



***From the Margins to the Mainstream?
Celebrating and Challenging Participatory Action Research***
Wednesday 11th June, 2025, 10.00-16.15
Collingwood College, Durham University, UK

This conference will celebrate the development and achievements of participatory action research (PAR). Together we will explore the varieties of activities that come under its umbrella, and the role of activists and academics globally from the 1970s onwards in creating the paths that enabled the founding of Durham University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA) in 2009 and the UK Participatory Research Network (UKPRN) in 2014. The conference will celebrate the work of CSJCA and UKPRN and the contributions of many organisations, groups and individuals to their success. At the same time, we will subject the varieties of PAR to a critical lens, asking key questions about the dangers of academic dominance, the persistence of colonialism, extractivism and the implications of increasing recognition and popularity by funders and universities. The event will also mark the forthcoming retirement from Durham University in Autumn 2025 of Sarah Banks, one of the co-founders of CSJCA and UKPRN.

BOOKING: The event is in-person only for participants and booking is essential using this booking link: <https://pay.durham.ac.uk/event-durham/from-the-margins-to-the-mainstream-celebrating-and-challenging-participatory-action-research> **Early booking is advised** as places are limited.

Fees: Waged - £45; Students and people on low incomes - £20; Unwaged members of community organisations – free. We are grateful to the Dept of Sociology, Durham University and UKPRN for contributing to the funding for this event.

OUTLINE PROGRAMME

- 10.00 **Coffee**
- 10.30 **Welcome from CSJCA and UKPRN, introduction to the event and to each other**
- 10.45 **Opening Panel: Re-examining PAR - past, present and future**, chaired by Prof Sarah Banks (Durham University) with Dr Rajesh Tandon (Participatory Research in Asia, India) and Prof Budd Hall (University of Victoria, Canada), both Co-chairs, UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education; Prof Mary Brydon-Miller (University of Louisville, USA); Yvonne Moffat (Community Researcher, UK) and Prof Gina Porter (Durham University, UK).
- 11.30 **Small group discussions** (with coffee)
- 12.00 **Plenary discussion**
- 12.30 **Lunch**
- 13.15 **Workshops round 1** (choose 1 out of 3 workshops)
- 14.15 **Break**
- 14.30 **Workshops round 2** (choose 1 out of 3 workshops)
- 15.30 **Break**
- 15.45 **Messages from the workshops about the future of PAR and closing plenary to acknowledge the contribution of Sarah Banks.**
- 16.30 **Close**

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In many countries participatory action research (PAR) is becoming popular, moving from the margins towards the mainstream. Its *action* orientation fits with research funders' concern for research impact (making a difference to real world issues); its *participatory* philosophy fits with agendas for public and citizen engagement; its valuing of *people with lived experience as co-researchers* chimes with the de-colonising imperative in higher education and public policy. At the same time the growth of digital technologies provides opportunities for extending the reach of PAR, with possibilities for global networks and inclusion of people previously not reached, while also excluding those without access to technology.

This context provides scope for the principles and practices of PAR to influence mainstream research agendas. Yet it also increases the threat of co-option and dilution of PAR as participatory methods and techniques are applied without being embedded in commitment to, and competence in, a more holistic and value-based PAR approach. This has always been a danger for PAR, but more so now as its popularity increases. We see tensions between means and ends; community control and co-option; liberation and protection; inclusion and exclusion. These are familiar and perennial ethical challenges, framed in the abstract, but how do we handle them now in our everyday practice?

WORKSHOPS: ROUND 1

WORKSHOP 1. The past in the present: navigating difficult histories in pursuit of hopeful futures in decolonial PAR, *Caitlin Nunn, Dana Almousselli, Ferdos Beit Lafteh, Mariam Zorba & Senna Yousef (Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging youth research team, a collaboration between academics, artists, Manchester Museum, and young people from migrant backgrounds).*

How do our personal, communal, and institutional histories shape our contemporary collaborations? What are the necessary conditions for naming and navigating these histories and their legacies in our projects? And what is at stake in this process, and for whom? In this workshop, we consider the (im)possibilities of decolonial PAR. We explore what it looks and feels like to strive for decolonisation: the difficulty and discomfort, humour and hope. And the centrality of care – for ourselves, each other, the work, and those it seeks to engage.

WORKSHOP 2. Participatory research with women in prison, *Gaynor Trueman (NE Sex Workers' Forum), Kate O'Brien and Alison Jobe (Dept of Sociology, Durham University).*

This workshop focuses on participatory action research with women in prison. The workshop draws from facilitators experience(s) of research with women in prison, including participatory/peer research with women who were involved in sex work prior to custody, and participatory theatre with mothers in prison. In the workshop, we reflect on the possibilities offered by participatory research for women in prison and the challenges of undertaking participatory research in the prison environment.

WORKSHOP 3. Arts from and for the community: reflecting on the technocratic turn in the mainstreaming of PAR, *Sui-Ting Kong (Department of Sociology, Durham University) and Clara Cheung (Hongkonger community artist).*

PAR often employs a myriad of creative methods, usually in combination of the conventional ones, to enable diverse voices and experiences to be expressed and included in knowledge production. With the mainstreaming of PAR, there seems to be more allowance for equating the use of creative or artistic methods with participatory action research. This experiential workshop will engage participants in artistic sense making of individual and collective experiences, and reflection on how this method can be used in participatory and non-participatory ways.

WORKSHOPS ROUND 2

WORKSHOP 4. The balancing act: Negotiating participation and protection in research with children and young people on violence and abuse, *Cait Jobson, Janelle Rabe, Lynne Cairns (Dept of Sociology, Durham University).*

In this experiential and reflective workshop, we consider different ways to balance children and young people's rights in the micro-moments of pockets of participation in research such as flexible consent, co-creating safety and mapping shared understandings. Rather than a rule-book, we hope to reflect together on ways we can make 'real' rights by balancing participation with protection, anchored in the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child. Through creative and participatory activities, we will discuss practical examples from our three PhD projects with children and young people on violence and abuse.

WORKSHOP 5. Legal PAR: Working with the judiciary on issues of intimate partner violence, *Dr. Kristin Kalsem (Charles Hartsock Professor of Law and Co-Founder of the Nathaniel R. Jones Center for Race, Gender, and Social Justice, University of Cincinnati, USA)*

This workshop will introduce "legal PAR," emphasizing its synergies with critical race and feminist theories. Specifically, the benefits and challenges of legal PAR will be examined in the context of an ongoing project to train judges in best practices in intimate partner violence cases. Participants also will participate in two PAR methods that have been central to this project, Asset Mapping and Group Level Assessment.

WORKSHOP 6. Thinking participatively: Challenging the western mindset, *Jane Springett (Emeritus Professor, University of Alberta, Canada and UKPRN; co-author with Margaret Ledwith of 'Participatory Practice, Community based Action for Transformative Change', 2022).*

This participatory reflexive workshop will explore the mind set required to do participatory practice/research. What does it really mean to think participatively? Why is it important for how we act in the world? Is it possible with a "western" mind set? If not, how do we transform the way we think and act in our research practice or is our social wiring too entrenched?

THE VENUE

Durham is a small, historic cathedral city. Collingwood College is one of the colleges of Durham University, about a 30-minute walk or a short bus/taxi ride from the train station.

QUERIES

For booking issues please contact: conferenceadministration.service@durham.ac.uk

For queries about the programme please contact: s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk