Participatory action research in social movements

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Abstract

This chapter outlines why participatory action research (PAR) can be useful to social movements, and how to make it so. PAR involves movement activists carrying out research geared to their own needs, in a democratic process that transforms movement relationships and practice. The chapter is grounded in a 25-year experience of supporting activists carrying out PAR, and shows the wide range of different shapes it can take as activists reflect together on their own practice. It argues that this is far less risky than trial and error; focusses on the thing activists have most control over (their own actions); that its participatory and collective educational dimensions benefit movements politically; and that PAR supports movements becoming learning actors. Despite the diversity of actually-existing PAR, the chapter highlights some core principles that can be distilled from the experiences discussed to make PAR genuinely useful to movements.

How can movements think about themselves and their activity in genuinely democratic and bottom-up ways, without giving power away to outside "experts"? Is it possible for this reflection not just to start from movements' own needs and ways of thinking but to ask serious questions about their effectiveness at responding to those needs and to improve how they think? Can "research" be a genuinely political activity carried out in line with movements' own best practice?

The promise of participatory action research (PAR) is that all of these are possible, if rather than starting from researcher and movement as two separate things to be brought together we think of research as something that movements already do to some extent, not always systematically, and that can be developed. In other words, we need to put movements' own thought in the centre rather than imagine "research" as something that happens from outside, according to academic logics (Barker and Cox 2011, Cox 2014).

At its simplest, *action research* is a systematic way of producing or articulating knowledge that changes the situation through its own process (rather than by how people use the result). When people who are already doing something together take time to stand back and reflect from it, this often changes how they do it. *Participatory* action research, though, means that the people doing the reflection are also central to deciding to do the research, choosing its themes and working out its process. All action research is transformative; participatory action research is also democratic.

PAR is well known in many areas of academia as a method for producing relevant knowledge and theory. This is particularly the case where – as in social movements and community-based research – there is already a collective social actor with its own conscious knowledge needs, research questions, structures and places for collective thinking, learning, discussion and knowledge production (Gramsci 1948, Eyerman and Jamison 1991, Wainwright 1994, Langdon 2020); but PAR is also widely used in settings where this collective agency is partly a desired outcome of the process, as for example in educational research or with disadvantaged and disaggregated populations.

Hence it is possible to present a stylised form of PAR in how-to form, as a step-by-step method of data collection; or to present it as a way of thinking about research in social movements. See e.g. Rappaport, this volume; Rahman 1993; Foote-Whyte 1990. The adult education literature on movement knowledge production is also important (e.g. Hall et al 2012; Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

This chapter, however, is mostly interested in whether and why it is useful for movements, activists, communities in struggle and radical organisations of different kinds. The easiest way into that is to tell a personal story of working with PAR.

PAR in social movement practice – a personal journey

I grew up around social movements and became an activist in secondary school, long before becoming an academic. I got through school, undergrad and PhD study on one scholarship after another, for about 13 years – meaning that so long as I paid enough attention to study, I could devote the rest of my time to activism in various movements. The more I knew about how movements vary across time and place, the more questions I had about individual movement strategies and how we could make a bigger change in the world. Then, halfway through my PhD, the money ran out and I had to get a fulltime job, teaching care workers at what was then Waterford Regional Technical College.

For the following 25 years, supporting other people's research – on taught Masters, research Masters, PhDs and postdoctoral projects – was a substantial part of my working life, among my most intense workplace relationships and those I learned most from. At the time of writing, for the first time in a quarter of a century, all my current students have completed their projects, so that I have the chance to stand back and think about the experience.

In 1996, like today, I was one of the few people researching social movements in Ireland, and this was the main reason people contacted me about possible collaborations. Most were already movement activists, and together we elaborated what became a specific approach to participatory action research in social movement practice.

At times this happened in fairly individual ways, but for much of the period there were substantial groups of people working in the area. At one time the corridor in Maynooth Sociology department where my PhDs were based was known as "Commie Row"; while for a five-year period I collaborated with colleagues in the dept and in Adult and Community Education on a Masters in activism, in the course of which I taught a module on PAR in social movement practice to Masters students, with the participation of my PhDs and sometimes others from outside.

We also piggybacked a significant number of research events, including a conference, a couple of symposiums, and many different workshops, on this body of activists. At one point we toyed with the idea of collectively producing a book on our experiences; if this chapter is told from my point of view, that in no way means that the ideas reflected here are all mine[1].

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[1] An incomplete list of people whose work and ideas are visible in this chapter includes (roughly chronologically) Margaret Gillan, Martin Geoghegan, Pat McBride, Jean Bridgeman, Terry Dunne, Hilary Darcy, Asia Rutkowska, Anna Szołucha, Samuel Udogbo, Don Marut, Christina Bermingham, Alberto

PAR and movements as an alternative starting point for knowledge

My own starting-point, which most of those I worked with shared, was a certain degree of self-confidence in movements' own ability to produce knowledge, and a lack of willingness to allow purely academic logics dictate what we could think about. This is perhaps easier in Ireland than in many other parts of the global North, for two reasons. One is that as a postcolonial state, born out of revolution and social movements, where development and modernisation were still driving forces at the end of the twentieth century, an engaged role for academia (not only the social sciences but also the humanities) is a relatively normal and legitimate one. It is not so hard to make the argument that our work as academics can and should involve serious and respectful dialogue with movements and communities in struggle as well as the bourgeois public sphere or policy-makers. (This does not of course mean that the university views all such dialogues with equal benevolence; but the principle is useful.)

The other is that – as Williams (1989) articulates in "Culture is Ordinary" – the idea represented in much French or Anglophone literature where thought and reflection are somehow the property of elites and ordinary people's role is to watch telly and read tabloids has relatively little purchase on Irish realities, even before today when well over half of 18-21s take part in third-level education. Before independence, the counter-discourses of Catholic nationalism challenged Whig historiographies in which the coloniser civilised the natives; an Irish language with its own longer written history and self-conscious culture countered the language of London; the peasants fought back against the landlords, and eventually won the land.

After independence, the defeated voices of the urban working class and socialism countered those of propertied wealth; feminists, LGBTQIA+ voices, counter cultures and the survivors of carceral Catholicism preserved hidden transcripts against the official pieties of religious patriarchy; the oppressed ethnic minority of Travellers maintained their own culture in the teeth of brutal violence; and from the late 1960s solidarity with northern Catholics challenged the 26-county use of anti-republicanism as an Irish equivalent to anti-communism.

When I first taught tutorials in the mid-1990s, the new business studies and economics students came from houses where the only books were coffee table ones, while my working-class and lower middle-class friends read far more widely and were steeped in musical and mythological cultures even as they dropped out of university. All of this means that Irish movements are used to sustaining their own discourses and institutions outside of official high culture, and lack the deference or anti-intellectualism that often surprises me in movements elsewhere.

Understanding PAR from the academic and movement points of view

Given this, a typical conversation started with being approached by someone with an activist background who wanted to "study the movement" at university, but assuming that the university would set its own terms for "real research". My response was that what we should actually start from what the movement needed to know, and work with

people in the movement to produce that knowledge in a meaningful form: the would-be researcher was usually pleasantly surprised.

Of course this is not the only possible relationship between movements and academia. Ireland like elsewhere has many people who believe that researching an issue is itself necessarily a radical political intervention; at times, taking people down to see the shelves of postgraduate theses gathering dust is a sufficient answer. Of course researching an issue *can* be a useful political contribution – when it is done in dialogue with movements and the results are fed strategically into the movement's own public arguments, using the added prestige of academic research.

But the vast majority of "critical research" never leaves the dusty shelves – or the paywalled journals – and remains largely unknown to activists let alone to the general public. By no means everyone has the skills to turn research into readable pieces for mainstream media consumption, or into the formats that may be effective for e.g. policy-makers (even if we assume goodwill and sympathy with movements' goals on the part of states and corporate media). Most of the time, the only product of critical research is the critical researcher themselves, as a radical academic looking for a job.

It is also entirely possible to research *movements* rather than issues, but on the terms set by academic enquiry, asking only questions that happen to be of interest within the changing trends of particular disciplines and fields. It is a way to make an academic career, whether as an ex-activist or otherwise; it only benefits movements accidentally, when their own needs coincide with the scholarly fad of the day.

My argument to would-be researchers involved in movements was as follows: from an activist point of view, research is a far less costly alternative to trial and error, but much research asks questions that matter more to the researcher than to the movement or organisation, and involves costs to the movement but little real gain. Instead, we should focus on *action* research, where the process of researching is itself transformative in some way and not dependent on how a particular research output might be received in some space that the researcher has little control over. Within this, we should focus on *participatory* action research, whose goals and processes are determined democratically or collaboratively.

Thus the emphases of *participatory action* research are ethical ones (from the point of view of academia) but also political ones (from the point of view of the movement): they answer the question "what are we doing this for, and why do we think it is likely to be worth it?" In practice, most PAR in movements focusses on movements' own practice and action, or on movement participants' experience and understanding: these are the areas where researching is itself most likely to be transformative, and those which activists know best (albeit often in tacit ways which PAR can help to articulate). "Practice" can of course be very wide-ranging, running from alternative technologies via solidarity economy practices to internal decision-making; "experience" similarly can mean experience of repression, of exclusion or of transformation in struggle.

From an intellectual point of view, practice and experience are the two areas which movement participants know and understand better than outside researchers – although it is amazing how many academics are happy to comment on movement practice when they have never themselves engaged in the kinds of difficult activities, in rapidly-moving conflicts and under extreme pressure, that they claim to understand better than the participants.

The *movement* argument for PAR in movement practice, then, is (1) trial and error is an extremely costly way to learn for many kinds of movement activity; (2) activists' own practice is the thing they have most control over, so that research here is most likely to bring results; (3) participatory relationships are politically good within movements, and involving activists in thinking about their movements is a useful self-educational tool; (4) because this kind of activity changes people and how they relate to each other, it has effects quite separate from any written material that might come out of it; (5) the resource cost to movements is usually relatively low; much of the effort involved in PAR is that of the researcher, carried by the education system or by them individually. Of course, we also hope that activists using PAR can help make it more feasible for others where it is not well-known or seriously considered because of top-down and / or positivist assumptions.

Examples of PAR in social movement practice

Given the considerations above, it is unsurprising that PAR means very different things in different movements, with their different forms of knowledge, ways of working together and knowledge needs. Below are a few examples.

Margaret Gillan was coordinator of the working-class Community Media Network from 1996. On their behalf as a key member of the Dublin Community TV project, her PAR thesis (2010) constituted the needs analysis for DCTV. This was quite a formal process that dovetailed with clear organisational processes, and at the same time a very political project. The station ran from 2008-2013 before crisis-induced funding cuts forced its closure.

Alberto Arribas Lozano's chapter (this volume) discusses movements' own forms of learning and knowledge production. I was privileged to be able to follow some of his collaborative work with the indigenous Andean Project for Peasant Technologies in Peru, where he helped to articulate some of their research further.

Waterford youth worker Martin Geoghegan's MA thesis (2000) explored community development as a social movement. Coming out of working-class self-organisation, the process of securing state recognition and funding had left many activists in a situation where they were officially carrying out simple service delivery work. His thesis helped to rearticulate their hidden transcripts (Scott 1990).

With Pat McBride, I co-facilitated a community-based oral history project in the working-class community of Ballymun in north Dublin, then being redeveloped by a public-private partnership. We supported local adults and early school leavers to identify key themes in their own history and interviewees, to carry out oral history interviews and analyse the results, articulating a long history of injustice and collective resistance. The PAR element was stalled towards the end when funding was pulled and other barriers prevented publication.

Anna Szołucha's thesis (2014, 2017; see also her chapter in this volume) on Occupy in Ireland and the US involved a PAR element where she was part of the Dublin camp's process of working out how to do consensus decision-making in practice and eventually facilitating it during assemblies. Having switched direction when Occupy erupted at the start of her research, she later had to change direction again when it came to an end and

incorporate the PAR element within a wider exploration of the practice of real democracy.

Nigerian development worker Samuel Udogbo's PhD thesis (2021) was carried out with MOSOP, the Ogoni organisation founded by executed indigenous environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (Corley et al. 2018). The project supported participants reflecting on their own needs and situation, articulating the distance between official movement activity and how young and disadvantaged participants saw it.

With popular educator Fergal Finnegan, Alberto Arribas, and three activist training networks – the Ulex Project, European Alternatives and European Community Organising Network – I am carrying out PAR research engaging experienced activists and popular educators in articulating social movement training needs for the Movement Learning Catalyst project, a large-scale year-long strategic training in alliance-formation across different movements, social groups and geographies (Cox 2022).

One uncomfortable learning experience is that PAR - and activist research generally - is hardest to carry out at PhD level. Participants doing our (part-time) Masters in activism were generally able to balance their movement activism with the university-based learning and research, and few were looking for an academic career. At the further end of the scale, people capable of getting postdoctoral funding, while still precarious in many ways, have mastered many of the skills of academia, and those who are still also activists have learned how to balance between both roles without being overwhelmed.

The tensions are hardest at PhD level, which represents a long-term investment of time and energy over years that is harder to maintain without the clear goal of an academic career, despite the increase in precarity for researchers in Ireland across this period[2]. Precarisation, and the pressures that go along with it, make it harder for people to maintain a critical distance from academia *and* to remain engaged with movements - particularly of course if that relationship is also a conflictual or difficult one, or where movements are subjected to traumatising levels of repression. The ideal situation for university-based research in movements under these circumstances is one where someone is supported by their own movement organisation to carry out research, but this is rare.

PAR in the diversity of real movements

As can be seen, in practice social movements and SMOs are extraordinarily varied, and the real challenge is often to see what the *principles* of PAR might mean in a specific context, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model. Notably, it is easy to talk about PAR as though "movement" is a clear and straightforward reality whose boundaries are obvious, whose existence as a conflictual collective actor is agreed by all parties, and whose intellectual and practical activities are transparent to its participants.

In practice, for some movement contexts it is precisely these dimensions that PAR contributes to – articulating the existence *of* a movement, becoming clear what it consists of and who it is in conflict with, naming what it does in practice and how this relates to its aspirations. This is of course important political work – and, it should be

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[2] Under contemporary circumstances, it may not be ethical to encourage people to take up PhD study.

said, often to some extent conflictual work where research aligns itself with participants who have themselves become clear about this and are happy articulating it.

In other contexts, the movement or organisation's existence and its activities are not in doubt, and PAR can be more straightforward and narrowly, even institutionally, defined around questions which immediately relate to bounded areas of activity (putting together a business plan, preparing a training programme etc.) This distinction reflects the diversity of "actually-existing movements", some of which have a high degree of self-awareness, a practice reflecting that and a significant range of intellectual activities (publications, debates, educational programmes, theoretical work etc.). Others are not so developed, for many different reasons; and here the contribution of PAR can help.

Another way of thinking about this is to say that PAR involves creating or enhancing particular kinds of relationship within an organisation or movement. It is thus a political activity, which often comes from particular kinds of people (inside or outside the movement) and may be in tension with others, for various reasons. Some may wish to de-emphasise the conflictual nature of movements, or deny that they are an aspect of a "community" imagined as given and largely passive in terms of shared experience, but with action written out of the story.

Others may be suspicious of intellectual (theoretical, educational, debate etc.) activities, whether for good reasons – is it an alternative to action? Does it suit strategies of social mobility at the expense of the movement? – or bad ones – does this undermine my position of power and prestige within the movement? Is it a threat to an otherwise unquestioned rhetoric which suits me?

At the extreme, PAR may not fit with the politics of some movements or organisations at all, while others may only have very limited organisational or political capacity to engage with it. For all of these reasons, large-scale, democratic radical movements work better with PAR than small, authoritarian and reformist or conservative ones. The former have the scale to engage in extensive reflection and typically need to do so for a range of reasons (they are democratic and so involve debate; they are radical and therefore cannot take the world for granted; they involve lots of new members and thus a constant conversation about what their activism consists of and why they take a given approach). The latter often see too much discussion as a threat to internal power relations and to the direction of their external activity; they do not have much "free space" for debate separate from immediate power relations or much capacity to devote to it.

It is obviously helpful for researchers to reflect on this as far as possible at the outset. If this is part of their own process of coming to reflect on a movement they have been socialised within, the learning process can be painful if their own increased reflexivity is not welcomed within the movement, or if they set goals for PAR that are beyond the capacity of the movement or organisation to meet.

An experienced mentor, or (even better) a community of practitioners can be helpful here; of course the most useful thing is a body of other activists within the movement who are also keen to develop the discussion further. The larger and "deeper" (in terms of openness to reflection) this body is, the more participatory the research can become (i.e. it is not a single individual's interest) and the more action is likely to emerge from it. As with many of the other engaged methodologies discussed in this volume, a PAR process is necessarily also a negotiation, a complicated collective learning process between the wider movement which may well start out unsure what PAR (or even

research on movements) is, and an initiator who has typically not done it before. In any case dialogue is needed, both as movement participants come to see the potential of PAR but also as they challenge the initiators' understanding of the process.

PAR and relationships within movements: becoming learning actors

Participatory action research within movements, then, is above all about *relationships*; it is a process of building on existing relationships and constructing new ones. Another way of saying this is that what PAR offers movements is a route towards becoming (more of a) learning actor. What does this look like in practice?

Typically there is an initial process of reflection, ideally among a wide range of actors in a movement or organisation. That often starts from a combination of discontent – a feeling that our actions are not having the effects we desire, or responding to our original reasons for getting involved – and some sense of possibility, that things could be different, that not all movements are like this. This reflection can develop long before any steps are taken towards a formal PAR process.

At some point, a greater degree of structure can be put on this. That could be an academic one (working out a research proposal in participatory ways that are meaningful within the movement); it might respond to a political crisis; or it might be shaped by another institutional process such as developing a training course or a needs analysis for a business plan.

Movement participants often need something relatively concrete like this to respond to: it is unfair and unhelpful to approach people with a completely blank slate, and more meaningful to make a proposal in a form they can recognise and react to. In this process, (some) movement participants engage with the idea of PAR sufficiently that they can give their feedback, highlight needs and concerns, and express some degree of conditional willingness to get involved. This could happen quite quickly in some movement contexts, or be a major part of the work in others.

The structured reflections that follow are not "the real research", although both movement and academic processes may push those involved to see them that way. The initial process of articulating a need for reflection, and the negotiation around what form it should take, are critical parts of what makes PAR participatory, and makes the action real; but for this reason they are also often the most fluid and hard to grasp. By contrast, the "routinised" element of PAR is often quite recognisable, building on and developing existing movement processes (of reflection, debate, education, knowledge production etc.)

All else being equal, the political and intellectual ideal is for this formalised element to take a shape which is organic to the movement, one that builds on how participants already discuss together and reflect on their practice. The research then means that the researcher adds extra time, space and energy to what the movement would normally engage in anyway. In other words, PAR adds capacity to the movements' own forms of knowledge production. Since movements often struggle to do as much as they would like in this area, it can also add depth and complexity, and (not least) a person whose primary commitment is to making this happen.

The physical form (whether meetings, online discussions or something else) and the "language" within which this reflection happens can thus not be prescribed from

outside. What is most important, however, is for something to emerge which participants didn't know already (we are not wasting their time reinventing the wheel).

Often the key mechanisms for doing this include bringing people from different parts of a movement or organisation together (e.g. across geographical distance, from different levels of activity, different class / racial / gender etc. bases or different political approaches or factions) so that key issues can be articulated more clearly across these distances (the models in Touraine 1981 and Melucci 1989 are worth considering). Alternatively, Freirean approaches can bring together either pre-existing groups or people from very similar spaces to articulate what they have in common, their hidden transcripts or tacit knowledge.

There are typically several iterations of this process, whether with different groups or participants, with the same group(s) across several stages, or in some cumulative form. At this point, research is also necessarily articulating provisional "findings" (which could be questions, expressions of discontent, statements of shared experience, contrasts in practice or many other things) in ways that enable communication from one group to another, from one session to the next or from one form to another.

The question of form will become particularly challenging as the formal PAR process approaches its end: on the one hand, new levels of understanding typically need to be expressed in new ways, but these new forms need to be developments of existing forms so that movement activists, beyond those directly involved, can recognise, respond to and learn from them. Often too there is a dialectic between how things are expressed verbally and the potential practical outcomes: a new strategic direction and a new theoretical understanding may go hand in hand but do not necessarily look the same.

Thus the "outputs" of PAR are very varied. In a sense, a PAR process whose main "output" is a lengthy written research report (thesis or otherwise) is perhaps a failed PAR process. At times of course a long written document, or a set of technical documents, may feed into an organisational outcome: e.g. a needs analysis may feed into a community-based TV station, or a research summary may feed into an activist training course. Equally commonly, the researcher, or the network of research participants, may take an action, create an organisation or otherwise intervene in the world in a way that clearly emerges from the PAR process but not as a formal document.

The most important PAR "outputs", however, often do not exist in this sort of institutional space. They exist in the greater capacity to learn (and hence to act effectively) that a movement, an organisation, a network or individuals have developed in the process; in the changed relationships between activists developed within the process; and in a wider self-awareness as activists and as movements.

In conclusion: the benefits of PAR for movements

Firstly, PAR is above all a contribution to movements' own learning and knowledge production processes, which also means developing a greater sense of themselves *as movements* (in terms of collective identity, strategy, persistence over time, handling difference etc.) Another way of saying this is that movements that engage in PAR are learning to become learning actors in a deeper way than previously (if they are not, it is questionable whether PAR is pointful). This general gain is often more valuable in the long run than any specific outcome from the process, although of course activists will want to see immediate and practical outcomes.

Secondly, PAR is all about constructing relationships within movements, and deepening existing ones. It is thus also an investment in the inner work of movements, and the quality of PAR engagements is a major contribution of the researcher. It is important – particularly where there are external pressures (from academia or other structures and processes) that a new researcher not be pushed into becoming too instrumental in supporting the PAR process, or this will be lost.

Thirdly, the relationships constructed within PAR cannot resolve the problems of entirely non-democratic, particularist / reformist or weak movements, but they do represent an additional contribution to the articulation of grassroots needs and perspectives within movements, to making connections across different elements of a movement and to a more radical perspective.

Finally, participation in PAR is also typically experienced as valuable in itself, individually and collectively – both in terms of self-understanding (collective articulation and reflection on experience) and in terms of skill and capacity to act. It is, or should be, a process of maturing (as activists and as movements) that enriches people's experience of their social movement activity but also enables them to carry out that activity more effectively.

My hope is that this chapter helps to articulate both *why* PAR can be a useful contribution to movements and *how* to make it so.

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