Participatory Action Research as/in Adult Education:
Offering Three Methods Anchored in Vivencia, Praxis, and Conscientization

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) is an embodied form of inquiry that engages those most affected by an issue or problem in creating knowledge and developing solutions. PAR epistemology intersects with the critical approach to adult education, particularly the belief that programs, methods, and content must be relevant to learner needs and challenges and ought to lead to greater social justice. The purpose of this paper is to offer a review of three critical, participatory inquiry methods that are anchored in three concepts foundational to PAR and to present readers with a useful description of how to implement these methods in diverse contexts.

KEYWORDS

Critical Pedagogy, Dialogue, Participatory Action Research, Social Change, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) is an embodied form of inquiry that engages those most affected by an issue or problem in creating knowledge and developing solutions (Gaventa, 1991; Wood & McAteer, 2017). As such, it explicitly seeks to upend traditional/positivist research paradigms and hierarchies, privileging the knowledge of the community – particularly those marginalized and oppressed by dominant social structures (Freire, 1990) in "a shared process of discovery" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 207). This process calls for a "critical and humanizing pedagogy" (Wood & McAteer, 2017, p. 253) entailing "inclusion, democracy, and respect for local knowledge emanating from lived experience of the specific context and culture" (p. 252). The goal of this pedagogy is not to reproduce the status quo but to democratize knowledge and society (Wood & McAteer, 2017).

PAR proponents attest that research must be conducted and disseminated with an in-depth understanding of the social and political context, which requires consulting local community members (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). This approach seeks not just to document human experience but "to improve the human condition" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 214) through problem solving and, ultimately, meaningful social change (Wood & McAteer, 2017). The resulting transformation must be horizontal, from and for the people, not from above, and power relations must be fundamentally reshaped rather than simply shifting the oppressed to the position of oppressor (Glassman & Erdem, 2014).

These ideas and ideals held by PAR practitioners are at once ontological, in that they connect to one's understanding of what can be known or learned, and epistemological, as they are rooted in one's conceptualization of how we know or come to know. PAR, then, is more than simply a method that can be transferred from one research design to another with little to know thought as to why it is engaged. Rather, PAR is an ontological and epistemological stance because it represents a major ontological and epistemological challenge to traditional, positivist approaches to knowledge creation (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, Reyna Rivarola, Hernández Zamudio & Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2019; Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, & Dazzo, 2019; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Torre & Ayala, 2009). Those who practice PAR take a firm stand against neoliberal knowledge production processes that, intentional or not, serve to re-produce and re-present systems and structures of dispossession, injustice, inequity, and violence.

CORE CONCEPTS

PAR is grounded in the core ontological and epistemological concepts of *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization* (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). *Vivencia* goes beyond observation or documentation to sharing in the lived reality of community members, "a full experience of an event with its all possibilities, lived through direct participation" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 212). *Praxis* stems from this embodied experience, practical action rooted in reflection on "the conditions one faces in order to change them" (Freire, 1970, p. 33). It is flexible and responsive to local conditions with the goal of "liberation and [the] path to freedom" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 212). Freire (1970) defines research as *conscientization*, the "process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform reality" (p. 27). Vio Grossi (1981, 1982) calls this *disindoctrination* – rejecting the systems and status quo imposed on oppressed groups.

ORIGINS OF PAR

Kurt Lewin (1946) is credited with developing action research (AR) in the 1940s as an attempt to reduce social conflict toward minority groups in the United States, and half a century later, William Foote Whyte (1994) designed a form of participatory action research to address problems in organizational structures (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). However, a very different strain of PAR surfaced in the Global South during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, aiming to "throw off the intellectual, social, and material shackles of colonialism" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 207). This revolutionary, grassroots resistance to centuries of oppression sought not to restore social order but to change it from below; it emerged out of local communities from Colombia to India rather than under the leadership of one central figure (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Pyrch, 2007).

Two Latin American intellectuals did, however, play important roles in developing and popularizing this liberatory method (Pyrch, 2007). Brazilian Paulo Freire's radical work in adult literacy education (Glassman & Erdem, 2014) and development of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) is often credited as crucial to PAR's epistemological basis. Likewise, Colombian Orlando Fals Borda (1988, 2006) was instrumental in developing this "methodology of liberation" (Pyrch, 2007, p. 200) through which we can "investigate reality in order to transform it" (p. 203, citing Fals Borda, 1979). This is just as relevant in the 21st century in the face of globalization, neoliberalism, and unending war (Pyrch, 2007).

As a form of action research, PAR has a cyclical nature, consisting of a flexible process of data gathering, reflection, and action (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Silver-Pacuilla (2004) describes this process, as codes emerge both from fieldwork and dialogic engagement with participants, themes are "spiraled" back to participants for analysis during ongoing data collection, and findings are presented to stakeholders to prompt change. PAR also fundamentally redefines the relationship

between researcher and researched: the researcher acts as a facilitator, becoming a participant in the lives of community members (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). The community, rather than the researcher, maintains ownership of data and shares equally in decisions about how to gather, analyze, and disseminate this knowledge (Chambers, 2002). Within the collective, university researcher(s) – often White and middle-class – and marginalized community co-researchers must negotiate power relations to enable authentic collaboration; however, privileged researchers can use their standing to bring attention to the knowledge of community members (Wood & McAteer, 2017).

PAR *AS* AND *IN* ADULT EDUCATION

PAR onto-epistemology intersects with the critical approach to adult education, particularly the belief that programs, methods, and content must be relevant to learner needs and challenges (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Wood & McAteer, 2017) and ought to lead to greater social justice (Freire, 1970; Prins, 2007). This contrasts starkly with the common model of lifelong learning focused on preparing students for the labor market; instead of upholding the status quo, critical adult education seeks to transform hegemonic ideologies, social structures, and systems (Brookfield, 2018; Lucio-Villegas, 2018). Central to this tradition are Marxist ideology and Freire's critical pedagogy, which both demand accountability from the system and work to democratize education for the good of the learner rather than for those in power (Brookfield, 2018).

Critical adult education aims to increase learner autonomy and change future trajectories by facilitating active participation and drawing on bottom-up knowledge rather than transmitting 'approved' content from established authorities (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Wood & McAteer, 2017). The educator takes the role of a facilitator of learning, encouraging critical reflection and advocating for the learners, rather than an objective source of knowledge (Brookfield, 2018). In addition, learners must develop a sense of solidarity and connectedness to identify shared challenges and work toward common goals (Prins, 2007). The authors of this article join numerous other scholars (e.g. Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Pyrch, 2007; Wells, 2014; Wood & McAteer, 2017) in asserting that PAR is an ideal way to gather and disseminate valuable community knowledge both *for* and *about* adult education.

PAR AS PEDAGOGY IN ADULT EDUCATION

Freire's involvement with adult literacy campaigns in Northeast Brazil in the 1960s inspired his radical critical pedagogy (Lucio-Villegas, 2018), first outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). This pedagogy centers on dialogue, conscientization or awareness raising, and ultimate liberation from the oppressed/oppressor relationship (Lucio-Villegas, 2018). Critical pedagogy is often applied in adult education today through PAR praxis. For example, Gwon and Thongpriwan (2019) incorporated photovoice (Wang, 1999) into a university pre-nursing course to encourage students to reflect on their beliefs about the US healthcare system and consider other perspectives. Participants appraised this as an engaging, in-depth learning experience. Also in the discipline of healthcare, Janssen, Hale, Mirfin-Veitch, and Harland (2013) find that PAR was a positive way for clinical physical therapists to learn about doing research.

PAR AS METHOD IN ADULT EDUCATION

PAR has also been used extensively to conduct collaborative research about adult education, from adult literacy to ecology and cancer prevention. It is sometimes used as a method for needs analysis, as in Khachan's (2009) examination of Egyptian women's diglossic literacy needs. From the discipline of ecology, Ballard and Belsky (2010) demonstrate the use of PAR with a group of harvesters and land managers to investigate and solve an environmental problem affecting their livelihood (2010).

Reporting on a participatory needs analysis conducted as part of a long-term partnership between a community literacy program and university writing center, Wells (2014) argues that collaborative, participant-driven inquiry is better suited to researching the "strategies, contexts, and constraints" (p. 51) of adult literacy programs than traditional methods.

PAR has also proven valuable for program and curriculum development in adult education. In Tulloch et al. (2017), PAR was used to develop, deliver, and evaluate an Indigenous language and literacy revitalization program for marginalized learners in Canada. The program was designed around a transformative bilingual education framework (Cummins, 2000) and a relational, empowering, and culturally responsive model built on participants' knowledge. Wood and McAteer (2017) describe a PAR process through which community members and teachers in South Africa designed an educational program for parents wanting to better support their children in school, while Cueva et al. (2018) worked with a group of Alaska Natives to develop and evaluate culturally relevant online learning modules about reducing risk factors and behaviors for cancer.

Several scholars have also demonstrated the value of PAR for program evaluation that includes the voices of adult learners and educators. For instance, Silver-Pacuilla (2004) engaged in PAR to learn about the challenges that women literacy learners with disabilities face in reaching their educational goals. The process spanned a year and included monthly focus groups, interviews, trust-building, reflection, and development of solutions. Participants shared their findings as recommendations to service providers, advice brochures for other women literacy learners, and public presentations (Silver-Pacuilla, 2004). Hanson (2014) reports on the use of PAR to learn about student experiences in a Canadian labor school for women which engages in feminist, Freirean transformative education, and Boughton and Durnan (2014) used PAR to evaluate mass adult literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia.

THREE PROMISING PARTICIPATORY INQUIRY METHODS

We have offered a quick yet thorough review of what participatory action research is and how it is anchored in the same onto-epistemological commitments to *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization* as critical adult education. *Vivencia*, or sharing in the lived experiences of those closest to a phenomenon, issue, or concern, is central to both PAR and critical adult education as the concept shifts our understanding of expertise from one that is exclusive and often disempowering to one that is inclusive and democratic. *Praxis*, or the interconnected process of action and reflection, connects PAR and critical adult education as it defines both processes as rooted in the reality of taking participant-drive, reflective action. Finally, *conscientization*, or awareness-raising, is at the heart of both PAR and critical adult education as both aim to move individuals or groups toward liberation from the oppressive structures, systems, and relationships that define injustice and inequity.

In the PAR and adult education courses we teach, we often hear the refrain, "Yes, we understand *what*, but *how*?" There have been many articles, chapters, and books dedicated to the *process* of participatory action research (e.g. Fals-Borda, 1987; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; McIntyre, 2008) – the *what*. Some scholars or disciplines may use the term action research, others participatory action research, critical participatory action research, or community-based participatory research… the list goes on.

While we are grateful for those contributions and use them often in our own work, we are eager to move away from the silos of names and fields and to move back to the onto-epistemological roots of what we call participatory inquiry, which is inclusive of and welcoming to all inquiry traditions that place at a premium the experiences and knowledges of those closest to and most affected by an issue, problem, or phenomenon: that is, knowledge production that deeply values and democratically engages the experiences and knowledges of those who are often pushed to the margins of society. Built on the concepts of *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization*, participatory inquiry honors lived knowledge, engaging and leveraging it for meaningful social change. The remainder of this paper will

offer a review of three participatory methods that can be used both pedagogically and methodologically in any field (e.g., education, social work, or nursing) and for any substantive purpose, whether in the context of an adult education course, a research project on the treatment of those living in nursing homes, or a community organizing initiative around fair housing. They can be used for both data collection and data analysis, as most often these processes are blurred.

These methods share a potential for facilitating the process of grassroots social change. We have used these tools in classrooms with adolescents, in church houses with adults, and in community settings with organizers[1]. Here, we describe three methods with particular potential for use in adult education settings. First, we discuss *Ripples of Change* (Chambers, 2002), which is an approach, rooted in the concept of *vivencia*, to understanding the desires, goals, and experiences of a community as well as how the community sees change occurring. Second, we present *Priority Negotiations* (adapted from Chambers, 2002), which is an approach, rooted in the concept of *praxis*, to reflecting on, grappling with, and ultimately taking action around the priorities of multiple stakeholders related to social change. Finally, we offer *Force Mapping* (adapted from Chambers, 2002), which, rooted in the Freirean notion of *conscientization*, is a simple yet powerful way to facilitate the community's identification of sociocultural forces that both push and pull, help and hinder a movement for social change. All of these methods can be used as opportunities for blended data collection and analysis, as is common in participatory approaches to research, and are firmly anchored in a critical, participatory tradition that is at once pedagogically and methodologically rigorous.

RIPPLES OF CHANGE AND VIVENCIA

Vivencia is grounded in the concept of "empathetic involvement in processes and with the considered judgement of local reference groups" (Fals Borda, 2006, p. 33). Indeed, all of the methods we offer in this manuscript fall under this concept, but we link it most closely with the activity Ripples of Change because of its potential as a first step toward illuminating, challenging, and transforming hierarchies of power anchored in racist, sexist, and xenophobic valuing of knowledge.

In this activity, a diverse research collective made up of all those who have a stake – or interest – in a particular community, issue, or problem is called to the proverbial table. For example, this collective could include a combination of adult learners, teachers, and administrators with or without the facilitation of university-based researchers. The authors of this article have done this with high school students and teachers concerned about school gun violence and often competing safety regulations and policies; community members, leaders, and policymakers involved in a local justice system working to better serve women of color; and a group of doctoral students hoping to transform their academic program into one that is empowering and supportive. It has been those groups – in which interests and agendas were the most diverse and the most contested – that this activity has yielded the most fruitful dialogue.

Once a group is gathered for this Ripples of Change activity, a facilitator draws three or four large, concentric circles in a place where all those who have gathered can have easy access (e.g., on a whiteboard). These circles represent the levels of change that members of the collective want to see related to their concern at various levels. These are referred to as "ripples" because, just like when a stone is thrown into a body of water, change occurs in ripples, often starting small or localized and then radiating outward to reach more people or to engage in broader ways. A few members of the collective are then asked to "label" these ripples or levels of change. It can be meaningful to ask those members of the collective who are the most marginalized or silenced in other situations to do this labeling in order to flip the traditional hierarchy of power on its head.

When using this method with high school students in an ongoing, long-term youth participatory action research (YPAR) project called *Courageous Conversations*, we, as facilitators, asked the student members of the collective to start our process[2]. We asked them to label the "ripples of change" that needed to occur to move the school community toward a desired end related to school gun violence.

For them, the most immediate change became the innermost circle, which they labeled as individual change; that is, changes in individuals' understanding of and attitudes toward guns, gun violence, and gun regulations. They labeled the next circle moving outward as school-level change. For this research collective, members believed that if individuals within the school community (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) were to better understand the phenomenon of school gun violence, they could work to change school-level policies. Collective members labeled the largest, outermost circle "Community-level" and then, after some discussion, added a fourth circle and labeled it "Social/Policy change". As university researchers, we clarified with the students that they saw change starting from individuals changing their minds and then working as a group for school, community, and ultimately social (i.e., large-scale policy) change.

After labeling the ripples of change, all members of the collective were given index cards or note paper to record their individual ideas in response. In an attempt to flatten hierarchies of power once again, for our *Courageous Conversations* collective, we gave different colored papers to different categories of collective members. For example, students received blue papers, teachers yellow papers, and university researchers orange cards. We then gave ourselves a set amount of time to brain write[3] one idea or desired change per note paper and to place each in the circle that represented the appropriate level of change. The different colors facilitated a quick but useful validity check; for example, if everything under school-level change was orange, it was easy to tell that the university researcher members of the collective dominated those ideas. It was apparent that we needed to spend a little more time discussing the suggestions, questioning the assumptions that went into those ideas, and making sure there were not recommendations from other stakeholders that could contribute to our thinking.

Once the allotted time was up, the same members of the collective who labelled the ripples or levels of change were asked to conduct a kind of thematic analysis, reading through all the note papers, placing similar papers or ideas next to each other, asking clarifying questions of the group, and, ultimately, identifying several main ideas to present to the rest of the group. The group engaged in dialogue to come to consensus about what changes were required and desired at each level of change.

Figure 1.
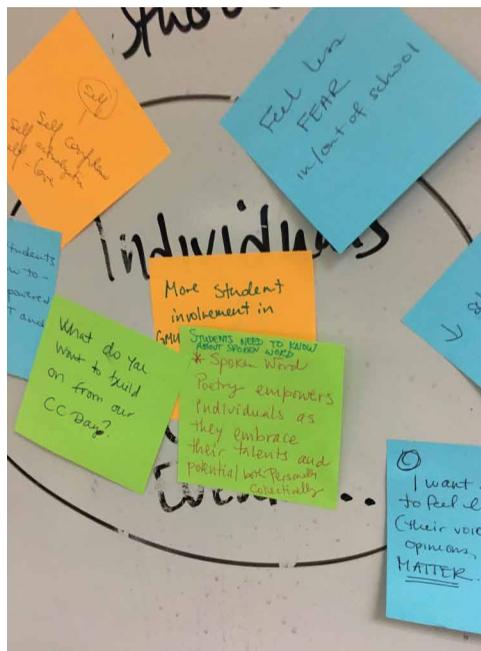
The changes our collective identified as necessary to achieving our ultimate goals became touchstones as the research collective moved on toward data gathering, analysis, and action. For example, after engaging in Ripples of Change, our data collection efforts focused more exclusively on how individual students saw and experienced changes in opinion about gun safety and gun regulations as they took part in dialogues ("Courageous Conversations") about recent and historical gun violence. As this project is ongoing, we have now come to a point where we have gathered and analyzed significant amounts of data focused on individual-level change that we are shifting our focus to school-level change – the second level or "ripple" of change identified by the collective as critical in the process of moving toward broad, social change related to gun violence.

PRIORITY NEGOTIATIONS AND PRAXIS

The concept of *praxis* is used in many different ways and for varied means. Although often used as a kind of synonym for "practice," it is engaged in PAR as a critical, interconnected process of both self and collective action and reflection anchored in an intersubjective movement or reaching toward social change (McLaren, Ryoo, Crawford, & Moreno, 2010). Indeed, PAR's engagement with *praxis* is quite connected to Marx's use of the term, as he described the activities unique to humans through which we both create and change ourselves and our world (Brookfield, 2018).

The term *priority negotiations* can conjure up images of lawyers and teams of people with competing interests all vying for some limited amount of resources, but this is not at all the case here. A better term for this approach to *praxis* might be priority *dialogue*, for it centers the dialectical engagement Freire valued in his own work and writings (Brookfield, 2018; Lucio-Villegas, 2018). However, this engagement should be seen through the lens of critical pedagogy, which repositions traditionally dissimilar or even opposing groups – teachers and students – as equals and partners in collaborative, mutual learning (Brookfield, 2018; Lucio-Villegas, 2018).

Ideally, this activity should take place after some dialogic process like ripples of change has occurred and through which the multiple and potentially competing interests, ideas, and goals have been mapped. Once a research collective has arrived at a place where they agree on a vision for change, they should also tease out what their priorities are for moving toward that change. This activity has similar components as ripples of change in that it places a premium on dialogue. The goal is to come to an understanding of the various priorities of collective members, not to arrive at agreement or consensus. It is important to begin with the understanding that this consensus *may* happen in the process but is not the primary objective.

With the ripples of change or other idea mapping artifact placed where everyone can see it (often on a board in front of everyone or on the floor where people can walk around it), a few members of the collective are asked to prioritize desired changes as low, medium, or high priority. As in the ripples of change, it is usually beneficial to ask those who are typically in positions of less power or have fewer opportunities to voice their opinions to begin. This process might involve physically moving the original cards to another area or creating a list on sheets of paper. Facilitators may want to ask the other members of the research collective to list their own priorities as a way to compare or to start dialogue, but this is not necessary.

Once priority lists have been created, the group can engage in dialogue about what has been deemed low, medium, or high priority and why. It is important at this step for facilitators to help collective members engage in respectful and humble ways, so rules might need to be established. For example, each member might be given a set amount of time to voice their opinions, going around in a circle to make sure everyone gets an equal chance to speak, with an opportunity to "pass" if desired. Facilitators may also ask members to silently compare their priorities with those set by the smaller group and reflect on why there are differences before speaking. Alternatively, there may be a set of questions members of the collective are asked to reflect on or a fill-in-the-blank approach such as, "I appreciate the priority to _____ because _____;" followed by: "I think it's

Figure 2.
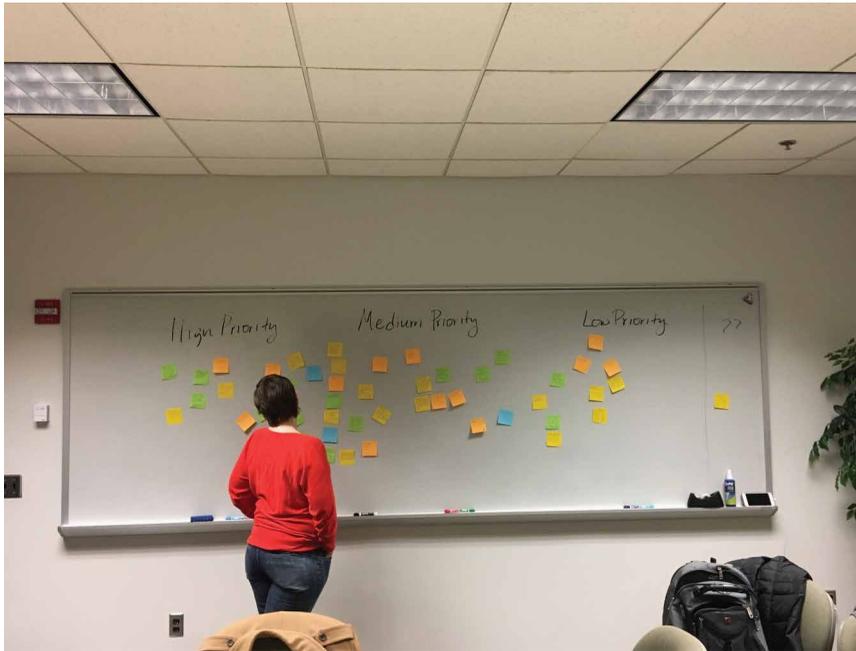
interesting that I did not prioritize _____ because _____:" or "I wonder if we should consider _____."

As we discussed earlier in this manuscript, all of these activities are built on pedagogies and onto-epistemologies that value democratic knowledge creation, so it is useful to ensure facilitators are capable of engaging with respect for participants' knowledge and opinions and of encouraging respectful engagement among all collective members. Priority negotiation would be a valuable component of participatory needs assessment in determining with adult learners the order in which to address program design problems or incorporate curricular objectives. For example, the second author engaged in this process informally with a class of non-literate, beginner-level English learners who worked as custodians in university dormitories, using their first language, Spanish, so that they could express their ideas more easily. Although the second author had assumed that establishing basics of print literacy should be the first priority, the learners expressed that learning how to respond to residents' greetings and questions would be more immediately useful. This was a simple but important form of praxis, listening to the learners' priorities and collaborating to adjust the curriculum according to what would begin to shift the power relations in their workplace.

FORCE MAPPING AND CONSCIENTIZATION

Grounded in post-Marxist critical theory and developed by Paulo Freire, the process of *conscientization* is one in which a person comes to an awareness of their own position in systems of power, oppression, and privilege; develops the ability to think critically about socio-cultural structures related to power; and builds the capacity to work toward the transformation of an oppressive reality. It can be difficult in the context of participatory inquiry to move through this process with a focus on identifying, teasing out, and confronting socio-cultural structures and systems of power because often research collectives are highly diverse. Members of the collective may identify as both oppressor and oppressed in various ways and this may cause anxiety about how or even if to engage in dialogue around difference, power,

and oppression. For instance, in a class of doctoral students learning about PAR (see Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, & Dazzo, 2019), in which the first author was the instructor and the second author was a student, participants wrestled with the incongruence of their positions of privilege as highly educated individuals and the challenges they experienced related to gender, race, ethnicity, and ability. They questioned whether the problems they recognized in their PhD program warranted participatory inquiry since, all things considered, they could not really be considered oppressed.

Indeed, it can be tempting to gather a collective comprised of people who share similar identities and experiences as people may feel more at ease sharing concerns, voicing opinions, or working for change. While we do not argue that this approach is wrong (indeed, we have worked with and even formed participatory research collectives in these very ways), we encourage those interested in participatory inquiry to consider the potential for dialogue that lies in what Torre (2009) calls the contact zone: "a radically inclusive research site that would function as…a messy social space where very differently situated people could work together across their own varying relationships to power and privilege" (p. 110, citing Pratt 1992, p. 4). Ritterbusch (2019) discusses her experiences developing *sentipensar* (a kind of simultaneous thinking and feeling) as she engaged in PAR contact zones that brought together human rights activists, homeless drug users, and sex workers in Colombia. Cahill et al. (2019) present their experiences "resisting the 'school-to-sweatshop pipeline'" (p. 576) in Salt Lake City, Utah, suggesting that it was through the contact zone they intentionally created across "diverse standpoints within [their] multiracial intergenerational collective" that they "create[d] spaces of radical acceptance…holding the complexity of our interdependence" (p. 577) as necessary in their solidarity. Even those collectives that may seem relatively homogeneous, like the doctoral student class mentioned above, have divergent and intersectional experiences, identities, priorities, and needs that can lead to ambivalence or tension within the collective and can present opportunities for meaningful dialogue that moves the group toward a praxis of solidarity that, in turn, moves the group closer to goals of confronting and dismantling structural injustice.

Force mapping is an inquiry activity that can be useful to start or foster dialogue across difference. This is a simple yet powerful process that helps members of a collective build an awareness and reach toward an understanding of people's varying experiences with systems of power and privilege, even in shared contexts. For this activity, members of the group are asked to identify forces that may play a role in the collective's work toward change. These forces may be abstract, such as systemic oppression, or highly concrete, such as limited funds for meetings. Through dialogue, the group works together to name these forces and to visually represent which way they push or pull the movement for change, as well as how strong the force is. Members draw on a whiteboard or other tool (like a large piece of paper) arrows that depict how the force pushes (against the movement or with/for it) and the strength of the force (larger arrows for stronger force, smaller arrows for weaker forces).

This process can help the group in several ways. First, as mentioned, it can build individual members' understanding of themselves and each other in relation to power and privilege, as well as other socio-cultural forces. Second, it has the potential to increase members' comfort and ability to articulate their thoughts on difficult, often taboo, topics. Relatedly, it can foster a dialogic space, which is a central component of successful participatory inquiry projects. Participatory research collectives often use varied and multimodal mapping strategies such as community mapping (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Fang et al., 2006), body mapping (Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017), and systems mapping (Saunders et al., 2016) as tools to better understand and grapple with nuanced, multifaceted phenomena and to open up dialogue with stakeholders who often have disparate interests and agendas. Force mapping fits within this subset of dialogic participatory methods that are anchored by the vision of and commitment to *conscientization*.

This could have been a valuable exercise for the doctoral student collective. Over the semester, the participants engaged in ongoing, increasingly reflective dialogue regarding their personal and academic challenges, ultimately deciding that their concerns should be brought to the attention of administrators for the sake of other doctoral students. However, along the way a number of concerns

emerged about managing expectations and possible repercussions that could come their way for critiquing the program. Visually mapping out the forces of power, the potential for change, and their roles in both could have aided in this process of *conscientization*, weighing the costs and benefits of conducting inquiry on their program, and deciding what types of data to collect and how to present it to stakeholders.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participatory inquiry is not easy. One does not just get out of bed one day and decide to try it out. It has been our experience that this is a long-term commitment and stance (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), one that comes with difficult decisions, ethical tensions, and very real negotiations of power and priorities. Both of us have, at more than one point in our academic lives, been told something to the effect of, "That's nice, but you have to get a job first." Or "Sounds great, but you need to make sure to set yourself up for tenure." We stand on the shoulders of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and many, many others to witness that staying true to our onto-epistemological commitments to *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization* as we take a stand against neoliberal knowledge production processes and for inclusive, dialogic knowledge creation is both trying and triumphant.

Along with many others (e.g., Cueva et al., 2018; Gwon & Thongpriwan, 2019; Khachan, 2009; Lucio-Villegas, 2018; Tulloch et al., 2017), we contend that participatory inquiry can and does produce useful knowledge about and for adult education. Moreover, it goes beyond research to create "serious and reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed, and exploited groups and social classes – the grassroots – and for their authentic organizations and movements" (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 3). As adult educators and early-career scholars, our work incorporates "this combination of liberating knowledge and political power" (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 3-4), guided by our onto-epistemological commitments to *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization*. We seek to share in the lived experiences of our learners and our participants, to take action with them toward improving their conditions, and to foster deep awareness about reality as well as the capacity for change (Freire, 1970; Glassman & Erdem, 2014).

Adult education ranges from literacy classes in church basements to terminal degree programs in Ivy League universities, and each context holds unique challenges as well as potential for positive change. In advocating for a critical approach to adult education pedagogy and research, we reject neoliberal models of lifelong learning that reproduce oppressive socioeconomic structures and embrace the possibility of democratic, transformative education that is accountable to the learner (Brookfield, 2018; Freire, 1970; Lucio-Villegas, 2018). In this manuscript, we have offered three inquiry activities as possibilities, anchored in Freirean dialogical principles, for engaging in participatory inquiry for and with adult learners in any setting, formal or non-formal. These methods have great potential for critical educators to live out their own onto-epistemological commitments, better understand and meet learner needs, and facilitate liberatory education (Brookfield, 2018).

These methods, like the critical pedagogy in which they are grounded, are inherently political, transgressing the dominant social order and the hierarchy upholding it (Freire, 1996; Lima, 2018). Lima (2018) discards the term lifelong education in favor of 'permanent education' in order to emphasize "personal and democratic development" (p. 221) over economic and instrumental purposes. Adult education, in this perspective, is about the development of the person and the society rather than the transmission of marketable skills in order to gain economic power (Lima, 2018). More than just a shift in teaching style or change of curriculum, this demands a revolution in the purposes and practices – the praxis – of adult education, from the church basement to the ivory tower. Who better to lead this revolution than those already in the trenches?

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ENDNOTES

[1]   See www.researchforempowerment.com for several examples of projects that have engaged these methods.

[2]   To see a more detailed description of how this process works and to view pictures from such an activity, please visit www.researchforempowerment.com

[3]   Brain writing differs from a typical session of brainstorming where often a group of people are asked to call out ideas or thoughts in a short amount of time to yield lots of ideas quickly. This can be fraught with problems, especially related to participants' fear of judgment. Brain writing is an alternative with similar goals of coming up with lots of ideas in a short amount of time but increases the likelihood of participation, and, therefore, more diverse ideas, because participants are asked to write their ideas down, pass them to another person to add, and then pass them to a third person to read aloud. Of course, this can be done in many different ways, but the core idea is to increase participation and idea generation by writing rather than yelling out ideas.

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