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Doing participatory action research and doing a PhD: words of encouragement for prospective students

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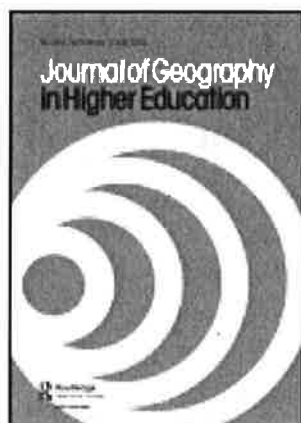
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Doing Participatory Action Research and Doing a PhD: Words of Encouragement for Prospective Students

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ABSTRACT *Participatory action research (PAR) carries the promise that academics can make a difference, an appealing prospect for many postgraduate students. This paper is written by an early career researcher who 'survived' a PAR PhD. Despite acknowledging the unique challenges faced by students attempting PAR, it argues that these have been overstated in much of the literature. This paper offers a detailed personal insight into the ways in which PAR and PhDs do (and do not) mix, and argues that successful PAR PhDs can be undertaken, contra the prevailing despondent rhetoric. It concludes with suggestions for 'energizing' PAR in graduate geographical education.*

KEY WORDS: Participatory action research, PhD, postgraduate

Introduction

There has been a 'participatory turn' in human geography in recent years (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Kindon & Elwood, 2009, p. 20; Pain, 2009). Although participatory action research (PAR) has 'come in from the cold', it has not achieved mainstream status (Hall, 2005; Kindon *et al.*, 2007). It is nonetheless unsurprising that geography postgraduates are attracted by PAR's seductive promise of 'meaningful' collaborative research. The timeframe of a doctoral degree engenders an opportunity to forge connections with the marginalized communities who are often the focus of PAR endeavours. Despite this 'fit', the literature examining PAR from a doctoral student's perspective is sparse (for exceptions see Maguire, 1987, 1993; Herr & Anderson, 2005) and oftentimes despondent about the potential for PAR and PhDs to coexist (McCormack, 2004; Moore, 2004; Moss, 2009). The wider PAR literature is critical of the modern, neoliberal university sector and frequently portrays the goals of PAR and academia as antithetical (Cancian, 1993; Hubbard, 1996; Moss & Matwychuk, 2000; Levin & Greenwood, 2001). Postgraduate students contemplating PAR are warned that they will face many challenges beyond those experienced by 'ordinary' doctoral students—including a battle for acceptance within their scholarly institutions (Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Such literature effectively

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pits PAR and PhDs against each other, creating a sense that only the 'bravest' students would dare mesh the two. This paper seeks to destabilize these discouraging discourses.

Geographers have a "longstanding concern with the societal impacts of academic research and teaching" (Kendon & Elwood, 2009, p. 20). A recent symposium in this journal showcased the growing body of work that recognizes the contribution of PAR to geographic teaching, learning and research (Kendon & Elwood, 2009; Pain, 2009). This paper explores the potential for successful PAR PhDs, and is written from the firsthand experience of an early career researcher who recently completed one. It argues that much can be done within the confines of a doctoral project in Geography to develop research that makes a 'difference'. Furthermore, it encourages academics writing about PAR in scholarly journals and books to be realistic about its challenges, but avoid making PAR seem too difficult for students to contemplate. It concludes by offering suggestions for how academic geographers and geography departments can support doctoral students contemplating (or already attempting) PAR. It does not suggest that PAR is the 'best' methodology for all students and projects. Nonetheless, if we agree that "our task as teachers" is to offer opportunities for students to engage in "decolonization and justice-building" (Howitt, 2001, p. 148), we should avoid scaring them away from PAR.

Understanding PAR

PAR is more than a methodology—it is a 'political statement' and 'theory of knowledge' which "affirms people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 10). It responds to calls for "more moral, caring and politically aware human geographies" (Pain, 2003, p. 650), and constitutes a direct affront to the traditional separation between academia and activism (Tandon, 1998). PAR has attained some popularity in Geography because it responds to broader concerns with the detached, hierarchical and exploitative nature of many conventional research encounters which produce "few tangible benefits" for research subjects (Cameron & Gibson, 2004, p. 316; see also Harvey, 1984; Routledge, 1996; Breitbart, 2003; Kesby *et al.*, 2005). The participatory action researcher "does not conduct research *on* a group, but works *with them* to achieve [the] change that *they* desire" (Kendon, 2005, p. 208, emphasis in original). By bringing new "voices into the academy" (Pain, 2004, p. 654), PAR increases the likelihood that research will be "appropriate, meaningful and relevant" to communities (Kesby *et al.*, 2005, p. 164). Both the research process and outcomes should be beneficial to participants (Maguire, 1987).

Of course, PAR does not always reach these lofty goals. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) extensive critique of the participatory orthodoxy in international development asserted that participation often reinforces power inequities. Their criticisms were not restricted to poorly implemented participatory projects, but directed at the discourse of participation itself (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Meanwhile, Isenberg *et al.* (2004, p. 13) noted that it cannot be assumed that "power sharing and PAR" always serve the "greater social good". Such critiques have important implications for academics practising PAR, reminding us that this methodology inhabits contested ground, and that adopting it does not place us beyond moral reproach.

A Background to my PAR PhD

This paper is not the product of an empirical investigation into PAR PhDs. Rather, it reflects on the author's own experiences of conducting a PAR PhD in human geography

from 2004 to 2008. My PhD investigated child domestic work¹ in Iringa Municipality, central Tanzania. At the outset of my doctoral candidature, I planned to follow a conventional research process. Then I started reading (and panicking). Was I a colonizing western researcher? What could I know about the feelings of teenage girls in an unfamiliar context? I was aware that child domestic workers experience exploitation and abuse. I wanted my PhD to benefit them, but was not positioned to know what they needed. PAR emerged as a way of working towards culturally sensitive and locally relevant action.

My decision to utilize PAR culminated in the establishment of a research team including three former child domestic workers, who were trained and employed as co-researchers. Faidha Mlossi, Vaileth Mvena and Amina Haule² were aged 17, 15 and 14 (respectively) at the commencement of the research. These young co-researchers were engaged throughout the research process—from setting aims, to collecting data³ and lobbying for change. The research team also included a Tanzanian research assistant (Esther John) and a Tanzanian musician and children's rights activist (Paul Mbenna).

The young researchers were adamant that our research should improve child domestic workers' lives, and suggested we work to develop a mechanism for them to be employed via formal contracts. Interviews indicated support for this idea among stakeholders (Klocker, 2011). The research team used interview data to draft a contract and supporting by-law to regulate child domestic work in Iringa, which were submitted to the local council. Although key council officials had conveyed support for the project from its commencement, the council declined to deliberate on the proposed by-law unless financial 'incentives' were provided. Ethical concerns and financial limitations prevented the research team from providing such incentives, thus our efforts at engendering change were halted. Further details of the action-oriented process are recounted in Klocker (2011). The participatory research process is described in detail in Klocker (2008).

PAR and PhDs—Finding Common Ground

An extensive body of literature has discussed the challenges faced by doctoral students and their supervisors, and numerous 'how to' manuals exist to help them navigate the experience (Graves & Varma, 1997; Lee & Williams, 1999; Rudestam & Newton, 2001; Ferguson, 2009). This paper is situated within this broad body of literature, but draws particular attention to the smaller, and more specific, literature on PAR PhDs. Of course, many of the issues raised are not unique to graduate students conducting PAR—all doctoral candidatures are highly challenging, and are meant to be so (Lee & Williams, 1999; McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Research degrees are "complex, often chaotic [and] sometimes messy" (Byrne-Armstrong *et al.*, 2001, p. vii). Many of the demands experienced are shared by students across disciplinary boundaries and chosen methodologies. At the same time, the experiences of students are fractured along lines of gender and ethnicity—among other attributes (Gundara, 1997; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Leonard, 2001; Barata *et al.*, 2005). The PhD experience is characterized by both commonality and difference.

The small body of literature specific to graduate research using PAR circulates a standard (and discouraging) message: PAR is more demanding and difficult than conventional research, and doctoral students attempting PAR will face many battles (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002; McCormack, 2004; Moore, 2004; Maguire, 2005; Burgess, 2006). Attempts to bring the "realities of graduate education" into line with students'

activist visions have been described as “crazy making” (Coates *et al.*, 1998, p. 334). Moore (2004, pp. 154, 158) cast the PAR PhD process as a ‘paradigmatic battle’ requiring students to challenge the hierarchical structures of their academic institutions—a daunting prospect. Meanwhile, as a supervisor (advisor), Moss (2009, p. 77) wrote of her ‘unease’ with encouraging graduate students to attempt PAR because it complicates the PhD process and ‘takes even more time’. I have personally deterred at least three graduate students from adopting PAR, a realization which (in part) prompted me to write this paper.

A substantial segment of the broader PAR literature is stridently focused on what universities are doing ‘wrong’ and how academic culture (individualistic, outcome-focused, timeline-driven) clashes with the foundations of PAR (collaborative, process-focused, time-intensive) (Cancian, 1993; Hall, 1993; Hubbard, 1996; Bernard, 1999; Gibbon, 2002; Moore, 2004). This clash is portrayed as particularly difficult for PhD students to negotiate. This paper is motivated by a concern that large swathes of the literature on PAR in general, and on PAR PhDs in particular, have overstated the extent of this tension. I did not face the cultural battles with my university that the aforementioned literature had primed me for. My intent in making this statement is not to be smug about a smooth PAR PhD process (nor to deny that some students experience such clashes). I also readily acknowledge the important role my academic supervisors played in facilitating a positive encounter with PAR. However, my intent here is to offer a counterbalance to the tenor of the existing literature, to draw attention to the ‘fit’ between PAR and human geography, and to demonstrate that PAR PhDs are inherently *do-able*. The cultural turn in human geography pointed us away from ‘rational’ scientific methods some decades ago, and helped deconstruct the objective, truth-seeking, all-knowing academic. Furthermore, the ‘academy’ is not a monolithic entity whose culture inevitably conflicts with PAR—many human geographers (and their departments) are likely to be open to PAR—even if they have not practised it themselves. PAR simply *fits* with critical human geographers’ quest to make ‘room’ for engaged and relevant research (Martin, 2001; Castree, 2002; Pain, 2003; Cameron & Gibson, 2004; Blomley, 2006, 2007). It *fits* with feminist geographers’ calls for greater reflexivity and more equitable power relationships within research (McDowell, 1992; Panelli, 2003; Kindon & Elwood, 2009; Kindon, 2010). It *fits* with postcolonial geographers’ calls for research that does not mine marginalized research subjects for academic benefit (Gibson, 2006). The gap between the objectives of PAR and the geographies already being practiced in many academic departments is not that big.

In the following sections of this paper, I unpack a number of ‘problems’ that have been identified relating to PAR PhDs. I recount my own experiences of negotiating these difficulties (or *not* negotiating them, when they proved to be non-events). Of course, other students’ experiences of PAR will vary according to their institutional contexts, supervisors, personal attributes, and the design and purpose of their projects. I nonetheless hope that students contemplating PAR PhDs (or already embroiled within them) will find encouragement in my attempts to dismantle some of the key (inhibiting) stereotypes of how PAR and PhDs clash.

Chronology of Events: Do PAR and PhDs Operate on Conflicting Schedules?

Influential proponents of ‘participation’ have argued that participatory projects should ideally be initiated by members of marginalized groups (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). This ‘pinnacle’ of participation is particularly difficult for doctoral projects to attain (Maguire,

1993; Moore, 2004). The limited literature on PAR PhDs regularly laments that key milestones in the PhD process may compromise ‘authentic’ participation as students must develop a PhD proposal and ethics application early in their candidature (Maguire, 1993; Moore, 2004; Burgess, 2006). These documents set out a ‘defined process for how the research will take place’, although participatory researchers are not supposed to pre-empt how projects will unfold (Gibbon, 2002, p. 555). By taking control of the research upfront, PhD students “jeopardize the defining partnership of PAR” (Burgess, 2006, p. 420); but delaying these milestones until community consultation has occurred could impede on-time completion (Moore, 2004).

This chronological disjuncture troubled me in the early stages of my PhD. Aware of my subjectivities and biases (as a white, western, middle-class researcher); it felt inappropriate to unilaterally put this research to paper as a PhD proposal and ethics application. Ultimately, I found that this process did not jeopardize my PAR intentions—for two reasons. First, it is permissible to build uncertainty into research proposals and ethics applications (whether they involve PAR or not). Research in the social sciences is rarely predictable and often ‘emergent’ in design (Herr & Anderson, 2005). I used my research proposal and ethics application to explain my chosen methodology and to anticipate questions the research *might* ask and directions it *may* take. I also explained why some uncertainty was necessary. Realistically, there are few research projects that end up where they started—PAR PhDs are not alone in this regard. It is entirely appropriate to change research questions and directions once in ‘the field’, and ethics review boards are (usually) open to receiving updated submissions in light of unexpected twists and turns. This flexibility offers scope for projects to shift in dialogue with the community of interest—in true participatory style.

Second, it is important to question the assumption that community-initiated participatory projects are always ‘ideal’. I could have spent years chatting to child domestic workers without them suggesting we conduct research on their lives. Most non-researchers do not conceptualize the world in terms of research projects, nor are individuals engaged in the task of daily survival likely to consider research a priority (Maguire, 1987). Furthermore, marginalized individuals are rarely found in ‘ready-made groups’, making them even less likely to initiate research (Maguire, 1987). They are also likely to lack the resources required to initiate an inquiry (Nespor, 1998). Academics publishing papers about PAR need to let students ‘off the hook’—by acknowledging that community-initiated projects are rare, and that it is perfectly acceptable for academic researchers to *initiate* participatory endeavours (Maguire, 1987).

Timeframes: Can a PAR PhD be Completed on Time?

PAR is often a time intensive activity (Maguire, 1993; Cameron, 2007; Moss, 2009). There is no way to ‘short-circuit’ the process of partnership building (Maguire, 1993, p. 176), and researchers must see projects through to their action stage to avoid disappointing participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005). It can be difficult to conceptualize PAR as a “linear product with a finite ending” (McCormack, 2004; Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. xv). However, the funding that universities receive for PhD completions (in Australia and the UK) is highly contingent on students completing their PhDs in four years or less. Of course, doctoral students also face their own financial barriers that limit the time they can devote to a PhD (Moss, 2009).⁴ Although timelines and finances are clearly an issue for all graduate

students, they can pose particular difficulties for PAR PhD students because “[c]ollective work is messy and time-consuming” and because participants “will surely not become empowered, liberated or transformed on our schedules” (Maguire, 1993, pp. 175–176).

I knew it would be difficult to come full circle in a PAR project within the expected timeframe of an Australian PhD. My own thesis was submitted in just under four years—and before the action component of the project had reached a firm conclusion. Although this initially caused me concern, I learned that it is possible to write a thesis without a ‘neat’ ending to the PAR process. It was acceptable for me to note the factors beyond my control, and to draw attention to my continued engagement in the action process beyond thesis submission.

It is also important to challenge the standard message that PAR is inherently time intensive. Although PAR may involve a great deal of time investment—particularly in the initial relationship building stages—that investment can ‘pay off’ in terms of time saved later on. As noted by Isenberg *et al.* (2004, p. 125), it is important to acknowledge that ‘collaboration is easier than noncollaboration in many cases’. The time-saving potential of PAR has scarcely been acknowledged in the literature, but was most apparent to me during the data collection phase of the project. It was, quite simply, possible to interview a large number of people in a short timeframe because I was part of a *team*. Of course, it is important not to exploit participants’ labour, and strategies for avoiding this must be negotiated with them.

Finally, although prospective PAR PhD students may be concerned about timelines, with Moss (2009, p. 69) having argued that “doctoral degrees are scarcely long enough to complete a participatory project”, there is unlikely to be another time during an academic career when a researcher can be so single-mindedly engaged with one project, for a period of three or four years. The demands of multiple research projects, grant capture, student supervision, undergraduate teaching, administrative responsibilities and regular publishing are familiar to all academics. PhDs offer a space and ‘wonderful opportunity to consider PAR’.⁵

Measures of Success: Can PAR PhDs Make a Valid Contribution to Academic Knowledge?

The small body of literature on PAR PhDs has expressed concern that knowledge produced by PAR is not valued in academic settings. Herr and Anderson (2005) claimed that doctoral students using PAR must legitimize the approach in their assessors’ eyes because many academics are not impressed by the locally grounded and practical knowledge generated. There is also a perceived ‘danger’ that examiners may assess the rigour of PAR PhDs using conventional criteria (Bernard, 1999; Moore, 2004, p. 158). Moore (2004, p. 160) came to the debilitating conclusion that we must wait until the criteria for evaluating academic success are changed, *before* moving PAR “into our classrooms and graduate theses”.

In the case of my PhD, the anticipated conflict between PAR and ‘real’ academic knowledge did not eventuate. My supervisors, examiners and department did not question the academic legitimacy of my work. Indeed, using PAR had the fortuitous side-effect of enabling my thesis to make a contribution to two fields of knowledge: that on child domestic work and that on PAR with young co-researchers.⁶ PAR drew my focus towards approaches that are highly valued in human geography—reflexivity and acknowledgement of researcher

subjectivity, as well as attentiveness to power differentials and contextual specificity. It was precisely these aspects of the thesis which were applauded by its assessors, and which gave it academic credibility. Of course, the successful reception of my thesis depended on selecting supervisors and examiners who were sympathetic to this approach. This is critical for all doctoral students, whether attempting PAR or not (Maguire, 1993).

Numerous scholars have warned that the potential implications of choosing PAR extend further into an academic career. For instance, Cancian (1993, p. 92) stated that PAR “retards academic publication and career advancement” and Moore (2004, p. 153) observed that PAR is “antithetical to academic success” (see also Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992; Hall, 1993; Coates *et al.*, 1998; Kindon & Elwood, 2009). Others have argued that the hours spent building and sustaining meaningful relationships and engendering social change have not been granted recognition (Hall, 1993; Pain, 2009). Rather, activist research is treated with disdain in the academy and ascribed the status of ‘community housework’ (Hubbard, 1996). Moss (2009, p. 68) has lamented that in this era of the neoliberal university it is increasingly difficult “to build a career in activist research”. Yet Pain (2009, p. 84) rightfully noted that Moss’ own career demonstrates that “excellence and participatory activism are not opposing poles”—the same point could be made about Pain’s career. At this early stage, I do not know how my engagement with PAR will impact on my academic career. I have faced some challenges, particularly in relation to peer-review processes. A recent PAR-focused paper of mine was labelled ‘insufficiently theoretical’ by one reviewer, although the other reviewers and journal editors were supportive. This small example suggests that there are still some human geographers whose definitions of legitimate academic writing remain limited to disembodied ‘high theory’, but they are (in my experience) increasingly in the minority.

Is this about ‘me’ or ‘us’? Reconciling the Individualism of PhDs and Collectivism of PAR

To attain a doctorate, the (conventionally solitary) student must produce a thesis demonstrating individual research competence—co-authorship is unacceptable (Herr & Anderson, 2005). PAR, meanwhile, is a collaborative process based on dialogue and negotiation (McCormack, 2004). In ‘writing up’ a thesis, students attempting PAR PhDs can reinforce unequal power relationships because they are solely responsible for the task of putting collaborative research to paper (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Concerns also exist over the rightful ownership of knowledge produced by a team⁷ (Burgess, 2006).

Elements of individualism and collectivism were readily apparent in the PAR project on which my PhD was based. As a group, we developed the research aims, recruited participants, designed data collection instruments, collected data, conducted a ‘practical’ analysis of results,⁸ developed an agenda for change and lobbied local decision makers. There were also components of the project I conducted alone—I prepared the research proposal and ethics application, conducted a review of academic literature and academic analysis of results and wrote the thesis. To reconcile the independent and collaborative components of the project, I conceptualized two separate, but overlapping, bodies of work. First, there was *our* PAR project (on child domestic work) which culminated in the production of a draft employment contract and by-law of which ownership was shared. Sitting alongside this was *my* thesis project, for which I alone was accountable to my university (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). Notwithstanding this cognitive separation, a deliberate balance was struck in writing the thesis, to ensure that the collaboration was not lost when put to paper. I had to write *our* joint

project into *my* thesis—which involved making deliberate decisions over the use of personal pronouns throughout the thesis (see also McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Although this may seem a minor grammatical issue, referring to ‘our’ research, rather than ‘my’ research made a powerful statement. To claim that this research was purely about what I did would have been inaccurate, disrespectful and dishonest, and would have failed to tell the whole story. Although they did not write any parts of the thesis, my co-researchers’ voices were ever-present in excerpts from our field diaries, detailed accounts of our activities and transcripts of interviews they conducted. Esther and Paul read and commented on the thesis (the young researchers were unable to because of English language limitations⁹).

Doctoral candidates want ‘academe’s most precious status’, and must therefore fulfil the non-negotiable responsibility of independently authoring a thesis (Fletcher, 2002, p. 94). Nonetheless, the perceived ‘battle’ between individualism and collectivism can be respectfully negotiated by PAR PhD students. The PAR literature must take care to avoid implying that the production of a thesis undermines the participatory process on which it is based.

Institutional versus Participatory Ethics

Ethical dilemmas are not unique to PAR PhDs, although the ethical premises driving PAR ‘often collide with institutional norms’ of ethical research in ways that more ‘conventional’ research encounters may not (Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Stoecker, 2008; Pain, 2009, p. 83). At the most basic level, PAR moves beyond the conventional ethical dictate of ‘do no harm’, by insisting that researchers have a duty to bring about positive change (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007). Academics utilizing PAR have also complained about the ill-fit between a one-size-fits all ‘restrictive, inflexible and top-down’ institutional ethics, and a participatory ethics of care that involves negotiation with participants (Cahill *et al.*, 2007, p. 307; Elwood, 2007).

I was very concerned that my university’s ethics committee would block this project. The children’s geography literature has noted an ill-fit between an institutional approach to ethics that favours keeping children at ‘arm’s length’ from research, and a participatory ethics which insists that it is unethical to conduct research on children’s lives *without* engaging them (Qvortrup, 1994; Matthews *et al.*, 1998; Jones, 2001). My ethics application explained why children’s engagement was crucial and (to my surprise) did not face obstacles from the committee. Perhaps this suggests that some committees are becoming receptive of unconventional methods. Although ethics ‘clearance’ was obtained, I will not pretend that this resolved the substantive ethical dilemmas mentioned above. I learned a great deal about ethical research throughout this PAR project, but the learning curve was steep and the ‘stakes’ were high, as real people’s lives were involved (Kindon & Elwood, 2009, p. 24). This is an aspect of the PAR process for which I have few reassuring words—there will be a great deal of self-doubt and many sleepless nights. Perhaps the greatest comfort is that all participatory action researchers, no matter how experienced, are perplexed by the same ethical dilemmas.

A Lack of Support and Training for PAR PhD Students: Is there Anyone to Guide us?

Finding an appropriate supervisor is a major issue for all graduate students. However, some authors have suggested that particular difficulties exist for PAR PhD students

because the number of academics experienced in PAR and 'capable of guiding a student through a path-breaking PAR dissertation are few, and in some fields nonexistent' (Moore, 2004; Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 91; Moss, 2009). Furthermore, many universities lack courses providing training and opportunities to practice PAR (Gibbon, 2002). In light of these gaps, Kindon and Elwood (2009, p. 27) admitted being simultaneously 'excited about the rising interest in participatory approaches' and concerned about the limited resources and training opportunities available to students.

My supervisors—both highly regarded human geographers—are not participatory action researchers, and I was the first PAR PhD student they had supervised. PAR was not taught in the human geography curriculum of my department. Nonetheless, my supervisors had the confidence to let me navigate my way through PAR and were able to offer an 'outsider' perspective, which proved valuable in ways that an insider perspective (from supervisors experienced in PAR) may not have been. I am not suggesting that PhD students should intentionally seek faculty inexperienced in PAR, but that the absence of such supervisors need not undermine a project. Contemporary human geographers understand the importance of reflexivity, context and power relations in research, and can apply this knowledge to supervision of PAR PhDs. Furthermore, if growing numbers of committed students opt to undertake PAR (even in the absence of a practiced supervisor), we may be able to rectify this perceived supervisory shortage in future years.

A second issue relating to support and guidance is the limited availability of literature specific to PAR PhDs—the handful of existing sources have been cited in this paper. I felt this absence keenly during my candidature, and hope that this paper contributes an additional voice to this small body of literature that may prove helpful to future PAR PhD students. However, what proved more detrimental to my progress than this 'gap' was the preponderance of judgemental and purist literature on PAR more generally.

Dealing with a 'Judgemental' Literature

Over the years of my PhD, I became increasingly frustrated with what I experienced as a frequently judgemental (even proselytizing) literature. The concluding sections of this paper have not arisen out of a desire to reflect (self-pityingly) on these difficulties, but out of a concern that other young scholars might also be finding sections of the literature difficult to reconcile with their own first attempts at PAR. Much of the PAR literature is dismissive of 'impure' or 'inauthentic' endeavours. Some authors have argued that the very involvement of academics in PAR institutionalizes, undermines and corrupts the methodology (Stoecker, 1999; Moore, 2004). Efforts at participation which have not achieved the 'ideals' set forth have been described variously as "diluted", a "process of vulgarization" (de Toma, 1996, p. 4), "tokenistic" (Mayo, 2001, p. 279), "deceptive" (Driskell, 2002, p. 41), "manipulative" (Hart, 1995, p. 24) and "sterile and unsatisfactory" (Cairns, 2001, p. 357). The very application of hierarchies and 'ladders'¹⁰ to the evaluation of participatory processes suggests that—unless a project is operating at the highest rungs—it has simply not got it 'right'. Influential segments of the PAR literature have also been highly critical of 'traditional' research (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Chambers, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002), effectively creating a binary of morally good research ('authentic' PAR) and morally bad research (conventional research and 'inauthentic' PAR). As I earnestly attempted to practice PAR, I experienced a fear of slipping back into the supposedly exploitative realm of 'traditional' research practice.

The 'action' imperative of my chosen methodology was also a source of angst. It became debilitating to read of projects which claimed to have "re-created civil society and broadened grassroots democracy" (de Roux, 1991, p. 51). The revolutionary overtones of the literature were at once seductive and unreachable. Calls for 'comrades' to join the 'revolution' and to take part (via PAR) in the "enlightenment and awakening of common peoples" (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991, p. vii) made me wonder what our little project could achieve. I felt incapable of contributing to a PAR whose ultimate and ambitious objective was "liberat[ing] the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 2).

However, the literature on PAR is not a monolithic whole, and some authors have recognized the need to be more open and accepting. Kesby *et al.* (2005, p. 145) have argued that it is important to avoid being 'puritanical' about the need to do participation "deeply or not at all" because "the road to 'doing research differently' has to begin somewhere"; whereas Herr and Anderson (2005, pp. 127–128) noted that there will not always be a "successful" change effort to document with a happy ending" (see also Pain & Francis, 2003). It was the words of scholars such as Rachel Pain, Patricia Maguire, Sara Kindon and Mike Kesby which provided encouragement for me to "err on the side of action" rather than the inaction of "waiting and wanting" to do PAR perfectly (Maguire, 1987, p. 127). Pain and Maguire in particular appeared to share my frustration over "the reality of participatory practice versus its sometimes glossy (or glossed-over) presentation" (Pain, 2004, p. 658); and with its "sometimes pretentious rhetoric" (Maguire, 1993, p. 162). They emphasized the importance of celebrating the attempt (at achieving meaningful and appropriate social change), "no matter how flawed, small-scale or less than ideal" it was (Maguire, 1993, p. 176).

Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper has sought to ease the path for graduate students who may be feeling uncertain about the prospect of successfully completing a PAR PhD. As academic geographers committed to PAR we can take several steps to support them. First, although this paper has sought to destabilize the assumption that PAR and academic cultures necessarily clash, some institutional changes would undoubtedly be beneficial. These may include raising awareness of the academic legitimacy of this methodology within ethics committees and among our departmental colleagues (whether geographers or not); as well as the provision of more learning and training opportunities for students and supervisors interested in PAR. This may require strategies for linking our teaching with our PAR endeavours—to provide students with opportunities for 'hands-on practice' wherever possible. These issues, and many more, have already been thoughtfully addressed in a symposium published in this journal (Kindon & Elwood, 2009; Pain, 2009), as well as by Stoecker (2008) and Khanlou and Peter (2005).

Second, for research students contemplating this approach (or already grappling with it), it is important to be aware that although there are myriad ways in which using PAR complicates the PhD process, there are also numerous ways in which it makes the journey easier. There is more labour power available to share the workload, responsibility for decisions is shared and research as part of a team can be less isolating (and more inspiring) than a conventional PhD experience. For every aspect of the PAR PhD process that I found perplexing, there was another aspect that was satisfying—not to mention the numerous

ways in which doing a PAR PhD can impact positively on the data generated, the participants and the researcher.

Finally, as academic geographers engaged in higher education, we 'teach' not only those (graduate) students with whom we have face-to-face contact, but also those who come across our papers, hoping to find within their pages something that will help them along the way. For these students, a more energizing and balanced portrayal of PAR in general, and PAR PhDs in particular, is likely to be of benefit. We can take practical steps to support these students by changing how we write about PAR. When recounting our PAR experiences in journals and books, it is important to talk about the challenges faced, and strategically crucial to agitate for change by highlighting the shortcomings of the academy in accommodating PAR. However, students must also be offered positive accounts of battles that did not eventuate, of institutions that did not create obstacles, of supervisors and examiners who were supportive and able to acknowledge the contributions made by PAR. At the same time, influential sections of the PAR literature must show a greater willingness to compromise on the idealistic (and often unattainable) methodological standards they set forth. In that process, we can demonstrate to our students (present and future) that successful PAR PhDs are achievable, and perhaps build a critical mass of students choosing this methodology in the future.

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Notes

- ¹ Child domestic workers 'work in other people's households doing domestic chores, caring for children, and running errands' (UNICEF, 1999, p. 2). They work for pay in cash or kind, are employed by adults who are not their parents and usually live in their employers' homes (Kifle, 2002).
- ² Amina Haule is a pseudonym as this young researcher did not want her real name included. Former child domestic workers were recruited rather than current child domestic workers because those who are still employed have insufficient spare time to engage in research.
- ³ Data were collected from June 2005 to October 2006 via 30 interviews with current child domestic workers and 34 interviews with former child domestic workers; 25 personal narratives written by former child domestic workers; 57 interviews with employers of child domestic workers and four focus group discussions with 29 local leaders in Iringa Municipality. All data were collected in Kiswahili.
- ⁴ Even for those fortunate enough to receive scholarships, the time frame over which they are supported is limited. Australian Government PhD scholarships (Australian Postgraduate Awards) are limited, in the first instance, to three years. A candidate can apply for an extra six months if there are adequate grounds for an extension.
- ⁵ This comment was made by an anonymous examiner of my PhD thesis.
- ⁶ This dual focus created its own challenges. It can be difficult to structure a PAR PhD experience into a traditional thesis format (Fisher & Phelps, 2006). In the case of my thesis, the story of its methodology was weaved throughout the thesis, rather than being confined to a methodology chapter. A similar 'weaving' process is described in insightful detail by Fisher and Phelps (2006), and the narrative style of PAR PhDs in McNiff and Whitehead (2009).
- ⁷ The relevance of this issue is not limited to students undertaking PAR PhDs—it is, for instance, a common issue for physical geographers who regularly work in teams when conducting field and

laboratory work. The more general challenges of writing a PhD thesis, which are faced by all doctoral students, have been widely documented, including in this journal, and there are numerous textbooks, manuals and journal articles to assist students in this task (see for instance DeLyser, 2003; Ferguson, 2009).

⁸ I distinguish here between 'practical' analysis and 'academic' analysis. The practical component involved working through interview and focus group transcripts and pulling out key issues, ideas and suggestions that would help us in developing an agenda for change. This was something in which the young researchers were involved, and which they appeared to enjoy. The academic component of the analysis involved entering data into the N6 and SPSS data analysis packages, coding data according to themes and engaging in manifest and latent content analysis. This was required for my PhD, but not for the practical objectives of our participatory project. I completed this academic analysis independently.

⁹ The 'practical' outputs of the research—that is, the draft regulatory instruments created by the research team—were all written in Kiswahili and were thus accessible to the young researchers.

¹⁰ For example, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation and Hart's (1992) ladder of children's participation.

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