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Slade, J. (2019) Doing what we can with what we've got: Reflections on PAR and the ECR experience. Planning Theory & Practice, 20 (2). pp. 305-310. ISSN: 1464-9357

https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2019.1595486

Doing what we can with what we've got: **Reflections on PAR and the ECR experience**

The label, Participatory Action Research (PAR), seems to be a good one, describing research oriented towards making change in which the interested parties actively participate. In identifying key principles or characteristics, proponents begin to tell us more about what drives it: a *collective commitment* to *participation and democracy* at all stages of the research process, from *identifying issues* to finding *useful solutions* (McIntyre, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This situates PAR as a self-conscious reaction against 'traditional' and particularly positivistic approaches to social scientific research – whereby 'neutral' researchers are in control of identifying research questions, extracting data from participants and deciding what it means – and points towards its ethical and political co-ordinates, as both critique and response to inequitable balances of power and resource. As Saija (2014) has made clear in this journal, this is not *only* political but also ideological, a commitment to engaging in democracy as process and working towards social change.

It is hard to find a route to PAR within planning, then, without understanding it to some degree as a turn away from planning's problematic modernist legacy. We are implicated by association with a tradition that planned *for* people, that gave perceived material improvement with one hand whilst disenfranchising with the other, undoing community cohesion and attachments to place that had developed in some cases over many generations. From this starting point PAR can seem to represent a new moral benchmark, affirming our commitment to social justice and engaging participants from the start of projects in identifying, investigating and finding solutions to problems (McIntyre, 2008). As a way of enacting the laudable values that are still central to the planning project in collaboration with impacted people, we might even characterise this as an attempted re-turn to planning's roots as a social movement. This ethical drive can lead to a temptation, however, to rely heavily on the distinction between good or genuine PAR and PAR that fails to hit the mark. Whilst thinking about what makes good PAR has to be central to reflective practice it is also the case that any attempt to enact it will end up being, in some sense, an exercise in failure; or perhaps more constructively, in learning from failure.

In highlighting this aspect of PAR I hope to contribute constructively to ongoing debates within the discipline and this journal, particularly in bringing together Raynor's (2019) recent contribution and the *Interface* on learning from mistakes (Campbell, Forester & Sanyal, 2018). Raynor persuasively argues that Early Career Researchers (ECRs) face particular structural barriers and disproportionate challenges in conducting PAR. My aim is to shed a different light on these issues through offering a

complementary perspective, based on my experience as a PhD student and an ECR. Alongside making a case for the worth of imperfect PAR, I look to problematise the notion of the Early Career Researcher (ECR), suggesting some limits to its utility to those of us at the start of our careers. In doing this I am also able to speak productively, if provisionally, about the power relations between communities and universities, and universities and ECRs. The insight garnered through the constitution of this triadic prism, PAR-Community-ECR, represents a productive way of helping to centre engaged scholarship – both inside and outside of planning – around a new humility (Corburn, 2017), speaking to wider debates within PAR, and pointing towards some routes to enacting the change we are keen to see in universities and beyond. Ultimately, I hope to have given the power relations that confront and constrain all of us a bit of a shake, whilst finding common cause with Raynor around the importance of keeping on keeping on.

PAR, the first edge…

My PhD research (Slade, 2017) looked to explore whether and how the perceived relationship between storytelling and planning (see e.g. van Hulst, 2012) could be exploited towards realising greater inclusion and democracy in community-led change. It took place in the context of a community-university engagement between the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Sheffield, and the community of Westfield (Crookes, Inch, & Slade, 2015). Opened in 1974, the Westfield estate was part of a planned expansion of Sheffield to its south east; by 2009 it had been identified by the City Council as an area of 'extreme multiple disadvantage' (SCC, 2009). In light of this and in line with the route to PAR suggested above, the utilisation of PAR as a research methodology made sense. PAR offered a response to the imbalances of power and resource that characterise post-industrial societies, acknowledging an ethical imperative to involve participants in the research and to seek to provide benefits to them as well as me.

Conducting PAR within the context of a PhD project, however, is not without its challenges. If you have gained a place and funding to research a particular topic, might it not be the case that those you look to engage are not interested in it, or perhaps not interested in research full stop? Even if they are at the outset, what if they change their minds? Perhaps building effective working relationships will prove impossible or take too long? Moreover, what are the ethics of coming out of the process with a sole-authored thesis, or coming out of the process at all? In some senses, however, these questions help to highlight both the imbalances of power and resource that PAR seeks to respond to, and to put the positions of academic research and researchers in perspective.

For we are not sitting above these processes, we are implicated in and constrained by them too. Indeed, part of our reimagining planning in light of its modernist legacy relies on leaving behind the notion that we have *both* all the answers *and* the ability to impose our solutions on individuals and communities.

What is required to make progress in this context is a degree of flexibility. To that end, in relation to PhD study, Klocker (2012) has encouraged interested researchers to pursue PAR, highlighting that both it and the academy can be more flexible than we often imagine. Not least because of the relative freedom PhD researchers can have over the direction of projects. Of particular significance in support of this position is Reason and Bradbury's (2008) suggestion that PAR represents, 'an orientation to inquiry' (p. 1), rather than a rigid methodology or set of methods. From here, and assuming that we are undertaking research in good faith, doing the best you can in the circumstances acquires a new significance. In my own work, it allowed me to proceed in the knowledge that I could undertake a successful and useful project even if it did not flawlessly realise all of the loftiest ideals of PAR.

In practice, this saw me design a project with two levels of analysis. At the grassroots level, this was engaged with a group of residents looking to understand their community, plan for and enact positive and enduring change. We produced a community plan collaboratively, based on a range of action research initiatives, that was useful for the community in directing and securing funding for their ongoing activities. Subsequently, I facilitated a story workshop for those who were involved in the community planning process. This involved creating anonymised talking heads from various interviews I had conducted with Westfield residents, drawing on the experience of our engagement on the estate. Audio recordings of these were listened to collectively, helping to facilitate discussion of Westfield's past, present and potential futures, and speaking to the ongoing community planning process. This grew out of the PAR methodology in a number of ways: enabling residents to contribute to analysis, speak back to and influence the ongoing research process and, crucially, in being oriented towards considering how our community planning practice could be improved going forward.

Encouragingly, workshop participants felt this process was helpful for reflecting on their work, going so far as to suggest that it could be a useful tool for other groups. As hard as it might be for us to believe, however, on another level they were not particularly interested in more 'academic' questions around the relationship between story and planning, even less so in the esoteric business

of writing and disseminating traditional research outputs that spoke to these questions. Whilst there were benefits in both directions, then, and a real commitment to working to realise meaningful change together, we did not have to pretend we were all doing everything in exactly the same way. Whilst this is not a novel or surprising insight (see Saija, 2014), it does say something about the distance between how the academy and academics – including PAR researchers – might perceive their power and the power academic discourses actually have in particular contexts. The extent to which this matters is an interesting question and developing a comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this piece. It is fair to say, however, that wrestling with this issue can give rise to significant anxiety, which as Raynor (2019) has highlighted can be particularly marked for those at the beginning of their careers. Below, I wish to show one route to making this productive.

First, however, and with the acknowledgement of a potential confirmation bias, it also seems important to note that the lessons afforded by this experience suggest a particular significance for planning research, not least in light of the recent *Interface* section in this journal on learning from mistakes (Campbell, Forester & Sanyal, 2018). In a discipline that revolves around the '*so what?*' question, a drive to doing what we can with what we have got leaves us well placed to learn from and contribute to wider debates within PAR. Our recent history is important here, for as a discipline we have learned the hard way that we do not have all the answers, and can make a strong case for pursuing our worthwhile and enduring ideals in a new spirit of humility. Alongside reassessing our practice, however, we would do well to reassess ourselves and the institutions where we are based. I hope to demonstrate this further by taking a second cue from Raynor (2019) and unpacking the notion of the 'Early Career Researcher'.

ECR, the second edge…

The figure of the ECR is helpful here because, like PAR, it frequently appears as an ideal type, a benchmark against which we measure ourselves. It is, of course, useful and important to have a language to talk about the challenges faced by those at the beginnings of their careers. Similarly, I do not wish to disparage the help, support and encouragement frequently given to those in the early stages of their careers by more experienced colleagues – this has been vital to my own ability to enter, remain and function within the academy, as I am sure it will have been for almost all academics. Rather, my aim is to highlight how the spectre of the ECR can function at an institutional level and to distinguish this from the meaningful and enriching relationships we enjoy with friends, colleagues and mentors. In a sense, then, the ECR seems to represent a manifestation of the

academy's super-ego, an idealisation that disciplines those of us recently engaged by academic institutions or desperately trying to become engaged. Successful ECRs do this much of this and this much of that, they organise conferences and initiate debates, they churn out a paper every other month and certainly do not seem to get tired or sick or fed up. Highlighting this function of the ECR phenomenon here provides helpful clarification of just how much power we frequently really have.

On the one hand, then, the notion of the ECR can function to set academic labour apart from other types of labour. The lucky ones are employed but the institution does not want us to feel like employees, preferring to perpetuate the student/teacher dynamic we have experienced heretofore or sometimes even more perversely a parent/child dynamic. This is true even of sympathetic understandings of the ECR phenomenon, which can boldly proclaim that, 'it takes a village to raise an ECR' (Browning, Thompson & Dawson, 2016). What renders this fantasy especially dysfunctional is the fact that our ability to reproduce our material existence is not secure. I am 31 years old after all and my wife, not unreasonably, expects me to contribute to paying our bills; meanwhile developing a career within the academy can look less like going to work – or living in a supportive village – and more like taking part in a television talent show. Every few months contestants go through yet more rounds of applying for a few more months of respite, having their recent performance assessed, frequently in the harshest of lights. Having said which, at least on a television talent show the vicissitudes of one's employment history can be turned to your benefit, tugging at the heartstrings of those viewer-voters. In the academy, by contrast, if you mention that you have recently been paying your bills by washing pots in a supermarket café all too many 'villagers' will look away with embarrassed incomprehension. Yet in all our minds the question must remain, will we ever organise enough conferences, publish enough papers, apply for and win enough funding, and do so with enough grace to satisfy the beast on our backs and in turn ourselves? Most of us will not and it seems to me that greater honesty and criticality are required if we are to avoid perpetuating a situation where we forever feel that we are not quite good enough.

At the same time, it is important neither to diminish the relatively privileged position we do inhabit if we have PhDs, nor the extent to which we are complicit in these processes. We have succeeded within an educational context, for the most part for well over 20 years. Academia is attractive to those of us who are that way inclined and when we are not worrying we frequently enjoy it. That is why we are (still) here. Moreover, in addition to representing interesting and potentially fulfilling work, if you find the holy grail of a permanent position with prospects for progression you are, in the grand scheme of things and for the time being at least, going to be doing reasonably well. Whilst

others do not have to agree with this analysis, it strikes me that this is a level of self-awareness, honesty and nuance that we would benefit from injecting into our research practices, an appreciation of the extent and the limits of our own privilege both within our institutions and within society more broadly. In universities, this might mean pushing back against the institution's tendency to live vicariously through the ECRs it endeavours to construct; in PAR it means resisting the temptation to cast ourselves, or the pressure to be cast, as superheroes in our research fantasies, acknowledging that we cannot give away power that we never had in the first place.

A helpful way to think about these issues is through the prism, PAR/Community/ECR, and the question of where we position the structural pressures and constraints on what we do. Discourses of both PAR and ECR credit researchers with a great deal of agency, and as such responsibility, to realise meaningful and lasting interventions, within fields of research and/or through relationships forged with communities. By contrast communities are understood to lack the power to engage their own agency. If we proceed in this light, we find that structural constraints frequently resurface with a vengeance when we 'fail'. Perhaps it is more helpful to give a more honest account of them earlier on, acknowledging that others have power that we do not; in universities over whether we are employed in the first place and how, and in communities over whether or not to engage with research/ers and in what spirit, which in the context of a research methodology based on empowering those traditionally understood as research subjects is, paradoxically, significant. At the risk of getting carried away, we might even suggest that ECRs are perfectly placed to comment on these relationships, empowered socially as researchers whilst at the bottom of institutional hierarchies. We are not inert in these processes and relationships but neither are we in total control. From here, I wonder whether it would be helpful to amend Reason and Bradbury's (2012) suggestion slightly, extending our understanding of PAR from an 'orientation to inquiry' to an *orientation to being in the world.* This might help us to reconstruct our 'fantasies' and our 'failures' more positively, as learning by doing.

Squaring the triangle?

By way of conclusion and of bringing the strands of this brief discussion together, I will dedicate some space to unpacking what it might mean to inject a PAR sensibility into other areas of our academic and extra-academic practice. Firstly, researchers do not exist on a parallel plane to everyone else. From within the 'ivory tower' of the university we all too frequently distinguish ourselves from 'the real world' and 'real people'. In some ways this can help us to think about our

privilege and our positions within instances of engaged research, yet in others it is profoundly unhelpful, fuelling super-egoic fantasies of exceptionalism and blinding us to how the power/knowledge relations we are adept at theorising have practical implications for us too. What we might seek to do, then, is extend to ourselves and one another the same understanding we would extend to co-researchers and participants in projects with which we are involved, around how external pressures shape their and our capacity to engage. Simultaneously, we should look to maintain and deepen our critical appreciation of institutions of higher education, especially when they appear to use our relationships with friends and colleagues, and our commitment to scholarship as tools of manipulation. Closely related to this is a call to be more honest about ourselves, what we are doing and the limitations of both our research and our ability to be the 'Early Career Researchers' the university wants us to be. In gently resisting the pressure exerted by the academy's super-ego, we can potentially have a great impact in supporting one another and in helping, alongside more established and/or formal initiatives, to make the change we would like to see both inside and outside of the university.

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