

### Spectrums of Participation: A Framework of Possibility for Participatory Inquiry and Inquirers

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## Spectrums of Participation: A Framework of Possibility for Participatory Inquiry and Inquirers

*Meagan Call-Cummings & Karen Ross*

**Key words:**

participation;  
participatory action  
research;  
epistemology;  
constraints; ideal  
type

**Abstract:** Using examples from our own inquiry experiences, we seek to identify the ontological and epistemological commitments we have as participatory researchers and to discuss how participation in social inquiry can look different in varied contexts. We turn to foundational literature on participatory action research as well as philosophies and theories of participation to unpack assumptions that may underlie our expectations of what "counts" as "good" participation. Our goal is to add nuance to and push back against binary conceptualizations of participation and to move toward understanding participation as a set of epistemological commitments rather than a set of methods that, if used, may somehow add up to a sum of "good enough." Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to ongoing discussions around the possibilities of participation for those who may be drawn to participatory inquiry but who may feel like it is not viable because of various constraints.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2017, Meagan held an informal meeting with a prospective student she hoped would attend her university and her program in particular. He had a unique background that would lead to interesting research, she thought. As they sat down together, the prospective student, Gio, began by walking Meagan through his background in international program evaluation. He listed several examples of opportunities he had had to conduct or oversee human rights-oriented program evaluations in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Guatemala, South Africa, and across the European Union. After just a few minutes, he came to his question: "When is participation really participation?" Meagan smiled and they continued their conversation about what participation really is in the context of social inquiry. [1]

We are aware that this type of encounter is not unique among scholars and practitioners across many disciplines and fields who share a commitment to engaging participatory processes and actions. Since that meeting in 2017, and even before, we have continually asked ourselves: what does *good* participation or *real* participation look like? We have each in various ways and at different times engaged in inquiry that has been framed as more or less participatory in nature. To this end, we have critiqued ourselves formally in academic outlets (CALL-CUMMINGS, HAUBER-ÖZER & ROSS, 2020; ROSS & CALL-CUMMINGS, 2019) as well as informally among friends, students, and colleagues, as we have consistently fallen short of the pictures we have in our minds of what *good* or *real* participatory inquiry is. As we continue to self-critique, we also press on in trying to unpack both the concept and practice of participation in a way that gets past the binary of how participation has traditionally been defined—as a thing that is either achieved or not, present or not. We may ask ourselves: "Was the project participatory, or was it not? Did you include all the right people in all the right ways at all the right times, or not?" While these questions may be helpful initially, they do not allow for a deeper understanding of the complexity and nuance of participation. [2]

Just a few weeks prior to starting to write this manuscript, in fact, Karen visited Meagan's graduate seminar on participatory action research (PAR) to chat about several of her own research projects in the context of how equitable, ethical research relationships are built and maintained. As Karen was discussing several different research projects that were relevant for engaging the concept of participation in different ways, the students began asking questions about her research. Karen clarified that while many of these projects were not framed as participatory per se, she always held herself and her inquiry to certain ontological and epistemological commitments, including a commitment to conducting research with, not on, others. Karen then introduced the idea of a spectrum of participation, suggesting that participation is not a binary, but rather that it can look differently in different contexts and is often constrained in different structural or systemic ways. This discussion was the impetus for this reflective manuscript. [3]

Engaging theory and drawing from the elements of our own inquiry experience that best reflect the range of conceptualizations of "participation" we discuss, we seek to identify the ontological and epistemological commitments we have as participatory researchers and to discuss how participation in social inquiry can look differently in varied contexts. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to ongoing discussions around the possibilities of participation for scholars, students, practitioners, and community leaders who may be drawn to participatory inquiry but who may feel like it is not viable because of various constraints or limitations within the contexts in which they work. [4]

In the next section we cover literature pertinent to this discussion, including work that helps us tease out how we conceptualize participation and how we think of the ideals to which we aspire in participatory inquiry. We then offer five examples from our own research experiences that help us draw out lessons about participation. We dig into these experiences in the following section, offering some methodological lessons learned around participation, and our final section offers concluding thoughts. [5]

## 2. Literature Review

In order to grapple productively with the concept and practice of participation, we turn to foundational literature on PAR as well as philosophies and theories of participation, to unpack assumptions that may underlie our expectations of what *counts* as *good* participation. Our goal is to add nuance to and push back against binary conceptualizations and to move toward understanding participation as a set of epistemological commitments rather than a set of methods that, if used, may somehow add up to a sum of *good enough*. [6]

### 2.1 Conceptualizing participation

Across many disciplines, fields, geographies, and spaces, PAR has been conceptualized as an epistemological stance that pushes back against a neoliberal, capitalist monopoly of knowledge production (RAHMAN, 1991):

"This is the distinctive viewpoint of PAR. Domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production but also over the means of knowledge production, including control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge" (p.14). [7]

Paulo FREIRE in Brazil, Orlando FALS-BORDA in Colombia, Muhammad Anisur RAHMAN in Bangladesh, and Ignacio MARTIN-BARÓ in El Salvador, among many others in the 1960s and 1970s, all theorized that participation, democracy, and pluralism are vital components of social inquiry which is anchored in equitable knowledge production and social change. These and countless other scholar-activists collaborating in anti-colonial, anti-oppressive struggles across South America, Africa, and Asia (GLASSMAN & ERDEM, 2014), as well as others from the Global North like Budd HALL and Boaventura DE SOUSA SANTOS, have urged scholars and practitioners to take up this "practice that

attempt[s] to put the less powerful at the centre of the knowledge creation process; to move people and their daily lived experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the center" (HALL, 1992, pp.15-16). DE SOUSA SANTOS (2008, 2014) added that participatory inquiry is an important tool in countering acts of what he has called epistemicide, or organized efforts to invalidate, erase, or steal the knowledges of subordinated cultures. [8]

Yet, against the backdrop of this strong conceptual foundation, we see much ongoing PAR discussion as remaining focused specifically on the technical and ethical dimensions of participatory research methods. As we publish on our own participatory work we see countless examples of publications that have focused on managing ethical dilemmas of participatory research (CAMPBELL-PAGE & SHAW-RIDLEY, 2013; MINKLER et al., 2002; MISTRY, BERARDI, BIGNANTE & TSCHIRHART, 2015); teasing out techniques to use when working with vulnerable populations (HOLKUP, TRIPP-REIMER, SALOIS & WEINERT, 2004; WINDSOR, 2013) or youth (CAHILL, 2007; WALSH, HEWSON, SHIER & MORALES, 2008); or treating participation as a useful method in settings where a university-based researcher is decidedly an outsider to the community where research is being conducted (MINKLER, 2004; SALSBERG, MACRIDIS, GARCIA BENGOCHEA, MACAULAY & MOORE, 2017). We see, and have even written ourselves (CALL-CUMMINGS & HAUBER-ÖZER, 2021; ROSS, 2017) many chapters and articles in which we detail how, when, and with whom to use one participatory method or another. We also see frameworks and typologies that seek to understand *types*, *forms*, or *models* of participation, seemingly with an eye toward allowing university-based researchers to reflect on how they work toward better or fuller participation of co-researchers (BERGOLD & THOMAS, 2012; BORG, KARLSSON, KIM & McCORMACK, 2012; SPRINGETT, ATKEY, KONGATS, ZULLA & WILKINS, 2016). While we do not mean to criticize or devalue this work, it is important to note that much of the PAR literature we see has tended to focus on participation in terms of individuals' involvement (e.g., how much time spent, how much "ownership" through authorship or other means) rather than on participation in relation to power relations, which is how PAR was originally conceived. [9]

We appreciate a growing body of literature that has helped us understand how some participatory research collectives have enacted a democratizing of knowledge production by radically destabilizing the knowledge hierarchy through relationality, reflexivity, and a constant questioning of power structures at play. For example, BOYDELL, GLADSTONE, VOLPE, ALLEMANG and STASIULIS (2012) troubled understandings of what counts as evidence as they offered a scoping review of arts-based health research (ABHR), finding ABHR presents an opportunity for alternative ways of knowing that move participatory inquirers beyond using one method or another to a complete "paradigmatic shift in how we approach inquiry into the social world" (§41). Later, BOYDELL, HODGINS and GLADSTONE (2016) used ABHR to create "a space for enhanced relationships" (p.692) that allowed the research collective to disrupt traditional academic expectations and assumptions about what counts as knowledge and "embrace[d] the embodied, messy and experiential nature of" arts-based and participatory

inquiry (p.693). In PHILLIPS, KRISTIANSEN, VEHVILÄINEN and GUNNARSSON (2013), the editors pulled together authors who connect reflexive praxis with a dialogic conceptualization of participation, often focusing on questions of power in the context of collaborative inquiry and explicitly examining the epistemological underpinnings of participation and their implications for research practice. [10]

Other authors focus explicitly on defining a participatory research paradigm (e.g., COOK, 2012) as well as the complexity of participation and the role that power plays in shaping what participation means and how it is enacted. For instance, CALL-CUMMINGS and DENNIS (2019) reflected on how power is treated in the context of participation, suggesting that "opportunities ... to establish ... the dignity of all" those engaged in a "*collective* reclaiming of power" (§39) through and in spaces of intra-active inquiry is crucial. They define this process as a co-production of agency through entangled relationships and opportunities. Similarly, PHILLIPS, FRØLUNDE and CHRISTENSEN-STRYNØ (2021), drawing on autoethnographic work, explored how power complicates the relationships that are foundational to collaborative inquiry. Their call toward a relational ethic of care that not only takes heed of power imbalances but confronts them head-on in dialogic, democratic ways is echoed by GROOT et al. (2019) and GUILLEMAN and GILLAM (2004); this scholarship helps move us away from a taken-for-granted notion of participatory or collaborative research as characterized by mutuality and a flattened hierarchy. [11]

In this article, we add to this literature that critically analyzes the complexities of "participation." By exploring our own epistemological ideals and what happens when we fail to fully achieve them, we are better able to articulate the tensions that exist in our commitments to a more liberatory praxis, power relations that challenge our capacity to achieve our ideals, and structural constraints that can change the forms of collaboration and co-creation of knowledge. Ultimately, we suggest that an emphasis on *commitments*, rather than *form* or *method*, serves as a useful starting point for understanding what we aspire to achieve when engaging in participatory inquiry—even when we cannot reach these ideals. [12]

## 2.2 The ideals to which we aspire

In an earlier paper (ROSS & CALL-CUMMINGS, 2019), we wrote:

"In our discussion of 'failure', we define the concept in terms of our inability as researchers to reach the ideals to which we aspire in our empirical fieldwork with others. Failure refers to our inability to achieve ideals both in terms of our relationships with those who participate in our research and ideals characterized by a desire to overcome broader constraints, such as those that limit whose knowledge is considered legitimate" (p.98). [13]

The core of this definition of failure, as we posed it then, was "inability to reach the ideals to which ... we aspire." We raise this point here because of its emphasis on *ideals*, which we believe are central to understanding

epistemological commitments as the basis of participatory inquiry, as well. In particular, we think about the ideals of participatory research as something to which we aspire, but sometimes (often?) fail to reach. Our conceptualization of *ideal* PAR, moreover, is based on fulfilling aspirations in terms of our onto-ethical-epistemological commitments. [14]

At the same time, as discussed above, we have noticed that while much of the scholarship on PAR extols onto-epistemological commitments as the basis of participatory inquiry, empirical literature primarily focuses on defining what makes something *participatory* at the level of *methods*. There is thus a disconnect between what is discussed as the foundation of PAR and how it is characterized in much of the scholarship discussing its implementation—a disconnect that in part can be understood by contrasting two conceptualizations of what is ideal: Jürgen HABERMAS' (1984 [1981]) *ideal speech situation* and Max WEBER's (1949 [1904]) *ideal type*. [15]

The ideal speech situation, as HABERMAS described it, relates to speech interactions based on rational deliberation: that is, dialogue in which participants raise questions about otherwise taken-for-granted, backgrounded assumptions that are part of their speech acts (BLAKE, 1995, p.356). The purpose of such rational deliberation is to achieve mutual understanding, which provides the impetus for raising questions and queries about others' speech acts. [16]

In "The Theory of Communicative Action," HABERMAS (1984) offered the ideal speech situation as a *limit case*, based on four principles:

- pure rational argumentation as the force governing speech acts, no coercion exists that can distort what is said or expressed;
- authenticity or sincerity of expression, participants must mean what they say;
- equality among actors, everyone must have the same opportunity to speak;
- openness to criticism and to understanding and listening to others. [17]

Crucially, HABERMAS noted that, in this situation, "we have to do with a form of communication that is improbable in that it insufficiently approximates ideal conditions" (p.25). In other words, communication will not *achieve* "ideal speech" in terms of the presence of these four principles, but we can hold these conditions up as those to which we aspire. This is how we understand the onto-ethical-epistemological commitments of participatory action research: commitments to which we aspire, but which, for reasons within or outside of our control, we are unlikely to fully achieve. [18]

In contrast to HABERMAS' ideal speech situation, WEBER's concept of the "ideal type" is helpful as an analytic construct that can help us understand *methods-focused* discussions of participatory action research. WEBER defined the ideal type as a "utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality" (1949 [1904], p.90). This concept refers to an abstraction of some social phenomenon that includes its most essential components, and that we can use as illustrative of

the phenomenon in its "pure" form (HOLLIS, 1994). As WEBER noted, in seeking to understand a phenomenon, no single case will correspond to the characteristics defining the ideal type. Yet, any given case can be characterized according to its inclusion of essential components. In our reading of the PAR literature, this is reflective of the way that empirical studies are mostly discussed: in terms of whether, and to what degree, they include specific methods or techniques that are associated with participatory research. [19]

An important distinction between HABERMAS' and WEBER's constructs are their normative dimensions: for HABERMAS, the ideal speech situation is a phenomenon that individuals engaging in rational discourse might hope or aspire to achieve. In other words, it reflects a judgment on what rational discourse *should be* or should aspire to be. WEBER's ideal type concept, on the other hand, lacks this normative dimension: ideal types reflect what *could* be, not what *should* be. [20]

To that end, we find these concepts useful in different ways. WEBER's ideal type is most helpful in framing an approach to participatory inquiry that is rooted in techniques, or to put it another way, participation as method. When participation is approached from this lens, we can think of the "ideal" of participation as reflecting use of a full spectrum of participatory techniques; however, no single case of participatory inquiry will reflect this *ideal* of participatory inquiry in all dimensions. Much of the literature discussed above that defines participatory research at the methods level draws from an underlying sense of *ideal* PAR research that is explained through WEBER's concept of the ideal type. HABERMAS' concept of the ideal speech situation, on the other hand, enables us to grapple productively with the normative dimension of PAR: we suggest that like HABERMAS' ideal speech situation, the limit case of participatory inquiry is a normative ideal that we aim to achieve through adherence to certain onto-epistemological commitments (such as sharing power across the lifespan of a project, decentering the expertise of a university-based researcher, or engaging collective decision making) rather than use of some spectrum of techniques that are perceived as part of the PAR spectrum. Further, any given participatory study will only approximate, but likely will never fully achieve, this ideal. [21]

Our framing of participatory inquiry as epistemologically-rooted, and thus aspirational, extends our previous writing on so-called failure in the context of empirical research (ROSS & CALL-CUMMINGS, 2019). Drawing on HABERMAS' (1987 [1985]) concept of system and lifeworld, we argue that there are failures to achieve ideals that are based in systemic constraints we cannot transcend; these constraints differ from failures that arise from missteps or miscommunication. In other words, failures that result from communicative misunderstandings differ qualitatively from failures due to structural limitations: the former can be addressed (and possibly prevented) through intersubjective reflection, while the latter cannot be transcended without changes to the very system within which inquiry takes place. [22]



In the following pages, we attempt to clarify the underlying onto-epistemological commitments that form the *ideal* to which participatory inquiry aspires, while noting also the complexities of those ideals in contexts characterized by power imbalances. In doing so, we focus on how participatory inquiry can achieve (or come close to achieving) those ideals, even when limited by systemic or structural constraints that might make achieving an ideal type of participation, as defined by methods, a challenging proposition. Drawing on examples from our own research, we analyze our onto-epistemological commitments and the ways through which these have and have not been achieved, in order to clarify both what the commitments are, and how these can be foregrounded even when structural constraints limit the possibilities for achieving participation as ideal type. It is when we do *not* foreground such commitments, particularly in contexts where we are not constrained by structural issues, that we suggest we have *failed* in our attempts at participatory inquiry. [23]

### 3. Examples

In this section, we draw on a series of examples from our own research studies to illustrate the difference between PAR as an ideal type and PAR as a normative ideal based on the epistemological commitments to which we aspire. We chose these projects as illustrative examples that allow us to reflect on *differences* in how participation can be enacted or constrained. [24]

#### 3.1 Example 1: Participatory evaluation interrupted

This example comes from an evaluation project Meagan conducted for a county government on the west coast of the United States. The county had received funding to open a transitional housing program dedicated to supporting women of color transitioning out of the criminal justice system, and who had experiences of trauma and addiction. While the county had originally requested that Meagan conduct a fairly basic program evaluation that identified what was working and what was not working, Meagan explained what a participatory evaluation might look like and representatives of the county thought that a participatory approach, which centered the experiences and voices of women who had lived or worked in the housing program as the focus of the evaluation, would fit their goals well. [25]

In the Fall of 2019, Meagan traveled to the site to begin gathering an evaluation collective. Representatives from several organizations as well as the county government and House management met with Meagan over the course of three days to build relationships and design the evaluation. They planned to conduct a Photovoice project (WANG & BURRIS, 1997), engage story circles (PITTAWAY, BARTOLOMEI & HUGMAN, 2010), and hold community consultations (BROWN & ISAACS, 2005; DICKERT & SUGARMAN, 2005; LÖHR, WEINHARDT & SIEBER, 2020)—all established participatory methods for data collection and analysis—over the next six months. They would then work together to collectively analyze the data they collected. Finally, they would co-author an evaluation report that would center the perspectives and narratives of women who had lived and worked at the House. [26]

Then COVID-19 hit. Meagan was unable to travel back to the location and the evaluation was put on hold. When the county came back to Meagan to ask what a virtual evaluation might look like, Meagan reached out to the original evaluation committee for advice. They agreed that Meagan would conduct a number of virtual semi-structured interviews with stakeholders identified by the committee, using a protocol co-created with the evaluation committee. Meagan would conduct a preliminary thematic analysis of the data and would submit her analysis to the committee for review and calibration. Once they had reviewed and added to the analysis, Meagan would draft the evaluation report, seeking out feedback from the evaluation committee at multiple points during and upon completion of the writing. [27]

Although not participatory in the ways they had at first imagined, Meagan worked with the original evaluation committee, a cohort of individuals whose experiences and backgrounds offered new and different forms of knowledge co-creation. In their discussions, the evaluation committee worked to ensure that the voices and perspectives of women who lived or worked at the House were centered in every aspect of the evaluation, including the final report—and that Meagan's expertise was decentered. For example, the evaluation committee chose to present two full, unedited testimonials from women who had lived at the House in the evaluation report prior to presenting any "lessons learned," which pulled quotes and evidence from across the body of data that had been collected. In this way, these testimonials preserved and honored the full narratives and embodied experiences of the women who offered them, without dissecting them through coding or other analytic methods. While Meagan and the evaluation committee were disappointed that they could not fulfill their original plan, they recognized that contextual constraints still allowed the evaluation to stay true to its commitment of honoring the voices and experiences of African American women who experienced the criminal justice system as well as trauma and addiction. Within the contextual constraints that presented themselves, moreover, an emphasis was placed on relationship building and on co-ownership of the direction of every aspect of the research process. [28]

### **3.2 Example 2: Restorative justice program evaluation**

An example from Karen's research comes from an ongoing project (on pause due to COVID) at a correctional institution in her state: a participatory evaluation of a restorative justice program implemented at this and several other correctional institutions in the region. The project took place in two phases. In the first phase, Karen, along with a small working group consisting of the restorative justice program director and several men who had participated in the restorative justice program, designed an evaluation study to understand the experiences of the men and the impact of their program participation. While the group worked as a collective to come up with a design for the evaluation and to set an interview protocol, several constraints led to Karen conducting the majority of interviews, along with a graduate student; and to Karen doing all data analysis on her own. [29]

In the second phase of this project, which got underway just prior to the shutdown of programs at the correctional institution due to COVID, Karen and a graduate student convened a working group that included restorative justice program participants, a program facilitator, the program director, and an administrator at the correctional institution. This working group began meeting regularly for research methodology training (delivered by Karen and the graduate student), with the intention of collectively developing a system for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the restorative justice program. The plan for this phase was to work with administrators at the correctional institution to ensure that data collection and analysis could be completed by incarcerated men who were part of the working group ("insiders"), along with Karen and other "outside" members of the working group. [30]

The way that this project evolved over time suggests the significance of engagement across the research spectrum as part of an onto-epistemological commitment. This did not occur during the first part of the project but was starting to happen during the second half—and in fact shaped the development of Phase 2. Karen worked with correctional institution administrators to ensure that participants in the working group would be able to participate in and get paid for data analysis, to address institutional constraints around how much they might participate. [31]

The project also highlights the significance of relationship and trust building as well as inclusion of those whose voices are typically not heard in the research process (especially those most affected by the program as the focus of the research) in the knowledge creation and meaning making processes. What is missing here, however, is involvement of participants across the research spectrum. While this was constrained in Phase 1 by institutional regulations, it is worth noting that even within such constraints there may have been opportunities to bring preliminary analyses back to the group for feedback in ways that could have led to radically different forms of knowledge production. [32]

### **3.3 Example 3: Summer teacher professional development**

Karen is currently part of a team, formed in collaboration between two institutions, that has developed a summer professional development (PD) program for teachers. Karen was asked to be the evaluator of this program and has been part of the team since it was first under development. Up until this point, Karen has done all of the data collection, analysis, and report writing for the program (assessment of a pilot and of the 2020 and 2021 summer PD opportunities). However, as part of the organizing team, Karen has also been involved with program decision-making from the outset; and all other team members have been involved in many aspects of conceptualizing the evaluation—for instance, data collection instruments were developed in collaboration with, and with feedback from, other team members. In this sense, the research associated with this project, while undertaken by Karen, has been developed in a participatory manner. [33]

In anticipation of the summer 2021 program, Karen proposed that design and implementation of the evaluation framework be more explicitly oriented towards a participatory approach that foregrounded knowledge and experiences other than those that are highlighted through traditional research methods training. To that end, a small group (consisting of Karen, several other team members, and one participant from the summer 2020 program) worked to develop the framework for evaluating the summer 2021 PD opportunity. Protocols for data collection (reflective journals and teacher observations) were created to emphasize needs other than research (in particular, to help the program facilitators develop their teaching frameworks). Moreover, every decision about the evaluation (overall design, creation of protocols, and so on) was made within the context of discussions among all team members in ways that aimed to address multiple stakeholders' needs and decenter Karen as the expert. On the other hand, during the first year of this project, teachers were not engaged in the research process—nor were teacher needs or expertise addressed in the context of developing the evaluation framework. This suggests a failure to meet commitments, particularly given a lack of institutional constraints that might have prevented an increased emphasis on relationship-building with teachers. [34]

### **3.4 Example 4: Jewish-Palestinian encounters**

Karen's dissertation study was a retrospective, comparative study of two organizations in Israel implementing Jewish-Palestinian encounters. The study, which entailed 11 months of fieldwork, over 100 interviews and more than 200 hours of participant observation, could hardly be characterized as *participatory* in a traditional sense. Indeed, it was not conceptualized as a participatory project at all. As a dissertation written for Karen's PhD, the project was expected to be a solo inquiry project without involvement of other researchers (or co-researchers). However, the project from the outset was developed in discussion with both of the organizations with which she was working. For instance, prior to beginning fieldwork, Karen met with staff from a range of different organizations—these meetings were partially about learning what kind of access to alumni and participants she might have, but also about learning what issues were of primary interest to the organizations (in terms of the long-term impact of participation on alumni) and whether the research questions she was considering would be useful for them. Ultimately, Karen's research questions were shaped by the discussion with all of these organizations and their staff, but in particular through discussions with the two organizations that ended up being the focus of her research. [35]

In addition, during the process of fieldwork, the focus of the research evolved based on deepening relationships with organization staff and their articulation of what knowledge could look like and how it would help them. Later when Karen returned to the USA to analyze and write up her research, she was in regular contact with the staff of both organizations, with whom she consulted about preliminary analyses as well as angles for analysis and writing. An article authored with input from the co-directors of one of the organizations, published in one journal's special issue funded by the Open Society Institute, generated additional funding for that organization. And, in the years since finishing her PhD,

Karen has continued working with that organization (the other organization disbanded shortly after she finished her fieldwork) in ways that have been more explicitly collaborative. For instance, the two follow up studies she has done have developed out of ongoing conversations about issues of focus and questions of interest to organization staff members. Numerous conversations with staff about data collected (as well as data Karen was provided from the organizations that were part of her analysis) have served as the basis of joint efforts to figure out how to make sense of it all. Likewise, staff have taken some of her preliminary analyses and used them as the focal point of retreats and/or strategic planning meetings for the organization. [36]

Ultimately, while not framed as participatory inquiry, this project and ongoing collaboration moved far from research being something conducted in isolation or by a single, solitary researcher, and exemplifies several of the onto-epistemological commitments we see as the ideals of participatory approaches. These include the significance of relationships and of building relationships and trust over time, the emphasis on research benefitting the organization or participants/stakeholders (financially and otherwise), and engagement of this organization across the research process: in design, determining research questions, discussions about preliminary analyses, and so on. [37]

### **3.5 Example 5: The roles of teacher-activists**

Meagan has recently begun a project with a colleague that attempts to understand how people who identify as teacher-activists come to own and live out that role. The goal of the project, which is just getting off the ground as we write this manuscript, is to map out typical and atypical trajectories of teacher-activists, identifying key moments or critical events in a person's life that may lead that person to activism through and in education. All data collection tools have been selected or created by Meagan and her colleague, and data analysis will be conducted by them, although there is the hope of convening some, if not all, of the participants for some collaborative analysis. Ultimately, Meagan and her colleague hope to attract the attention of teachers who may feel drawn to activism but may not know how to take a first step, where or with whom to be involved, or how to navigate structural constraints. [38]

Meagan has described the project to other colleagues and students as *not participatory*, yet she does not feel that she is turning her back on her onto-epistemological commitment to participation. She feels competing responsibilities as she frames this project—a responsibility to protect teachers' time by not asking for much in the way of time or energy since teachers are already so overworked and underpaid in the United States (where the project is happening), and a competing responsibility to invite full participation and joint ownership of the process and products (a possible book, scholarly publications, presentations, and more), not wanting to exclude anyone from the process. Without funding to allow participation to be rewarded financially, she is unsure how to characterize the project and, more importantly, how to navigate this tension. [39]

This project might not at first glance fit assumed characteristics of what would count as *participatory*. However, its focus on balancing benefits and requests of participants, joint ownership of products, inclusion of voices and experiences not typically valued, and collaborative meaning making in the data analysis process, all indicate an aspiration to stay true to the onto-epistemological commitments we view as the ideal of participatory inquiry. At the same time, we see in this example two significant elements that move it away from this ideal. This entails, first, the assumption that teachers would not want to be more involved in the process—or, more broadly, assumptions made by Meagan about participants' interests, agendas, goals, and their own commitments. Second, in this project there has been no attempt at relationship-building beyond rapport-building during data collection. Some participants are known personally to Meagan and her colleague but others are not. [40]

#### 4. Unpacking Commitments to Participation in the Context of Constraints

Taken together, the examples above bring to light some of the ontological, ethical, and epistemological commitments that we see as central to the ideals of participation, both in terms of how they manifest in our research projects and in the ways that we have been faced with and have navigated constraints. Our examples illustrate that the normative ideals of participation, or the commitments to which we aspire, include an emphasis on 1. studying *with*, 2. the significance/utility of research to the communities we work with, 3. the importance of relationships, and 4. honoring the knowledge and embodied experiences of those whose voices are not typically heard. In this sense, our work reflects similar commitments to those addressed in other analyses focused on what it means to enact "participatory" research (GROOT et al., 2019; PHILLIPS et al., 2021). [41]

As our examples illustrate, however, these commitments do not all look the same in every example. For example, our commitment to studying or inquiring *with* includes collaboration in decision-making about project focal areas (Example 4) or in project design (Example 1), and participation of co-researchers in some but not all aspects of the process (Examples 2 and 3). In these examples, the *commitment* is present, but the degree to which the methods or *ideal type* of participation (e.g., full co-researcher engagement across the research spectrum) is present varies. In part, this illustrates our commitments as aspirational. That is, the examples demonstrate how, in our conceptualization, participatory research is characterized by a set of onto-ethical-epistemological commitments—but that the specifics may look different due to systemic and institutional constraints, cultural conditions, resources, time, and so on. [42]

These examples also illustrate where we might situate our failures in undertaking participatory inquiry. By "failures," we mean places where *not* achieving what might have been possible in terms of meeting our commitments was not due to structural constraints, but rather to challenges we faced personally in decentering our own role in order to foreground relationships and emphasize relational ethics and mutual responsibility in ways that might be uncomfortable, tentative, or fluid

(GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004; KUMSA, CHAMBON, YAN & MAITER, 2015). For instance, Example 3 reflects a situation where our desire to make inquiry useful to all was limited by providing feedback only to the organizations with which Karen was working, rather than also to the teachers who were part of the professional development initiative. In this case, the feedback *could* have been shared with these teachers, but Karen failed to open up the knowledge production process to those who could have provided a different—perhaps radically different—understanding of the program's impact. Another failure is reflected in Example 5, which was characterized both by a lack of relationship building with participants, and (related), by making assumptions about the interests and goals of Meagan's collaborators/co-researchers. The important point to make here is that the choices made were not limited by structural constraints—at least, not in terms of finding it challenging to achieve our ideals in terms of meeting commitments. Instead, these examples illustrate *failures*, as we define them—situations where limits on meeting the ideals to which we aspire came solely from us and how we went about designing our projects. In particular, they reflect a failure to foreground the need for destabilizing power hierarchies and re-envisioning research in a radically different way. [43]

At the same time, we suggest that it is important to consider intentionality in relation to these commitments. Karen's failure in Example 3 to not fully include teachers in the decision-making process came from her awareness of how overworked teachers are, and from being cautioned that if asked to engage, they might say yes out of a sense of duty rather than out of a true desire to do so. Thus, while on one hand we can say that Karen failed in meeting the commitments of participation, on the other hand this particular failure emerges from a place of caring (CAINE, CHUNG, STEEVES & CLANDININ, 2020). This caring is similarly seen in Example 5 but presents a tension there. Meagan, as a personal friend, colleague, mentor, and research collaborator with many K-12 teachers in the United States, is intimately familiar with the structural constraints and pressures faced by potential research participants. Meagan, along with her research project colleague, made a decision without consulting participants that is intended to exhibit care and awareness but may cause unintended harm. The assumption that no participant would be interested in or have the time or energy to participate in other ways could be wrong. In this example, a possible alternative that would allow Meagan to maintain her epistemological commitment and that would move her closer to her epistemological ideals would be to engage in dialogue with each individual participant separate from or in addition to data collection to gauge their interest and capacity for broader participation in the project. As is often the case, participants may have other ideas for how they could participate, or what they might contribute, that may not have occurred to Meagan or her colleague. [44]

These examples also help us understand the difference between participatory research as characterized by *commitments* and participation as characterized by methods that fit within an ideal type. This is best illustrated by the difference in our examples above between *participatory* and *collaborative* approaches—for instance, Example 4 was never imagined as a fully participatory project, but

rather was characterized by Karen's collaboration with the organization from initial conceptualization of the research, including in ways that provided material benefit to the organization and over the course of a decade-long, deep and sustained relationship. Other examples (Examples 2 and 3 in particular) illustrate wide stakeholder involvement during the period of project conceptualization but lack of co-researcher involvement in some elements of the research spectrum. To some, this might be indicative of a non-participatory research project—however, given our distinction between normative ideals and ideal types, we see this as reflective of research that does not necessarily fit conceptualizations of *participatory* which are methods-based, while still adhering to underlying onto-ethical-epistemological commitments to which we aspire in participatory inquiry. In other words, even if researchers are engaged in collecting or analyzing data on their own, this is done on the basis of decisions made by a collective, on behalf of/in a way that is useful to that collective, with a primary emphasis on the collective's knowledge and experiences, and where the researchers' input is decentered. This decentering of researchers and broadening of expertise is not just about including multiple voices (which might move us towards an *ideal type* of participatory research), but also about making a commitment to different perspectives (e.g., TORRE, 2005), including radically different forms of knowing. [45]

Finally, the emphasis we place, as shown through these examples, on *aspiring* towards achieving our commitments, suggests the importance of conceptualizing participatory research as an emergent rather than pre-formed design (ZHAO, ROSS, LI & DENNIS, 2021). The examples illustrate that in many cases, it is not possible to know in advance what the concrete elements of the research will look like, and whether these techniques that are considered part and parcel of participatory research will be foregrounded. However, we can always go into projects with our commitments in place, and those commitments can carry through the entire research process no matter who we work with or what the emphasis of the research ends up being. [46]

## 5. Conclusions

The examples we offer here are intended to make clear the multiple and intersecting constraints that show up in all research in one way or another. Meagan perceived structural constraints as she assumed teacher participants would not have the time or capacity to devote to her project beyond an hour-long interview. Karen encountered institutional constraints in her restorative justice program evaluation. Meagan experienced contextual constraints in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As researchers, these types of constraints are both perceived and experienced in many ways and at varied times. They may present more acutely depending on our vulnerability. For example, both Meagan and Karen were conducting all of this research prior to receiving tenure at either of their universities. We have felt, at times, the pressure to "publish or perish," which translated to sometimes doubting our commitments to participation. At the same time, we recognize that, as two white women, we experience less vulnerability in the academy than others who (rightly) feel heightened concern around conducting participatory research that may take longer or may be seen as less



than rigorous. We find utility in reviewing these examples to better understand a spectrum of participation—as opposed to a binary treatment of it—that ultimately helps us understand how we, as researchers who have made explicit commitments to disruption of traditional power imbalances in research contexts as well as co-construction of knowledge with people who are often excluded from or wounded by traditional knowledge creation processes, reach toward our ontological, ethical, and epistemological ideals. We recognize that in all examples of participatory or collaborative inquiry (ours and those articulated by other scholars), it is necessary to engage in further critical reflection on the way that power dynamics shape the research process. However, we hope that this discussion can allow us all to focus more on the onto-epistemological commitments and orientations expand our conceptualizations of participation rather than to focus on exclusionary definitions that may or may not be viable in a given research context. [47]

Finally, our experiences have shaped the way we approach our teaching and advising of students, as we note in the introduction. We encourage our students to think beyond technical dimensions when defining participation, and instead to reflect deeply on how participation as a potential *approach* fits with their epistemological ideals and commitments. To that end, we offer this discussion as one of hope for students and other scholars who may feel stuck or limited in their capacity to conduct inquiry that is in line with their own epistemological ideals, and urge them to stay committed even amidst disciplinary and other constraints, for, as we articulate here, it is in the action of reaching toward our ideals that a radical disruption of norms may be achieved. [48]

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