Doing Participatory Action Research as a Doctoral Student in the Peace and Conflict Studies Field

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Abstract

There is still little written about doing participatory action research (PAR) as a doctoral student. This paper provides a missing first-person account of doing a PAR Ph.D. in the Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) field. Based on the author's own experience of using PAR as part of his PACS doctoral degree this paper reflects on why he decided to use PAR in his doctorate project and how he went about doing it. It further highlights some of the benefits (academic and non-academic) of doing a PAR Ph.D., as well as challenges faced and responses to them. Four key lessons learned are also offered with the hope that they will be helpful to others embarking on PAR. The paper also includes a discussion of the broader implications for those interested in doing PAR, as well as a call for more PAR in the PACS field, making the argument that it offers a powerful means for narrowing the oft-cited gap between peace research and peace action.

Author Bio(s)

Phill Gittins, Ph.D, is a practitioner-scholar with over 20 years programming, analysis, and teaching experience in the areas of youth, peace, and conflict. He currently serves as Co-Director, Global Curriculum Development, for NewGen Peacebuilders. He is also a Rotary Peace Fellow, Kathryn Davis Fellow for Peace, and Peace Ambassador for the Institute for Economics and Peace. His academic background is in Peace and Conflict Studies, Education and Training, Youth and Community Work, and Counselling and Psychotherapy. His research and practice focuses on the roles that education and young people play in contributing to conflict and peace. He has designed and led trainings in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Denmark, England, Turkey, and the USA in peace education, peacebuilding, conflict analysis, conflict transformation, terrorism, psychology and psychotherapy. His forthcoming book, A collaborative approach to developing context-specific peace education programme: Theory, research, and praxis, will be published by Information Age Publishing in their Peace Education Series. His first book explored the theory, research, and practice of peace and peace education.

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Academic and policy research on doctoral education has mushroomed in the last 20 years, and there is now an evolving body of literature examining the modern day doctorate (Lee & Danby, 2012; Jones, 2013; John & Denicolo, 2013; McAlpine, 2017). There is also increasing attention given to doctoral student experience itself (Hopwood, Alexander, Harris-Huemmert, McAlpine, & Wagstaff, 2011; Mills & Paulson, 2014). A smaller body of work reflects on the personal experiences of doing a participatory action research (PAR) Ph.D., and much of this work tends to paint a discouraging picture, suggesting that doing PAR as a doctoral student is more difficult and demanding than doing a doctorate via more conventional research approaches (Maguire, 1993; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Gibbon, 2002; Moore, 2004; Burgess, 2006; Klocker, 2012; Van der Meulen, 2011; Southby, 2017; Bengle & Schuch, 2018).

The literature is missing a first-person account of doing a PAR Ph.D. in the Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) field. This is problematic, leaving a gap in the literature about the benefits and challenges of incorporating PAR as part of doctoral work in PACS. This paper helps to fill this gap by reflecting on my own experience of doing a PAR Ph.D. in the PACS field. From a reflection upon why I decided to use PAR in my doctorate project and how I went about doing it, I highlight some of the benefits (both academic and non-academic) of doing a PAR Ph.D., as well as challenges faced along the way and responses to them. Four key "lessons learned" are offered next with the hope that they will be helpful to others embarking on PAR. I continue with a discussion of the broader implications for those interested in doing PAR, before ending with a call for more PAR in the PACS field, making the argument that it offers a powerful means for narrowing the oft-cited gap between peace research and peace action. I preface all this discussion by offering a few words about my understanding of PAR, highlighting some of the specificities, strengths, and challenges particular to this kind of research in relation to other kinds of research.

What is PAR?

It is generally acknowledged that PAR can be understood in different ways. Fundamentally, though, it can be seen as an umbrella term that takes many forms, all of which can use a range of qualitative and quantitative methods and are linked in some way to partnership

and processes of reflection and action, but each of which has a different focus on partnership and action, depending on "the nature of the research," the issue being studied, the resources available, and the "contributions of the communities or parties involved" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 174).

A useful definition of PAR is that it is a "democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation" that "brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1). It is a way of doing research which places emphasis on collective self-reflective enquiry, the co-construction of knowledge, and the development of skills for speaking back and organizing for change with others (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 5; Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 5; McIntyre, 2008, p. 5; Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). In short, PAR is research into practice, undertaken by and with those involved in that practice, with the aim of investigating a problem and acting on it in a way that enhances that practice (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 2; McNiff, 2014, p. 227).

The following gives a sense of what distinguishes PAR from other kinds of research. PAR involves: (1) deepening understanding and contributing to change; (2) thinking about the past, present, and the future; (3) working from a stance of pragmatism; (4) including those on the receiving end of the practice as research partners; and (5) bringing reflexivity to the work (Gittins, 2017; see also Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The best PAR projects join first-person (e.g., researcher self-study), second-person (e.g., researchers working face-to-face with others on an issue of mutual concern), and third-person (e.g., research which extends to a wider populous) research/practice accounts (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 3).

Like conventional research, PAR is concerned with the pursuit of knowledge and making contributions to scholarship that are rigorous. But unlike (and often a critique of) "the conventional model of pure research" (Foote Whyte, 1991, p. 20), PAR moves beyond mainstream methods used in most research with human subjects, i.e., interviews and focus groups. It links with principles of grassroots community organizing that build knowledge collaboratively within a community of practitioners and researchers (Stringer, 2007, p. 151; Bradbury Haung, 2010, p. 95). In effect, PAR calls for a process of dialogue between "evidence-based and people-based inquiry," offering a systematic approach to inquiry that satisfies both the need for scientific rigour and the need for democratic practices (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, pp. 4-5).

Still, there are, of course, challenges with doing PAR. These include the divergence of opinions on what constitutes PAR, debates around what is a "good" PAR project, power dynamics between the researcher and those being researched, extra time requirements needed to do PAR, different perspectives on ethics, researcher positionality, issues of confidentiality, accountability, trust, tensions between research rigour and relevance, the legitimacy of PAR in higher education, validity and reliability, and institutional obstacles with respect to training (see, for example, Argyris & Schon, 1989; Pratt, 2007; Bradbury Haung, 2010; Brydon-Miller, 2012; McNiff, 2014; Hawkins, 2015; Kim, 2016; Bengle & Schuch, 2018).

PAR is most active in the fields of education, healthcare, development, and geography (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013), but some have highlighted its benefits and challenges in the PACS field (e.g., Morrow & Finley, 2014). Literature discussing PAR in peace education shows how it has been used to help develop a five-year, 50-lesson peace education manual for teachers in Vietnamese schools (Conley Tyler, Bretherton, Halafoff, & Nietschke, 2008); examine personal and group relations between Arab and Jewish students who are citizens of Israel (Zelniker, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Peretz, Azaiza, & Sharabany, 2009); and enable youth who are homeless to articulate their worldviews and to foster youth awareness of their own power (Goldberg, 2013).

Elsewhere, some researchers (e.g., Smyth, 2004; Elder, 2016) have used PAR to explore conflict transformation in South Central Somalia and political violence in war-affected populations in Northern Ireland and South Africa, while others (e.g., Johannsen, 2001) have used it to address peace-related issues in post-conflict situations, such as Eritrea, Mozambique, Guatemala, and Northeast Somalia. Duckworth and Kelley's (2012) edited volume shows how a *Scholarship of Engagement*—an approach like PAR—is helpful in engaging themes of social movements, conflict transformation, inclusion and exclusion, transitional justice, genocide awareness, and fundamentalism. Kaye and Harris (2017) demonstrated how PAR and action research have contributed to peace efforts in Africa, addressing a wider range of issues, including anti-corruption, gender-based violence, reconciliation, healing, and restorative justice.

While the work described above makes important contributions to our understandings of the use of PAR in the PACS field, there are some areas which remain underdeveloped. One important area pertains to the fact that little attention has been given to the experience of doing a PAR Ph.D. in PACS. Based on my own doctorate, and drawing on what others have written

about PAR, this paper provides a missing first-person account of doing a PAR Ph.D. in the PACS field.

The Decision to Execute a PAR Ph.D.

Fulfilling a Ph.D. that contributed to knowledge and action was of utmost importance to me, in part because I did not want to experience myself as a "living contradiction," which is taken here to mean "how our values are denied in practice" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2003, p. 72). Critiquing the general separation of research and action in the PACS field while not combining research and action in my own work would, for example, contribute to my own perception of myself as a "living contradiction." I, hence, saw the use of PAR as an opportunity to align my values with my practice. To be specific, using an approach that combines inquiry and action, knowledge creation, and practical application align with my values of co-learning and praxis.

I also agree with Reason and Marshall's (1987) ideas about research. They say that "All good research is for me, for us, and for them. It speaks to three audiences and contributes to each of these three areas of knowing" (p. 112). This influenced my decision to do a PAR Ph.D. *For me*, because I wanted to better understand and improve my own practice; *for us*, because I wanted to contribute to knowledge that would be of use to the field; and *for them*, because I wanted to engage in both research and practice that could be done with and for the benefit of those taking part in the research. So, besides contributing to my own professional development, I also saw the process of doing a PAR Ph.D. as an opportunity to not only produce scholarship that could be of use to the academe and the real-world, but to also engage in action on-the-ground.

Summary of My PAR Ph.D.

I began my International Conflict Analysis doctoral degree at the University of Kent (UK) in 2012 and completed it in 2017. A full account of this work appears elsewhere (Gittins, 2017, forthcoming). The focus here is on my experiences of doing a PAR Ph.D., not on the empirical results itself. My doctoral thesis was situated within the fields of education and peacebuilding broadly conceived. Proceeding on the premise that peace education and related programmes focused on peace ought to be contextualized (Salomon, 2011, pp. 52-54; Richmond, 2014a, p. 120), the research process was set up to inquire into the study and practice of developing context-specific peace education programmes *with* those on the receiving end of the work.

I did this through PAR, since it is considered the most collaborative research approach (Reason, 1994), has been found to be suitable for both peace education and peace research (Conley Tyler et al., 2008, pp. 348-350; Zelniker et al., 2009, p. 202), and lends itself well to "context-informed approaches to training" (Lederach & Thapa, 2012, p. 27). PAR also upholds peacebuilding norms of inclusion, dialogue, and praxis, and provides a natural fit for those interested in developing localized versions of peace education as opposed to relying on the all too often one-size-fits-all model imposed by outsiders (Gittins, 2017, forthcoming).

I spent from June 2013 to February 2014 in La Paz, Bolivia. Conceptualizing our work together as research collaboration, thirty-four Bolivian research collaborators and I used a combination of methods (four semi-structured interviews, twelve focus groups, learning journals, and over thirty-five hours of classroom observation and dialogue) to examine what peace education should look like in Bolivia—including how to design, implement, and evaluate it. Seventeen research collaborators were students, aged 18-30, selected from three different universities. The other seventeen were made up of governmental, UN, and senior management officials from universities, foundations, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The project activities were divided into three main phases (design, delivery, and evaluation). Each phase was influenced by research collaborators. In phase one, all thirty-four research collaborators were involved in influencing decisions concerning the peace education audience, as well as the purpose, content, and pedagogy of peace education for their context and student group. They were also involved in deciding any actions that arose out of the work and the ways in which to disseminate the results. All PAR projects should also involve action. On a scholarly level, having input into the development of their own peace education programme was one way to provide research collaborators with the opportunity to engage in action. Another way was to include them in the collection and analysis of data.

Phase two (delivery) also encompassed action in several different ways. At a more practical level, it involved me teaching and carrying out classroom observation of the twelve-week peace education programme that research collaborators and I had designed together in phase one. The seventeen students, noted earlier, made up the student group, and its delivery took place from September to December 2013. This phase also contributed to local peacebuilding efforts. I supported the students to apply what they had learned beyond the

classroom walls by coaching them through the successful completion of three youth-led peace projects.

This entailed me offering advice and guidance on every stage of their projects—from initial conceptualization, to implementation, and then to evaluating the results and writing up their final reports. I also visited each of the projects along the way to mentor and troubleshoot as appropriate. The peace projects in question addressed issues of violence, human trafficking, human rights, and multi-culturalism, directly serving more than 120 community members. In phase three (evaluation), the seventeen students reflected on what they felt they learned as a result of their involvement in peace education. This phase also included a peace conference which arose in response to requests from research collaborators and took place in February 2014.

Benefits

The benefits of doing a PAR Ph.D. are many and here I share a few of them. Academically, it offers the chance to acquire field experience, reflect on one's own positionality, and experience the complexity and messiness of doing research with others (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Doing a doctorate via PAR also offers multiple opportunities for publication, unlike traditional Ph.Ds. which tend to lend themselves to the findings alone (Bengle & Schuch, 2018). This is because PAR, at best, encompasses writing about first-, second- and third-person inquiry, as noted above.

In my case, I can publish articles about my own self-study as an educator. I can also write about co-designing a peace education programme with local actors, the interaction between students and me in the classroom, university-community collaborations, the benefits to students going through the peace education programme, theory and practice linkages, and the process and outcomes of supporting students to complete youth-led peace projects. This paper is one example of the additional angles from which I was able to write following the completion of my PAR Ph.D.

I have already mentioned how my PAR Ph.D. also involved action—co-designing and delivering a peace education programme, mentoring youth-led peace projects, and organizing a peace conference—unlike many Ph.Ds. that tend to focus on theory or empiricism alone. By doing so, I was able to develop a range of transferable skills considered to be useful both within and outside academia (e.g., relationship building, teamwork, programme design, and programme

management). These skills are highly sought after by employees in the peace industry but are rarely taught in graduate PACS programmes (Carstarphen, Zelizer, Harris, & Smith, 2010).

Having PAR Ph.D. experience, hence, gives us a comparative advantage because we can not only talk about completing the usual Ph.D. tasks, including conducting independent scholarly research and making an original contribution to knowledge, but we can also talk about applying some of the industry skills that I just described above. In brief, doing a PAR Ph.D. can make us more attractive to employers, whether pursuing a career in academia or in industry. One caveat requires mention, however. While having PAR experience can equip us with a set of skills that are sought after in academia and industry, it should not be assumed "that people know what it entails to do PAR, so we have to inform them and give specific examples" (Bengle & Schuch, 2018, p. 619) in order to help set us apart from others in the job market.

A primary benefit of a PAR Ph.D. is the opportunity to impact positive change, as noted earlier. What constitutes change is virtually limitless. Still, I like Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon's (2014) ideas about change in PAR. They spoke about how PAR can contribute to changing "the way things are done here" (p. 69). This includes changing "social practices, including research practice itself" (pp. 2-3). In the case of my PAR PACS Ph.D., I contributed to changes in my own practices and my understanding of my practices, which will be discussed later. It also contributed to a change in the way in which most peace education programmes are developed, as it included those on the receiving end in the design, delivery, and evaluation of their own programme.

Moreover, my PAR Ph.D. also contributed to changes in the way in which young people are typically engaged in discussions about peace and conflict. In addition to including them as co-researchers it engaged them as agents of change, providing them with opportunities to put what they learned in peace education to direct use in the community. This took the form of peace projects (discussed in more detail later). While peace education that tackles the difficult challenge of combining peace education and peace action is recognized as important in the literature (Galtung, 2008), it is a departure from the norm. Most peace education and related initiatives do not include an applied element beyond the classroom. Supporting young people to complete peace projects in my PAR PACS Ph.D., hence, helped to position them as peacebuilders as opposed to the dominant image of youth as either victims or perpetrators of violence.

Challenges

I faced many challenges doing a PAR Ph.D., such as adhering to the standards of the school I was attending, positivism in the university, a lack of PAR training available at my institute, trying to fit PAR into a doctoral timeline, sharing power with local actors, and the tensions between being a researcher and a practitioner. These challenges are relatively well known and have been discussed in some of the literature on the topic that I have already highlighted (e.g., Gibbon, 2002; Klocker, 2012; Southby, 2017; Bengle & Schuch, 2018). Beyond this, I shall reflect on four other challenges particular to my PAR Ph.D. and responses to them.

Rigour Versus Relevance

PAR has the dual goal of satisfying the needs of science, by standing up to the rigour of academic analysis, as well as the needs of those who are taking part in the research, by producing knowledge that is of practical relevance. My PAR Ph.D. can be deemed to be relevant because it addressed a practice currently underdeveloped in Bolivia (peace education). It also responded to findings from an earlier study (Gittins, 2010) that highlighted the need to offer peace education to university age students and to support them to apply their learning beyond the classroom.

Yet, there were times in my Ph.D., especially during my work in Bolivia, when I had to (re)address the "balance" of focus between rigour and relevance. This was because I was too focused on practice and in jeopardy of compromising the research. This was addressed by involving research collaborators in the analysis. My supervisors were also helpful in this regard. While those in Bolivia often reminded me of the practical relevance of the work, my supervisors worked relentlessly to remind me of the important scholarly contributions. They read through the work I produced for my Ph.D. to ensure that I was rigorous in my interpretations of the data.

Being Accountable

A distinguishing feature of PAR is that it involves being accountable to two main audiences: the first is the research community, and the second is the people taking part in the research (Bradbury Huang, 2010, p. 99). I held myself accountable to the university I was representing by completing supervision reports, updating supervisors on my fieldwork, and submitting draft chapters for revision as appropriate. Accountability to those in Bolivia entailed being aware of my actions and the potential consequences of them, whether intended or

unintended. I attempted to navigate this task in several different ways, but there were three approaches that I found most useful.

The first was through reflective practice. I used reflexivity to think through how this project could potentially "do harm" as well as "do good." I also reflected on issues of power and my own privilege (as a white, middle-aged man from England) in addition to how my own understandings of peace and peace education (growing up in the global North) may not necessarily be representative of those in Bolivia. These reflections typically took the form of a learning journal, which I kept on an ongoing basis and shared parts of with "critical friends" who asked provocative questions, which both supported and challenged me. A second way I strived to be accountable to those in Bolivia was by being transparent with them about the research, explaining what I was doing, how, and why.

The third way I approached this task was by ensuring that research collaborators had opportunities to say what accountability meant to them. Their answers were varied. Some wanted recommendations to inform their teaching, while others wanted dialogue around the issue I was studying. Those at the Ministry of Education wanted to be "kept in the loop," rather than simply hearing about the "foreigner's analysis at the end." Accountability, according to students, included "doing what I said I was going to do." Attempts were made to honour such requests in a way that did not jeopardize the research but enhanced it. For example, I sent copies of transcripts to those who asked for them, shared preliminary findings and invited feedback, in addition to making the results of the work public by organizing a community consultation which took the form of a peace conference.

Accountability to local communities has become a key area of debate in the PACS field. Unfortunately, research suggests that the international peacebuilding community is too often not accountable to target populations (Autesserre, 2014, pp. 239-245) and that top-down accountability, to funders or governments, has been the norm (Church, 2011). The main point here is that if the international community purports to serve the needs of host populations, then there must be ways of holding them accountable—what Autesserre (2014) terms "up-ward accountability" (pp. 209-211). To this end, "something more than the usual research article" was a comment I heard many times from Bolivian research collaborators in relation to how I could be accountable to them.

Competing Ideas

The centrality of bringing together different kinds of knowledge and expertise in PAR makes it rewarding but challenging. In my case, it was rewarding because it helped to elicit a multitude of viewpoints on how peace education should look in Bolivia. It was challenging because the divergence in opinions created a dilemma as to whose ideas should take priority. To be more specific, whose ideas about a context-specific version of peace education in Bolivia should hold more weight: the students; policy makers, educators, think tank, and NGO officials; or my own, drawn from academic study and practical everyday working experience in Bolivia.

My research collaborators had a range of opinions about how to approach this dilemma. Most advised me to listen to the students. In doing so, I found their ideas useful in informing my own thinking. They spoke about how the chances of developing a peace education programme that is fit for purpose in Bolivia are significantly greater if they include students themselves in the conversation, as well as other experts on Bolivia and peace education more generally. In the end, I (as the person ultimately responsible for the research) had to make a judgement call about the "look" of the final peace education programme. However, sharing perspectives emerging from the work with my research collaborators and enabling them to have a say helped to ensure that no one agenda dominated. In PAR, the chance of allowing one agenda to dominate is lessened, precisely because dialogue is central to the work. When there is true dialogue, it is difficult for one agenda to be pushed. At the very least, there is a discussion about whose agenda is taking priority.

This section discussed some of the challenges that ensued in the course of my PAR Ph.D. and responses to them. The next section discusses four lessons learned from this work that are likely to be useful to those engaged in PAR in general—and not only those in the PACS field.

Lessons Learned

Doing a PAR Ph.D. has been a profound experience for me and my Bolivian research collaborators. It has been an experience of practical and intellectual learning. Practically, I learned that research of this kind can be time-consuming, challenging, and sometimes met with scepticism, yet at other times very rewarding and even transformative. By doing a PAR Ph.D. I was able to recognize in new ways that doing research *with* communities (as opposed to *about* them) can be a complex and messy process that does not always turn out as planned.

Doing a PAR Ph.D. also helped me to interrogate my own teaching practice, to problematize it. Through self-study, and feedback from students, I became aware that I had been overlooking the comparative advantages that outside ideas could offer (despite writing about them in my Ph.D.). Before, my strategy was to rely more on the facilitation of learning and less on teaching. To clarify, I understand the distinction between the two in a way that is similar to many in peace education and the broader education community—namely, the former focuses on "how" the learning experience is facilitated and the ways in which students engage with the material, while the latter is more traditional and directive, tending to focus on "what" content is to be taught. Nowadays, I am a little less reluctant to take sides. I think about the relationship between the two as not so polarized but existing more along a continuum. There are times when the facilitation of learning is needed and times when teaching is needed. In short, there is no one way of being; people must find their own ways of being, depending on the working group.

Aside from my own professional development, the effort carried out in my PAR Ph.D. also contributed to action in Bolivia. As already noted, it trained young people in a range of peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills and supported them to design, implement, and evaluate three peace projects. The idea for peace projects arose primarily in response to requests from research collaborators who wanted young people to engage in peace action. But they also responded to calls in the literature to implement more "community actions projects with a Participatory Action Research Lens" (Diaz-Soto, 2005, p. 96) and to take up the difficult task of braiding "peace education, peace action, and peace research together" (Galtung, 2008, p. 55).

Beyond this, there were also important intellectual lessons. Four are presented here. While being derived from the work done in my Ph.D., they are likely to be applicable to others engaging in PAR in general, and particularly researchers and supervisors in the PACS field.

Lesson 1: PAR Augments Local Agency

PAR in Bolivia helped to augment local people's sense of agency. This is because those involved in the research were not seen as merely passive objects of study but rather as people who are active, people who have agency and can inform the research that directly affects them. I have already mentioned about how research collaborators exercised their "right to research" (Appadurai, 2006) by being involved as co-researchers and helping to inform the design, delivery, and evaluation of their own peace education effort. Here I want to say something more

about how they had agency in determining one of the ways in which the outcomes from this work was disseminated in Bolivia, namely, the peace conference.

In focus groups and interviews, research collaborators were clear—they were not interested in reading about this work in a journal article. Conversations that followed provided opportunities to consider how they would like to learn about the research and practice elements from this PAR Ph.D. The consensus was a conference, which gave them the opportunity to be showcased to academics, practitioners, and the wider public. The purpose of the conference was discussed with research collaborators, and three main objectives were established. First, to provide a forum for students to present their work for peace to the public; second, to engage in a specific discussion about the preliminary findings from my research; and third, to engage in a general discussion about contextualizing peace education programmes. In preparation for the conference, students appeared on local and national radio and television to advertise the event. The conference was attended by over 120 members from the community, including young people, parents, and officials from the UN, Ministry of Education, universities, schools, and several NGOs. Many of these individuals heralded the conference as making an important contribution in a country that has been more concerned with conflict than talking about peace.

A lesson learned here is that those doing PAR have to be open to negotiating the outcomes from such work with the community itself, since PAR is done *with* and *for* the community. In this regard, the community might decide that it is not an article they need but rather a presentation, written report, or tool kit—and these, too, can be considered as legitimate scholarship.

Lesson 2: PAR Facilitates the Development of Programming That Can Meet Local Needs

The apparent success of the work in Bolivia can in part be attributed to the ways in which the PAR approach helped to develop a peace education effort that aligned with the needs of the local context. This was done by allowing research collaborators to inform decisions about how the purpose, content, and pedagogy of peace education could be responsive to the young people's needs and country priorities. While peace initiatives should be shaped by engagement with the local (Lederach, 1995, p. 55) there is also a view that outside input can enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding activities (Autesserre, 2014, p. 7; Richmond, 2014b, p. 11).

To this end, another advantage of using PAR in my Ph.D. was that it helped to ensure that the peace education programme was neither an appropriation of outside interventions nor an

uncritical romanization of the local. PAR, because of its prioritization and valuing of dialogue between a range of different actors and groups, offers a suitable approach for local, international, or hybrid forms of peace (education) to emerge (Mac Ginty, 2010). A post-evaluation of the programme corroborates this view. Students, in their own words, spoke about how they were able to engage with, and learn about, content and perspectives deemed important to the Bolivian context (e.g., gender-violence, decolonization processes, and vivir bien – understood as to live well), as well as general perspectives deemed important to the field (e.g., negative and positive peace; direct, structural, and cultural violence). In sum, a PAR approach helped to develop better-informed, more hybridized, and (ultimately) more context-specific approaches.

Lesson 3: PAR Improves Relationships

The value of PAR in Bolivia can also be understood in terms of how it helped to improve relationships between the researcher and the research population. PAR does this because it prioritizes relational inquiry. This type of relational work helps to reduce power relations by allowing those who are typically on the receiving end of the research to share some control over the research process, and the decisions made, that affect them. Yet, while sharing power helps to improve relationships it also means that the researcher must let go of some of the power and trust those with whom they are working. Trust is key to the development of effective relationships. But developing trust is not easy. It often takes time.

Thanks to my pre-Ph.D. history, first, as a practitioner, and later as a researcher, in Bolivia, several research collaborators already knew and trusted me. This exposure not only helped me to get to know the context and develop relationships, but it (according to those in Bolivia and a number of scholars (see Autesserre, 2014)) strengthened my credentials and allowed me to speak with more authority than the usual "travelling scholar." The relationships that I had developed over the years also helped to facilitate the work I did in Bolivia.

Many vouched for me, assuring others that I had the interests of Bolivia at heart. They also put me in contact with Directors at the Ministry of Education and UN officials. Despite initial scepticism about programmes being brought in from outside, contacts at the Ministry of Education and the UN regularly mentioned that they were not against outside involvement, per se. Time and again, I heard them saying that the international community needed to develop a relationship with us if they wanted to work effectively here. The relevant point I make is that PAR's emphasis on including communities in their own research is not only less likely to be met

with local resistance but also more likely to increase the legitimacy of outside intervention and improve relationships.

Lesson 4: PAR Requires Research Collaboration and Critical Distance

PAR relies on research collaboration to help bridge the distance between the researcher and its subject of inquiry. In this context, one of the challenges that I faced in doing PAR was that I was, at times, too close to the work on-the-ground and found it difficult to distance myself in order to keep a critical perspective. For me, this is one aspect which differentiates PAR from a type of "reflective practice" (see Schön, 1989). While reflecting on practice (experimenting, collecting evidence, and thinking about ideas) is important, it can be argued that this type of work lacks the features of research—systematic investigation, analytical engagement, and the use of scientific techniques to critically analyse data.

Here's the challenge for those doing PAR: how to let oneself go to view subjectivity with objectivity (Rogers, 1961, p. 14). That is, how to strike a balance between the sensitive, authentic, and empathic work needed for engaged practice, and the critical distance needed to do research. None of this is easy, and I was surely not always successful in this pursuit. However, I now understand better than I did that while knowledge generated from practice and research can be mutually reinforcing, critical distance between researching practice and practicing research is needed at times. This lesson is particularly pertinent to peace work more broadly, given that critical peace research calls into question traditional approaches that typically favour distance (see, for example, Jutila, Samu, & Tarja, 2008; Fischer, 2009).

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Implications

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This section reflects on some of the broader implications of doing a PAR Ph.D. These implications are especially relevant to those engaging with PAR in the PACS field, whether researchers or supervisors.

Training in the Hard and Soft Skills Needed to Do PAR

The potential for PAR to be used more in the PACS field is arguably greater when universities provide appropriate training. Doing PAR effectively requires a wide range of knowledge and skills, the main ones being proficiency in a set of hard and soft skills. Hard skills include an understanding of the philosophy, theory, values, and methods particular to PAR endeavours. Soft skills include the ability to ask good questions, actively listen, and create an environment that can cultivate the type of relational inquiry and co-learning that PAR requires.

Soft skills like these are important to all research done with people. They are, however, given insufficient attention in academic training relating to PACS (Smith, 2016, p. 15).

Research training in academic institutions tends to focus more on helping students to develop expertise in hard (data) skills and less on the soft skills needed to discover and learn together. Thus, in addition to ensuring that universities offer training in PAR, there should also be careful reflection upon existing PAR training courses and consideration for whether they are providing appropriate opportunities for students to learn both the hard and soft skills necessary for implementing effective PAR projects. PAR also involves studying one's own practice to deepen understandings of it. In part, this means that those doing PAR are not only the instruments but also the objects under study. Self-study and the issue of "I" are often under-valued or de-prioritized in scholarly work, although this is changing (Whitehead, 2009).

Embracing Uncertainty

PAR is achieved through a continual developmental process. To invoke this process, researchers conceive of learning as "an adaptive and iterative process" (Pretty & Chambers, 1994, p. 185), one that evolves as the research develops and as those working together engage in ongoing dialogic learning and improvement. In short, there is a risk in PAR—one that requires, borrowing from Lederach (2005), "stepping into the unknown" (p. 169), "into a place where you are not sure what will come or what will happen" (p. 163).

PAR, hence, is not "a process of implementing rules in order to fit action into a predetermined model" (McNiff, 2005, p. 4). To conduct PAR, in the way conceptualized in this paper, researchers must be willing to enter something that they cannot control nor fully predict the outcomes. It means embracing uncertainty—as an important and inevitable part of all inquiry done with people. Coming from this place of uncertainty—a place of openness, curiosity, and intent to discover—allows for surprise. This, however, can also be at odds with the positivist view of academic knowledge, which lends itself to control and prediction.

Focus on the Process

Because PAR requires the researcher to embrace uncertainty, "in many ways, the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes" (Reason, 2006, p. 197). This has broad implications, insofar as it requires the research to be open to critical scrutiny, becoming more fully established in the process of doing work with others, and capable of transformation. The tendency for the PACS field to construct knowledge, removing the contexts they wish to study,

and to exclude those on the receiving end of peace interventions in the design and delivery of their own programmes, inhibits the ability to think of knowledge as being the product of an "iterative process of learning, that is done in relationship with others" (Lederach, 2003, p. 58).

This focus on process has implications for PAR supervision as well. Because PAR is a different approach to knowledge, there is a view that those supervising PAR projects need to adopt a type of "process oriented supervision" (Reason & Marshall, 2001, p. 415). Thus, like PAR, the way of working between the researcher and the supervisor is not an "impersonal, external and solely intellectual endeavour, but rather a complex and personal social process" (p. 415). The supervisor should seek to assist students with exploring issues related to research, but also gaging their own values and their own process of development.

A related issue here is the relationship between PAR and research ethics committees (RECs). A common expectation for a Ph.D. is that it is individual work. This can make seeking approval from RECs to do a PAR Ph.D. more complex because PAR is an inherently collaborative endeavour. I sought and gained ethical approval to proceed with the work in my Ph.D. from the Research Ethics and Governance Committee at my university. Like most RECs this entailed covering the usual requirements that have been suggested as the basis for evaluating the ethics of a research project, including issues of value, scientific validity, fair participant selection, favourable risk-benefit ration, independent review, informed consent, and respect for the enrolled participant (Celling & Munn-Giddings, 2011, p. 102).

But unlike most RECs I also wrote about the "participatory" and "action" components of this PAR Ph.D., which entailed, for instance, detailing how research collaborators would be included in every stage of the research process, how they would be involved in making decisions about the action components of the work, and how I would go about teaching the peace education programme itself. Thus, in the end, I felt at ease putting my name on the Ph.D. because I wrote it, yet always highlighted throughout the text the different ways in which research collaborators were involved in informing the research and practice parts of the work.

Sharing Power

In the PACS field, there is a view that power is largely ignored (Tellidis & Toros, 2015; Firchow & Anastasiou, 2016, p. 3). External actors' lack of contextual knowledge, practical lived experience on-the-ground, and the dearth of research done *with* local communities (Chandler, 2010, 14; Bush & Dugan, 2015, p. 12; Gittins, 2017) provide a context for the ways in which the

international community tends to normalize power imbalances. Indeed, a broader truth about peace research and practice, in general, is that peace initiatives are frequently produced under conditions of asymmetrical power relations, since locals have a disproportionately low share of power in influencing their own peace research and practice (Gittins, 2017, forthcoming).

While power imbalances are inherent in all types of research, PAR projects share some of the power with those taking part in the research. This practice of power-sharing is reflected by the fact that decisions about the research process and products happen in collaboration with the local community. Carefully developed research projects that are done with the people they are designed for, imply new types of power-knowledge relations between the researcher and those taking part in the research, favouring "power with" instead of the usual focus on "power over" them (Gittins, 2017).

Conclusion

Many scholars in the PACS field wish to produce more than just publications—further hoping that their work makes a difference to practice. As interest around peace work grows, many agree that there is a "need for peace research to benefit participants as much as researchers" (Cremin, 2016, p. 12). Despite this agreement, there is too often a divide between peace research and peace action. My intention in this paper has been to both provide a missing first-person account of doing a PAR Ph.D. in the PACS field, as well as to give a sense of how those using PAR can combine peace research and action to benefit both the participants and the researcher.

This paper calls for more PAR in the PACS field. By doing so, I am not suggesting that we should all be using PAR. My intent, instead, is to argue that as a body of scholars some of us should. Like any approach, there are times when PAR is more appropriate than others. Because there has been more emphasis on traditional scholarship—where researchers tend to focus on description, the past, and doing research on others (McNiff, 2014, p. 16)—PAR offers an alternative approach to complement conventional science.

PAR offers an approach suitable to realising Anthony Bing's (1989) vision for "good peace studies," one that involves "thinking our ways into new forms of action and acting our way into new forms of thinking" (p. 49). PAR fits with the field's concern for "putting local people at the heart of the action" (Francis, 2009, p. 11). PAR is also capable of contributing to the transformation of the field in ways that align with its stated values of dialogue, inclusion, and

praxis. On a broader level, PAR offers one means of addressing a core challenge comforting the modern-day university: the increasing pressure academics are under to demonstrate how their work contributes to intellectual debates, as well as having an impact beyond academia.

I would like to end this paper with an invitation to doctoral students in the PACS field to embark on doing a PAR Ph.D. and look forward to reading your accounts in the future. While there are challenges and complexities involved in using PAR as part of doctoral work in PACS, the opportunity to harmonize values and practice make it well worthwhile.

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