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## Migrant Communities and Participatory Research Partnerships in the Neoliberal University

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### Abstract

*Participatory research holds the potential to decolonize knowledge production and put research into action to advance social justice aims and the concerns of participant communities. Participatory approaches are becoming more accepted, yet the output and impact demands researchers must fulfil remain mismatched to participatory work, driven instead by a neoliberal academic model. In this context, I see a cautionary tale in the history of participatory practices among international development institutions, where participation was brought into the mainstream but in the process hollowed out and de-radicalized. Reflecting on my experiences with two participatory research projects over the course of my PhD studies, I ask whether the incomplete opening for participatory research could similarly push research in particular directions. Specifically, I consider whether participatory work with strong organizational partners will be structurally favored over potential partnerships with non-organized or highly marginalized communities and groups.*

**Keywords:** *participatory research; neoliberal university; migration; hometown associations; DACA.*

### Introduction

This article draws on my experiences as an early career migration scholar working to make sense of my own fallible engagements with participatory research and reflecting on its broader place within a neoliberalized academy. Participatory research is demanding and challenging on many levels, but at least one key barrier has been brought down – acceptance of the approach’s validity. As a graduate student in the 2010s, my expressed interest in participatory research was welcomed and supported. My supervisors and committee members never questioned the approach, nor did they raise objections or advise against it. Paradoxically, even as universities and the academy as a whole are increasingly reshaped by neoliberal forces, participatory research and the broader critical and feminist approaches under which it is nested have gained acceptance verging on mainstream status in the social sciences, education, and public health.

The increasing acceptance and recognition of participatory research creates something of a Catch-22 for researchers, especially those early in their careers or otherwise precariously situated. Participatory research is accepted, even encouraged under the rubric of outreach and broader impacts, yet little allowance is made for the slower timelines, increased uncertainty, and general evolutionary nature of participatory work. In short, participatory research is accepted only to the

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extent that academics engaged in it can still meet productivity and impact standards to which participatory research is notably ill-suited. At the same time, the unique types of outputs and impacts that participatory research can create are often devalued or ignored, as they do not fit within the rubrics for evaluating candidates or tenure and promotion cases.

This paper draws from my experiences with two participatory research projects over the course of my PhD studies. One project was relatively straightforward, while the other has been delayed and derailed and remains uncertain. The straightforward project was a partnership with an established nonprofit organization serving the local immigrant community, while the derailed project was with an informal immigrant-led organization. I reflect on these experiences in light of the forces noted above that both welcome and complicate participatory research. Drawing from the history of participatory practices in the international development industry, in which participation was brought into the mainstream but in the process stripped of its radical elements, I ask whether the partial openings for participatory research in academia could subtly push projects and partnerships in particular directions, despite researchers' best intentions. Specifically, I consider whether participatory work with strong organizational partners will be structurally favored over potential partnerships with non-organized or highly marginalized communities and groups.

### **Framing**

One of the fundamental aims of participatory research is to avoid the extractive relationships that often exist between academics and research "subjects." Engaging in a co-production framework allows us to shift the dynamic and ensure that research is shaped by participants' input, reflects their knowledge and perspectives, and advances their interests. Participatory research methods are becoming more accepted in academia, including within my own field of Geography (Kindon et al., 2007; Kindon & Elwood, 2009; Pain, 2004; Torres, 2019).<sup>2</sup> While this shift is welcome, it also gives reason for pause and careful consideration. Even as universities are (re)embracing their role in public discourse and community engagement, the (stronger) pressures for a neoliberal, economic-value-centered university model remain (Mountz et al., 2015; Wright, 2019). These contrary forces underlie the gap between universities' discourses of engagement and the realities of limited practical support for and acceptance of community-based and participatory research (Pain, 2014; Robinson & Hawthorne, 2018).

Given these realities, a cautionary tale can be drawn from the history of participatory methods in the field of international development – which shares common roots with community-based and participatory research (Janes, 2016; Kesby, 2007; Pain, 2004; Kindon et al., 2007). Participatory development practice grew out of radical critiques of the traditional, top-down development industry, but eventually was mainstreamed in a diluted version that provides a veneer of engagement without shifting fundamental power dynamics (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Leal, 2007). The fuzziness of the concept allowed neoliberal development institutions to simultaneously embrace participation as a new buzzword while also dramatically shifting its meaning (Cornwall, 2007).<sup>3</sup> The neoliberal version of participatory development "creates a 'feel good' community experience, but elides the behind-the-scenes stage management. It promotes the

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<sup>2</sup> The most commonly used label in geography is participatory action research (PAR), while in public health and other fields community based participatory research (CBPR) is more common. In this paper, I shift between terms but mostly use "participatory research" as catch-all. This follows Letiecq and Schmalzbauer, who note that despite differences, the approaches "share a common set of core principles and characteristics" (2012: 247).

<sup>3</sup> The terminology of buzzwords has also been applied to participatory academic research, with Caretta and Riaño noting that "participation and dialogue have become buzzwords" (2016: 259).



sharing of power, but (instead) manages to centralize power” (Kapoor, 2005 :1208). In this paper, I consider whether a similar diluting and coopting should be feared as participatory approaches become more widespread in academia. I draw on my experiences to reflect on the ways the mainstreaming of participatory research could play out.

As a graduate student, I was drawn to participatory research as a way to expand beyond the traditional qualitative research paradigm and engage with migrant communities in more meaningful and impactful ways. However, as I read the participatory research literature, I was struck by similarities to the critiques that have been mounted against participation as practiced by international development institutions. This paper explores those concerns further, reflecting on my experiences with two participatory research projects and a fellowship focusing on community-based and participatory research practice. The tension and challenge I highlight is how to capitalize on the growing acceptance of participatory research methods while also avoiding a descent into a sped-up, watered-down version driven by the dictates of the neoliberal academy. In particular, I highlight the potential for participatory research to over-rely on partnerships with strong nonprofit organizations out of convenience, rather than being purposive in working with a broad and diverse range of community actors and organizations.

I want to emphasize up-front that this paper should not be read as a critique of how others have approached participatory research – indeed, established and emerging scholars in this field have set a sterling example that I struggle to live up to – but rather as a reflection on the tensions and pressures that influence our work. I write in the spirit of humble reflection on my own struggles and failures (Sousa & Clark, 2019) and the ways those experiences connect to broader concerns.

In this paper, I focus on the institutionalization of participatory research and the kinds of partnerships that are more likely to flourish or flounder under the partial openings for these approaches. While not the focus here, it is worth briefly highlighting other paramount issues that also must be grappled with in this context. One is the role of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which take a very different view of ethics from those envisioned by participatory research (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007; Lac & Fine, 2018). Institutional processes meant to regulate power relations are insufficient or even counter-productive for the kinds of relationships built through participatory research. Thus, for example, the IRB process was not a useful tool for reflecting on the ways my identity and positionality have influenced my relationship with the migrant communities with whom I have worked. Navigating racialized and classed power differentials is fundamental to decolonizing research, yet it is left unaddressed or even impeded by institutional research bureaucracies.

### **DACA project**

The first participatory research project I worked on was a partnership with a local immigrant legal center to document the benefits and challenges associated with the DACA program, which provided partial legal status for undocumented immigrant youth. I had been a regular volunteer with the organization when the director asked me to work with them on a survey to document the benefits and challenges that local DACA recipients face. Our direct goals for the project were fourfold: (1) to strengthen advocacy work in favor of continuing, expanding, and making permanent DACA or the Dream Act, (2) to identify service gaps and other challenges that limit the potential benefits of DACA, (3) to support the community organization’s grant writing by documenting the impacts of its work, and (4) to create publishable academic research on the effects of the DACA program. The legal center obtained grant funding for the research, which they allocated to pay incentives of \$20

to survey participants, pay staff time dedicated to the research, and partially reimburse my time for data processing and analysis work.

This project had both participatory and non-participatory elements. The community organization envisioned and initiated the project and approached me as an academic to help conduct the research. We worked closely together to determine the scope of the project and to develop and test a survey instrument, with the goals and needs of the community organization taking precedent throughout the design process. Two generation 1.5 immigrants on staff at the organization played a key role in developing the survey and invited a group of DACA recipients who were active with the organization to test the survey and provide feedback and suggestions. These immigrant young people, staff and constituents of the organization, played a leading role to ensure that the research focused on concerns they considered important and relevant to the DACA community, and that the survey felt relatable.

These participatory elements, however, also co-existed with more traditional research approaches, or shortcomings in participation. Most fundamentally, the research was a partnership between an academic and a nonprofit organization, an immigrant-serving legal center, which opens questions about who counts as “community,” how their voices are represented, and to what extent they are able to shape the research (Minkler, 2004). Despite key roles played by staff members who identify as DACA / 1.5 generation immigrants, the wider DACA community was only able to participate by answering the survey. Second, given the time pressures and limited resources of the community organization, they decided that I should handle data processing and analysis individually, rather than doing it collaboratively. Thus, participatory elements created bookends for the project – collaboratively defining the scope and designing the research before I individually analyzed the data, then working together again to interpret the findings and produce a public-audience report to be released by the community organization.

Reflecting on this project as a participatory research experience leaves me with mixed feelings. On one hand, the project was relatively successful, achieving robust data collection and producing a report that has served the partner organization in its continued service and advocacy activities, contributing in some small way toward the ultimate goal of lessening the systemic injustices that DACA recipients and the immigrant community face. On the other hand, the project was only partially participatory, with limited opportunities for community member involvement or control. Indeed, the bookend participation I describe above corresponds to what Strand et al. (2003) characterize as the bare minimum standard for community-based participatory research, leaving me in the somewhat contradictory role of participatory research consultant (Stoecker, 1999) rather than the ideal situation of a full partnership.

### **Hometown Association project**

The second experience on which my reflections are grounded grew out of my dissertation research about migration and development. My overall project was to examine how migrant hometown associations (HTAs) and the Mexican government interacted through a collective remittance-based rural development model, formalized as the 3x1 Program. HTAs are informal clubs of migrants from a common origin, typically a small rural community, who live in the same city or region in the US. The clubs serve a variety of purposes, including recreation and maintaining Mexican and hometown identity, though in the era of the 3x1 Program most Mexican HTAs devote their primary attention to sponsoring development projects in their hometowns – things like



renovating churches, paving streets, improving sewer and water systems, or making donations for education and healthcare needs (Garcia Zamora, 2005; Iskander, 2015). My research aimed to understand how the implementation and outcomes of this migration-linked rural development model varied according to the contexts in which it was applied, including examining the relations between HTAs, origin communities, and the state (Malone, 2019).

This work was underway, focusing on interviews and fieldwork in the USA and Mexico, when I had the opportunity to join an interdisciplinary community-based participatory research (CBPR) fellowship at my home institution. The fellowship offered monetary support in the form of a one-semester research assistantship, as well as a structured year-long seminar to study and reflect on the theory and practice of participatory research with a cohort of similarly engaged graduate students and a faculty mentor. The fellowship served as an opening to reevaluate my research design and incorporate a substantial participatory component.<sup>4</sup>

I previously had interviewed the leader of a local federation of HTAs, an umbrella organization bringing together a dozen individual clubs representing different hometowns in central Mexico (hereafter “the Federation”). The Federation is at best a semi-formal organization – it is not a registered non-profit, does not pursue grant or foundation funding, and has no staff or physical space. Meetings are held in restaurants, community spaces, and homes, usually on evenings and weekends to accommodate members’ long working hours and family commitments. The Federation and its member HTAs raise funds for hometown projects through raffles, fundraiser picnics, dances, and small donations. Despite the challenges inherent to this sort of informal organization, the group’s dedication of time and effort has allowed them to sponsor dozens of small development projects in their hometowns in Mexico.

I approached the president of the Federation about the possibility of working together under the auspices of the CBPR fellowship and explained the premise of participatory research. I began regularly attending the Federation’s meetings and events and worked with the president to brainstorm research that would serve the needs of the group and also complement my overall dissertation project. The president’s interests centered on expanding the Federation’s membership and spurring greater levels of engagement and activity among existing and new members, with the ultimate goal of increasing their ability to carry out community development projects to improve the quality of life in their hometowns in Mexico.

We decided that a survey of members would help the group’s leaders better understand who participates and why, which could help in their efforts to strengthen the Federation. I worked with the president to construct the survey questionnaire, including jointly reviewing questions used in other studies of hometown associations (Portes, Escobar, & Radford, 2007; Suro, 2005). The president and I explained the survey to the rest of the Federation’s leaders and asked them to help distribute it and collect responses from the larger membership and community. Responses trickled in at the next few meetings, but it became clear that the larger leadership group did not see the project as a priority, and many doubted it would provide any new insights. The survey project never really got off the ground before we abandoned it.

The lack of interest and responses to the survey project forced me to step back and reassess the situation. I realized that I had relied too heavily on the Federation’s president and had not done enough to build relationships with the larger leadership group. Even beyond the survey, they had

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<sup>4</sup> See Bengle and Schuch (2019) for a thoughtful reflection on engaging in participatory research as a graduate student.

not been engaged enough in discussions around what participatory research meant or how it might benefit them. There was not consistent buy-in from the group. My faculty advisor and peers in the CBPR fellowship were very helpful in processing these challenges and encouraged me to persevere, but I was uncertain about the path forward and worried about delaying progress on my dissertation. I also was wary of asking too much of the Federation, particularly given the substantial time and resources members were already dedicating to the organization. Furthermore, given the group's goals and the challenges they faced, I was not confident that engaging in participatory research would be the most relevant or valuable sort of capacity building to undertake (Janes, 2016). These concerns left me reticent to try again after the initial attempt at a participatory research project fizzled.

Despite intentions to engage in a participatory research partnership, I settled into a traditional researcher role. I continued to attend the federation's meetings, conducting participant observation and interviews, while also helping with administrative tasks and paperwork. Engaging in practices of "resourcing," using the resources available to me as an academic and leveraging my background and skills to benefit the partner organization (Derickson & Routledge, 2014), set me more at ease with the relationship. I was able to complete my dissertation in a way I was comfortable with ethically, mixing traditional research methods with in-kind support to the organization, as well as believing that my results will be of interest to the group. However, this level of reciprocity fell far short of the goal of decolonizing research – I remained the researcher who was extracting information about the organization in service of my own academic projects and career advancement. Abandoning the participatory component also meant that the dissertation suffered a lack of richness and perspective that participatory research would have provided.

Although I abandoned the initial participatory research project with the Federation, now that I have attended meetings and participated with the group for more than three years, we have a strong relationship from which future projects could grow. Beneath the initial failure remain seeds that could still blossom into a participatory research partnership, particularly given changes in the Mexican government's approach to the diaspora that have spurred the Federation to take stock and re-examine its activities. Even as we renew conversations about co-producing research, it is also important to recognize that my earlier decision to step back into a traditional researcher role will likely complicate any future attempts at participatory research with the Federation. We will have to break out of the habits and relationships we have established and re-establish new practices and mindsets to engage in participatory work together. Still, the foundation we have built over the years leaves me optimistic about the substantial potential for future participatory research collaborations.

## **Discussion**

During the CBPR fellowship, we held bi-weekly meetings to discuss participatory research literature, share progress reports, and reflect on the challenges of bridging theory and practice. In these meetings, I often expressed frustrations and uncertainties about where my research was headed. I struggled to make sense of my work with the Federation, and as noted above, eventually abandoned the participatory approach. In contrast, some of my peers were making great strides with inspiring and impactful research projects – particularly those who were working with high-capacity nonprofits or were partnering with established youth programs. We reflected on the uncomfortable reality that their projects were staying on track in part because their community partners were nonprofits with paid staff and organizational resources that made collaborative research more feasible. Adding to this, my experience with the DACA project reinforced the notion that research



with formal organizational partners tended to flow more smoothly, which raised questions about how to balance the goals of community participation and co-production of research with the practical concerns of meeting academic benchmarks and proceeding along an already difficult career trajectory.

Although my attempts at participatory research met with a mix of successes and shortcomings for a variety of reasons, my emphasis here is on the way partnerships with different types of organizations shape research processes and outcomes. In sum, I found that my research partnership with an established nonprofit was much more linear and efficient, though not fully participatory, while attempting participatory research with an informal group was halting and circuitous, leading me to abandon the approach in the short term while still holding out potential for truly participatory, co-produced and action-oriented research in the long term. There are many factors that influence any given project, and the formality or informality of the partner organizations may not be the most important, yet I believe it merits examination.

The unpredictability of engaging in participatory research with informal organizations or non-organized communities can be difficult to overcome. The incentive structures of the neoliberal academy put the ethics and motivations behind feminist and activist approaches in direct conflict with the demands of output and speed (Darby, 2017; Evans, 2016; Mountz et al., 2015). These tradeoffs are not simple – insisting on slow scholarship and fidelity to ideals is risky for early career scholars and people from marginalized backgrounds, whose own positions within the academy are tenuous. Given this reality, even scholars dedicated to participatory research might find that engaging with more formal organizations as research partners is necessary to balance these pressures.

Working with established organizations such as migrant-serving nonprofits can be an excellent path for participatory research. These partnerships can be both impactful and productive, particularly given the resources and knowledge the organizational partners bring. It is important to recognize, however, that working with community-serving nonprofits can yield much different research than working with other types of partners – particularly working directly with a more broadly-defined community (Holt et al., 2019). If the doors are opened to participatory approaches, but only to the extent that researchers are still able to meet output standards calibrated for more top-down methods, then partnerships with informal groups, non-organized communities, and people at the margins are unlikely to flourish. These potential partners do not wield the same resources or organizational capacities, which often translates to slower research processes and more uncertainty around the direction projects will take and what the eventual outputs will be. Again, there is great value in research partnerships with community-serving nonprofits and strong, formal community groups, but if the opening for participatory research remains partial, then other voices and other possible partnerships will continue to be excluded.

The point I wish to make is quite simply that research partnerships should be able to arise organically and purposefully depending on the interests and needs of the communities, organizations, and researchers, rather than being limited to only certain types of partnerships that can fit within the dictates and pressures of the neoliberal academy. The increased yet incomplete acceptance of participatory research within academia leaves some kinds of partnerships more feasible than others. These concerns become especially important given the emphasis among participatory scholars to work with marginalized communities, including migrants and refugees, and to counter systems of oppression and injustice. If participatory research is welcomed into the

mainstream but judged by output and impact standards for which it is ill-suited, it is likely that some varieties could thrive while others remain as marginal and devalued as ever.

### Conclusion

In a recent forum about the roles academics should play as public intellectuals, Willie Wright lamented, "in academic environments wherein knowledge is often converted into political and economic capital, public intellectualism runs the risk of becoming institutionalized as a part of the university's program of professionalization rather than acting as a tool for decolonizing knowledge and producing social change" (2019: 174). Given the intense pressure for individual researchers to demonstrate their value to the university, and for the university to prove its value to society in increasingly economic terms, participatory research faces similar risks. The growing acceptance and recognition of participatory approaches presents important openings for feminist, activist, and engaged research, but also could be hollowed out by the pressures and incentive structures of the neoliberal university.

If a sort of participation-lite predominates, what others have called out as "faux PAR" (Pratt et al., 2007) or "participatory bluffing" (Ritterbusch, 2019), then the problems that have been so well documented in the mainstreaming of participatory development practice will also plague participatory research. We must ensure that the openings for participatory research are wide enough to accommodate the full spectrum of approaches and partners, that the timelines are generous enough to allow for setbacks and detours, that the standards for impact go beyond publications and journal rankings, and that the ethics and relationships of engaged research remain central – in short, we must push for participatory research to be accepted on its own terms rather than allowing it to be remade in the image of the neoliberal university.

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