PAR on the Couch: A Discussion Between Disciplines

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PAR on the Couch
A Discussion Between Disciplines

Maya Benish-Weisman and María Elena Torre

Abstract   The discipline of psychology covers many fields under its professional umbrella (e.g., cognitive, social, clinical, neuropsychological). Too often discussions of research and theory are conducted in one field with almost no connection to any of the other fields. While this strategy creates specialization and expertise, it leaves little space for reevaluation or reexamination of basic assumptions inside a particular field. This paper wishes to challenge this tradition by creating a conversation in which participatory action research (PAR) is looked at from the perspective of clinical psychology.

The idea for this dialogue emerged during my (Maya's) participation in a course on PAR during my postdoctoral year at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. This course, taught by Professor Michelle Fine, was my first significant encounter with PAR. The process of reading the materials in class and hearing about the projects people were involved with was both fascinating and strange, evoking many questions. I often felt my clinical perspective painted the ideas and words in class in different colors than perhaps the authors or speakers intended. The course left me with the desire to discuss my thoughts and questions with an experienced PAR researcher. María Elena Torre, whose piece we read in class, gladly agreed.

What follows is a dialogue between María and I in which we share our own perspectives on different themes related to PAR and therapy. We hope that this dialogue might open a larger discussion between two communities not always in conversation, that both clinical psychologists and participatory action researchers might take pause and reexamine their practices and ways of knowing from across a shared table.

There are some shared theoretical points between PAR and therapy. For example, if we extend the definition of research to learning through consistent and systematic ways, therapy, and here I mean a dynamic approach, can be considered a researching of self through guidance. Moreover, both approaches do not just remain on the explorative level; they are aimed at affecting change in people lives.

However, there are areas of discord between PAR and clinical approaches. For example, I have struggled to locate the borders in PAR work. The borders between what happens inside the project (that is, within the research group during the group meetings) and what happened in the outside world. Does the group exist outside the meeting room? Are there any borders? Is it important to have borders? Or, on the contrary, is it important that there be no borders at all? I will return to this question later.

Here I wish to give a short and very broad background about classical dynamic therapy. Dynamic therapy is interested in the unconscious dynamic of the client. The unconscious level is ruled by fears, fantasies, or suppressed memories and emotions. The unconscious influences the everyday life of the client, but since the client has no access to the unconscious, she has no control over this part that affects her emotions, cognition, and behavior. The goal of therapy is to uncover the unconscious dynamics. As result of this process the client is no longer ruled by her unconscious, but achieves more freedom and control over her life.

Since clinical psychology focuses on the unconscious, reading between the lines is part of the life of the clinical psychologist. Ruthellen Josselson (2004), the clinical psychologist and narrative researcher, has developed two strategies based on Ricoeur that I have found useful for textual analysis: the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. While the former tends to accept the words in the text as is, a hermeneutics of suspicion looks below the written words to find hidden meanings. Clinical psychologists often use the second strategy. From this point of view, I am curious about the space between the declaration and ideology of PAR researchers and what happens in the world. That is, I'm interested in the space between what is being told openly to what happens latently. For example, in therapy it is clear that the role of the therapist and patient are different and it is understood that they are not equals. (Although there is an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which the relationship is one-sided as opposed to mutual.) I think that the situation in PAR is more complex. All the members of the research group are called co-researchers; but do they all share equal standing? How does the ideology of equality function in reality? It is with these questions in mind that I began my conversation with María.

María: It is interesting to think about PAR within a clinical frame. Although I must admit that I am not completely at ease with this exercise. I think my discomfort lies in knowing that at times PAR has been dismissed by assumptions that we focus too much on the "process" or nature of the research team and not enough on the research itself. I worry that a prolonged public conversation about the dynamics of the research team might feed simplistic attacks on the "scientific rigor" of participatory research, and

fuel comments like those I have heard from university colleagues that PAR represents "activism" not scholarship. Mutually exclusive categories, of course!

However, as someone very interested in participation and the *participatory* aspects of PAR, certainly a clinical perspective, as well as a perspective that pays attention to group dynamics, to how power is negotiated for example, is useful in thinking about how people can participate as equally as possible within a research team. And I am of the position that the more equally people are able participate, the more rigorous the research. But participation is not easy. It does not just happen. PAR collectives are always made up of unequally positioned people. Sometimes this is more obvious than others, but whether it's by class, community member/academic, prisoner/free, professor/student, race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, you name it; differences in power are at play. So what becomes important is *what we do with these differences* to make our research collectives power-full. Because to a certain extent these differences are the very reason we engage PAR work, right? We believe that certain questions are best answered by collectives that represent a variety of experiences living and studying the particular injustice. So what do I mean when I say the importance lies in what we do with these differences? We must *work* them! We must heed the lessons of Audre Lorde (1984), Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and remember the creative sparks that fly when differences are engaged within and across bodies.

PAR provides a unique opportunity in research settings for people to come together around issues of great importance to them – issues like the need for quality education programs in prison – issues that people are often very differently situated in relation to. In the best of situations, research collectives take the opportunity to recognize the ways in which members are differently situated to each other and to the questions they are studying. All of these differences are talked about and acknowledged in an ongoing way throughout the research and continually put into a larger social historical context. In addition, collectives spend time thinking about what resources each member brings to the table – materially (access to computers, space, funding), culturally (histories, practices, traditions, languages, codes), and practically (energy, time, sense of humor!). All of this early work in the collective allows members to come to understand each other as multi-layered, multi-resourced contributors to the research, with the goal of creating an identity of co-researcher that moves us far beyond insider or outsider.

But like I said, this aspect of the work is not easy – most of us have not grown up in spaces where power is discussed or worked collectively. To be sure there are times when PAR collectives do not work power and difference and end up slipping into reproducing traditional hierarchies. PAR researchers must be intentional about power

and difference. But that is part of what is so exciting about this work! When they are, not only does the validity of the research design skyrocket, but the research ends up creating spaces for co-researchers to try out new relationships and understandings of self, connections to 'others' as well as to ideas and issues. What could be better?

Maya: These kinds of words really make me admire PAR. But my wish is to look closer. For example, the sentence: "All of these differences are talked about and acknowledged in an ongoing way throughout the research and put into a larger social historical context." How is it done? Deliberately? Just when a problem happens? Is it possible to look at the differences all the time? Are there times when it is easier not to talk about the differences? Are there times when talking might be dangerous? Is believing in the same purpose enough to bridge or reconcile the differences?

María: In my experiences with participatory action research, the project begins with an injustice or a problem. In other words, the people who eventually become the research collaborative usually come together around their desire to respond to an injustice in their community, to better understand a problem in the hopes of making change, or to document the effects of unfair conditions or practices in everyday lives. PAR is about extending notions of expertise beyond the academy. It is about recognizing that the people most impacted by an injustice very often have deep insight into that injustice and should frame the research questions, design the methods, conduct the analysis, and decide what research products are most meaningful.

However, in order for a research collaborative to participate together as equally as possible, the group as a whole needs to set the research table, if you will. What I mean is that part of recognizing the group's multiple positionalities and knowing the resources everyone brings to the table is that there needs to be a time and place set a side, early on, for everyone to locate themselves within the collective. Particular knowledges – research methods, community context and history, shared practices, relevant social history, and politics – need to be shared across the group. This needs to occur in addition to (as it will inform) the usual conversations about deciding research questions, determining research designs, and designing appropriate methods among others. Conversations also need to be had about each individual's desires for the research, possible research outcomes, intended audiences, potential vulnerabilities, scaffolding support for researchers closest to the point of scrutiny. Should community groups or other organizations be called in as allies? What will happen when the research collective disbands? Who will be left with their ankles in potentially hostile waters?

To answer your question, I think because difference and power exist all around us

all of the time it is not so much a choice whether to talk about it or not – it's happening! In other words, there are always layers and levels of inequalities among research teams. But, again, it is what you do with these inequalities that matter. In my mind stronger research *addresses difference*! To me the danger comes when we deny it – when we pretend it is not there. It is within this denial, for example, that we don't ask the pointed question in the interview, that we overlook silences in the data, that we don't push the analysis. As a result our overall research suffers. I will give you a small illustration of this. I was working in a PAR project with a group of middle school youth researchers who were designing a survey about inequalities in their school. Two young women were debating whether or not to ask participants race and ethnicity in the demographic section. The White young woman worried that to do so would just "continue to divide us" while the African American young woman argued that it was important information necessary to make claims about the kinds of experiences specific students, particularly African American and Asian students, were having. Now if we had just glossed over this tense conversation, rather than engaged it – and by engage it, I mean had we not stopped to probe, without shame, what each young woman meant with her position – we would have lost out on layers of important analysis and later findings. Instead, we reached into the tension for a rich discussion of the implications of "colorblindness" and how such a discourse in the young woman's school was mirroring an institutional resistance to examining how racially and ethnically diverse students were experiencing school. It was an important moment on multiple levels, in terms of the research, we deepened our understanding of survey development and how ideologies operate; and it terms of intergroup relations, the youth researchers gained experience or practice, you might say, in how to have honest, even if difficult, conversations about race and racism.

Maya: You mention that PAR typically begins with a "problem." So does therapy. However, unlike PAR in which the problem is defined by the group, in therapy, the problem is initiated by the client and is brought to the therapist. Sometimes, the encounter between the therapist and the client changes and modifys the focus or the subject of the problem. Regarding the diversity of the group in PAR, in therapy, the therapist should hld a double position: on the one hand she need to see the problem from the client's perspective, or as Bollas (1987) phrases it, part of the therapist need to feel sick like the client in order to be able to help. On the other hand, there should be some distance, or some dissimilarity between the client and the therapist. Taking different perspectives by the therapist allow the client to reexamine former inflexible structures. It seems that in PAR the differences between people are not so much a

barrier, but the reason that change happens. Moreover, in therapy the gap between the experience of the client and the experience of the therapist can initiate change. For example, when the therapist fails to understand the client experience (empathic failure) to certain extent – where it does not break the therapeputic relationship – can be a catalyst for new insights.

Your example with the middle school youth researchers is very interesting, and it makes me wonder about your own place in the group. First, I wish to make a comment not from my clinical perspective, but from my Israeli perspective. During my time in the States I came to understand how differences in status are embedded in the English language. While the words "Professor" and "University" enjoy capitalization, "youth group" or "neighborhood" do not. Capitalization does not exist in Hebrew. From this perspective I wonder about the situation of PAR research, especially when it is done with youth. How can researchers from the "University", who are older, privileged, and more educated, be considered by themselves, and/or by the group, as equals? I guess that I wonder: do you find it hard sometimes not to feel different or privileged?

María: There is no question that privilege and difference are always in operation in a group—just as they are in the world around us. I don't think it should be the goal of any PAR collective to attempt to ignore these differences in power and privilege. What collectives should be struggling with, so that they can achieve a more equal level of participation in the research process, is how these differences – how the co-researchers' relationships to power and privilege – impact their ability to participate. So, again, it is what you *do* with difference that matters. Rather than be paralyzed or guilt-ridden by your privilege in a given research setting, think about what you have to offer the collective, materially and intellectually. Think individually and collectively about how it is that people in your category have ended up disproportionately benefiting from the social arrangements you are perhaps studying. Think individually and collectively about resources in communities that have historically been discounted or overlooked. Most people lead complex lives and embody biographies of varying amounts power and privilege. I do not mean to suggest some relative state here, but rarely are people "purely" one or the other, right? In the best of PAR research, collectives are organized so that co-researchers are able to engage the data and each other on multiple levels, facilitating bridging across different kinds of personal and social experiences, of *both* marginalization and privilege.

So in PAR "working difference" – by which I mean recognizing it, and using it to connect to each other, in order to understand each others experiences, each others unique history and resources – is important to building the collective and creating the

conditions necessary for more equal participation. *And it is also crucial to increasing the rigor of the research*. The more collaborative the research, the more the research questions, methods, analyses, interpretation, and products are informed by, and therefore benefit from, all the theoretical lenses (independent and intersecting) brought by the co-researchers.

Now, to your question about the capitalized/rich "University," I have come to recognize that while the academy is a place of privilege, those of us in it hold many different identities. At this point in the history of US-based PAR that has emerged from academic settings, I would venture to say a fair amount of the recent research has been undertaken by folks who are somehow connected to communities they are participating with. I don't think this is coincidental. Traditional social scientific research has not done right by communities of color, poor and working class communities, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, most marginalized folks for that matter. PAR provides academics coming from these communities a way of doing research *with* that stands in opposition to this traditional history of researching *on – or all over* to be more accurate! It allows expertise to reside inside their communities, alongside the ivory tower. While this shift does not solve everything – again, issues of power, representation, etc. must still be addressed – I think it's an appealing stance – this and PAR's commitment to using research for social change. For those of us who never thought we had a place inside the academy, not just because the academy "wouldn't have us" but also because we ethically didn't feel comfortable with some of the epistemological frameworks that were being used, PAR creates new spaces.

Maya: Your comment regarding the ivory tower evokes a comparison between the inventiveness of PAR and the novelty of progressive fields in clinical psychology. As I see it, PAR engages in ongoing debate with the traditional research. While the traditional research claims to be objective and therefore scientific and precise, where the researcher holds the knowledge that the subjects passively provide; PAR wishes to use relationship and knowledge that is shared between the different participants/co-researchersto understand the subjective reality. There is parallel in clinical psychology. While a traditional psychoanalytic perspective considers the therapist to be an objective authority that holds the knowledge,more recent perspectives, like the relational psychology, hold different views. Relational theory argues that therapeutic progress is achieved through a reciprocal process between the therapist and the client (Berman, 1997). Knowledge is not imposed on the client, but rather discovered by him in a shared environment.

It appears that in both of our sub-fields of psychology progressive perspectives

are taking hold. These shifts in research and therapy reflect anacknowledgment that knowledge is not located in one person or posessed by a single group. Further, the disillusion from the hypothesis that we begin with a "blank screen", promotes research methods that are more egalitarian and less hierarchical.

Regarding your comments about group discussion, since clinical psychology is about talking (hey, some people will say that is *all* we do…), I really think that speaking and revealing are important ways of understanding. The first patient of Freud's used the metaphor of "pipe cleaning." So I support this approach, but sometimes talking is not that easy. And a lot of effort in therapy focuses (from the therapist's side) upon whether to talk and when it is appropriate to do so. I wonder if it is always possible to talk in PAR. Are there subjects that you felt you couldn't talk about, or topics that had this explosive quality such that it felt better not to touch? I wonder if you can think of conversation that you feel it would have been better if it had never happened.

María: I'm not sure that I can think of a conversation that I wish never happened – though I am sure there are instances, probably many in my work with youth co-researchers, where I could have negotiated a conversation more smoothly than I did. In truth one of the things I love about doing PAR is that it is precisely about asking hard questions. That it invites groups of people to dig into the uncomfortable, not for the sake of hurting each other, but in an ongoing attempt to understand. The nature of PAR (usually) draws together people who are passionate, or at least very interested, in something that is quite often negatively impacting their lives. So, you have a group gathered that is trying to understand something in order to somehow change it, even if it is impacting them all differently—some really terribly, some not so bad, and some (sometimes) not personally at all.

I have seen youth for example in PAR collectives raise difficult questions about issues that have been bothering them in their schools and communities for a long time, but they felt they had no place to discuss them. In some ways I think PAR becomes useful in creating what Edward Soja (1996) would call a "third space" whereby collectives use research to open up—and analyze—these kinds of questions. In fact, the additional layer of data shifts the conversation away from the personal as needed, to create a dynamic conversation that bounces back and forth between individual and systemic levels of analysis. It can be hard to study issues of injustice that you are living with/within on a daily basis—particularly if you are studying them with people who experience the injustice differently than you or not at all. In the Opportunity Gap Project I often noticed how youth co-researchers would move between their lived experiences of educational injustice and the data we had collected. The data seemed to

serve not only as a buffer so that it wasn't "about me," but at times to strengthen and embolden, "its not only about me but my experience mirrors the 95% of the Latino youth we interviewed across 13 school districts."

Maya: You describe how knowledge can be a shield that protects us from feelings of inferiority and distress. It is a well-known defense mechanism called intellectualism. Instead of experiencing stress and discomfort, one can think about his or her life from distanced intellectual perspective.   Knowledge and education from that perspective can serve as a mechanism that helps the individual to cope with his personal and social circumstances.

I wish to return to my initial question regarding borders in PAR. In therapy the borders are very strict since that is what protects the process; the therapy takes place in a specific place during a specific time, behind a closed door. And it is very clear that what happens in the room stays in the room. The borders are very clear between the therapist and the patient as well. Their relationship exists just inside the therapy room and cannot transform into a social or romantic relationship outside the room. Moreover, occasionally meetings outside the therapy room might feel weird. This is because such a meeting outside the therapy room disturbs the clear separation between the therapy (what happens inside the treatment room) and the "real world" and can feel as an interruption of the intimacy and privacy that exist behind the closed therapy room door.

From this perspective, I wonder what the relations are outside the project time (and space) in PAR. Friendship? Project-mate? Are the definitions clear to everybody? What happens in cases where these roles aren't clear?

María: In the PAR projects I have been a member of people have come together around a particular project. We have become friends through the work and through our shared commitments to social justice, knowledge building, and perhaps most importantly interest in the research effort itself. I'm not sure there are the hard boundaries in PAR work around relationships as there are in traditional clinical practice. That said, there can be many limitations to relationships between PAR co-researchers once a project is over or even outside of meeting times. Depending on institutional settings (schools, prisons), work obligations, health, school, family and community responsibilities, individuals may have many prior commitments and/or life challenges. Even within the PAR collective itself, it is a fantasy to think that every one will be able to contribute or participate in exactly the same way, all of the time. People will likely want

to do different things at different times, will have different resources, strength and interests to share. Part of our challenge is to rethink how we value different research activities, products, and venues, whether it be writing, speaking, performing, or publishing in a refereed journal, community newspaper, or comic book.

PAR projects are inherently action-oriented. Often the initial inspiration for the research is a hope that science can be used to inspire social change – that in the face of scientific "evidence" change will take place. However, just as the nature of evidence must be determined by the collective, so too must the nature of appropriate, or relevant, action. Action in PAR looks different for all projects depending on the context. Typically action is an ongoing part of the process, rather than something that happens only at the very end. Sarah Zeller-Berkman (2007) has written beautifully about the cyclical process of action in participatory research. But all of this raises interesting questions about how we understand action and about what constitutes change.

Maya: Another question I have related to borders refers to the borders between the researcher and the research subjects. From a clinical perspective this discussion relates to how close the current theme being talked about in a specific therapy coincides with processes that the therapist has gone through (or is going through) him- or herself. For example, a therapist might suffer from marital problems while advising a client with similar problems. The therapist should be very careful not to introduce her own personal feelings into the therapy sessions. In this case the therapist might suggest solutions or directions to the client (e.g. leaving home) that she is too afraid to take herself, but might not be appropriate in the client's life. However, some therapists claim that similarities between events or situations in the therapist's and client's lives can advance therapy, particularly when these similarities are revealed. For example, a client struggling with a sick parent might find comfort knowing that his therapist is coping with the same challenge.

I wonder how these issues are addressed in PAR? Is it more effective to have personal knowledge about the problem being studied? For example, do you need to suffer from discrimination to fight discrimination? Or, on the contrary, can it help a group to come from the outside, to look at a problem from a different angle?

María: Your questions raise some of the foundational ideas behind why PAR can be both a necessary and important epistemological approach. When I worked with the PAR collective that produced *Changing minds: The impact of college in a maximum security prison* (2001), it was crucial to our investigation that some members of the

collective were prisoners and some were not. The women in the prison brought knowledge and layers of analysis that we on the outside would never have been able to access. And the women from The Graduate Center (of the City University of New York) brought knowledge and an outside perspective that had been closed off from the inmates. For example, during an early data analysis session at the prison a Graduate Center researcher was concerned that the women interviewed were presenting narratives of split selves – "good" and "bad": had dominant discourses surrounding prisoners become so toxic that they were being internalized as "self-hatred"? Inmate researchers interrupted with an alternate explanation, recognizing that yes dominant discourses had seeped through the prison walls and prisoners were well aware of them. Our interviewees had used redemption stories as a way to create an opening for a later story of personal change and, for some, even social critique. These were not fractured selves, but sophisticated women prisoners, reading the social and political climate, while narrating complicated, at times conflicted, lives. There were many instances where we pushed the research design, interpretation, and analyses in part because we were a collaborative of "insiders" and "outsiders."

Your comments also raise a set of questions about ethics and responsibilities. I have come to feel that PAR itself is an ethical response to research in particular settings. In this way it moves beyond simply a method, and approaches a politic. It's about recognizing the communal aspects of knowledge making. It's about no longer researching *on* communities, but *with* communities. It's about research collaboratives in which particular community groups take the lead in defining the issues to be studied, and then decide the appropriate methods, design, analysis, etc. As we discussed earlier, this is a radical departure in what has been the traditional relationship between "the academy" and "the community." What is perhaps most exciting is that in the best PAR projects we are writing new relationships into and between the academy and communities. There are moments where, through these projects, we are changing what the face of the academy looks like, what people can expect, not just in terms of ethical practice, but in the form of social responsibility from academics and research. When these projects work well, not only is there the energy of discovery that is implicit in all research, there is also the experience of living new relationships that are often more diverse, and of embodying a politic that is often more participatory and democratic then our regular lives. And I have found that the marriage of these two things to be both deeply engaging and, sadly, very rare. Youth co-researchers I have worked with have often told me how they have never been able to find similar spaces after our PAR projects were over. I think this is a sad commentary on how public life is currently organized that there are few (if any) spaces where this type of engagement exists.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all schools had a permanent rotating PAR team instead of a student government? If all city halls had an attached PAR collective? If all city agencies had to have a PAR team with members drawn from the communities they were serving? I wonder what this could mean for the clinical community…maybe there could be PAR collectives made up of clinicians and particular treatment populations that were not organized around therapy, but to examine and speak back to the literature on their group. I would think their research would be a wonderful and important addition to clinical training programs. Can you imagine?

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