A PLACE FOR PAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY?
A Guest Editorial

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It is perhaps fitting to take stock of where we are after nearly three decades of pushing the boundaries of research methodology. And more specifically, is there (still?) a place for PAR as an alternative, even subversive or revolutionary methodology when viewed against the backdrop of traditional positivist approaches that traditionally defined academia.

CONTESTING ORIGINS
As many readers of CJAR will be aware, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has its origins in the second half of the 20th century. Its genesis can be traced back to work conducted by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in his development of Action Research (AR). While Lewin's work has continued to be influential on both PAR theory and practice, contemporary approaches have increasingly been shaped by several other intellectual traditions including Marxism, feminism, post positivism, and Freirian approaches to adult education. Thus, although Action Research introduced the notion that academic researchers could legitimately collaborate with individuals and groups (usually professionals e.g. teachers) while maintaining their integrity as experts, PAR has continuously sought to critique and challenge this relation between the researcher and his/her research ‘subjects’ by insisting on the inherently hierarchical nature of conventional research (including AR) and its propensity to distort knowledge producing practices across a broad range of social contexts.

THE PRICE OF POWER
The hierarchical nature of research, however, is merely one aspect of the conceptual practices of power (Smith, 1990) that regulate and define the production of what is considered to be legitimate knowledge. Drawing on critical approaches to social theory and research, practitioners of PAR have increasingly questioned not only the social
organisation of conventional research, but the ways in which it has served to reproduce the relations of ruling within contemporary capitalism (Smith, 1990). For example, in their interviews with over 40 British social anthropologists, Mills and Ratcliffe (2012) have observed how the concept of the ‘value chain’ (borrowed from the private sector) has infiltrated the criteria by which UK national funding councils award research grants so that ‘The impetus is to increase the rate of what the bureaucrats now call ‘research outputs” and, where possible, to create commercial value from publicly funded research’ (p. 151). This is not limited to Britain. As Canadian researchers are well aware, Tri-Council funding agencies (SSHRC, CIHR, NSERC) have been under similar pressure in recent years to ensure that the research they fund will also have defined outputs and commercial value. At my own university for instance, one might easily receive an invitation to an event such as one in which celebrated “researchers who were issued patents, licensed technologies, launched new companies, and achieved other significant results related to taking innovative research from “bench to society” in the past year.” Within this new framework, the “why” of research is clear.

Shifting the definition, parameters and, ultimately, the purposes of research is not without political repercussions. In the contemporary era of global neo-liberal capitalism, where patents are rewarded with bravura, and new companies constitute the product of the academy, this mentalité has increasingly infiltrated broad fields of research in the social and natural sciences to a point where it has begun to define the epistemological foundations of entire fields of social inquiry (e.g. consider the emergence of the learning sciences since the early 1990s). As Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) have convincingly argued Neoliberals aimed to develop a thoroughgoing re-education effort for all parties to alter the tenor and meaning of political life: nothing more, nothing less [...] Their efforts were aimed primarily at winning over intellectuals and opinion leaders of future generations, and their primary tool was redefining the place of knowledge in society, which also became the central theme in their theoretical tradition [italics added] (p. 431).

**A Hopeful Future for PAR**
As more disciplines are likely to succumb to and are colonized by neo-liberal relations of knowledge production, it is likely that PAR and related forms of social research – e.g. the ‘other’ AR of Activist Research (Choudry & Kuyek, 2012), as well as Indigenous Research Methodology (Jordan, 2014) - that are relatively autonomous from the academy may have increasing relevance in a world dominated by market fundamentalism (Sandel, 2012).

The participatory methodologies that are named here also closely ally themselves with social movements that challenge and resist the common sense hegemony of a neoliberal mindset. They upend and thereby contest notions of ‘knowledge mobilization’ and ‘integrated/knowledge translation’ so popular with Tri-Council funding agencies over the last decade. The knowledge producing practices of PAR and these other methodologies are organic in that they arise from the social movements in which researchers are often embedded. Because of this, the research that they produce has to be accessible to
participants in social movements, the general public, media and government agencies. They also prefigure radically different forms of social organization and practice for the research process. This ranges from the researcher being prepared to be taken as a ‘willing hostage’ (Kapoor, 2009), to the recognition that research tools, other than the standard survey or interview, need to be explored with particular populations (e.g. talking circles’ of indigenous people). This requires social and educational researchers to be open to embracing different cosmologies, ontological principles, and epistemological standpoints that may well conflict with and contradict their own training.

Unlike conventional research conducted within the academy, PAR and these other methodologies share some common principles and values that do not only offer alternative pathways forward, but propose the possibility of establishing knowledge producing practices based on participatory, democratic and inclusive modes of inquiry, rather than practices that follow the neo-liberal marketplace. These have emerged either from the fringes of institutionalized scholarship or have roots in social movements outside of it (activist research and indigenous research methodology). They are not bound by the ravenous traditions and conventions of the corporate university (Turk, 2000).

So – to answer the why question posed in this editorial’s title; Yes. As the contributions to this issue by Gardner and Hammett show in relation to AR and transformative learning; Giles and Darrock’s discussion of community participatory research and post-colonial feminist theory; Oh Neill’s study of children at risk; and Wong’s AR pedagogy reveal, PAR is alive and gearing up for a long and healthy future.

REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

Dr. Steven Jordan, current chair of the Department of Integrated Studies in the Faculty of Education at McGill University, is this issue’s guest editor. His research interests focus on exploring how forms of participatory action research can be used to enhance the learning of adults and aboriginal peoples in Canada.