

Together we practice... strong objectivity. That is,  
we build initially fragile and increasingly sturdy contact  
zones where diverse knowledges dialogue.  
Michelle Fine

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: TOWARDS A MORE FRUITFUL KNOWLEDGE

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# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: TOWARDS A MORE FRUITFUL KNOWLEDGE

Tom Wakeford and Javier Sanchez Rodriguez



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## CONNECTED COMMUNITIES Foundation Series

Today we are increasingly seeing calls for universities to collaborate with communities in designing and conducting research. While such calls are to be welcomed they tend to suffer from a historical blind-spot that ignores the fact that research collaboration – partnerships, participation (call it what you will) – is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.

This series of reviews developed as part of the AHRC’s Connected Communities Programme, sets out to make visible some of these traditions of collaborative research. In doing so, the series aims to:

- help those who are new to the field to understand the huge wealth of history and resources that they might draw upon when beginning their own research collaborations;
- help those who seek to fund and promote collaborative research to understand the philosophical and political underpinnings of different traditions; and
- support those working in these traditions to identify points of commonality and difference in their methods and philosophies as a basis for strengthening the practice of collaborative research as a whole.

▼  
*Research collaboration is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.*  
▲

The eight reviews in the series were developed to provide eight very different ‘takes’ on the histories of collaborative research practices in the arts, humanities and social sciences. They do not pretend to be exhaustive, but to provide a personal perspective from the authors on the traditions that they are working within. As we worked together as a group to develop these, however, a number of commonalities emerged:

1. A critique of the mission-creep of scientific knowledge practices into the social sciences and humanities, and of the claims to produce universally valid forms of knowledge from specific limited institutional, cultural and social positions.
2. A commitment to creating research practices that enable diverse experiences of life and diverse knowledge traditions to be voiced and heard.
3. A resistance to seeing research methods as simply a technocratic matter; recognising instead that choices about how, where and with whom knowledge is created presuppose particular theories of reality, of power and of knowledge.
4. A commitment to grapple with questions of power, expertise and quality and to resist the idea that ‘anything goes’ in collaborative research and practice. There are better and worse ways of developing participation in research practice, there are conditions and constraints that make collaboration at times unethical.

At the same time, a set of names and events recur throughout the reviews: John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway appear as theorists and practitioners who provide powerful philosophical resources for thinking with. Critical incidents and moments reappear across the reviews: the rise of anti-colonial movements in the 1950s and 1960s, of second wave feminism and critical race theory in the 1960s and 1970s; of disability rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s; of post-human and ecological analyses in the 1990s and 2000s. Read as a whole, these reviews demonstrate the intellectual coherence and vibrancy of these many-threaded and interwoven histories of engaged scholarship and scholarly social action.

The first of the reviews, by **Kevin Myers** and **Ian Grosvenor**, discusses the long tradition of ‘history from below’ as a collaborative enterprise between researchers, archivists, curators, teachers, enthusiasts, local historians, archaeologists and researchers. They discuss the emergence of the ‘professional historian’ alongside the rise of the nation state, and the way in which this idea was challenged and deepened by the emergence of activist histories in the mid-20th century. They investigate the precedents set by the rise of groups such as the History Workshop movement and trace their legacies through a set of case studies that explore feminist histories of Birmingham, disabled people’s histories of the First World War and the critique of white histories of conflict emerging from the work of black historians and communities.

Two of the reviews explore currents within participatory and critical research traditions. Niamh Moore explores these traditions through the lens of feminist philosophies and methodologies, while Tom Wakeford and Javier Sanchez Rodriguez explore the history of participatory action research (PAR) and its ties to social movements outside the academy.

**Niamh Moore's** review highlights the strategic contributions made to participatory research through the traditions of feminist and indigenous methodologies. Drawing on Donna Haraway's metaphor of the cat's cradle, Moore explores the way that these different traditions have learned from each other, fed into each other and been in (productive) tensions over the years. Importantly, she makes visible the common threads of these traditions, including a concern with questions of power, matters of voice, agency and empowerment and reflexivity. She identifies examples that include: popular epidemiology and women's health; the controversies and emerging insights arising from the publication of the book 'I Rigoberta Menchú' (a collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan activist and Peace Prize winner and anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray); and the online Mukurtu platform for sharing and curating community stories.

**Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez's** review is written from the position of individuals who situate themselves as both activists and academics. From a perspective both inside and outside the academy, they make visible the traditions of participatory action research that have evolved in social movements and their interaction with academic knowledge. They explain how PAR emerged as a practice that seeks to intervene and act on the world through disrupting assumptions about who has knowledge, and by building intercultural dialogue between those whose interests have historically been marginalised and those experts and institutions in dominant positions. They discuss the contributions of Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, as well as the emergence within universities of centres for Action Research and indigenist approaches to research before exploring recent examples of PAR from the Highlander Folk School in the US, to the Cumbrian Hill Farmers post Chernobyl, to questions of Food Sovereignty in India (amongst others).

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*Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge.*

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Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge. Such a turn, however, can often overlook the distinctive and sustained tradition within contemporary arts of reflecting upon the question of how publics can come to participate in arts practices. Our series therefore includes two reflections on this question from different perspectives:

First, **Anne Douglas'** review offers a 'poetics of participation in contemporary arts', locating the turn to participation in contemporary arts within a wider history of 20th and 21st century arts and politics. She highlights the huge range of work by artists and arts co-operatives who are seeking to make work through participatory forms, and the deep scholarly tensions and debates that surround these practices. She explores through this rich history the debates over whether participation has become instrumentalised; whether the art/life divide should be preserved or eroded; the links between participatory aesthetics and cybernetic ethics; and the capacity for participation to challenge alienation and neoliberalism. Recognising arts practice as itself a form of research and inquiry into the world, she concludes with a set of powerful reflections on the role of the freedom to improvise and the importance of participation as a moment of care for and empathy with the other.

Second, **Steve Pool**, community artist and academic, reflects on the related but different traditions of community arts as they might relate to social science research. He considers what researchers in the social sciences might need to know and understand about artistic traditions if they desire to mobilise arts practice within the social sciences. He discusses the increasing democratisation of tools for making, the potential for them to open up artistic practice to publics as well as the importance of recognising that such practices are part of wider traditions and philosophies about the value and purpose of art. In particular, he discusses the tension between the idea of artistic autonomy – art for art's sake – and artistic democracy – the democratic creativity of all individuals. He foregrounds the way in which the community arts movement was also allied to a wider politics that moved towards cultural democracy and explores the contemporary practice of artists working in and with social science through examples such as Nicola Atkinson's 'Odd Numbers' and the Community Arts Zone's 'Being Cindy Sherman'.

More recent traditions of collaborative research characterise our final three reviews which take on, respectively, the way that design theory and practice are playing an important role in reshaping society, products and services; the emergence of new technologies to facilitate new forms of collaboration; and the increasingly urgent injunction to develop research approaches that enable collaboration with the 'more-than-human' others with whom we share the planet.

**Theodore Zamenopoulos** and **Katerina Alexiou** discuss the field of co-design and its underpinning theories and methods. They argue that Design as a process is always concerned with addressing a challenge or opportunity to create a better future reality, and explore how co-design has evolved as a process of ensuring that those with the life experiences, expertise and knowledge are actively involved in these making new tools, products and services. They observe how the participatory turn in this field has been concerned with both changing the objects of design – whether this is services or objects – *and* with the changing processes of designing itself. They highlight four major traditions and their distinctive approaches, before exploring the politics and practices of co-design through case studies of work.

**Chiara Bonacchi** explores how the internet is enabling new forms of collaborative knowledge production at a massive scale. She locates this discussion in the traditions of citizen science and public humanities, and examines how these have been reshaped through the development of hacker communities, open innovation and crowd-sourcing. In this process, she discusses the new exclusions and opportunities that are emerging through the development of projects that mobilise mass contribution. She examines the cases of MicroPasts and TrowelBlazers that demonstrate how these methods are being used in the humanities. In particular, she explores the ethical questions that emerge in these online collaborative spaces and the need for a values-based approach to their design.

**Tehseen Noorani** and **Julian Brigstocke** conclude the series with an exploration of the practice and philosophy of ‘more-than-human research’ which seeks to build collaborative research with non-human/more-than-human others. They discuss its philosophical foundations in pragmatism, ecofeminism and indigenous knowledge traditions and identify some of the theoretical and practical challenges that are raised when researchers from humanist traditions begin to explore how to ‘give voice’ to non-human others. In the review, they consider how researchers might expand their ‘repertoires of listening’ and address the ethical challenges of such research. To ground their analysis, they discuss the work of the Listening to Voices Project as well as accounts of researcher-animal partnerships and projects that draw on Mayan cosmology as a means of working with sustainable forestry in Guatemala.

This collection of reviews is far from exhaustive. There are other histories of collaborative research that are under-written here – there is much more to be said (as we discuss elsewhere) on the relationship between race and the academic production of knowledge. Each of these accounts is also personal, navigating a distinctive voiced route through the particular history they are narrating.

Despite this, at a time when politics is polarising into a binary choice between ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘populism’, these reviews show, collectively, that another way is possible. They demonstrate that sustained collaborative research partnerships between publics, community researchers, civil society, universities and artists are not only possible, but that they can and do produce knowledge, experiences and insights that are both intellectually robust and socially powerful.

**Professor Keri Facer**  
**Dr Katherine Dunleavy**

Joint Editors: Connected Communities Foundation Series

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Tom Wakeford

Tom Wakeford is an action researcher and participatory worker from North West England. He has attempted to make use of his privilege as a white middle class man with a science doctorate and 30 years experience of working within neoliberal universities to co-create spaces for voice for those whose knowledge has been marginalised. He acknowledges his debt to those individuals and organisations from oppressed communities, particularly in the UK and India, with whom he has worked towards this shared objective. Originally trained as a biologist at Cambridge and York universities, he is the author and co-editor of articles and books on issues ranging across the sciences and humanities, including *Everyday Experts* (2017), *Empowered Participation* (2008), *Liaisons of Life* (2001) and *Science for the Earth* (1995). He is also a member of the editorial advisory boards of two journals *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice* and *Action Research*. He currently works for a small, international civil society organisation, ETC Group (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration), is an Associate Member of the Centre for Global Knowledge Studies, University of Cambridge and a Fellow of the Linnean Society.

### Javier Sanchez Rodriguez

Javier Sanchez Rodriguez was born in South Central Colombia in a peasant family. He grew up amidst peasant communities in rural and urban areas during the civil war, only having a single year of schooling until the age of 12. He is now a political activist and participatory action researcher. He studied theatre, dance, music and anthropology in London where he lived for 12 years. Co-founder of CAISMALOKA – Social Action and Research Centre Maloka in rural south Colombia. Javier is also part of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing (ISBO) which is active in Jamaica and Colombia. He is one of the directors of Solidarity Hull CIC, an organisation combating racist stereotypes and actively supporting young adults from refugee and migrant backgrounds to create a place of belonging, friendship and action to bring about social change in the North East of England. He is also co-founder of Braich Goch-Red Arm CIC in Mid Wales, a critical learning centre. Javier uses popular and critical pedagogy methods and philosophies in his work, including theatre, dance, music and participatory film making. He was part of the editorial collective that produced *People's Knowledge and Participatory Action Research: Escaping the White Walled Labyrinth* (2016).



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Everyone's view of the world is influenced by their background. Following this logic, we should briefly give ours. TW grew up under the influence of action researchers and scholar-activists in the North West of England. He studied natural sciences up to doctoral level at UK and US universities, but was always interested in issues of power and voice in the production and use of knowledge. He began to challenge scientism as a student (Wakeford 1995). In the mid-1990s he started learning about participatory action research (PAR) by doing it. JSR was born in South Central Colombia in a peasant family. He took an anthropology degree at a university in the UK and spent many years working as a political activist and PAR practitioner in the UK and Colombia. He has used popular and critical pedagogy methods and philosophies in his work, including theatre, dance, music and participatory film making (Sanchez Rodriguez and Delapava 2017). Both TW and JSR have been co-performative witnesses in many participatory approaches to research, particularly those initiated by groups outside professional research institutions. We dedicate this review to our beloved inspiration, Ros Norton, co-originator of RefugeeYouth (see Section 6.6 below) and pioneer of PAR, who tragically died while we were in the process of writing it.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**Our review takes as its starting point the history of how hierarchies of knowledge arose in parallel with the rise of the modern research university. The institutionalisation of research took place as an integral part of the colonisation of peoples around the world by European powers. Two centuries of colonial dominance imposed a new world order in relation to knowledge. It systematically denied contributions from those who were not members of the European professional elites. Over the centuries, the hegemony of a single, narrow approach to the production of what constitutes valid knowledge has benefited some – but marginalised and excluded many, many more. The process has also been to the detriment of humanity's overall knowledge base.**

The still-dominant model of knowledge creation today has its roots in 17th century Europe, as wealthy 'gentlemen' founded *institutions*, notably the Royal Society in London, dedicated to the study of what was then called 'natural philosophy'. The basic approach, crafted in a very specific social and historical context, has come to be known as 'the scientific method'. Viewed by numerous mainstream thinkers as the only route to reliable knowledge, it has often been accorded an overweening power to trump any deviation from its formulaic strictures.

The limitations of this prescriptive approach are increasingly recognised,<sup>1</sup> yet the uncritical application of scientific or quasi-scientific methods to inappropriate fields of study – sometimes referred to as '*scientism*' – is still evident within the academy and beyond.<sup>2</sup> It is the widespread belief in, and misuse of, methods of investigation that were originally designed for the study of phenomena of the physical universe that sustains the resistance to the adoption of participatory approaches by many of those working in research institutions today.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a set of approaches that has emerged from people who are in, or who are working in close collaboration with, communities experiencing oppression.<sup>3</sup> In PAR, as with *indigenist* approaches, people who had previously been marginalised are able to designate the focus of the participatory and dialogue processes themselves.<sup>4</sup> Its premise, to be agreed by everyone involved, is that no one group knows everything.

PAR has the potential to act as a counterweight to the current spread of 'fake news', election-meddling and the promotion of populist 'alternative facts', such as those relating to climate change, immigration and the efficacy of childhood vaccinations that have gained currency since the mid-2010s. Far from saying 'anything goes', PAR calls for research to become more rigorous by eliminating potential blind spots in the perspectives of both professionals and everyday experts.<sup>5</sup> The slogan 'no research about us without us is for us' was popularised by social movements composed of people living with HIV (see Section 6.3).

<sup>1</sup> Midgley 1992, 2014; Pigliucci 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Sorell 1991; Riemen 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Hall and Kidd 1978; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Fals Borda 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Smith 2007.

<sup>5</sup> People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2017.

More recently, the 'right to research' for social movements has been promoted by influential figures such as Arjun Appadurai.<sup>6</sup>

PAR has thus emerged from many traditions in several different languages over many years.<sup>7</sup> Although it has been academics who have published the most widely cited PAR guidelines and principles, most of those who undertake PAR at the **grassroots** prefer to base their practice on rules-of-thumb developed by other members of social movements through lived experience. It is often transmitted peer-to-peer and through other forms of informal and solidarity-based learning, rather than through written texts. Even if they accept that they need not be seen as universally applicable, some activists have resisted establishing a fixed set of key principles for PAR. In this spirit, the following six features of PAR that we introduce here to help orientate the reader are key for many, but not all, of those who attempt it:

1. PAR attempts to contribute to an improvement of the human condition through repeated cycles of collective action and reflection, with the members of the collective all working on an equal footing.
2. PAR raises two related questions: 'Who has relevant knowledge?', and 'Who should have the power?'
3. PAR answers these questions by challenging assumptions of academic autonomy (i.e. that professional researchers know best and therefore should be in charge).
4. PAR demands that research institutions should decide the agenda of their research programmes in collaboration with others outside the institutions who have relevant knowledge and may be affected by its outcome.
5. PAR aims to support intercultural dialogue between those whose knowledge and interests have historically been marginalised, and treated solely as objects of research, and those experts and institutions in dominant positions.
6. PAR encourages professional researchers to abandon the myth of neutrality and become more fully involved in struggles related to people who are experiencing oppression, thereby putting themselves economically, socially and potentially physically at risk.

In this review, we give examples of key figures in the history of resistance to scientism and of pioneering instances of PAR within academia and beyond. These approaches, based on dialogue among people with widely differing perspectives, have already demonstrated their potential to transform the process by which knowledge is generated and understood, thereby contributing to struggles for greater social justice and transformations towards environmental sustainability. The following section examines the rise of the dominant model in scientific research and its critique. Section 3 is an historical survey of participatory and action research approaches. Participatory approaches in practice are reviewed in Section 4. The challenge to academia represented by PAR along with some practical examples of PAR and other participatory approaches, form the next two sections. Finally, Sections 7 and 8 look at emerging themes and provides advice for those wishing to build participatory approaches in solidarity with wider social movements.

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<sup>6</sup> Appadurai 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005; Hall 2005, Zeller-Berkman 2014.

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## 2. THE RISE OF THE DOMINANT MODEL IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND ITS CRITIQUE

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**The dominant model of research within the modern university arose in the wake of institutional developments in various European nations.<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest was the founding of the Royal Society in London, which was established under the patronage of King Charles II in 1662. It began as a club of aristocratic English gentlemen interested in 'natural philosophy'. The founders of the Royal Society recruited other elite men who supported a new experimental philosophy as 'Fellows'. The principles of this approach had been outlined by the politician and philosopher Francis Bacon. His influential 1627 book *New Atlantis* proposed the creation of a new class of bureaucrats that would 'interpret nature' and create new knowledge in the service of the interests of the Crown – helping to build the technical expertise behind the nascent British empire.**

Within a century, the Royal Society had secured its place as the key institution equipped to combine knowledge and power in Britain. Its Fellows also developed an elaborate, subtle and effective culture for performing experiments. Historian Stephen Shapin describes how the Society made and then formalised a distinction between technical knowledge of an expert elite and the common-sense know-how of peasants and artisans, who were not seen as creditworthy witnesses in the creation of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Physician and Royal Society pioneer Sir Thomas Browne commented on the 'erroneous disposition of the people'; the ignorance and subjugated status of artisans made them readily deceived by 'fortune-tellers, jugglers and geomancers'.<sup>10</sup>

The Royal Society's motto *nullus in verba* (trans: 'nothing (proved) by words') summed up a scepticism towards what was merely written or spoken. The Society distrusted theories that could not be demonstrated repeatedly in front of an educated audience in a quiet and orderly space. It was an innovative and fruitful approach to discovering new natural phenomena.<sup>11</sup> However, over the following centuries the Royal Society, along with learned societies established elsewhere in Britain, in other European nations and in their colonies, systematically marginalised other systems of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Reliable knowledge was to be generated through the habits, practices and disciplines institutionalized in organisations such as the Royal Society and the burgeoning research universities. Disciplines gradually arose in this context as a system for managing distinct sciences and the people who worked within those fields.

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<sup>8</sup> Dussel 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Shapin 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Shapin 1996: 88.

<sup>11</sup> Schaffer and Shapin 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Dussel 2013; Mitchell 2002; People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2017.



The rise of European colonial powers, which Dussel calls ‘the empires of the center’, was accompanied by an increase in influence among its scientific academies, which secured financial and political support for their universalising knowledge systems. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the university became the home of a professionalised scientific community, and the institution on which the authority of knowledge depended. Chad Wellmon suggests that ‘the university came to stand in for a new ethics of knowledge, a new way of organizing and cultivating the desire to know’.<sup>13</sup>

Within this context, the ‘scientific method’ became formalised as a process of incrementally generating ever more reliable knowledge, through the testing of falsifiable hypotheses in intentionally-constructed ‘experiments’. To isolate phenomena and limit the variables in any given experiment, the experimental conditions are strictly defined and inevitably radically simplified, compared to the complexity of the real world. Furthermore, the standpoint of the independent researcher is conventionally said to be ‘objective’ and shielded from error-producing ‘bias’. Moreover, knowledge production is framed as ‘top down’ in a one-way process in which researchers disseminate their expertise to an inactive, compliant public.

This classical picture of the scientific method presents the subject of research as a passive object and an object in itself, isolated and defined apart from social context and relationships. The impossibility of such Olympian ‘objectivity’ and its detached subject matter has been comprehensively critiqued, not least by ‘standpoint’ theorists such as Sandra Harding, who coined the useful term ‘**strong objectivity**’ (2007). In addition, the work of Donna Haraway (1988), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013), Makere Stewart-Harawira (2013) and many other critics has shown that the conditions under which scientific knowledges are constructed and validated can no longer be regarded as unproblematic.

A knowledge-generating method that arose to investigate phenomena of the physical world and is grounded in mechanistic metaphors is now widely acknowledged to be inappropriate beyond them. Such ‘scientism’ – the misapplication of the conventional scientific method, especially in the biological, social and behavioural sciences and the humanities – has been widely challenged by philosophers such as Tom Sorell (1991) and Mary Midgley (2014), and researchers on **decolonising** knowledge such as Akwasi Asabere-Ameyaw, George J. Sefa Dei and Kolawole Raheem.<sup>14</sup>

The racial bias in Enlightenment science was exposed by how scientists studied people of colour. The pioneer of ethnography in the United States, Samuel George Morton, based his theories on studies of what became known as ‘the American Golgotha’ the world’s largest collection of human skulls, which was at Philadelphia’s Academy of Natural Sciences. Using these skulls, many of which were from slaves, Morton constructed an ‘objective’ tool to distinguish the races using a technique he called mathematical comparative anatomy.

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<sup>13</sup> Wellmon 2015.

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<sup>14</sup> Asabere-Ameyaw et al. 2012.

▼  
**A knowledge-generating method that arose to investigate phenomena of the physical world and is grounded in mechanistic metaphors is now widely acknowledged to be inappropriate beyond them.**  
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Morton’s findings, published in 1839 as *Crania Americana*, was based on the measurements of the ‘mean internal capacity’ of less than one hundred skulls in cubic inches. Finding that the skulls from the ‘Caucasian Race’ measured out the largest in that tiny sample, Morton concluded that white people had ‘the highest intellectual endowments of all the races’. His conclusion relied on the untested, and it turns out wholly incorrect, assumption that the bigger the skull, the bigger the intellect of the person.<sup>15</sup> Morton’s work contributed to what we now recognise as the pseudo-science of phrenology, which purported to determine character, personality traits, and criminality on the basis of the shape of the head and thus of the skull. White supremacist political activists, and even one notable Nobel Prize-winning follower of scientism, continue to draw on cultural assumptions that there is rational basis for racist ideologies.<sup>16</sup>

A related critique of conventional approaches to research emerged in the 1970s. This points to their Orientalism – their exaggeration of difference, the presumption of Western superiority, and the application of clichéd analytical models for perceiving the Oriental world. Edward Said’s classic book (1978), points to Orientalism as the source of the inaccurate cultural representations that form the foundations of Western thought and perception of the non-Western world, specifically in relation to the Middle East region. Said, a Palestinian, saw research as a ‘corporate institution’ that made statements about the ‘other’ (whether they be Middle East or other **indigenous** peoples), ‘authorising views’ of them, ‘describing, teaching about, settling and ruling over’ people like him. For Smith, it is this ‘corporate institution’ of research, as well as the epistemological foundations from which it springs, that needs to be decolonised.<sup>17</sup>

Participatory critiques of scientism arose in parallel with rising public concern about the role of the Western military-industrial complex, as highlighted in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and by popular opposition to the nuclear industry and to the secret use of toxic chemical agents during the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup> Science and its related technologies became the focus of public debate and criticism, prompting various responses from scientific elites.

Widespread institutional anxieties relating to a perceived decline in public support for scientific research in the 1980s were epitomised by the UK’s Royal Society report on public understanding of science. In this, the decline in public support for science was not seen as resulting from problems with the processes of production of scientific knowledge, but rather as a result of deep-seated public ignorance and misunderstanding of science.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kendi 2016: 179-180.

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<sup>16</sup> Cressey 2007.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith 2007: 118.

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<sup>18</sup> Carson 1962; Winner 1986; Sclove 1995.

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<sup>19</sup> Royal Society 1985.



**Figure 1**  
 "Dinner is served, thanks to engineers."  
 London Underground advertisement by  
 the Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1996.

The Royal Society report was a call for action, which generated almost two decades of information and public relations campaigns. The aim of the many organisations who backed these initiatives was to 'educate' the public about the benefits of contemporary scientific and technological developments. The advertisement in *Figure 1* is typical, constructing its viewer as a passive beneficiary of the advances in science and engineering, for which they should be grateful. Ignoring the labour of the farmers who reared the poultry and grew the vegetables, not to mention the person shopping and cooking, the advert presents the engineer behind devices of Western domestic convenience as the sole figure who, almost like a deity, must be thanked.

Notably, the Royal Society 1985 report advocated a role for social science research in this area. As a response, the Science Policy Support Group of the UK government's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded a research programme in the 'public understanding of science'. The funding was premised on the assumption that the core problem was the public's ignorance of science. According to this view the public's uptake of 'false' beliefs could undermine support for government funding of scientific research and for government science.

However, the ESRC-funded research revealed a more nuanced picture, with the lacunae in the scientific community's understanding of the limitations of their own practices being the most significant.<sup>20</sup>

In the decades since the Royal Society's report, models of participation based on monologue rather than dialogue – often little more than public relations campaigns – have become integral to the corporate and capitalist-government nexus as it seeks to introduce new technologies (such as GM crops or fracking) in the face of public scepticism and often opposition.<sup>21</sup> Yet such approaches, which essentially cast non-scientists as passive recipients, observers or consumers of knowledge produced by others, continue to limit the potential power and range of humanity's knowledge and understanding. They have also fostered a public backlash, such as the response to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or 'mad cow disease'), the MMR vaccination scandal and the rapid growth of alternative medicine.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>  
 Irwin and Wynne 1996.

<sup>21</sup>  
 Nelkin 1997; Horst et al. 2017.

<sup>22</sup>  
 Van Zwanenburg and Millstone 2005;  
 Dixon and Clarke 2013; Offit 2013.

## 2.1 Blind spots in conventional research

Jon Wagner highlights two different kinds of ignorance: *blank spots* in existing knowledge – matters scholars know they don't understand – and *blind spots*, that keep scholars from seeing patterns in the world that they have not yet noticed.<sup>23</sup> While natural scientists are often able to identify *blank spots*, history is replete with examples where those without formal research training have revealed patterns that the scientists had not noticed. As the following sections demonstrate, scientists' existing theories, methods and perspectives have created *blind spots* that have prevented them from seeing these patterns.

Historical evidence has established that knowledge developed solely by professional researchers without reference to those outside the institutional purview has often been damaging to the common good.<sup>24</sup> Time and again, knowledge systems existing among non-professionals that could have shown up blind spots were marginalised.<sup>25</sup> People and their systems of knowledge have been oppressed at the hands of European colonists and their descendants in a process that has been called 'epistemicide'.<sup>26</sup> In response, Indian anthropologist Shiv Visvanathan (1997, 2009) has called for '*cognitive justice*', a process whereby societies attempt to recover the systems of knowledge that have been lost or degraded by scientism and its violent cousin, colonialism. Visvanathan is thus calling for colonised peoples to have the right to use any alternative ways of knowing about themselves and the environment that have managed to survive the assaults of colonisation.

Philosopher Miranda Fricker has characterised the practice of ignoring the expertise that people have gained from life experience as 'epistemic injustice', while arguing for people's rights to learn and to have their existing knowledge recognised.<sup>27</sup> She also makes a useful distinction between *heuristic injustice* – the denial of opportunities to develop greater knowledge (an inequality also highlighted by Appadurai 2006) and *testimonial injustice*, where expertise derived through life experience, rather than professional training is side-lined. With particular reference to his own discipline of psychology, Thomas Teo has described how *epistemic injustice* often translates into the pathologising of marginalised communities. Academics circulate 'findings' that 'ignore structural conditions, history, and power; and misrepresent (...) outcomes of structural injustice as causes of oppression'.<sup>28</sup> Even projects by socially progressive top-down researchers can reproduce a 'punishing gaze on those who have paid the most severe price for historic and contemporary oppression. These data circulate in ways that falsely confirm deficits and amplify fears that stick to marginalized bodies, justifying the containment and denial of human rights'. Teo has named this all-too-common process 'epistemological violence'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup>  
 Wagner 2010: 32 – 33.

<sup>24</sup>  
 Connor 2005.

<sup>25</sup>  
 Irwin 1995; Smith and Stirling 2017.

<sup>26</sup>  
 Suzuki and Knutson 1992;  
 de Sousa Santos 2015.

<sup>27</sup>  
 Fricker 2007.

<sup>28</sup>  
 Torre et al. 2018: 485.

<sup>29</sup>  
 Teo 2008.

The challenging of epistemic injustice and the promotion of cognitive justice has been a feature of some recent uses of the term 'transdisciplinary', coined by Jean Piaget (1972) and used in contrast to the term *'interdisciplinary'*. Piaget coined the term transdisciplinary to mean going beyond interdisciplinary research, envisaging 'a total system without stable boundaries between the disciplines'. It was broadened a decade later when Basarab Nicolescu proposed that the term should include the meaning 'beyond disciplines'. While interdisciplinary research is any study or group of studies undertaken by scholars from two or more distinct disciplines, transdisciplinary research refers to 'research efforts conducted by investigators from different disciplines working jointly to create new conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and translational innovations that integrate and move beyond discipline-specific approaches to address a common problem'.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than rejecting the disciplines inherited from the past, transdisciplinarity seeks creative ways of bringing about a fertile complementarity between and among them. Its popularity has grown as integrative researchers have struggled to cross the boundary between the natural sciences, which often tend towards scientism, and the humanities, which often privilege the constructivism of the cultural studies paradigm.

In recent years, those commissioning transdisciplinary research, such as the European Commission, have drawn on concepts of participatory democracy in which the perspectives of both those from professionally-trained research backgrounds and those whose expertise comes from their life experience can jointly contribute to research.<sup>31</sup> Indigenous and PAR concepts of transdisciplinarity go further, addressing issues of power inequality between Western scientism and the knowledge that was systematically suppressed during European colonialism.<sup>32</sup>

Citing Foucault, some commentators question whether the term transdisciplinary is anything more than a misguided attempt by those minds that have been colonised by technocratic thinking to continue the dominance of disciplinary thinking and the continued practice of epistemological violence.<sup>33</sup> Others see it as a useful transitional term that makes it possible to discuss radical participatory approaches with those trained in mainstream scientific approaches.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nicolescu 2014.

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<sup>31</sup> European Commission 2017: 17.

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<sup>32</sup> Williams et al. 2012.

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<sup>33</sup> Christie 2006.

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<sup>34</sup> Osborne 2015.

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*Indigenous and PAR concepts of transdisciplinarity address issues of power inequality between Western scientism and the knowledge that was systematically suppressed during European colonialism.*

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### 3. HISTORIES OF PARTICIPATORY AND ACTION RESEARCH APPROACHES

**From the 1960s, participatory approaches to research, particularly PAR, have drawn on the pioneering practices of adult learning developed by social movements in Latin America, the most widely-known member of which was Paulo Freire. Freire's revolutionary shift was from a mode of participation that entirely focused on people's presumed need to gain knowledge – and hence allowing heuristic justice (in Fricker's sense) – to one where the teacher would open themselves to learning from the lived experience of those who were called their students, thereby allowing testimonial justice. Freire and his colleagues also laid the ground for transdisciplinary approaches, before they had been so-named, in the way in which such approaches transform the relationship between the expert and the everyday person.**

Freire's early life shaped his participatory philosophy. Born in Brazil in 1921, he became familiar with poverty and hunger during the Great Depression of the 1930s. When Freire's father died in 1934, his family lost their main source of income. Later, Freire attributed his struggles at school to the economic precariousness of his childhood. The young Paulo's social life changed too, and revolved around playing football with other impoverished children. His approach to education and participatory forms of learning emerged as a practical expression of his sense of solidarity with those who experienced poverty. This experience brought home to him the powerful relationship between social class and knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Qualified as a lawyer, Freire chose instead to work in secondary schools teaching Portuguese to under-privileged children. In 1946, Freire was appointed Director of the Department of Education in the state of Pernambuco. Working primarily among the illiterate poor, Freire began to embrace a non-orthodox form of liberation theology. One legacy of Portuguese colonialism was that the ability to read and write was a requirement for people to be eligible to vote. Realising that only a small minority of the poor were literate, he pioneered what he called 'cultural circles'. These were groups in which non-literate people in both rural areas and the favelas in the cities came together every week to learn not just how to read and write but also about social justice and power.

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<sup>35</sup> Torres 2014.



Freire believed that people could develop the tools to challenge injustice only if they learnt about power alongside how to read and write. This concept of **'critical pedagogy'** presents teaching as something that embodies the values of those who teach. He rejected the idea that knowledge can be neutral. Knowledge, and the technologies to which it often gives rise, always serve the interests of some rather than others. Moreover, issues of social justice and democracy are not considered distinct from acts of teaching and learning. If Brazil's peasants are to force the government to be democratically accountable, they must not only become literate in letters and numbers, but also be literate about the political process and how the government works.

Freire pointed out that the original meaning of the word 'pedagogue' was not 'teacher', but rather the person who accompanies the learner. For Freire, a teacher also had to be a learner. If someone from an urban middle class environment goes into an area where, for example, peasants are making a living through subsistence farming, the city-dweller will have much to learn from the peasants about how they face challenges year after year, generation after generation. For Freire, social transformation had therefore to accompany the process of pedagogy, but this learning had to be through dialogue – a conversation between the peasant and the middle class urbanite through which both could learn.

The shift to testimonial justice that Freire initiated was dependent on practices such as the 'people's circle'. Now widely adopted as a part of participatory approaches, 'people's circles' are based on learning being a social, rather than individual, process. Freire's practice drew on Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual – someone who can become as critical a thinker as a professor, yet has not passed through the elite institutions traditionally associated with intellectuals. Here he also drew on the ideas of the Czech philosopher Karel Kosik, who, anticipating Hannah Arendt, pointed out how easy it was for anyone to pass through everyday life without thinking critically about what is happening.<sup>36</sup> Freire subsequently developed the concept of **'conscientisation'** – consciousness that has the power to transform reality.

Freire was deeply influenced by African liberation thinkers, such as the leader of the anti-colonial struggle in Guinea, Amilcar Cabral. He took from Cabral the idea that, even though the days of colonialism were coming to an end, the colonisation of the mind continued. For Freire, conscientisation, or detoxification, was also about re-Africanization.<sup>37</sup>

Colombian polymath Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008) invented the term PAR and lived long enough to see the approach adopted by social movements across the world over the past four decades. His early work alongside many other anti-colonial thinkers such as Father Camilo Torres Restrepo, struggling for justice under a brutal US-backed dictatorship.

A charismatic priest who eventually joined the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN), Restrepo was killed in 1966. Though Fals Borda chose a more peaceful road, establishing the first sociology faculty in Latin America at the National University of Bogotá, Colombia in 1959, he lived according to his belief that it is the duty of a researcher to not just to examine the social reality of the country, but also to work towards remedying the injustices they uncover.

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<sup>36</sup>  
Kosik 2012.

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<sup>37</sup>  
Brookfield 1986: 151.

Equipped with a doctorate in sociology, Fals Borda acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Colombian countryside while working at the ministry of agriculture from 1959 to 1961. Drawing on Freire's work, Fals Borda developed a radical approach to inquiry, which he called 'participatory action research'. His more conventional academic colleagues regarded his contacts with peasant movements as subversive. For many years, he was denied a US visa. He eventually returned to the US with honour in April 1995, delivering a speech in Atlanta, in which he outlined four guidelines for researchers:

- i) Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers.
- ii) Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests, but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them.
- iii) Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organisations.
- iv) Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals.

Despite the political turmoil in the region, the first International Participatory Research Network took place in 1978 in Cartagena – Colombia. The principles drawn up at this event deeply influenced the work of one many PAR practitioners, including the authors of this piece. These principles are:

1. P(A)R involves a whole range of powerless groups of people – the exploited, the poor, the oppressed, the marginal.
2. It involves the full an active participation of the community in the entire research process.
3. The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed and solved by the community.
4. The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvements of the lives of the people themselves. The beneficiaries of the research are the members of the community.
5. The process of participatory research can create a greater awareness in the people of their own resources and mobilize them for self-reliant development.
6. It is a more scientific method of research, in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality.
7. The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research i.e. a militant rather than a detached observant.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>  
Hall and Kidd 1978: 5.



**Figure 2**  
Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Nga Mokopuna,  
a Māori School in Wellington, Aotearoa  
(New Zealand).

These seven principles have been subject to revision and criticism (see Box 3). However, despite their limitations they have served as an important historical reference for the PAR community.<sup>39</sup>

Based in a university business school in Britain, Judi Marshall and Peter Reason took the legacy of PAR in a different direction. The Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at Bath University, founded in 1995, took a more reformist approach by not directly challenging **imperialism** and neocolonialism, as had Freire and Fals-Borda. Within a couple of years, and until it was closed by the university on Reason's retirement in 2011, it was by far the largest university-based centre undertaking participatory and action-orientated research in the UK and among the largest in the world. Participatory and action-based approaches were a focus of publications and many of the Masters and doctoral theses, which they supervised during the centre's 16-year existence. Together with Hilary Bradbury, Reason co-founded and co-edited the *Handbook of Action Research* and the *Action Research* journal. Bradbury continues to edit *Action Research*. Alongside Patricia Maguire, Judi Marshall pioneered feminist critiques of action research, which, until the 1990s, had mainly featured men as the lead researchers.<sup>40</sup>

A network emerging from the *Action Research* journal has supported participatory and action researchers across the world, particularly in Scandinavia, Canada, Turkey and Israel.<sup>41</sup> In the US, pioneer action researchers such as Mary Brydon-Miller, now at University of Louisville, have established similar initiatives.<sup>42</sup> Others who have popularised similar practices in academic circles include Budd Hall, John Heron, Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain and Rajesh Tandon.<sup>43</sup>

Indigenist approaches to research, pioneered by Australian Aborigine scholars such as Lester Rigney, share many aspects of PAR.<sup>44</sup> They are formed around three principles of resistance, political integrity and privileging indigenous voices. 'Like other indigenous researchers', says Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Rigney 'connects research to liberation and to the history of oppression and racism'. Smith puts his definition of research in the context of 'Kaupapa Māori', a Māori term which means any particular plan of action created by Māori to express Māori aspirations, values and principles (Figure 2). A Kaupapa Māori approach to research 'sets out to make a positive difference for the Māori, that incorporates a model of social change or transformation, that privileges Māori knowledge and ways of being, that sees the engagement in theory as well as empirical research as a significant task, and that sets out a framework for organizing, conducting, and evaluating Māori research'.<sup>45</sup>

**39**  
For example, Watterson 2002.

**40**  
See Moore in this series.

**41**  
Bradbury 2017.

**42**  
Bydon-Miller et al. 2011.

**43**  
Kindon et al. 2007; Heron 1996;  
Hall and Tandon 2017.

**44**  
Rigney 1999.

**45**  
Smith 2007: 120.

## 4. PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

Records of participatory approaches to research initiated by disenfranchised communities date from at least the time of W.E.B. Du Bois in the late 19th century and Jane Addams in the early 20th century.<sup>46</sup> Indigenist approaches to research emerged more recently.<sup>47</sup> Both these approaches are usually led by groups outside research institutions and bring together people who embody distinct forms of knowledge. These collectives, often drawn from very different situations, undertake systematic inquiry on issues of social and environmental injustice, albeit 'in a small domain'.<sup>48</sup>

Those using participatory approaches in this context are often inspired by the ideals of PAR. Though most PAR is led by collectives outside universities, most documentation of PAR has historically been produced by academics, with the necessary time and financial support. It is rare to find first-hand accounts published by people at the grassroots with experience of PAR.<sup>49</sup>

Paul Taylor has shown how Freire's work emphasised two distinct but interrelated continua that illustrate how participatory processes work in practice.<sup>50</sup> The first represents the forces in society that determine the scope and content of education. At one end of the continuum, everything is determined by an institution, while at the other the agenda is set by the people – in Freire's terms, the learners. The second continuum represents the spectrum of practice that takes place between a conventional teacher, the holder of knowledge, and an educator who is committed to dialogic learning in which people learn from each other, drawing on their different perspectives and experiences. Figure 3 uses these two continua to illustrate the differences between four different types of research.

A wide range of researchers have published papers or reports that use what they call 'participatory', '**co-produced**' or 'engaged' approaches in each of the four quadrants on Figure 3.

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**Most documentation of PAR has historically been produced by academics, with the necessary time and financial support. It is rare to find first-hand accounts published by people at the grassroots with experience of PAR.**

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**46**  
Torre et al. 2018.

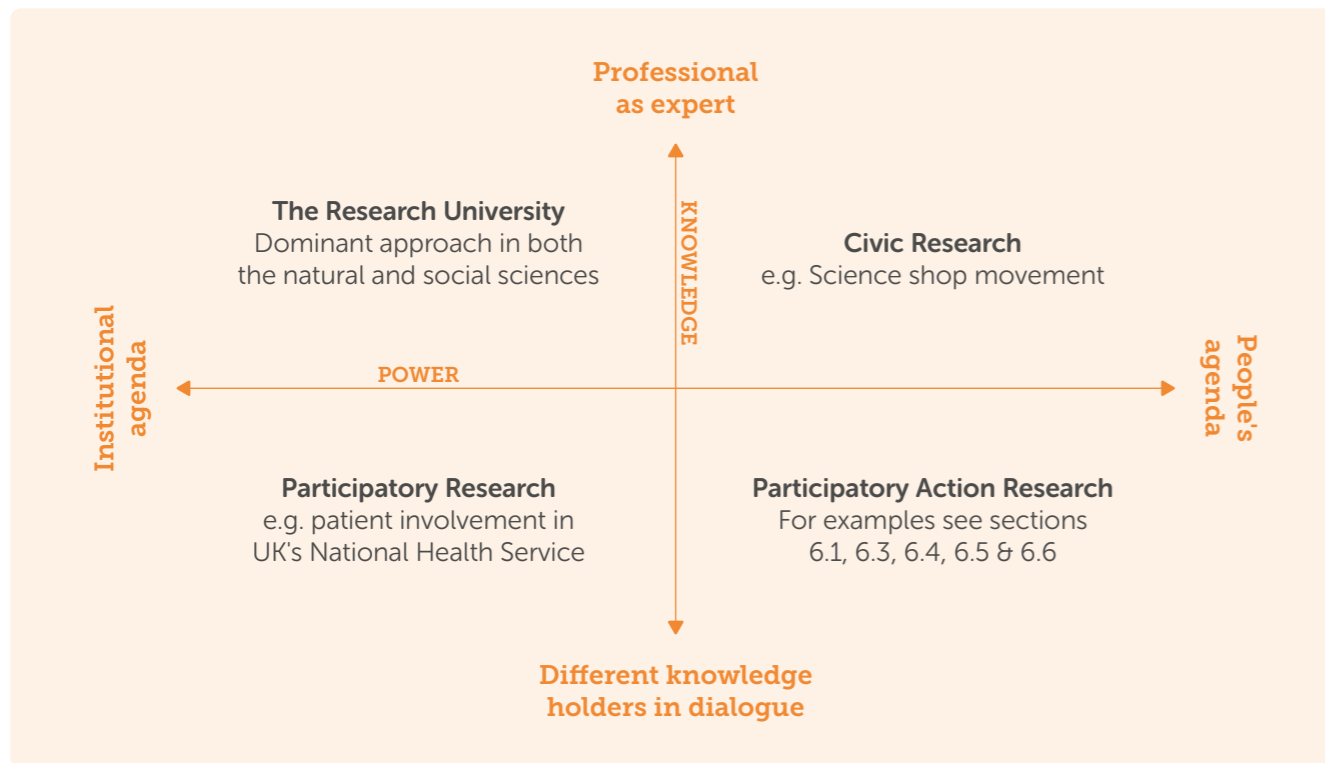
**47**  
Smith 2007.

**48**  
Ibid: 12.

**49**  
Also see, Anonymous 2016;  
Guzman et al. 2016; Clay 2016;  
Sanchez Rodriguez and De La Pava 2016.

**50**  
Taylor 1993.





**Figure 3**  
PAR placed in the context of other approaches to research.

- **Top-left:** The extreme case studies carried out by the archetypal research university in which the professional researcher maintains their position as the sole repository of expertise. The institution or individual researcher(s) set the agenda for the research, but often still claims it is participatory.
- **Bottom-right:** This is true PAR in which knowledge is co-produced by the professional researcher(s) and people with lived experience of the issues, while following an agenda that has, at least in part, been set by these everyday experts, rather than an institution.
- **Bottom-left:** A process of dialogue between different knowledge-holders is dominated by the agenda of the institution.
- **Top-right:** The professionally-trained researcher remains the dominant voice, but they follow an agenda set by those whose expertise comes from their life experience.

The accusation from those of us attempting what we believe to be true PAR and indigenist approaches is that many in the Research University (top-left) are commodifying (or 'stealing' as Steven Jordan puts it) participatory approaches 'for the purposes of supporting and reproducing the social relations of accumulation in their multifarious forms'.<sup>51</sup> It seems we are far from being the only people who have experienced participatory and indigenist approaches being 'appropriated and reconstituted by neoliberal discourses of participation in ways that are antithetical to both its founding principles and traditions'.<sup>52</sup> María Elena Torre fears that 'in times of enforced austerity, budget cuts, and punishing audit cultures, community-based groups who work in collaboration may lose funds to universities that appear to be more 'neutral' places for supporting social research'.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Jordan 2003: 195.

<sup>52</sup> Smith 2007: 126.

<sup>53</sup> Torre et al. 2018.

## 5. PAR AS A CHALLENGE TO ACADEMIA

Practising PAR, and thus applying Freirean principles to research, poses a fundamental challenge to the way most academics have worked for hundreds of years. Anisur Rahman justifies PAR because the 'domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production, but also over the means of knowledge production including, as in the former case, the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge'.<sup>54</sup> More recently Sara Motta (2017) has called for the concept of the 'masses' to be replaced by a paradigm that embraces people in all their diversity rather than targeting an undifferentiated *Lumpenproletariat*, all assumed to belong to a single culture. While Rahman's Marxist critique of the modern research university becomes all the more relevant as universities become commercialised, Motta suggests the very concept of intellectuality, at least as used in Western universities, is based on problematic concepts of what constitutes an intellectual.<sup>55</sup>

In reference to indigenist approaches to research, which we have already discussed as having similar decolonising aims and methods to PAR, L. T. Smith goes further:

Decolonization is political and disruptive even when the strategies employed are pacifist because anything that requires a major change of worldview, that forces a society to confront its past and address it at a structural and institutional level that challenges the systems of power, is indeed political. Indigenous research presents a challenge to the corporate institution of research to change its worldview, to confront its past and make changes... social sciences cannot simply develop grand narratives of the silenced without including the voices and understandings of marginalized and silenced communities.<sup>56</sup>

Like indigenous research, the aims of PAR are thus different from much conventional research. Its practitioners are often activists and disenfranchised peoples who are primarily concerned with learning in the cause of addressing issues of injustice through democratically agreed objectives, rather than in pursuing scholarship in the abstract. Among conventional academics, particularly social researchers, PAR is often taboo because it is seen as undermining the epistemological foundations of academic research. PAR's simultaneous criticism of, but also existence in dialogue with, professional researchers based in traditional research institutions, has led to tensions in the practice of PAR that are only occasionally discussed in the literature.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Rahman 1991: 14.

<sup>55</sup> See also Box 3; Winn and Hall 2017; Stewart-Harawira 2013: 22.

<sup>56</sup> Smith 2007: 121.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Fine 2008, 2017 and Pearson et al. 2016.

**Table 1**  
How different worldviews inform approaches to research. 58

Worldview/ aspect	Physical/ quantitative science	Qualitative/ artistic inquiry	Doing hybrid research inclusively
<b>Goals</b>	Discovering universal truths; scaling up to larger areas or populations; predicting future states of the world; controlling behaviour	Unravelling of accepted truths; construction of personal truths; exploration of the specific; generation of art	Constructing situated knowledges; troubling the taken-for-granted; pragmatic guidance for practitioners
<b>Questions</b>	What does it mean from the researcher's point of view? What is the relationship among factors? What behaviours can be predicted?	How do/can we cope with life? What other ways can we imagine? What is unique about my or another's experience?	How do participants understand their world? How can we co-construct a different world? What are the practical implications of our work?
<b>Methods</b>	Coding and measuring; random sampling; frequencies of behaviours; surveys; structured interviews	Dialogue; performance; introspection; visual arts; storytelling	Discussion groups; grounded theory; participatory action research; collective historical/archival research

Lacking a distinctive academic community intent on demarcating the boundaries of the discipline, PAR practitioners have had the freedom to pursue a wide variety of creative approaches to research and call it 'PAR'. Like many artists and activists, PAR practitioners do not use a single methodology, but rather a set of hybrid practices suited to the specific circumstances in which communities find themselves.<sup>59</sup> These are more likely to draw on ways of viewing the world that are artistic and qualitative rather than physical and quantitative. In *Table 1*, almost all approaches based on PAR would be likely to come under the right-most column – Doing hybrid research *inclusively*.

By using hybrid approaches that are also inclusive of previously excluded voices, PAR is particularly good at highlighting an area of ignorance or blind spots stemming from limitations of a particular research perspective.<sup>60</sup> PAR is the most suitable framework to challenge the epistemologies of ignorance present in prevailing research paradigms, which arose under historical conditions of patriarchy and colonialism.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> From People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016b: 110.

<sup>59</sup> Horton 1976; Kicheloe 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Nind 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Akala 2018; Eddo-Lodge 2017; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Alcott 2010.

PAR is an exploration, a step into the unknown, raising new questions and creating new risks over time. Given its emergent properties and responsiveness to social context and needs, PAR cannot limit discussions and decisions about ethics to the design and proposal phase. PAR practitioners must constantly reassess their norms of ethical conduct and their implications as each project unfolds.<sup>62</sup> Because every application of PAR is specific to its immediate context, there is no single set of guidelines or any set of workshops that can, by themselves, guarantee a PAR practitioner will do the right thing. However, its existence outside the academic mainstream has severely limited the resources available to allow PAR practitioners to critically reflect on their practice.<sup>63</sup>

Rather than simply observing and studying human behaviour, PAR makes sense of the world through collective efforts to transform it. If it is to make a meaningful contribution to addressing oppression, PAR must be a collective enterprise. Its fundamental premise is that individuals gaining knowledge sit within a communal process of greater mutual understanding. For PAR practitioners, there is no 'I' without there being a 'we'.

However, universities have been slow to adopt paradigms involving two-way processes of dialogue, not least as a result of research incentive and reward systems.<sup>64</sup> Such engaged approaches in general, and PAR in particular, do not fit comfortably with values that embrace competition and individualism, which are increasingly dominant in Western academia. Tools designed to measure the achievement of university researchers, such as the UK Research Excellence Framework, which pushes researchers to fit their work within discipline-based units of assessment in order to obtain future funding, risk further marginalising participatory approaches in academia.<sup>65</sup>

For those who are willing to take the risk in engaging in participatory approaches, each social context in which they are used raises a different set of ethical challenges. One issue arising with increasing frequency for PAR practitioners based in institutions arises from their position as outsiders in the communities within which they work. Working with Indigenous peoples, for example, raises a different set of issues to that undertaken with elite settler communities.<sup>66</sup>

Despite a devastatingly negative experience of positivist research in Indigenous communities, Indigenous peoples have not rejected all forms of research. Indigenous people have always been researchers. In the simplest terms, research is observing a phenomenon (problem statement), making a hunch (hypothesis), forming a question (research question), and systematically searching for the answer (methodology). It involves seeking knowledge, learning to hear, to see, to be aware, to use and trust our perceptions, and observing if the observable facts can be repeated.<sup>67</sup> Thus, as Smith argues, the Indigenous critique 'does not write against knowledge or research, but for new ways of knowing and discovering, and new ways to think about research with Indigenous peoples'.<sup>68</sup> Leonie Pihama notes that Indigenous methodology, aligns with critical theory in the act of exposing underlying assumptions that serve to conceal the power relations that exist within society and the ways in which dominant groups construct concepts of 'common sense' and 'facts' to provide *ad hoc* justification for the maintenance of inequalities and the continued oppression of Māori people.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Wakeford 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Guzman et al. 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Genus 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Willis 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Nietschmann 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Lambert 2014: 19–20.

<sup>68</sup> Smith 2012: xiv.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Smith 2012: 187–188.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith has also pointed to a central characteristic of Kaupapa Māori research – its emphasis on being and identifying as Māori and as a Māori researcher. If a non-Māori researcher undertakes a participatory research involving them living in the community, they do it as an ‘outside insider’, in other words from the position of being accepted as a member of the community, but not a member of the inside group. This could be seen as a kind of deception carried out on the part of the researcher. For Māori researchers operating within a Kaupapa Māori framework, the rules of interaction and reciprocity operate within a particularly complex set of interrelationships and rules. By transgressing the norms of social interaction pertaining to reciprocity and trust, albeit for research purposes, the researcher runs the risk of being seen as exploitative of their Indigenous hosts.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s experience of growing up on the Mexico-Texas border has led her to combine Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory to develop the concept of the *mestizaje*, meaning a state of being beyond a binary (‘either-or’) conception. She calls for a ‘new mestiza,’ an individual aware of her conflicting and meshing identities, using these ‘new angles of vision’ to challenge binary thinking. The borderlands to which she refers in her writing are geographical as well as a reference to mixed races, heritages, religions, sexualities, and languages.<sup>70</sup>

Where the clear divide between the professional researcher and the individual or group with whom they are working might be tenable in mainstream traditions of the research university (*Figure 2*), this separation becomes impossible to maintain when researchers are attempting to understand a network, group or struggle of which they themselves are a part.<sup>71</sup>

Using the term *nos-otras* (trans: ‘us-the other’) Anzaldúa points to the value in combining the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives in research, leading to new understandings – giving new meanings at rich intersections of identities, cultures, histories and struggles. Anzaldúa’s work challenges simple depictions of entangled relationships between colonisers and the colonised. According to Torre et al. (2018) ‘Anzaldúa argues that over time, the identities produced in these relationships start to ‘leak’ into each other, creating a hybrid *nos-otras* or ‘we’. This *nos-otras*, ‘builds on hyphens demanding a new theorizing of power that is bidirectional and mutually dependent’, but should not be taken to mean that relationships ‘are balanced free or equal’. The relationships are not static or determined and, as L. T. Smith observes, are built ‘on a shifting ground’.<sup>72</sup>

The use of participatory approaches in these contexts is challenging. There is a tension between revealing too much on the one hand, and stating what is necessary in order to ‘give voice’ to validate the research and thus support the goal of transformation on the other. Any conflict between the requirements of the professional research community (who will validate the knowledge) and the needs of the Māori community cannot be resolved through the simple application of generic ethical guidelines.<sup>73</sup> Negotiating this specific tension of *kaupapa* research requires particular sorts of responses to maintain the primacy of Māori world views and objectives.<sup>74</sup> Similar ethical issues arise if we were to replace the Māori with communities who identify as Scots Gaels, or young people of refugee backgrounds.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Anzaldúa 2009.

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<sup>71</sup> Juris & Khasnabish 2013.

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<sup>72</sup> Smith 2007: 121.

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<sup>73</sup> For example, Banks et al. 2013.

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<sup>74</sup> Smith 2013; Stewart-Harawira 2013.

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<sup>75</sup> MacKinnon 2017; Virdee 2014; Case Study 6.4.

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## 6. EXAMPLES OF PAR AND OTHER PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

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The following seven case studies give a cross-section of initiatives using PAR and other participatory approaches over the last century, from both inside and outside the academy. They are our personal selection, based on our experiences and mostly first-hand knowledge of the work of the individuals and collectives mentioned. A complementary set of examples of participatory approaches are discussed in the companion review in this series by Niamh Moore.

### 6.1 Highlander and the North American civil rights movement

The Highlander Folk School, now the Highlander Research and Education Center, was originally established in Grundy County, Tennessee, in 1932. The original name reflected the fact that Highlander did not originally conceive of itself as an organisation focusing on research. Its original goal was to support people from the working class facing oppression as the United States experienced the Great Depression. Workers in all parts of the country met with major resistance from their employers when they tried to organise labour unions, especially in the Southern States. Against that backdrop, a small group, including Myles Horton, created the school ‘to provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the... cultural values of the mountains.’

Like Paulo Freire, Horton was influenced by popular education traditions abroad. He observed rural adult education schools in Denmark started in the 19th century by Danish Lutheran Bishop N. F. S. Grundtvig. During the 1930s and 1940s, the school’s main focus continued to be labour education and the training of labour organizers. In the 1950s, Highlander turned its energies to the rising issues of civil rights and desegregation. Highlander worked with Esau Jenkins of Johns Island to develop a literacy program for people of colour who were prevented by literacy requirements from registering to vote. The Citizenship Education Schools, coordinated by Septima Clark with assistance from Bernice Robinson, spread widely throughout the South and helped thousands of black people to register to vote. Later, the program was transferred to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, closely associated with Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, who also participated in sessions at Highlander.

It was only when reflecting back on his early work that Horton discovered that the term for the mode of research undertaken at Highlander was participatory action research.<sup>76</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, the center used participatory approaches to tackle issues of worker health and safety in the coalfields of Appalachia.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Horton 1990.

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<sup>77</sup> Fine 2017.



Working with sociologist Helen Lewis, they invited poor white housewives who were already collecting incidence records of fathers, husbands and sons with black lung disease, to bring their grounded knowledge together with that of disabled miners, black lung physicians, leaders of the United Mine Workers union and musicians.

Highlander documented in epidemiology and song the embodied consequences of the coal mining industry. Their work thus played a role in the emergence of the region's environmental justice movement, but also led to visits from the local Ku Klux Klan. The Center helped to start the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training program, and coordinated a survey of land ownership in Appalachia.<sup>78</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, Highlander broadened its base into broader regional, national, and international feminism and environmentalism; struggles against the negative effects of globalization; grassroots leadership development in under-resourced communities. Beginning in the 1990s, it became involved in issues relating to discrimination against people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, both in the US and internationally.

## 6.2 Cumbrian hill farmers, post-Chernobyl

Peter and Jean Williams had spent their whole lives in Cumbria in the northwest of England among the Lakeland fells and were held in high esteem by the hill farmers, who packed their children off each day to the village school where Peter was head teacher. Then, just after he retired, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster struck in May 1986, contaminating the pastures of Cumbrian hill farmers with radioactive fallout. To investigate and record the impact of this event, the Williams' carried out more than 50 interviews with affected farmers and their wives. A sociologist of science at Lancaster University, Brian Wynne, joint director of a public understanding science project, accompanied them on some of these interviews.<sup>79</sup>

The economic viability of these hill farmers depends entirely on rearing lambs in spring, grazing them in the valleys and selling them on to farmers elsewhere before the grass on which they graze is depleted. In the aftermath of Chernobyl, scientists from the Ministry of Agriculture banned them from selling their sheep, but reassured them that the elevated levels of radioactive caesium in their sheep would last only about three weeks. In the end, the ban was extended indefinitely, with alarming consequences for the hill farmers' livelihood.

The scientific predictions that the initially high radioactive caesium in the sheep would soon fall were based on an erroneous model of how the element would behave in the Lake District's acid uplands. The scientists' projections of how long lambs would remain radioactive were based on data from alkaline clay soils, which rapidly trap caesium and prevent its uptake by plants. The scientists' blind spot (in the sense used by Wagner, above) was not deliberate – their own institutional culture led them to be ignorant of their own ignorance. The acidic, peaty soils of the fells recycled the caesium, making it available to the growing plants grazed by the sheep. Peter and Jean were able, as trusted locals, to talk with the farmers and record the farmers' frustration and dismay when faced with these high-handed scientists who were clearly uninformed of the realities of the local ecology and hill farm management.

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<sup>78</sup> Gaventa 1982.

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<sup>79</sup> Wynne, Williams and Williams 1988.

The credibility of the scientists was severely damaged among hill farming communities of England and Wales. The farmers felt their own expertise and knowledge had been devalued and indeed ignored. Their extensive knowledge of the local environment and how best to farm it had been brushed aside. The subsequent unease and distrust surrounding the nuclear industry was later matched by a widespread public scepticism around government advice on BSE (mad cow disease) and FMD (foot and mouth disease), followed by GM (genetically modified) foods.<sup>80</sup>

## 6.3 Women living with HIV

Although rarely in the headlines, the HIV/AIDS pandemic claims one million lives a year across the world.<sup>81</sup> Approximately 36.7 million people are living with HIV globally. Yet, for many years these people were not involved in research into testing, treatments and other aspects of the disease. After campaigns by activists in many countries, including those in France popularised by the acclaimed 2017 film *120 Beats per Minute*, the principle of Greater Involvement of People Living with or Affected by HIV and AIDS (the 'GIPA principle') was adopted by 42 national governments at the Paris AIDS Summit in 1994. While the GIPA principle is widely accepted as being critical to ethical and effective national responses to the pandemic, the views and voices of people living with HIV still tend to be overlooked or ignored.

GIPA is a useful mobilising device to rally around but, at the time, no strategy was put in place to secure effective involvement of people living with HIV. Furthermore, the principle was never gendered. For many years, research into testing and treatment of HIV had focused on men. Globally, young women are twice as likely to acquire HIV as their male counterparts, with almost a million new infections each year. AIDS-related illnesses are the leading cause of death among 15 – 49-year-old females globally. Despite this, the issues facing women living with HIV were, and often still are, a blind spot for national, regional and local mainstream research and dialogue processes.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Irwin 2014; Wynne 2013; Martineau 2001.

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<sup>81</sup> UNAIDS 2016.

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<sup>82</sup> UNAIDS 2015; Sophia Trust and Terrence Higgins Trust 2018.

▼

***Globally, young women are twice as likely to acquire HIV as their male counterparts, despite this, the issues facing women living with HIV were, and often still are, a blind spot for national, regional and local mainstream research and dialogue processes.***

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Being included in research proved harder still for young women and others who are more marginalised, such as sex workers, incarcerated women and women who use injecting drugs. The following quotes are from women living with HIV who had taken part in research and policy initiatives in the 1990s and 2000s. They illustrate their experience of exclusion during design, planning, and implementation of research projects:<sup>83</sup>

**'Our input is not implemented, and our ideas are not taken into consideration.'**

**'We have organisations, but men lead them, and our issues don't get discussed.'**

**'Policy makers sit in boardrooms and decide what is relevant to our lives – we are not part of the process.'**

A quarter of a century of PAR and related activities since the GIPA Principle was launched has begun to transform research and policy to the extent that women living with HIV are not only now present at decision-making tables where a mandatory space has been created, but some are involved in setting the agenda. For example, women living with HIV called for research into how they experienced gender-based violence (GBV), and how it affects women's sexual and reproductive health and human rights, with clear implications for policymakers.

During 2014, activists undertook a study involving women living with HIV from key affected populations. The study included PAR-based approaches, such as being overseen by a global reference group of women living with HIV, who identified mental health as the issue to be the main focus of the research. Overall, 945 women living with HIV from 94 countries participated in the full research project, which used a combination of interviews and an online survey. 89% of the 480 respondents to an optional section on GBV reported having experienced or feared violence, either before, since and/or because of their HIV diagnosis.<sup>84</sup> Organisations both led by and consisting of women living with HIV have taken these results into policy-spaces. They argue that policy needs to go beyond traditional notions of being 'evidence-based' to include stories, opinions and ideas, making it 'evidence-informed', as in *Figure 4*.<sup>85</sup>

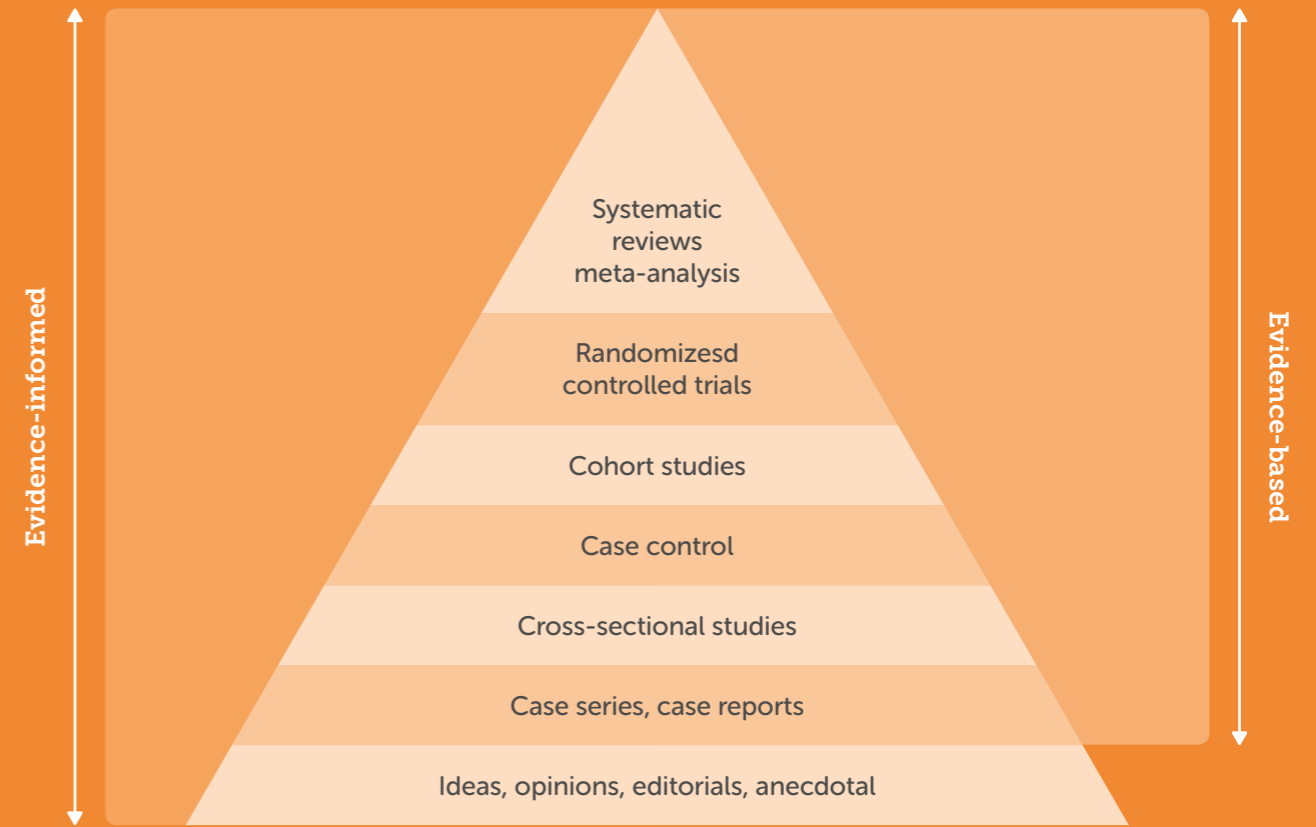
The Salamander Trust has now developed ALIV(H)E, a framework and theory of change to ensure that participatory approaches to research are integrated into the detailed implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and particularly those relating to HIV and violence against women, through a range of national and international policy initiatives.<sup>86</sup> Participatory action research has been integrated into an holistic vision for change (*Figure 5*).

<sup>83</sup> ICW 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Orza 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Woodbury and Kuhnke 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Salamander Trust 2017.



**Figure 4**  
The difference between evidence-based and evidence-informed policies.



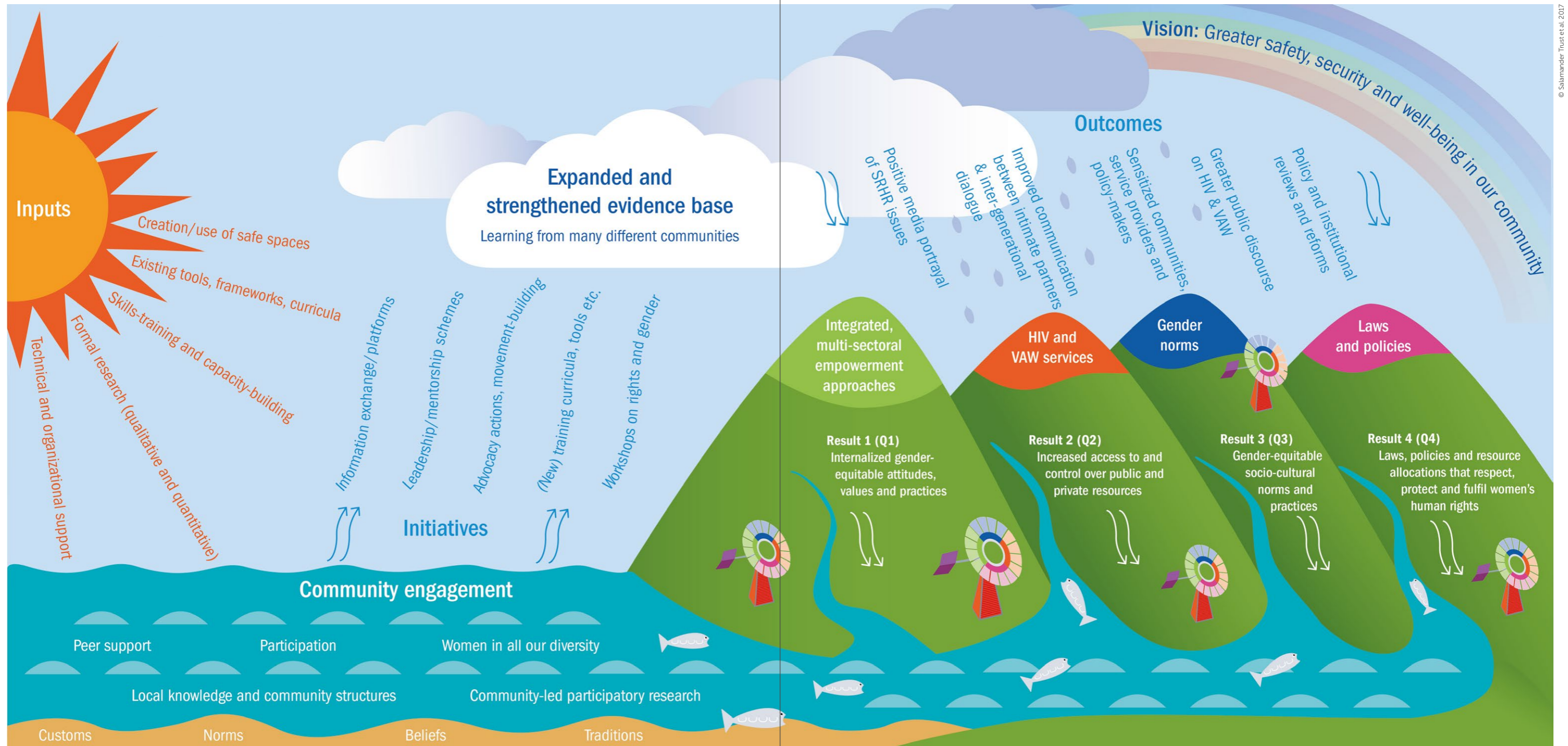


Figure 5  
The ALIV(H)E theory of change.

## 6.4 Food sovereignty

The 'cultural invasion' of agriculture, as Freire described it, by government and corporate interests was a key influence on his early work. He understood cultural invasion as the penetration, in any society, of an alien culture that imposes its ways of seeing the world. He accused agricultural experts, 'the so-called extentionists', of turning 'all their specialized knowledge, all their techniques into something static, materialised (in order to) mechanically extend them to persons, indisputably invading their culture, their view of the world'.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen in Section 6.2, scientists and other professionalised experts continue to ignore the expertise gathered through experience of rural people.

These ideas and the principles of PAR are among the guiding forces behind an international network of movements made up of peasant farmers, some of which is coordinated by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty. Here we describe two different uses of PAR to support the principles of **food sovereignty** in India in 2001 and 2017.

### Part 1: 2001

In response to an attempt funded by the World Bank and Britain's DFID, to displace farmers from the land in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh via a strategy called Vision 2020, a coalition of Indian grassroots-led organisations and PAR practitioners from India and the UK undertook Prajateerpu ('people's verdict') – a hybrid approach to deliberative democracy called a **citizens' jury** (see Box 2) and another methodology called the **scenario workshop**. The jury was made up of a majority of women farmers, with people from Dalit and Indigenous groups also in a majority. At the time, Golden Rice, the marketing term used for rice that had been fortified with Vitamin A through genetic modification, was being promoted by the biotechnology industry as a pioneering way of addressing malnutrition. When an expert spoke in support of Golden Rice, the farmers pointed out that it was the very dominance of rice in the diet, to the exclusion of vegetables and pulses, that was threatening malnutrition, not the lack of Vitamin A alone. The report of this PAR process had a major impact regionally, nationally, and internationally.<sup>88</sup> The UK government's response was to claim that the process was biased. Under pressure from the UK government, the two institutes where the report's authors were based withdrew the report, without consulting with the Indian organisations. It was later reinstated, but the reputations of both the organisations that had first published and then undermined the report were damaged: they lost credibility amongst social movements for their lack of independence from government.

<sup>87</sup> Freire 1979, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Kuruganti et al. 2008.

### Box 1

#### Deliberative democracy as participatory research?

Deliberative democracy, the form of democracy in which public deliberation is central to decision-making, has significant overlaps with participatory approaches to research. The approaches to deliberative democracy that emerged in the West during the 1990s were a breakthrough for epistemic justice as they encompassed two elements identified by Fricker – heuristic (people's right to learn), but more importantly the testimonial (having their lived experiences seen as valid). However, only very rarely did such exercises go as far as PAR, in which people who are experiencing oppression get to decide the subject matter of the participatory and dialogue processes. An exception is the conversion of the classic citizens' jury process into a do-it-yourself process for oppressed communities to influence decision-making through a PAR process (see 6.4).

▼  
*The approaches to deliberative democracy that emerged in the West during the 1990s were a breakthrough. However, only very rarely did such exercises go as far as PAR.*  
▲

### Part 2: 2014 – 2018

As predicted by the PAR process of Prajateerpu, smallholder farmers across the country have lost control over their resources and food over the past few years, resulting in crippling debt and suicide amongst people in rural areas. In Badampet village in Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana), in the same Indian state in which the Prajateerpu process took place, 20 farmers came together with members of the Kūdali Intergenerational Learning Centre, including PAR workers Sagari Ramdas and N. Madhusudhan.<sup>89</sup> Together with farmers of diverse ages, genders, castes, communities and religions, they have devised a drama with Madhusudhan, with financial support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). This has been performed in villages across the region.<sup>90</sup> The farmers are part of the India's Food Sovereignty Alliance which has built an autonomous movement through a process of PAR, allowing it to work independently of large NGOs and thus undertake research that serves the needs of those excluded by established research and policy processes. The farmers' drama demonstrated the high degree of accuracy of the assessment made by other similar farmers in the Prajateerpu PAR process 17 years before (see Part 1).

<sup>89</sup> Madhusudhan 2008, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Avadhani 2018.



## 6.5 Public Science Project

In 2012 a group of mothers and grandmothers in the South Bronx working with a public interest lawyer contacted Brett Stoudt, María Elena Torre and others at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). For years the women had been gathering evidence, on videotapes and on phones, photographing events from their windows – of brutal arrests and incarcerations by the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Thus, the Public Science Project (PSP) was formed as a coalition of activists, researchers, youth, elders, lawyers, prisoners, and educators, launching projects on educational injustice and lives under surveillance. In contrast to traditional social research, which tends to test theories that have been chosen by academics, PSP supported people of colour to document and publicise the experiences of those experiencing the collateral damage of a system of mass incarceration. The local families helped to design and undertake their own community-wide survey, exposing the blind spots in the policy-makers' understanding of policing. The Morris Justice Project, a community-led survey of a 40-square-block area of the Bronx gathered evidence from more than a thousand residents on over-policing and the consequences for children, community safety and democracy during 2013.<sup>91</sup> Here Michelle Fine describes the process:

**Our research teams include those who have paid the most serious price for injustice sitting alongside other community members, advocates, policymakers, and more traditionally-trained researchers; together we practice... strong objectivity. That is, we build initially fragile and increasingly sturdy contact zones where diverse knowledges dialogue.**<sup>92</sup>

PSP projects have been situated in schools or community-based organizations struggling for quality education, economic opportunities, and human rights. Knowledge-sharing research camps in these 'contact-zones' set the stage for most of this work, designed to bring together differently positioned people around a common table to design and implement the research: youth and educators; mothers and their children who have been pushed out of schools organizing for quality education in communities under siege; and prisoners, organizers, and academics.<sup>93</sup> Most projects have advisory boards of youth, community elders, educators and/or activists to shape the work and hold practitioners accountable to the needs and desires of local communities. Although largely funded and administered through structures in CUNY, the approach used by PSP – which they call critical PAR – pushes the practice of co-direction by those outside the university further than in perhaps any other North American university at the present time.

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<sup>91</sup> Stoudt and Torre 2014; Torre et al. 2018.

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<sup>92</sup> Fine 2017: 79.

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<sup>93</sup> Torre 2010.

## 6.6 People with refugee and migrant background

*Becoming a Londoner* (RefugeeYouth, 2009) was a PAR process organised and led by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, including one of the authors (Sanchez Rodriguez). It investigated the experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds about learning to live in London and the way they experienced the many sectors who are supposed to work with them: social services, police, college and school. The study advised different statutory bodies where they were performing well and where they were failing. Because academic researchers rarely have a refugee or migrant background, knowledge of these issues has been a blind spot for them. The research was converted into a theatrical performance of the same name, *Becoming a Londoner*, to accompany the book. The book launch was also the premier of the play which toured in London and elsewhere in the UK.

RefugeeYouth described their participatory approach as a 'creative campaign'. Of the hundred or so people involved in the campaign, some were formal researchers conducting interviews; some wrote or performed the play; some were musicians. Others were the often-anonymous sources of first-hand testimony. What was written emerged through a process of relationship building. Crucially for the sustainability of the process, the effort to sustain these relationships did not end when the book was finished. Reflecting on the process, Pearson et al. conclude that the writing served 'as a way of capturing the learning, helping us to understand ourselves better and enabling us to share (our experiences) with others'.<sup>94</sup>

Strengthened by their experience of this PAR process members of RefugeeYouth have built four new organisations using the principles of PAR – in Northern England (Solidarity Hull), Wales (Braich Goch), CAIS Maloka (Colombia) and North West London (Nomad). They continue to publish and perform, using PAR processes that include the Theatre of the Oppressed and participatory video.<sup>95</sup>

## 6.7 Jineoloji as decolonising practice

Drawing on the work of the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, a group of feminist participatory researchers have come together to decolonise research, based on their common belief that 'a new structuring of the social science is needed for a more democratic, gender-libertarian and ecological social structuring'.<sup>96</sup> In traditional Kurdish society, a woman's role is to be subordinate to men. Jineoloji is now taught in Kurdish community centres throughout Turkey and Syria where women learn about female emancipation and self-defence in the context of honour killings, rape and domestic violence, and where female victims of domestic abuse are helped. Having established a worldview that builds on elements that already exist in Indigenous Kurdish culture, women are establishing processes of dialogue with researchers to explore how the Jineoloji concept can be used to transform research, combining PAR approaches and ecofeminist thinking.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Pearson, Sanchez Rodriguez and Mohamed 2016.

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<sup>95</sup> Diamond 2007.

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<sup>96</sup> Jineoloji Committee Europe 2018: 82.

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<sup>97</sup> Kurban 2018.

## 7. EMERGING THEMES

The last quarter century has seen a shift in the institutional location of participatory approaches. Instead of being undertaken by people who are marginalised, professionals in mainstream Western universities are being funded to carry out PAR. Many of the organisations that pioneered PAR approaches, such as CARPP at the University of Bath, have been closed, while many researchers are finding it increasingly difficult to carry out projects using genuine PAR approaches given the management techniques used in neoliberal universities.<sup>98</sup> Critical PAR, the approach we favour as the antidote to conventional extractive research, can only progress if it can overcome a range of challenges. Here we present three of these:

### 1. Power relations

During the past half-century much PAR has been undertaken at the grassroots by people with little or no money. Yet now, many high-profile initiatives are managed by professional researchers with significant budgets, for which they are accountable to an external funder, rather than to grassroots-based individuals and groups. Although their aim may be to share power equitably, the power of money may mean that the outcome of the research is to re-entrench of power inequalities rather than to alleviate them.

Although some funders are beginning to critically reflect on these issues,<sup>99</sup> until the economic marginalisation of vast numbers of the world's population is addressed, we cannot expect the power inequalities in research that prevent effective participatory research to diminish.<sup>100</sup>

### 2. Structural issues

Despite the fact that numerous mainstream research institutions have adopted the language, published books and designed toolkits for participatory and transdisciplinary approaches, a range of structural barriers preventing them collaborating effectively with community groups continue to exist. These range from difficulties in transferring funds, recognising time spent on projects or valuing the intellectual property of collaborators.<sup>101</sup>

Only rarely does documentation of participatory processes of research led by non-professionals become available publicly. If they are published, they are likely to be printed or filmed only in the language spoken by people experiencing oppression, limiting their availability to a wider audience.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup>  
Anonymous 2016.

<sup>99</sup>  
Facer and Enright 2016.

<sup>100</sup>  
Wilkinson and Pickett 2018.

<sup>101</sup>  
People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016a.

<sup>102</sup>  
People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016c.

Critical PAR practitioners, such as Nick Hildyard, suggest that 'the first thing that (institutions) serious about participation should do... is not to reach for the latest handbook on participatory techniques, but put their own house in order: to consider how their internal hierarchies, training techniques and office cultures discourage receptivity, flexibility, patience, open-mindedness, non-defensiveness, humour, curiosity and respect for the opinions of others'.<sup>103</sup>

It would be hard for anyone to object the term 'respect', used by Hildyard et al. here, but, Smith asks indigenist researchers to think critically about the term:

What is respect and how do we know when researchers are behaving respectfully? What does respect entail at a day-to-day level of interaction? To be respectful, what else does a researcher need to understand? It is when we ask questions about the apparently universal value of respect that things come undone, because the basic premise of that value is quintessentially Euro-American. What at first appears a simple matter of respect can end up as a complicated matter of cultural protocols, languages of respect, rituals of respect, dress codes: in short, the 'p's and q's' of etiquette specific to cultural, gender, and class groups and subgroups.<sup>104</sup>

### 3. Decolonising the mind

Scientism, with its origins in European colonialism and its entrenched patriarchy and racism, is culturally embedded in most Western research and teaching institutions. Its dominance prevents many attempts at participatory approaches from being transformative. Our consciousness (including that of the authors of this paper) have, to some extent, been colonised by this prevailing culture, as Dussel suggests:

The new imperialism is the fruit of the third industrial revolution. (If the first was mechanistic and the second monopolistic, the third is the international effort of the transnationals, which structure their neocolonies from within). The transnationals do not occupy territories with armies or create bureaucracies. They are owners, directly or indirectly, of the key enterprises of production of raw materials, process industries, and services of the periphery. Furthermore, the new imperialism exercises political control over its neocolonies and their armies. One utterly new feature is that the empire pursues a policy of cultivating desires, needs. This empowers it, through mass media advertising, to dominate peripheral peoples and their own national oligarchies. An ideological imperialism is also at work here.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup>  
Hildyard et al. 2001: 56.

<sup>104</sup>  
Smith 2007: 129.

<sup>105</sup>  
Dussel 2003: 20.

Despite these challenges, there is evidence that participatory approaches provide a way, perhaps the best available way, of developing powerful research programmes that combine both critical thinking and effective advocacy, though much of it remains in the grey literature.<sup>106</sup> They have the potential to offer a radical alternative to a mode of knowledge creation that extracts information from its subjects and then rewards its researchers according to the extent to which their findings contribute to the balance sheets of universities, to profits of corporations and to ongoing structural violence.

In choosing critical PAR as an approach, practitioners may be forced to challenge the forces in higher education that keep scholarship 'objective' (mystifying), 'non-political' (non-subversive) and 'academic' (elitist).<sup>107</sup> They reject a paradigm that continues to reserve the higher status technical training for that small portion of the world's population who will manage the rest, as well as consume or control its resources and political economies.

Fine suggests that, at the present time, critical PAR can only exist in 'fugitive spaces' and that many have, therefore, given up on the academy as a space of radical possibility. Instead many practitioners see a means whereby: 'academics/Whites/elites colonize or appropriate the ideas and suffering of Others, and get tenure', even performing participatory approaches if that what helps them get there.<sup>108</sup>

As feminists have long pointed out, the myth of intellectual work being a process that largely takes place at the level of a single individual, or through a particular style of thinking is misleading. Approaches such as critical PAR, indigenist approaches to research and the ALIV(H)E framework supplement individualistic puzzle-solving approaches with styles that value collective reflection and learning. They also enable the researcher to explore ways of communicating undervalued by traditional Western academic practice (surveyed in Table 1) including embroidery, painting, theatre, music and dance.<sup>109</sup> As in Haraway's ground-breaking work (1988) a situated, self-reflexive collective approach to research is sought.

The challenge of such a strategy for Western-trained academics is that, to survive as professional researchers, they are likely to have to justify their involvement according to the standards and the criteria of the academy, presenting conference papers, publishing in peer reviewed journals and applying for grants. Even the concept of extending the notion of peer review to non-academic peers is seen as a radical step, despite being at the centre of whole social movements, such as that of people living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>110</sup> At the time of writing, neither journal editorial boards (with the exception of a handful, such as *Action Research*) nor research funders (with exceptions such as the UK AHRC's Connected Communities programme and some programmes within Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) appear sympathetic to funding proposals underpinned by the PAR paradigm.

<sup>106</sup> Benham and Daniell 2016; Singh 2017; Avadhani 2018.

<sup>107</sup> James and Gordon 2008.

<sup>108</sup> Fine 2017: 117.

<sup>109</sup> Cohen-Cruz 2012; Segalo et al. 2015; see also reviews in this series by Douglas and Pool.

<sup>110</sup> Funtowicz and Ravetz 1991; Healy 1999; Salamander Trust et al. 2017.

## Box 2 Citizen science and public engagement – beyond token participation?

During the past decade, the term 'citizen science' has become the rallying cry for a new breed of science communication, often giving the impression that non-scientists will be empowered by undertaking scientific data collecting. The older term **public engagement** is even broader – simply referring to those with power or expertise engaging in communication with broader society. However, both these and other types of institutionally-led outreach initiatives have generally continued to follow the methodology of traditional natural science in that they typically analyse problems within a simple hypothesis-testing paradigm.

Those designing citizen science initiatives are largely unaware of the critical work around scientific knowledge undertaken by Freire or of any of the post-Freirean examples presented in the previous section, with the tensions surrounding knowledge and power that they highlight.<sup>111</sup> They usually maintain a simple division between 'researchers' (professional experts) and 'citizens' (inferior non-experts).

Data flows to the centre, for use by the experts, and is never seen again by its contributors. Furthermore, these approaches promulgate a belief that problems can be solved by the application of specialised expertise alone. The terminology used in many 'citizen science' initiatives draws on the philosophy of scientism that has been rejected

by PAR practitioners.<sup>112</sup> Citizen science projects may be able to tackle blank spots in a research programme, in the sense used by Wagner. However, unless they use PAR approaches, they will be unlikely to expose blind spots.

There is a small but growing number of studies critically reflecting on processes whereby universities use these and other terms, such as community participation, and co-inquiry for the public good, whilst at the same time blocking schemes that might allow research to take place in a way that is truly inclusive.<sup>113</sup> Too often the question of who is in control of the research process is side-stepped. Meanwhile social movements, such as ones made up of people living with HIV/AIDS, have been effectively been conducting their own science, often in dialogue with scientists, without ever using the term.<sup>114</sup>

In some political contexts, scientists justify any process of citizen science as being a bulwark against the threat of the anti-science movement.<sup>115</sup> At the time of writing, just such a situation now exists under the Trump regime in the US. With the White House having begun the dismantling of the US government's Environmental Protection Agency, large corporations now see citizen scientists, working with environmental NGOs, as being the last remaining threat to their brand of corporate-led scientism.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Colston et al. 2015.

<sup>112</sup> People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016b.

<sup>113</sup> Long et al. 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Salamander Trust et al. 2017.

<sup>115</sup> Pandaya 2014; Soleri et al. 2016.

<sup>116</sup> Rodriguez and Walton 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Kapoor and Jordan 2009: 3–4.

Kapoor and Jordan call for spaces for a 'people's PAR' that becomes engaged with a politics of the margins 'as these sites remain the soil of germination for Indigenous, anti/critical colonial, and third worldist PAR engagements'.<sup>117</sup> For them this bottom-up form of PAR would embrace 'Indigenous conceptions, approaches and practices of PAR as a living praxis'. It would achieve this by 'magnifying the role and contribution of PAR in the multifarious struggles of marginalized social groups in the regions of the Global South'. It was simultaneously attempt to engage 'critical Euro-American conceptions of PAR and its utility in a politics attentive to addressing ecological concerns, commercialization of education/research and containment of democratic pedagogies in formal education'.



## 8. BREAKING OUT OF FUGITIVE SPACES

We see the position of participatory approaches to research as analogous to the people of Kurdistan (6.7). Kurds live as fugitives, recognised by none of the three nation states in which they have historically resided. Like them, participatory processes continue to exist in fugitive spaces in what Anzaldúa calls the borderlands – the contested terrain between Western academic disciplines and those outside research institutions who have often been subject to *structural violence* enacted by those same institutions. Existing in these spaces makes such approaches challenging, both intellectually and practically, for both those with professional research backgrounds and those whose expertise has been gained through life experience. But such initiatives also expose their practitioners to risks – ranging from a mild career crisis to physical injury or even death. Given that we remain committed to the values and ideals of participatory approaches, we must find ways of communicating about and critiquing how we work without adding to the dangers we already face.<sup>118</sup>

118  
Box 3 and Denzin et al. 2006.

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*Participatory processes continue to exist in fugitive spaces: the contested terrain between Western academic disciplines and those outside research institutions who have often been subject to structural violence enacted by those same institutions.*

▲

### Box 3 15 practical questions for institutionally-based researchers considering participatory and transdisciplinary approaches:

1. Where can I find a mentor in my use of participatory approaches who is trusted by those in the communities with whom I would like to work and, preferably, by sympathetic colleagues in the university?
2. Who is 'I' or 'we' that is undertaking the participatory research?
3. Have those who have traditionally been excluded from research been included at the earliest possible stage?
4. Can I persuade those with power over me to let me resist applying off-the-shelf research methods and instead use creative forms such as visual arts, dance, performance, Theatre of the Oppressed, and folklorica?
5. What can I learn from the history of the past use of research in this area and of participatory approaches in particular?
6. Are the sources for this history inclusive of all relevant voices or just of elites?
7. If the latter, how can I help widen the range of voices that can be heard?
8. Could there be a retelling of the history, this time highlighting the stories of the people who were previously excluded?
9. How can I remain accountable to, and guided by ethical processes devised with diverse members of popular movements and other communities, whilst also fulfilling any obligations I may have to my institution?
10. Who will own the data produced by the research (Colston et al. 2015)?
11. Who decides what are the products of the research? Is there a commitment to there being products:
  - i) for and by movements?
  - ii) for transforming how researchers think about expertise and knowledge?
12. Whose language is being relied upon?
13. Who gets the money and credit associated with the project?
14. Who may be vulnerable and how can they be protected?
15. How can the participatory approach influence structural change, such through shifts in public policy, whilst still maintaining its humility as just one part of wider struggles?



**Figure 6**  
Morris Justice Project, a grassroots-led initiative in New York City supported by [publicscienceproject.org](http://publicscienceproject.org)

The team that is building up the Public Science Project (PSP, 6.5, Figure 6) recommends ‘opening up the university to the concerns of the common good’ and ‘carving a delicate space of collective criticality and public science where we interrogate privilege and argue through differences’, forging, what Audre Lorde calls, ‘meaningful coalitions’. They also highlight the double power struggle that PAR projects in universities will always encounter – struggles in/with the academy, funders, traditional science community not willing to challenge where expertise lives on the one hand, and ‘within our research collectives where we find ‘choques’ among the ‘nos’ and the ‘otras’.

The PSP has also developed the idea of PAR being undertaken by collectives using the idea of ‘participatory contact zones’ – ‘sites where people representing radically different standpoints come together as research colleagues around a common inquiry’.<sup>119</sup> Accepting that conflict is an inevitable part of collaborative research between people with such differing standpoints helps ensure that ‘political analysis of the power dynamics among the researchers and the power surrounding and producing that which is being researched’ is at the heart of the process.

The PSP use Anzaldúa’s term ‘choques’ (trans: ‘collisions’) for moments during which ignorances are ‘peeled open and challenged – not always delicately or in ways that satisfy, but they are not ignored’. For Torre et al., such *choques* also help craft PAR that builds solidarities, albeit often fragile ones, with oppressed communities and popular movements.

<sup>119</sup>  
Torre et al. 2018.

Working beyond the local, the PSP team have outlined a ‘global movement for community-based PAR’ to enable ‘the popular production and ownership of critical inquiry by and for communities under seige’. Drawing on their work in prisons, their proposal challenges ‘the hegemony of elite interests as the dominant lens of science and insists of social inquiry theorized, practiced, and collectively owned by and for communities enduring state violence’.<sup>120</sup>

PAR, when undertaken critically, offers a provisional and delicate space for what Anzaldúa refers to as a ‘kneading’ process. If the participatory process begins by asking the right question, it can, as Fine suggests, be ‘a research complex that deliberately brings people together to contend with our differences, to design inquiries from the bottom and generate challenging knowledge from the margins’.

Given that our global ecological crisis ultimately has its origins in social problems, it should be no surprise that PAR is often at the forefront of attempts to address urgent environmental issues, such as land-grabbing for industrial agriculture, desertification and sea-level rise.<sup>121</sup>

The adoption in Western academia (such as those in the UK, EU, US, Australia and Canada) of neoliberal policies and the government imposition of metrics that discriminate against participatory approaches risks worsening epistemic injustice and various forms of oppression. As we know from history, rampant inequalities and oppression create tension and conflict, the opposite of the conditions needed for equitable dialogue and mutual understanding.

Those of us who are participatory practitioners outside and inside universities will only make progress by building alliances that allow us to break out of the fugitive spaces in which we are likely to find ourselves. To turn the monologue into a genuine dialogue, we should nurture cross-cultural conversations between those using critical PAR, the majority who use more conventional approaches and those whose practice comes somewhere in between. We should encourage our interlocutors who are inclined to be wary of PAR to revisit fundamental questions such as: who is the expert, how should research be conducted ethically and what should be done with the conclusions? We should have the humility to welcome questions about participatory approaches they may wish to put to us. We should also acknowledge that, in such politically difficult times, research is often just one small element in larger projects for justice and transformation.

We share Torre et al.’s belief that popular inquiry is ‘a collective right and a path toward a different tomorrow’ and Grace Lee Boggs’ reflection that ‘even though justice is on our side... we are also products of this society. That is why we make sure that the methods we use in our struggles are transforming ourselves as well as our opponents into *more human* human beings’.<sup>122</sup> Whatever your perspective on the utility of the paradigm of research we have discussed, we invite you to enter a dialogue with us so together we may move towards more fruitful approaches to creating knowledge.

<sup>120</sup>  
Torre et al. 2018.

<sup>121</sup>  
Kirschke et al. 2016 and Sections 6.1–7 above.

<sup>122</sup>  
Boggs and Kurashige 2012; Torre et al. 2018.

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# GLOSSARY

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## **Citizens' jury**

A forum designed to foster public deliberation and to influence decision-making on contentious issues. Citizens' juries have varied widely in their design and implementation, but conventionally they follow a uniform procedure. 12 or more members of the general public (the 'jurors') participate in a process of dialogue under the guidance of a chair or 'facilitator'. They interrogate specialist commentators (sometimes called 'witnesses') chosen because of their knowledge of a particular subject. Unlike legal juries, it is an issue not an individual that is 'on trial'. Jurors then draw up and publish their conclusions, with a few jurors possibly acting as advocates on behalf of the whole jury. The jury process is intended to be transparent, with fairness and balance safeguarded.

## **Cognitive justice**

Coined by Shiv Visvanathan to call for the recognition of decolonized forms of knowledge, sometimes referred to as alternative sciences. He argues that different knowledges are connected with different livelihoods and lifestyles and should therefore be treated equally.

## **Coloniality**

Refers to the interrelationship of the practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge, advanced in postcolonial studies and Latin American subaltern studies.

## **Conscientised**

Achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. A popular equivalent term is 'woke'. Conscientisation also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding.

## **Co-production**

People actively involved in knowledge production, usually alongside formally trained researchers.

## **Critical pedagogy**

A philosophy of education and social movement that combines education with critical theory. It has been developed as an educational movement to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action.

## **Decolonisation**

Decolonisation not only refers to the complete removal of the domination of non-Indigenous forces within the geographical space and different institutions of the colonised, but also to the decolonising of the mind from the coloniser's ideas: the ideas that made the colonised seem inferior.

## **Epistemic injustice**

When professional expertise is supported at the expense of other forms of knowledge. Miranda Fricker, who coined the term, suggests that it is made up of two components: heuristic injustice and testimonial injustice.

### **Heuristic injustice**

The denial of opportunities to develop greater knowledge.

### **Testimonial injustice**

Where expertise derived through life experience, rather than professional training, is typically side-lined.

## **Food sovereignty**

The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume the food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. Among other aspects, food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, religious and racial groups, social classes and generations. Many of those involved in movements for food sovereignty explicitly draw on Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy in the context of the food system (Freire 1979).

## **Grassroots**

People at the local and/or most basic level rather than at the larger scales of political activity. Grassroots movements and organizations utilize collective action from the local level to effect change at the local, regional, national, or international level.

## **Imperialism**

A policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonisation, use of military force, or other means. Its name originated from the Latin word *imperium*, which means to rule over large territories.

## **Inclusion**

An organizational practice and goal drawing on the sociological notion of inclusiveness. This refers to the political action and personal effort in which different groups or individuals having different backgrounds (like origin, age, race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity) are culturally and socially accepted and welcomed.

### **Inclusive research**

An umbrella term encompassing participatory, emancipatory, user-led, and partnership research.

### **Indigenist approaches/research**

An attitude towards research that does not treat the culture of Indigenous peoples as a curiosity, or of interest solely in order to study the individuals who practise the culture; instead it recognises that Indigenous peoples possess entire philosophies of knowledge capable of generating new knowledge through different models of inquiry from those used in Western thought.

### **Indigenous peoples**

The assembly of those who have witnessed, been excluded from, and have survived modernity and imperialism. They are peoples who have experienced the imperialism and colonialism of the modern historical period beginning with the Enlightenment. They remain culturally distinct, some with their native languages and belief systems still alive. They are usually minorities in territories and states over which they once held sovereignty.

### **Institutions**

Stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour (e.g. 'marriage is an institution'). As structures or mechanisms of social order, they govern the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. Institutions are identified with a social purpose, transcending individuals and intentions by mediating the rules that govern living behaviour. Erving Goffman (and to some extent Michel Foucault) discussed 'total institutions' as a place of work and residence where a great number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community for a considerable time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered life.

### **Interdisciplinary**

The combining of two or more academic disciplines into one activity, such as a research project. It is about creating something new by crossing boundaries, and thinking across them.

### **Public engagement**

A broad term referring to those with power or expertise engaging in communication with broader society.

### **Scenario workshop**

A strategic planning method that some organisations use to make flexible long-term plans based on speculative potential future scenarios. The design of potential scenarios may involve the recognition that many factors may combine in complex ways to create sometime surprising futures. It also allows the inclusion of factors that are difficult to formalize, such as novel insights about the future, deep shifts in values, unprecedented regulations or inventions.

### **Scientism**

The uncritical application of scientific or even quasi-scientific methods to inappropriate fields of study. Based on the statements of prominent believers in scientism, philosopher Mary Midgley has suggested that the principles of scientism are: all questions of philosophy are either meaningless or can be answered by science; science has authority because it is based on empirical evidence – scientific claims will therefore always overrule philosophical claims; and science provides the ultimate account of the basis of reality – the ultimate metaphysics – but it substantively changes the questions, getting to the correct ones, rather than the meaningless philosophers' ones.

### **Strong objectivity**

A term coined by feminist philosopher Sandra Harding, suggesting that research that starts from the lives of women 'actually strengthens standards of objectivity'. Strong objectivity can be contrasted with scientific 'weak' objectivity (see Scientism) since strong objectivity embraces a researcher's bias. A researcher's life experiences will always be a lens through which they view the world and subsequently their research (Harding 2005). Bias is an inevitable feature of research, rather than treating it as something extraneous that must be removed.

### **Structural violence**

Refers to situations where neither culture nor the will of the individual is the sole factor behind harm to people; rather, historically given – and often economically driven – processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency. Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of new knowledge or to benefits enjoyed by others.

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