

From the Margins to the Mainstream?
Celebrating and Challenging Participatory Action Research
Wednesday 11th June, 2025, Collingwood College, Durham University, UK

BRIEF REPORT

Around 70 people attended this conference in Durham, with the aim of celebrating the development and achievements of participatory action research (PAR).



Participants set out to explore various activities under the PAR umbrella, and the role of activists and academics globally from the 1970s in creating the paths that enabled the founding of Durham

University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA) in 2009 and the UK Participatory Research Network (UKPRN) in 2014. Contributors celebrated the work of CSJCA and UKPRN and the contributions of many organisations, groups and individuals locally, nationally and internationally. At the same time, participants examined the varieties of PAR through a critical lens, asking key questions about the dangers of academic dominance, the persistence of colonialism, extractivism and the implications of increasing recognition and popularity by funders and universities. The event also marked the forthcoming retirement from Durham University on 30 September 2025 of Sarah Banks, a co-founder of CSJCA and UKPRN. The Dept of Sociology, Durham University, along with UKPRN and NINE Doctoral Training Partnership contributed towards the expenses of the event.

After a lively panel discussion on the theme of 'Re-examining PAR – past, present and future' participants discussed in small groups some of the opportunities and challenges afforded by PAR. Some of the main points raised in the feedback from the groups are noted below, with thanks to Jane Wistow for the notes and the photos.

Opportunities

- The time that PAR gives researchers to work more slowly (although this is also a challenge in a fast-moving world).
- Establishing community-based ethics review processes can increase accountability of academics and outsiders.
- Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are changing in universities As more researchers undertake PAR, RECS are becoming more aware of the intricacies of such research.
- The National Health Service (NHS) and National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) are now interested in public involvement, engagement and co-production in research.
- Durham Community Action is working with the Rural Design Centre on establishing a Rural Durham Community Research Network, with input from Durham University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, to undertake and promote community-led research.
- There can be advantages of being on the margins and not in the mainstream.
- PAR can be very impactful and is valued because of this.

Challenges

- Convincing managers and funders that the time and flexibility are needed can be challenging.
- It is important to use every day rather than academic language, to involve people rather than create a barrier.
- There can be many ethical challenges around conflict, power and democratic engagement.
- There are concerns around constraints of time and commitment for students and community-based researchers. How to include people that might be working in and for communities?
- PAR may take too long.
- PAR is very complex and may be too difficult.
- There's a concern about whether communities of place/identity actually want to do research.
- The importance of trust, which takes time to build.
- Once trust is built, is there potential that academics and other researchers could be guilty of constantly going back to the same parts of a community?
- Shared values and definitions can be inclusive or exclusive. How to work with conflicting values?
- Ethics approval processes can be difficult because PAR is misunderstood.
- How to work with the power of academics and 'professional' researchers.
- It is important to remember that the action element of PAR is not a separable component but an integral part of the whole research process.
- The importance of finance and sorting payments out. Where is the money to set up the projects properly and to pay community researchers fairly?

- The expectations of funders may be too high or unrealistic.
- Time pressures for all involved.
- Management in universities sometimes tends to take over, limiting freedom of community-based researchers.
- Some universities may try to take over intellectual property (IP) rights.
- Shifting power in the academy is difficult.
- Monies often go to new research partnerships, not those already built.
- We need to recognise that a different set of ethical guidelines applies to PAR.
- Even if not paid, we're obstinate enough to keep doing it.
- There are questions about compensation for community members' time and the valuing of their knowledge.
- The importance of valuing non-academic outputs, and valuing community-based co-researchers.
- PAR can be seen as a 'nice' thing to do. It may be superficial, tokenistic.
- It is difficult to measure and attribute how change happens.
- How do we accommodate PAR at different scales, locally and internationally.
- The challenge of giving space for conflict and not diluting messages through the techniques of participation.
- Creating spaces to look after one another is important.
- Dealing with conflict within a community, especially when some voices are excluded, and handling the complexity.

PROGRAMME

- 10.00 **Coffee**
- 10.30 **Welcome** from Durham University Sociology Dept (Prof Geetanjali Gangoli), CSJCA (Dr Sui Ting Kong) & UKPRN (Prof Toby Brandon), introduction to the event and to each other.
- 10.45 **Panel: Re-examining PAR - past, present & future**, Prof Sarah Banks (Durham University) with Dr Rajesh Tandon (Participatory Research in Asia, India) & Prof Budd Hall (University of Victoria, Canada), Co-chairs, UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research & Social Responsibility in Higher Education; Prof Mary Brydon-Miller (University of Louisville, USA); Yvonne Moffitt (Community Researcher, UK); Prof Gina Porter (Durham University, UK).
- 11.30 **Small group discussions**
- 12.00 **Plenary discussion**
- 12.25 **Summing up**, Sophie Duncan, National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement
- 12.30 **Lunch** (with book launch, [*Teaching Community-Based Participatory Research: Socially Responsible and Ethically Anchored*](#) (Hachette India) edited by Rajesh Tandon and Budd Hall.
- 13.15 **Workshops round 1** (choose 1 out of 3 workshops)
- 14.15 **Break**
- 14.30 **Workshops round 2** (choose 1 out of 3 workshops)
- 15.30 **Break**
- 15.45 **Messages** from the workshops about the future of PAR and closing plenary to acknowledge the contribution of Sarah Banks.
- 16.30 **Close**

WORKSHOPS: ROUND 1

WORKSHOP 1. The past in the present: navigating difficult histories in pursuit of hopeful futures in decolonial PAR, Caitlin Nunn, Dana Almousselli, Ferdos Beit Lafteh, Mariam Zorba & Senna Yousef (*Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging youth research team, a collaboration between academics, artists, Manchester Museum, and young people from migrant backgrounds*).

How do our personal, communal, and institutional histories shape our contemporary collaborations? What are the necessary conditions for naming and navigating these histories and their legacies in

our projects? And what is at stake in this process, and for whom? In this workshop, we consider the (im)possibilities of decolonial PAR. We explore what it looks and feels like to strive for decolonisation: the difficulty and discomfort, humour and hope. And the centrality of care – for ourselves, each other, the work, and those it seeks to engage.

WORKSHOP 2. Participatory research with women in prison, *Gaynor Trueman (NE Sex Work Forum), Kate O'Brien and Alison Jobe (Dept of Sociology, Durham University).*

This workshop focuses on participatory action research with women in prison. The workshop draws from facilitators' experience(s) of research with women in prison, including participatory/peer research with women involved in sex work prior to custody, and participatory theatre with mothers in prison. In the workshop, we reflect on possibilities offered by participatory research for women in prison and the challenges of undertaking participatory research in the prison environment.

WORKSHOP 3. Arts from and for the community: reflecting on the technocratic turn in the mainstreaming of PAR, *Sui-Ting Kong (Department of Sociology, Durham University) and Clara Cheung (Hongkonger community artist).*

PAR often employs a myriad of creative methods, usually in combination of the conventional ones, to enable diverse voices and experiences to be expressed and included in knowledge production. With the mainstreaming of PAR, there seems to be more allowance for equating the use of creative or artistic methods with participatory action research. This experiential workshop will engage participants in artistic sense making of individual and collective experiences, and reflection on how this method can be used in participatory and non-participatory ways.

WORKSHOPS ROUND 2

WORKSHOP 4. The balancing act: Negotiating participation and protection in research with children and young people on violence and abuse, *Cait Jobson, Janelle Rabe, Lynne Cairns (Dept of Sociology, Durham University).*

In this experiential, reflective workshop, we consider different ways to balance children and young people's rights in the micro-moments of pockets of participation in research such as flexible consent, co-creating safety and mapping shared understandings. Rather than a rule-book, we hope to reflect together on ways we can make 'real' rights by balancing participation with protection, anchored in UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child. Through creative and participatory activities, we will discuss practical examples from our three PhD projects with children and young people on violence and abuse.

WORKSHOP 5. Legal PAR: Working with the judiciary on issues of intimate partner violence, *Dr. Kristin Kalsem (Charles Hartsock Professor of Law and Co-Founder of the Nathaniel R. Jones Center for Race, Gender, and Social Justice, University of Cincinnati, USA)*

This workshop will introduce "legal PAR," emphasizing its synergies with critical race and feminist theories. Specifically, the benefits and challenges of legal PAR will be examined in the context of an ongoing project to train judges in best practices in intimate partner violence cases. Participants will participate in two PAR methods central to this project, Asset Mapping and Group Level Assessment.

WORKSHOP 6. Thinking participatively: Challenging the western mindset, *Jane Springett (Emeritus Professor, University of Alberta, Canada and UKPRN; co-author with Margaret Ledwith of 'Participatory Practice, Community based Action for Transformative Change', 2022).*

This participatory reflexive workshop will explore the mind set required to do participatory practice/research. What does it really mean to think participatively? Why is it important for how we act in the world? Is it possible with a "western" mind set? If not, how do we transform the way we think and act in our research practice or is our social wiring too entrenched?