Chapter 11
Youth Participatory Action Research: The Nuts and Bolts as well as the Roses and Thorns

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Abstract Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) challenges traditional social science research because it teaches young people how to inquire about complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequences of oppression directly related to their lives. More significantly, YPAR provides marginalized youth with an opportunity to exercise their agency by being civically engaged, developing their critical consciousness, and learning how to advocate for oppressed communities. The purpose of this chapter is to do the following: (1) discuss the historical origins of YPAR and demonstrate how it is part of Indigenous/decolonizing methodological traditions, (2) provide key characteristics of YPAR and how it has been utilized in the field, (3) explain the central critiques of YPAR, and (4) provide key significant insights and challenges from my own YPAR study with system-involved youth.

Introduction

Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, and Morrell (2017) explain how Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is "a critical research methodology that carries specific epistemological commitments toward reframing who is 'allowed' to conduct and disseminate education research with/about youth in actionable ways" (p. 313). Put simply, YPAR challenges traditional social science research because it teaches young people how to inquire about complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequences of oppression directly related to their lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Youth are involved in all aspects of the

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research cycle: from formulating research questions to collecting and analyzing data to presenting findings and offering key recommendations that lead to social action and meaningful change (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). More significantly, YPAR provides marginalized youth with an opportunity to exercise their agency by being civically engaged, developing their critical consciousness, and learning how to advocate for oppressed communities (Dolan, Lin, & Christens, 2005; Irizarry, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017).

In this chapter, I first discuss the historical origins of YPAR and how it is part of Indigenous/decolonizing methodological traditions. Next, I provide key characteristics of YPAR. Third, I discuss how YPAR has been utilized in the field. Afterward, I discuss central critiques of YPAR. I conclude by providing some significant insights and challenges from my own YPAR study with system-involved youth.

Historical Context of YPAR

YPAR can be described as an ethnographically based inquiry process to challenge and transform traditional power structures that has its roots in Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). Since the 1970s, PAR has been employed in Latin America. Fals Borda and Rahman (1991) define PAR as an "experiential methodology" because it countervails power for the "poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes" (p. 121). More importantly, from the very beginning, there is grassroots participation on the design and implementation of research. PAR is explicit and unapologetic in its goal of social justice and social transformation.

Conversely, PAR can also be traced to Paulo Freire's pivotal work on praxis, critical pedagogy, and critical consciousness (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2004), which raised important questions concerning how to empower the poor. Lastly, other scholars trace the origins of PAR to various Indigenous communities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and South Pacific (Caraballo et al., 2017; Mirra et al., 2016). In this fashion, PAR acknowledges and celebrates Indigenous knowledge as well as a process that engages in decolonization.

YPAR builds on PAR in that it seeks to empower the oppressed, challenge social injustices, and helps young people connect to decolonial knowledge(s). Furthermore, PAR and YPAR forefront the voices of participants throughout the research investigation and engage in social justice-oriented group work by prioritizing the well-being of youth and their communities (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2003). Additionally, both help participants interrogate essential issues that are impacting their lives and teach them how to advocate for change. Thus, both PAR and YPAR help "to demystify and deconstruct power structures, [and] then transform them in order to construct a new reality, [wherein] critical agency is fostered" (Caraballo et al., 2017, p. 316). Fundamentally, PAR and YPAR provide the necessary tools for the oppressed to engage in social action and create social change within their communities.

Decolonizing Methodology

YPAR embraces and advocates for a *methodology of the oppressed* (Sandoval, 2000) where research serves the marginalized and allows them to tell their stories in their own words. In addition, YPAR complements Indigenous/decolonizing methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 1999) because it is concerned with presenting alternative knowledges, highlighting subjugated knowledge, and concerns itself with liberatory practices by empowering those who have been denigrated by Western research. More importantly, researchers who utilize YPAR are well aware of how Western research has been utilized to dehumanize colonized communities.

As a result, YPAR researchers are interested in creating innovative approaches to methodology that presents youth participants in authentic ways that preserve their ways of being and demonstrate how their epistemologies actually help to sustain them in the face of oppression. Moreover, this novel form of research is similar to Indigenous/decolonizing methodologies in that it assists in correcting past wrongs, directly challenges colonization, and forefronts the lived experiences of the oppressed. Furthermore, this revolutionary approach speaks to oppressed/colonized people because it is explicitly political, offers a reflexive discourse, and stresses subversive, multivoiced participatory methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Last but not least, it is committed to liberatory and emancipatory inquiry for social justice purposes.

Key Principles of YPAR

McIntyre (2000) and Rodríguez and Brown (2009) have developed the following three principles of YPAR: (1) the collective investigation of a problem that directly addresses the needs of youth involved, (2) the reliance on marginalized youth knowledge that validates and incorporates their lived experiences, and (3) the desire to take collective action to improve the lives of oppressed youth. Caraballo et al. (2017) add that YPAR has four distinct entry points: (1) academic learning and literacies, (2) cultural and critical epistemological research, (3) youth development and leadership, and (4) youth organizing and civic engagement.

Academic learning and literacies focus on how YPAR has been utilized to foster academic literacies, disciplines, and learning in a way that is transformative and leads to academic enrichment (Bautista et al., 2003; Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015; Morrell, 2004). Cultural and critical epistemological research demonstrates how YPAR helps youth to connect with cultural knowledge, cultural identity, and reclaiming lost knowledge (Alberto, Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Johnston-Goodstar, 2013; Torre, 2009). Youth development and leadership articulate how YPAR supports youth to develop socially and emotionally through their research as well as become leaders within their community or school

(Grace & Langhout, 2014; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Lastly, youth organizing and civic engagement illustrate how YPAR assists in community organizing, helps influence policy, and fosters youth advocacy (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, & Kirshner, 2015).

YPAR in the Field

One of the first studies to document YPAR was conducted in conjunction with photovoice to examine the violence youth experienced within their communities (McIntyre, 2000). Furthermore, McIntyre contends that one of the chief benefits of YPAR is the power of "engaging in a process that positions youth as agents of inquiry and as 'experts' about their own lives" (p. 126). Henceforth, it is not surprising that several scholars have employed YPAR to assist youth, both in and out of school, in order to address a variety of issues such as community violence, school segregation, the prison-industrial complex, juvenile justice, and educational inequity (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Alberto et al., 2011; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Fine, 2009; Ginwright, 2007; Grace & Langhout, 2014; Yang, 2009). Cammarota and Romero (2009) present three student cases that demonstrate how YPAR can be used as a bridge between the classroom and students' realities. Cerecer, Cahill, and Bradley (2013) had youth conduct interviews, create a video-docudrama, and utilize social media such as a blog to disseminate their findings on undocumented immigrants. Yang (2009) notes how his YPAR study helped high school students gain mathematical knowledge and concepts by deconstructing school accountability report cards. Other scholars have utilized youth culture such as hip-hop and spoken word poetry to help youth articulate the problems they see in their communities (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Furthermore, YPAR has also been utilized to reclaim cultural knowledge and revitalize lost traditions (Conrad, 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Irizarry, 2011). Lastly, in all of these studies, youth present their findings to various public and academic communities in the hopes of affecting and creating more socially just policies.

Tensions Within YPAR

Caraballo et al. (2017) have identified several tensions in YPAR, such as the following: projects being co-opted by mandates, a lack of continuity, internal politics, scheduling issues, and conflicting values among facilitators. The politics and complexity of maintaining relationships with community members and organizations are of particular concern due to turnover (Irizarry, 2009). Other YPAR researchers have noted the tensions associated with facilitators and youth in regard to knowing when to "step in" versus "step out" (Winn & Winn, 2016, p. 116). On the one

hand, YPAR is youth driven, and youth voice should be privileged; on the other hand, youth still need guidance and assistance in the completion of projects and maintaining project goals. In addition, the tedious process of "grinding" (i.e., data analysis and data interpretation) (Mirra et al., 2016) is not always fun and can be taxing. Consequently, youth may not always be engaged in this process. Lastly, scholars warn that YPAR's liberatory framework, which has "the power to support meaningful social and political change, often lose their radical capacity as they are co-opted or absorbed into the mainstream" (Caraballo et al., 2017, p. 329). This idea translates to how researchers must maintain fidelity to the principles of YPAR.

Leaders Organizing 2 Unite & Decriminalize

Now that I have provided the history of YPAR and how it has been utilized in the field, I will now describe the YPAR project I have conducted. This example serves as a case study of the successes and challenges of maintaining an ongoing YPAR project.

Over the last three years, I have worked with Leaders Organizing 2 Unite & Decriminalize (LOUD) members—who comprise both formerly incarcerated and youth on probation and allies—who have worked toward creating a more socially just and humanizing criminal justice system through YPAR. Throughout this process, youth have found their voice and have been able to speak out and raise awareness on critical issues that needed reform within the juvenile justice system (JJS) by speaking directly with key decision-makers and shaping public policy.

Located in a major urban city in the Southwest, LOUD is a partnership between a local grassroots community organization and the local Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI), which is housed within the local JJS. The former helps youth mobilize regarding issues such as racial justice, health, economic, and education equity. It also provides a platform to engage these issues through civic engagement. The latter is a model site for JDAI, which is sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. As a model site, other JJS sites from the nation and around the world visit to learn how to reduce juvenile incarceration rates.

At the time of this study, I was working with six Latinas and three Latinos, one African American male, and one Diné female. Additionally, half of the members self-identified as queer. The ages of the LOUD members ranged from 15 to 20 years, and educationally, they ranged from a high school freshman to a first-year college student. Overall, members joined LOUD because they were interested in sharing their experiences of being incarcerated in order to advocate for change and reform within the JJS.

It is important to note that for formerly incarcerated youth, their freedom hovers on a tightrope. Over the course of three years, we had members placed in residential treatment programs for alleged drug violations, who were then isolated from the outside world. We had some members who went on the "run" (absconding from their probation) because of home instability, not having shelter, or alleged

violations. Fortunately, no member has had to go to a youth prison, but a few did have detention holds (placed in the detention center) on them (from two days to two weeks). These were strong, painful reminders of how easily freedom can be taken away, and how members may be removed from their families, their communities, their schools, and of course from this study at any time. New members were welcome to join anytime during the course of the study.

Major Successes of LOUD

Conceivably, the greatest success of LOUD has been the ability to help youth become system free and find their voice, which ultimately enabled them to become the best advocates for juvenile justice reform since they had firsthand knowledge. Part of this advocacy came via the partnership with the local JDAI that wanted system-involved youth to participate in their various steering committees such as Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RRED). They also were invited to help reshape the state Probation Agreement. As a result of LOUD youth participation, the revised state Probation Agreement moved away from a punitive instrument to a more individualized instrument that focuses on positive youth development. More importantly, LOUD youth conducted approximately 120 surveys that were given to system-involved youth, which examined their experiences at different points in the JJS: court hearings, detention center, prison, residential treatment programs, and/or probation. Lastly, LOUD youth conducted four focus group interviews inside the detention center and three focus group interviews with Specialty Court programs. This research is unparalleled because I am not aware of youth being allowed to conduct research in incarceration facilities. While I assisted LOUD youth in each step along with another facilitator, what is important to highlight is the fact that LOUD youth were responsible for developing the survey and focus group questions, analyzing the data, and providing recommendations.

These findings were shared with the local JDAI and their various steering committees. In addition, LOUD youth presented our research during various national site visits to the local JDAI. LOUD youth even spoke at the state capital to lobby for juvenile justice reform; two of them spoke directly with the Lieutenant Governor on the issues youth face in the state. Additionally, they have presented our work at national education conferences. Furthermore, LOUD youth have also demonstrated academic success. Nearly 95 percent of LOUD youth graduated from high school or obtained their General Education Development (GED). Thus, LOUD has underscored the findings in the field: (1) developing cultural identity, critical consciousness, and (re)connecting to cultural knowledge; (2) developing youth advocacy, activism, and civic engagement; (3) developing positive youth development and leadership; and (4) developing academic and college-going skills.

Key Challenges in LOUD

While LOUD has enjoyed tremendous success, there have also been some tough challenges. The first challenge was developing trust. Given the makeup of LOUD, youth were apprehensive of the adult facilitators at first. For many system-involved youths, they have witnessed adults abuse their power and violate their trust. Therefore, "brokering relationships" (Mirra et al., 2015, p. 50) was especially important as LOUD first got started. YPAR was secondary to youth getting to know adult facilitators and solidifying the culture of the group, which was learning how to advocate, how to communicate during steering committee meetings, and teasing out the various issues of the JJS. Similar to L. T. Winn and Winn (2016), in the first and second years, the adult facilitators were constantly trying to find a balance of when to "step in" versus "step out." YPAR was a novel approach to the youth, and they were also trying to figure out what it meant. The third challenge was the transiency of the participants. Since we were working with system-involved youth, over the years, we had youth not able to attend or continue with the program because they were placed on detention holds, they were sent to residential treatment programs for drug treatment, and other youth stopped participating because they were absconding. However, we were fortunate that youth always came back, even if briefly. The next main challenge was getting youth to engage in the "grind" (Mirra et al., 2016), which meant having youth analyze the data and find key themes. They were always excited and ready to take the lead when time came to perform the focus group interviews. However, they were less enthusiastic when time came to analyze the data since coding data can be tedious.

Sustainability was one of the most significant challenges. After the second year of LOUD, we found out that the community organization where LOUD was housed was shutting down due to financial reasons. This issue caused a major rupture because for a few months we struggled to find a new community organization that would sponsor us. Once we found a new community partner, new roles had to be adjusted. Moreover, it was difficult to obtain support for LOUD because the community organization had their own set of programs. Simultaneously, the community-based co-facilitator was leaving to pursue a graduate degree. This news was devastating to LOUD members who had bonded with her. She was an outstanding, incredible advocate for them and worked tirelessly to ensure they had opportunities to influence JJS policies. As all of this was occurring, we also found out that funding for her position would be cut. This update was damaging because the community-based facilitator served as a pseudosocial worker. She would help youth find resources such as shelter, food assistance, attend probation meetings and/or court hearings, and help youth navigate different life obstacles. I was able to perform many of these duties, but after the second year, I was fortunate to have a new addition to my family—a baby girl who was born a micro-preemie. Since she was born so early, she faced health challenges, and my priorities shifted. Life-changing events are something that needs to be added to the literature as an important issue that contributes to YPAR success or not.

Finally, the last key issue missing from the literature that must be considered is how group dynamics might change. While LOUD members had co-constructed community agreements, it did not always mean they were followed. Therefore, it is important to continue to revisit community expectations and remind youth of the culture that is being established and nurtured. Additionally, one issue that we did not take into account was how social media can impact group dynamics. For instance, sometimes what members posted affected the group and led to serious disagreements. In other cases, an argument escalated on social media, which resulted in youth saying hurtful words to each other. Ultimately, these arguments would infiltrate the group, and adult facilitators would have to settle the disputes, which at times, impacted the group and project goals. Therefore, it is vital for adult facilitators to be aware of group dynamics and have in place protocols on how to handle youth conflict.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the emancipatory framework of YPAR, which is summarized as follows:

> Grounded in its catalytic nature, we propose that a YPAR critical-epistemological approach leads to the coconstruction of critical knowledges that can, in turn, reframe the question of what counts as knowledge and research, and what constitutes action, in education research and scholarship. Such a critical-epistemological framework must be grounded in the contexts of inequality in which it is to be employed, and developed in juxtaposition to the theoretical and methodological shifts of our time. (Caraballo et al., 2017, p. 330)

As stated above, YPAR fundamentally changes the paradigm of what counts as knowledge and research, how to utilize research to create social action or change, and how research should be a co-endeavor between researchers and facilitators. Furthermore, I have discussed how YPAR projects have demonstrated great promise in promoting youth activism and civic engagement, leadership, critical consciousness, and academic achievement. Most importantly, I have shown how regardless of activities with students or research topics addressed in YPAR, what unites YPAR scholars is a strong commitment to marginalized students and empowering them to seek solutions on the issues that most impact their daily lives. Furthermore, there is a deep commitment to developing authentic, caring relationships with participants so that YPAR scholars are as much mentors as they are educators. Finally, YPAR researchers understand the gravity of developing and fostering youth agency. Youth are well-respected collaborators in this process and are given the responsibility to help create social change. Perhaps, the most important aspect of YPAR "is the realization of the full humanity of young people" and embracing the "potential in all students by offering them opportunities to name, explore, and analyze their experiences…[and they are the] experts of their own lives" (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 5).

Suggested Readings

Caraballo, L., Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., & Morrell, E. (2017). YPAR and critical epistemologies: Rethinking education research. *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), 311–336.

This article is the most recent literature of YPAR in the field of education. It discusses the key elements of YPAR and how it can be utilized to fundamentally change research paradigms.

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2010). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (J. Cammarota & M. Fine, Eds.). New York, NY: Routledge; Taylor and Francis Group.

This edited book provides a unique overview of several YPAR projects found throughout the country. It offers different frameworks utilized within YPAR and bridges theory and practice by bringing together youth participants and scholars in the field.

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators and students*. New York, NY: Routledge; Taylor and Francis Group.

This book offers an unprecedented, in-depth exploration of the Council of Youth Research, which is one of the longest running YPAR programs. The book also provides a step-by-step guidance on how to successfully create a YPAR project.

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