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### Questions That Won't Go Away in Participatory Research

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## Practice-Based Knowledge

# Questions That Won't Go Away in Participatory Research

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*Ethical issues are intrinsic to conducting research regarding society and natural resources, but they often become poignant when engaging in Participatory Action Research. We compiled common and persistent challenges into a list of “Questions That Won't Go Away” or “QTWGAs” that are relevant to people interested in conducting participatory research to benefit communities. We discuss these questions in the context of previously published literature and share examples from the experience of graduate student Fellows who conducted research with various communities around the United States. The questions serve to stimulate ongoing reflection about the process of participatory research, which may help reconcile expectations and improve research outcomes for both practitioners and communities.*

**Keywords** community-based research, North America, participatory research, research ethics

Ethical issues are intrinsic to conducting research regarding society and natural resources, but they are often more prominent when engaging in participatory action research (PAR). We use the term PAR broadly to describe approaches that engage

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community members in all aspects of the research process. This methodology was inspired by the writings of Freire (1970), Fals-Borda (1987), and like-minded thinkers associated with anticolonial and liberation social movements in the Global South, particularly Latin America.<sup>1</sup> The Community Forestry Environmental Research Partnerships Program (CFERP) was founded with the goal of extending the practice of PAR into community forestry research in the United States. The program reflected a broad conception of PAR, with funded projects demonstrating various degrees of community engagement; however, the stated mission of the program (CFERP 2014) featured the principle of promoting social justice that was so fundamental to PAR's origins: "CFERP's mission is to nurture a new generation of scholars and university-community partnerships to build scholarly and community capacity for stewardship of natural resources in ways that are socially just, environmentally sound, and economically sustainable." From 1997 to 2010, the program supported 103 graduate students conducting participatory research on environmental issues. Before initiating their field research, these Fellows participated in workshops to discuss PAR concepts, methods, expectations, and experiences, along with their faculty advisors and with partners from their research communities. Midway through the program, we compiled a list of "Questions that Won't Go Away (Table 1), to help research teams deal with the persistent ethical issues they confronted in PAR. These questions, and the rich discussions they occasioned, became such a central fixture of our training over subsequent years that we began referring to them by their acronym—the "QWAGAs" ("kah-tawh-gahs"). We have found the QWAGAs more broadly applicable to others interested in examining their own and others' assumptions when conducting meaningful participatory research. We share them here in the hope that they inform and stimulate ongoing reflection about the PAR process and enable better research outcomes for both practitioners and communities.

The initial list of questions emerged from our experiences as practitioners and teachers, as two were faculty members with experience conducting and teaching PAR, and two were recent former Fellows of the program. We refined the questions based on feedback we received in workshop evaluations from graduate students, faculty advisors, and community partners. Many reported that the QWAGAs captured the internal tension that researchers often felt in conducting PAR. We used the QWAGAs to help the teams recognize the common challenges across their individual projects and to relate them to issues that had been examined in PAR literature.

Scholarly literature has proposed guidelines and principles for addressing ethical issues of PAR (e.g., the checklist of questions developed by Green et al. [2003], lessons from Gaventa [2004], and the principles outlined by Israel et al. [1998]) that are useful to researchers and communities in planning, assessing, and improving PAR projects. In addition, two edited volumes have previously shared common challenges among research partnerships, including many supported by CFERP (Fortmann 2008; Wilmsen et al. 2008). This practice-based knowledge article focuses on ethical issues through the lens of the QWAGAs framework, as a tool through which PAR practitioners can more critically examine their own practice.

<sup>1</sup>Other terms and descriptions, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Israel et al. 1998; Pontes Ferreira and Gendron 2011), reflect how the PAR concept has evolved, especially in the United States.

**Table 1.** Questions that won't go away (QTWGAs) have been grouped into clusters and presented to stimulate discussion of ethical issues in PAR

Cluster	Issue	Sample questions
1	Community identity	What are the implications for research if the concept or perception of community is not clearly defined or agreed upon?
	Divided communities	What are the implications for participatory research when the community is divided?
2	Membership issues	How does the research process change when the professional researchers are or are not members of the community? Who decides who is an "insider" and who is an "outsider"?
	Roles of the researcher	What is the professional researcher's principal role in the community? What issues are raised when professional researchers assume different roles in the community (e.g., organizer, facilitator, teacher, consultant, supervisor, bringer of money, or provocateur)?
3	Community expectations	What responsibilities do professional researchers have in helping the community to address/resolve their problems? What are the professional researchers' responsibilities in creating expectations? What are the community's responsibilities in creating expectations?
	Accountability	How should professional researchers navigate tensions between what members of the community want and what colleagues and members of the academic community want? How can these tensions best be communicated to everyone?
	Rewards	What are appropriate ways to credit and reward community members who work on the research? How might these be different from credit and rewards in academia, and how can these be reconciled?
4	Sustaining the research	How can research be done so that it promotes lasting benefits for the community? How can the research be continued after the specific project (thesis, dissertation, grant, etc.) is completed?
5	Power relationships	What are the implications when participatory research affects power relationships in the community, either intentionally or unintentionally? What power might the community have over the professional researcher, and what power might the professional researcher have over the community?

Here we provide examples from a range of representative CFERP projects using publications, reports, and personal communications with former Fellows and community partners to help illuminate the QTWGAs. Many of the Fellows reported

facing dilemmas that went beyond the expected challenges required to complete a thesis or dissertation and yet were specifically related to their positions as graduate student researchers:

1. They were frequently inexperienced in conducting PAR, although some had completed master's theses or had worked in the communities where they were conducting their research.
2. Many had advisors who were unfamiliar with PAR.
3. They were often positioned between the demands of their academic advisors and the expectations of the community regarding what they could and should deliver.
4. They, and their research partners, faced significant limitations of personnel, finances, and time.

While these questions were associated with limited experience and resources, we found that the QTWGAs “won’t go away,” because they are inherent to participatory research and should be revisited again and again. Therefore, they warrant ongoing reflection, creative thinking, and adaptation, from project conception to delivery of products, and beyond.

### **The Questions, Examples From the Field, and Lessons Learned**

We discuss the QTWGAs, as grouped into the five clusters in Table 1, along with examples of the dilemmas and lessons learned from CFERP projects that have broader applications for the field. We intended the questions to encourage researchers to reflect upon the challenges and implications of research in dialogue with their community partners and other researchers. We found that first-time researchers, and many of their partners, often used and related to phrases such as “insider/outsider” and “divided communities.” Based upon feedback from workshop participants, we modified many of the questions to make them more universal and to avoid unproductive assumptions about communities and their contexts. As discussed in the following, deeper reflection often led to realizations that terms such as “the community” were often overly simplistic. In presenting the QTWGAs, we reminded teams that we used such shorthand terms to allow for discussion across diverse projects, but that dichotomous terms are often inappropriate for describing complex situations. With that caveat, our consideration of the QTWGAs began by probing the definition of the community or communities that are intended to be the focus of a participatory research effort.

### **Defining the “Community”**

#### *Community Identity*

What are the implications for research if the boundaries and/or definition of the community are not clearly defined or agreed upon by collaborators?

#### *Divided Communities*

What are the implications for participatory research when the community is strongly divided?

The issue of how to determine the appropriate scope and definition of “community” for a research effort constitutes a key question facing participatory researchers. Attempts to define communities based on shared geography, demographic characteristics, or sense of identity and common interests are frequently contested (Agrawal and Gibson 2001). Even small rural communities have competing interests (Yoshihama and Carr 2002) that are often not well understood nor represented in community-based projects.

Many of the researchers reported finding themselves in the middle of a conflict, navigating divisions and tensions that existed before the research project even began. Minkler (2004) noted a potential irony in that PAR may be well suited to the study of controversial issues, yet pursuing such topics may risk exacerbating community divisions. Her point highlighted one of several instances where PAR could be described as a double-edged sword. She suggested that discussing questions about community identity in a public forum can be helpful in achieving consensus on a research objective and bounds for the research community.

*Examples and Lessons Learned.* The Fellowship application stipulated that Fellows needed to “live within the community” for an extended period during their research, which implied residence within a specific, place-based community. Though many Fellows did commit to this goal, many others limited the scope of community in their project due to resource constraints or to focus on marginalized perspectives. CFERP Fellows engaged in a sharp debate within the pages of *Society & Natural Resources* (Hibbard and Madsen 2003, 2004; Sturtevant and Bryan 2004) about both the appropriate boundaries of a defined-community and representativeness within groups. Hibbard and Madsen focused on the views of environmental activists who felt underrepresented in one of the place-based environmental collaboratives studied by Sturtevant and Bryan. The latter challenged that the former team had relied upon an unrepresentative sample, while the former argued that the point of the work was to bring to light concerns of the minority. Reflecting seeds planted by the QTWGAs discussions in CFERP workshops, the debate highlighted the need to consider how bounds of the community might influence the findings and outcomes of the research, especially in situations marked by a history of conflict and claims of marginalization.

## **Membership Issues and Roles of the Researcher**

### *Membership Issues*

What are implications for the research process when the professional researchers are or are not members of the community? Who decides who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider”?

### *Roles of the Researcher*

What is the professional researcher’s principal role in the community? What issues are raised when professional researchers assume different roles in the community (e.g., organizer, facilitator, teacher, consultant, supervisor, funder, or provocateur)?

The colloquial language of “insider/outsider” often resonated with researchers and community members in our workshops, but it also frequently proved too simplistic for characterizing complex relationships. “Insiders” evaluate whether knowledge is consistent with local community understanding, while “outsiders” evaluate

whether knowledge is consistent with discourse within the broader scientific community. Definitions of who is an insider and who is an outsider may change over time and depending on whose perspective is considered. For example, Green et al. (2003) and Minkler (2004) noted that differences in race, ethnicity, and culture between community partners and outside researchers may lead to misunderstandings. Minkler (2004) described the importance of having community partners serve as “cultural guides” in such contexts. However, the position held in the community by such individuals may be varied and shift as a result of participation in the research process.

Questions about the professional researcher’s roles provide a link between the researcher’s position relative to the community and subsequent questions about expectations for the research. Minkler (2004) noted that researchers may play critical roles as boundary spanners, mediators, and organizers. However, researchers should carefully consider their skill sets, as Stoecker (1999) suggested that most are not well prepared to serve as community organizers. Taking on many other roles that demand mediation skills and the appearance of neutrality may also be challenging for researchers, especially those with more limited experience.

*Examples and Lessons Learned.* One of the CFERP Fellows proposed evaluating the sustainable harvest of a plant on tribal lands as an artisanal dye, although the plant also had well-recognized commercial value as a medicinal. Even though the research project had received support and encouragement from an organization representing community members and gatherers, it was derailed when concerns about the potential for inappropriate commercial uses of tribal resources were raised in a larger public meeting, due to the sensitivity of the traditional ecological knowledge involved and who would have access to it. The Fellow lacked experience in assuaging such a contentious situation, so she redirected the research to lands outside the reservation (Furgurson et al. 2012). The example illustrates challenges in conducting PAR on potentially sensitive issues: Community members may be suspicious of an outsider’s intent and have legitimate concerns over how information might be shared and misused, while the outsider may have an insufficient understanding of local attitudes, politics, and decision making to be able to respond proactively and effectively.

A small minority of Fellows conducted research in their natal communities. However, as the CFERP program evolved, more and more Fellows planned to conduct research within communities that were similar to their own cultural/ethnic heritage (e.g., Native Americans and Native Hawaiians working with different communities than the one where they grew up). In these settings, the convenient shorthand of “insider/outsider” did not fit as well. These students were “nearer” in experience to their research communities, but they still might be seen by their non-natal partner community as outsiders. By internalizing the tensions between internal community views and outside academic views through reflection via this QTWGA, an individual researcher may be better able to address them in dialogue with members of both the partnering community and the academic community. Where the terms “insider/outsider” prove to be overly simplistic, explicit discussions between academic and community researchers can advance beyond a binary categorization toward recognizing a spectrum of experience that changes according to context.

In most CFERP projects, Fellows were outsiders to the communities and served as an “initiator” or catalyst for a research project (Stoecker 1999). Some of these

projects were sustained by the communities, while others were not. For example, after the Fellow who worked with a local harvester organization on nontimber forest products in the Pacific Northwest left the region, the organization did not have sufficient political power or organizational capacity to continue the ecological research (Ballard and Belsky 2010). Another Fellow recruited members of his partnering tribal community to be Fellows in the CFERP program. However, discussion of this QTWGA surfaced how Fellows struggled with the many roles researchers may be asked to take on in the quest to help communities build capacity. Responsibilities such as mentoring, project supervision, and fundraising not only require additional skills and effort, but may heighten ethical concerns by adding to the researchers' authority and leverage.

## **Expectations, Accountability, and Rewards**

### *Community Expectations*

What responsibilities do professional researchers have in helping the community to address/resolve their problems? What are the professional researchers' responsibilities in creating expectations? What are the community's responsibilities in creating expectations?

### *Accountability*

How should professional researchers navigate tensions between what members of the community want and what colleagues and members of the academic community want? How can these tensions be communicated to everyone and resolved?

### *Rewards*

What are appropriate ways to credit and reward community members who work on and contribute to the research? How might these be different from credit and rewards in academia, and how can these be reconciled?

One of the core questions facing PAR practitioners is whether and how community participants benefit from the research outcomes. The question may also be posed in terms of whether benefits to community participants exceed the risks and costs of participation, and how equitably the possible benefits of the project are distributed. One of the most compelling rationales for using participatory research approaches is to address criticism of past research that left the community feeling exploited and disempowered by extractive researchers (Freire 1970; Glass 2001). Pontes Ferreira and Gendron (2011) noted the wariness of many indigenous communities toward "helicopter research" in which researchers figuratively (and in some cases, literally) drop in to collect data without delivering results back to the community. As a general principle, up-front agreements with local knowledge holders should be established to clarify how benefits will be shared and how community members will be able to participate in ways that protect confidential and sensitive information (Pontes Ferreira and Gendron 2011; Gamborg et al. 2012). Furthermore, projects need to consider potential side effects (Minkler 2004) and revisions to new ethical issues as the research unfolds (Edwards et al. 2008).

The issue of compensation for local partners is fraught with complexities—who should be compensated for what work, in what form and in what amounts? What are the criteria for compensating some people and not others? Researchers in the CFERP program had to grapple with these questions and develop answers that seemed appropriate to their particular contexts. A common problem, however, is that research bureaucracies (either university or agency based) and practical funding constraints complicate attempts to compensate community members (Minkler 2004).

*Examples and Lessons Learned.* Community partners working with CFERP Fellows often emphasized the importance of research leading to tangible outcomes and clear benefits for community members, including policy changes, land use or management changes, or new social institutions in the community. One Fellow worked with a rural Native Alaskan community that had experienced historical environmental contamination and long-term health problems. Although the research helped document and validate people's concerns, insufficient funding combined with sampling limitations made it impossible to evaluate causal relationships to the degree that members of the community had hoped (Godduhn et al. 2013). In this case and others, triggered by discussion of this QTWGA, Fellows learned the importance of trying to achieve a common understanding about the desired benefits of their joint efforts, and to acknowledge the possibility that the research may not lead to a resolution.

While many Fellows were able to establish informal or formal agreements, such commitments may be bolstered considerably when the researcher is able to maintain a physical presence and long-term engagement. One CFERP Fellow described his effort to maintain such a relationship with members of his partner community:

All the traditional ecological knowledge that has been invested in me from the tribal community is expected to stay, and I am expected to produce goods or services that will benefit the community for the rest of my life. Recently in speaking with tribal elders and ceremonial leaders they expressed concerns reminding me of the commitment I have as a scientist and a caretaker of traditional knowledge to the community. Following the fellowship research experience, students may not have a similar level of responsibility, or may not think they are expected to contribute back to the community, but be mindful that some commitment may be expected. Do not create expectations that you will not be able to fulfill, or promises you will not be able to keep. (Lake 2006, 12)

Many of the Fellows recognized the importance of sharing findings with communities in ways that can be understood and are accessible. In some cases, publishing the research in scientific journals was useful as a means of saving information for the community (Long 2008) and giving voice to a community's concerns (Godduhn et al. 2013). However, Fellows also pursued more creative modes of sharing results, by publishing articles in local newsletters and newspapers, presenting their findings at informal local gatherings or community meetings, and producing plays. Many of these were explicit discussions of benefits and reciprocity during CFERP workshops. Many Fellows found that interviews lent themselves well to production of audio-visual materials, including documentary films, which in turn became useful tools for community engagement during the research process (Cumming and Norwood 2012). Researchers can address community expectations by collaboratively

planning how findings will be shared, which will increase the likelihood that the research findings will be used to promote actions.

A more immediate type of community benefit concerns rewards or compensation for community partners during the research process. Fellows found that discussions with community partners could help answer difficult questions about who should be compensated (including whether it should be individuals and/or institutions), how (in cash or kind), how much, and the potential consequences of different options. Even after settling on appropriate compensation, Fellows faced challenges in directing such payments. For example, a Fellow working with nontimber forest products harvesters encountered long delays in processing reimbursements for the primarily undocumented workers with whom she collaborated, ultimately causing serious frustration from community partners (Northwest Research and Harvester Association [NRHA] 2008). While financial compensation as a form of reciprocity is often controversial, many Fellows noted that one of the primary benefits of fellowship funding was access to discretionary funds that could be used to compensate community members.

## **Sustaining the Research Beyond the Current Partnership**

### *Sustaining the Research*

How can research be done so that it promotes lasting benefits for the community? How can the research be continued after the specific project (thesis, dissertation, grant, etc.) is completed (and the researcher may need to leave)?

These questions are closely related to issues about expectations and accountability, since a common goal from the community perspective is translating a particular project into sustained effort. Graduate students often have only a few years at best to devote to a research project before moving on to a new position, often far from the site of their research. That short timeline often conflicts with community expectations for an enduring relationship. As practitioners in both universities and nonprofits work toward building institutional capacity and securing long-term funding, individuals should examine the challenges to the PAR enterprise that arise with the probability that the researcher may more quickly leave the community.

*Examples and Lessons Learned.* The unique position of graduate students working with a PAR approach is truly manifested at the completion of their graduate programs, when many Fellows pursue faculty appointments or other long-term employment, often leading them away from their partner communities. One CFERP Fellow working with members of a rural community had been asked to help them demonstrate the sustainability of their forest management practices on their traditional lands. The ecological field studies they felt were necessary to establish credibility were beyond the scope of his graduate research project. Nevertheless, the Fellow worked with them to try to convince the responsible federal agency to set up the ecological research project. The agency balked, and the Fellow ended up accepting an academic appointment that took him to another state. As the field research seemed unlikely to proceed, his community partner surrendered its access permit to the land. During the 2006 CFERF workshop, the researcher described his sense of defeat:

I had spent so much time developing relationships and making commitments that I never even considered how I would go about leaving the

area. Leaving felt like a violation of trust. For many people in Vallecitos, it was a violation of trust. I suppose, for convenience sake, I ignored the concern because I thought I'd just find a job in the area. . . . Nonetheless, I failed to incorporate those concerns into my research. (Correia 2007, 7)

That said, many CFERP Fellows have continued to work with partner communities while broadening the scope of their research program and service. Some have extended their research as postdoctoral students and full-time scientists; others have served on boards of community organizations, mentored college students from their research communities, helped obtain grants, or provided other services to support various research-related endeavors. One Fellow was able to assist her research partner to acquire traditional lands (Middleton 2007), an act that became more feasible after she obtained a faculty position in the region. Several other Fellows gained nearby faculty positions that allowed them to maintain long-standing working relationships. Another Fellow worked to institutionalize elements of a PAR project through the establishment of a summer program for high school and college students (Long 2008). Efforts to build community capacity impose a heavy burden on researchers, yet from the perspective of many community members, such commitments are critical. One community partner explained, "If you are not really committed to dedicating your life to helping the community, then you are disappointing the community" (Burnette and DeHose 2008, 93).

## Power

### *Power Relationships*

What are the implications when participatory research affects power relationships in the community, either intentionally or unintentionally? What power might the community have over the professional researcher, and what power might the professional researcher have over the community?

Power dynamics are a central theme in PAR, given its roots in efforts to transform social systems through empowerment of impoverished and illiterate people (Freire 1970). Conducting research may influence power dynamics within the partnering community and set precedents for future efforts. Support from local elites or interest groups may elicit capacity to support research or actions, yet risks the appearance or effects of such influence. On the other hand, researchers addressing the needs of marginalized groups may encounter resistance from powerful interests, and participation in such research may pose risks to community members. Paying attention to power dynamics and potential consequences is particularly important in communities that may have experienced historical trauma, oppression, or discrimination by outside groups (Minkler 2004; Pontes Ferreira and Gendron 2011).

*Examples and Lessons Learned.* One Fellow explained her reflections and internal debate about how making research findings public could alter power relationships:

The greatest challenges in my fieldwork revolve around a number of ethical concerns. First, the participatory mapping work is proving somewhat tricky, as I am concerned with how the final map will be used and distributed. At a recent meeting with several members of the Association, it was brought

to my attention that beekeepers are looking for ways to enter into the honey business by hauling their bees south. Until now these out-of-state beekeepers have not been able to find and access suitable hive locations, and they are not welcomed by many of the local producers. Thus, I am concerned with how a map of suitable hive locations may bring competition and undermine local producers. Therefore I am working with the Association to develop strategies for managing this situation, as well as discussing the equitable allocation of map data amongst local beekeepers. (Watson 2007, 4)

In academia, sharing findings is a fundamental norm; however, in cases like the one just described, open access could potentially harm the producers with whom the study was completed. Such dilemmas are not unique to PAR, but may be more prominent in such projects because of the commitment to transparency and information sharing.

## Conclusions

The QTWGAs provide a concise and useful vehicle to help maintain focus on fundamental PAR values and principles, anticipate potential conflicts, and seek balance in the face of competing demands. Fellows and advisors frequently underscored their belief in PAR as one of the most rewarding experiences of their academic careers, and their preferred approach to research. However, the QTWGAs highlight the special challenges, high costs, and unique expectations of such endeavors, which can help researchers tailor proposed projects to their contexts and constraints. Many students came to PAR with lofty and naive goals, but with insufficient recognition of the practical limitations and constraints—particularly on their own time. For example, while some Fellows originally proposed cross-community comparisons, discussions occasioned by the QTWGAs often helped them realize the difficulty of conducting meaningful participatory research with more than one community. Therefore, wrestling with the QTWGAs may encourage researchers to reconsider committing to a participatory approach, either for a particular project or even as a broader career choice. Indeed, discussion of the QTWGAs has become a cornerstone of a graduate research methods course at the University of California at Davis, designed to help students critically examine their research methods and approach early in the research planning process. Course participants have reported in evaluations that they feel better prepared to have the honest and difficult conversations that are essential to respectful PAR work.

Some of the practical ways that CFERP Fellows addressed the issues raised by the QTWGAs were:

- More proactive identification of issues in their research proposals, especially in institutional review board applications.
- Establishment of research protocols and memoranda of understanding with community partners and organizations to determine how issues would be handled.
- Establishment of multistakeholder advisory or review boards to help manage expectations and monitor the various effects of participation, including unintended outcomes.

We constructed the QTWGAs to highlight concerns raised by community members in our annual workshops, but they were primarily conceived as tools to

stimulate dialogue and reflection among university researchers. However, the evolution of the CFERP fellowship program underscored the need to expand the scale and scope of PAR beyond short-term academic research projects to the larger process of building knowledge that serves communities. We suggest that the QTWGAs provide a starting point for considering the range of issues regarding the role of academic research in service of communities. Considering the QTWGAs early and often can help researchers and their community partners more constructively address the natural creative tensions that emerge in a participatory research project. They can also spur community members to reflect upon what the research has yielded and how to address their issues going forward.

The QTWGAs provide a starting point, rather than a benchmark, for discussions among research teams. During the CFERP annual workshops, a commonly raised question was, “How *participatory* does a project need to be to ‘qualify’ as PAR?” Rather than responding with a measuring stick for project evaluation, the QTWGAs encouraged researchers to consider difficult questions within the context of the project, at different stages, and in dialogue with their community partners and faculty advisors. These open dialogues helped reveal and clarify power relationships in ways that appear necessary to transform inequitable relationships. Centering discussions around these questions can help research partners decide how to facilitate participation based upon the research questions, the stage of the research, available resources, and the capacity and desires of the community. Those conversations not only elicit strategies for how to conduct research in ethically appropriate ways, but also provoke reflection upon the deeper question of how PAR endeavors can enable social justice rather than reinforce prevailing hegemonies. Encouraging researchers to consider these questions early in their careers can help foster participatory research that is not just an afterthought, or a progressive label, but rather helps transform how a new generation of scholars conducts research.

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