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Article

Integrating participatory action research and photovoice as mixed methods: Synergies, tensions, and implications for social work

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Abstract

This article examines the integration of two qualitative research methodologies, namely Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Photovoice (PV), to explore their synergies, tensions, and implications for social work. While both methodologies are rooted in participatory, subjectivist-objectivist, and transformative-emancipatory frameworks, they differ in their objectives, methods, and levels of participant involvement. PAR focuses on challenging power structures and promoting systemic change through collaborative community actions. PV prioritizes the use of visual narratives to influence policy and public opinion. Methodologically, PAR follows iterative cycles of action and reflection led by community members, while PV emphasizes individual storytelling. Integrating these approaches thoughtfully can leverage their strengths to foster both individual and collective transformation.

Keywords

participatory action research, photovoice, mixed methods, community-based research, transformative social work

Résumé

Cet article examine l'intégration de deux méthodologies de recherche qualitative, à savoir la recherche-action participative (PAR) et Photovoice (PV), pour explorer leurs synergies, tensions et implications pour le travail social. Bien que les deux méthodologies soient ancrées dans des cadres participatifs, subjectivistes-objectivistes et transformateurs-émancipateurs, elles diffèrent par leurs objectifs, leurs méthodes et leurs niveaux d'implication des participants. PAR se concentre sur la remise en question des structures de pouvoir et la promotion d'un changement systémique par le biais d'actions communautaires collaboratives. PV donne la priorité à l'utilisation de récits visuels pour influencer les politiques et l'opinion publique. Méthodologiquement, PAR suit des cycles itératifs d'action et de réflexion menés par les membres de la communauté, tandis que PV met l'accent sur la narration individuelle.

L’intégration réfléchie de ces approches peut exploiter leurs atouts pour favoriser la transformation individuelle et collective.

Mots-clés
recherche-action participative, photovoix, méthodes mixtes, recherche communautaire, travail social transformateur

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Introduction

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Photovoice (PV) have been readily adopted in various disciplines such as education, health, and social work, especially when addressing issues faced by marginalized communities (Bradbury, 2015; Huss & Bos, 2019; Seitz & Orsini, 2022). PAR, a democratic research methodology, encourages active community participation to collectively understand and solve local issues (Benjamin et al., 2018; Bradbury, 2015; Park, 1993). It aims to emancipate and empower individuals often labelled as “oppressed and powerless” (Park, 1993, p. 2), enabling them to transform their situations at a grassroots level (Bradbury, 2015; Burns et al., 2021). Through active engagement in collective inquiries and actions, community members address immediate local issues and gain capacities for future problem-solving (Benjamin et al., 2018; Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Ngo, 2011). PAR’s roots could be traced back to the global movements in the 1940s and beyond, drawing inspiration from action-based research, anti-colonial initiatives, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, South Asian human rights movements, and critical and feminist theories (Brydon-Miller, 2008; Fals Borda, 2008; Delgado-Baena et al., 2022).

PV, on the other hand, was developed in the early 20th century as scholars in anthropology and sociology incorporated photography into their research (Carlson et al., 2006; Sitter, 2017; Barley & Russell, 2019). The introduction of photography as a research tool in social sciences in the 1960s allowed participants to represent their experiences and perceptions of social realities visually, valued for its ability to capture visual representations and socially constructed realities (Ferreira & Serpa, 2020; Pauwel, 2010; Pink, 2012; Rose, 2012). In the following decades, the growing interest in using participatory photography, such as PV, as a visual research method emphasizes its potential for stimulating social change and empowerment (Coemans et al., 2017; Gaboardi et al., 2022). The pioneering work by Wang and her colleagues in the 1990s reinvented PV, using it to visually explore public health and social justice issues through marginalized women’s experiences in the province of Yunnan in China (Wang & Burris, 1997). Researchers have used PV to empower underprivileged participants to visually express their experiences and foster collective identities and social cohesion in community development (Budig et al., 2018; Liebenberg, 2018). They have used PV to critically examine personal and community issues

within the historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts and advocated for social change (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Both PAR and PV align with the participatory paradigm that values inclusion, co-learning, and empowerment. However, differences exist in their specific transformative intents, methodologies, and participation levels. This paper analyzes the complex intersection between PAR and PV, elaborating on the philosophical alignments and methodological divergence. It further explores the synergistic strengths of integrating PAR and PV in social work research and practice.

Philosophical alignment of PAR and PV

Ontological congruences

As a research methodology, PAR acknowledges an interconnected world in which community members interact and possess abilities to shape their relationships (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Its ontology embraces participatory, subjectivist-objectivist, and transformative-emancipatory realities (Mertens, 2003; Ngo, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Participation recognizes collective perceptions of the social world, representing an aggregate of individual viewpoints and creating a framework to facilitate consensus via negotiation (Park, 1993; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR, therefore, celebrates social realities constructed by community members through their linguistic and cultural expressions (Park, 1993, 2006).

PAR recognizes that there are objective, material realities that exist in communities, such as socioeconomic disparities, systemic challenges, and public health issues (Cornish et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2017; Ramphele, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 2020). However, it also acknowledges that individuals and communities construct subjective understandings and meanings around their lived realities through social interactions and discourse (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). Regarding social constructionism versus social constructivism, the critical distinction is that social constructionism focuses on collective, intersubjective meaning-making - how groups collaboratively generate constructions of reality through language and shared understandings (Gergen & Gergen, 2015). Social constructivism, on the other hand, focuses more on how individuals cognitively construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences in the world (Howell, 2016). Thus, while material realities may exist objectively in PAR, people interpret and ascribe meaning to those realities intersubjectively through social processes and discourse within their communities (Eliliker et al., 2013; Ramphele, 1990). PAR recognizes that more effective solutions to community issues can emerge by engaging community members in collaboratively analyzing and reconstructing shared understandings of their realities (Magwenya et al., 2023). The participatory process centers community members' local knowledge and perspectives rather than imposing external constructions of their realities (Eliliker et al., 2013; Ramphele, 1990).

Lastly, PAR's transformative-emancipatory focus, influenced by critical theory, disability studies, and feminist perspectives, emphasizes the role of power dynamics in shaping social realities (Mertens, 2003; Ngo, 2011). This paradigm suggests that realities are socially constructed through power, social justice, democracy, and social pluralism (Park, 2006). PAR

researchers support community members, particularly disadvantaged individuals, to critically examine their realities, considering the relevant historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and recognizing their abilities to enact change (Delgado-Baena et al., 2022; Kreitzer, 2004). They thus reject the idea of fixed societal structures and instead advocate for democratic transformations (Bradbury, 2015; Burns et al., 2021).

Building on the discussion above, the ontological assumptions of PAR align well with the worldview proposed by PV researchers. PV is often viewed as a method within PAR (Harley, 2016; Sitter, 2017). Extending the work by Wang and Burris (1997), scholars have identified the three pillars forming the philosophical foundation of PV: (1) Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy; (2) feminist underpinnings; and (3) photography's role in instigating social change (Liebenberg, 2022; Ponic & Jategaonkar, 2012; Sutton-Brown, 2014). Mirroring PAR's transformative-emancipatory paradigm, PV draws heavily on Paulo Freire's work (Freire, 1970, 1973), particularly emphasizing the empowerment of disadvantaged group members through raising critical consciousness. Freire critiqued the 'banking concept' in education, reinforcing power and privilege and suppressing learners' creativity and critical thinking capabilities (Freire, 1970). This power dynamic pervades broader societal contexts, exacerbating the vulnerability of disadvantaged communities whose knowledge and awareness are marginalized.

Freire asserted that oppressive situations could be transformed by empowering marginalized groups to achieve critical consciousness, enabling them to address their situational issues (Freire, 1970). This approach requires including these groups in a collaborative process, allowing them to examine their circumstances and develop appropriate solutions critically. To enact change, members of disadvantaged communities need to introspect and reflect on their situation (Freire, 1970). Freire (1973) described three levels of consciousness: naive, magical, and critical. At the naive level, individuals accept social realities as status quo. Under magical consciousness, individuals view institutions as having absolute power, leading them to comply with rules and regulations, eliminating resistance and impetus for change. Critical consciousness, however, allows individuals to understand the impact of these two dimensions on their lives and seek solutions accordingly (Freire, 1973). Individuals remain vulnerable under naive and magical consciousness, and the more they understand this, the deeper their critical understanding of their situation becomes (Freire, 1973).

Incorporating Freire's belief that collective changes can be initiated through individual praxes of attaining critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Mitchell et al., 2017), PV embraces the concepts of dialogue and co-generation of knowledge. Freire emphasized that dialogue is critical to engaging vulnerable individuals in praxis, an ongoing process of reflection and action (Freire, 1973). Consequently, he introduced the thematic investigation approach, enabling individuals to discuss their concerns through creative, art-based means such as drawing or photography (Freire, 1970, 1973). This influenced liberally oriented research and practice methods to empower and center participants as active co-learners and co-producers of knowledge. Through these processes, individuals critically scrutinize socio-political structures in their context and pursue

collective changes, demonstrating the unity of PV with PAR's transformative ontological assumptions.

The second philosophical pillar of PV is grounded in feminist theories, which advocate for the deconstruction of knowledge to transform women's societal status and social-political structures (Beasley, 1999). Feminist perspectives aim for radical changes to enhance women's lives and societal contributions (Maguire, 1996). Women's life experiences are thus crucial in producing knowledge, as illustrated in Wang and Burris's early work with PV (1997). This approach embodies the philosophical foundation of empowerment theory, advocating for public resistance, confrontation of inequalities, and pursuit of structural transformations (Maguire, 2006; Turner & Maschi, 2015). Feminist philosophy also encourages a critical approach to understanding the experiences of disadvantaged groups within society, viewed through intersectionality, as these groups face systemic oppression due to race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, among other categories (Crenshaw, 1991; Mullaly & West, 2018).

The third pillar of PV's philosophical foundation draws from documentary photography, viewed as a vehicle for social reform as it visually represents and constructs realities (Wang & Burris, 1997, 1999). Individuals participating in PV processes document issues in their communities that impact their lives significantly and discuss the photos they have taken from their perspectives (Ponic & Jategaonkar, 2012). It constitutes an active process of constructing social realities, reinforcing the foundations of the empowerment concept. Participants, now co-researchers, are empowered to document community issues from their perspective (Ponic & Jategaonkar, 2012; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Thus, as part of PV, documentary photography serves as a record of social events and a catalyst for social reform.

As a participatory visual method, PV constitutes an aspect of the empowerment process that essentially contributes to constructing social realities (Mitchell et al., 2017; Pink, 2012; Sitter, 2017). As Wang (1999) argued, constructing social realities through photos is an aspect of self-locating in social worlds, whereby the individual interacts with the world from multiple perspectives (Wang, 1999). Technologically, documentary photography profoundly impacts how we interpret the world. It offers visual praxis, providing a space for individuals to document the external world in association with their inner experience and knowledge, contrasting with the traditional use of photography (Coessens, 2010). On the one hand, an image can represent the existence of the social world. On the other hand, it emphasizes how an individual understands such realities, which are significantly influenced by multiple social, cultural, and economic aspects (Wang, 1999).

Epistemological congruences

Epistemologically, PAR is an approach rooted in collaborative inquiry, embracing both subjectivist and objectivist realities and honouring multiple ways of understanding social realities (Heron & Reason, 2008). It refers to a democratic process, engaging participants not as subjects of study but as co-researchers who actively contribute to the research process. PAR employs a holistic framework that integrates experiential, presentational, propositional, and

practical knowledge, setting it apart from traditional positivist research methods (Heron & Reason, 2008). Experiential knowing stems from direct encounters and interactions with events, people, or objects. It calls for an open, empathetic, and resonant perception of reality. Presentational knowing, in turn, allows an individual to make sense of the specific experiences articulated in experiential knowing, often employing creative forms like painting, drawing, photography, music, or storytelling (Heron & Reason, 2008). Propositional knowing is the process by which individuals abstract and generalize the expressive forms of lived experiences into concepts, theories, or themes. It is the intellectualizing phase, where individuals apply analytical skills to make sense of their experiences. The culmination of this process is practical knowledge. This stage involves raising critical awareness, collectively agreeing upon the interpretations, and collaboratively proposing solutions to address identified issues (Heron & Reason, 2008).

The concept of knowledge in PAR aligns with Freire's idea of critical consciousness. Researchers in PAR, much like Freire's critically conscious individuals, engage in praxis, allowing them to deconstruct the existence of hidden knowledge and achieve new forms of understanding about local issues (Freire, 1970, 1973). Moreover, PAR emphasizes a different typology of knowledge for its practical purpose: representational, rational, and reflective (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Park, 2006). When individuals become co-inquirers in PAR, they combine their local knowledge with the external information researchers provide to create a new understanding and effectively address their issues, leveraging the community's strengths (Coleman, 2015). Representational knowledge encompasses functional and interpretive subtypes. Functional representational knowledge provides descriptions of identified issues, whereas interpretive representational knowledge relates to the inquirers' interpretations of those descriptions (Park, 2006). Rational knowledge, on the other hand, applies this interpretive knowledge across various dimensions of social life. Finally, reflective knowledge enables inquirers to be aware of identified realities and transform them. This form of learning drives participants toward critical awareness of human dignity, freedom, and justice, acknowledging the unique capabilities of individuals who can understand and transform their lives (Coleman, 2015; Park, 2006).

PAR's extended epistemological assumptions, which account for various forms of knowledge, reject notions of dominance and privilege, whether empirical or interpretive, in understanding realities. PAR thus advocates for a collaborative inquiry process that focuses on working with people rather than working on or for them; the priority lies in understanding how to know what (Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Heron & Reason, 2006; McIntyre, 2008). Both researchers and participants partake as co-inquirers, which enables them to construct social realities through a negotiable agenda (Heron & Reason, 2008). Therefore, PAR requires academic researchers to consider a process that encourages participants, who may not have formal academic training to engage in reflection and action, preparing for changes (Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Park, 2006).

As an art-based approach, PV parallels PAR's assumptions about diverse ways of knowing. It challenges fixed views of social realities and contests traditional research methods, transitioning participants from passive data providers to active knowledge creators (Lomax, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017). PV interprets social realities through the lens of marginalized groups, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their concerns (Wang & Burris, 1997). PV's empowerment philosophy allows participants to use photography to capture their community's issues, enhancing their understanding and potentially stimulating grassroots changes (Wang & Burris, 1997). By sharing photos, participants collaboratively explore their realities and gain interpretive knowledge through interaction with others (Lapenta, 2011). Therefore, building mutual rapport among members is critical to this process. The images produced and issues discussed enable community members to gain integrative knowledge, linking problems to their contexts and prompting social action (Chonody et al., 2013). As PV's transformative philosophy suggests, critical awareness can lead to collective efforts and changes (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Pritzker et al., 2012).

PV's research and action processes promote democratic engagement and mutual understanding between participants and researchers (Liebenberg, 2018). The methodology allows participants to express their knowledge of the social world through visual imagery, fostering experiential learning (Liebenberg, 2018; Mannay, 2014). Furthermore, PV prioritizes marginalized groups, aiding them in understanding and communicating their community concerns and promoting grassroots change (Wang & Burris, 1997). The PV process involves visually recording community concerns, analysis through critical dialogues, and sharing outcomes with diverse community stakeholders. This process, often realized through exhibitions, acknowledges individual and community-level transformations and promotes social action (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1999).

To sum up, PAR and PV are participatory research methods with an emphasis on the subjective construction of reality through shared experiences. They challenge the positivist notion of objective reality, and value diverse ways of knowing and forms of knowledge, including experiential and practical knowledge. Both approaches promote critical reflection and action for social change, actively empowering marginalized communities to shape their realities. By dismantling traditional researcher-participant hierarchies, PAR and PV foster equitable collaborations that blend academic and local insights to address community challenges.

Divergences in transformative intents, methodological implications, power dynamics and participation

Divergences in transformative intents

As previously outlined, PAR and PV are grounded in three core philosophical principles: consciousness-raising, empowerment, and emancipation, which, while interconnected, function at varying levels of social change. As Freire (1970, 1973) described, consciousness-raising enhances critical awareness by challenging prevailing assumptions and identifying paths for change, thereby addressing power dynamics and dominant societal narratives. According to

Liebenberg (2022) and Adams (2017), this foundational step paves the way for empowerment, which enables individuals and communities to develop skills, agency, and leadership to enact significant actions. Empowerment aims to improve self-determination and efficacy, especially among marginalized groups, through capacity-building that impacts individuals, their interactions, and societal structures. Emancipation, linked to achieving social justice and equal rights (Boog, 2016; Derr & Simons, 2020), focuses on freeing oneself from external control, necessitating critical consciousness and the removal of barriers imposed by systemic inequalities.

PAR actively confronts established societal norms and structures by extensively emphasizing understanding and altering power dynamics, highlighting inequalities, and critically examining the ideologies that sustain predetermined social norms (Bradbury, 2015; Lenette, 2022). By focusing on these elements, PAR aims to understand and actively reshape the narrative around these power structures (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, 2015). In practice, PAR differentiates itself from traditional research methodologies by reimagining the role of participants. It dismisses the conventional view of participants as passive subjects from whom data is collected. Instead, it positions them as active co-researchers whose knowledge and experiences are invaluable to understanding and addressing the issues (Coghlan & Shani, 2015). This shift acknowledges the expertise and life experiences of individuals within these communities, especially those from marginalized or oppressed groups, viewing these insights as essential to creating effective, sustainable change. Therefore, PAR seeks not only to study the world but to change it, involving those most affected by societal issues as critical players in devising and implementing solutions (Bradbury, 2015).

PV, on the other hand, has its genesis in the documentary photography tradition and is deeply intertwined with public health, operating on the principle that photography and visual storytelling can be powerful tools for highlighting societal and health-related issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Seitz & Orsini, 2022). It allows participants, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented communities, to capture elements of their daily lives, struggles, and environments through photographs (Derr & Simons, 2020). This method empowers individuals to narrate their own stories, providing a platform for perspectives frequently overlooked or unheard in mainstream discussions about public health and social issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Seitz & Orsini, 2022). PV's strength lies in its ability to render the often-invisible aspects of daily life and struggles in various communities visible. By providing participants with cameras, PV democratizes the process of documenting reality and expressing personal and communal narratives. The resulting photographs serve multiple purposes: (1) a form of individual and collective expression, (2) a way to communicate participants' realities to wider audiences, and (3) a potent means of influencing policymakers and public opinion. Through these visual narratives, PV bridges the gap between personal experiences and broader public health initiatives, highlighting the need for policies and actions grounded in the real-life contexts of those they aim to serve (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Seitz & Orsini, 2022).

While consciousness-raising is more about cognitive development, empowerment revolves around building capabilities, and emancipation encompasses societal transformations. PAR and

PV are designed to foster critical consciousness and empower participants, with emancipation as the eventual objective. However, critics argue that PV projects sometimes fail to incorporate anti-oppressive actions necessary for tackling systemic injustices (Adams, 2017; Seitz & Orsini, 2022).

Divergences in methodological implications

Methodologically, PAR is inherently interactive and collaborative, involving community members throughout the research. According to McIntyre (2008) and Ngo (2011), the process starts with the joint identification of a problem. Unlike traditional post-positivist research methods, where problems are often predefined by researchers, in PAR, the issues are mutually recognized and described by the community, ensuring the research genuinely reflects their experiences. The following steps in PAR, data collection and analysis, are similarly collaborative. External researchers do not isolate them; instead, they are conducted in partnership with community members (Benjamin et al., 2018; Hormel, 2016; McIntyre, 2008). This approach democratizes knowledge creation and improves the data's relevance and accuracy by weaving in a tapestry of diverse viewpoints and localized expertise. Its cyclical nature is crucial to PAR: an ongoing reflection, action, and reevaluation process. Eikeland (2015) and Ngo (2011) emphasize that this cycle allows solutions and interventions to emerge from collective analysis and be implemented within the community context. Such an iterative approach ensures ongoing learning and adaptation, making actions attuned to the community's changing needs and circumstances. Most importantly, PAR empowers community members by involving them directly in decision-making and action. This involvement builds a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to outcomes that are more effective and sustainable (Bradbury, 2015). Through this method, PAR transcends mere research; it becomes a tool for fundamental transformation within communities (Bradbury, 2015).

On the other hand, PV adopts a unique, visually centered approach, giving participants cameras to document their daily experiences, challenges, and the context of their communities (Seitz & Orsini, 2022; Suprapto et al., 2020). This method empowers participants by providing them with the creative freedom to capture and highlight what they perceive as most important, viewed through their lens (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). The photos taken in PV are powerful storytelling tools. They express intricate emotions and narratives, revealing details of community life and personal experiences that might be missed or insufficiently expressed through conventional data-gathering techniques such as surveys and interviews (Harley, 2012). These visual stories are pivotal in advocacy and awareness, vividly communicating the realities participants face to policymakers, stakeholders, and the larger community. PV's emphasis on visual storytelling significantly influences public awareness and policy advocacy. The images act as compelling, tangible representations of communities' lived experiences and challenges, often evoking more profound empathy and understanding among decision-makers and the public (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Seitz & Orsini, 2022). PV thus serves to connect individual experiences with more significant social issues, adding a rich and intricate

layer to the understanding of public health research. Through its potent visual narratives, PV helps illuminate community needs, guiding the development of more informed and impactful policies and interventions (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

To sum up, PAR and PV target social change but vary in adopting distinct methods to achieve this goal. PAR is primarily oriented toward tackling systemic challenges and fostering collaborative knowledge production to catalyze community-led changes. In contrast, PV aims to impact policymaking by elevating visual stories encapsulating individual experiences. While PAR concentrates on empowering communities collectively, PV offers a medium to bring individual, often marginalized voices to the forefront. Essentially, PAR underscores the importance of collective action and community engagement, whereas PV underscores the power of personal storytelling to raise awareness.

Divergences in power dynamics and participation

Power dynamics can significantly influence participation approaches and outcomes when integrating PAR and PV methodologies. This issue is essential, given the interconnected relationships between researchers and participants in participatory studies (Castleden et al., 2008; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, 2015). Power imbalances may limit how participants can actively collaborate and co-govern the research process, undermining principles of empowerment, social justice, and democratic engagement.

Evans-Agnew and Rosemberg (2016) critically observe that engaging in PV requires an understanding that transcends the basic principles of participation as commonly conceptualized in PAR. They point out that while PV is often an integral component of PAR studies, its deployment necessitates a nuanced comprehension beyond the general tenets of PAR participation. This insight suggests a more profound complexity within the participatory dynamics of PV, particularly when it is nested within PAR frameworks. Moreover, some academics, including Higgins (2014), contend that despite PAR's ostensibly collaborative ethos, its development has been predominantly within a Western research paradigm, often applied to non-Western contexts. This trajectory raises concerns about potential colonialist underpinnings within PAR, which could inadvertently influence participatory elements and outcomes in these studies. Such a Western-centric approach in PAR might inadvertently impose certain biases or limitations, thereby not fully honouring the concept of participants as co-researchers who are deeply engaged in scrutinizing and addressing local issues.

Boutain (2005) elaborates on this argument by highlighting potential shortcomings in research designs that do not adequately foster genuine participation. In many instances, participant roles within PV are narrowly defined, capturing photographs, interpreting them, and then displaying these images in exhibitions aimed at policymakers. This restricted scope of participation may limit the depth and breadth of engagement and understanding that participants can offer. Consequently, Evans-Agnew and Rosemberg (2016) argue that the responsibility for research design and its implementation disproportionately falls on the researcher instead of a more evenly distributed collaborative effort in PV applications. This observation calls for a more

reflective and inclusive approach in employing PV within PAR, ensuring that the method truly captures and amplifies the voices and perspectives of the participants in a manner that aligns with the transformative goals of both methodologies.

Cornwall's (1996) spectrum of participation provides a framework for understanding varying levels of community involvement in PAR. This ranges from minimal participation via co-option or compliance to deep collaboration through co-learning and collective action. In co-option mode, researchers maintain control with limited input from community representatives. Compliance relegates participants to assigned tasks within a researcher-led agenda. Researchers direct the analysis and planning in consultation mode while garnering community opinions. Co-operative mode involves more joint priority setting, though researchers still lead. Co-learning enables participants and researchers to collaborate as equal partners in generating knowledge and devising actions. Finally, community members drive the participatory research process independently in collective action mode (Cornwall, 1996).

Participation should be guided by empowerment, emancipation, and social justice principles, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued equally (Lykes, 2006; McIntyre, 2008). Therefore, the collective action mode should be targeted. Park (1993, 2006) highlighted the importance of participation in community research, noting that it should enable community members to discuss relevant issues meaningfully. Thus, researchers are crucial in providing frameworks that help articulate these issues. They should introduce methodological options that align with the community's realities and resources, clearly explaining advantages and disadvantages to aid informed decision-making; thus, guiding community members in data collection and analysis is crucial (McIntyre, 2008; Ngo, 2011). This collaboration ensures active community involvement in every significant research phase and subsequent actions, which makes the research outcomes a basis for collective reflection and ongoing dialogue (Bradbury, 2015).

It is acknowledged that PV methodologies align with the core tenets of PAR as they prioritize empowerment, underscore the strengths of individuals and communities, facilitate co-learning, foster community capacity building, and strike a balance between research and action (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Sitter, 2017). Furthermore, PV proves advantageous in offering detailed, deep, and nuanced descriptions of issues and their contexts, especially regarding data triangulation (Harley, 2012). However, despite recognizing this consistency with PAR's theoretical framework, scholars also draw attention to questions concerning power differentials and participation levels in the PV research process (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016; Liebenberg, 2018). Several PV projects illustrate that PV applications frequently align with consultation-based participation rather than the collective engagement idealized in PAR (Johansen & Le, 2014; Shannon & Hess, 2019).

For instance, Johansen and Le (2014) used PV to explore the perspectives of youth aged 14-18 on multiculturalism and intergroup relationships. Youth were provided with cameras and prompts about capturing their views on multiculturalism, and the photos were discussed in interviews and focus groups. While youth voiced ideas freely in interviews and focus groups, their role was mainly consultative rather than fully collaborative in decision-making and

knowledge generation. The project aligned with consultation mode – community opinions were garnered through the photos and discussions, but the researchers maintained a pre-designed agenda and analysis. Also, the Wang and Burris (1997) example illustrates how participants may be restricted to primarily taking photos rather than expressing their engagement at each stage, which could limit the critical discussion and interpretation process. This divergence from the participatory analysis paradigm reveals power dynamics that constrain PV participants' roles compared to the PAR emphasis on direct community control. As a result, this could lead to the researcher's disengagement, hindering the progression toward community collaboration (Liebenberg, 2018). Under these circumstances, PV methodologies might become a form of photo elicitation, restricting community members' involvement in data collection only (Liebenberg, 2018).

When integrating PAR and PV approaches, practical obstacles also arise regarding participation and positionality. Some researchers worry their actions may inadvertently restrict participation, while community hesitation could hinder collaboration (Carlson et al., 2006; Liebenberg, 2018). For instance, Carlson et al. (2006) argue that hesitant participation and community dependence could impede the inclusion of community concerns and needs in research designs. Furthermore, integrating strengths, such as community values and culture, into community-led solutions addressing local issues might also be neglected (Carlson et al., 2006; Liebenberg, 2018).

As such, these bidirectional interactions can make the integration of PAR and PV more challenging. Different communication styles and languages between researchers and participants can present additional obstacles. For example, Simmonds et al. (2015) reflected that language differences could hinder participation; participants may have difficulty expressing their perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of images fluently in a language that is not their first language or one they are entirely comfortable with. This could limit their ability to narrate the meanings of their photos entirely (Simmonds et al., 2015). Therefore, engaging in the ongoing process of reflexivity to mindfully negotiate power differences and cultivate trust is required to mitigate these challenges (Benjamin et al., 2018).

In summary, critical reflexivity regarding power imbalances and negotiation of participation levels is essential when aligning PV with the ideals of collective engagement in PAR. Evidence suggests PV risks becoming an extractive method that limits community involvement without careful implementation guided by empowerment, social justice, and democratization principles. The researcher must reflect on their positionality, actions that may inadvertently restrict participation, and practical barriers such as communication differences. Cultivating trust and community capacity is essential; ongoing reflexivity and dialogue can help mitigate power differentials. Since collaboration requires flexibility regarding timeframes, methods, and expectations, embracing community diversity and strengths may necessitate adapting the original agenda. Ultimately, the aim should be to remove barriers to participation, providing scaffolding for communities to drive the process.

Implications for transformative social work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) defines social work as blending practice-based learning with commitments to social justice, human dignity, and respect for diversity. This discipline leverages insights from social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge to support individual and community well-being and tackle life's challenges. It champions societal transformation through individual empowerment, promotion of social unity, and equitable policy advocacy (CASW, 2005; Langer & Lietz, 2014). Social work is fundamentally driven by a transformative agenda to address structural inequalities and uplift marginalized communities (Mullaly & West, 2018). This mission aligns with the objectives of PAR and PV methodologies that engage disenfranchised communities in research to contest oppression and drive change (Huss & Bos, 2018; Huss et al., 2019). Incorporating PAR and PV into social work practices reflects the profession's foundational values, including fostering dignity, cultivating relationships, and assuming collective responsibility, compelling social workers to confront injustice at various societal levels (Barbera, 2008; Jarldorn, 2019).

As a collaborative, participatory framework, using PV is gaining recognition as an effective educational tool in social work, providing an innovative approach to teaching and learning (Christensen et al., 2022; Malka, 2022; Monteblanco & Moya, 2021). Its implementation in educational settings enables social work students to develop a deeper, empathetic understanding of the perspectives of marginalized groups. PV encourages students to actively engage in and analyze social issues, fostering a participatory approach to addressing these challenges. This method not only provides a platform for oppressed communities to express their experiences but also necessitates careful consideration of ethical issues such as representation and the dynamics of power (Christensen et al., 2022). The process of PV, which involves social work students taking and discussing photographs to represent and articulate their viewpoints, significantly enhances their reflexivity, critical thinking, and ability to connect with and understand communities emotionally (Rogers et al., 2019). This approach proves particularly useful in discussing and navigating sensitive topics like grief, trauma, and inequality within the social work curriculum. As a result, PV stands out as a potentially transformative pedagogical tool, equipping students with a socially aware and participatory practice emphasizing empowerment (Rogers et al., 2019).

In social work research, PV engages marginalized communities as active partners in research, valuing their insights and lived experiences. This approach aligns well with feminist research methodologies, underscoring the importance of inclusivity and participant leadership (Coemans et al., 2019; Cosgrove, 2021). It also encourages social work practitioners and researchers to critically reflect on and address their biases and assumptions around issues such as gender, race, and class. Such introspection and action, including inclusive language and pronouns, are crucial in creating more equitable and welcoming environments (Cosgrove, 2021). Applying feminist and empowerment theories in social work practice enables professionals to link individual experiences with broader systems of structural oppression, thereby enhancing their practical

knowledge and contributing to participant-driven leadership and social change (Coemans et al., 2019).

In social work practice, PV has proven to be a highly effective tool in dealing with trauma among young individuals (Chonody et al., 2013). It offers a unique and expressive medium, enabling youths to indirectly communicate challenging memories and experiences, such as those involving violence, probation, or systemic injustice (Fitzgibbon & Healy, 2019; Ohmer & Owens, 2013; Shannon & Hess, 2019). Using aesthetic symbols and metaphors, PV can help express complex and painful emotions, build resilience, and resolve problems (Gray & Schubert, 2018; Malka, 2018). At the community level, PV is pivotal in reshaping societal perspectives. It allows individuals to express personal experiences and perceptions, revealing hidden power structures and questioning widespread systemic oppression. This process initiates critical conversations and actions, enabling communities to shape their social realities and foster collective change actively (Gitterman & Knight, 2013; Huss et al., 2019).

In essence, our discussion strongly supports the idea that incorporating PAR and PV into social work education, research, and practice can reinvigorate the profession's founding values of social justice, empowerment, and transformative change. PV can raise critical consciousness, build capacity, challenge oppression, and promote social action by positioning marginalized communities as experts and agents driving collective liberation. Adopting these approaches asserts the role of social workers as facilitators and supporters, working in solidarity with communities to confront systemic inequities.

Conclusion

The paper examines the integration of PAR and PV, shedding light on their shared participatory foundations and critical distinctions. Our examination highlights that while PAR and PV have philosophical alignment in their foundations, integrating them also surfaces tensions regarding divergences in their theoretical and practical applications that require critical examination. Incorporating PAR and PV into social work education, research, and practice aligns with the profession's dedication to social justice, dignity, and empowerment. Thus, understanding how PAR and PV complement each other is crucial for grounding participatory paradigms within the field. This knowledge will promise to equip social workers with participatory, transformative tools that empower those experiencing structural disadvantage and advocate for societal changes.

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