



Researchers' Reflections on Community Engagement Through Participatory Action Research

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“I feel that the only way to be successful in mitigating disaster risk, through a researcher's perspective, is to become a cohesive part of this evolving force [the community] and not an independent actor, if your intentions are truly about benefiting the community.”

-DTSC Member 5

Disaster Trust and Social Change (DTSC) is a lab focused on reducing disaster risk in marginalized Florida communities. One key methodology used by DTSC is Participatory Action Research (PAR). By actively involving community members and stakeholders in the research process, **PAR not only enhances the relevance and impact of research** but also fosters a **more inclusive and equitable approach to knowledge production and social change**. PAR transforms both project outcomes and research professionals by fostering dynamic exchanges of ideas and experiences (Mehdipour, ahead-of-print). **This is especially important for young researchers, PAR can reshape what it means to do research as they move into the field.**

This poster examines the impact of PAR on undergraduate lab members' perceptions of research and community in a social justice context through qualitative surveys and thematic analysis.

PAR: a methodology in which researchers partner with community members in an iterative and cyclical process of observation, action and reflection that allows research questions and processes to be largely driven by community members themselves

Background

- Participants pull from DTSC’s work in Health Zone 1, Jacksonville, Florida (HZ1)
- HZ1 faces compounded social and environmental risks, underscoring the need for spatial justice and sustainable planning
- In HZ1, undergraduate researchers collected survey responses, attended community revitalization events, and community wellness days

Methodology

- We designed survey questions to prompt the lab’s five undergraduate members to reflect on how PAR impacted their relationships with HZ1 residents, the research process, and their perceptions of community and risk reduction.
- We applied thematic analysis (TA) to the survey responses, coding and grouping them into categories to identify key themes.

Acknowledgements



PAR Impacts on Researchers



Facilitates Community Engagement

- Undergraduate researchers have found that regular, genuine interactions with community members foster trust and deeper engagement.
- Building credibility through community leaders facilitated access to residents who otherwise may not have been reached

“Through PAR we learn how the community really ticks. We learn about particular issues residents care about, who they trust, and how we can fit into their greater goal.” DTSC Member 5

Fuller Picture of Vulnerability

- Through PAR, researchers gain a comprehensive view of the social and environmental factors contributing to disaster vulnerability in HZ1

“I have been able to see more tangibly the ways that risks compound in the form of low income, poor health, housing quality, food access, and so on. It is powerful to see these problems compiling in people's lives in person.” DTSC Member 4

New Perspectives on Researcher Positionality

- The researcher’s felt their role become more impactful when approaching as a collaborative partner rather than an outside figure
- Preconceptions of power dynamics between researchers and residents were deconstructed

“PAR has impacted my relationship with residents of HZ1 by helping think about how research can be built around the participants.” DTSC Member 3



References

Mehdipour, H., Prokosch, M., Williams, D. A., Thomas, A., Seymour, B., Conley, J., Von Meding, J., (2024), “The Importance of Belonging: Reflections on a Participatory Action Research Project in Jacksonville, Florida”, Disaster Prevention and Management, ahead-of-print.