

Elucidating the Power in Empowerment and the Participation in Participatory Action Research: A Story About Research Team and Elementary School Change

Deanne Dworski-Riggs · Regina Day Langhout

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Abstract Community psychologists are increasingly using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a way to promote social justice by creating conditions that foster empowerment. Yet, little attention has been paid to the differences between the power structure that PAR advocates and the local community power structures. This paper seeks to evaluate the level of participation in a PAR project for multiple stakeholder groups, determine how PAR was adjusted to better fit community norms, and whether our research team was able to facilitate the emergence of PAR by adopting an approach that was relevant to the existing power relations. We conclude that power differences should not be seen as roadblocks to participation, but rather as moments of opportunity for the researchers to refine their methods and for the community and the community psychologist to challenge existing power structures.

Keywords Participatory action research · Empowerment · Power · Schools · Reflexivity

Introduction

As a field, community psychology has embraced empowerment as a means of promoting social justice (Juras et al.

1997; Rappaport 1981). Yet, despite the prominence of empowerment in community psychology, within community psychology, not much is written about power, especially in contexts in the United States (Gregory 2000; Newbrough et al. 2008; Prilleltensky 2008). Given the relative infancy of a power theory in community psychology, we turn to Hayward's theory of power, which is based in political philosophy. Her theory defines power as "a network of social boundaries that constrain and enable action for all actors" (Hayward 2000, p. 11). Boundaries, or political mechanisms, "include laws, norms, standards, and personal and social group identities [that] demarcate fields of action" (Hayward 2000, p. 8). Power asymmetries exist when one person or group has more control over the boundaries to their action than others. Consistent with community psychology (Fisher et al. 2007; Martín Baró 1994; Nelson and Prilleltensky 2005), Hayward views power as relational and dynamic.

This definition implies that the boundaries of power are neither natural nor inevitable, but are merely political mechanisms, which could be arranged in other ways. Realizing the mutable nature of power can lead to political freedom (Hayward 2000). This view fits well with community psychology's theory of empowerment as the process by which groups or individuals increase control over conditions that affect their lives (Rappaport 1981; Zimmerman 2000). Hayward's theory, however, expands on the notion of empowerment in two important ways. First, it is more firmly grounded in a theory of power, so that achieving empowerment or freedom necessitates understanding power relations. Second, it recognizes that living in social groups requires setting boundaries. Therefore, the goal is not for each person to have complete control over all of the boundaries that affect their lives, but rather that people are aware of them and that there are no fixed power

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D. Dworski-Riggs
Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, USA

R. D. Langhout (✉)
Psychology Department, University of California,
1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
e-mail: langhout@ucsc.edu

asymmetries regarding control of the boundaries. The intended outcome, therefore, is for all community members to have access to control over the resources that affect their lives, paying special attention to groups who have been historically excluded from that access.

Community psychology strives to incorporate the ideals of empowerment into research, practice, and interventions (Rappaport 1981). Researchers can promote empowerment by utilizing interventions that foster it, as well as by working with empowering methodologies (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Rappaport 1990). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one method that allows researchers to put empowerment theory into practice (Selener 1998; Sullivan et al. 2005) by ensuring that everyone who has a stake in the outcome of the partnership (i.e., stakeholders) has a voice in the process of decision making (Sarason 2003). A PAR project is one where stakeholders participate in one or more of the following: problem definition, problem assessment, intervention planning, implementation, and evaluation (Hughes 2003; Ho 2002). Participation means having a say in the process (Serrano-García 1990). This is in contrast to collaboration, which can be understood as working together. For this paper, we are concerned with participation in intervention planning.

Empirical studies have confirmed the empowering potential of PAR. For example, PAR has enhanced participants' critical consciousness and resources such as knowledge, social networks, and sense of community (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005; Nelson et al. 1998). When people raise their consciousness, they increase their awareness of power relations and critically examine their social resources. This process facilitates the creation of structures—through PAR—that enable people to act on boundaries that they feel are unjust. Given the ability of PAR to create conditions that foster empowerment, it is not surprising that more and more researchers, especially community psychologists, are utilizing this framework.

Despite the popularity of the participatory approach, few researchers articulate the degree of participation attained (Greenwood et al. 1993). This silence around the creation of PAR makes it appear as though PAR is simply used, rather than developed over time with varying degrees of implementation. The claim that “participatory action research is not a thing but a process” (Greenwood et al. 1993, p. 188) is especially relevant when applied to communities that do not function in accordance with PAR's egalitarian power structure. In communities where power asymmetries exist, it is important to understand community members' consciousness of power relations in order to promote second order change and thereby the creation of PAR. Serrano-García (1994) suggests that there are four levels of consciousness: submissive (social reality is constructed as natural and immutable), precritical

(dissatisfaction accompanied by the belief that change may be within reach), critical-integrative (analysis of power asymmetries and the initiation of change efforts), and liberating (acknowledging asymmetries as oppressive and demanding change). We argue that for PAR to emerge, researchers must promote increasing consciousness of power asymmetries and create structures that enable community members to challenge those asymmetries.

As described by Hayward (2000), the mechanisms of power can take many forms. In this paper, we focus on boundaries that limit stakeholders' opportunities to take part in decision making. This topic is important because the opportunity to participate in decision making about how an organization—such as a school—is run means stakeholders can discuss, challenge, and shape the boundaries that affect their lives. In other words, stakeholders who have these decision making opportunities are empowered. There are several key boundaries that constrain school stakeholders from being able to participate in decision making. School policies regarding supervision and permission giving directly mediate who has how much control over decisions. Another important mechanism of power is school policies regarding time. Finally, social norms are a power mechanism that must be considered. Indeed, Serrano-García (1990) theorizes that researcher and participant social norms are important mediators of participation. We will therefore focus on policies regarding permission giving and time, as well as school social norms.

These boundaries to participation are particularly relevant in the context of the United States. Most schools in the United States are structured hierarchically (Sarason 2003), meaning that policies only facilitate the participation of select stakeholders by ensuring that they have the authority and time to make decisions. Additionally, school stakeholders with more time scheduled for meetings and more flexible schedules have more opportunities to take part in decision making than others. Finally, researcher and participant social norms are influenced by contextual factors and the history of science. Social-political climates in the United States often socialize people to act in accordance with social norms or narratives that are in the best interests of the “Haves” (Alinsky 1971; Wang et al. 1998). Additionally, most social science research is aligned with logical positivism (Morawski 1994). Community psychology in the United States is also embedded in this ontology (Fisher et al. 2007; Langhout 2006). In general, this framework incurs institutional support and assumes no community participation beyond subjects giving data. Because of the long history of logical positivism in social science research, many stakeholders assume a passive role and do not anticipate their own participation (Serrano-García 1990). This analysis implies that school power structures and social norms enable the participation of

some stakeholders in decision making while constraining that of others.

Unless community members believe that change can occur regarding power structures, it is improbable that those who face such boundaries will volunteer to participate in the research process because doing so would violate school policies regarding time and decision making, contextually established social norms, and their understanding of science (Serrano-García 1990; Wang et al. 1998). Even when community members are involved in the research process, they may become frustrated with the demand on their time and resources if they and others do not see the importance of their participation (Bond 1990; McMillan 1975). An unintentional consequence is that tensions between the social norms of the community and the egalitarian decision making model used by participatory action researchers often lead to community resistance (Juras et al. 1997; McMillan 1975; Serrano-García 1990; Wallerstein 1999). Although it may appear that PAR inherently creates opportunities for individuals and communities to affect decisions that will change their lives, in settings with no history of egalitarian participation in decision making, political mechanisms may limit such opportunities.

In most places where community psychologists work, asymmetrical power relations exist among community members (Wang et al. 1998) as well as between community members and researchers (Bond 1990; Langhout 2006; Serrano-García 1990; Selener 1998; Wallerstein 1999). The researcher therefore must be aware of relevant boundaries to participation and who has control over those boundaries. In this paper, we take an in-depth look at how the research team and the school stakeholders navigate the boundaries to participation, and work to create structures that enable control over these boundaries, thereby shifting power relations to be more egalitarian. In other words, we are examining second order change (Boyd and Angeliqne 2007), or change that alters relationships and is therefore theorized to be more systemic. We are interested in second order change among community members, but also as it relates to the community member-researcher relationship.

Several researchers have discussed how power must gradually shift from the researcher to the community (Greenwood et al. 1993; Selener 1998; Serrano-García 1990; Wallerstein 1999). Yet, with few exceptions (Wang et al. 1998; Wakeford and Pimbert 2004; Westby and Hwa-Froelich 2003) researchers have utilized PAR without writing about the power imbalances between researchers and community members. Additionally, there is almost no literature concerning how power relations among community members must be transformed. By claiming to be participatory when power differences exist, researchers may inadvertently cover up these asymmetries rather than working in solidarity to transform them (Bond 1990;

Wallerstein 1999). This paper aims to fill in some of these gaps by analyzing a project between a research team and an elementary school to understand: (1) the boundaries to participation faced by different groups of school stakeholders, (2) how the research team's understanding and use of PAR must adapt to these boundaries, and (3) whether PAR is emerging at Ruby Bridges Elementary School.¹

Method

Study Context

The research team—called the Community Psychology Research and Action Team (CPRAT)—consisted of a faculty member, two graduate students, and four undergraduates, all of whom worked at or attended Wesleyan University. Wesleyan University is an elite, small, expensive (tuition, room, and board tend to closely track U.S. median household income and were over \$42,000 during the year discussed in this paper [2004–2005]) liberal arts school that is characterized by its left wing politics and activism. According to the University's web page (<http://www.wesleyan.edu/admission/facts/index.html>), the majority of students and professors at Wesleyan are White (77% of students and 86% of faculty) and upper-class (58% of students receive no financial aid); however, the research team was comprised of members from diverse racial and socioeconomic groups. (The research team self-identified as 14% South Asian, 29% Biracial, and 57% White and 14% working poor, 29% working class, 29% lower middle class, and 29% upper middle class.) With respect to the socio-political climate around participation at Wesleyan, very little community-based research occurs, and even less participatory research takes place. Further, at university-wide faculty meetings, many have strongly voiced the opinion that faculty decision-making powers have eroded as power has been concentrated at the administrative levels.

This research was conducted at Ruby Bridges Elementary School. During the time of the project, approximately 250 students were enrolled. The school served children from the surrounding neighborhoods, which could be characterized as working class and working poor. Approximately 75% of the students were eligible for free or reduced price lunches, meaning that a majority of families had household incomes that fell well below the tuition, room, and board at Wesleyan University. The student body at Bridges was racially diverse (1% Asian American, 19% Latino/Hispanic, 40% African American/Black, and 40% White); however, the staff were mostly

¹ This name has been changed.

white women who did not live in the surrounding neighborhoods. The citywide community narrative held that this particular community participated minimally in city governance; however, there was a solid effort to increase community development and power through the organizing activities of a neighborhood group.

Background

This study describes the stakeholder participation in the determination of a school-based intervention, as facilitated by CPRAT. Our previous research experience with the school both provided a rationale for this intervention determination process and set the stage for how power relations played out during the study. This 4 year collaboration can be divided into three phases, which closely mirror PAR: problem definition (phase 1), determination of an intervention (phase 2), and implementation of an intervention (phase 3). This paper's focus is on phase 2. A PAR approach was adopted given the consistency between this paradigmatic approach and the issues that stakeholders raised during the problem definition phase of this collaboration. Additionally, consistent with the literature, we believed that the adoption of PAR would lead to more sustainable interventions (Singer and Weeks 2005), create conditions to facilitate the empowerment of children, parents, and school staff (Selener 1998; Sullivan et al. 2005), and would serve as an exemplar of how to make decisions in ways that were more participatory (Serrano-García 1990).

Phase 1 (problem definition) of our involvement with Ruby Bridges lasted 2 years. It began when a newly hired principal was quoted in a newspaper article saying that she was interested in pursuing a relationship with Wesleyan. In response, the faculty leader contacted the school. The principal invited the faculty member to work with the school on jointly-determined projects, and also asked her to serve on an advisory committee. The faculty member agreed and put together CPRAT. At a subsequent advisory meeting, parents, teachers, and the principal asked CPRAT to assess the overall school climate because parents thought that there was too much attention on discipline and behavior in the school, and teachers observed that student relationships were somewhat acrimonious. Both groups of stakeholders agreed that these issues were related to the social climate of the school. CPRAT created a climate survey, based on parent, teacher, and principal concerns as well as the literature on school climate. Next, we had parents, teachers, and students examine the survey, and then we made changes based on their input (for example, students wanted more questions about students fighting and starting rumors). Shortly thereafter, the climate survey was distributed to parents, staff, and students.

There were two main results from the climate study. The first was that the school structure tended to exclude many stakeholders (especially children and parents, and to some extent, teachers) from the school's decision making process. For example, students felt that teachers dedicated a significant amount of time to controlling student behavior and were divided as to whether students contributed to rule making (Langhout et al. 2004). Also, parents did not feel that they had any say over what happened in the school. Indeed, the fourth most common change requested by parents in the write-in section of the survey dealt with increasing ways for parents to get involved (e.g., "try new strategies-[take] suggestions from parents"). Some stakeholders not only felt excluded from the decision making process, but also from basic communication (e.g., "I would like to see more communication from teacher to parents," and "better communication between administration and staff."). A last point related to this main finding was that school staff responded neutrally on almost all scales of the climate survey, a result that may indicate that they did not feel comfortable voicing objections or opinions (Langhout et al. 2004). These findings indicated that, like most other schools in the United States, the social-political climate of Ruby Bridges Elementary did not facilitate a more consensus-based model of governance where criticism and discussion are encouraged and where all stakeholders are involved in the process of making decisions. This finding is particularly problematic given that staff and parents indicated a desire for increased communication and participation.

The second main result (though not as overwhelmingly endorsed as the first) was that multiple stakeholders viewed student relationships with one another and with the recess aides as challenging, indicating that recess was a difficult time given that this was the most unstructured time of the school day. On the survey, scales related to student interactions and their relationships with recess aides were skewed such that many more students viewed these relationships as negative rather than positive. On a write-in section of the survey, where students could write two things that they would like to change about their school, the fourth most common response was about peer relationships (e.g., "have nicer kids" and "all the fights that happen"). For parents, the most common write-in issue was the need for personnel changes, with a significant number of comments related to recess staff (e.g., "recess teachers," and "supervision on the playground"). For school staff, the second most common write-in problem was related to discipline (e.g., "student arguing"). Overall, all stakeholders viewed student to student and student to recess aide interactions as less than ideal.

CPRAT made several recommendations based on the findings of the climate survey. One recommendation

included working with students and recess aides to develop more positive relationships (Langhout et al. 2004). Over a fourth of the report recommendations, however, focused on increasing stakeholders' participation in decision making at the school. For example, CPRAT suggested that students be included in the decision making process and that the school "develop ways parents can be more involved in school planning" (Langhout et al. 2004). In addition, the research team explained some benefits of community participation: student participation leads to increased sense of autonomy and parent participation is associated with better student performance. From the beginning, CPRAT encouraged community members to imagine other ways power could be arranged in the school and suggested alternative approaches.

With the hiring of a new principal a year and a half later, roles were renegotiated. This principal decided that CPRAT would focus on recess because of the climate survey results concluding that more positive relationships among students should be a goal, as well as her personal assessment that recess was an area that could be improved (Langhout et al. 2004; Langhout and Dworski-Riggs 2004). Initially, the principal had simply asked CPRAT to create a recess intervention. Given the school climate report recommendation that more stakeholders should be involved in the decision making process at the school, we asked the principal if we could instead ask students and recess monitors what was going well at recess, as well as what changes could make recess more positive for everyone. She agreed to this paradigm shift. Before proceeding, CPRAT conducted playground observations given that we had never been to recess and therefore did not know much about it. The results from these observations and subsequent focus groups with students and recess monitors were compiled in a Recess Report (Langhout and Dworski-Riggs 2004). We hoped the report would further understanding of the problem definition and serve as a springboard for change.

Thus began phase 2 of this collaboration: talking with all stakeholder groups (i.e., students, parents, and school staff) about potential recess interventions that would address the aforementioned problem definitions—student negative relationships with peers and recess aides, as well as more open participation and decision-making structures. For staff, these conversations happened at staff meetings and through short questionnaires. Parent dialogues occurred during PTA meetings, coffee groups, in the hallway during parent teacher conferences, and through short questionnaires. Student small group discussions were held during indoor recess. These methods of communication were selected in order to ensure multiple routes for stakeholder participation and because it became clear that single efforts to reach out to all stakeholders were not sufficient. Because of these multiple venues for dialogue, phase 2

lasted 1 year. This phase serves as the basis for the analysis of this manuscript. Phase 3 lasted 1 year and included the implementation of the interventions agreed to in phase 2 of this research project.

Procedure

A content analysis was used to further investigate the process of determining and planning a school intervention and the roles of stakeholders in this process. A variety of materials were coded including fieldnotes taken by the research team (one professor, two graduate students, and four undergraduate research assistants), e-mails among the research team, questionnaires sent out by the research team, and flyers and newsletters from the school. Fieldnotes were taken in accord with the methods outlined in Emerson et al. (1995); they were descriptive and usually written within 48 h. Additionally, fieldnotes often ended with a more analytic entry (set apart) that detailed the researcher's impressions and ideas about what had happened. These materials covered the 2004–2005 academic year.

In order to analyze these materials, several steps were followed in accord with a content analysis and grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1995; Emerson et al. 1995). First, all the materials were read in one sitting. Questions such as: "What is going on?", "What are people doing and saying?", "What are they trying to accomplish?" and "What assumptions are being made?" were asked in order to understand the actions, statements, and perspectives of stakeholders. This pre-coding stage allows the researcher to examine the data and the researcher's social location and position in more depth and detail. Second, an open coding (i.e., generating as many themes as possible) was conducted through a line-by-line coding. Memos were also developed to trace issues and areas that were repeating. The third step was a focused coding, where actions and events were summarized into themes—based on raw data, researcher notes and memos—to gain a better understanding of all the materials (Charmaz 1995; Emerson et al. 1995). Next, based on the focused coding, the first author, in consultation with the second author, created a codebook. The codebook was designed to, among other things, investigate stakeholder groups' (i.e., students, parents, teachers, school administration, and the research team) participation, process of decision making, agency, and structural aspects of the school and research team (such as policies and procedures); these are the codes drawn upon in this paper. Finally, two research team members who were not involved in Phase 2 of the project coded the materials using the codebook. Inter-rater reliability—as determined through Cohen's Kappa—was 78% across all nine codes, which is acceptable agreement (Burke and Dunlop 2002). Final codes were assigned only if both coders had agreed

on the code. See Table 1 for the codes that apply to this paper.

Current Study

This study focuses on a 1 year period, when CPRAT discussed the recess report with the community and collectively planned an intervention. In line with a participatory approach, our efforts focused on working with the community to evaluate alternative interventions, choose at least one of those interventions, plan the intervention, and (in phase 3) implement it. The intervention choices were determined from a list of possible actions or programs that were generated by children or that were consistent with their recommendations and based in previous research.

Results

This study seeks to examine the power relations among stakeholders during this intervention planning stage. We examine the boundaries that facilitate or constrain stakeholders' opportunities to participate in decision making through an analysis of school policies about decision-making and how time is structured, as well as by examining social norms. Throughout this analysis, we reflect upon whether these boundaries cause tension with the PAR framework, what researchers can do to adapt PAR to be relevant given the existing boundaries and how researchers can encourage community members to move toward a critical or liberating analysis of power structures (Serrano-García 1990). Finally, we assess whether community

Table 1 Sections of the code book

Code	Definition	Example
School policies		
Decision making structure	A system of authority which requires permission and supervision of "superiors" and may therefore displace behavioral responsibility	A parent commented that more volunteers are needed to "watch kids much closer" Principal needs superintendent's approval for us to send out reports & questionnaires to parents
Structural resources	Stakeholders do or do not feel constrained by a lack of funding, staff, time, or materials	At the staff meeting PI felt pressured not to take up too much time Parents agreed that "recess was understaffed"
Social norms of participation		
Participation	Stakeholders demonstrate or do not demonstrate the desire for themselves or others to be to be active, involved members of programs, committees, or other venues associated with the research project	Students volunteer to be game leaders and peer mediators
Supportive actions	Though not working from within the structures of the research project, stakeholders contribute to the efforts of the project	"It was agreed that the PTA would allocate \$200 for playground supplies"
Decision making	Stakeholders view themselves and/or others in an authoritative role, with the ability to make decisions. Or Stakeholders do not view themselves and/or others as an authority and are hesitant to make decisions or take a leadership role	"No parents voiced objections to the recommendations" A staff member commented that students "are too young to be involved in the decision of how recess is run"
Agency	Stakeholders do or do not view themselves as having information, commodities or other assets that they feel are valuable to the research project	Parents suggest that they loan the school movies Students suggest movies they want to watch
Awareness	Stakeholders do or do not feel a need to be informed about the research project	"A parent asked me what else we were doing for parents to <i>hear about the results</i> "
Culture of the school		
Markers of success for the research project	How do stakeholders define and refer to success? What are their goals for the project?	Principal says that recess is going much better because the number of office referrals decreased PI wrote that the parent teacher conferences were a "huge success" b/c over 50 parents stopped, talked, requested more info. and "expressed some interest in staying involved"

Stakeholders (denote the stakeholder for each coded piece of data): a. parents, b. students, c. staff (Recess aides and teachers), d. principal, e. superintendent, f. research team

members are increasing their participation in decision making over time.

Research Questions 1 and 2: What are the boundaries to participation faced by different groups of school stakeholders, and how does the research team's understanding and use of PAR adapt to these boundaries?

School Policies

The Role of Permission in Decision Making

School policies required that certain stakeholders, such as the principal and superintendent, make final decisions. Obviously, the research project, which took place in the school, was embedded in these boundaries. A result is that the vast majority—approximately 75%—of decisions about the research project were made by the principal.² Although we see this as a step in the direction of being more consistent with PAR (in that the research team was not making most of the decisions), PAR necessitates that all stakeholders help to make decisions, not only those who have been granted institutional power. Of all the groups of stakeholders, CPRAT asked for permission most frequently; approximately 70% of requests for permission were made by the research team. One example clearly illustrates this point. CPRAT made the full recess report available to parents when they signed up to receive a copy of it. As the research team was preparing to mail the reports, we sent a copy of the questionnaire that would go out with the report to the principal. Our intention was to give her the form for her information, so that she knew what we were mailing to parents.

I sent the [questionnaire] to [the] principal on Friday and she said that the superintendent would have to approve it. I asked if that was necessary given that the parents gave me their addresses and that it was coming in the mail from me. [The] principal said that yes, it was necessary, and that the superintendent liked to review all materials that go home, regardless of who they are from. (fieldnote 12.6.04)

This situation demonstrates how, like at most schools, the hierarchy of governance at Ruby Bridges extended beyond the principal and even beyond the school walls to include upper-level administrators such as the superintendent. Even the field of action of more powerful stakeholders—like the

research team and school principal—were limited by boundaries, including school policy.

This hierarchical structure of governance created some tensions when trying to engage in PAR. Indeed, though parents had directly requested the recess information, the research team sought and waited for permission in order to respect the situation of the principal and the system of governance at the school. Having to get permission from the superintendent to send information to parents (even though they had requested it and it was coming from a professor at Wesleyan University, in a Wesleyan University envelope, on Wesleyan letterhead, and with Wesleyan postage) may have changed the nature of what was communicated to parents by CPRAT, either at this time or in the future. This dynamic of possibly censoring what is communicated may also affect school personnel. These kinds of procedures may inhibit communication rather than increase opportunities for open dialogue required by PAR.

In addition to seeking permission before communicating with parents, CPRAT was also sensitive to this hierarchy of permission granting as it related to communicating with students and teachers. Specifically, the research team included the recommendation to discuss results with students on the staff and parent questionnaires (Questionnaire 10.20.04). Also, the principal first approved any materials that went out to teachers. Thus, we worked within existing power structures by allowing select groups to have control over the participation of other stakeholders.

Time, Scheduling, and Power

Policies regarding time served as boundaries to participation in decision making. Examining meeting schedules alone demonstrates how the opportunity to participate in decision making depended on the “expert role” of the stakeholder. The CPRAT and the principal had ample time allocated for meeting with various groups, the “professional” staff met only once a month and the “non-professional” staff did not meet at all. Students had biweekly town hall meetings, but CPRAT did not attend enough of these meetings to get a sense of whether the power relations or boundaries at these meetings differed from the rest of the school.

Few stakeholders had enough control over their schedules to circumvent time structures because of policies that governed their work. For example, teachers' schedules were constrained by school and union regulations, making it almost impossible for them to meet outside of the monthly staff meeting. In contrast, the community-based school social worker, who was hired by an outside organization, was able to set her schedule and could make time for assemblies, trainings, and meetings at almost any time of the day. Although policy required her to meet with a

² This percentage was determined by adding up how many times decisions were made about the research project, as indicated by the data collected (denominator), and then comparing this to the number of times each stakeholder group made a decision (numerator). The same procedure was followed for determining requests for permission, but with permission requests as the variable of interest.

certain number of students individually, she was able to renegotiate her time to be able to work with CPRAT. These power asymmetries, rooted in policy and time, made it difficult to utilize a participatory process of including all stakeholders in the research project.

The research team adapted to these boundaries in order to facilitate increased stakeholder participation. For example, although staff meetings did not include the entire staff, the research team presented the results of the recess report at this venue as a first step in disseminating results and intervention planning because this was the only meeting where the majority of school staff was present. During this meeting “CPRAT had been left off of the meeting agenda, but the principal said that we should stay and she’d squeeze us in” (fieldnote 10.12.04). By the time the principal got to the end of the agenda, the faculty member only had 15 min to describe the results and begin a discussion. Her fieldnote reads, “during the presentation I went kind of fast because I was feeling pressured not to take up too much time” (fieldnote 10.12.04). Even when teachers did have time for meetings, the way the meetings themselves were structured did not allow for shared decision making. Although there was enough time for the staff to be given information, the staff was not able to engage with that information and use it to make decisions about how to improve their school. Thus, staff meetings constrained the staff’s ability to participate in decision making, and thereby restricted their power in the school.

Like the teachers’ days, the children’s school days were strictly scheduled, making it difficult to meet with them. CPRAT wanted to hold a meeting to discuss the recess report and recommendations with students. It was suggested that CPRAT speak at the monthly town hall meeting that was run by a group of fifth graders. CPRAT, however, was concerned that we would “be taking away 5th grade time” (email 12.13.04) given the town meeting agenda was determined by a few fifth graders. Rather than taking over the meeting, the research team brainstormed other options with the principal, and decided to meet with the children in small groups during indoor recess days (when they would otherwise be watching a movie). Although this model took considerably longer, the research team felt this was a better plan so that the children could maintain more control over their town meeting time. Additionally, students may have been more willing to speak up in small groups as opposed to talking in front of the entire school. Also, most children were happy to talk about recess rather than sit on the floor and watch a movie they had already seen countless times. Indeed, the following focus group transcript (from phase 1 of this research project) shows a common response regarding indoor recess:

Researcher: Can you tell me more about when you get bored [at recess]?

Child 2: I don’t know.

Child 3: When you watch movies [for indoor recess].

Child 2: When you watch movies, definitely.

Child 3: That you already saw and don’t want to watch.

Child 2: I don’t want to watch *Winnie the Pooh*.

Researcher: So you are more bored at indoor recess?

All children together: Yes

Child 1: I fall asleep during the baby movies.

The tight control of time was a boundary that limited students’ participation in intervention planning. CPRAT needed to be flexible in figuring out how to engage students in a dialogue around recess interventions.

Throughout the project, tensions arose between these boundaries to participation and the goal of PAR: the encouragement of an egalitarian contribution of all stakeholders in decision making. The way time was allocated at Ruby Bridges did not allow for meaningful discussions about different aspects of how recess was run and therefore posed a challenge for using a more participatory model. Furthermore, certain stakeholders had more control over their time and therefore more power in the decision making process than others. In some cases, as with the staff meeting, the research team worked within these hierarchical power structures in order to get “our foot in the door.” In other cases, as with the student focus groups, CPRAT worked with the school to create new spaces for discussion in order to promote shared decision making.

Social Norms

Social norms and perspectives about who could make decisions also represented boundaries to participation. Consistent with previous research, we concluded that the school’s social norms regarding decision making discouraged most community members from participating (Wang et al. 1998). Although it may have appeared that CPRAT created opportunities for stakeholders to make decisions about the research project, these opportunities were in fact constrained by local social norms.

Stakeholders who were thought, a priori, to have a greater ability to make decisions had more power over the research project. Indeed, the capacity of students to participate in decision making at all was questioned. This perspective on knowledge—and the resultant power asymmetries—is at odds with participatory research. PAR is founded on the assumption that all knowledge, including experiential and community knowledge, is necessary and power asymmetries should be small or non-existent

whenever possible. The research team had to continuously discern whether it was appropriate to challenge these social norms.

Staff

Early on in the project it was clear that only a select group of staff members (namely the principal and superintendent) were accustomed to making decisions regarding the school. These social norms influenced participation in the research project. The majority of the staff were supportive of the project, but were not inclined to make decisions about it. The following fieldnote illuminates how social norms affected staff participation in the research project from the very first meeting.

The first part of the meeting consisted of the principal relaying large amounts of information to the school staff. Two other guests were there to talk about a school-wide volunteer program and the current building construction. Near the end of the allotted time, the principal said that I would give a report back to the teachers about recess. I clarified that I also wanted to get the staffs' feedback. I was able to share the recess report findings, but the staff did not contribute any suggestions or critiques when asked... The staff seemed to be listening but not really interacting with the material. There were no questions, comments, or ideas. (fieldnote 10.12.04)

The social norm that the expert researcher was there to give information to the staff limited the staff's opportunity to make decisions about the future of the project. This norm was enacted by the principal but also enforced by the school staff. Indeed, this portion of the staff meeting looked no different from the other parts, with the expert (and only the expert) relaying information.

In response to the dearth of bidirectional discussions, CPRAT put questionnaires in the mailboxes of every staff member asking for their reactions to the suggestions and possible interventions. CPRAT used the questionnaire as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of the staffs' knowledge and their ability to contribute to the project. The faculty leader explained that, "because time was limited at the meeting, I was unable to get much feedback from you regarding the recommendations" and that "our group is interested in your opinion as a professional" (Questionnaire 10.20.04). By using the questionnaire, CPRAT hoped to create a contextually sensitive opportunity for them to take part in decision making.

The research team's efforts did increase participation, but not to the level that we had hoped. Twelve of the 50 staff members returned questionnaires, but none of them wanted to be involved in further intervention planning

(fieldnote 10.12.04; Questionnaire 10.20.04). One reason for the kind of responses we received may have been that teachers and other school staff—such as recess monitors and janitors—do not normally take part in decision making or school-wide interventions and therefore do not see it as their role or responsibility to do so. A staff member's comment supports this hypothesis. After the meeting she said that she "looked forward to [the research teams'] next steps" (fieldnote 10.12.04). This comment suggests that even though the staff member was interested in and supportive of the project, she did not necessarily consider that she might become more involved.

Overall, it appears that staff members behaved in ways that indicated that they viewed their social reality as fixed. They were therefore supportive and encouraging of the project, but did not act in ways that indicated that it was their role to make decisions regarding what their students did at recess. Their low level of participation was likely related to how staff meetings were run (teachers received information only), union regulations (teachers have specified roles and duties), and how they viewed their role in school (as responsible for the classroom). These structural constraints, which heavily influence social norms, come together in a specific way that makes it difficult for teachers and other staff to redefine the boundaries of their participation and therefore more fully participate in and make decisions about recess.

Parents

Like the staff, parents did express interest, support, and enthusiasm for the project, but their behavior indicated that they did not see it as their role to plan an intervention. Rather, it seems that parents envisioned information being shared unidirectionally: from the expert researcher to them as recipients. A comment of the PTA president, arguably the most powerful parent in the school, gives voice to this social norm. "The PTA President told me [the faculty leader] that she was glad I would give the information to other parents" (fieldnote 10.18.04). Parents liked the idea that they and other parents were aware of what was happening. Consistent with the school climate survey results, parents did not have much control over school-related decisions, and the sharing of information was in and of itself considered progress in terms of parent involvement. Efforts of the research team to include parents in decision making were limited by these social norms and school boundaries to participation.

Throughout the project, CPRAT's parent outreach efforts were fraught with challenges and parent response to our outreach efforts indicated that most parents wanted to be informed about the project, but not actively involved in decision making. Over a period of a few months, the

research team was available to discuss the research project and encourage increased participation at multiple venues in order to reach as many parents as possible. In addition to presenting at the monthly PTA meeting, the principal set up a parent coffee night dedicated solely to discussing the recess report, mostly because CPRAT had told the principal that we were not yet satisfied with outreach efforts. We asked the principal if we could call parents to publicize the parent coffee, and we were told that we could not because “the [parent] list...was confidential information” (fieldnote 10.12.04). Instead, the principal and a staff member brainstormed names of parents who they thought might be interested. “They came up with two names and [the staff member] agreed to contact them” (fieldnote 10.12.04). Although there were over 120 parents at the school, only two parents were contacted regarding the recess report. The PTA meeting and parent coffee were sparsely attended. CPRAT still wanted to reach out to more parents. Based on a staff member’s suggestion, we sought and obtained permission to set up a table at Parent-Teacher Conferences. We targeted this event because “turnout is usually about 100%” (fieldnote 10.12.04). At the parent teacher conferences, “over 50 parents [about 40% of the parent population] stopped and talked with me, requested more information about recess and expressed some interest in keeping informed about recess” (fieldnote 12.3.04). We considered this to be a very high level of interest given that we had been told by more than one staff member that parents would likely be uninterested.

Along with sending parents the research report, they received a questionnaire asking for further recommendations, their alternative ideas, and inviting their further involvement. Based on our multiple outreach efforts, sixty parents requested more information; of those, eight returned the questionnaire and six wanted to become more involved. This level of interest and questionnaire return rate illustrates that most community members wanted information regarding what was happening with the research project, but they did not view it as their role to interpret the information gathered or plan an intervention. The level of parent interest in planning and implementation is strikingly discordant with the school climate survey results. The survey indicated that parents had little role in decision making and that they viewed recess as an area that needed changing. The CPRAT offer opened a door to decision making and recess change. Given parent interest and desire for change, it is notable yet not surprising (based on their historic exclusion from decision making and social norms) that parents seemed to experience this boundary as fixed regarding decision making about the recess intervention.

Yet, let us not forget about those six parents who wanted to become more involved. Unfortunately, their

participation never came to fruition. Although CPRAT had wanted parents to be involved and the principal approved the questionnaire sent to the parents, the principal ultimately did not want to include the parents until the intervention was running smoothly. At this point in the school year, forty to fifty percent of the teachers were on maternity leave. The principal did not wish to pursue parent involvement at that time because the school was in a state of flux and she felt that the transition was enough to manage (email 4.1.04). This example illustrates how the principal, not the parents, had control over the boundaries to parents’ participation.

Not involving parents in the planning phase may have been frustrating for those who wanted to participate in designing and implementing the program. Furthermore, it may have undermined CPRAT’s message that we valued parents’ skills and knowledge. Unfortunately this turn of events may make those parents reluctant to participate in the future. This exclusion also meant that parents did not have input into determining the intervention or how it was designed; the intervention therefore was potentially less contextually relevant and conditions were not created that might have facilitated the empowerment of parents. Despite these consequences, the research team decided not to push the issue any further, claiming that “I think all we can do is make our suggestions and then support [the community] the best we can in the way they choose to do it...” (email 4.1.04). In the interest of maintaining our relationship with the principal and continuing our work with the school, we decided to work within the hierarchy of the school and not challenge the principal’s control over the participation (or non-participation) of other stakeholders.

Students

Students were involved in decision making about the intervention, but to a limited extent. As mentioned earlier, we held focus groups where students discussed the results of the recess report. These discussions were successful in terms of students evaluating potential interventions; however, the school community did not attribute this success to the students. On the contrary, community members linked the success of the project to CPRAT’s skill and presence. For example, a staff member who had witnessed part of a student focus group attributed their success to the research team’s acumen at interviewing children, stating that the research team was “particularly skilled at getting the kids to talk” (fieldnote 10.12.04.). Also, the principal felt that “outdoor recess [was] going much better”—even before the intervention was implemented—because at recess, CPRAT modeled good behavior and helped watch students (fieldnote 10.12.04). Multiple community members

indicated that the mere presence of the research team was improving the school even though the intervention was still in the planning stage. Although this may be true, this perspective places the ownership and responsibility for the project in the hands of CPRAT. Alternatively, the stakeholders' statements about success indicate their appreciation for CPRAT's work and their desire for this work to be recognized by others. Of course, there is nothing wrong with commending the ability of CPRAT, as long as the positive sentiment expressed is used to create more excitement about the project, rather than to diminish the community's ownership over the project.

Unfortunately, dominant social norms of who can make decisions, coupled with their emphasis on the expertise of CPRAT, suggests that the community members might not think that they can or should take part in decision making. This is especially true in the case of how students were viewed. On a questionnaire, a staff member directly questioned the capacity of students to take part in the decision making process, arguing that "students need to be given directions. They are too young to be involved in the decision of how recess is run" (Questionnaire 10.20.04). In general, students had the least control over the boundaries to their action. As the students indicated in their school climate surveys, they did not make many decisions about the school. It is therefore not surprising that their capacity to make decisions about the intervention was called into question.

In response, CPRAT attempted to introduce an alternative narrative that emphasized the importance of student participation. When suggesting the peer mediation program (one intervention discussed in the recess report), CPRAT stated that it would "use children as resources for an under-resourced area" (Questionnaire 10.20.04) and pointed out that "[CPRAT] has resources, and can help out, but we don't have all the skills for some pieces" (fieldnote 3.3.05). While validating our own skills and knowledge, we made it clear that the community had important resources to bring to the collaboration and that their participation in decision making was necessary. In the parent and staff questionnaire, CPRAT wrote that we wanted "this project to be something the entire school community can endorse" and "feel positive about" (Questionnaire 12.6.04). CPRAT also did not "want to make changes if students don't like our ideas or don't think they will work" (fieldnote 1.16.05). CPRAT's assumptions about factors necessary for success communicated our belief that all community members, including students, should be a part of the decision making process.

CPRAT

Evidence from multiple community members suggests that they viewed CPRAT as experts who should be in charge of

choosing and planning the intervention. For example, in a flyer going home to parents (and created by a parent) describing the upcoming PTA meeting, the CPRAT faculty leader was described as a "special guest" (although she had been attending PTA meetings regularly) who would "discuss her extensive work with" Ruby Bridges Elementary (Flyer 11.9.2004). This flyer was the parent's understanding of the event after a conversation where the faculty member said that the purpose of the meeting was to have an open discussion with the parents regarding the recess initiative. After the PTA meeting, an article was written in the PTA newsletter entitled "Professor Langhout and the Recess Initiative" (Newsletter 12.2004). These documents and conversations portrayed the research project as following the logical positivist model of research in which the researchers have almost absolute power over the research rather than the participatory approach we were attempting to utilize and had explained several times. In other words, the research team was seen as highly capable and therefore deserving of ample power over the research project despite CPRAT's continual efforts to be more inclusive and participatory.

The Intervention

In the end, the discussions and questionnaires indicated that the majority of the community endorsed many possible recess interventions. With the community's stamp of approval, yet relative reluctance in getting involved with intervention planning and implementation, CPRAT and the principal decided to proceed with several recommendations. The main intervention was the implementation of a peer mediation program that would train a group of elementary school students to resolve conflicts on the playground. The research team met with the principal and the school community social worker—the two staff members who wanted to get involved—to plan the intervention.

The peer mediation program was one way that empowerment and second order change were initiated. Peer mediation is based on the belief that students are better at detecting and resolving conflicts than adults (Cunningham et al. 1998). This theory validates students' ability to improve their environment, views students as resources, and changes the relationship among students and between adult recess monitors and some students, thus facilitating second order change. At Ruby Bridges, multiple stakeholders felt that there was a custodial climate and a "culture of telling" (Langhout et al. 2004; Langhout and Dworski-Riggs 2004). The peer mediation program gave students the skills and training to take responsibility for their own behavior and take more control of their recess time. Furthermore, the way the program was run allowed students to guide the project. For example, most peer

mediation policy was created by the mediators as part of their training. With the initiation of the peer mediation program, elementary school students, as well as a few school staff, were making decisions about recess.

Research Question 3: Is PAR emerging at Ruby Bridges Elementary School?

Future Participation

Is participatory action research emerging? We answer this with a tepid yes. Data from a number of sources indicate that a few stakeholders were voicing their desire to change boundaries to participation to be more inclusive. With respect to the peer mediation program, some parents felt “the diversity of students at the school was a positive” and supported the selection of a racially and ethnically diverse group of mediators (fieldnote 10.18.04). In regards to participation, one parent expressed her support of children’s participation in the project, stating that it “might be more successful if everyone can have a part in it...so that all children can feel responsible and helpful” (Questionnaire 12.6.04). The principal echoed this sentiment by saying that she “wanted to turn the school over to the children” (Feinstein and Langhout 2004). Awareness of unequal power structures has been theorized to be among the first steps toward liberation (Serrano-García 1994). Thus, if community members and researchers continue to critique and challenge power asymmetries, second order change has a greater chance of following.

In fact, there is some evidence that our work with Ruby Bridges was becoming more participatory. For example, the school community social worker asked the research team to assist her in starting a school-wide anti-bullying program and the school nurse asked for help with a program dedicated to promoting a healthier lifestyle for all school children. These individuals self-identified problems based on their experiences in the school and proposed universal or primary prevention programs as solutions. Further conversations with the school community social worker indicated that she was open to using a consensus model for the intervention by creating forums for parents to discuss issues of interest to them using deliberative dialogue (Becker et al. 1995), or addressing bullying by leading students in conducting a participatory action research project where the students would be the action researchers. Following phase 2 of this project, the school community social worker partnered with us to implement a peer mediation program and lobbied the principal to ensure that the peer mediators set the peer mediation program policies and procedures. Indeed, students met regularly to fine-tune the peer mediation policies and procedures that governed the program. Students also met with recess aides

to discuss how the two groups could work together in a more effective way. These actions illustrate the mutable nature of the boundaries to participation.

These examples demonstrate the beginnings of a more embodied participatory model; the school nurse and social worker had to renegotiate school policies, challenge social norms about their roles in the school, create spaces that challenged the social norms and decision-making process as they applied to students and parents, and include other stakeholders in the determination of the problem definition, the solution, and the implementation of the solution. Such changes suggest that at least some school stakeholders were acting to rearrange power boundaries within the school by creating spaces that challenge power asymmetries. These changes imply that more stakeholders are gaining a little more control over boundaries to power at Ruby Bridges Elementary, that power asymmetries can wane (at least for some stakeholders, which can have a ripple effect if those stakeholders then implement programs that are more participatory in nature), and that second order change can occur, even if it is in very small steps. Yet, it is disconcerting to note that those who had worked to change the boundaries of participation were also those who were outside of the formal school hierarchy (the school nurse and social worker are both employed by a community health center, not the school district). As the boundaries to participation change, the style of the research team must also change. In this case, the community psychologists must become less directive and allow other stakeholders to take ownership and responsibility for their projects so that PAR continues to grow and strengthen.

Discussion

In communities or organizations where shared decision making is not the norm, PAR should be seen as an intervention that must challenge boundaries to participation and thereby create conditions that foster empowerment and initiate second order change. An important aspect of the entry phase of PAR is creating structures that will facilitate participation (Serrano-García 1990). Yet, as with all interventions, PAR should be “responsive to community needs and norms” (Harper et al. 2004, p. 193) and, therefore, the structures that best facilitate participation will vary from setting to setting (Bond 1990). As our story shows, researchers must adopt the structure of PAR to the community.

Boundaries to Participation

In order to utilize relevant approaches, researchers must first understand the power structure of the setting. Our

results indicate that power asymmetries do exist among stakeholders. Indeed, mechanisms of power such as school policies regarding decision making and time as well as social norms facilitate the participation of some stakeholders, but limit the participation of the majority of the school community. In accordance with Hayward's (2000) theory, we believe that the power of all actors is constrained by structural forces, but some actors face more constraints than others.

The low level of participation by many stakeholders is difficult to interpret. It may indicate that they did not believe in a participatory system of governance or that they were generally disinterested in the recess interventions and did not see their involvement in this project as being a pathway to empowerment. This second interpretation would be consistent with a study examining employees at a large human service organization (Foster-Fishman et al. 1998). These employees viewed their empowerment as being related to issues such as their level of autonomy, knowledge, and the respect afforded to them. On the other hand, employees did not view their empowerment as being related to participation in organizational decision making. The majority of employees worked at sites where they were actively discouraged from this kind of participation; subsequently, they said that decision making was not important and instead signaled other pathways to their empowerment. Yet, even in this research, employees did see participation in organizational decision making as important for their empowerment if they worked at the one site where this was encouraged (Forster-Fishman et al. 1998). Therefore, employees believed that participation in organizational decision making was important to empowerment when this opportunity was available.

CPRAT encouraged participation in decision making, and this school context was one where decision making and recess were concerns of all stakeholders. It is therefore likely that stakeholders viewed their participation as a route to empowerment and were interested in recess interventions, to at least some degree. Indeed, stakeholders directly remarked on the importance of diversity and inclusion. Further, parents would not have advocated for greater student involvement in a recess intervention if decision making was not viewed as an important path to empowerment. Additionally, the stakeholders who were involved with the research project agreed that participation was important (at least theoretically). Finally, a few stakeholders were designing programs that were more participatory in nature. For these reasons, we find it more likely that school policies and social norms created boundaries that limited participation in decision making, rather than disinterest. Yet, we also conclude that pathways to empowerment were influenced by school policies and procedures, thus meaning that there were differing views

on pathways to empowerment. Therefore, the research team changed tactics and proceeded cautiously by working within the existing system while simultaneously trying to promote discussion and reflection about the community's involvement in decision making.

Adapting PAR Based on Boundaries to Participation

Given that the power asymmetries within the broader community conflict with the participatory model PAR advocates, a dynamic emergent PAR model is necessary. As with any intervention, creating participatory research must be supported by the community. Although community psychologists believe that PAR is consistent with our values and our emphasis on empowerment and social justice, researchers should not assume that the community shares the same perspective. It would be ideal if every person participated fully in action research, but this is not a realistic outcome given differing individual interests and contexts. Although PAR seems to implicitly hold that researchers should get each and every community member to participate equally in the action research project, a more realistic goal, and one that is consistent with Hayward's power theory, is to facilitate access of all community members to participate—as they see fit—in the action research project. The community psychologist can facilitate this access so that community members develop a more critical understanding of power asymmetries and the boundaries to their participation. This strategy requires critical awareness and reflexivity on the part of the community psychologist so that lower than desired levels of participation by certain stakeholder groups is not naturalized by the community psychologist. In fact, it may lead to a poorly executed PAR project if the community psychologist stops trying to find contextually appropriate ways to facilitate access for all community members, especially those belonging to historically excluded groups.

Researchers should be attuned to the boundaries stakeholders face and create suitable ways for community members to participate (Bond 1990; Westby and Hwa-Froelich 2003). One way for researchers to be more sensitive to the boundaries to participation without scrapping the shared decision making model is to reconsider their role. Gutkin (1999) argues against the dichotomization of researcher roles into expert and collaborator, and proposes two dimensions to a researcher's leadership style: coercive/collaborative and directive/non-directive. This approach allows researchers to gear their style to the social norms of the stakeholders, while still allowing the community to have the final say. It is also important to conceptualize leadership style as dynamic so that as community members challenge boundaries around decision making, researchers become less directive.

In order to modify PAR to be relevant in the school setting, CPRAT was flexible and accommodating, complied with school policies, and used a directive leadership style. When working with community members who did not see themselves as decision makers, a collaborative directive leadership style seemed to be the best fit at that particular moment in time. In many ways CPRAT filled the role of “expert” researcher that the community expected. We presented our recommendations based on data we had collected and analyzed. We were also heavily involved in decision making about the project, often offering our advice based on our understanding of stakeholder values, our research (the Recess Report), or other literature we had read. By acting as technical consultants we were able to disseminate relevant information for the school that otherwise might not be accessible to them. At the same time, by conducting the research ourselves, we did not teach the community our skills and we did not learn as much from them. Nevertheless, given the boundaries to participation the community faced, we decided that this strategy was a good compromise. While still allowing all stakeholders to contribute, this approach avoided forcing community members into a role they were not yet willing to assume.

The research team struggled with how directive we should be when working with different stakeholders. If the researcher is unassertive, community members may become frustrated with their roles and the slow rate of progress. Yet if the researcher is too directive, community members will not have a sense of ownership or control over the project. At times CPRAT was too directive. For instance, we pushed hard for parent involvement even though school staff were uncertain about the idea. Perhaps if we had listened attentively to the staff’s concerns rather than pushing a more participatory agenda, we could have avoided soliciting parent involvement and thereby potentially undermining our efforts to build trusting relationships. On the other hand, it could be argued that we were not directive enough given the expert role that many stakeholders wanted us to take. More research needs to be done to determine when researchers should use a directive approach and how directive they should be.

Although we changed our PAR approach, we did not abandon it. CPRAT still promoted the ideals of participatory action research, as can be seen by our efforts to involve community members in the process of making decisions as well as through multiple attempts to send the message to the community that we valued their skills and knowledge. Based on the theory of small wins, as community members participate in change efforts, even in limited ways, they gain skills, knowledge, and self-confidence in their ability to influence the conditions that affect their lives (Alinsky 1971; Serrano-García 1990; Weick

1986). Thus, limited participation may sow the seeds of empowerment, second order change, and may also give participants the confidence to challenge boundaries to their participation, allowing them to engage more actively in decision making. In addition, once researchers build relationships with community members, they can engage together in critically reflecting on existing social norms and power structures (Juras et al. 1997). Therefore, researchers must be attuned to mechanisms of power within local contexts so that they can create opportunities for participation and also encourage the community to evaluate their own power structures.

PAR and Ruby Bridges Elementary School

As our results show, it appears that this strategy is beginning to bear fruit, albeit extremely slowly. Both the school nurse and social worker challenged existing power boundaries by approaching the research team with school-wide initiatives that they wanted to lead. It is important to note, however, that neither the school nurse nor the social worker were typical community members in the school. These two staff members may also inhabit liminal spaces; both work at the school but are not employed by the school. Additionally, they are two highly educated stakeholders. In fact, the principal, social worker, and school nurse could be viewed as holding a great deal of power in the school. We feel slightly conflicted, therefore, that these are the people who have taken up PAR as a possibility given the intention of PAR. Because people with expert knowledge are seen as more competent decision makers at the school, it may be easier for specialists to capitalize on the opportunity to make decisions than it is for most community members. Therefore, if specialists see themselves as highly capable in the school setting, they are likely to feel confident about making decisions in research projects as well. Again, taking a small wins approach, we view these developments as a move toward greater participation.

We did not reach a consensus model where all stakeholder groups were participating, yet we were inching along in that direction. Additionally, it might be the case that a “fully egalitarian consensus model” is an unrealistic outcome. The idea behind freedom or empowerment is not that everyone in the school has control over all decisions, but that no avoidable asymmetries exist in who controls the mechanisms of power. As indicated earlier, there are reasons why the school uses a hierarchical system, just as there are reasons why CPRAT advocates for a consensus model. Therefore, the most appropriate approach may be to analyze both structures and their underlying assumptions in order to decide on a system that will best fit everyone’s needs and goals. What is important is that whenever

reasonable, everyone should be able to be part of the decision making process.

Conclusion

The process described in this study confirms that PAR can emerge gradually if researchers are aware of the power relations in the community and tailor their approaches to that setting. We hope we have provided enough thick description that other community psychologists can determine what parts of this story might be applicable to their own collaborations, and that others will write about their PAR process so that we can build a solid literature related to best processes. The idea of empowerment has been embraced by community psychology for some time now, but the critical examination of existing power structures and how to change them to achieve empowerment is still under theorized in our field. This study is a first step in empirically and systematically understanding the power structures in which we work and the process of adapting PAR so that it can transform, rather than maintain, those structures. Neither researchers nor the community can remain static in this process; the power structures of each need to be critically assessed and altered in order to create a more participatory and socially just world.

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