IS THERE AN ‘F’ IN YOUR PAR? UNDERSTANDING, TEACHING AND DOING ACTION RESEARCH

Liza Lorenzetti and Christine Ann Walsh
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is increasingly recognized within academic research and pedagogy. What are the benefits of including feminism within participatory action research and teaching? In responding to this question, we discuss the similarities and salient differences between PAR and feminist informed PAR (FPAR). There are eight themes or categories to provide a structure for this discussion: (a) theories and methodologies developed from popular movements and dissent; (b) marginalization within academia; (c) theories and methodologies critiqued for exclusivity; (d) focus on researcher reflexivity and subjectivity; (e) education for personal transformation; (f) critical research methodologies; (g) flexible and diverse theoretical and methodological interpretations; and (h) social justice and emancipation. Implications for education and research are highlighted.

Keywords: Feminism; participatory action research; popular education; teaching.

INTRODUCTION
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is increasingly recognized within academic research and pedagogy. Rooted in the emancipatory movements of Latin America (Fals Borda, 1987), and catalyzed by the critical pedagogy and liberatory or popular education writings of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1969, 1970), PAR has traditionally encountered significant barriers and exclusion in academic circles. In referencing PAR, Koirala-Azad and Fuentes (2009/2010) note the “ongoing struggle to find space, recognition, and legitimacy for this type of scholarship within the academy” (p. 1). Similarly, feminism, feminist
pedagogy, and feminist research (FR) with a decidedly ideological stance, (Lather, 1986) have also encountered roadblocks within a post-postivist and empiricist educational settings. For example, in the process of institutionalization of feminist knowledge production into the academy, feminists have encountered “strong resistance from the academic community” (Linnason, 2011, p. 18).

Despite these barriers, PAR and, its predecessor, popular education, are increasingly utilized as methodology, theory and classroom teaching practice. While disciplines such as education, nursing and social work, among others, have utilized PAR as an emancipatory approach to addressing social injustice (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Conde-Fraziera, 2006; Corbett, Francis, & Chapman, 2007; Healy, 2001; O'Neill, Woods, & Webster, 2005), few pedagogical models of action research are available (Hammond, Hicks, Kalman, & Miller, 2005), limited scholarship concerns how the “delivery of such material should be structured” (Walsh, Rutherford, & Sears, 2010, p. 191) and a recent review (Wagner, Garner, & Kawulich, 2011) concluded that formal pedagogical culture for research methods in the social sciences is lacking. Further, feminists have critiqued PAR's androcentric lens and the omission of gender within the earlier PAR teachings (Maguire, 1987, 1996, 2001, & 2004).

In this paper we ask what are the benefits of including feminism within PAR and teaching? The liberatory pedagogical framework that shapes our responses is based on our experiences in teaching for personal and social transformation within community and school-based settings, and within post-secondary institutions. In responding to the above question, we discuss the similarities and salient differences between PAR and feminist informed PAR (FPAR) and conclude with some of the advantages of infusing a feminist lens within a participatory action framework. In order to develop our argument, we present the theoretical development and methodological underpinnings of both PAR and FR, as they are antecedents of FPAR. In examining the relevant literature we have created eight themes or categories to provide a structure for this discussion. While by no means exhaustive, these themes establish a foundation to frame investigation and comparative analysis within teaching, research and practice domains. The theme areas are: (a) theories and methodologies developed from popular movements and dissent; (b) marginalization within academia; (c) theories and methodologies critiqued for exclusivity; (d) focus on researcher reflexivity and subjectivity; (e) education for personal transformation; (f) critical research methodologies; (g) flexible and diverse theoretical and methodological interpretations; and (h) social justice and emancipation. In entering this inquiry, it is important to note that feminist perspectives, or “feminisms”, are diverse in their approach as are conceptualizations of PAR. Thus our exploration of the multiple approaches and counter-approaches within the same methodologies is limited.

**Literature Review**

*Theories and Methodologies Developed From Popular Movements and Dissent*

An appropriate beginning to identifying the similarities between PAR, FR, and FPAR is their emergence from lived realities of oppression and exclusion. Orlando Fals Borda (1988), a
founding PAR theorist, defines the methodology as “a complex process which includes adult education, situation analysis, critical analysis, and practice as sources of knowledge for understanding new problems, necessities and dimension of reality” (p. 85). PAR theory and methodology was developed, and is frequently utilized to address issues of marginalization and oppression (Dupont, 2008; Varcoe, 2006). Key concepts relate to popular struggles for social justice, a critique of power-relations, dominance and class oppression with a focus on self-empowerment of the people in the face of subjugation (Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). PAR is increasingly being adopted as a libertatory teaching method with school-aged youth, as exemplified by Schensul and Berg’s (2004) transformative Youth PAR study with African American, West Indian/Carribean and Latino youth in the United States.

Similarly, feminism and FR emerged from social movements primarily focused on gender oppression, sexism, and patriarchy (Maguire, 1996). Feminist Betty Friedan (1963) emphasized that the core of women’s liberation was in women’s daily reflections and lived experiences. The development of FR in particular centered on producing alternatives to sexist methodologies and research that actively excluded or omitted women’s realities and voices, or marginalized them through a masculinist lens (Eichler, 1997; Maguire, 1987). In terms of teaching, Crawley, Lewis and Mayberry (2008) invite educators to re-envision traditional pedagogy by aligning with the goal of feminists “concern for both what we teach and how we teach it” (p. 2). In doing so, feminist teaching is a form of emancipatory or liberatory education which allows students to develop critical consciousness of social conditions and inequities (Larson, 2005).

FPAR, emerging from both PAR and FR, shares similar groundings in popular people’s movements for social justice and human rights. FPAR incorporates PAR’s focus on class/poverty and emancipation, and relevance to non-Eurocentric cultures, and also includes FR’s gynocentric lens. FPAR’s heightened focus on intersectionality and the interrogation of class/poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression (Maguire, 2001; Reid Frisby, 2008), connects this approach with the class and anti-imperialist struggle underscored within PAR (Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). An obvious difference between PAR and FPAR is PAR’s androcentric beginnings, although these differences are currently less evident as women continue to participate in further developing the methodology (Maguire, 1987; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993).

Marginalization within Academia
Stemming from their origins in people’s movements and methodological specificities, PAR, FR, and FPAR are located within a school of approaches that can be viewed as being “at odds with the mainstream research academic traditions in social science” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 10). As will be discussed further in this paper, FR, PAR and FPAR are grounded in a critique of positivism and the claims of objectivity within the social sciences and in society (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Reid, 2004). The stated subjectivity of these forms of research, as well as PAR and FPAR’s redefining of research subjects as participants and co-researchers, and perceived conflicts with insider/outsider knowledge are among

Herr and Anderson (2005) further contend that the “built-in conservatism” (p. 26) of any forms of action research developed and fostered under the guidelines and restrictions of an academic institution can be contentious or problematic. Despite these ongoing conflicts regarding overtly ideological and participatory forms of research, participatory and feminist methodologies can be increasingly found within more mainstream academic research texts (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), and are commonly practiced within traditional academic institutions. Participatory forms of research however, like their traditional counterparts, have to contend with student reluctance towards research, instructor capacity to teach research and the competing demands for curricular content (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013).

From a teaching lens, within school-based settings and post-secondary institutions, the tension between the banking model of education and more liberatory and transformative pedagogy (Freire, 1970) is apparent. While Grundtvig folk schools concept (Allchin, 1997; Warren, & Jonas, 2011) and experiential teaching methods are becoming further centralized as alternatives to hegemonic and often exclusionary approaches to learning and contributing, our own contested teaching approaches have demonstrated the inherent struggle in adopting and implementing more liberatory educational frameworks.

Theories and Methodologies Critiqued for Exclusivity
Although both feminist approaches and PAR were catalyzed in response to oppression, these theories and methodologies have also been critiqued as marginalizing and exclusionary (Hall, 1993; Krane, Oxman-Martinez, & Ducey, 2006; McGuire, 1987; Reid, 2004; Varcoe, 2006). The plethora of ‘founding fathers’ and exclusion of gender through a masculinist view defines most methodological traditions within academia, and was again replicated in PAR; exposing it to critique for its androcentric nature (Mcguire, 1987).

Similarly, Western feminism as an ideology, movement, methodology, and practice continues to be critiqued by racialized, Aboriginal and other marginalized women for promoting a falsely universal feminist approach that in reality centers exclusively on white women’s lives (Mohanty, 2002). Wane, Deliovsy and Lawson (2002) comment that, “Black feminist thought arose in response to the unavailability of space within White women’s feminism” (p. 13) and what Deliovsy (2002) refers to as “white feminist hegemony” (p. 57). Integral to this critique is the historical denial of difference, oppression and intersectionality as critical factors in women’s experience, and the elevation of gender oppression as the primary and defining social location (Calliste & Sefa Dei, 2000).

FPAR, a more recent methodological development, espouses a firm commitment to intersectionality (Maguire, 2001; Reid & Frisby, 2008). Crenshaw (1989, 1994) articulated the concept of intersectionality, focusing on the overlapping marginalization of racialized women resulting from a pattern of racism and sexism or gender-based oppression. Rather than focusing on singular forms of oppression examined in isolation, Crenshaw argued that
the relationship among various types of oppression is critical to understanding lived experiences. The FPAR methodology purports itself to be a “conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women’s multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action” (Reid, Tom, & Frisby 2006). Despite this objective, Reid (2000), in her research with women living in poverty, engages in a self-critique regarding the inability of middle class researchers and service providers to address the class-power stratification between themselves and the participants. This conflict has also been noted in relation to PAR (Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). An additional challenge to FPAR's inclusiveness is the reality that feminism continues to be a contested terrain, mired in its association with white women’s middle class hegemony (Wane et al., 2002). In summary, the above examples denote that FPAR and PAR, while espousing emancipatory intentions, are challenged by historical or present-day exclusionary characteristics.

Focus on Researcher Reflexivity and Subjectivity

PAR is value-based, refuting positivism and claims of neutrality in research and in life (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005; Reid, 2004). Desires to address social injustice or a concern for human welfare are common subjective goals that inspire a PAR undertaking (Bargal, 2008; Dupont, 2008; Varcoe, 2006). Subjectivity should be central and embedded within all phases of a PAR process, as collaboration between researcher and participants on the negotiation of meanings, the identification and assessment of problems, and the planning and evaluation of interventions are core features of this approach (Bargal, 2008; Park, 2001).

What feminist scholar Patti Lather refers to as “unabashedly ideological research” (1986, p. 67), is a cornerstone of a feminist methodology. In contrast to positivist approaches to inquiry, feminist teachers and researchers focus on de-centering the white male as the primary or exclusive research subject and knower, with the inclusion of multiple voices and diverse realities (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Reflexivity on the part of the researcher and a commitment to address the imbalances of power and centralize women’s marginalized knowledge are espoused within feminist theory and methodology (Reid & Frisby, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Similarly, feminist educators have elaborated on the ways in which reflexivity could be used to transform the curriculum, specifically by centering on the lived experiences of those who have been excluded (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993).

Subjectivity and reflexivity in PAR and FR are materialized within FPAR. The researcher’s expression of intent and social location, and a purposeful focus on addressing gender inequality, other forms of oppression and intersectionality are among the subjective elements of the methodology (Reid & Frisby, 2008). With a focus on dialogue and participation inherent to PAR (Park, 2001) and FPAR (Frisby et al., 2005), inter-relational reflexivity (Gilbert & Sliep, 2007) which is the unearthing of power relations and the use of power within the research process, can also be practiced within both methodologies (Reid, 2004; Reid & Frisby, 2008). A potential difference between PAR and FPAR may be the focus of gender within the FPAR methodology, although, as previously stated, numerous PAR
studies by women researchers recognize gender or identify it as one component within an intersectional approach (Varcoe, 2006).

**Education for Personal Transformation**

Paolo Freire’s (1970) critical consciousness or conscientização, grounded in Marxist thought, is a core component of popular education and PAR. Popular or liberatory education focuses on the development of critical consciousness as integral to the development of praxis. Praxis includes deep reflection on positionality, oppression, and related social conditions, with personal transformation as a cornerstone of learning, reflection, and action.

The process of education for the purposes of critical consciousness is highlighted by Boal (1979), in ‘Poetics of The Oppressed’, where passive spectators are encouraged to become engaged actors with transformative capacities. This is the core of popular education. By thinking and acting for themselves, Boal argues, the now engaged actors are no longer watching others who make decisions and act for them. Personal transformation of researcher and participants, based in critical consciousness and self-empowerment, is a foundational underpinning of PAR (Dupont, 2008; Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). While Freire’s critical consciousness continues to be a cornerstone of liberatory education and popular social justice movements, it has also been critiqued as ignoring the domination of men over women and women’s unique realities (Klein, 1983; Reid 2004).

Subjectivity, empowerment, conscientization, and a critical examination of women’s lives are cornerstones of feminist thought and methodological considerations within feminist approaches (de Koning, 1996; Eichler, 1997; Reid & Frisby, 2008). In direct opposition to objectivity claims of empiricists, catalytic validity in FR, viewed as the personal transformation of researcher and participants through the research process as a step to promote self-determination, and open possibilities for social change, is legitimized (Lather, 1986). Feminism’s conceptualization of catalytic validity and empowerment through the research is however, different from the framework of personal transformation based in PAR’s participatory process of collective praxis. FR does not necessarily incorporate PAR’s core tenet of participant involvement throughout the research process (Reid & Frisby, 2008).

FPAR builds on the transformational tenets of both PAR and FR; including critical consciousness and the empowerment and self-determination of women, within an intentional collective dialogue and participatory processes (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Focusing on the interplay of FR and PAR in the formulation of a FPAR approach, Maguire (1987) emphasizes how “participatory research taught me the necessity of being explicit about personal choices and values in the research process. Feminism taught me to recognize that the personal is political” (p. 5). Feminist PAR is congruent with PAR in its stated purpose to achieve personal transformation, although FPAR research primarily focuses on the personal transformation of women (Reid, 2004).
Critical Research Methodologies

FR, PAR, and FPAR share an epistemological underpinning; they are rooted in, arise from and are embedded within a critical research framework. Critical research originates in Marxist and feminist thought (Agger, 2006; Kemmis, 2008), and is connected with anti-oppressive theory and practice (Carey, 2009). Critical theories are grounded in social analysis and debate, with a focus on the root causes of inequity and a vision of a more socially just world (Agger, 2006). Critical research rejects the assumptions of positivism (Agger, 2006), and demonstrates an explicit concern for the moral acceptability of research that does not benefit or has a potentially damaging impact on those who participate (Carey, 2009). While maintaining that critical social theories and methodologies differ in their unique perspectives, Agger (2006) proposes four certain commonalities that link these together: (a) an opposition to positivism and the belief that any approach to theory or theorizing is value free; (b) the view that structural domination is upheld by false consciousness; (c) a belief that social change is rooted in one’s everyday life and being; and (d) a commitment to raise consciousness about the past and current circumstances of oppression, with a focus on an alternate and attainable future acquired through the work of social and political action. Critical research, he asserts, can also be termed as transformative or emancipatory, as it is based on theories that underscore the need for social justice and social change.

FR, PAR, and FPAR fit within the definitions and assumptions of critical research presented above. These methodologies are blatantly subjective, rooted within communities of people, critical of neutrality claims, and focused on anti-oppression, social change and benefits to those who are oppressed (Eichler, 1997; Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991; Hesse-Biber, & Piatelli, 2007; Reid & Frisby, 2008).

While PAR and FPAR can be designated as forms of critical research, PAR has been utilized in various mainstream settings, including businesses and academia, without the inclusion of key elements that underscore a critical worldview (Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). In reviewing FPAR research projects; this methodology does not appear to have undergone the same level of co-optation as PAR, possibly due its more recent emergence or the incorporation of a feminist lens, which is yet contested in mainstream circles.

Flexible and Diverse Theoretical and Methodological Interpretations

There are numerous labels, descriptions, and approaches to PAR, FR, and FPAR. Beginning with the umbrella of action-oriented research, overlapping methodologies with diverse foundations yet complimentary aspirations and methods are often viewed as ‘action research approaches’ (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In addition to PAR, some of the most recognized within this group include action research (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) and participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1994). Fals Borda (2001) noted the multiple streams of PAR, commenting that contemporary PAR “appears to have two motors in combination: one in Third World societies…. and the other in the North” (p. 126). He also highlights the differences in resource allocation for PAR in Northern as opposed to Southern societies, and the impact of
this on the proliferation of publications. A similar distinction could be noted with regards to FPAR research and its dissemination.

As remarked in the last section, a trend to implement only certain aspects of PAR or to utilize the methodology in academic and/or other conservative circles has diminished its commitment to true participation, collaboration and social justice (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman (1991) discuss the issue of co-optation, underscoring the need to emphasize “participatory action researchers’ particular philosophy and practical results in order to counter such faulty assimilation (p. 28-29).

FPAR is a form of action research, and is also housed within FR and what can be viewed as “feminisms” (Maguire, 1996). There are various and multiple interpretations of feminism and FR including anti-racism feminism (Calliste & Sefa Dei, 2000), Black American feminism (Hills-Collins, 2000), Black Canadian feminism (Wane et al., 2002), Asian American feminism (Chow, 1987) and decolonizing feminism (Mohanty, 2006). The transformation of feminism through a significant and enduring critique, as well as a commitment to openness and interpretative possibilities within the methodology, are apparent in conceptualizations of FPAR (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Indeed, some FPAR researchers encourage “open critique and revision” to their proposed model and methods (Reid & Frisby, 2008, p. 94).

In summary, although both PAR and FPAR are grounded in popular movements and particular methods that require flexibility, they have encountered diverse theoretical and methodological interpretations and have multiple abridgements and adaptations. A possible distinction between FPAR and PAR in their flexibility and adaptability is primarily focused on an explicit articulation of gender oppression, or what Maguire (1996) asserts is “an understanding that women, in all our diversity, face some form of oppression and exploitation” (p. 28).

Social Justice and Emancipation
PAR combines education, empowerment, action, and social transformation within the research process (de Koning & Martin, 1996; Maguire, 1987, 2001; MacDonald, 2012). A focus on participation, critical consciousness, including the critical recovery of history, subject-subject relationships among researcher and participant, knowledge generation, and people’s empowerment are underpinnings of PAR’s social justice and emancipation approach (Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991). PAR processes have been used with a number of communities to promote social justice (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Integral to PAR is the intention to “introduce the possibilities for change on multiple levels” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 72), although, as stated previously, this change has been widely interpreted.

With a focus on gender and intersectionality, and the incorporation of PAR’s social justice approaches highlighted above, Reid and Frisby (2008) posit that FPAR researchers “seek to facilitate building knowledge to change the conditions of women’s lives, both individually and collectively, while reconstructing conceptions of power so that power can be used in a
responsible manner” (p. 317). Some argue that feminist teaching should also have an explicit goal of social action (Crawley et al., 2008); this aligns well with PAR’s goal of action for social justice and the mandate of the social work profession (McNicoll, 1999).

While PAR and FPAR emphasize social justice aspirations as integral to research, articulations of the nature of justice and injustice may differ between the two approaches. For instance, the gynocentric nature of FPAR is exemplified in Maguire’s (2001) description of social change as being “the long haul struggle to create a world in which the full range of human characteristics, resources, experiences, and dreams are available to all our children” (p. 66). The stated focus on children and caregiving for the next generations punctuates the feminist influence within FPAR. Although a women-centered interpretation of social justice is neither a fundamental tenet or readily evident throughout all PAR projects, PAR continues to be highly adopted and theorized by women (Brydon-Miller, 2004; Park et al., 1993), therefore transforming the methodology through praxis.

CONCLUSION
This paper highlights the congruencies and some of the salient differences between FPAR, and its antecedents PAR and FPAR. There are many similarities among these theories and their conceptualization as educational tools for personal and social transformation and emancipatory research methodologies. Differences among the approaches are primarily related to FR and FPAR’s inclusion of a gynocentric perspective and a focus on theory and research topics related to women’s oppression. PAR, however, continues to be adopted and utilized by women, which is reflected in the shift away from androcentrism and an omission of women’s lived realities. As FPAR is a more recent methodological construct than FR or PAR, core issues related to intersectionality, such as the struggle to end racism, class/poverty, gender inequality, and other forms of oppression are more firmly embedded (Reid & Frisby, 2008). These may be the wisdom of lessons learned from white feminism’s exclusionary approach, and PAR’s androcentric lens.

As an education tool, FPAR benefits from PAR’s aspirations of developing critical consciousness through popular or liberatory education, the feminist pursuit of empowerment, and the inherent drive towards social justice as foundational to both frameworks. PAR increasingly occupies space within educational settings, putting into question the post-positivist hegemony and claims of neutrality in teaching, learning and research. Building on this development and FPAR’s key emancipatory principle of centering and accounting for intersectionality, a greater inclusion of FPAR within educational settings is called for. Through FPAR, greater opportunities for the advancement of understanding and personal and social transformation within the realms of teaching and action research can be realized.

REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

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**Liza Lorenzetti** is an instructor, researcher and PhD candidate in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary, Canada. Her interest in research leading to social change is based on twenty-five years of experience as a social work practitioner and activist working on a myriad of interconnected social issues such as gender-based violence, poverty, peace, anti-racism.

**Dr. Christine Walsh** is a professor of social work at the University of Calgary. As an activist and an educator, Christine employs feminist informed and experiential pedagogical approaches to teach epistemology, research methodology and social justice. In her program of research, she uses action and arts-based methods to promote social justice among disenfranchised populations.

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