AcPrac Case Study

What Lies Beyond Participatory Methodology: Reflections on Power, Resources, and Knowledge-Making Among Practitioners, Researchers, and Funders

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Atlantic *Fellows* | FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

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About AFSEE

The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the 'Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change (AcPrac)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) has long been the preferred methodology for facilitating inclusive research processes that seek to dismantle the ivory tower that has typically characterised academic research. In an ideal scenario, participatory action research is a useful transformative tool that integrates practitioners' advocacy-needs with scientific evidence in accountable and reflexive ways. However, PAR has often been instrumentalised to meet the sometimes-arbitrary requirements of research calls and donor-funded agendas – with the effect of dulling the potentially transformative power of meaningful co-created research processes. The reasons for these shortcomings are complex but can sometimes include a) the lack of participatory design in funding calls for academia-practitioner research opportunities, b) the resource and time intensiveness of co-creative action-oriented research, and c) the seen and unseen power differentials that exist among diverse actors (funders, academics, formal civil society and activists) that undermine the transformative potential of such collaborations. This reflection piece attempts to unpack these dynamics, informed by the experiences of the author and available literature. Drawing from feminist and emancipatory PAR, the paper presents a set of recommendations for how to overcome the challenges that surface when moving from instrumental PAR to transformative PAR – with the goal of enhancing the co-creation agenda to the benefit of decolonial and gender-equitable outcomes.

Introduction

In the early days of my career in Cape Town, South Africa, I was employed as a researcher at a local university unit working to address poverty and inequality at the interface of multisectoral research, policy development and advocacy. One such multisectoral collaboration centred on the work of the Worcester Hope and Reconciliation process, a community-led organisation working to advance restitution efforts, against the backdrop of socioeconomic inequality, violence, and racial exclusion. My role, as a young researcher, was to support the community by documenting their process with the hope of a) expanding the body of evidence about successful community interventions that advance transformational justice; and b) supporting the community in their own learning and reflections about their journey.

My days were initially filled with long drives out of the city, through the rolling blue Cape mountains and into a small town called Worcester. There, I would sit in community meetings, listen, document, yet seldom speak. This experience constituted a radical shift from my undergraduate training, which was characterised by what felt like inaccessible philosophical and predominantly Western educational musings over material on money and power. My experience in Worcester went beyond the realm of what I studied in my politics textbooks, namely the

Machiavellian-style divide and conquer approaches. In Worcester, there was hope for community organising, co-creation, and an attempt to build social justice-centred ways of relating among the town residents. However, as quickly as my eagerness to document began, so too did it end: within a few weeks of my assignment, I was told that there was no more funding for me to conduct my work (i.e. sit quietly as a community-requested researcher, take notes and curate the story of change). Indeed, without a clear research question, nor prospects for donor funding, there were insufficient grounds for continuing the research project. Yet, the community's collective work continued regardless of these limitations.[1]

Following the project's abrupt end, I spent time in conversation with others, including those working at the University's then-small Knowledge Co-op, which was a space where students and researchers could offer their skills to advance social transformation under the guidance of social partners.[2] Across the board, young black female researchers expressed feeling limited in their attempts to meaningfully pursue participatory research or other research-related interests, because of their inability to meet the complex demands of donor-funding. With little or no accreditations to their name, they instead pursued research under the auspices of well-funded, white male colleagues – trying to adapt pre-set methodology and research questions that the latter prioritised, into something adjacent to participatory research. 'It's the commodification of research,' remarked one colleague – a phrase that stayed with me during my remaining two years at the University. Our shared experience was of academia being available to the highest bidder – with research funders shaping the parameters of enquiry, from the themes chosen, methodology adopted, and ultimately, to the desired degree of social impact.

Furthermore, as a young black female researcher, I witnessed and experienced countless cases of racist and gendered microaggressions in academic spaces – including being asked to clean a white male professor's office. I was told that the act of emptying his bin was part of my professional development. For others, cases of being overlooked for promotions, and experiences of sexual harassment, were the straw that broke the camel's back. By the end of that academic year, I recall being only one of two young black female researchers still working on poverty and inequality in the unit.

[1]While there has been limited academic engagement on the topic, civil society funded a book: Western Cape Government. 2013. Reconciliation Book Launched on Mandela Day. Available at https://www.westerncape.gov.za/news/reconciliation-book-launched-mandela-day

[2]The Knowledge Co-Op has since expanded to include a list of community-driven research topics that students are invited to focus their research on, posing a beautiful case study on how to develop practitioner-centred, impact-driven research. UCT Social Responsiveness. ND. Get Involved: UCT Staff. University of Cape Town, available at: http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za/kco/involved/staff

My experiences of academia, and consequently working as a civil society practitioner conducting research, unlocked a series of conversations and reflections over the years that form the basis of this reflective piece. Oftentimes, research calls will include participatory processes as a minimum requirement. This is done to limit the extractivism that has historically characterised the academic research process. In the best-case scenario, PAR has been a useful tool to inform enquiry and practice, shaping collective advocacy and research agendas. More frequently though, it has been instrumentalised to meet the sometimes-arbitrary requirements of research calls and donor-funded agendas – with the effect of dulling the transformative potential of meaningful efforts at co-creation, collective enquiry, and advocacy. Questions of power, voice and agency come to the forefront in PAR, as researchers are forced to grapple not only with their own positionality, but also with the complex power dynamics that exist among diverse collectives who are included in the research process. If the stated goals of one's research is to advance PAR with the intended aim of contributing to social transformation, it is insufficient to conduct it without looking at the full lifecycle of research – including inviting oneself, collaborators, and funders to reflexive conversations around power-sharing practices.

This reflection piece offers up lessons from my experience of these dynamics and tries to articulate what lies one step beyond PAR. I reflect on feminist and decolonial responses to PAR (and how to operationalise them). After defining PAR, the paper shares a short reflection on the shortcomings of traditional PAR processes that I have observed. The dimensions I cover include a) the resource and time intensiveness of truly participatory action-oriented research, b) the lack of participatory design in funding calls for academia-practitioner research opportunities, and c) the seen and unseen power differentials that exist among diverse actors (funders, academics, formal civil society, and activists) that often undermine the truly transformative potential of such collaborations. The paper concludes with addressing alternatives to the current ways in which PAR is practically implemented, highlighting the importance of expanding and negotiating the bounds of ethical clearance to include all voices and to centre epistemic justice in the process of legitimising knowledge.

Defining Participatory Action Research

How we write about inequality matters: not only heuristically, but also in the processes we deploy to formulate our research questions, identify our research methodology and partners, analyse our data, and tell a story through the findings. When working in multisectoral collaborations, each step of the process is significant, from the assumptions we make about the world (which inform our initial research questions) to the audiences we prioritise in our dissemination. Every stage of the

research process presents an opportunity to interrogate ourselves in the world and what we offer up to others in and through our research.

The Participation Research Cluster at the Institute for Development Studies (UK) defines participatory action research as ‘researchers and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better’ (Participation Research Cluster, ND). This approach is informed by the work of Kurt Lewin, who used *action research* to reflect the process of ‘learning by doing,’ and advance a theoretical framework and research methodology built on the premises that ‘reflections on knowing and action can lead to actionable theory’ (Jones, 2018, p.36). In reviewing PAR, Jones (2018) identified three primary schools of thought and their differing goals when making use of qualitative methodology. The goals of *technical* PAR include problem-solving through generalisations and empirical facts. It takes a positivist approach that views action research as the independent process by which the researcher validates their observations through ongoing reflection. *Practical* PAR seeks to illuminate the understanding and knowledge of participants, where the latter can learn from the expert knowledge of the researcher and through the research process itself. Finally, Jones identifies *emancipatory* PAR as seeking to ‘connect personal and political aspects [of the research] in order to transform situations and challenge environments of oppression and domination’ (Ibid, p.38). Here, PAR is used to answer the research question systematically, including the influence of social, economic and political dimensions relevant to the context. It seeks to engage in scientific enquiry for the collective benefit of research participants who are closest to the matter under investigation, unpacking not only theoretical findings, but identifying pathways to systemic change that can be used to improve the context in question (Ibid, p.36–7).

Emancipatory PAR has become popular in recent years, as practitioners and activists have increasingly reflected on their interactions with predominantly Western-based research institutions (including international non-profit organisations and think tanks), which have been characterised by unequal and extractive research processes. This critique can be taken further, to disparage the power differentials that exist between the researcher and those ‘being researched.’ The challenge put forth by emancipatory PAR is as much about interrogating the social categories that create power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, as it is about interrogating the colonial landscape of knowledge-making that has unduly legitimised Western pedagogy, thought and practice above all other forms of enquiry and sense-making. Sometimes, where PAR has been used, it has been through the lens of white-saviourism, which in turn maintains the status of the researcher as the expert who bears the ultimate responsibility and capability to respond to the needs of Global South, indigenous and grassroots collectives.

Because of these dynamics, participant groups have come to mistrust researchers who, with ethics clearance from their institutions, have also extracted stories from those living in vulnerability, without displaying much accountability in their research methodology (Pittaway, Bartolomei, Hugman, 2010). Here, white saviourism references people of Caucasian descent who use harmful and problematic research practices that reflect their white privilege, entitlement, and lack of reflexivity. Such saviourism constitutes an embodiment of whiteness, whereby the academic who prescribes to Western thought and forms of research enquiry is viewed as the only or the most legitimate actor in knowledge production. This extractive research process is not only present within Global North academia but is also adopted in some instances by formal institutions and researchers (including civil society, predominantly international or formalised non-profits) within the Global South. Emancipatory PAR provides an alternative way of holding indigenous, local, and non-academic knowledge in legitimacy, while affording the opportunity for researcher and collaborators to think about their positionality in the research and for the former to be as intimately under investigation as those being researched. Emancipatory PAR is thus not only about liberation of the other, as a construct of coloniality, but of the collective – including emancipating the researcher from the place of privilege and the 'burden' of the expert status. At the centre of this emancipatory approach are questions around power, reflexivity, and space – demonstrating that it is equally important to reflect on the type of questions asked, how they are formulated and answered, as well as who benefits from them.

Two interrelated forms of emancipatory PAR stand out to me in enabling this approach, Feminist Participatory Action Research and Decolonialisation Studies. Feminist PAR adds to the emancipatory PAR a focus on gender and intersectionality by problematising the assumption that women's voices are automatically included in 'the community' (or the objects of research). On this note, Reid and Frisby argue: '[w]hile PAR and [action research] are increasingly engaging marginalized women, rarely are feminist analyses or gender relations fully considered and women's activities are sometimes trivialized, ignored, misrepresented, or homogenized' (Reid & Frisby, 2008, p.94). In seeking to advance pathways for change, ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines requires that researchers centre women and children, their lived experiences, and priorities, while working to shift unequal power dynamics and their contribution to social inequalities (Chakma, Matambanadzo and Okech, 2020, p.7).

This requires the researchers to be reflexive over the course of the research, with an emphasis on interrogating how gender diversity and discrimination plays out in the participatory process. This approach is supported by principles of intersectional feminism, including critical reflections on race, class, gender, ability, migration status, and sex worker status privilege. Ideally,

the researcher is assumed to be working in service of the collective with an awareness of their own positionality. Their role includes attentively observing who gets to shape consultative processes, who takes up space in discussions, as well as focusing on the power relations within the research process, in order to identify opportunities for power-sharing and power-ceding where possible. Furthermore, feminist PAR explicitly mentions a safeguarding and an approach that is anti: racism, sexism, bullying and exploitation. It advances an ethic of care among those involved in the research process, including by making provisions for unpaid care work, considering gender-sensitive meeting times and venues, as well as accessibility and language needs at the centre (Chakma, Matambanadzo and Okech, p.30). Therefore, the ‘action’ in ‘action research’ fundamentally includes a process and methodology that humanises participants and centres dignity.

Feminist PAR thus advances an approach of doing no [more] harm and actively contributing to movement building in whatever role one finds themselves in the research process (from data collection, analysis, to convening and facilitating meetings). As decolonisation has gained traction as a research approach, it contributes to advancing emancipatory PAR, by building upon the feminist ethos of care and by highlighting the ways in which feminist PAR explicitly interrogates the positionality of the researcher and the research process at large. It challenges the assumption that power-sharing is possible in situations where individuals are invited to participate in predetermined research processes that have pre-set research questions and that are backed by institutional and monetary power. Such forms of participation are rooted in coloniality as they maintain the hegemonic, unquestioned expert status of the researcher. Instead, decoloniality seeks to foreground co-creation, whereby, as argued by Gill et al (2012, p.4): ‘decolonizing research does not begin with institutional requirements or goals of research, but rather co-emerges or is co-created relationally from a sense of ethical responsibility or as a result of passionate activism/advocacy with a specific research community or context.’ Oftentimes, this meaningful co-creation is not possible because of both historical and current socioeconomic and political structures that continue to value Western, formalised institutions, resources, epistemic knowledge and affiliations with power and legitimacy (Gill et al, p.7).

Hence, colonial logics often reproduce certain power dynamics in research, which are reflected in the priorities of the researcher, donors, as well as within the partnerships that Western institutions carry out with partners in the Global South, in order to legitimise conducting research on brown, black and indigenous communities. These often tend to be unequal partnerships, whereby the researcher can opt out once the data is collected, sometimes with an obligation to share research findings – though more often than not, little is left to the benefit of research

participants. Although research projects undergo ethics clearance, there is usually not enough consideration for the researcher's responsibilities towards the participants *after* the data is collected, analysed, and published. In some instances, researchers share their findings with participants – but this would merely be technical PAR (at worst) or practical PAR (at best). A truly liberatory approach would require more.

What then would a decolonial PAR demand of us? Gill et al argue that (2012, p.11): 'Looking at research as insiders/outsiders in terms of a complicated, fluid and messy process rather than a clearly defined methodology and beginning from a place of mutual activism/advocacy, we believe is of utmost importance. This epistemological shift along with the recognition of participants as researchers and pedagogues with agency even as they participate in informal researcher/teaching roles asks us to re-imagine research as a non-hierarchal teaching/learning/advocacy process rather than a method of investigation and discovery which echoes violent colonizing projects of history' (Zavala, 2013). By building on the work of Paulo Freire (1993), emancipatory PAR can help the research process move away from extractivism[3] towards a co-created ethic of love and humility, where the researcher (and I would argue their associated institutions) must be willing to be transformed and cede-power in the process of realising social change. In some instances, this might require an ongoing, long-term iterative process of shared enquiry for social change.

From Participation to Co-Creation: Interrogating the Commitment to Equity Across Diverse Partners in the Research Process

It is often easy to identify academics and researchers who engage with practitioners for extractive reasons: the research questions are usually firmly set at the first invitation to collaborate, and oftentimes include questions that feel irrelevant to the political context in question. There is little to no scope for the practitioner to play a role in shaping the questions and research methodology, although their participation is central in legitimising the latter. Moreover, the time and labour that practitioners and their partners dedicate to the research process are not acknowledged enough. They can be subject to exploitative practices, and be poorly paid, if remunerated at all. Another issue is that researchers sometimes deploy practitioners as field workers while remaining detached from the data collection process, with little to no understandings of the context and the

[3]Extractivism here is similar to the process of the 'banking model' described by Freire as the process by which the teacher deposits knowledge into the mind of their students, a limited approach where the teacher has knowledge, and the students do not. Freire argues for a more collaborative and collective model that is the premise for true knowledge sharing, where the students have knowledge that is held. Freire, P. 1993. Pedagogy of the oppressed. In Toward a Sociology of Education. Routledge, pp.374–86.

associated risks. Finally, there are not enough feedback mechanisms for practitioner communities to engage with the research findings. Resulting publications often exist behind inaccessible paywalls, which significantly limits the impact of PAR. These are examples of well-documented realities of academic exploitation, especially when working with marginalised groups (Pittaway et al, 2010).

Even for reflexive academics who adopt critical methodologies and show up to research projects with the best intentions, they face resource and time constraints that undermine their capacity to conduct PAR in a manner that is transformative for all stakeholders involved. In one instance, I was contracted as a researcher to a Global South-headquartered civil society organisation (CSO) that works with young women. I was asked to analyse the gender-responsiveness of a set of policy documents. The feminist PAR guidelines that the organisation (and myself) were committed to, required that I workshop an open-ended research question into something more specific to advance the advocacy needs of the young women concerned. I drew up a rough set of research questions, hoping to workshop these and unpack them with the young women at the centre of this work. Due to limited donor resources and time, the process was reduced to sharing the interview guide and focus group questions in a WhatsApp group chat with the women in question. I received their feedback in the form of personal voice notes sent to me, sometimes at late hours of the night. The use of WhatsApp may have been an innovative solution to financial and time constraints but was less than ideal for the praxis we had committed ourselves to.

During my time consulting at the CSO, I watched as the research organisers, themselves black women, attempt to conduct their work under immense strain: balancing multiple, competing donor priorities, and yet wanting the best outcomes for this research to support young women in their actualisation of an important policy agenda. Time to conduct meaningful feminist PAR was a privilege that was not afforded by and to this civil society group.

In another instance, where I was a practitioner, an academic approached our organisation with the stated commitment to feminist participatory action research, but with the clear caveat that the steps of co-creation of the research agenda would be limited and focus more on consultation for the set research questions and the use of our team as field workers to conduct data collection at reduced rates – due to the cost-limitations of a significant co-creation process. We attempted to scale our budget to meet the data collection needs of the research, mindful that the research topic (on the impact of social grants on unpaid care work distribution) was of strategic importance to us too. As we prepared to submit our proposal to the donor, we were constantly reminded that it was the cost of our data collection stipends that were too expensive – and not that of the salaried

personnel costs (from both the academy and our formal CSO), who were of relative privilege in the process. The latter could not conduct the research without the former and the negative externalities of the cost-minimization exercise were more comfortably accrued to field workers, the majority of whom were black women living in poverty and in need of work.

In each of these instances, there was an articulated goal of conducting feminist PAR, with the caveats of research funders requiring quick, but people-centred analysis at a fraction of the cost. In our shared reflections on the research design process, some participants to the research design process remarked feeling devalued and unclear on the expectations of them. As a contracted researcher, I noted feeling especially inadequate at my attempts to conduct meaningful feminist PAR in a way that did not centre human connection, but instead prioritised quick and extractive validation. At a minimum, co-creation takes time. At best, it requires resources be allocated transparently and equitably, especially when using feminist, decolonial and emancipatory PAR. But Scholars and researchers have to contend with the increased corporatisation of academia and the influence of funders on the research process and its parameters (Buckley, 2022). In the above cases, the funder had stipulated a requirement of co-creation and meaningful participation, but in practice had rolled out a reductionist funding framework for the academic-practitioner engagement that had instrumentalised participation: requiring that it be named as a priority, but not making time or resources available for it to be done equitably, resulting in PAR being done hastily and in ways that add no significant, transformative value to the research enquiry or outcomes.

Significantly, how research funders identify their fields of enquiry, and the parameters thereof has not been subject to enough scrutiny. When compared to funding made available to civil society, academic funding remains largely rigid. The women's rights movement, for example, have been highlighting the problematic ways in which donor funding has been inflexible, reductionist, colonialist and extractivist – with little transformative power to grassroots collectives working on the frontlines (Dolker, 2020). And while many have challenged the corporatisation of academia,[4] few have contended with research funders and their problematic practices. Practitioners may have valuable lessons to offer to academics who want to engage their funders to be more transparent and accountable. Some examples include participatory resourcing that includes recipient of funds on decision-making committees or flexible funding that can more

[4] See for example Fran Baum's keynote speech at the 56th TB Davie Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2022: Baum, F. 2022. Corporatising universities threatens academic freedom. University of Cape Town. Access August 2022 at https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2022-08-26-corporatising-universities-threatens-academic-freedom

closely pair research with advocacy work (see examples below). Because academics also rely on donor funding, and are heavily constrained by their parameters, it may be necessary to invite research funders to a process of transparent accountability for how they identify and set their priorities, and what types of resources are necessary to ensure meaningful participation in the research process. This necessarily must include researchers and practitioners working together to shape these agendas and their intended outcomes.

Taking this process one step further, research funders must be held accountable and transparent for their process of identifying research priorities, methodologies, and preferred funding partners. Obligating partnerships between global North and South universities, sometimes with the inclusion of a practitioner partner may not be as transformative as funders believe it to be, including when they typically require global North institutions to be the primary investigators. This already creates a colonial hierarchy that legitimises the perceived expertise of whiteness-adjacent researchers and relegates global South and practitioner partners to participation – instead of meaningful co-creation.

Often, accountability in the design of their research calls is limited, as are the requirements for safeguarding practices and recognition afforded to practitioner partners invited to partake in the research process. I have served on several global research consortia of this sort, where simple things like understanding the time constraints of grassroots organisations in developing countries is an alien concept to researchers from the Global North, who demand full-time devotion to their projects, without making the necessary resources available for the time commitment from practitioner teams. This contributes to the ongoing burnout and competing priorities among grassroots teams, that is understood by academics to be an indication of laziness and lack of responsiveness – rather than the outcome of unequal resource distribution within the consortia that require practitioner organisations to balance multiple projects and processes. These problematic trends and patterns are not unique to North-South partnerships, nor visible only in academic-practitioner interactions. The lessons here can be extrapolated to any funded research process where one partner may feel undue pressure due to inequitable implementation of the research process. These dynamics are one of many pronounced outcomes of the legitimacy of cost-minimisation as a framework for assessing the value of research.

In February 2022, Vice Chancellor Professor Brian Schmidt, raised the alarm bells on how political interference posed an existential threat to universities and academic freedom at the Australian National University. In December 2021, the national Education Ministry interfered in the awarding of funding of Australian Research grants, resulting in the discard of proposed research on climate change and China (Karp, 2022). Reflecting on the incident, the third of its

nature in the past six years, Karp (2022) remarked that political interference, 'can corrupt knowledge and slow down its creation,' limiting independent enquiry with dire effects for spectrum of research possibilities. The experience of Australian National University is not a unique one. As civic space restrictions related to freedom of expression have increased globally, so too have political threats and interference accrued to academic freedom, including recent cases in the United States of America, Hungary, and Uganda – among others (The Nordic Institute, 2022; West, 2022). In an assessment of different roles research funders identified for themselves in clinical research in Sweden, three most recurrent included '[a]dvocacy work,' '[m]onitoring implementation outcomes,' and '[d]issemination of knowledge' (Brantnell et al, 2015**, p.**7). However, these are limited roles in the broader research process, and must be interrogated for their own accountability to grassroots partners. Advocacy work with who and for who, one might ask. The monitoring of implementation costs as opposed to a critical reflection of value-add to equitable knowledge, might be another consideration. Research funders do not exist in an apolitical vacuum and are driven by their own political interests. For example, the biggest health research funding organisations globally are the United States National Institution of Health and the European Commission (Viergever and Hendriks, 2016: np). Decolonisation requires us to interrogate how these institutions come into their funding, their alignment to national political interests, and their commitment to advancing justice-centred research design that is accountable to those living under the burden of extractive political economies.

Understanding the levers of decolonial, feminist, emancipatory PAR must therefore include questions on the sources of our research funding and how these reinforce or challenge existing inequalities between and within countries and research collaborators. By example, Bond UK adopts a participatory, co-creative approach to funding dissemination and centres a safeguarding, anti-racism approach to its funding.[5] Research funders need to do better in their accountability, to safeguard these partnerships and make them truly equitable – including between fund recipients and funders themselves.

Concluding Reflections: Moving Forward Towards Alternatives

Until there is greater accountability for what funders identify as priorities (i.e., until this process can be co-created in more meaningful and transparent ways), and until funding schemes are better designed, we will continue to see extractive patterns of research practice emerge, where academics perpetuate sometimes inherited, problematic power dynamics.

[5]See: Bond.org.uk

In late 2022, I had the privilege of co-facilitating an accountability process for an international civil society group that was looking to distribute power more equitably with their partners from the global South. This move was done to actively promote a more decolonial, justice-informed approach. In one session, a partner noted that they had a disdain for the word 'participation' because it had come to mean an invitation to a pre-determined, rigid process that reinforced Eurocentric power in both visible and more subtle ways. There is often a belief that participation is sufficient to address unequal power relations. However, I have demonstrated here its limits within existing power structures. In fact, it is necessary to move from participation to co-creation – starting with a blank slate of all issues that can be documented and tabled for positive enquiry.[6] This process is time and resource intensive, but foregrounds the opportunity to expand a set of shared pathways for enquiry that benefit of a justice-informed learning process where funders, academics and practitioners can mutually find value in the research. Each must question their power, intentions, and critically reflect on their role in promoting equity – not only in relation to the topic being researched, but how research is conducted too.

It is also important to consider that when centring co-creation, the ethics clearance process has its limitations and does not guarantee collective care. It offers researchers and participants a set of parameters to mediate short-lived, and often transactional interactions, with some stipulated remedies in cases of ethics breach. Unless ethics processes specifically consider safeguarding of all involved in the research, the signed forms say little about negotiating power-sharing, power-ceding and an ethos of care from conception to implementation. Co-creation can facilitate the negotiated boundaries of interaction among all consortium partners, and must include rules of engagement around safeguarding, and foreground an ethic of care and accountability. Emancipatory, feminist and decolonial PAR may require that the process of creating the terms of ethical research and negotiating their clearance are also deeply consultative and contested. Ethics cannot be cleared by a research committee alone. When embedded in deep consultation with funder, researchers and participants together (and sometimes with contestation), ethics may be cleared in ways that are transformative. This presents an opportunity for all members to the research process, funders included, to reflect on their positionality and interrogate the way in which they uphold harmful power-relations.

[6]The Partos Power Analysis Tool (2020) facilitates such a process whereby every team member identifies and documents any issue they deem necessary for decision-making in a partnership. This can facilitate a move away from participation in pre-determined processes with limited transformative power, to more open-ended ones that hold opportunities for co-creation. For further details, see: https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Power-Awareness-Tool.pdf

Lastly, this work of shared accountability must be premised on epistemic justice:[7] the process by which the stories and lived realities of individuals and groups facing marginalisation are understood and held as legitimate, unconstrained by the bias and privilege of the researcher/academic in the PAR process. Epistemic justice also requires that PAR be grounded in the recognition of diverse forms of knowledge- production and sense-making. These must be perceived of equal importance in the research process, expanding the language available to speak about oppression, justice, and how to achieve liberation. Without these critical reflections on positionality and power, including on the sources of funding and the impact of commodification in the research process, PAR will continue to reinforce unequal, extractive power relations that characterise the funder-researcher-practitioner relationship.

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