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Authors

Langhout, Regina Day

Thomas, Elizabeth

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Imagining Participatory Action Research in Collaboration with Children: an Introduction

Regina Day Langhout · Elizabeth Thomas

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For decades, social science researchers have been studying programs, services, and settings that are explicitly designed to have an influence on children (e.g., mental health services for children, school classrooms, after school programs, families, neighborhoods). Researchers who are concerned with the contexts in which children develop, social issues that influence children, and/or social justice generally define and evaluate a problem related to these programs or settings, and sometimes create and assess an intervention. Consequently, these researchers are often the ones to determine the problem definition. Common definitions include poor developmental or educational outcomes, child abuse, child labor violations, and so forth. These problem definitions and subsequent conceptualizations then become part of a larger narrative about what or who needs fixing (Seidman and Rappaport 1986). Frequently, these problems are studied by collecting survey data from adults or by observing children. Generally, these measures and observational procedures are designed by adult researchers.

In the field of community psychology, however, there has been a broad consensus that community members should also be involved in defining problems and solutions, as their participation improves the research and benefits the community. When thinking about issues that affect children, community psychologists have most frequently conceptualized important stakeholders as parents and extended

family members, family advocates, teachers, mental health professionals, and other adults in children's lives. These adults may be consulted in interviews or focus groups, usually responding to the problem as conceptualized by the researcher. Increasingly, adult stakeholders and older youth may take on more participatory roles. Rarely, however, are children consulted or asked to help formulate the problem definition or proximate solution. Indeed, research is typically done for children, but not *with* children. This special issue is a collection of papers about participatory action research with children who are middle school age or younger, and is intended to stimulate dialogue and to offer alternatives when conducting research that affects children.

Imagining Childhood

Community psychology challenges us to create spaces where those who have structurally been denied a voice in democracy can begin to build power for civic engagement. This mandate is of utmost importance because if there is a group that is systematically excluded from civil society, then this structural exclusion tends to breed injustice. Historically, community psychologists have engaged specific populations that fit this description, including those labeled as seriously mentally ill (e.g., Fairweather et al. 1969). More recently, researchers have also worked with those who are or have been incarcerated (Fine et al. 2003), recent immigrants (Solis 2003; Suárez-Orozco 2000), those who are undocumented (Dominguez et al. 2009), and youth (Watts and Flanagan 2007). Children also fit this description.

Children are often not consulted or even asked to participate in civil society, nor in research that is about their lives. These omissions are likely the consequences of researchers' views of children, which are informed by

R. D. Langhout (✉)

Psychology Department, University of California, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
e-mail: langhout@ucsc.edu

E. Thomas

University of Washington Bothell, Bothell, USA

societal beliefs. For example, dominant narratives in many societies hold that children are not able to participate in making important decisions that affect them. Yet an empowerment perspective demands that we question these dominant narratives and to seek out alternative stories that challenge assumptions about children's capacities (Rappaport 2000). This perspective enables us to imagine shifting roles and relationships, as well as the possibility of meaningful partnerships between adults and children. We may envision children as collaborative change agents in the settings and contexts of their lives.

Developmental research supports this vision of children taking up more active roles in second order setting change, suggesting that children hold more complex cognitions than was earlier presumed (Kellett et al. 2004; Rogoff 2003). This research has generated a more multifaceted understanding of the active and ongoing transactions between individual children and their social worlds. Indeed, a sociocultural approach has directed attention to children's changing participation over time in the meaningful routine cultural practices of families, neighborhoods, schools, and other key settings in their lives (Rogoff 2003). Researchers studying the timing of children's acquisition of various skills and competencies have become more aware of great variation in different cultural communities. Adult goals and expectations, as well as routine activities to which children are exposed, influence the development of skills and competencies, such as being responsible for themselves or others, or participating as apprentices in a research team.

Another growing area of research, known as the sociology of childhood or childhood studies, has also raised many questions about how children are viewed within many communities, especially Western societies. The critique offered within these perspectives is that childhood is socially and culturally constructed, and that the construction of "child as innocent" or "child as becoming" leaves children without a say in important matters affecting them (Durand and Lykes 2006; Kellett et al. 2004). Instead, the sociology of childhood perspective encourages us to listen to children's perspectives and view children as experts in their own lives. Children's expertise can be cultivated by teaching them specific skills. Participating in research, for example, can help them gain more control of the resources that affect their lives. Children, therefore, can become advocates for themselves and others.

Imagining Research with Children

These sociocultural findings and childhood studies/sociology of childhood perspectives, when combined with other research that indicates the benefits of learning more from

the community members being theorized, lay important groundwork for epistemological innovation, especially as it relates to how knowledge is generated and understood. Collaborative methodologies are consistent with community psychology values (e.g., collaboration, valuing human diversity, social justice) and theories (e.g., empowerment, civic participation). For example, research that has asked homeless people what services they need has resulted in a very different perspective and understanding compared with research that asks case workers about the needs of the homeless (Acosta and Toro 2000). Research dealing with children and their lives can similarly be transformed by embracing the role of children as social actors and collaborators/co-researchers.

Research that affects children can be further reinvigorated by reconceptualizing the research process as an intervention in and of itself, where children learn skills through guided participation and active engagement. In other words, research and intervention are not separate steps, but rather are the components of praxis, or an embodied theory, with an agenda of creating conditions that facilitate individual and group empowerment, as well as social change. Using the theoretical framework of participatory action research with children has the potential to strengthen research findings, interventions, and social action.

This special issue brings together an eclectic set of papers that engage children—from around the world, who are of middle school age and younger, and who are of different races, ethnicities and generally from financially poor communities—in a participatory action research (PAR) process. PAR is a theoretical standpoint and collaborative methodology that is designed to ensure a voice for those who are affected by a research project (Nelson et al. 1998). Cycles of a PAR project may engage participants in any or all of the following: helping to formulate the problem definition, assessing the problem, determining an intervention, implementing the intervention, and assessing the intervention. Multiple methods are often used with PAR, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, Photovoice projects, observations, and community mapping. Although PAR research has engaged adults and older youth in the process, very little PAR research, especially in the United States, has included the role of the child as social actor, collaborator, researcher and/or change agent. This state of affairs is problematic given that participatory action researchers and community psychologists argue that problem definitions and interventions are more valid and effective when all stakeholders are involved in the process.

What happens when the people of concern are children? Are they afforded the same rights by society and by researchers? If researchers interested in empowerment are obligated to collaborate in communities in ways that

enhance the power that people have over their own lives (Rappaport 1981), does this same obligation hold if our participants are children? This special issue addresses these questions as it tests and expands the theoretical underpinnings of empowerment and PAR by collaborating in an embodied theory with children.

Imagining this Special Issue

This compilation of articles is quite diverse in terms of the disciplinary backgrounds of the authors, as well as the countries and settings where the research takes place. In addition to academic contributors, there are practitioners (Chen et al. 2010; Maglajlic 2010; Newman Phillips et al. this issue; Porter et al. 2010) and a child (Patel, highlighted in Kellett 2010). Beyond psychology, primary authors are from anthropology (Newman Phillips et al. this issue), childhood studies (Clark 2010; Kellett 2010), social work (Maglajlic 2010), education (Van Sluys 2010), social studies (Ren and Langhout 2010), geography (Porter et al. 2010), and public health (Wong et al. 2010). Also, PAR is represented in many places around the world, allowing readers to examine how PAR is situated in and across several countries. Outside of the US, these places include Sub-Saharan Africa (Porter et al. 2010), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Maglajlic 2010), Canada (Liegghio et al. 2010), and the UK (Clark 2010; Kellett 2010). This diversity allows for rich comparisons with respect to methods, age of children, social and cultural contexts, and settings where the research is conducted.

There are, of course, a number of ways that this special issue could have been organized. We chose to group the articles according to whether the primary focus was on theory and methods, school-based examples, or community-based examples. As we read through the articles, many issues arose across the three subsets of articles. We were particularly struck by the observation that, although all of the papers deal with children and PAR, the papers are positioned differently in terms of guiding paradigm and theoretical tradition when engaging children as collaborators. Given that many papers draw from multiple paradigms and theoretical traditions, our intention is not to sort papers into mutually exclusive groups, but rather to examine the papers along these two dimensions.

Guiding Paradigms

The papers draw upon three broad guiding paradigms: post-positivism, social constructivism, and critical theory. This range of perspectives within the special issue is an important reminder that PAR can be a method choice and/or an epistemological choice. PAR as a method can be

used, of course, with any paradigm because a method is simply a tool for collecting data.

Where PAR is taken up by researchers primarily as a method choice, it is often used in conjunction with a post-positivist perspective. In these cases, the reason for using PAR is generally to increase the validity of data, often to provide evidence to support structural changes within specific settings. For example, in a multisite study reported by Chen and colleagues (2010), girls in five US cities served as evaluators of their after-school programs. The authors found that PAR is a promising evaluation tool; the girls determined what offerings worked well and what could be improved to make after-school programming more engaging for them. Additionally, staff learned that the girls were capable of engaging in research, which challenged their assumptions about the girls and had implications for future programming. Finally, the authors recommend that PAR practices be integrated in future program evaluation across the organization's many US sites as a way to improve data collection, showcase the skills and talents of the girls, and alter relationships between the girls and staff. In another large scale study discussed by Porter and colleagues (2010), children in Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa used a variety of methods, including interviewing and weighing carried loads, to learn from other children about their travel, transportation problems, and safety concerns. The long-term goal of the project was to improve children's safety as they travel from one place to the next. In both papers, some authors are a part of the community being studied. Yet, it is also the case that in both papers, the authors argue convincingly that children are able to collect better data because of where they are positioned (i.e., as insiders) and that children contribute to the strength and integrity of the research findings.

As an epistemological choice, PAR is most closely aligned with social constructivism and critical theory. Indeed, epistemology deals with how we know things; by definition, it includes the relationship between the researcher and knowledge, as well as how this relationship is connected to knowledge generation. Both social constructivism and critical theory argue that knowledge is co-constructed and produced through the relationships between researchers and participants, and that these relationships are mediated through values. Within these frameworks, PAR highlights the relationship between the researcher and the researched through a reflexive examination of the researcher, and also brings into question how knowledge is constructed.

Like all paradigms, social constructivism and critical theory bring with them specific sets of assumptions and values that shape research and action (e.g., for critical theory, the importance of working toward social justice).

Several papers in this special issue emphasize the importance of attending to power relationships and how they affect knowledge construction in PAR with children. For example, Liegghio and colleagues (2010) caution that when working with children who have been diagnosed with mental health issues, adult roles need to be carefully scrutinized with respect to power and privilege. Additionally, adult roles need to change to be more aligned with social justice values. They see children as active responsible agents and co-constructors of knowledge, and they view PAR as a tool for changing the way children diagnosed with mental health issues are viewed and treated. Power and knowledge construction are also at the forefront for Kellett (2010). In her paper featuring the original research of an 11 year old girl, she argues for childhood emancipation. Through using PAR, she helps us imagine a world where children's perspectives are center stage, and children have the power to contribute to social change. Both the Liegghio et al. (2010) and Kellett (2010) papers, among others in the special issue, urge us to contemplate how empowerment and social change are connected to the research process, from "before the beginning." Within this special issue, all the papers are connected to empowerment and social change, but how they are connected to these issues vary based on theories of change, which are embedded in their respective guiding paradigms.

Another important distinction related to guiding paradigm is how these special issue papers are positioned with respect to best practices and best processes. Goals of interventions from a post-positivist paradigm include looking for best practices that can lead to universal claims, generalizability of knowledge, and empirically supported interventions. A number of papers in this issue take up these goals. For example, drawing upon a study designed to determine what high quality PAR implementation in middle schools entails, Ozer et al. (this issue) propose core components and key conditions for effective implementation and sustainability of school-based PAR, as well as challenges to implementing best practices. Also aiming toward best practices, Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) offer a clear set of tools for engaging youth in qualitative data analysis. Their ReACT method of data analysis includes a sequence of creative activities in which youth identify important messages and organize those messages into thematic groups. Wong and colleagues (2010) posit a new model for thinking about youth development and participation that is based in best practices from the positive youth development literature. Using an empowerment framework, they identify five types of participation that vary along the dimension of youth-adult control and in their relationship to optimal child and adolescent health promotion.

Goals associated with best practices are related yet distinct from social constructivist and critical theory

paradigms, especially when considering interventions. Here, the belief is that a focus on best practices may separate knowledge generation from specific contexts. In other words, practices that work in one context cannot be moved wholesale into another context and be expected to show the same level of efficacy because of different contextual demands and conditions. To prevent this separation, social constructivism and critical theory focus on applicability through thick description instead of generalizability. In these frameworks, some practices are understood as transferable and others are not, as the focus is on ensuring that all practices are contextually and culturally appropriate; the assumption within these paradigms is that all contexts are rich and varied and therefore require flexibility and adaptation. With these context-dependent ideas in mind, the focus is on best processes, or what processes should be followed to enact a contextually and culturally appropriate intervention. The Maglajlic (2010) contribution takes this perspective by arguing against a common way to conduct PAR across several research settings in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She offers a timely critique of international models of community development as children in three different regions ask one another what they want from their communities and share what they learn about participation in community life with adults. In a smaller scale study with younger children, Clark (2010) makes a similar point, suggesting that adult researchers should make available and accessible multiple methods and roles for children. As child researchers choose methods and enact roles, adult partners may further identify and build upon the strengths of these child researchers. In Clark's innovative approach (2010), young children create a composite picture, or mosaic, of their lives from a number of different tools, including child-led tours and map making.

Although assumptions about standardization and generalizability differ across perspectives, both best practice and best process approaches are designed to lead to the best outcomes for stakeholders who are, in this case, children. Both approaches also emphasize the need for extensive preparation and training for child and adult research collaborators. Additionally, lessons learned from each of our contributors remind us that PAR is always situated in broader social, economic, political, relational, and institutional contexts.

Theoretical Traditions

Along with different guiding paradigms, this set of papers also draws from different theoretical traditions to inform PAR with children. In general, these papers are rooted in one or more of the following literatures: positive youth development, sociocultural perspectives, critical education, and community psychology.

Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach that grew out of dissatisfaction with prevention research and intervention focusing on isolated risk factors (e.g., for teen pregnancy, substance abuse, or youth violence). Recognizing that the most effective prevention programs were not directed toward one risk factor, but instead looked more like health promotion and skills development, this strengths-based approach challenged those in the prevention field to think about youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be managed (Shinn and Yoshikawa 2008). Research grounded in PYD has focused on identifying and supporting contexts that promote educational achievement, healthy outcomes, and strengths. Yet healthy outcomes, milestones, and assets traditionally have been defined by adult experts, including developmental psychologists and youth advocates. Also, a PYD approach tends to be couched in a best practices perspective, looking for common solutions and models across varied contexts and diverse children. PAR programs utilizing this tradition focus on the positive impact for individual youth development: building cognitive and emotional competencies, interpersonal skills, and so forth. Wong and colleagues (2010) draw from and contribute to this tradition by offering a heuristic tool for those interested in settings for child and adolescent health promotion.

A sociocultural perspective on children holds that how they move from being novices to experts is shaped by their particular area or setting. Children's expertise is acknowledged through the community, formally (e.g., giving a presentation) and/or informally (e.g., an adult telling a child that she did a good job on a task). PAR from a sociocultural approach tends to engage adults in teaching children sets of skills so that the children can become experts in the skills and then carry out research that is important to them. Clark's MOSAIC method (2010) is rooted in this tradition. She discusses how children become knowledge builders through collecting data (i.e., creating artifacts). Children develop skills that enable them to share their expertise with others, which moves them from being labeled as novices to socially recognized as experts.

Those working from a critical education framework argue that when people come together and think critically about their world and their position in the world, they develop a critical consciousness that moves them into action. Using a critical education perspective to inform PAR will often take a dialogic approach, or a dynamic approach centered in dialogue with others that can transform the situation, and focus on the analysis of the data collected with an emphasis on how the data relate to broader structural conditions. Van Sluys (2010) deftly uses this framework, researching adult literacy practices with a set of middle school students to facilitate them re-positioning themselves as literacy students within the broader

structural constraints of schooling. The children take the lessons they have learned in their research to change their actions in and reformulate their relations to other settings.

Finally, a community psychology approach emphasizes empowerment through participation in problem definition and the development of solutions. PAR from a community psychology perspective will therefore focus heavily on identifying subordinated stakeholders and involving these groups in determining problem definition and solutions in an effort to ensure that these groups have more control over the resources that affect their lives. Ren and Langhout (2010) take this approach by focusing on children defining problems for their elementary school recess time, as well as determining potential solutions. Many papers in this special issue draw from more than one of these theoretical traditions.

Theoretical traditions also inform how the researchers think about the participant and social change process. At the individual level of change, PAR can be viewed as youth development (positive youth development approach; see Ozer et al. this issue and Wong et al. 2010), skill building and identity development (sociocultural approach; see Chen et al. 2010 and Clark 2010), transformational education (critical education approach; see Van Sluys 2010), or creating an empowering setting (community psychology approach; see Foster-Fishman et al. 2010 and Ren and Langhout 2010). With respect to social change, PAR can be viewed as altering a setting, a policy, social geography, or relationships and roles. Examples in this special issue include attempts to change schools (Duckett et al. 2010; Newman Phillips et al. this issue), playgrounds (Ren and Langhout 2010), after-school programs (Chen et al. 2010), how municipalities function (Maglajlic 2010), mental health care systems (Liegghio et al. 2010), and transportation policies (Porter et al. 2010). One notable point regarding the varied research programs that these papers represent is that many of these activities are aimed at change on more than one level of analysis; by examining a different set of the data from the same project, the same project at a different point in time, or the data in a different way, changes at other levels of analysis could be highlighted.

Challenges in Conducting PAR with Children

Many of the papers in this issue tell a similar story about the limits of conceptualizing and actualizing PAR as a "project." It may be useful and expedient for adult researchers in academia or community-based organizations to think about a specific beginning and ending point for their work, and it may be necessary to establish clear boundaries around a particular set of events. Yet PAR cannot be successful without attention to roles and

relationships that exist prior to any project, the institutional policies and norms that exist outside the project, and the energies required to sustain change efforts beyond the project. Projects are inextricably connected to the daily realities of children and adults. So, for example, Duckett and colleagues (2010) describe a project in the UK designed to engage children in considering the concept of a healthy school and in building a healthier school together. These university researchers reflected on why the project was not as successful as they hoped, analyzing power relationships and concluding that institutional strains, both in public schools and in higher education/academia, led to conflicting perspectives and ultimately a failed project. Phillips and colleagues describe a project designed to engage children and teachers in PAR, but point to broader structural issues that created challenges. Detractors from the PAR process include limits in the timeframe of the project that did not allow for relationship building over time, inadequate time and institutional support for teachers to feel empowered in the project, and the climate of high stakes testing in public schools in the US. Both papers provide useful critical analysis of well-planned projects that faced serious barriers in overcoming external stresses.

Another challenge in engaging in PAR with children is in how to conceptualize the nature of adult and child research relationships. Indeed, there are several ways for adults to work with children within a PAR context, and there is likely no one right way. The special issue features a wide range of child-adult collaborations, from children who serve as primary problem posers to children who participate as data collection experts in studies that have already been clearly defined by adults. Many collaborations feature child-adult research relationships that are somewhere in between these points. Children often have some influence, but within adult-guided parameters. Within this special issue, children are conceptualized as both novices and experts, with expertise coming both from lived experience and from training in research processes. Adults are conceptualized as novices and experts as well. We appreciate Clark's (2010) term, "authentic novice," to describe the stance of the adult researcher who recognizes that communication difficulties between adults and children are not just children's problems. Indeed, these authentic novices seek to build bridges to children's lived worlds in their collaboration. In all cases, the roles of children and adults deserve careful attention.

A final set of challenges deal with political and ethical issues. These challenges are addressed—usually by examining power in roles and relationships with children—across many of the papers in this special issue. The papers raise important questions about the conditions under which children's participation may actually increase vulnerability and/or subordination. They also remind us that listening to

children sometimes sounds nice until we hear what they have to say. The perspectives of children may bring conflict as they challenge adult roles and perspectives, as well as institutional norms, cultures, and communities. These papers highlight the potential of PAR projects to pose problems and raise challenges to the status quo rather than offering easy solutions to adult-defined problems.

Imagining the Future

This special issue is poised to contribute to a conversation that is just beginning, with rich reflections from a variety of orientations, methods, traditions, contexts, and regions. Although the papers are diverse, they have much in common. Together, they make a strong case that participatory action research with children is not just about applying the same set of conceptual or methodological lessons from PAR with adults or older youth to a younger group of people. We require a different skill set to do this exciting work; these competencies include new ways of thinking about children, research expertise, research projects, and research products.

We note how strange it is to produce a special issue aimed primarily at adult researchers, even as we imagine new ways of children and adults working together to understand the obstacles that children face in realizing their goals and dreams. Yet, our intention is that in so doing, we facilitate an awakening of the imagination not just in our readers but in the children with whom we collaborate.

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