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On PAR with the Yard: Participatory Action Research to Advance Knowledge in Corrections

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) focuses on conducting research with people, instead of on people. While this collaborative approach has been used across a range of disciplines, criminology has been slow to adopt the tenets of PAR. The current article seeks to reinvigorate the discussion of PAR as a research methodology within corrections. We highlight the success of our own project, where five incarcerated interviewers conducted over 400 interviews within the Arizona Department of Corrections. We describe the project—how we set it up, our perceived benefits, and our challenges—and we conclude with some thoughts on how PAR can be expanded in corrections specifically and in criminal justice in general. Our broader purpose is to highlight an innovative methodology to ensure conversations advance research that is translated into meaningful action.

Some of the best conversations take place in prison. Humanity is laid bare behind the walls, unbridled by the distractions of modern technology and the temptation to be somewhere else. Fear, regret, and remorse commingle with hope, anticipation, and redemption. Longer time to serve means longer time to think, and longer time to engage in thoughtful communication. When scholars are welcome participants in these conversations, the dialogue is memorialized in print for others to listen in on. From Cressey (1953), Sykes (1958), and Giallombardo (1966) to Ritchie (1995), Petersilia (2003), and Western (2018), much of what we know about life before, during, and after prison is based on conversations that took place within correctional facilities.

But good prison conversation does not necessarily mean the content is reflective of reality. Prison research is a validity nightmare. Prisons fall short as an ideal setting for obtaining truth— in terms of the physical and interpersonal environment. First comes the logistical demands of research within a prison: the often-lengthy travel time accompanied by accumulating travel costs, denied access on any particular day due to lockdowns or other institutional inconveniences, and time constraints from unyielding prison clocks that dictate where people need to be and by when (see also Schlosser, 2008). Once in, the sights, sounds, and smells of the institution invade interviews, and it is near impossible for conversations to take place detached from the value assigned to particular spaces by people who are incarcerated. Rapport is scarce. This precursor to validity competes against work, chow, medical, court, and most importantly, prison

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culture. Prisoners are unique participants in that they "share with one another certain sentiments, orientations and experiences of prison existence" (Newman, 1958, p. 130). Rapport (and truth) can be subverted by suspicion, distrust, fear, confusion, embellishment, pride, and social desirability. Taking this all into account, do we really know what we think we know?

One way to answer this question is to blur the line between "them" and "us"—between researchers and participants. At first blush, this recommendation would seem to violate every principle defining rigorous qualitative research. But the evolving methodology of participatory action research (PAR) documents the merits of doing research with people as opposed to research on people or for people (McIntyre, 2007). This type of work can combine the inside knowledge of individuals familiar with the intricacies of places, like prisons, with the outside knowledge of individuals familiar with the big picture understandings of human behavior (Merton, 1972). Perhaps more importantly, PAR can provide solutions to challenges that would otherwise persist against the individual efforts of either group.

The purpose of this article is to reintroduce PAR to the field of corrections. We do so by highlighting our work in Arizona as part of the Arizona Transformation Project (ATP)—an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program think tank comprising incarcerated men and Arizona State University (ASU) faculty and graduate students. In the spring of 2017, the ATP engaged in a collaborative research project with the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) and the Arizona Governor's Office to determine what works in reducing recidivism (Wright et al., 2017). Incarcerated men participated in all stages of the research project, from identifying research questions to designing the survey tool to interviewing participants to analyzing data and proposing implications. All told, these men conducted more than 400 interviews of other incarcerated men in a medium security prison. We describe the project—how we set it up, our perceived benefits, and our challenges—and we conclude with some thoughts on how PAR can be expanded in corrections specifically and in criminal justice in general. Our broader purpose is to highlight an innovative methodology to ensure conversations advance research that is translated into meaningful action.

Participatory action research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a research methodology that can be used to understand and find solutions for complex social problems within a community or similar collective context. With its roots in action research, it is a research process that involves participant data collection that, at its core, is focused on enacting and facilitating change (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). The PAR research paradigm emphasizes reflection and improvement situated within a collective endeavor, where all individuals have a stake in influencing their own social and physical contexts (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). It differs from traditional research in that it advocates for the inclusion of the social participant in the research process, above and beyond being a "research participant." Further, it allows those who are most directly affected by the research to actively clarify and resolve their own problems rather than relying on outside experts to produce and enact solutions (Dupont, 2008). In the end, a goal of PAR is to allow research participants

to directly benefit from empirical research alongside the researchers, rather than researchers being the sole beneficiaries, as is common in traditional research methodologies.

PAR is an idea rooted in the methodological history of a range of disciplines. Starting in the 1940s, researchers began to realize the critical role that participants and insiders play in the creation and development of knowledge. This led scholars to adapt this research paradigm to study oppressed groups (Baldwin, 2012; Elden & Levin, 1991; Khanlou & Peter, 2005). Over the past 70 years, this method has been used across a range of disciplines including public health, sociology, education, psychology, criminology, social work, and urban planning (Baum et al., 2006; Danley & Ellison, 1999; Dupont, 2008; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Pain & Francis, 2003; Payne & Bryant, 2018; van Rooyen & Gray, 1995). For example, Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, and Baldwin (2012) utilized PAR as a way to understand how to increase community engagement in water planning. The need for PAR in public health arose from the desire to study low-income or rural communities that had little trust in researchers (Baum et al., 2006). Thus, in all of the above disciplines, the decision to use PAR often resulted from a situation where individuals within a specific context felt that the current state of knowledge acquisition and change was inadequate or insufficient. Effective solutions to problems within specific contexts are ultimately dependent on the inclusion of insiders, who "know more, know better, and in more depth how an organization, community" or other social space operates (Fine & Torre, 2006, p. 261).

PAR often recruits populations within specific research settings to assist in the identification of relevant research questions, the development of surveys or interview questions, and even in the collection of data (Baum et al., 2006; Payne, 2017; Payne & Bryant, 2018). This approach necessitates the use of what are called "indigenous interviewers" who are members of the population under study. Broadly, indigenous interviewers are interviewers who share common characteristics with their participants, including living in the same community or sharing similar background characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, education, or cultural experiences (Alexander & Richman, 2008). Researchers have argued that including indigenous interviewers in a research project improves access to groups that normally would be inaccessible, unlikely to provide fruitful information on a topic, or those whose language may prove to be a barrier to understanding the nature of their responses (Berg, Lune, & Lune, 2004). Further, researchers have discovered that indigenous interviewers are likely to receive a more realistic response to a question compared to traditional interviewers (Clark, Scott, Boydell, & Goering, 1999).

The use of indigenous interviewers comes with its own set of challenges, such as the risk of falsifying data, the risk of interviewers "relapsing" or returning to previously held negative perceptions, lack of experience in qualitative and interviewing methods, and refusal of interview requests based on the interviewer being a member of the participant's own community (Alexander & Richman, 2008; Berg et al., 2004; Gwiasda, Taluc, & Popkin, 1997). The close nature of relationships within an isolated setting may affect the information respondents are willing to disclose. Although many of these limitations can be overcome by interviewer training, others are more difficult to overcome without changing the framework of the research itself. Further, unlike PAR, the use of indigenous interviewers does not presuppose the interviewers having a central role in the creation of knowledge resulting from the research project. The use of indigenous interviewers represents a unique approach to carrying out traditional research but falls short of involving the affected population in the design, implementation, and analysis of research.

PAR is a beneficial research and public policy tool for a number of reasons. First, PAR is seen as an empowerment process whereby individuals are able to enact and facilitate change in their own community and lives in ways that are meaningful to them (Lee, 1993; Reason, 1994). This is especially important in contexts where the interested group is oppressed or not given much freedom or say over the environment in which they exist. Second, and relatedly, PAR aims to solve real-world problems while trying to make a positive change in the lives of those involved in the research (Baldwin, 2012; Payne & Bryant, 2018). Third, PAR is important for understanding the scope and breadth of problems as they relate to understudied or inaccessible populations. PAR allows for access to groups, contexts, and knowledge that may be out of reach in traditional research (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Reiter, 2014). Further, given the participant role and level of involvement in PAR, the approach could reduce participant distrust of traditional researchers (Danley & Ellison, 1999). Similarly, in some environments, the use of PAR actually mitigates ethical concerns about research participation when groups are oppressed or exist in an involuntary institutional setting (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Holbrook, Farrar, & Popkin, 2006; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Price, 2008). Thus, PAR allows researchers to understand more concretely the question of "what matters for whom and under what conditions?"

The PAR research methodology, however, is not without its own set of unique challenges and limitations. There are logistical limitations to the use of PAR, including time required, proper dissemination channels, and funding demands (Baum et al., 2006; Liebling, 2014). In their summary of PAR, Baum et al. (2006) suggested that PAR-focused projects are often perceived as having limited opportunities to be published and are often seen as lacking the proper scientific rigor to qualify for adequate funding. In addition, PAR approaches can take a comparatively longer time to implement than traditional research practices. In their thorough review and critique of PAR, Khanlou and Peter (2005) suggested that PAR should be carefully considered in areas where the findings of the research could lead to political or structural changes that could put the oppressed group at risk. Others have stated that PAR can still lead to unequal levels of power, within the group and between the group and the researcher. In their study of crime and victimization among young people, for example, Pain and Francis (2003) found that power differentials were still apparent despite using a PAR paradigm. Further, the authors pointed out that the ideal level of participation discussed in the PAR model is often unachievable in most practical situations. Participants themselves can be difficult to engage in all parts of the research process, with some researchers reporting trouble securing participant engagement beyond the data collection stage (Kitchin, 2001).

Participatory action research in criminology & corrections

PAR in criminology

The adoption and application of PAR in criminology has been limited due in part to a number of structural and philosophical roadblocks. As discussed by Argyris and Schön (1989), "social scientists are faced with a fundamental *choice* that hinges on a dilemma of rigor or relevance" (p. 612). Many social science journals emphasize empirical research and evaluation studies grounded in quantitative data. Conversely, PAR emphasizes the role of practical knowledge that is important to the stakeholders and participants that can

exist apart from quantitative data. Dupont (2008) echoes the conflict between meaningful change and empirical research in her call for the greater use of PAR in criminological research. It appears, then, that PAR is undervalued in criminological research for its perceived lack of rigor despite its ability to produce insightful and meaningful content. Thus, as research funding becomes more limited and the need for realistic application of research to practice becomes coveted, methods like PAR can become fruitful frameworks within which to examine and respond to community-identified problems.

Despite the above-mentioned points, there are examples of the PAR paradigm within criminological research. Action research involves buy-in and involvement from stakeholders, which is common in criminological research considering agencies or communities as stakeholders (Brennan, 1999; Hawkins, Catalano, & Kiklinski, 2014; Simmons, 2007). Similarly, criminological research has included participants in the research process. The use of focus groups has been a common occurrence in past criminological research (Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Fine & Torre, 2006; Logan, Stevenson, Evans, & Leukefeld, 2004). These can be a source of data and a source of knowledge creation. They also allow a researcher to brainstorm and identify relevant research questions, survey items, or methodological concerns (Fern, 1982). Further, insiders and local populations have been used in research that involves hard-to-access populations and in communities where cultural trust of outsiders is low, such as drug users (Magura & Kang, 1997; Waldorf, Reinarman, & Murphy, 1989) or in cases where the content of the research may be taboo or biased in a typical research context (Magura & Kang, 1997; Skoog, Roberts, & Boldt, 1980). Therefore, it appears that criminological research tends to adopt tenants of the PAR paradigm, rather than fully embrace the paradigm itself.

PAR in corrections

Although relatively few researchers in criminology have utilized a true PAR paradigm, there is a growing body of PAR research occurring within the prison context. For example, Fine et al. (2003) explored the impact of college education on incarcerated individuals using a host of data sources, including interviews conducted by incarcerated interviewers. The authors applied PAR to the prison context by involving those incarcerated in all parts of the research process, from the creation of research questions to making sense of the findings. This included the use of focus groups, administrative data, and interviews with various participants and stakeholders. Further, the work of Bryant and Payne (2013) and Payne and Bryant (2018) advocates for the use of the PAR paradigm in conjunction with classes of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. By combining these two innovative approaches to research and education, the authors highlight the ability for community-based social change for those on the inside and outside of prison walls. Unfortunately, the adoption of the PAR paradigm within prison research has largely been focused around work by Fine, Bryant, Payne, and their colleagues (see Fields, González, Hentz, Rhee, & White, 2008; Fine & Torre, 2004, 2006; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Piché, Gaucher, & Walby, 2014).

Highlighted by Fine et al. (2003) and Payne and Bryant (2018), PAR can and should be incorporated in the correctional research paradigm in a larger and more systematic way. This is because prison research, and the populations that prison research seeks to serve, fit well into the guiding principles and aims of PAR. Prison populations are often hidden, oppressed within the institution, and can be unwilling

to speak to a researcher. As discussed above, PAR seeks to access oppressed, untrusting, and hidden populations by involving them in the research process more systematically and investing in understanding community issues, as opposed to issues that are institutionally defined (Heron & Reason, 2001; Khanlou & Peter, 2005). To be successful, PAR in the prison context must seek to place these populations at the forefront of the research process and emphasize the desire to bring action to the issues defined by the prison populations. It is important to note that we are not advocating for PAR to be a replacement for traditional research. Rather, we feel that it is an important addition to the toolkit of alternatives to traditional research in corrections. PAR may not be applicable to all research questions, so there should be thoughtful consideration of the benefits and challenges of PAR research in relation to the question at hand.

Benefits of PAR in the prison context

The use of PAR in correctional research is beneficial for a number of reasons. Overall, PAR seeks to give a voice to those populations who are marginalized or oppressed (Payne & Bryant, 2018). The PAR methodology can lead to incarcerated populations feeling empowered by their ability to make changes in their environment through participation in the research process. Empowerment-based research is largely focused on increasing participants' self-worth, resilience, and abilities, as well as their beliefs in the ability to change the social environment in response to perceived negative conditions (Tsey et al., 2007). The prison environment is rarely filled with opportunities for empowerment, but the ability for PAR to provide this within such a system can be important for fostering positive attributes among an incarcerated population (Payne & Bryant, 2018).

Further, this type of research allows incarcerated individuals to see and individually benefit from the research endeavor, above and beyond any policy changes that surface from the research findings (Drake, 2014; Dupont, 2008). Together, many researchers have encouraged constant communication and holistic involvement with all members of the research team to solidify the central role of the incarcerated population in the entire research process (Dupont, 2008; Payne & Bryant, 2018).[1]

Conducting research in the correctional setting forces researchers to take into consideration the unique aspects of the environment that can affect research and its subsequent findings and implications. For example, racial and ethnic relations are a pervasive aspect of society, inside and outside of prison walls (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Weis & Fine, 2004). Research participants can differ in their likelihood to respond to questions and the content of those responses when demographic characteristics, like race/ethnicity, gender, or social class, are unequal (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988; Johnson, 1981). By involving incarcerated individuals in all parts of the research process, there may be less of a power differential during interviews than would be commonly seen in research projects with marginalized populations.[2]

It has been argued that including incarcerated individuals within the research and interview process allows the participants to speak more openly about their experiences using language that is germane to the topic while reducing the need for incarcerated respondents to explain or translate meaning during the course of the interview (Toch, 1969). Removing the power differential in research as much as

possible can allow for more accurate research findings, greater trust from research participants in marginalized populations going forward, more relevant policy recommendations and implications, and a greater emphasis of the power of population-defined solutions to salient problems (Drake, 2014; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). Some researchers have highlighted that close relations and shared context can be a barrier to accurate knowledge disclosure and that this might be particularly salient in the prison context; these sorts of issues may be mitigated by proper interviewer training, legitimacy of the project, and avoidance of internally harmful questions (Alexander & Richman, 2008; Berg et al., 2004). In light of the benefits and suitability of PAR within a correctional setting, the following sections describe a PAR-focused project that occurred collaboratively with a team of incarcerated researchers within a prison setting in the state of Arizona.

PAR in the desert

In this section, we describe our research project in more detail, from the development of a survey instrument in collaboration with incarcerated members of the ATP, to preparing incarcerated interviewers to carry out research, to administering the survey. We also discuss our focus on protecting the rights of interviewers and interviewees and the challenges of carrying out research led by individuals who are incarcerated.

Survey development

The survey instrument was developed jointly by interviewers in the ATP, researchers at ASU, and members of the Governor's Recidivism Reduction Project Team. The Governor's Office made recidivism reduction a key goal beginning in 2016 and convened the Recidivism Reduction Project Team. The Governor's Office was interested in partnering with ASU to interview first-time and repeat offenders to better understand what was and was not working with reentry in Arizona. An ASU researcher on the Recidivism Reduction Project Team suggested tapping into the knowledge and skills of the five incarcerated members of the ATP to develop and administer a survey of men in a medium security prison yard.

This novel approach was supported by the Governor's Office and ATP members drafted initial questions in December 2016. The incarcerated members of ATP were heavily involved in the instrument design, as we recognized that the project would only be successful if the interviewers felt comfortable with the survey and felt like the data being collected would be useful. An initial full draft of the instrument was developed in early 2017, incorporating suggestions and questions from Recidivism Reduction Project Team stakeholders, including administrators from the Department of Economic Security, the Department of Housing, the Department of Health Services, and the Health Care Cost Containment System in addition to ADC. The questionnaire covered a number of topic areas, including employment and housing prior to incarceration, substance use, concerns about reentry, and proposed solutions to reducing recidivism, as well as background information on the respondent. ADC gave approval for the project in February 2017.

Interviewer training and Institutional Review Board approval

Although all of the incarcerated interviewers had at least a high school education and had received the highest grades in the college-level Inside-Out Prison Exchange course, they did not have prior experience in carrying out social science research. To make possible their full participation in the research process, we wanted interviewers to have an understanding of gathering data and of the importance of protecting the rights of those they would be interviewing. We developed training for interviewers on conducting semistructured interviews. Although the survey instrument was standardized, it included a number of open-ended questions. Although interviewers were instructed to use the exact question wording for each interview, they were also encouraged to use follow-up probes as needed. ATP interviewers read an introductory book chapter on interviewing (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) and then received instruction from ASU researchers that emphasized the importance of establishing rapport with respondents, using probes as needed to fully understand respondent answers, identifying ways to get quiet respondents to open up, and avoiding reacting positively or negatively to respondent answers.

Because of ASU's involvement in data collection, the ASU Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed all research procedures. The use of incarcerated interviewers surveying incarcerated participants presented additional concerns raised by the IRB. We worked closely with the IRB to develop protocols and creative procedures to address these concerns and ensure data collection minimized the potential for harm to interviewers and interviewees. We think these solutions could be utilized in other sites in an effort to incorporate nontraditional research staff in PAR projects.

The IRB wanted to ensure that incarcerated interviewers understood the importance of protecting research subjects and could properly obtain informed consent. Because incarcerated interviewers do not have access to the internet, they could not complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program[3] social and behavioral research basic course online, as is required for social science researchers at ASU ("Social-Behavioral-Educational (SBE) Basic," n.d.). To address this, we created a packet of printed materials from CITI. We also conducted an in-person training focused in particular on the importance of informed consent and voluntary participation, as well as confidentiality. To maintain confidentiality, interviewers were also instructed not to discuss a respondent's answers with anyone. Importantly, training also emphasized the limits of confidentiality protections and the fact that disclosure of any dangerous future behavior should be reported to a correctional officer. To ensure data security, physical surveys were immediately placed in a sealed envelope and locked in a file cabinet until ASU researchers could pick them up.

We are not aware of any prior studies in a prison setting where individuals who are incarcerated received the same training on protecting human subjects as researchers. We think though that this was an especially important part of the project, because it prepared the interviewers to carry out research and allowed the incarcerated research team to truly lead the data collection process. The IRB also worried about the potential exploitation of incarcerated interviewers because they were working on a volunteer basis. Each interviewer wrote a letter to the IRB and signed an interviewer consent document that made clear that he was excited to participate in the study and understood he would receive no compensation. The document also was an opportunity for interviewers to certify that they

understood the CITI curriculum and would follow all study procedures. This process gave the interviewers a voice with the IRB and made them active participants in the approval of all study-related protocols.

Survey administration

The five interviewers piloted the survey instrument in February 2017, conducting 25 interviews. Using feedback from the pilot, they made recommendations to tweak questions and a final survey instrument was developed in March 2017. They began interviews on May 12, 2017 following approval of all study protocols by the IRB. An additional 384 interviews were completed between May and July 2017, for a total of 409 completed interviews.

Because ASU researchers were not involved in survey administration, they also were not involved in the recruitment of potential participants. Recruitment was led entirely by the incarcerated interviewers in multiple ways. Flyers about the project with the names of all five interviewers were approved by the deputy warden and posted 2 weeks prior to the start of data collection. The interviewers also went to each housing unit to generate interest for the project and to answer any questions potential respondents may have had. Those interested in participating could make appointments with interviewers or show up during scheduled hours in the peer education room, where the interviews generally took place.

Interviews took approximately 30 minutes to conduct and were completed in as private an area as possible. Interviewers used a paper form, reading aloud each question and writing down responses as close to verbatim as possible. Prior to starting the interview, interviewers read a consent script to potential respondents, who had to give their verbal consent before the interview could begin. No identifying information was included on the survey, and survey responses cannot be linked to a particular respondent. Interviewers did keep a list of all men who were interviewed, and they cross-referenced this list weekly to ensure no respondent was interviewed more than once.

Benefits & challenges

Benefits

Are there additional benefits to PAR beyond those commonly identified in the literature? We experienced the usual expected advantages including obtaining high rates of cooperation, reducing power differentials between researcher and participant, and providing a voice to a marginalized population. But there were unintended gains of the approach that surprised us. Each of these was characterized by the development of a sense of legitimacy—to the approach, to the interviewers, to us as researchers, and to our audiences, including the men who were interviewed. The additional benefit of established legitimacy led to the unexpected outcome of our final product being a means to achieving something greater.

The support and endorsements from crucial organizations, the Governor's Office and the ADC, developed external legitimacy that was critical to our ability to focus on our research. It opened the door, but the research team needed to validate that external

legitimacy. The project was carried out without any critical incidents, without any real logistical setbacks, and without much disturbance to the day-to-day operations of the prison. The project team did not abuse the opportunity in a manner that could be viewed as threatening to the authority of the ADC. And in a research rarity, we met all expected deadlines on time. The report was prepared and shared widely throughout state agencies and community organizations.[4] The external legitimacy at the start of the research process was bolstered by the internal legitimacy of a successful project.

We thought that the report was the end goal and that PAR was the means to achieve that goal. But in legitimizing the approach, we created an additional product: the tool of PAR. We have plans underway to engage in a second research project at the unit using this methodology, this time to answer questions more explicitly developed by members of the project team. The ATP is now official within the ADC: a signed memorandum acknowledges its existence and operation and places a hold against transferring inside members to another unit, whenever possible. The ATP is listed as a community partner alongside the Arizona Department of Economic Security, the ADC, and several university and community partners on a grant-funded project to implement programming at the women's prison at the Arizona State Prison Complex–Perryville. The assumed end-goal project report was only the beginning to additional work to be done.

The legitimacy of the method—and the steps required to establish that legitimacy—affected those directly and indirectly involved with the project. Our incarcerated interviewers developed a sense of purpose and a sense of confidence. Although still on the inside, they engaged in what Maruna (2001) and others might call generativity. We know this to be true because we read it in the manuscript written entirely by the men, which is currently under peer review at an academic journal. We became better researchers through teaching others about the research process. The incarcerated interviewers were not graduate students who needed to develop and hone their skills; they had no formal education or training on carrying out research, and so it was often necessary for us to take a step back and explain why, for example, it was important to understand the meaning of *beneficence*. We became better researchers because we were more tightly held to thinking about the people within the study sample.

When Ivory Tower meets Prison Tower, adjustments should be made to better situate research within the structural and cultural confinements of the prison. Too often this simply means justifying the Ivory Tower approach—validating that a particular established scale is appropriate with an incarcerated population, for example. From basic question wording to the racial similarity between interviewers and participants, we were constantly forced to think deeply about our approach and its implications for our results. Finally, the interviewed men were provided a sense of legitimacy by having their voice shared. Since this study, other men who are incarcerated on the prison yard have expressed an increased interest in getting involved, including with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Arizona Transformation Project (ATP), and activities like prison art shows to raise money for children's charities. One of the men interviewed put it this way, "It shows us that there are people out there that actually give a damn and it makes you want to do good." We could not have anticipated the level of impact created by the institutional legitimacy of the PAR approach, and we hope that others will try to utilize a similar research technique to realize the unintended benefits unique to their participatory action community.

Challenges

Despite this host of benefits, our work was not without challenges. We experienced some of the common issues with PAR that we discussed earlier. One example was the difficulty of ensuring our incarcerated interviewers were full participants in the entire research process. Although we used a collaborative process to design the survey instrument, and incarcerated interviewers collected all the interview data, the nonincarcerated members of the research team led data analysis and drafting of the final report. This was due in part to the inability of those behind bars to access statistical software used to analyze quantitative data, and their lack of experience in coding and synthesizing qualitative data. All ATP members reviewed and made comments on a draft report prior to submission to the Governor's Office, and all are listed as report authors, but ultimately the faculty and students had more control over how the data were analyzed and presented. As noted above, the interviewers did work together on a manuscript, which gave them control over describing the data collection process in their own words. Thus, though the incarcerated members of the research team were actively involved in the study, as is often the case in PAR, we did not achieve their full participation in all aspects of the research process.

Some of our challenges were unique to conducting PAR in a prison setting. We discussed the many benefits of an interview process led by those on the inside. With these protocols, however, came a reduction in the amount of oversight the nonincarcerated members of the research team had over survey administration. Incarcerated interviewers carried out all interviews, and to avoid affecting respondents or the flow of these interviews, we did not directly observe any of these interviews. Although we emphasized strict adherence to all protocols approved by the IRB and received no complaints from respondents about potential violations of human subjects protections, we also were not physically present to verify that our interviewer training was effective in the field. Because the respondent pool is incarcerated, we could not easily contact a sample of interviewees to audit the work of interviewers. And because we did not have any nonincarcerated interviewers, we could not compare the findings from incarcerated versus nonincarcerated interviewers to check for data quality issues (see Holbrook et al., 2006). We have no reason to believe that there were issues with the data or with survey administration, but we also did not have the same means to oversee data collection as we might in a nonprison field survey project.

The prison setting and distance between the prison and the university where nonincarcerated ATP members work also prevented frequent meetings with the full research team. We started with pilot data collection, using the first 25 interviews as a baseline to assess the work of each interviewer and to discuss collaboratively the data collection process and any issues that emerged. At this point, we provided feedback to each interviewer and in particular encouraged interviewers to take as detailed notes as possible on open-ended responses, ideally capturing respondents' words verbatim. But throughout the survey development and data collection period, the team typically met monthly, preventing frequent check-ins with the incarcerated interviewers. We would have preferred weekly meetings and daily check-ins, but the nature and setting of data collection did not make this feasible.

Although our oversight challenges raise potential questions about data reliability and validity, we also emphasize that our approach here may not be generalizable to other

settings, an issue we revisit in our conclusion. All of this work occurred in one unit of one Arizona prison housing only males. We do not know whether these same protocols could be replicated in other states or even in other prisons in Arizona. We suspect though that such a project would not be possible in a unit where we did not have strong existing relationships with staff and a group of incarcerated individuals. This is not so much a challenge to our work, as it is a recognition that our model for PAR in prison may not be easily transferable to other correctional contexts.

Conclusion

Those who are confined in our correctional facilities are often spoken about, but rarely included, in political and academic discussions of issues related to imprisonment. Those voices, however, are critical to understanding the complexities of life in prison and the effects of incarceration on prisoners, their families, and their communities. The purpose of this article was to include the voices of the incarcerated and to advance the use of PAR in corrections by describing a collaborative research project with incarcerated members of the ATP. Collectively, the incarcerated members of the ATP, Khan, Justin, Johnny, Varrone, and Timm, conducted more than 400 interviews with men housed in a medium security prison in Arizona over a 3-month period that led to a technical report submitted to the Arizona Governor's Recidivism Reduction Project Team and other local agencies and community organizations, an article drafted by the incarcerated members of the ATP, and opportunities for additional research projects. In the end, the opportunity to conduct research with an isolated and marginalized population, rather than on an isolated and marginalized population, allowed the research team to generate more accurate findings on issues related to recidivism and reentry that we believe led to more relevant policy recommendations and implications. At same time, the team garnered greater trust from research participants housed in the prison facility by providing and extending an explicit emphasis on population-defined solutions to relevant problems. We again note that we are not advocating that PAR should replace traditional research, but that it is an alternative (or complement) to traditional research that should be considered when the research question warrants such an approach.

As discussed in the introduction, we want to end this paper with recommendations as they relate to the application of PAR in correctional research.

(1) Our approach to PAR may not work everywhere: The unit where this project took place is a unique place, and this is something we were acutely aware of throughout the research process. The men who are incarcerated there, our close working relationship with the interviewers, and the yard environment all contributed to the success of our project. The same factors may not be present everywhere, even within another unit in Arizona. Thus, we encourage others to use our approach, benefits, and challenges as a starting point for future projects.

(2) Support from the Department of Corrections is critical: Although our project was inmate led, we would not have been able complete this project without the support of the Arizona Department of Corrections. We were transparent, honest, and respectful of the ADC, which led to strong and continued support of our project. Further, years of collaboration and partnership with the ADC increased the

likelihood that the Department would support our project. We strongly advise against any sort of PAR project that does not involve agency support or projects which seek to "sneak in" to the department. Garnering buy-in is important, for current research and continued research down the line.

(3) Recognize the investment and responsibility of what you are doing: PAR is a unique type of research. Research with people, rather than on people, means that the benefits of the research are more obvious and visible than in traditional research. This means time, energy, personal, and mental investment. We emphasize that PAR should not turn into traditional research. Rather, researchers involved in PAR projects should be aware of the investment and importance of the research they are conducting. Simply going in and getting out should not be the focus of PAR.

It is often said that people end up in prison for the wrong choices that they make. It is expected that they will make better choices in the future, and yet choice is all but removed from the daily lives of incarcerated individuals. Created in Sing Sing Prison in 1915, the Mutual Welfare League brought incarcerated men together with the sole purpose of promoting the interests and welfare of those in prison by extending increased autonomy to prisoners ("Mutual Welfare League at Sing Sing," 1915). It was an opportunity for those incarcerated to become their own ruling body. Through their motto, "Do Good; Be Good," the Welfare League sought to provide social education through the opportunity to create rules, determine appropriate responses, and model good behavior ("Mutual Welfare League at Sing Sing," 1915). PAR behind bars could be, in a sense, this century's Mutual Welfare League. Incarcerated men and women are able to do good, be good, and make good through actively participating in research. Through PAR, the best, most productive, and potentially life-changing conversations can be used to empower marginalized populations and to direct the most effective and relevant recommendations for policy.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that we are unable to determine the mechanism by which individual change may be achieved. This is particularly apparent when a PAR project is accompanied by an institutional policy change. Nonetheless, we feel that the paradigm supplies many of the same expectations as desistance researchers who value strengths-based approaches to rehabilitation (Kewley, 2017; Maruna, 2001).
2. We note that it may be possible that information leaked after disclosing to a fellow individual who is incarcerated could be more damaging than information leaked by a researcher. It is important for future research to investigate the fluid nature of power dynamics in research and better understand instances where power dynamics in PAR research may be larger than those in traditional research.
3. "Social-Behavioral-Educational (SBE) Basic." (n.d.). Retrieved from: https://about.citiprogram. org/en/course/human-subjects-research-2/.
4. The full report with findings can be found at: https://ccj.asu.edu/ccs/reducing-recidivism-arizona. Full citation for the report can be found in the reference list.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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