Can PAR lead to enhanced citizenship?

Following Dewey, Horton and Freire, we see PAR as a strategy of democratic change that pushes far beyond aggregative voting towards a ubiquitous state of “democracy from below”. The extent to which enhanced citizenship is the core measure of PAR’s legitimacy or merely a positive externality is debatable, but those on both sides of the argument agree that as a research strategy PAR holds untapped potential to deepen the political agency of those involved and re-distribute power through the development of emancipatory alternatives to the way that dominant institutions usually work.

PAR acknowledges that the elevated status of “formal” knowledge positions as intellectually inferior those whose ways of knowing may not follow academic guidelines. PAR makes a concerted effort to overturn such hierarchal thinking through a process akin to Freire’s conscientization. PAR builds the capacity of those who are the focus of the research. It allows them to monitor and learn from the results of the research in which they are involved. This process shifts internal and external expectations and, thus, what is politically possible. By wrestling with knotty social justice issues, PAR can build strong political constituencies that serve to elevate the voice of previously marginalized or unrecognized groups. It is a decolonizing methodology, and through collaboration, PAR can give legitimacy to new or indigenous theories of change that may have gone unseen.

The power that PAR builds is relational. Relational power is power with, rather than over, others, and implies common aims. By dialectically exploring relationships and striving toward a Habermasian ideal that assumes there is no truth outside that which communities construct, PAR can develop a critical consciousness that breaks through existing mythologies and deepens the agency of participants as citizens. PAR gives space for the enhancement of citizenship through the process of facilitating inter-subjective discourse in the public realm. Participants become partners in communicative action where the universalizing capacity of argument comes to the fore. New nodes and vectors of leadership can emerge in these spaces as groups gain the strength to “make the road while walking.”