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Dr. Kaat Van Acker is a lecturer and researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences and a research fellow at the Center for Social and Cultural Psychology at the KU Leuven. kaat.vanacker@odisee.be
Dr. Erik Claes is a lecturer and researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences. erik.claes@odisee.be
Harm Deleu is a researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences and a Phd student in social sciences at Antwerp University. harm.deleu@odisee.be
Nele Gulinck is a lecturer and researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences. nele.gulinck@odisee.be
Liesbeth Naessens is a lecturer and researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences and a researcher at Antwerp University. liesbeth.naessens@odisee.be
Prof. dr. Mieke Schrooten is a lecturer and researcher in social work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences and Antwerp University. mieke.schrooten@odisee.be
Tom Flachet is a youth worker at the Brussels youth organisation D'Broej. tom.flachet@gmail.com
Ali Moustatine is a former youth worker at the Brussels youth organization D'Broej. alimoustache@hotmail.com

Correspondence to: Kaat Van Acker
E-mail: kaat.vanacker@odisee.be

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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND URBAN SOCIAL WORK: STRATEGIES FOR NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATION AND RECIPROCATION

PARTICIPATIEF ACTIEONDERZOEK EN STEDELIJK SOCIAAL WERK: STRATEGIEËN OM PARTICIPATIE EN WEDERKERIGHEID TE REALISEREN IN DE ONDERZOEKSPRAKTIJK

KAAT VAN ACKER, ERIK CLAES, HARM DELEU, NELE GULINCK, LIESBETH NAESSENS, MIEKE SCHROOTEN, TOM FLACHET, ALI MOUSTATINE

ABSTRACT

Social work research is witnessing a growing popularity of Participatory Action Research (PAR), yet putting PAR's commitment to participation and reciprocation into practice is complicated and poses many challenges. In this article we propose a model that identifies nine strategies to actualize PAR's ethical principles of participation and reciprocation throughout the different stages of a research process. For heuristic reasons, we distinguish three research stages: (1) establishing a co-generative space; (2) engaging in a collaborative inquiry and (3) promoting parallax perspectives, which are comparable to the stages of identifying and defining, designing and collecting, and analysing and reporting in traditional social science research. For each stage, we offer three strategies to address the challenges that researchers are commonly faced with in that particular stage and we provide examples of our own attempts to put these strategies into practice. The model presented here must not be seen as a set of normative guidelines, rather we hope that it may spark critical discussions on PAR in social work and inspire new and established participatory action researchers on their journey.

Keywords

Participatory Action Research, social work research, research ethics, reciprocation

SAMENVATTING

De populariteit van participatief actieonderzoek (PAO) groeit binnen sociaal werk, maar het in de praktijk brengen van de participatie en wederkerigheid die kenmerkend zijn voor PAO stelt onderzoekers voor vele uitdagingen. In dit artikel presenteren we een model dat bestaat uit negen strategieën om de ethische principes van PAO, participatie en wederkerigheid, te verwezenlijken doorheen de verschillende onderzoekstadia. Om heuristische redenen onderscheiden we drie stadia: (1) het creëren van een vrije onderzoeksruimte; (2) het uitvoeren van een collaboratief onderzoek en (3) het uitdragen van een verscheidenheid aan perspectieven. Per stadium bespreken we drie strategieën die ingaan op een aantal veel voorkomende uitdagingen in dat stadium en illustreren deze met ervaringen uit onze onderzoeksgroep. Het model dat wordt gepresenteerd moet niet begrepen worden als een lijst van normatieve richtlijnen, maar als een poging om inspiratie te bieden aan nieuwe en ervaren actie-onderzoekers en om het kritisch debat over PAO in sociaal werk te stimuleren.

Trefwoorden

Participatief actieonderzoek, Sociaal werk onderzoek, onderzoeksethiek, wederkerigheid

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that explicitly positions participants as experts on their own communities and experiences—co-researchers rather than objects of research—and engages them in a collaborative inquiry on a topic of interest (Abma, Banks, Cook, Dias, Madsen, Springett, & Wright, 2019; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). PAR's popularity in social work is growing in response to the observation that traditional social science research projects' attempts to formulate generalizable theories of social problems and to eradicate those problems by implementing specific interventions are not always successful. Because people belonging to marginalized or oppressed groups may be hesitant to share their worlds with academic researchers (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005), such projects may fail to account for the complexity and multilayeredness of social problems and, therefore, fall short of effecting social change (Stringer, 2007). By approaching research as a collaborative self-reflective inquiry in which participants closely work together with academic researchers to develop critical consciousness ('conscientização', Freire, 1970/2003) and to promote social change (Abma *et al.*, 2019), PAR is well geared to engage people with lived experience of the topic under study. In doing so, the researcher takes the role not of an 'expert' but of a facilitator "who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work towards effective solutions to the issues that concern them" (Stringer, 2007, p. 24).

In order to fairly engage social workers as well as people with lived experience in the research process, PAR advances a research ethics that is demanding and poses many challenges to social work researchers. Researchers engaging in PAR not only assume responsibility for the protection of participants, but also attempt to design research that makes the invisible visible and that is both just and beneficial to participants (Cahill, 2007). Elaborating on the work of the South-African professor Sharlene Swartz (2011), researchers' efforts to 'give back' to those involved in the research may be described as an 'intentional ethics of reciprocation' (ibid.). Such an ethics of reciprocation strives to give back ownership of knowledge to those participating in the research as well as providing them with more immediate – tangible or intangible – rewards. Thus, research ethics in PAR focus on both participation and reciprocation.[1] PAR's commitment to participation and reciprocation affords a continuous negotiation over questions such as: who is included in the community of inquiry; who makes decisions and how; whose interpretations are to prevail; how do we write about the project;

who is granted authorship on research products; how do we compensate participants, and so on (Eikeland, 2006). Thus, apparent methodological questions reflect underlying ethical questions.

As the authors of this article, we are faced with these questions in most of our research projects. The bulk of our research is embedded in the urban setting of Brussels, which is marked by sharp social inequalities. Given the complexity of emancipatory challenges in such settings and the call to transform needs into social rights, valorising the voice and local knowledge of people with lived experience of the topic under study becomes more and more indispensable if social work researchers want to maintain their credibility for the field (Kong, Banks, Brandon, Chappell, Charnley, Hwang, Rudd, Shaw, Slatcher, & Ward, 2020). Although our experience with the core business of doing PAR is still modest, we collectively felt the need of formulating a set of strategies that may help us and other researchers navigate the many challenges that come with PAR's commitment to participation and reciprocation.

We started searching for strategies by reviewing relevant research literature, particularly looking into existing guidelines, strategies and models (see e.g. Abma *et al.*, 2019; Lenette, Stavropoulou, Nunn, Kong, Cook, Coddington, & Banks, 2019; Swartz, 2011). Quickly, we realized that the insights stemming from the literature strongly resonate with our own research experience. Based on the literature as well as our own research experience, we propose a model that identifies nine strategies that may guide researchers to put PAR's commitment to participation and reciprocation in practice throughout the research process (see Figure 1). For heuristic reasons, we distinguish three stages of the research process (1) establishing a co-generative space; (2) engaging in a collaborative inquiry and (3) promoting parallax perspectives. These are comparable to the stages of identifying and defining, designing and collecting, and analysing and reporting in traditional social science research (see Abma *et al.*, 2019 for an alternative model including more stages). For each stage, we offer three strategies and provide examples of our own attempts to put the proposed strategies into practice. The strategies presented here must not be seen as a set of normative guidelines. Rather we hope that they may spark critical discussions on PAR in social work and inspire new and established researchers on their journey (Lenette *et al.*, 2019).

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

Stage 1: Establishing a co-generative space

In the initial stages of a PAR project, the focus is on creating a meaningful co-generative space where genuine collaborative research is possible (Lenette *et al.*, 2019; Roose, Bie, & Roets, 2013).

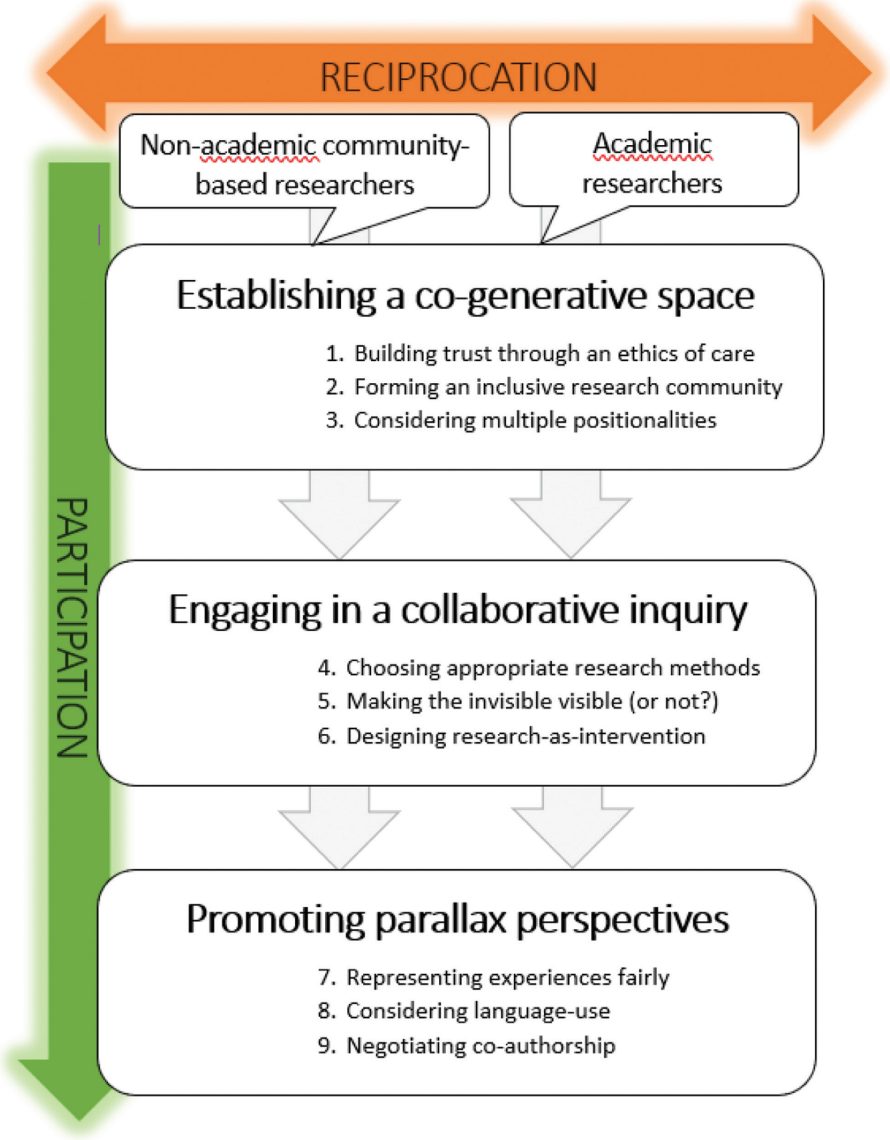

Figure 1: Nine strategies to actualize PAR's ethical principles of participation and reciprocation.

Inspired by Habermas' understanding of communicative culture, establishing a co-generative space involves the realization of a communicative space in which social work practices can be questioned with respect to their underlying assumptions and in which issues pertaining to PAR's ethics of participation and reciprocation can be openly discussed (Roose *et al.*, 2013; Van Bijleveld, De Vetten, & Dedding, 2020).

Building trust through an ethics of care

In order to open a mutual space of co-creation with members of vulnerable or oppressed groups, researchers first have to build trust. Research experience drawn from a PAR project on radicalization (Claes, Flachet, Moustatine, De Backer, & Bim, 2020) demonstrates that building trust with people who often fundamentally distrust researchers entering into their lifeworld requires researchers to adopt an ethics of care (Cahill, 2007), a set of ethical attitudes – including presence, patience, humility and engagement – that convey reciprocity. The project taught us that collaborating with young people and youth workers on such sensitive topics as radicalization is only possible when academic researchers suspend all strategic moves and instead try to be at service.

One of the involved youth workers phrased it as follows: "Each researcher who pretends to engage in action research with a youth association has to understand several basic conditions. First, with young people and youth workers, you're not in a zoo. And you don't experiment on us. Second, if you really want to embark on action research you have to experience and expose yourself to the life world of young people. Finally, you have to be able to valorise young people." Valorising young people not only means bringing their strengths to the surface, it also implies giving them a voice. Sometimes, this may be taken literally. It then involves bringing structure in loose fragments of reflections and thoughts so as to capture in words and phrases what young people have experienced. Thus, only when researchers are able to subordinate their strategic research interests (e.g., academic research priorities, ownership of data, publication deadlines) to the pressing needs of the field (e.g., access to human rights, improving one's sense of belonging) and embody a set of ethical attitudes that convey reciprocity, a real co-generative space may be opened.

Forming an inclusive research community

One question figuring prominently in PAR concerns who is to be included in the research community. This may appear to be a methodological question, but it reflects ethical concerns.

While some projects are initiated as community–university partnerships, others are initiated by academics who then wish to involve community-based partners as co-equal researchers (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). Because of academic institutional requirements with career opportunities depending on researchers' success in acquiring funding and with funding agencies offering limited time to prepare proposals, initiative often lies more with academic researchers. Moreover, PAR in social work often evolves as research with social workers, while people with lived experiences are less readily included as active contributors (Roose *et al.*, 2013).

One of our research projects – even though it wasn't initiated as a PAR project per se – is illustrative in this regard. The project focused on the collaboration between social work organisations operating in Brussels' prisons and was designed in collaboration with both representatives of the relevant organisations and policy makers (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2019). Since the aim of the project was to analyse the collaboration between prison social work services, it included social workers and their managers as active collaborators but not people experiencing imprisonment. However, during the project, social workers noted that the context of old prisons has a huge impact on the social work services that are offered. According to them, social work services should also be analysed through the experience of people in prison. In response to this, an additional work package was developed to include the voice of people with lived experience in prison (Naessens, De Koster, & Segaert, 2018). This required considerable flexibility from the academic researchers who had to adapt the original design and justify changes to the funding agency. This points at the tension between the academic world, where the allocation of project resources is usually based on a detailed project plan and a participatory approach, where sharing power and control might lead to unpredictable ways and outcomes. It also further illustrates how ethical choices (i.e. giving people in prison a voice) almost inevitably raise methodological questions (i.e. how to adapt the research design).

In some cases, (visible) participation in the research community may not be desired by members of marginalized or oppressed groups since it leads to – at least perceived – identification with a research project (Chataway, 1997). To the extent that people with lived experience publicly contribute to a research project they surrender anonymity and assume responsibility. Actively negotiating levels of participation with community-based partners is thus an important ethical strategy to ensure that stakeholders can exert influence over the research process while allowing them to preserve public distance to it if they prefer so.

At the same time, some (sub)groups may be invisible to researchers and therefore often not included in the research community. For example, people living in hidden homelessness often remain invisible

to both social workers and researchers because many do not make use of public services (Metraux, Manjelievskaia, Treglia, Hoffman, Culhane, & Ku, 2016; Schrooten, Gérin, Schmaal, Verbeeck, & Deleu, 2020). One of our projects started from the observation that the number of people in situations of hidden homelessness is increasing in Brussels and that professionals would like to gain more insight into their living situations. For the reasons that were described in the introduction of this article, PAR as a research approach is well-suited to valorise people's voice and local knowledge. Because there is presumably little contact between people in hidden homelessness and formal social work organisations, we decided to collaborate with people who are either currently living in a situation of hidden homelessness or have experienced such a situation in the past, rather than with social workers. This brings about a number of specific challenges as it proves to be rather difficult and time-consuming to involve people with lived experience as co-researchers and to keep them engaged throughout the process.

Considering multiple positionalities

In order to create a co-generative space where genuine collaborative research is possible, it is important to consider each research partner's multiple positionalities in terms of gender, age, life experiences and complex identities (Hopkins, 2007; Swartz, 2011). When academic researchers, social workers and people with lived experiences jointly engage in research they have to manage "a complex set of insider-outsider identifications" (Griffiths, 1998, p. 138). Academic researchers will always be outsiders to some degree simply by virtue of being researchers, especially in communities that are culturally remote from the academic world (Bridges, 2001). They will also almost inevitably occupy a position of power since they are mostly members of an educated group, dedicate more time and resources to the project and perform activities by which they exert influence such as writing first drafts of proposals and research products. Yet, by carefully considering other characteristics such as age, gender or socio-cultural background, the possibilities for an equal and inclusive partnerships can be increased (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). To this end, one may for instance choose to assign a researcher to a project who shares certain characteristics with the targeted group such as speaking a certain language or having shared in a particular life experience.

In this vein, Hopkins notes that "the multiple, interweaving and intersecting ways in which our various positionalities and identities are revealed, negotiated and managed in research encounters are crucial to the conduct of ethical research" (2007, p. 388). This requires a great degree of reflexivity from academic researchers, including being mindful of one's dress, way of talking, walking, sitting or standing. It also involves carefully balancing between engaging in the

collaborative inquiry and remaining invisible, imposing as little of their own thoughts or influence on the groups as possible.

Stage 2: Engaging in a collaborative inquiry

Once a research community is formed, the focus shifts to setting up a collaborative inquiry about the topic of interest. How this inquiry is to be designed depends in the first place on the nature of the research question that is guiding the research. However, the active contribution of community-based research partners in knowledge creation is essential to PAR and, thus, designing the inquiry such that those partners can be maximally involved poses new challenges to the research process.

Choosing appropriate research methods

In traditional social science research data collection often requires substantial methodological and scientific knowledge and is therefore not easily taken on by people with limited schooling or language skills (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Matthew & Barron, 2015; McLaughlin, 2006). Nevertheless, there exist plenty examples of social work research projects that demonstrate great effort in developing, adapting or combining research methods in order to engage people with limited schooling or language skills as co-researchers (Matthew & Barron, 2015; Van Bijleveld *et al.*, 2020). One social artistic method that might be inspirational in this regard is digital storytelling. Digital stories are one to three minutes movies that consist of a series of photographs or video-tracks combined with an audio-track, all of which are made by people with lived experience themselves. Although the logic of digital storytelling is outcome-oriented, the process is equally important as it allows for the co-construction of knowledge about the topic of interest. In one of our recent projects, digital storytelling was used to map the life situations of large-scale social high-rise residents of a particular site in Brussels (see also Rifaad, Aernouts, Mosseray, & Ryckewaert, 2020).[2]

Importantly, a distinction can be made between the use of participatory methods in more traditional social science research projects and PAR as a holistic approach based within a participatory paradigm. Still, this distinction is not so clear-cut since the use of participatory methods may also lead a research partnership to become more participatory in other respects (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). In the project described above the participatory digital storytelling process facilitated residents' ability to express their fears and suggestions. During the sessions they asked for example for improved rubbish removal, more shops, better transport and denounced the poor maintenance of the buildings and the limited accessibility for residents with health problems.

Although the project was not initially designed as PAR, the project's focus moved towards the participatory redesign of the public space around the high-rise buildings, and residents became much more active collaborators, to the point of negotiating the possibility to conduct their own follow-up research on the topic. While the use of participatory methods may indeed lead a research project to become more participatory overall, we would like to encourage researchers to position a project as PAR from the start because this will enable them to carefully design the project according to PAR's principles of participation and reciprocation.

Making the invisible visible (or not)

Involving social workers and people with lived experiences in a collaborative inquiry enhances their willingness to disclose sensitive information, yet attention should be given to how they are made vulnerable by their openness. Negotiating involvement in data collection requires discussing the consequences of sharing experiences, including how these experiences could be potentially (ab) used by policy makers, (legal) institutions or the media (Cahill, 2007; Swartz, 2011). It also involves mapping the boundaries of the research by agreeing on what can(not) be used as data (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). Several researchers have noted that withholding information may either be an act of self-protection for people belonging to oppressed groups or a means to keep knowledge – as conducive to power – in their own hands (Chataway, 1997). This speaks not only to academic researchers' responsibility to create supportive spaces in which people feel safe to disclose sensitive experiences, but also to their ethical commitment to consider the potential consequences of making the invisible visible (Cahill, 2007). In the above-mentioned research project concerning prison social work, people in prison expressed that they felt safe to disclose their experiences in prison and in doing so they felt heard, seen and supported (Naessens *et al.*, 2018). This is exemplary for the emancipatory importance of making the invisible visible, even though it was clearly discussed with them that this may not directly lead to a change in their situation.

Designing research-as-intervention

Engaging in a collaborative inquiry must be beneficial to the people involved (MacLauhglin, 2006; Swartz, 2011). Swartz refers to this as an intentional ethics of reciprocation, which calls upon researchers to give back in ways that are meaningful to those participating in the research (MacLauhglin, 2006; Swartz, 2011). However, ideas on what 'giving back' should involve in practice differ with some authors suggesting that giving back should involve remuneration and that in the absence of any remuneration, researchers may be experienced as exploiters (Bridges,

2001; McLaughlin, 2006) while others argue that people in vulnerable situations should be equally treated as people who can agree to participate without requiring to be given something tangible as reward (Jeffrey, 2006 in Swartz, 2011). In this latter view, providing tangible rewards may even be seen as patronizing.

Designing research-as-intervention may constitute one way in which giving back can be non-patronizing while being sensitive to the needs and expectations of social workers and people with lived experiences involved (Swartz, 2011). Such an understanding of intervention implies that academic researchers actively negotiate with their non-academic partners what they want from the research process and from researchers (McLaughlin, 2006). Negotiation over the outcome of the research project was explicitly incorporated in the above-mentioned PAR on hidden homelessness (Schrooten *et al.*, 2020). In the project's proposal one outcome was described as 'tools for intervention', deliberately lacking further elaboration. The involvement of community researchers in related decisions was explicitly mentioned. Depending on the outcome of these discussions possible research products might take the form of publications, as well as specific practices or actions.

As to more tangible benefits, apart from any remuneration, co-researchers can be offered opportunities to learn desired skills or to participate in rewarding activities (Swartz, 2011). More abstractly, participation fosters critical consciousness which may in turn galvanize co-researchers into taking concrete action for themselves and others, including making improvements to the services they use, campaigning or studying. Thus, knowledge is for action and serves to enable co-researchers to become agents of change in their own lives and that of others (Matthew & Baron, 2015). The high-rise project described above illustrates this. Having to reflect on the future regeneration of the social high-rise site challenged residents to use their experiential knowledge to formulate ideas, thus stimulating their self-learning ability. They drew self-confidence from the digital storytelling process because they could express themselves creatively and make something of their own. The digital storytelling process also helped several residents to find their unique voice, making them wonder what they want to achieve in life and how to do so.

Stage 3: Promoting parallax perspectives

In the final stages of a PAR project, the focus is on co-constructing interpretations from the generated data, reporting to the broader public and in this way further facilitating social change. The overarching aim then is to promote 'a parallax of perspectives' (Ginsburg, 1995); this is to

ensure that research partners are not misrepresented "through shallow, monocled gazes", but instead that every possible effort is made to consider their perspectives in ways "that allow a reader to change position as the subject is viewed from changing perspectives" (Swartz, 2011, p. 49).

Representing experiences fairly

It is sometimes argued that only those who have shared in a particular experience can legitimately represent what it is like (Bridges, 2001). Even though researchers can have an understanding of people's experiences in a particular situation, it will almost certainly differ from the understanding of the people themselves and "whether it will be of any value will depend on the extent to which they have immersed themselves in the world of the other and portrayed it in its richness and complexity, on the empathy and imagination that they have brought to their enquiry and writing, and on whether their accounts are honest, responsible and critical" (Bridges, 2001, p. 375). The academic researcher coordinating the Brussels' prisons project testifies how people in prison are able to pinpoint the bottlenecks of the prison system from such a nuanced insider perspective that is not easily acquired by people without lived experience (Naessens *et al.*, 2018). To assure not only a conceptually enriching but also an honest, empathic representation of experiences is a major reason why social workers and people with lived experience are to be involved in data interpretation.

Fairly portraying the realities lived and reported by social workers and people with lived experience is typically achieved through multiple rounds of member checking in which emerging interpretations of the shared experiences are played back and discussed within the research community (Madill & Sullivan, 2018; Thomas, 2017). Member checks often consist of intense interactions as engaging with academic researchers' interpretations can catalyse a mix of ambivalent feelings among their community-based partners ranging from feeling exposed and ashamed to feeling deeply understood and empowered (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). Those – perhaps difficult – interactions may facilitate reflexive discovery by providing academic researchers with the opportunity to reflect and, potentially, transform their understanding of what is important to their partners and to gain insight into their own blind spots. This can be illustrated by the social high-rise project in which the initial digital stories were processed by the researcher-facilitator who then presented them back to the residents in multiple very lively group member checks, resulting in considerable changes made to the stories of the residents.

At the same time, the academic researcher should continue to adopt – at least partially – an analytical stance. A complete loss of this analytical stance – pure participation or blind following of the interpretation of the partners – has been described in anthropological literature as 'going native' or 'becoming the phenomena'. This is associated with reduced analytical interest and often results in the inability of researchers to publish their materials (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Considering language-use

When reporting on the experiences of people with lived experience, not only the accuracy and authenticity of representations matter but also the language that is used to describe experiences, starting from the choice of labels used to refer to the people involved (Kong *et al.*, 2020). Writing about the lives of people belonging to marginalized or oppressed groups, whose experiences may be quite different from one's own, and providing a legitimate penned account of their voices in academic language is fraught with difficulty. The danger lies in language-use that either orientalizes or "exploits the emotions of readers through the injudicious use of quotations" (Swartz, 2011, p. 61). In the context of South-Africa, this has been referred to as 'white writing' by Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee. One way in which 'white writing' manifests itself is in using verbatim quotations from non-native speakers or people who struggle with language. This may unfairly recreate the impression that they are childish, unsophisticated, and even unintelligent. Carefully negotiating over an empowering language may involve an appreciation of alternative, more creative forms of language such as poetry, drama or visual language (Kong *et al.*, 2020). These creative forms may serve better to narrate the perspective of people with lived experience in their own images, *and* words, limiting the danger of misrepresentation.

Negotiating co-authorship

Perhaps the most obvious strategy to promote co-ownership over a research project is to grant co-authorship. Granting authorship assigns credit for one's contributions to a project. It gives right to the benefits that come with ownership and it signals responsibility for its contents (Sarna-Wornjcicki, Perret, Eitzel, & Fortmann, 2017). In doing so, it reduces the 'epistemic injustice' apparent in the failure to acknowledge non-academic collaborators' intellectual contributions (Fricker, 2007, in Sarna-Wornjcicki *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, granting authorship to non-academic partners implies a shift in the meaning of authorship from the physical act of writing, which is often required by journals, to authorship as accountability for the creation of knowledge.

However, there are several reasons why non-academic partners could prefer not to co-author such as not wanting to assume responsibility for the produced knowledge, not wanting to speak on behalf of their group and not wanting one's knowledge "to be misappropriated or commodified" (Castleden, Morgan, & Naimanis, 2011, p. 23). One inclusive co-authorship practice, that maintains some level of anonymity, is collective authorship (Castleden *et al.*, 2011). Some journals are hesitant to accept collective authorship as it is opposed to liberal notions of singular ownership of knowledge. Yet, it is very much in line with PAR's epistemology that conceives of knowledge as co-constructed among people. The project on radicalization that was referred to earlier in this article resulted in a book project that included youth workers and youngsters (under a collective name) as co-authors (Claes *et al.*, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

By approaching research as a collaborative self-reflective inquiry in which academic and non-academic researchers closely work together to develop critical consciousness and to promote social change, PAR is well geared to engage people with lived experience of the topic under study. Therefore, social work researchers might opt for PAR as a pragmatic choice for improved accuracy.

The standard of objectivity that reigns traditional, expert-lead research projects has long been accepted as the means for achieving accuracy, but as Stoecker (2005, p. 6) describes: "scientists gradually forgot that objectivity was but a means to accuracy and increasingly saw it as an end in itself". Practitioners, particularly feminist researches, have pointed out that the creation of emotional distance between researcher and research subject may make research less accurate, because it leads the research subject to withhold information from the researcher (Stoecker, 2005).

Other reasons to opt for PAR relate to social justice and democracy. The traditional research approach has often not lead to substantial changes in the life of research subjects. For instance, while there has been plenty of research on poverty, poverty is still increasing. PAR is rooted in a rich tradition of cumulative concerns for inequalities and processes that keep people living in poverty oppressed and depended. The ideas leading to PAR converged around the 1970s during a period when the failures of 'top down' expert designed projects were beginning to be exposed, notably in development projects (Abma *et al.*, 2019). PAR bears the idea of social justice and improving conditions for oppressed and marginalized groups. In this sense, it is closely connected to the values of social work. Social work researchers feel drawn towards PAR because of its commitment both to democratize research knowledge and spaces and to challenge the status quo (Lenette *et al.*, 2019).

Yet, putting PAR's values and principles into practice is challenging to such an extent that one continuously runs the risk to jeopardise the very same values and principles one is driven by.

The model described in this contribution is aimed to increase social work researchers' self-reflexivity about the challenges that come with PAR. Literature on PAR is often criticized for being "remarkably unenlightening" about the research process (Healy, 2001, p. 96). With this model, we want to encourage researchers to position a project as PAR from the start, to jointly negotiate appropriate ethical strategies with their non-academic collaborators and to report in all transparency on the decisions that were taken. While the model presented here may assist social work researchers on their journey, there are a number of issues that remain.

First, while we introduce strategies to assist researchers when faced with challenges during the research process, some suggestions may seem unclear. For instance, we present mixed arguments for visible participation of people belonging to marginalized and oppressed groups, and for remuneration of co-researchers. To overcome these unclarities, we recommend academic researchers to explicitly negotiate over these issues with their non-academic collaborators in order to come to joint decisions. Further work is needed to provide some guidelines on how such a negotiation process may evolve in practice and on how researchers should report on it.

Second, our model is still unclear with regards to what is enough participation and reciprocation to label a project as PAR. A common criticism to PAR is that researchers put forth maximal participation as the espoused theory, but it is not before the following reflection-on-action process that researchers can really understand how participation was enacted. Several authors urge PAR researchers to design and employ metrics to assess how the project empowers equitable and just contributions (Lake & Wendland, 2018; see Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, & Ross, 2019 for an example of a method that can be used to this means). This is particularly important because to the extent that participatory processes can be seen to have taken place, and that people belonging to oppressed or marginalized groups have had the opportunity to voice their grievances, without leading to substantive change in policies or structures which perpetuate the problems being addressed, then the danger will be that the status quo may appear more democratic (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006).

Finally and relatedly, our model gives limited guidance as to what kind of social change a PAR project should result in. This speaks to a general critique on PAR: "participatory researchers seek nothing less than the progressive transformation of the social order. Yet exactly what counts as transformation remains unclear" (Healy, 2001, p. 99). Healy encourages researchers to distinguish

structural from local forms of change and to value the local forms of change based on solid relationships that PAR can help us to achieve.

To conclude, embarking on a PAR project continues to be a challenging enterprise, and our model does not provide definite answers to many of the challenges, yet it does provide researchers with a compass on their journey. More generally, we hope that our reflections spark further debates among academic and community-based researchers in social work and that in so doing, the plurality of perspectives will further enrich the tradition of PAR as a distinctive research approach in social work.

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NOTES

1 We start our reflections on the ethics of participatory action research from two ethical communicative principles (participation and reciprocation), but we also could have initiated our analysis from an ethics of care, or virtuous attitudes (such as courage, patience, presence, attentiveness, acceptance, humility). On the dynamics between communicative ethics and an ethics of care, see Liégeois (2016).

2 The project was a collaboration between our department, a community-based social work organisation and the Centre for Urban Research, VUB, Brussels and took place against the background of the future regeneration of the site.

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