within the social sciences over the dominant social science paradigm. (MacDonald, 2012, p. 37)

PAR and adult education share these philosophical foundations and commitments and both seek sustainability and transformation in education and in the community. However, in the actual practice of doing PAR, do researchers have enough knowledge and are they able to use practices to reverse unequal power relations? What is the relationship between researchers' identity, experience, and standpoint and PAR as a methodology? What should we do to treat PAR as a praxis for actually liberating our research?

### **My Journey of Conducting PAR: Can PAR Empower Participants in Adult Education Studies?**

From 2015 to 2017, I conducted a critical ethnographic study in a Vancouver-based immigration settlement organization. From January 2016 to February 2016, I conducted PAR with seven Chinese immigrant mothers participating in a six-week parenting workshop. As a facilitator in the research, and as part of my PAR, I engaged with these immigrant mothers as they discussed their issues, interviewed each other, and summarized their findings and reflections. Three steps were taken during the PAR: (1) discussing and choosing the topics, (2) conducting interviews, and (3) reflecting on experiences and findings.

During the PAR, I first asked the Chinese immigrant mothers to discuss which topic they were interested in and the reasons for their interest. In the first week, I helped them brainstorm the topics of interest. Then I guided the immigrant mothers to choose a topic in which they were most interested. In the second and third week, I asked them to design several interview questions and interview one classmate after the meeting. The interviews were audio-recorded. In the fourth week, I provided transcripts of the audio-recorded interview data to the mothers and asked them to discuss their understanding of the transcripts. In the last week, I facilitated the mothers to reflect on their experience.

I organically designed PAR as part of my research project to investigate Chinese immigrant mothers' learning in Canada because it provided an alternative approach to explore immigrant mothers' knowledge, experience, ways of knowing, and learning. Although most of the time PAR is used to collaborate with community members helping to promote social equality, my research collaboration with Chinese immigrant mothers focused on exploring how people from the margins produce knowledge and learn in cross-cultural contexts. One of my goals was to help the researched express their voice and to help researchers reflect on the process of research and knowledge production. This PAR challenged the traditional research process and affected the results on three layers: (1) designing research questions, (2) doing interviews, and (3) reflecting. First, this PAR let the participants decide what research questions to ask. Different from traditional research designed by professionals, this research focused on participants' interests and explored the issues that they wanted to raise, which could be the issues that they found to be the most significant in their lives. Second, this PAR process challenged the traditional ways of conducting qualitative research by using dialogues or interviews between the researchers and the researched. This experimental PAR used the researched to interview each other.

To some extent, this reduced the chances for researchers to guide the interview questions or directions. Third, this PAR challenged a “researcher-oriented” research process. As a researcher, my facilitation of the participants’ research helped them better understand the research purpose, questions, and process, which in turn helped the researcher to reflect on the role of researcher and the relationship between researcher and researched.

Although the immigrant mothers undertook these activities and discussed their understanding and thoughts with us (the researchers), their ideas were eventually written up by the researcher (the Ph.D. candidate) within an institution (the university) and mediated by external conditions such as funding and neo-liberal policies. Unequal power relations were produced at different levels: between individuals, institutions, and a larger global context. I was fascinated by the literature and theories of PAR, but also found a gap between theory and practice in conducting PAR in adult education research. I address this gap because I realize a lack of consciousness in the hierarchical social and power relations being reproduced on a daily basis.

While most adult educators or participatory action researchers use and apply the commitment of empowering the marginalized, they may fail to pay equal attention to the actual practice of using the PAR methodology in adult education research. Here, I use a Marxist-feminist theoretical framework to discuss if PAR could empower adult participants. Marxist-feminist theory is a theoretical framework deeply rooted in Marx’s theory of dialectical historical materialism. With this framework, I understand the human world through social relations and its dialectics (e.g., Bannerji, 2005, 2011; Smith, 1990, 2005). Marxist-feminist scholars have argued that in order to understand our social world, people need to understand language, knowledge, and theories, as well as the realm of reality (Allman, 2007; Carpenter & Mojab, 2011; Smith, 1990). Our social world has been organized by different social relations, such as race, gender, and class relations that are deeply embedded in the conceptual world and people’s daily lives. Dialectics, on the other hand, as a thinking method, helps us to pass the “real concrete” to “the thought concrete” through the process of abstraction (Ollman, 2003, p. 60). In this sense, the abstraction means the intellectual activity of “breaking this whole down into the mental units with which we think about it” (Ollman, 2003, p. 60). The process of abstracting empowerment has led to a problematic lack of reflecting on and challenging the internal power relations within the PAR. In other words, the dynamic and unequal social relations are deeply embedded inside the research methodology. Based on the understanding of abstraction, the research itself is socially organized by individuals, the institutions, and different actors.

While conducting PAR, I benefited from its epistemological approach of combining theories of social justice and activism for social change. I reflected on the ideological practice of empowerment and tried to challenge the institutional power behind the practice of PAR. Empowerment is problematic. While using this notion, there is an assumption that Party A could empower Party B, which means that Party A might be from the privileged group with more power. Many times, the privileged group takes empowerment as a way of securing their identities from the group that needs to be empowered.

As a Chinese immigrant mother myself, I positioned myself as not only the researcher, but also the researched. While I find that there is an unequal relationship between the researcher and researched, I was trying to balance this by taking the participants’ standpoint. While taking the researcher’s perspective, I found that most of the mothers “failed” to conduct the interview. Only two mothers provided me with the recorded interviews. I use

the word "failed" with quotation marks because most of the mothers had different goals in conducting the PAR. One of their goals was to learn mothering skills from me. Taking the standpoint of the participants, I noticed that most of the mothers did not complete the process for several reasons, including a lack of motivation, not enough guidance and practice in conducting research, and certain constraints in doing research, such as taking care of kids or doing household work. Rather than setting the goal as empowering these mothers, I took the opportunity of conducting this PAR as a journey to hear their voice and reflect on their settlement, learning, and mothering experience.

Using a Marxist-feminist theoretical approach, I critically and dialectically view PAR and the commitment of empowerment within a hierarchical, patriarchal, and imperialist social and institutional framework. Based on my personal experience, I discuss the limitations of PAR in adult education from three aspects: (1) unequal social and power relations, (2) institutionalization, and (3) external conditions from globalized neo-liberalization.

### *Unequal Social and Power Relations*

While much PAR in educational studies focuses on professional education such as engaging with teachers or school leaders to develop a PAR project, PAR is increasingly paying attention to the subaltern who has less power and has been oppressed. As a participatory action researcher working with women of colour, I find that certain social relations, such as race, gender, and class inequalities, are embedded in the relationships between the researchers and the researched. The researched, usually marginalized groups of people, are easily stereotyped and discriminated against by the researchers. Thus, the reproduction of inequality between privileged researchers and marginalized participants becomes an inner flaw of PAR in adult education research.

Research itself contains certain social relations that shape the activities of researching or being researched. For example, in my PAR about Chinese immigrant mothers' parenting style, the mothers were eager to learn from me, perceiving me to be an expert or to know more about Western parenting. During one of our discussions about the "tiger mother," most of the participants thought that it was a "bad" model for a mothering style; they admired the Western-style mothering practice and were eager to learn about "good" mothering models. Wong, a Chinese immigrant mother, told me that her knowledge, experience, and mothering practices were "unprofessional" and that she needed to learn more from the experts in Canada. She asked my opinion on how to best parent children. In other words, she was looking for a correct answer from me. As well, the participants passively did the research among themselves, seeking "more professional" answers and guidance from experts. Although I provided a basic guide for them to follow, including how to conduct interviews and write down their reflections, the immigrant mothers, most of whom had little academic training, found it difficult to follow the research requirements and waited for my help. Eventually, they received the answers and assistance from me, someone whom they believed was the most professional and "the best." We collaborated and finished writing a brief reflection on how we understood the tiger mother. From this experience, I found that the role of researchers/facilitators is controversial. On the one hand, researchers know they have a commitment to empower participants. On the other hand, they are helping the researched to co-produce the knowledge and conduct research under unequal power relations.

Another example came from one of my observations while I participated in another PAR project. My colleagues organized a PAR for a Canadian employment agency, with a purpose of empowering and hiring immigrant workers. While the research team comprised two white males and one white female, they did not realize the unequal racial relations among the researchers and the researched. The researchers did not have a good understanding of why immigrant workers could not find jobs, thinking the reason was that employers don't take responsibility for hiring immigrant workers. With this understanding, they designed the PAR project only working with the employers. They did not work with the immigrant workers, or even talk with them. They treated immigrant workers as the "others" and thought they should work with local employers and/or policy makers to empower them. As a result, they did not really empower immigrant workers; rather, they empowered the employers.

The separation between people's thoughts and actual social activities becomes problematic. Smith (2011) pointed out that the problem of a conceptual separation between consciousness and life is understood as a product of philosophers' practice upon their thoughts and ideas rather than actualities. While organizing the PAR among Chinese immigrant mothers, I found that unequal social and power relations, including race, gender, and class relations, were repeatedly reproduced in the practice of PAR. My experience of doing PAR has reminded me that unequal power and social relations exist not only in the relationship between researchers and the researched, but also in the knowledge and experience possessed by researchers and participants. As a practitioner of PAR, while I have focused on the power relations between the researchers and the researched, I also have found that unequal social relations greatly shape participants' and researchers' activities, ways of conducting the research, identity construction, and knowledge production, and that these, in turn, affect the outcome of the research.

### ***Institutionalization***

Conducting my research as part of a university project, I found institutionalization to be a major challenge. Since adult education research emphasizes the learning process within a social organization, a community, an academy, a workplace, or other related institutions, institutionalization and power from social institutions cannot be ignored. In this section, I discuss how certain institutions, such as universities, settlement organizations, or government institutions, limit PAR in adult education research.

Institutionalization greatly affects the process of conducting PAR through separating what researchers do from what researchers know. Ideas from university experts and academic institutions have considerable impact on a PAR project. Heaney (1993) explored the relationship between an institution and knowledge production, analyzing in particular how to view the university as a place for knowledge production. Heaney noted that the role of the university is "to control, legitimate and produce knowledge" (p. 41), which means adopting mainstream, dominant ideology, research methods, and curricula. The institution, such as the university, controls the entire process of conducting PAR, reviewing ethical relations, applying for funding, writing, and publishing. Researchers need to carefully note the role of the university and how academia prevents recognition of outsider knowledge.

Since I conducted my fieldwork in an immigration settlement organization, my project was also restricted by the organization's rules, policies, and regulations. My agreement with



the organization affected both the outcome and process of participation. The ethics and rules regarding confidentiality applied to the process of doing PAR, and to some extent restricted participants from sharing actual ideas and real experiences. In terms of the policies, the settlement organization did not want me to talk much about issues to do with the immigrants' family relations, interpersonal practices, and other sensitive topics. For example, while we were talking about the physical discipline of children within an immigrant family, most of the immigrant mothers told me that they still used the traditional way of disciplining their children and that they thought it was very effective. While the Chinese immigrant mothers wanted me to keep this aspect confidential, since meting out corporal punishment to children is frowned upon in Canada, they said in the PAR that they believed that the Canadian style of parenting without any punishment was the best.

To summarize, institutionalization not only influences the process, decision making, and control of the project, but also affects the knowledge-production process and control of knowledge. All in all, institutional restrictions need to be of concern to participatory action researchers, especially those working in an institutional setting.

### *External Conditions from Globalized Neo-liberalization*

Conducting PAR among Chinese immigrant mothers as a local project provided me with a unique experience related to the dynamic relations that have emerged between local practice and globalized neo-liberalization. Neo-liberalism was first proposed in the late 1980s as a theory of political economic practices that emphasize the notion of human beings attaining advancement by "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005). Since that time, neo-liberalism, representing global capitalism and the free market, has shaped the global political, economic, and social orders in substantive ways (Ashcroft & Katwyk, 2017; Harvey, 2005).

By taking a Marxist-feminist approach, we can understand neo-liberalism not only from its width—its global and local impact—but also from its depth—its historical effect. Several Marxist scholars (e.g., Clarke, 2006) have built critiques of neo-liberalism. Cahill (2011) understood neo-liberalism as a "historically specific process of state and economic restructuring [that is] socially embedded through three mechanisms: ideological norms, class relations, and institutional rules" (p. 479). Neo-liberalism has been embedded into ideological norms that may be understood as "neo-liberal ideology." Neo-liberal ideology, as the dominant ideology used by the bourgeoisie, interacts with state privatization, marketization, and participation in the global free-trade market. Neo-liberalism not only affects marginalized people in the global free market, but also brings a set of neo-liberal ideologies that require individuals to be self-supporting and to fully participate in the global neo-liberal project. Jordan and Kapoor (2016) argued that forms of participatory and action research have been subject to "this process of 'redefining of knowledge' under the weight of neoliberal thought and practice, which has detached it from its original emancipatory, radical democratic and inclusive impulses" (p. 139). They particularly posited that PAR has been used as a tool for "maximizing the capacity and productivity of the 'value chain' in business and the neoliberal state, which enacts regimes of social regulation for the purposes of control" (p. 140).

I argue that neo-liberalism interacts with PAR from two aspects: knowledge production and resource distribution. From the aspect of knowledge production, the neo-liberal ideologies control and/or reproduce knowledge from the global level to the local level. On the global level, unequal power relations between the West and the East and between the North and the South have great impact on individuals' knowledge production. Both researchers and the researched produce knowledge within a Western-oriented framework. On the local level, participants, as marginalized people, aim to acquire "suitable" knowledge in order to be self-educated or self-supportive and fit into neo-liberal social institutions. For example, to fit into an institutional requirement as a "good immigrant mother," these immigrant mothers "gave up" their previous Chinese traditional idea of a "good mother" and tried to learn the Canadian ways of good mothering. They imagined the Canadian value of good mothering and reproduced the knowledge in the way they thought Canadian mothers would. Under neo-liberal ideology, participants' experience and knowledge are devalued and unrecognized and participants are encouraged to collaborate with the researchers and produce knowledge based on neo-liberal needs and requirements.

Another aspect is on funding and the distribution of research resources. Under the influence of neo-liberal policies, the state resets its goals of redistributing social welfare and providing funding for research. Reduced funding for researching marginalized people greatly affects the time and quality of research. These external conditions create tensions between PAR and state funding. For example, in order to get more funding, many research projects try to direct the participants to certain areas of studies and discussions that the funding committee might be interested in. While many participatory action researchers working with governments, communities, or social organizations are supported, many researchers working with marginalized individuals are still not funded or do not receive any support. There are different restrictions on time, space, and funding for similar PAR.

### Conclusion

This paper explores three limitations of conducting PAR: internal unequal social and power relations, institutional restrictions, and the external conditions of globalized neo-liberalization. It revisits the historical development of PAR and its close relations with adult education. It aims to address the gap between the philosophical development of PAR and its actual practice. My experience of conducting PAR for new immigrant mothers deeply interacts with my understanding of a separation between people's practice and thoughts. I argue that PAR should be understood as a praxis that could be used to mobilize social transformations. Researchers should be aware of gaps between the commitment to empowerment and the actual practices that reproduce unequal social relations.

My reflections are along three dimensions. First, I am concerned about power relations between researchers and participants and believe it is difficult for researchers and participants to balance these power relations. While I worked with the Chinese immigrant mothers and was treated as an expert, I realized an invisible power relation between us. I suggest that researchers take the participants' standpoint and become more aware of power relations while conducting research. Second, conducting PAR with adult learners might be understood in terms of structural, institutional limitations or deep-rooted academic cultural issues. While working with the mothers in the settlement organization, I found that the knowledge-production process throughout the PAR was deeply impacted by

institutions, including universities, settlement organizations, and government institutions. Finally, neo-liberalism, as an ideology, interacts with PAR from two aspects: knowledge production and resource distribution. Under neo-liberal ideology, the devaluation of participants' knowledge and the decrease in funding and support resources shape the process of conducting PAR in communities, workplaces, and academia.

By taking a Marxist-feminist approach, participatory action researchers and adult educators could close the gap between the philosophical principles of PAR and the actual practice of doing PAR. I view participatory action researchers and participants as agents for social change and suggest they remain aware of these issues while conducting PAR. In this paper, I have raised issues of unequal social and power relations among individuals, institutions, and the larger global and neo-liberal contexts, suggesting that participatory action researchers become more conscious of these issues and practise their social activism in transformative ways.

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