

# Participation and other ethical considerations in participatory action research in post-earthquake rural Haiti

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**Loretta Pyles**

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

## Abstract

This article offers reflections on work with rural peasant organizations in Haiti to build capacities to engage in participatory action research (PAR) and sustainable community recovery and development after the 12 January 2010 earthquake. Specifically, it is based on the perspectives of an engaged scholar who has conducted ongoing research and transnational recovery and development projects in collaboration with rural disaster survivors. Drawing from Pretty's framework for participation, the researcher engages in a retrospective analysis using critical ethnographic methods to problematize the processes seeking to make transparent the ethical tensions around participation, power, language, gender/race/class, outcomes, and institutions.

## Keywords

Disasters, Haiti, participation, participatory action research, social change, social development

## Introduction

Haiti is a country in the Caribbean that has been significantly impacted by the experiences of colonization, occupations, and dictatorships. It has long been considered one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere with two-thirds of the labor force working in the informal sector and three-fourths of the population living on less than US\$2 per day (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). At the same time, the country boasts the only successful slave revolt in history, and contemporary democratic grassroots social movements offer a lifeline of support and solidarity for the most vulnerable Haitians.

With a notoriously weak governmental infrastructure, local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play key roles in the health and social welfare of Haitians (Schuller, 2007, 2010). Indeed, the country has been referred to as the 'Land of 10,000 NGOs', and these NGOs have little or no accountability to the government or the people, even though they provide the bulk

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## Corresponding author:

Loretta Pyles, University at Albany, State University of New York, 135 Western Av., Richardson Hall, Albany, NY 12222, USA.

Email: lpyles@albany.edu

of social welfare services (Schuller, 2007, 2010). The powerful position of the international humanitarian aid and development industry undergirds the post-colonialist relationship between outside actors and local citizens (Haslam, Schafer and Beaudet, 2009). These conditions create a context where local 'participation' in development projects becomes highly complex and contested, creating a host of ethical considerations for practitioners and researchers working there.

### *The 2010 Haiti earthquake*

The 12 January 2010 earthquake in Haiti negatively impacted the physical and social capabilities of individuals, families, community organizations, and governmental agencies throughout rural Haiti. Some communities were affected by injury and loss of life as well as by vast devastation to physical infrastructure and livelihoods. Other regions of rural Haiti did not suffer direct physical damage, but they were impacted in other, significant ways. For example, some rural areas experienced a substantial wave of reverse migration, that is, urban families from the hard hit areas of Port-au-Prince moving back to their hometown communal sectors (Oxfam America, 2010). The good hospitality of rural communities resulted in additional strains on their food supplies, shelter, and agricultural capacities, in particular (Oxfam America, 2010). Local community groups as well as international NGOs stepped in to provide support to these families, including money for seeds, though funding for such support would eventually run out (Oxfam America, 2010).

Even though it is difficult to quantify the social, cultural, political, and economic consequences of the earthquake, its effects on the social geographies of local, rural communities and their quality of life have been tangible. For example, the actual findings of the participatory action research (PAR) that my research team conducted revealed that the disaster created tremendous challenges for community organizations (Pyles et al., 2011). Challenges included responding to immediate needs of organizational and community members, engaging in recovery efforts, and maintaining a commitment to long-term development.

Some of the social problems faced by individuals and organizations in Haiti, complex and deeply entrenched before the disaster, have been exacerbated and compounded in the post-disaster environment, a phenomena that is reflected in the disaster literature (Harrell and Zakour, 2000; Morrow and Peacock, 1997). For example, in addition to the loss of governmental buildings, 20 percent of government employees died in the disaster, making accessing public supports, a task that was previously challenging, even more difficult (Oxfam International, 2011).

Despite these challenges, there have been new opportunities for organizational capacity building, enhanced community education about social issues, and a proliferation of social change activities since the earthquake (Farmer, 2011; Schuller and Morales, 2012). The literature affirms the common occurrence of such opportunities after a disaster, especially pro-social behavior and social movement building after disasters (David, 2006; Blocker et al., 1991; Rodríguez et al., 2006). In the face of these myriad challenges, both pre- and post-disaster, individuals and grassroots groups have been able to coordinate community-level efforts toward relief and recovery, work with existing resources in the community, and procure additional supports from international NGOs and other local and international actors.

### *Overview of this study*

The research and development initiative described in the ensuing analysis is an example of how international actors have contributed to Haiti's recovery. In this account, I employ a first person narrative to analyze the role and meaning of participation of local people and other salient ethical issues in a PAR project conducted in rural Haiti. The actual results of the PAR research itself have

been presented elsewhere by members of the American and Haitian research team and will not be presented here (Pyles et al., 2011). *The purpose here is instead to analyze the PAR process and offer insights to international actors working in similar settings so as to bring awareness to ethical practices and the facilitation of participation.*

This PAR was designed and implemented in partnership with a community-based, peasant-led NGO, located in Port-au-Prince. The project was conducted with this NGO, my project partner, at their request as a way to strengthen their knowledge, capacities, and resources. It involved a team of engaged investigators who used the experience gained and findings the research yielded to develop transnational partnerships, engage in education and advocacy, and procure funding and other opportunities for the target communities. I will offer more details about the substance of the actual project later in the essay.

In this analysis, I strive to problematize and make transparent issues of relevance to disaster recovery, international community development, PAR, and social change practice. These themes include topics such as participation, power, race/class/gender, and other contested terrains. Before discussing these tensions, I analyze some of the relevant literature and then identify the critical ethnographic methods that I utilized in order to reflexively analyze the research experience. I then present the major themes of my analysis of the process of conducting the PAR project.

## Literature review

I begin this analysis of the literature by setting the context for development and disaster recovery work in rural Haiti, elucidating community engagement activities of local people in relation to the larger context of post-colonial development. Next, I discuss previous PAR studies in disaster settings. Finally, I analyze the role and meaning of participation in disaster and development work generally, including the barriers and challenges that exist for local participation. Toward this end, I present Pretty's (1995) model of participation which will serve as an analytical framework for the article.

### *The Haitian peasant movement and the post-colonial development context*

In the absence of a strong central government, Haiti has been a country with vibrant grassroots community organizations, particularly in the rural areas (Schuller, 2007; Smith, 2001). The Haitian peasant movement emerged in the 1980s after the Duvalier dictatorship years. With a more democratic environment, local peasant actors have been proactively organizing themselves to impact the development of their own communities (Schuller, 2007). Since the earthquake, these pre-existing groups have responded by housing and caring for fellow community members and family members from Port-au-Prince, cleaning up rubble, rebuilding homes and businesses, and engaging in innovative economic and social development activities.

Knowing some of the history of the interactions between rural peasants and international actors is critical to understanding the peasant movement and the wider civil society context. It is especially important for this research, as I, a White foreigner, came in as an outsider to provide technical and educational support. While I have an extensive background in teaching about oppression and engaging in social change work, I had a significant learning curve as I sought to understand the harsh legacy of colonialism in Haiti. To be sure, I had personal objectives related to this project, including the desire to publish findings. Many outsiders coming into Haiti do not understand the historical and current oppression of Haitians nor do they tend to be transparent about their aspirations with regard to Haiti. This has resulted in what Smith (2001) has noted as a consistent 'othering' of rural Haitians constructed by the international development establishment. Smith (2001) describes this,

The image consists of four intertwined and multifaceted characteristics: a preference for dependency on more powerful others (... sometimes called, a slave mentality); a fatalism leading to apathy and resignation; an inability to think analytically or constructively about their situation; and a chronic resistance to working cooperatively and effectively in the interest of the collective good. (p. 31)

This image is belied by more in-depth study of the rural peasant movement especially when one is able to bracket post-colonialist development cultural norms.

Many scholars have noted that international aid in Haiti has created more problems than it has solved (Farmer, 2011; Schuller, 2007; Smith, 2001). And rural Haitians, especially those involved in the popular movement, tend to be attuned to this situation and view 'foreign-sponsored development and democratization initiatives as inherently exploitative strategies – as being aimed primarily at breeding dependency and undermining grassroots efforts directed at real change' (Smith, 2001: 30–31). In an ethnographic study with rural peasant leaders, Smith (2001) cites the observations of a leader of a peasant woman's organization: 'Everywhere you look, you see projects piling up ... in every little corner of the country, projects. But they're not really benefiting the country ... it's not development you see here, but *enveloppement*' (p. 31). Thus, this is the context in which this particular PAR project occurred after a devastating earthquake, making trust, relationships, and participation complicated and challenging, to say the least.

### *PAR in disaster and development settings*

Rural Haitian community members, like many people in developing countries or poor neighborhoods, often have had negative experiences with social research. Conventional social research, described as top-down (controlled by experts) and outside-in, is especially problematic. In rural Haiti, evidence suggests a history of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) engaging in research and assessment without the input or participation of community members (Smith, 2001). To add insult to injury, such external research actors have been known to leave before starting and/or completing any projects that act on the findings.

This has been the dominant approach to research described as understanding-oriented, and it illuminates a critical feature of PAR – it is action-oriented. PAR is ideally different from such endeavors because local actors conduct the research and the subsequent actions are chosen, driven by and engaged in by local actors. In this study, PAR, or as the research team translated it into Haitian Creole, *Rechech ak Aksyon Patisipativ* (RAP), is a community development/organizing and research method started in the 1950s and 1960s. It is grounded in the popular education philosophy and practices of Paulo Freire and others (Kindon et al., 2007). This critical-emancipatory genus of PAR cannot be initiated without prior understanding of the people, their social contexts and their cultural traditions (Pyles and Svistova, 2015). Outside research actors-as-experts are involved, but their primary role is to co-coordinate the process and provide technical assistance and other supports. In addition, PAR actors and their partners may seek out other resources to implement their actions.

Given the importance of participation in recovery projects, PAR is an appropriate method to employ in order to assess, identify, and implement projects for recovery. PAR methods have been employed to assess needs or evaluate projects in countless contexts, focusing on a diversity of substantive issues from gender and employment in Kenya (Opondo et al., 2007) to educational reform in the United Kingdom (Adelman, 1997). Such projects affirm the values and practices of process, participation, and capacity building. MacKinnon (2011) has emphasized the capacity-building aspect of PAR through an examination of a project in an inner-city neighborhood with Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The origins of PAR are in the developing world, embodying the intention of advancing a range of community development and social change goals. Thus, PAR is always a value-laden activity, emphasizing a participatory ethics that contests traditional researcher ideas about representation, participation, and accountability (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007). PAR researchers and participants 'make a virtue of sharing and clarifying roles, responsibilities and decision making on an ongoing and reiterative basis' (p. 37). What is more, PAR contests ordinary ideas about epistemology and its practitioners are grounded in a broad range of radical theories that inform their work and which demand constant self-critique.

PAR has been utilized in relation to disasters though more so for disaster preparedness and/or risk reduction. Post-disaster settings may often favor the participatory rural appraisal, which though shares some similarities with PAR, emphasizes a more 'quick and dirty' approach to research. The marriage of PAR and disaster recovery represents a terrain where the social change and transformative potential of disasters for communities could take hold (Fraser et al., 2004). Nonetheless, given the challenges of participation in disaster recovery, PAR can reasonably be construed as a daunting form of social practice, particularly in an environment like Haiti where many individuals were living in misery before the earthquake.

Participation in international development and PAR are contested activities (Adelman, 1997; Kapoor, 2008) and participation has arguably become a rhetorical meme as international NGOs strive to legitimize and rationalize their projects as participatory. Because of these tensions around representation and participation, PAR was a suitable form of assessment and intervention for this setting. Although international NGOs and other international partners have certainly played significant roles in development projects, the self-directed nature of the peasant movement lends itself to a PAR approach which privileges the agency, voices, and leadership development of community actors.

### *Participation in disaster recovery and development*

External actors play influential roles in enhancing recovery efforts of vulnerable rural communities after disasters. Their activities can include: meeting immediate needs for food and shelter, engaging in housing reconstruction, providing agricultural infrastructure support such as replacement of seeds and tools, creating opportunities for livelihood development, and building the capacities of local community-based organizations (CBOs) (Eade, 2007; Kenny, 2007; Pantuliano, 2007; Tadele and Manyena, 2009; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). Despite such critical responsibilities and with full appreciation of the contributions they make, the ability of external actors to engage community members in meaningful *participatory* recovery is suspect. Indeed, disaster scholarship is replete with recommendations for participatory models of disaster recovery that center the needs and desires of locals rather than outsiders (Pyles, 2011a, 2011b; Schuller, 2010; Tadele and Manyena, 2009). Local ownership, accountability and transparency are core principles of the Humanitarian and Minimum Standards of the Sphere Project, the Red Cross Code of Conduct, and the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). In this regard, scholars have viewed outside donor projects that exclude local involvement as major impediments to disaster recovery (Berke et al., 1993). When community leaders and members are active participants in the processes of recovery and re-development, they are in positions to create visions for their own future, control resources, and direct rebuilding initiatives (Berke et al., 1993).

There is significant discourse and research about the possibilities for 'transformation' and 'social change' in disaster-affected communities (Blocker et al., 1991; David, 2006; Rodríguez et al., 2006). The extent to which these activities actually result in significant social change is a matter of contention (Christoplos et al., 2010; Lovekamp, 2010). The 1985 Mexico City earthquake is

a case where the pressure of popular movements resulted in one of the most significant housing recovery programs in history (Tavera-Fenollosa, 1998).

In the case of hurricane Katrina, a grassroots neighborhood movement resulted in city officials heeding the voices of local people and changing the recovery process so that it involved more local citizens (Pyles and Harding, 2012). That being said, the most marginalized people in New Orleans were not always able to participate in those processes due to the fact that many were still evacuated to other cities and had not returned. This experience replicated these populations' pre-disaster histories of social exclusion. Indeed, neighborhoods like the Ninth Ward have hardly recovered and probably never will some ten years after the storm.

Thus, social class, gender, and race/ethnicity become particularly salient dimensions of participation to consider in disaster situations, including rural settings. It is especially important to be aware of the social exclusion and social isolation that already marginalized individuals, families, and groups experience after disasters (Pyles, 2011a). And, international organizations operating in disaster relief and recovery settings may actually contribute to this marginalization. For example, these international organizations tend to partner with high-level government actors, intermediary NGOs, or local groups that can be characterized as highly professionalized with the majority of members holding professional status. These organizations often neglect and ignore grassroots groups, poor people or women, who tend to be more excluded from society (Ikeda, 2009; Pyles, 2011b; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). As cases in point, Trader-Leigh (2008) found that African American churches provided a critical function in relief and recovery after hurricane Katrina, but their roles have been largely ignored in disaster management circles. In a study of 45 villages in rural India, Prokopy (2009) discovered that wealth and literacy were significant determinants of participation in a community-based drinking water project, reflecting that those with less money and education had limited capabilities to participate. Other studies have confirmed this link between education and participation, but results about the role of wealth in participation in some studies are mixed (Prokopy, 2009).

### *Pretty's participatory development model*

Participatory models, and PAR in particular, may be even more important for societies or subcultures that tend toward more collectivist orientations, including rural communities like the ones in Haiti under investigation (Paton et al., 2008; Smith, 2001). There are several models of participation that have been articulated in development studies; all such models recognize that participation exists on a gamut, moving from tokenizing or manipulative forms of participation and progressing toward more authentic forms of participation (Cornwall, 2008; Oakley, 1995). In a study of a Nepalese development project, of the 51 rural villagers who participated in a focus group about nutrition projects, none of them had engaged in 'full' participation in the projects (from project conception to project evaluation), only partial (Khadka, 2000).

Pretty's (1995) typology of participation (Table 1) elucidates seven types on a continuum, offering a useful framework for reflecting on participatory recovery projects. In a disaster recovery context, any laudable goals of participation are always mediated by pressure from both survivors and the public generally to move the recovery along and for people to have their lives put back together as swiftly as possible. This tension certainly bears itself out in my experience working in rural Haiti after the disaster, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

Partnership-building that gathers external resources and technical expertise, in conjunction with grassroots knowledge of the situation, appears to be the most promising sustainable disaster recovery practice that might be able to address 'unresolved development challenges' (Ozerdem, 2003). The types of recovery activities that fall into Pretty's (1995) fifth (functional participation), sixth

**Table 1.** Pretty's typology of participation.

Type of participation	Description of participation
1. Manipulative participation	Participation is a pretence; unelected; no real power
2. Passive participation	Participation involves being told what has already been decided
3. Participation by consultation	Information-gathering process by external agents
4. Participation for material incentives	Participants contribute labor for food, cash
5. Functional participation	Participation seen as a means to achieve project goals more cost effectively
6. Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis and development of action plans; participation is a right
7. Self-mobilization	Local people take initiatives independently of external institutions though they may use external resources; retain control over how resources are used

(interactive participation), and seventh (self-mobilization) types are especially salient in terms of understanding the best ways that local communities can act on their own behalves successfully with the right kinds of external support.

Research has documented that there are multiple barriers impeding the participation of marginalized people in development projects. Furthermore, it is clear that historical legacies of social exclusion, as well as local histories of social movement participation, such as is the case with the post-colonial rural Haitian context, play significant roles in the extent and quality of participation in post-disaster recovery projects. The research, however, is not clear as to what factors facilitate and impede participation. In addition, no study has offered first person reflections utilizing the insights of critical ethnography on the issue of participation in PAR in the post-disaster Haiti context.

## Project background

The PAR project outlined here, 'Transforming Rural Haiti for Sustainable Grassroots Development', or in Haitian Creole *Travay Developman Dirab Pou Transforme Kominote Riral D'Ayiti*, was first conceived before the earthquake by a rural Haitian activist priest who has founded several influential organizations that promote development in rural Haiti. Before the earthquake, the purposes of the project were as follows: (1) to better understand the strengths and needs of rural communities and organizations and (2) to enhance the capacities of rural peasant organizations across the country to engage in democratic development. Through such a project, peasant groups could identify and advocate for infrastructure needs (such as water, electricity, safety, and education) with their elected officials and transnational supporters. After the earthquake, the need for the project became even greater and the research team also sought to learn about the impact of the earthquake on community organizations and their visions for recovery.

The research team consisted of two Haitian community leaders, who worked for an umbrella peasant organization described at the beginning of the article, and myself. While the research presented here is centered on my own experiences and perceptions of the research project, the team has presented findings from this research together at various venues including to community groups, at a university, and at a peer-reviewed academic conference. The two Haitian community leaders identified 1 delegate/lead interviewer from 11 different communities who would return to their communities, mentor other interviewers, and then conduct interviews with leaders of local grassroots organizations, including peasant organizations devoted to agriculture and micro-enterprise, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, and youth organizations. The

**Table 2.** Transforming rural Haiti PAR phases.

## Project phases

1. Pre-planning and project development
2. Workshop on PAR with delegates/lead interviewers in Port-Au-Prince
3. Delegate mentoring with assistant interviewers
4. Interview team conducts qualitative interviews with organizational leaders in communities
5. Delegates report back in Port-au-Prince and reflect
6. Transcribe and translate data
7. Analyze data
8. Workshop with delegates and communities on project management and other topics
9. Present and publish preliminary analysis and community needs
10. Establish MOUs with funders for projects
11. Implement projects
12. Reflect on and evaluate process and projects

PAR: participatory action research; MOUs: Memorandums of Understanding.

11 delegates were community leaders who worked for similar organizations in their own communities; they had high school educations and in some cases college educations. They were identified based on relationships that my partner organization had developed through their work over several years prior to the earthquake.

The research model was based on the PAR literature that is salient to this specific post-disaster context and especially the manifest needs of local organizations. Drawing from McTaggart's (1997) four key components of PAR, which include (1) participation, (2) collective reflection and critique, (3) communitarian politics, and (4) action research, the research team applied this framework to the context of grassroots community organizations in rural Haiti (Smith, 2001).

While the process presented below can be viewed as linear and sequential, such a view in actuality misrepresents PAR as it is practiced. PAR, as practiced here, was and remains nonlinear and 'on the ground'. In contrast to research conducted as a single event in time, this PAR was iterative and recursive. Table 2 articulates the phases in this research. It is worth noting that following this project, I continued my relationship with these communities through a 3-year research project. That study has provided significant capacity-building opportunities for the communities, in addition to knowledge-building and educational outcomes related to partnership-building in post-disaster contexts. We also have published an article from this newer project (Svistova et al., 2014), with one of the authors being a member of the original Haitian research team discussed here.

### *Objectives and pedagogy of the PAR workshop*

Where marginalized people are targeted for participation, and indeed joint leadership, PAR often begins with a workshop with a preferred pedagogy. The pedagogy ideally is tailored to the needs of the participants. The aim is to help them learn and strengthen competencies, awareness, and commitments. Empowerment may be an elusive construct, but in the case of PAR it is genuine, and it begins in the workshop and its pedagogy. In this work, the design of the workshop was itself a collaborative undertaking, as described below – and with the intent of developing a sense of ownership and attendant empowerment.

We conducted the workshop on PAR in Port-au-Prince in August 2010, approximately 7 months after the earthquake. One delegate from each of the 11 participating communities (one representing



**Table 3.** Transforming rural Haiti PAR workshop objectives.

## Workshop objectives

- 
- To understand the philosophy of PAR as a method of community organizing aimed toward democratic involvement, development, and disaster recovery.
  - To learn to identify community assets and wealth as well as opportunities for change in one's community.
  - To enhance community organizing and leadership development capabilities in rural communal sectors.
  - To support the abilities of grassroots actors to engage in critical reflection about personal experiences and social issues of global, national, community, organizational, family, and individual importance.
  - To understand and apply the ethical mandates involved in conducting research with human subjects.
  - To learn specific PAR skills, including sample identification, interviewing, and action planning in order to implement the 'Transforming Rural Haiti' PAR project.
  - To prepare participants to mentor others in community development/organizing and PAR methods.
- 

PAR: participatory action research.

each of the 10 departments of Haiti, including two from the largest department, the Artibonite) came to Port-au-Prince for a 3-day participatory workshop co-led by myself and the two staff members of my partner organization. Table 3 articulates the stated objectives for the workshop.

This collaboratively developed workshop borrowed from popular education techniques and sought to actualize ethical principles of participation that include representation, accountability, social responsiveness, agency, and reflexivity (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007). All participants, including workshop facilitators, were active learners whose stories and experiences were central to the process. For example, a leader of a peasant organization told the story of how he fell down during the earthquake and kept trying to get back up again and again. The night of the earthquake he slept on a hill with his horse. The office where his organization was housed was destroyed after 22 years of operation. These events impacted his ability to lead his organization, affected his role as an interviewer, and provided important information about what the content of the interviews in that community might contain. The educational environment of our workshop provided opportunities to share stories, information, ideas and critically and compassionately reflect on them toward the end of community recovery and transformation.

Lectures, group exercises, small group activities, and extensive discussion constituted the pedagogical methods. For instance, we engaged in a theatrical exercise developed by Brazilian dramatist and activist, Augusto Boal (2002), called 'Colombian Hypnosis'. This exercise is done in pairs and each person takes a turn as a leader and as a follower. The leader forces the follower to go along with his/her every physical movement. It inevitably results in frustration, resentment, and/or feelings of helplessness on the part of the follower. The leader's experience may range from feelings of being in control or vengeance to feelings of guilt for pushing others around. As participants reflect on the experience, they are invited to think about power, oppression, liberation, and leadership.

## Methodology of this study

In the findings that follow this section, I conduct a retrospective analysis of my experiences over the course of the 12 phases (Table 2) of the development and implementation of the PAR project in rural Haiti following the earthquake. I bring particular attention to the *processes* involved in the project especially as they relate to PAR as a methodology, participation of rural Haitians, and the strengthening of capacities of rural Haitian NGOs to engage in disaster recovery and development.

My data sources include: (1) project materials, such as training materials and interview guides, (2) field notes that were kept during the training and throughout the experience, and (3) ongoing communications (e.g. emails) and activities (e.g. the training) related to the project. All of these materials were analyzed using the tools and insights of critical ethnography (Madison, 2005).

Critical ethnography 'begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain' (Madison, 2005: 5). It is based on the insights of critical theory, an approach to scholarship and social change work that identifies systemic oppression and affirms the importance of acknowledging social location and privilege, including the intersectionality of race, class, and gender (Pyles, 2013). Given the engaged nature of this work that is grounded in a social change practice such as PAR, critical ethnography is an appropriate methodology in terms of its ability to assist the applied researcher in identifying the winners and losers (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000). Furthermore, in the context of PAR in rural post-disaster Haiti, critical ethnography brings a method and lens that deepens ethical obligations, as well as to bear insights to the historical disparity between 'researcher' and 'researched' that has existed in rural Haiti through traditional ethnography (Madison, 2005; Smith, 2001).

Using the methods of critical ethnography (Madison, 2005) in relation to Pretty's typology of participation, I focus on and analyze my own positionality. According to Madison, 'a concern for positionality is a reflexive ethnography; it is a turning back on ourselves. When we turn back on ourselves, we examine our intentions, our methods, and our possible effects' (p. 14). And yet, identifying my social location as a White middle-class woman 'is only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study' (Behar, 1997: 13). The kind of vulnerability that this kind of inquiry necessitates is an anathema to traditional social science research whose objective is to analyze impersonal social facts as well as to forms of social work practice that are concerned with showing positive outcomes based on the evidence (Behar, 1997).

## Findings, reflections, and implications: Problematizing the process

Following the steps of the PAR process outlined in Table 2, here I engage in the final step in the process, which is to 'reflect on and evaluate process and projects'. All of the findings, reflections, and implications articulated below represent key ethical issues that researchers in similar settings should consider. The central theme of my reflections revolves around the meaning and significance of *participation*, including how best to maximize its benefits while avoiding and preventing unintended side effects and undesirable outcomes. Rather than separating out Findings and Discussion/Recommendation sections, throughout the ethical considerations that follow, I reflect on Pretty's (1995) typology while also considering meanings and implications of this research. This is an appropriate approach for a critical ethnography whereby one's analysis and call to action are intertwined, echoing Marx who said, 'the philosopher's job is not just to understand the world, but to change it'.

### *Cultivating awareness of power*

One of the primary objectives of PAR practice, according to McTaggart (1997), is to 'confront the subtleties of power' (p. 33). Like participation, power is a phenomenon that weaves through the other tensions I discuss below. And while addressing discrepancies in power is a fundamental goal of both PAR and critical ethnography, sometimes there is nothing that can be done about such power imbalances other than to cultivate awareness of and be as transparent as possible about the ways that privilege and disenfranchisement manifest themselves in the situation. While there are

innumerable instances where hegemony plays itself out and is reproduced in subtle ways in Haiti, issues of power are generally not very subtle at all in Haiti.

Indeed, during my first trip to Haiti (Phase 1 in Table 2), driving through poverty and disaster-stricken neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, the advantages that I have were grossly apparent – my own driver, a US passport, money in my pocket, and an intact home to which I was able to return. When a colleague guided me on a walking tour of Carrefour, a hard hit suburb of Port-au-Prince, I became aware of the ability that I had to re-present and re-produce disaster-stricken Haiti as a White American with a camera, the slippery slope of disaster tourism. I chose not to take any pictures during this tour as it was not directly relevant to the work I was doing with the rural communities.

A conventional researcher would likely engage in ‘spectator research’, getting the data, publishing, and moving on. PAR begins with a different frame of reference, and though it affirms the importance of gaining understanding, it also simultaneously embraces critical awareness and transformation of oppressive social practices. Later though, as I made my way to visit a rural community, I did choose to take pictures of the devastation there, as it was related to our work. It is not a comfortable situation for anyone, as local villagers looked at me with exasperated expressions that seemed to say: ‘what good will your photos do?’ This was a case of the slippery ethical ground that I confronted as an engaged scholar – I had to make the case (with photographs) for the need for this project to be able to secure funding back home to move forward with the PAR process. And yet, there seems to be something inherently disempowering about this to the people that I took the pictures of. Thus, I would argue that social workers and engaged scholars must consider how they re-present vulnerable populations in similar settings.

When visiting a spontaneous tent community in Port-au-Prince that contained literally thousands of crudely built tents of plastic tarps and scrap metal, a young Haitian man approached us. I imagine he thought that I, a White person who appeared to be an official of some kind, might work for an INGO and/or have some resources available. I did not have resources to share, but I listened to how he had organized the internally displaced persons (IDP) community and had documented the names of every person in the camp and assessed their capacities and needs. Contrary to the ‘helpless victim’ images that the media has so often portrayed Haitian earthquake survivors to be, this young man and his community demonstrated personal power through their resilient and proactive activities. This was clearly an example of Pretty’s (1995) highest level of participation, that is, local people taking initiatives independently of external institutions. Overall, PAR researchers can cultivate a practice of awareness of the ways that ‘the Other’ asserts his or her power, one’s own privilege, and the choices that one has or does not have. This creates fertile ground for the kind of social change disaster recovery work in which the team has tried to engage.

### *Interrogating the fields of translation and interpretation*

I began studying Haitian Creole about 6 months before we conducted the workshop on PAR. Having some experience with French, I was able to achieve a *very basic* competency in Creole in that time. My goal simply was to be able to engage in basic social interactions with my hosts and colleagues. Nonetheless, I required an interpreter for our formal, professional activities. This inevitably puts a burden on my Haitian colleague who carried dual roles as a research team member and as an interpreter. Interpretation is exhausting work and he did not receive any extra money for it. Unlike the large INGOs and other international actors that may have paid interpreters available, our budget was very small and no such resources were available.

Furthermore, we chose to make the time and create the space for translation of all documents and interpretation of all activities into Creole, the local language of our delegates. Obviously, this

is a critical component of access and participation and a fundamental requirement for maintaining some basic balances of power within the project. Social movement scholars have noted the importance of developing the capacities of grassroots groups to create multi-lingual spaces and allow individuals to speak their truths in their native languages (Pyles, 2013). As well, PAR scholars have embraced the importance of creating a social setting that is conducive to constructive social discourse.

Translation can certainly be considered social change work and given the transnational context of disaster recovery practice, it is important that the practice be interrogated. As we worked on translating many documents into Creole, we were conscious of wanting to use the words of the grassroots actors we were working with rather than words that come from a more urban and elite form of Creole, which could have a distancing effect with our delegates. Because my partner organization is staffed by people who come from the rural areas, the team was committed to using language that was most commensurate with rural actors' predilections. Generally, this is an area where I believe we were particularly successful and it created a solid foundation for the entire group to operate at Pretty's (1995) level six, which is where 'people participate in joint analysis and development of action plans; participation is a right'. However, one of the workshop documents was not translated into the local dialect very well and we never had time to revise it (it had been done by a student of mine from my university in the United States who originally hailed from Port-au-Prince). The delegates would later note this oversight and identified the situation as problematic. Their willingness to critique such situations, grounded in the peasant movement's belief in democratic dialogue, as well as McTaggart's (1997) framework for PAR that we embraced, deepened the quality of participation in the project.

The ability to conduct the interviews in the native language of the interviewers and interviewees was instrumental to the success of the project and critical to our values around participation. When the delegates later reported back about their interview efforts, they said that having local people conduct the interviews made the project successful compared to if outsiders had conducted the project. It is important to note that the amount of time and money it takes to transcribe and translate 79 qualitative interviews (the total number of interviews the 11 delegates and their teams conducted) from Haitian Creole into English is significant, as it is labor intensive and requires tremendous resources (i.e. money to hire professional translators and/or time to coordinate qualified volunteer translators). This situation reveals an ongoing tension about participation in disasters that social workers and engaged scholars should be aware of, namely that fostering participation and sharing power takes time, a resource that is always in short supply when recovering from a disaster.

### *Gender, race, and class*

Only 2 of the 11 lead delegates/interviewers who completed the PAR workshop and led the interviews in the communities were women. Although, there were other women who were mentored by our delegates in their local communities and participated in the project. Nevertheless, I was disappointed with our low rates of women's participation as delegates. This situation reinforced the point to me that discourses about gender and the importance of women's participation must be explicit and be prioritized in PAR, disaster recovery, and other social change practices, or else the situation will not change. While my partner organization has a strong value system concerning the importance of women's participation, we needed to create more specific plans for recruiting and retaining women into the project. This might have included addressing the additional support needs that women may have (e.g. child care) to be able to travel out of town and participate in a training.

The staff of my partner organization included two men and one woman; the woman was only part-time and I also noted that she was quiet and/or deferred to the two male staff people often. Part of my ongoing PAR social practice was to make extra efforts to include her in the conversation, or the task at hand. Strengthening the quality of participation of an individual who likely experiences ongoing sexism, racism, and classism in her life is clearly salient to a project whose goal is to 'transform rural Haiti for sustainable grassroots development'. This kind of informal mentoring of women and willingness to challenge the patriarchal cultural norms of Haiti are activities worthy of consideration by social workers and engaged scholars working in similar settings.

Being the only White person involved in this project and obviously the one with the most power (my university provided the majority of the financial resources) was always the elephant in the room for me, even though we made efforts to talk about race and racial oppression (we discussed class privilege very little). One delegate stated in the evaluation of the workshop that 'the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. is being accomplished' as he had 'dreamed that one day whites and blacks might sit together and work together'. Another participant said about me: 'even if your skin is white, I see the Haitian in your heart'. I appreciated these positive sentiments about our micro-level racial relations as they affirmed a sense of trust and the strength of the relationship, allowing us to continue to move forward. But they, of course, do not erase the macro-level racial dynamics of a post-colonial development context. For social workers and engaged scholars who want to do social change work in international disaster settings, it is critical that the intersections of race, class, and gender are addressed throughout all phases in the process; my wish is that we would have been more proactive and systematic about this.

### *Negotiating institutional factors regarding the conduct of research*

Although difficult to achieve, this project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university. This was a challenging process for two main reasons – (1) PAR does not fit into the traditional research paradigm and (2) the co-lead investigator (partner organization staff member) lived in disaster-stricken Haiti with very little infrastructure, including limited access to electricity and the Internet. Nonetheless, my co-investigator completed the mandated online Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training in just 1 day, an impressive feat for anyone, but given his spotty Internet connection in infrastructure-poor Haiti, it was nothing short of miraculous. Fortunately, my university IRB recognized that it would be virtually impossible for our 11 lead interviewers to complete the online CITI training program, as they come from rural areas where there is often no consistent electricity, let alone Internet connection. Thus, my co-investigator conducted an amended IRB training for them during our workshop in Port-au-Prince. This turned out to be a positive thing for participation as my co-investigator was able to deepen his new knowledge about the subject and share it directly with his colleagues in their native language.

Toward the end of the amended IRB training, we requested the delegates to sign investigator agreements and human subjects' verification forms. The participants were overwhelmed and baffled by the forms. They were confused about things like what a middle initial was and what a zip code was, US conventions of no relevance to rural Haitians. Additionally, they were worried about what they might be signing and requested extra time to read the forms overnight. Furthermore, some of the participants asked to see the final workshop certificates they would be getting before they signed the forms. We should have anticipated such reactions, but with so many other issues to address in the crisis context, we did not. We gave them all the time they needed with the forms and tried to explain why the university needed this information.

The willingness of the participants to be in contention with what was happening is a reflection of the democratic values and practices that are so dominant within the Haitian peasant movement

and their experiences with Pretty's seventh level, self-mobilization. But, the situation exacerbated barriers to participation, such as trust, and disrupted our goals around sharing power. As much as I like to think of myself as doing independent research in a grassroots way, I am always a representative of my university as an institution, as the human subjects experience reminded me. I can never extricate myself from the legacy of White researchers that have come to Haiti to collect data and study the culture in a way that tends to perpetuate oppression there rather than transform it. It is also unclear to me in what ways this experience and others might have served to alienate my partner organization from its own delegates.

The above account signals the several boundaries involved in the work described here. Some are known in advance. Others emerge during the course of PAR. Both sets require negotiations and compromises, some time-limited and others continuous. Such are the endemic challenges of PAR, and they are especially important in international work involving disasters in diverse national contexts.

### *'We want results!'*

The question of what counts as a successful outcome or resulting action of a PAR project is challenging to tease out. Everyone wants results – my Western, linear mind demands them and certainly the traumatized Haitian communities I worked with demanded them. Given the less than positive history of post-colonial development projects in Haiti, our delegates and the people they interviewed were weary of people showing up in their communities and doing assessments with no tangible and sustainable projects and results. There was, and still is, a constant tension that this project had to result in something, and the sooner the better. The participants were very concerned that I would not be back after the initial assessment. The ethical mandates in PAR practice and other participatory projects seem to clearly imply that not only is no harm done with such projects, but that people should be better off than before the project, that is, some positive results should be achieved. In a disaster setting, the pressure to achieve results is very strong and can trump values around process and participation (Pyles, 2011b), especially when people are living in tents in the middle of the rainy season, and cholera is lurking around the corner, as was the case in Haiti.

Fortunately, we had some successful outcomes with the project, including signing a Memorandum of Understanding with a US-based INGO led by members of the Haitian Diaspora. The INGO worked with my partner organization and its delegate communities on issues related to micro-entrepreneurial support, water projects, and disaster preparedness, all issues that were identified in the assessment process. We also found some recovery funding for a women-led micro-enterprise that was destroyed in one of the delegate communities. Finally, we secured funding for a new research project that hired some of the delegates as local researchers. This new research project has resulted in a written guide for INGO actors working in Haiti focused on the topic of developing local-foreign partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

Each of Pretty's (1995) seven forms of participation has materialized throughout the PAR experience following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti – from the tokenizing to the self-mobilizing. While my project partner is a grassroots organization, it is one step removed from the local community organizations that its delegates represented. My project partner made some decisions concerning the implementation of the project without the input of the delegates, and I made other decisions without my project partner's input. In addition, while my project partners had some control of the

resources, I ultimately held the purse strings, thus making this aspect of Pretty's highest value of participation, namely 'retaining control over how resources are used', elusive. It is inevitable that there be such layers of participation given the post-colonial social context as well as barriers of geography, infrastructure, technology, and the impacts of disaster. Nonetheless, the kinds of ethical issues and micro-processes that I have identified – issues of power/privilege; translation and interpretation; gender/race/class; the importance of outcomes; and the role of institutions – matter, and ultimately produce social research and disaster recovery.

While making generalizations from this study to other settings is not appropriate, shedding light on these often-untold back-stories can inspire social workers and engaged scholars in a disaster setting to be in a better position to illuminate the 'participation' of participatory disaster recovery and PAR. But, does fostering awareness about power and creating more opportunities for participation make a difference in the capacities of these organizations? Does it make them any better prepared to continue to engage in recovery and ongoing sustainable development work in a meaningful way? I believe that the answer to both of these questions is affirmative, as bringing awareness to one's past and current circumstances may result in more empowered and resilient social change agents. Nonetheless, it would seem that further research on the topic of participation and its relationship to various forms of empowerment in disaster contexts would be appropriate.

Scholars have noted that throughout the disaster relief and recovery cycles, public policies and public/private practices are prone to bypass processes of transparency and accountability, as actors intentionally and unintentionally embrace the values of neoliberal disaster capitalism and the norms of the professionalized humanitarian aid industry (Gunewardena and Schuller, 2008; Pyles, 2011). Given this context, reflections on the processes of power and participation are more important than ever if social workers and engaged scholars are to understand disasters as spaces where we can uncover the intersectionalities of vulnerability, adopt sustainable recovery and human rights approaches, and engage in transformative social change work (Gunewardena, 2008).

As previously noted, PAR requires constant self-critique, and PAR researchers tend to 'make a virtue' of their observations about power and decision-making (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007: 37). The reflexive nature of such work can seem tiresome and never ending. On the other hand, there is a Zen Buddhist saying – 'there are no enlightened people only enlightened actions'. Similarly, one might say: 'there are no participatory projects only participatory actions'. In the same vein, where PAR in post-disaster, transnational settings is concerned, it may be that the practice itself matters as much as the outcomes.

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### **Author biography**

Loretta Pyles is an engaged scholar interested in transformative social change, participation in disasters, and the pedagogy of holistic engagement. You can learn more about her work at [www.lorettapyles.com](http://www.lorettapyles.com).