
‘Choosing’ participatory research: partnerships in space–time

Fran Klodawsky

Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6, Canada; e-mail: fran_klodawsky@carleton.ca

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Abstract. Participatory action research has received increasing attention in geography in recent years, with numerous discussions about how best to proceed and lessons learned from past efforts. There has been less interest, though, in critically probing the circumstances under which participatory research takes place: in other words, the sociospatial contexts within which such research approaches are *chosen*. One explanation may be that participatory action researchers sometimes infer that the reasons for their choices are primarily ethical and political. In this paper, I consider this and other assumptions about participatory action research, drawing upon my own involvement in two action research projects in Ottawa, Canada. I argue that reflecting on this question is a particularly timely undertaking, given the ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’ in which professionalization and partnerships are becoming more prominent. I begin by reviewing what has been said about participatory action research and the circumstances under which this approach is likely to be selected, and reflect on how these discussions might be enhanced by linking their circumstances specifically to emerging analyses about spaces of neoliberalism. Using these insights, I then examine the sociospatial context for the two studies and how their characteristics had specific effects on their methodological choices. All of these elements provide the scaffolding for consideration of the rationalities that supported the usage of participatory research in one study and the lack of engagement with this approach in the other.

Participatory action research has received increasing attention in geography in recent years, with numerous discussions about how best to proceed and lessons learned from past efforts (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Pain, 2003; 2004; Pain and Francis, 2003; Smith, 2001). There has been less interest, though, in critically probing the circumstances under which participatory research takes place: in other words, the sociospatial contexts within which such research approaches are *chosen*. One reason may be that participatory action researchers sometimes infer that the reasons for their choices are primarily ethical and political:

“Its most distinguishing features are a commitment to the democratization and demystification of research and the utilization of results to improve the lives of community collaborators” (Breitbart, 2003, page 162).

In this paper, I want to think about this assumption and its relation to space–time, drawing upon my own involvement in two action research projects.

Reflecting on why one chooses, or doesn’t, to engage in participatory action research—the focus of this paper—is a particularly timely undertaking. The “actually existing neoliberalisms” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) in which we are living have thrown up many challenges for activists interested in promoting social justice (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Larner and Craig, 2005). Heretofore straightforward assumptions about allies and foes, principled options, and dangerous strategies, have become destabilized. Particularly relevant is a deepening appreciation of the “transformative and adaptive capacity of [neoliberalism as a] ... far-reaching political project” (Peck and Tickell, 2002, page 380), and the implications of this insight for thinking about partnerships and professionalism in relation to participatory action research (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Kothari, 2005; Larner, 2005; Larner and Butler, 2005; Larner and Craig, 2005).

Since participatory action research is necessarily a collaborative venture—in the cases examined here, university–community partnerships are explicitly involved—investigating why participatory action research was chosen in one but not the other of two research projects, contributes to a greater understanding of the “multiple spatialities and subjectivities of neoliberalization, and how these are being assembled in particular spheres” (Larner, 2005, page 14). Given growing pressures on the voluntary sector to use evidence-based policy recommendations as the basis for intervention, this paper provides yet another perspective from which to think critically about the value of this orientation (Laforest and Orsini, 2005).

The projects I examine both involve action research in Ottawa, Canada. The first is the Panel Study on Homelessness (PSH), whose purpose was to explore, over time, the pathways into and out of homelessness experienced by a broad range of homeless people in the city (Aubry et al, 2003; Klodawsky et al, 2006). To this end, 412 diverse individuals were interviewed in depth in 2002–03 and 255 were interviewed again in 2004–05. The other project—the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)—began in 2004 with the goal of informing the City of Ottawa about internationally recognized best practices in the realm of ‘diversity and gender’ inclusive local governance, and through this means, engaging formally with municipal officials to revise policies and practices accordingly.

The very different engagement of these two projects with participatory action research (PAR) offers an intriguing empirical terrain for the problem at hand, especially since many other elements of the projects were quite similar. Both were university–community partnerships that grew out of a grounded history of involvement at the local level. For both, the federal government was a key funder, with the municipality acting as an important junior partner. Both projects espoused social justice goals, promoting greater political and social inclusiveness and material equity for residents of Ottawa and beyond. I write this paper as one of two lead researchers of the PSH and one of two academic advisors to the CAWI⁽¹⁾.

According to Pain (2003),

“The keystone of participatory research is that it involves those conventionally ‘researched’ in some or all stages of research, from problem definition through to dissemination and action. Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher. Education and knowledge building are also viewed as important outcomes” (page 652).

Over time, participatory research became a central thrust of the CAWI but not of the PSH. The PSH operated more conventionally, with a governance structure consisting of two advisory committees: one committee was comprised of researchers; and the other of community representatives, who provided feedback at the prompting of the two lead researchers. The interviews that comprised the core of this project were carried out with the help of a full-time project coordinator and eleven part-time interviewers. While some effort was made to involve one or more persons with some experience of being homeless in the community advisory committee, most members were employees of organizations that worked with homeless persons, such as emergency homeless shelters, refuges for battered women, and services geared to youth, aboriginal peoples, and/or newcomers. The remaining membership consisted of federal, provincial, and municipal government representatives.

CAWI’s mission has been to engage in action research to draw upon information about ‘best’ ‘diversity and gender’ inclusive governance practices internationally, to evaluate how they might be revised to address the particularities of the Ottawa context,

⁽¹⁾ In the PSH, the other lead investigator is Dr Tim Aubry, University of Ottawa. In CAWI, the other academic advisor is Dr Caroline Andrew, University of Ottawa.

and to promote these revised innovations at City Hall. This project began by building networks of diverse women in Ottawa and drawing upon their expertise in increasingly complex ways. The CAWI has been managed by a steering committee composed of City of Ottawa managers and grassroots women as well as two academic research advisors, and has benefited greatly from the full-time help of a very skilled community organizer. At every stage, the input of diverse grassroots women has been sought and, over time, these women have become more fully engaged in analyzing the innovations, and in thinking strategically about how best to promote them to City Hall bureaucrats and politicians. In addition, these networks have been involved in determining how to convince the municipality of the benefits of being more inclusive in its strategic planning activities overall. One especially noteworthy outcome thus far has been a carefully constructed, nine-month training initiative to link marginalized women with mentors for more effective lobbying at City Hall. Simultaneously, a somewhat distinct, yet equally diverse, group of CAWI members has been working with City of Ottawa staff to develop a 'gender and quality' lens and practice with regard to strategic planning throughout city offices and activities.

In this paper I reflect critically on the differences and similarities between these two projects with regard to 'choosing' PAR. To do this, I begin by reviewing what has been said about PAR and the circumstances under which this approach is likely to be selected. I reflect on how these discussions might be enhanced by linking their circumstances specifically to emerging analyses about spaces of neoliberalism. Using these insights, I then examine the sociospatial context for the two studies and how their characteristics had specific effects on methodological choices. All of these elements provide the scaffolding for my consideration of the rationalities that supported CAWI's usage of participatory research and the PSH's lack of engagement with this approach. I argue that participatory action research is an outcome of embedded time–space processes that engage with the art of the possible.

Participatory action research

Among PAR researchers, there is considerable agreement over its primary distinguishing features: substantive involvement by research subjects in the research process, and "making social change" (Stoecker, 1999, page 841). Yet under this broad umbrella there are differences over what constitutes meaningful involvement and how social change is to be evaluated. For some, a key element of social change has to do with qualities of the interactions themselves, where PAR's key distinction is that the "*means* by which data are co-generated and interpretations debated are a key part of the change process" (Breitbart, 2003, page 162, original emphasis). Practically, such arguments suggest that both the 'what' and the 'how' of knowledge production require close attention. Stoecker's admonition about the importance of recognizing "forms of knowledge, such as folk culture, not normally seen as valid" (1999, page 841) is related to this concern, as is Maguire's feminist argument regarding voice:

"The telling of, listening to, affirmation of, reflecting on, and analysis of personal stories and experiences 'from the ground up' are potentially empowering action research strategies drawn from women's organizing" (2001, page 62; see also Mohan, 2001).

Others agree that it is not so much the particular methods that are at issue—both qualitative and quantitative approaches are seen as legitimate—as the epistemological assumptions on the meaning of research:

"Action researchers turn their backs on 'conventional' disengagement (whether intended or not) with the phenomena studied, equating this disengagement with naive assumptions about objectivity and impartiality" (Hoggart et al, 2002, page 290).

Naivety, though, is problematic not only with regard to the possibility of being an objective researcher: it also pertains to how PAR collaborators ascertain the efficacy of knowledge for social change. Stoecker (1999) warns that “There is a concern ... that participation may be promoted unreflectively, seen as an empowerment strategy that powerful outsiders provide for powerless insiders” (page 842), without ensuring that there is a substantive shift in power relations. In the realm of development studies, an important contribution has been to examine critically the recent interest of mainstream organizations such as the World Bank, in PAR-inspired methodologies. Kothari (2005) contends that “although ... many participatory advocates and practitioners are concerned with decentering the authority of the development professional, its co-optation into mainstream development discourse and practice ... has ironically reinforced the centrality of Western knowledge and expertise” (page 437).

Gaventa and Cornwall’s primary concern is to critically locate PAR processes within a diffuse Foucauldian field of power/knowledge. They assert that there are dangers as well as benefits to PAR, including a too facile view of ‘community’ or ‘the people’:

“Little attention is generally given to the positionality of those who participate and what this might mean in terms of the versions they present ...” (2001, page 75).

These scholars argue that critical reflexivity should take place as part of a PAR approach, at every stage of involvement:

“Participatory research which becomes only ‘consultation’ with excluded groups at one point in time is limited, for it prevents the possibility that investigation and action over time may lead to a change in the knowledge of people themselves, and therefore a change in understanding of one’s own interests and priorities. Not only must production of alternative knowledge be complemented by action upon it, but the participants in the knowledge process must equally find spaces for self-critical investigation and analysis of their own reality, in order to gain more authentic knowledge as a basis for action or representation to others. Such critical self learning is important not only for the weak and powerless, but also for the more powerful actors who may themselves be trapped in received versions of their own situation” (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001, page 76).

Drawing on their own field experiences, Gaventa and Cornwall identify the importance of taking a multiscalar, holistic, and long-term approach to PAR that involves constant checking to ascertain whether the activities are still ‘on track’ as far as key goals are concerned. Although neither is a geographer, their recommendations on how to work with large-scale organizations suggest an appreciation for the “social construction of scale” analysis that has become an important hallmark of critical human geography (Delaney and Leitner, 1997):

“Rather than seeing participatory research as only a tool or mobilizing the powerless against the powerful, this approach takes a more nuanced view, to explore how participatory methods can facilitate change at multiple levels, among multiple actors. Such an approach is not to wish away conflict ... but it is to suggest that to change the boundaries of the possible, especially in a highly globalized world in which issues and actors are so interrelated, means to bring about change in multiple spaces and arenas, and to link those processes of change through new and accountable forms of interconnection. This approach also argues that the potential for large-scale change through participatory research is determined as much by the quality of the relationships of one set of actors to another, and the extent to which they each address power relations, as by the capacity or strength of any one set of actors in the process” (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001, pages 78–79).

In other words, PAR is not an abstract ideal but rather about the art of the possible—understood reflexively—in a variety of venues and spaces. Change becomes not only distinct adjustments that are experienced by ‘the powerless’ but, rather, a multitude of ongoing shifts both within and between individuals and groups within space–time. Gaventa and Cornwall recognize both PAR’s tremendous potential but also the challenges that lie at every stage of involvement.

Choosing participatory action research: part 1

Through an insightful overview of who is doing what in North American community based research (CBR), Stoecker (2004) locates PAR within a broader field that includes action research, community development, community organizing and participatory research. CBR consists of “partnership[s] between professional researchers and community groups integrating research and action for social justice” (Stoecker, 2004, page 1) and, within this approach to ‘engaged’ scholarship, he highlights a philosophical and conceptual divide between those with primarily functional worldviews and those who understand the world in conflict-laden terms. He links the former with American psychologist Kurt Levin’s collaborative university–community initiatives and the latter with liberation pedagogy and the work of Paulo Freire (Stoecker, 2004; see also Wadsworth, 2005). Traditionally, action research tended to adopt the former perspective while participatory action research was more closely linked to the latter. Today, though, appreciation of these different traditions and what they imply has become blurred:

“you can’t depend on knowing someone’s practice based on the labels they use. Today’s action researcher is as likely to be doing participatory research as today’s participatory researcher is to be doing action research” (Stoecker, 2004, page 4).

The common ideal of CBR is what is seen as the defining centre of PAR:

“the research question should be generated primarily from community residents, and ... they should play a decisive role throughout such a process” (Stoecker, 2004, page 5).

The extent to which this ideal is achieved, though, has much to do with the context within which a CBR is embedded. Actual practices depend on a wide variety of factors, including: the philosophical orientation of key actors and/or organizations (functionalist versus a conflict-oriented worldview), the institutional setting (that is, the extent to which participating organizations are ‘mainstream’ or ‘grassroots’); interactions among, and the relative strength of, five typical sets of actors (researchers, community residents, community workers, students, and funders); and the initiating impulse for the research (including where the idea came from, its relation to other community objectives, implementation ideas, and the impact of funders). Actual practices also depend on the outcomes of grappling with (or ignoring) a series of creative tensions, including ‘community versus academy’, ‘research versus action’, ‘training students versus solving problems’ and ‘service versus social change’ (Stoecker, 2004, pages 7–9). Another significant distinction is between organized and disorganized communities. Whereas organized communities are characterized by a sophisticated sense of how research might be used to attain a particular goal, within disorganized settings research is just as likely to be primarily a community-organizing strategy to help mobilize a group around an issue.

In this view, PAR becomes one possible outcome of a series of negotiations among situated actors who share an interest to engage in collaborative research for social justice goals. PAR is enabled when community residents have an ‘authentic’ opportunity to actively engage in research activities and when they are able to make links between the research they do, the social justice goals they share, and making social change.

Choosing participatory action research: part 2

Stoecker's analysis is particularly insightful in exposing that the decision to use a PAR approach is the outcome of a complex series of negotiations among multiple and multiply situated actors. It delivers far less, though, with regard to the insights and connections that some scholars have made between research choices and the sociospatial dynamics of the current period (Carroll and Shaw, 2001; Law and Urry, 2004). Yet, without such an appreciation, it is difficult to explain the different paths chosen by the PSH and the CAWI. How an analysis of these broader linkages should be approached has been aided significantly by Bondi and Laurie's (2005) recent editorial and writing efforts to think through:

“how the negotiation of the spaces of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002, page 349) deploy or are bound up with processes of professionalization ...

Individually and collectively [the articles] help to illuminate links between the framing context of neoliberal restructuring and the ways in which professionalisation involves processes of representation, negotiation and embodiment as activism feeds into ‘scaled up’ policy making. In doing so, these studies elaborate how the spaces of neoliberalism are ‘worked’ in two related senses, namely how neoliberalisation incorporates, co-opts, constrains and depletes activism, and how professional(ised) subjects inhabit and sometimes subvert the opportunities neoliberalisation opens up” (Bondi and Laurie, 2005, pages 394–395).

Two key insights are implicit in Bondi and Laurie's efforts. The first is that neoliberalisation is a dynamic emerging rationality. Scholars have begun to document how neoliberalization, as an open-ended, fragmented, but coalescing set of processes, is evolving in ever more complex spatially situated ways (Larner, 2005; Larner and Craig, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002). One approach is to look at neoliberalization as a flexible governmentality with relevance in a variety of realms and settings and the capability to respond quickly and creatively to critiques levelled against its initial policy and programmatic manifestations. “In this context, it is more useful to see the current moment as involving innovation, experimentation and contestation rather than the rolling out of a coherent programme” (Larner, 2005, page 1).

The second insight involves recognizing that ‘subversion’ under these conditions is not a straightforward endeavour. Given the dynamic, context-sensitive, multifaceted, and multisectoral manifestations of neoliberalization, Bondi and Laurie (2005) acknowledge both new pitfalls and new possibilities. They recognize the enticing nature of neoliberal rhetoric that promotes “subjects as self-governing individuals who exercise economic and political choices as citizen-consumers” (Bondi and Laurie, 2005, page 398). Rather than using this insight to warn about the dangers of cooptation of any involvement with neoliberal governance, they suggest a strategy that attempts to work both “with and against the state” (Andrew and Klodawsky, 2006):

“Drawing especially on feminist geography methodologies (for example, Gibson-Graham 1994), we argue that approaching neoliberalism as a constructed social terrain ... turns notions of inevitability into resources in the long-term political project of ‘deliberalizing’ space” (Bondi and Laurie, 2005, page 399).

For PAR practitioners intent on promoting democratization of the research process and ‘making social change’, the challenges are formidable and there is considerable debate over the likelihood of success (Craig and Porter, 2003; Kothari, 2005). In this paper I respond to the arguments that the changing meanings of research, professionalization, and partnership are worth investigating at close range (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Laforest and Orsini, 2005; Larner and Butler, 2005) and that PAR research is an appropriate focus for such an examination (Kothari, 2005).

Setting the context: Ottawa, Canada, 1990–2005

In 2001 Ottawa, Ontario, was Canada's fourth-largest city, with a population of about 774 000 (Statistics Canada, 2002). Its metropolitan population of about 1 million included significant residential and employment clusters in the adjoining province of Quebec. For the bulk of the period after World War 2, Ottawa, as the seat of Canada's government, enjoyed a very stable employment and housing regime. In the 1990s though, the city's long sojourn as a stable government town began to unravel when the federal government, under pressure to reduce deficits and lower taxes, initiated a major public sector downsizing effort, as well as cutting back health and social welfare transfers to the provinces (Peck, 2001; Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 1999). Soon after, provincial electors brought to power a neoconservative political party intent on 'reinventing government', especially with regard to reducing payments on equity and social security matters, and promoting neoliberal rationalities on how social services should be shaped and delivered (Ralph et al, 1997).

Among the numerous outcomes of these changes has been a growing sociospatial polarization of residents within the city, based on income but also, increasingly, on ethnicity, as growing numbers of aboriginal peoples, refugees, and immigrants select Ottawa as their new home (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2005). Municipal governance arrangements have also been radically adjusted, in response to broader debates about the necessary trade-offs between efficiency and equity (Sancton, 2005). In 2001 the 'old' City of Ottawa was amalgamated with eleven area municipalities and the 'old' second tier regional government, to become a single municipal entity. The challenges of merging multiple political and bureaucratic cultures have had numerous repercussions at City Hall, especially within the context of limited financial maneuverability. A comprehensive 'growth management plan'—Ottawa 20/20—has been one ambitious response:

"Ottawa 20/20 is the result of a dynamic process where citizens, in collaboration with City staff, have articulated a shared vision for the new City of Ottawa City Council decided to ... establish a set of principles to guide the planning activity at the heart of that process These principles are:

- A Caring and Inclusive City
- A Creative City Rich in Heritage, Unique in Identity
- A Green and Environmentally Sensitive City
- A City of Distinct, Liveable Communities
- An Innovative City Where Prosperity is Shared Among All
- A Responsible and Responsive City
- A Healthy and Active City" (City of Ottawa, 2003, pages 3–4).

The process generated a series of plans (Human Services, Employment, Transportation, Land Use, etc) that link principles to the complex tasks that the City is being asked to perform. In the context of the substantive focus of this paper on homelessness and gender equality, the five elements that link the principle of a 'caring and inclusive city' to the various plans are particularly noteworthy:

- Promote diversity and inclusion
- Protect local identities
- Engage citizens
- Ensure access to basics
- Enhance personal safety and security" (City of Ottawa, 2003, page 12).

Housing's acknowledged significance in the document, in relation to 'access to the basics', reflected long-standing municipal involvement in promoting affordable and nonprofit housing, as well as a growing consensus on the part of large municipalities across Canada that senior governments needed to give more attention to this issue

(Carter and MacAfee, 1990; Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 1999). Gender's much more muted presence reflected a much less widely perceived problem. However, its mention in the detailed discussion of 'a caring and inclusive city' in association with a recognition that diversity also was an important emerging issue, was felt to be a victory on the part of local feminists. Understanding the contexts within which the PSH and the CAWI emerged is not possible without an appreciation of their interactions with the City of Ottawa within this dynamic context. The interest of the 20/20 Plan in 'engaging citizens' as one of the elements of 'a caring and inclusive city' was echoed in two 'responsible and responsive city' principles: (1) promoting collaborative community building, and (2) promoting partnerships. Indeed, the plan asserted that "Partnerships with the private, public and voluntary sectors, along with school boards, colleges and universities, and other levels of government, will be essential to achieving many Ottawa 20/20 goals" (City of Ottawa, 2003, page 17).

While there is nothing new in the recognition that municipal governments in Canada often operate through various partnerships, including with community groups, (Valverde, 1995), current activities suggest, at the very least, a new level of interdependence. Whereas previous arrangements reflected understandings that 'the city' and 'the community' were two quite distinct realms, with City Hall clearly in the lead, this distinctiveness now appears to be on the wane, to be replaced by institutional arrangements of greater hybridity. Notes reflecting the perspective of one City of Ottawa staffer in the context of a community 'roundtable' discussion on how best to address the needs of Ottawa's 'high-risk homeless women population' are suggestive of how the city and the community are becoming more necessarily intertwined in their efforts to address social needs:

- “● We are co-creators. We are in an experiment of rolling out a community plan. The City is just one agency involved.
- It is important to identify that each has a part. All have the opportunity to influence what happens.
- My role is at provincial ministry tables and at tables involving other sectors such as health.
- Funding allocations will play out in the next few months. I am frustrated that this group may not be ready and funding will pass by.
- All need to link to the community plan. Ask city staff for assistance in doing this” (Community Capacity Building to End and Prevent Homelessness, 2005).

The perspective driving these comments seems to be that without an agreed-to 'community plan' reflecting the active 'buy-in' of interested stakeholders, senior government funding opportunities would not be available. Municipal staff might have some opportunities to promote various policy perspectives at provincial 'tables' that were not available to other actors, but municipalities' limited financial maneuverability means that local government and community actors were equally dependent on senior governmental specifications about integrated community planning efforts.

Coupled with these developments in municipal–community relations, Laforest and Orsini (2005) have documented the growing pressure for national-level voluntary organizations to engage in evidence-based policy making. They raise important questions about the extent to which this orientation pits these voluntary organizations against their local partners, who are less likely to have the means to carry out such research activities and who may object to the conclusions that are drawn from such, usually conventional research practices. In this context, participatory action research becomes more marginalized and denigrated.

Both the particular relations between the City of Ottawa and each of the PSH and the CAWI, as well as the circumstances under which funds were garnered, hold clues

about the choice of PAR. With these matters in mind, along with the above discussions, my focus now shifts to engaging these ideas via an examination of each of the two projects.

The Panel Study on Homelessness (PSH) and the National Housing Initiative

The PSH was one particularly ambitious effort in a myriad of engagements with the Alliance to End Homelessness (AEH). Over time, this network of local social service and nonprofit housing organizations developed a vision of being “an inclusive community that takes responsibility for ending homelessness by ensuring that everyone has the right and support to define, access and sustain housing of their choice”, and a mandate of “working collaboratively to eliminate homelessness by gaining a better understanding of homelessness and developing and implementing strategies to end it” (Alliance to End Homelessness, 2005, page 1). University–community research initiatives have been an on-going element in the Alliance’s history, with an important driver being the respect that the AEH had garnered for the academic ‘rigour’ of its studies and its ability to generate statistically significant evidence about various trends.

The Alliance was first established in the mid-1990s, in the wake of provincial shifts which negatively impacted the housing and welfare circumstances of low-income and moderate-income households, resulting in dramatic increases in visible homelessness (Layton, 2000). Both nonprofit housing agencies and social service organizations recognized that cross-sectoral pressure and engagement would be required to contest these developments. One key problem was identified to be the assumption that people were homeless because of particular individual-level characteristics which were in need of change through targeted social services, rather than because of structural housing-market and labour-market imperfections. In 2001 there was consensus within AEH that the best means of garnering evidence against a purely ‘individual problems’ argument was through a longitudinal study constructed as a conventionally rigorous approach to data collection and analysis. Undoubtedly, this decision was influenced by more general debates about evidence-based policy making (Laforest and Orsini, 2005).

As a result, the PSH was set up to address three goals: (1) to explore systematically the extent to which homeless people in Ottawa were diverse in characteristics and in reasons for homelessness; (2) to examine their complex pathways into and out of homelessness over time in order to provide longitudinal insights into who would be more or less likely to exit homelessness; and (3) to provide bureaucrats and front-line workers with related insights about the various subpopulations of persons under study. There was a clear interest in a systematic analysis that would be insightful with regard to the multidimensional nature of peoples’ experiences of homelessness, and what this implied for program development and implementation (Klodawsky et al, 2006).

The survey instrument consisted 157 close-ended questions and standardized self-report measures, as well a numerous opportunities for those being interviewed to elaborate qualitatively on their responses. The questionnaires were administered by eleven interviewers, who conducted one-on-one interviews with the respondents, usually in a private setting at the shelter or centre where the person had been recruited for the study. Many homeless people expressed their appreciation that someone seemed to be interested in their situations, although many also found the 90–120 minute interviews to be demanding. Ten dollars was given to each individual who participated in the process, to recognize their contribution to the study (Klodawsky et al, 2006).

The 412 individuals we interviewed were drawn from fourteen different shelters and three drop-in programs. The sampling plan was organized to maximize the overall diversity of those we spoke to. As a result, we heard from about eighty people in each of five equal size groups: adult females, adult males, female youth, male youth

(where ‘youth’ was defined as between 16 and 19 years of age), and adults living with at least one child under 16. Prior to data collection, on-site visits at each of the shelters gave us a chance to explain the reasons for the study and to enlist the help of shelter staff. These visits were an invaluable opportunity to present the draft questionnaire and receive input on how to improve it. Just one of the many positive outcomes was learning about the extent to which occupants of shelters for women and for families consisted of newcomers to Canada, some of whom would require cultural interpretation if they were going to answer the questionnaire. The shelter employees assigned to this project were responsible for approaching residents, introducing the study to them, requesting their participation according to closely detailed ethical guidelines, and communicating with the panel study coordinator (Klodawsky et al, 2006).

PSH funding had its origins in a new federal government initiative—the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI)—established in 1998 amid growing arguments that homelessness was becoming a national emergency. The NHI bears many hallmarks of neoliberal ideologies (Jessop, 2002). On the one hand, the ideas that ‘smaller is better’ in the realm of government and that decision-making authority should be vested as near as possible to affected populations influenced the decision to situate the federal government as a facilitator and coordinator for community responses to homelessness (Smith, 2004). On the other hand, the criteria that governed how the funds should be used were closely managed from above, around quite particular ideas regarding the problem as well as its most likely solutions. Rather than any effort being made to address what many felt was the root cause—a severe lack of affordable housing—focus was placed on how better to coordinate services and to ensure that homeless people were no longer visible on the streets (Hulchanski, 2002).

The NHI constructed legitimate participants in the community planning process as a series of stakeholders, including senior and local governments, community and social services organizations and homeless individuals themselves. With regard to the homeless:

“An October 2001 NSH research report ... suggested that, beyond helping clients in shelters and other facilities, homeless people have significant potential to be involved in two areas of governance: sitting on boards and committees, and being involved in policy consultations and plans. That Canadian Policy Research Network report concluded, ‘When agencies serving homeless people simply provide them with a service, the tendency is to maintain the status quo By contrast ... involving clients in governance or work can lead to real change in clients’ lives’” (Smith, 2004, page 20).

Thus, the orientation that shaped the Canadian response to homelessness was one that elided recognition of the need for structural change. For community-based actors, the NHI provided additional funds and support for the better coordination of the myriad services and supports that homeless people need to cope with their untenable situations, as well as some support for research. Funding was distributed primarily through a municipal-level management structure (in Ottawa’s case, the City of Ottawa), after a credible community plan had been approved.

Within the AEH, the possibility of a participatory approach was raised early on, but community workers discouraged this choice, identifying the chaotic lives of homeless persons as a significant barrier to research success. More generally, the normative idea that homeless people themselves (as opposed to the circumstances in which they find themselves) are risky and unreliable undoubtedly reinforced this reaction (Wright, 1997). In Stoecker’s (2004) terms, the AEH was an organized community within which homeless individuals were a disorganized group. Although effort certainly was made to encourage feedback from homeless people about the PSH instruments and approach, the participatory-research ideal of involving homeless people more and more fully in

the design and implementation of the research was not central to the PSH's objectives of challenging the accepted governmental framing of the homelessness problem and its remedies. Given the PSH's interest in shifting policy thinking at the local, provincial, and federal levels, one interpretation is that the PSH wanted to use its credibility—an outcome of the methodologies chosen as well as of the credentials of the academics who led the research—to engage in 'scale jumping' on the issue of specifying just what the homelessness problem was (Smith, 1993). The City of Ottawa fully supported this effort—it was the first funder to support a longitudinal approach. The NHI has responded very favorably to the research and has incorporated some of its insights and recommendations into the second phase of funding for the program, with some greater recognition of the important policy links between homelessness and housing affordability. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this recognition will result in greater senior government activity in the field of affordable housing.

City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) and Status of Women Canada

The CAWI is the latest effort by a loose but long-standing network of feminist scholars and municipal politicians to make local governance more inclusive of the needs and concerns of diverse residents. In 1992 feminist organizing around the issue of women's entitlements in Ottawa's public and private spaces created a new organization called Women's Action Centre Against Violence. But throughout the 1990s this organization and other local feminist initiatives were preoccupied with a search for secure funding, in an environment of rapidly diminishing and increasingly restrictive funding opportunities, and growing service demands from women adversely affected by economic restructuring and welfare reform. Little expansive organizing was carried out, especially with regard to governance practices at City Hall.

In the late 1990s the adoption of the International Union of Local Authorities' Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities provided an opportunity to launch a new project involving community, municipality, and university actors. In conjunction with adopting the declaration as a guiding principle at City Hall, the municipality supported a partnership approach to research the question of whether gender disparities were evident in the provision of municipal services. Analysis indicated that ethnic minority and poor women were especially disadvantaged and that, in general, although there were salutary piecemeal practices, there was no overall framework for promoting gender equality (Andrew et al, 2004). The CAWI grew out of this initiative, as a second phase whose initial intent was to research and promote appropriate 'good' practices in gender inclusive local governance, drawing from an international network of scholars and activists⁽²⁾ From the start, a key motivation for the initiative was to acknowledge that Ottawa was changing rapidly and becoming much more ethnically and racially diverse.

Both phases were enabled because a federal agency—Status of Women Canada—offered funds to women's community organizations to engage in action research. In contrast to the NHI, Status of Women Canada (SWC) was established in the mid-1970s as one result of an ambitious Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Its original vision involved community organizations carrying out lobbying and research activities to make government more sensitive to the situations of women (Brodie, 1995). Despite multiple experiences of restructuring and retrenchment, some elements of this early vision remained part of SWC, including the Women's Program, whose mandate throughout the period was to support "the work of women's and other equality-seeking

⁽²⁾ The organization Women in Cities International (<http://www.femmesetvilles.org>) constitutes the clearest encapsulation of such research and activity.

organizations to remove barriers to women's full participation in Canadian society" (SWC, 2003). In 1996, as a result of a wide-ranging consultation on how best to use the limited funds available, a set of guiding principles was identified:

"In working with women's organizations and other partners, the Women's Program will:

- involve those most directly affected by the problems in identifying solutions;
- recognize the interconnectedness of women's equality issues;
- acknowledge the diversity of women and their experiences; and
- understand the systemic nature of women's inequality" (SWC, 2003).

Given the SWC's miniscule funds⁽³⁾ in relation to the ambitious nature of its mandate, one interesting outcome, certainly influenced by neoliberal governmentalities, was to carefully specify links between principles, mandate, and objectives with an emphasis on actions (including action research) "which will result in progress on women's equality issues" (SWC, 2003).

Clearly, SWC's explicit focus on broad-based social change to advance women's equality provided a much more friendly terrain for choosing PAR than did NHI's more managerial orientation towards homelessness. Moreover, SWC's focus unambiguously reinforced the feminist perspectives of local organizers to ensure that the voices of women who had typically been marginalized in municipal decision making would, in this initiative, be privileged. These similar worldviews about the importance of ensuring that the voices of those most directly affected by the initiative would be heard undoubtedly established an environment in which PAR perspectives were assumed to be the ideal, in direct contrast to the PSH case described above.

Yet, without one other element coming into play, it would have been unlikely that PAR would become central to CAWI's approach to the degree that it did. While CAWI's initiators were clearly committed to CBR and had strong feelings about participatory approaches in general, none explicitly articulated that PAR must constitute the research approach. Initial efforts were mostly focused on: (1) acquiring sufficient funding from SWC to hire a full-time coordinator, and (2) establishing a democratic, inclusive, and transparent decision-making structure for the research activities. The funding appeal was successful because SWC saw numerous benefits in supporting a municipally focused project that involved a partnership of (credible, feminist) academics, community nonprofits, and local government. There was an element of good fortune in the fact that the community organizer hired to work with the CAWI was someone for whom PAR was a central element of her educational and experiential background. She was drawn to the project because she saw that the approach would be strengthened by the systematic incorporation of PAR principles and CAWI was drawn to hire her because she had a clear sense of how to bring together the various elements that CAWI wanted to see take place within the project.

One of the organizer's first suggestions, upon learning that partnership efforts with the City of Ottawa would have to be put on hold temporarily (because of ongoing budget deliberations), was to conduct interviews to establish baseline information about community perceptions of City Hall's accessibility and responsiveness. Not only did this quickly introduce the CAWI to a broader group than had heretofore been involved, and provide an evidential base against which to measure the impacts of subsequent activities, it also became an effective way of explaining, both to themselves and to City Hall, why diverse women needed to be actively engaged in the project.

⁽³⁾ Status of Women Canada's entire annual budget in 2003–04 was Can \$10.75 million, in comparison with NHI's CAN \$753 million for the period 1999–2002, and the estimated Can \$1 billion annually that would be required to add 20 000 to 25 000 new units of social housing per year (Consulting and Audit Canada, 2002, page 1; Hulchanski, 2002, page 20; NHI, 2004, page 5).

These interviews clearly indicated a lack of confidence on the part of community women, in particular those who were newcomers and visible minorities, about how to inform municipal politicians and staff about their needs and concerns effectively. These insights provided the basis for the subsequent 'two pronged' strategy that has become the CAWI's modus operandi. On the one hand, the interviews suggested that women wanted and required additional information in order to become more effective representatives of their own communities at City Hall. On the other, local politicians and bureaucrats needed to appreciate that without structural changes in its operations, City Hall would continue to inadvertently exclude a growing proportion of its local citizenry. The former led the CAWI to develop a series of training initiatives with and for women with an interest in building lobbying and citizen involvement skills for themselves and their communities. The latter led to the CAWI's insinuation into the development of strategic plans with explicit gender and equality goals and objectives, throughout City Hall. As one part of this effort, the CAWI took the lead on developing a gender equality training module for managers. Throughout, at every opportunity, the involvement of community women has been nurtured, promoted, encouraged, and coached. Just one of many examples of the creativity that has been unleashed as a result is a song which community women sang to City Council as part of their efforts to challenge assumptions about the value of tax cuts in the 2005 budget deliberations:

"We've come to talk
To share our views
Cause when we vote, we'll think of you,
We are women across this city
We represent communities

Please take the time
To see our views
We are the city that cares, includes
Please bring alive the 20/20
In our budget Two thousand Five

Nous sommes les femmes
De toute la ville
We'll be happy if you will
20/20 will work just fine
In our budget Two thousand Five"

Andrew and Klodawsky (2006)

The CAWI has continuously drawn upon the Ottawa 20/20 Plan and principles to align its own goals with those of the city. Simultaneously, an increasingly stretched city bureaucracy has used the same plan for shaping its own work priorities and resources. In the area of diversity in particular, the CAWI offered city staff and politicians insights into the perspectives of minority women that were not available elsewhere. This expertise was demonstrated in numerous ways, thanks largely to the CAWI's PAR approach. In every instance where the CAWI has been called upon to provide feedback, the response has been collective, not only with regard to the visible presence of a diversity of women, but also with regard to content, approach, and perspective. (Klodawsky and Andrew, 2006).

Reflections and conclusions

It is clear that a commitment to PAR was not the central goal for the academics, myself included, involved in either the PSH or the CAWI. We were there because we

appreciated the opportunity to work with community and municipal actors to achieve certain social change goals (changing understandings of who was homeless in order to end homelessness, and promoting greater gender-inclusive and equality-inclusive practices at City Hall), and because community actors saw merit in the research skills and funding opportunities that our presence afforded. The language of ‘partnership’ suited our interests and inclinations but this orientation also meant that the interests of other actors and groups had to be considered. In the PSH, there were distinct groups of players, some very well organized and others much less so. The academics were seen to offer certain skills and knowledge and were expected to participate on that basis. The ‘scale jumping’ element tied to our social change goal further reinforced a certain approach to research that was seen as superior to other approaches. In terms of homelessness, the federal government had deliberately shaped the problem to be located *within* communities, with the federal government acting as a facilitator of coordinated community responses. Challenging these premises meant the need to present the evidence in a manner that was seen as ‘rigorous’, where rigour was defined in rather conventional terms—having to do with sampling strategies and interview integrity. The involvement of homeless people themselves was given rather short shrift in this regard.

In the case of the CAWI, a much, much greater emphasis on marginalized women’s involvement was intertwined with a more fluid and dynamic environment of engagement, in which social change through a participatory approach was privileged over other interests. Rather than *scale jumping* being a significant goal, efforts focused on drawing expertise from other nodes in a geographically dispersed *network* of feminist actors engaged at the municipal level. While the CAWI had an identified social change goal—making City Hall more inclusive in the context of a rapidly changing city—how to achieve that goal was very much up in the air. There was no self-evident directionality, as in the case of the PSH. Feminist ideals both at the federal and at the local level created an environment that was inclined towards a participatory approach, in contrast to its negative assessment within the PSH. The CAWI’s early success in reaching out to, hearing from, and engaging with diverse community women was noteworthy to municipal politicians and staff because it indicated that political engagement of diverse women was feasible, despite the municipality’s prior lack of success in this regard. Here too credibility was at issue, albeit of a different kind: PAR was, in fact, a strong contributor to highlighting our credibility in the eyes of municipal staff and politicians.

One question that remains is whether one approach is clearly superior to the other in terms of “the long-term political project of ‘deliberalizing’ space” (Bondi and Laurie 2005, page 398). The CAWI’s documented success at engaging diverse community women who until quite recently, felt alienated from local politics is probably the clearest example of such an effort. These women have expressed a new-found self-confidence in articulating their own visions of what should be valued at City Hall. In a somewhat similar vein though, the PSH findings that the largest proportion of homeless people are homeless because of lack of access to affordable housing have been used to good public relations effect in a yearly report card produced by the AEH. In contrast though, both initiatives might also be accused of helping to maintain the legitimacy and the efficacy of neoliberal governmentalities, the PSH by providing additional information for regulating a ‘problem’ population, and the CAWI by helping the city articulate an appropriately ‘inclusive’ language.

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