

THROUGH A FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALIST LENS: EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

An emerging literature has been building bridges between poststructuralism and participatory action research, highlighting the latter's potential for transformative action. Using examples from participative action research projects with incarcerated or previously incarcerated women, this article discusses how participatory action research is a methodology that can be enabling and restraining, with the effect of destabilising or maintaining or existing relations of power. Theorizing embodied subjectivity as a vehicle and an effect of power, this article explores how participation and action can have normalizing and disciplinary effects, as well as be sites in which participants can interrogate and frame subjectivities in new and alternative ways.

KEYWORDS: Participatory action research, Subjectivity, Power, Poststructuralism, Incarceration, Women

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research¹ (PAR) is a methodology that aims to initiate transformative action that benefits its participants (Anadon & Savoie-Zajc, 2007; Golob & Giles, 2013;

¹ In this article, feminist participatory action research, action research, and community-based research are included within the PAR “family.” Of course, each term has its specific nuances (Golob & Giles, 2013), but they all reflect a strong commitment to enhancing participants’ lives and tackling inequalities *along with* research participants. Since this article raises theoretical considerations about key elements of these different approaches—namely, participation and action—I will employ the term PAR to include these different approaches.

Ozanne & Anderson, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stoecker, 2009). As Reason and Bradbury (2008) have argued, PAR can be understood as a “family” of techniques that uses different, and sometimes contradictory approaches and methodologies, but nonetheless its practitioners see themselves “as different from other researchers [...] willing to pull together in the face of criticism or hostility from supposedly ‘objective’ ways of doing research” (p. 7). By involving research participants in the research process, it aims to uncover, acknowledge, and to include knowledges and practices of excluded and marginalized groups; by engaging with them in transformative action, it aims to intervene and address practical issues that affect their lives (Anadon & Savoie-Zac, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stoecker, 2009; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). That is, PAR aims to transform and change participants’ lives, by not only engaging with participants in knowledge-making, but also by engaging them in implementing solutions.

Since PAR methodology aims to bring about transformative social change, substantial literature has grown up around the question of power and the empowerment of participants (Israel, Eng, Schulz, Parker, & Satcher, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Relying on a Marxist and structuralist definition of power², some studies have focused on power as a resource or a barrier in the research process, suggesting different methodological strategies to conduct research “with” and “for” rather than “about” participants (for instance, Israel et al., 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Authors grounded in critical studies have explored different avenues to theorize and address the notion of power in PAR (Anadon & Savoie-Zac, 2007; Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Golob & Giles, 2013; Lennie, Hatcher & Morgan, 2003). In doing so, they have adopted a poststructuralist conceptualization of power, in which power is exercised by all rather than owned by a few, infuses society and is inherent in all social relations, and is both repressive and productive of subjectivities, discourses, and practices (Foucault, 1976). Thus, a poststructuralist conceptualization of power focuses on the battlefield of rationalities and technologies of power, their strategic alliances, and their effects, rather than on the actions of individual actors.

The existing literature that employs a poststructuralist conceptualization of power has focused on two aspects of PAR. First, focus has been placed on how power relations unfold and shape the knowledge-making process (Dillon, 2014; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2004). Second, scholars have explored how research that claims to be “empowering” can have the unintended effect of reinforcing existing power relations (Henkel & Stirrat, 2004; Kothari, 2004). However, few studies have explored how power relations produce discourses and constitute subjectivities (Cameron & Gisbons, 2005; Golob & Giles, 2013; Lennie et al., 2003). Golob and Giles (2013) offered a more balanced account of power by emphasizing how power not only constrains action, but also renders it possible. They outlined how PAR can be a site in which participants can define and work through their own subject positions since, in a Foucauldian approach to power, “the exercise of power [is] the condition of possibility for an individual’s self-(trans)formation” (p. 358). Their discussion mostly

² These schools of thoughts define power as a commodity that can be owned and redistributed.

focused on how PAR is both a technology of domination and of the self, with disciplining and subjectifying effects, simultaneously carrying the potential to maintain the status quo or destabilize relations of power.

Building on this emerging literature, this article aims to deepen the discussion of the contribution of poststructuralism to PAR by focusing on the concept of embodied subjectivity, a concept developed in feminist poststructuralism. In contrast to Foucault's conceptualization of the body as "passive", which is often used in poststructuralist literature, feminist scholars (Bordo, 1993; Frigon, 2003, 2012; Grosz, 1994; McNay, 2000) have highlighted how the integration of the body – or, more correctly, bodies – into a discussion of the "self" allows for the exploration of how materiality "talks back" (Frigon, 2003, p. 131) to subjectivity, as well as enacts it, mediated by language and constructed through discourses and practices.

In order to demonstrate how feminist poststructuralism can enrich PAR and its practice, I will start by defining the concept of embodied subjectivity. To illustrate my argument, I will examine two PAR projects that were conducted with American and Canadian incarcerated women on the issue of health; even though they relied on different theoretical frameworks, both explicitly discussed the issue of power in relation to their methodology, as any participative study conducted in prison is marked by its coercive context. After providing some background on the issue of women's health and prison, I will discuss how each PAR project had the potential to destabilize or maintain relations of power, by enabling new embodied subjectivities or reinforcing existing ones.

EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITIES: VEHICLES AND EFFECTS OF POWER

The current literature on PAR does not explicitly define subject and subjectivity: it relies on an implicit definition of subjecthood that is rooted within the Western humanist tradition (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Cleaver, 2004; Lennie et al., 2003). Within that tradition, the subject—the empowerable participant, the academic researcher, and so on—refers to a united self who exists by virtue of his or her consciousness; a pre-social and united entity, the subject experiences the world, and it is through his or her experience that truth can be found (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Weedon, 1997). That is, what the humanist "I" think, feel, and experience consciously or unconsciously, how "I" define and identify "myself"—all these aspects are comprised within subjectivity. Grounded in the humanist tradition, the purpose of PAR is thus to emancipate and liberate the subject, to free subjectivity from capitalist or patriarchal oppression, freeing the subject from her own alienation and repression (Cameron & Gibson, 2005).

Foucault questioned and challenged the notion of the "humanist" subject (Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1997). Through his studies of madness, disciplines, sexuality, and technologies of the self, Foucault explored how subjectivity is an effect and a vehicle of power relations, stripping it from its rationality, unity, and truthfulness. Indeed, the Foucauldian subject is a multiple, disunited, porous, social, and historical entity. Our subjectivities—our inner voices, our feelings, our

dreams and our actions—are the effects of our locatedness within a matrix of power relations, a matrix through which we are governed and constituted. As subjectivity is an effect of power relations, it is fragmented and dependent on context, reflecting the “non-directionality” of power. As a vehicle of power, subjectivity engages with and relies on technologies of the self to allow for self-governance (Foucault, 1980). Departing from the humanist traditions, subjectivity is thus defined in plural: it is never a fixed process or a strategic location, never a finality or an essence (Foucault, 1980, 1991; Lupton, 1995; McNay, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

As briefly discussed earlier, feminist poststructuralist scholars have built on poststructuralist scholarship to theorise the self as a material, symbolic, historical, and discursive entity, while highlighting how the self is embodied and embedded (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Frigon, 2012, 2003; Grosz, 1994). Of course, the point here is not to reduce “women” to their reproductive capacities or to argue that the body is the vessel of our “true” self: the body, as subjectivity, is multiple and fragmented, and is understood here as a “series of processes of becoming, rather than a fixed state of being” (Grosz, 1994, p. 87). Embodied subjectivities are thus vehicles and effects of power, enabled and constrained by these power relations, a conceptualisation that allows to interrogate the health of incarcerated women as embedded in historical and social processes, thus enabling the questioning of biomedical accounts of health and prison that are enacted and embodied within participants’ narratives of doing health in and out of prison. Before showing the relevance of such conceptualisation for PAR, I will briefly provide some background on the issue of women’s health in prison.

INCARCERATED WOMEN’S HEALTH: A BRIEF PORTRAIT

Recent studies and reports on the health of incarcerated women in Canada and in the United States paint a dark picture: incarcerated women are not healthy, either physically or mentally; incarcerated women have higher rates of mental and physical illnesses both compared with the general population and with incarcerated men (Ammar & Weaver, 2005; Archambault, Joubert & Brown, 2013; Covington, 2007; Fisher & Hatton, 2009; Stewart, Sapers, Nolan & Power, 2014). Studies have demonstrated that incarcerated women have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Covington, 2007; Giroux & Frigon, 2011), as well as a higher prevalence of chronic physical conditions (asthma, hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes) and illnesses such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, and sexually transmitted infections, than non-incarcerated women (Ammar & Weaver, 2005; Kouyoumdjan, Schuler, Hwang & Matheson, 2015; Poulin et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2014). Studies from Quebec suggested that half of the women who are incarcerated have been victims of sexual abuse, and seven out of ten have experienced violence in intimate relationships (Boutet, Lafond & Guay, 2007; Frigon & Duhamel, 2006). In brief, due to their high rates of victimization, infectious diseases, and psychiatric illnesses, incarcerated women have been extensively described as a vulnerable population in terms of health (Covington, 2007; Fisher & Hatton, 2009; Martin et al., 2009).

Incarcerated women's health issues are related to the marginalization and exclusion that criminalized women experience prior to their incarceration (Giroux & Frigon, 2011; Covington, 2007), but they can also be exacerbated by confinement or even caused by experiences of incarceration. It is well known that confinement can negatively impact mental health (Kilty, 2012), and that specific disciplinary measures, such as solitary confinement, are detrimental to prisoners' mental and physical health (for instance, Giroux & Frigon, 2011; Lhuillier & Lemiszewska, 2001; Sykes, 1958). The living conditions of prisoners have been criticized for ranging from "inadequate" to harmful in certain American and Canadian female prisons. For instance, in Canada, access to appropriate physical and mental health care services has been raised as a key health issue that women face in both provincial (Quebec Ombudsman, 2013) and federal prisons (Office of the correctional investigator, 2014), especially for women struggling with mental health issues. Even the physical prison living conditions can be detrimental to women's health, including hazards such as rat and mouse infestations, mould, and dilapidated facilities (Quebec Ombudsman, 2013). Inmate overpopulation has accelerated the deterioration of living conditions in prisons, an ongoing issue in provincial prisons (Quebec Ombudsman, 2013), and a growing issue within federal penitentiaries (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). Elements of the prison "lifestyle" have also been identified as detrimental to women's health, including inactivity and a poor diet (Plugge, Douglas & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Martin et al., 2009).

Feminist scholars have critically assessed the gendered forms that confinement takes and its impact on women. Isolation from one's social network and family, the need to conform and obey institutional rules in order to have basic needs met, the lack of intimacy, boredom, and the challenges of adapting to prison life may lead women to feelings of depression and anxiety (Fields, Gonzalez, Hentz, Rhee & White, 2008; Frigon & Duhamel, 2006; Giroux & Frigon, 2011; Kilty, 2012; Pollack, 2004). Furthermore, some studies have argued that prison pathologizes women who struggle to adapt to the coercive institution of prison, without addressing the inherently alienating prison structure that causes women to resist or exhibit uncooperative behaviour, instead labeling them as "mentally ill" and "high risk" (Kilty, 2012; Maidment, 2006a, 2006b; Pollack, 2005). The use of evaluation tools that rely on actuarial calculations conflate risk with needs and thus leads to an increase in the coerciveness and punitiveness of the measures that aim to deal with "problematic" and "difficult" prisoners (Hannah-Moffat, 2006; Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2001).

To my knowledge, few PAR studies have been undertaken that address the health of incarcerated or previously incarcerated women in Canada or the United States. Martin et al. (2013, 2009) and Fields et al. (2008) worked with incarcerated participants in Canada and the United States respectively. Despite adopting different theoretical frameworks, these studies had the same implicit rationale: PAR would provide a space for women to collectively voice their concerns about health in prison, and to bring about changes which would benefit them. However, whereas Martin et al. (2013, 2009) appear to rely on a fixed subjectivity – the health-seeking prisoner – that led to a scripted form of action, Fields et al. (2008) used a more fluid version of subjectivity, which enabled them to move away from scripted engagement with PAR. In analysing the embodied subjectivities constituted in

each study, I will show how the concept of embodied subjectivities can shed a new light on PAR.

EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITIES IN ACTION

Martin et al. (2013, 2009) conducted a PAR project in a Canadian provincial prison with incarcerated women, prison staff, and academic researchers (for a complete description, cf. website). During the initial stage of the project, participants identified nine health goals that were considered to be essential for the reintegration of women into their communities (Martin et al., 2009). The research team, made up of incarcerated women, administrators, and academic researchers, identified one of the goals to be “improved awareness and integration of healthy lifestyles” (Martin et al., 2009, p. 143). Among other projects, a pilot nutrition and fitness program study was designed, implemented, and evaluated by incarcerated and non-incarcerated members of the research team, after surveying incarcerated women on their perception and knowledge of nutrition and fitness. The nutrition component of the program involved educational presentations and the distribution of Canada’s Food Guide, including personalized food charts that allowed participants to track their eating patterns. The fitness component was organized as follows: participants were given a facility orientation of the prison gym and were then provided with the opportunity to join a group circuit class, or to develop an individual exercise plan with a certified instructor. In both cases, participants were provided with an exercise program card to track their progress. In order to assess the impact of the pilot program, participants were involved in a pre- and post-program.

In sum, the pilot program was an answer to the health concern raised in the PAR project and constituted one of the “action” components of the project. Surprisingly, literature on PAR seldom defines “action,” though it can take many forms, ranging from the formation of therapeutic groups to micro-credit initiatives. For Reason & Bradbury (2008), PAR is characterized by the connection between research and practical actions, “in the pursuit of practical solutions in the pursuit of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (p. 4). In his review of PAR and community-based research, Stoecker (2009) underlined how PAR projects often failed “to walk the talk” of action, while implying that action could only be conveyed through structural and institutional change. In the case of Martin et al. (2013), the action of tackling “improved awareness and integration of healthy lifestyles” aimed to promote healthy behaviours in terms of nutrition and fitness, as well as to provide them an opportunity to engage in a fitness program. It did not have any claims of bringing about organisational or structural change, although the fact that food in prison is often considered as inadequate and unhealthy (Plugge et al., 2008). It was a practical solution to a health issue, in which the pathway to attain its goal focused on the individual.

Martin et al. (2013) assessed that the program was successful in providing women with the opportunity to engage in a healthier lifestyle. On the 150 incarcerated women, 50 were interested by the program, 28 enrolled, and 16 women completed the program and pre-post assessment. As described by Martin et al. (2013), these women were recruited on a

voluntary basis. In terms of results, the majority of participants showed an improvement in body measures and reported decreased stress, improved sleep, decreased desire for illicit drugs, and an overall feeling of health. Participants also highlighted how the peer-led nature of the program helped them to stay mobilized and focused on their goals. According to Martin et al., (2013) the social aspect of circuit classes was also greatly appreciated, which was an unforeseen finding. Thus, not only participants' behaviour change with regards to fitness, they also developed relationships with other women through the program. As the program unfolded, more women accessed and used the gym, even if they did not participate in the study, which Martin et al., (2013) interpreted as a "ripple effect of enthusiasm" (p. 147). Thus, the pilot program seemed to have benefited not only the participants, but also a larger group of incarcerated women.

Considering the literature on women's health in prison, the positive impact of the pilot program cannot be ignored. Many authors who have previously conducted research on women's experiences of incarceration reported that the lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, and weight gain, and the long-term impacts associated with the aforementioned, are key concerns for women (Giroux & Frigon, 2011; Kilty, 2012; Plugge et al., 2008). Considering that organisational constraints – such as disciplinary sanctions or a lack of surveillance staff – often prevent incarcerated women from accessing gym facilities and benefit from physical activity (for instance, see Quebec Ombudsman, 2013), a PAR involving the warden and management staff clearly facilitated issues of access. Overall, participants seemed to have positive experiences within the program, both physically and mentally, as illustrated by the following quotes: "I like the way I feel" (p. 144), "I didn't feel as depressed as I did before – exercise makes me feel better in my mind. This exercise program was fun!" The "ripple effect of enthusiasm" points toward the conclusion that this practical action answered a pressing need for incarcerated women.

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, we have to question the form and the effects of an action: an action that is successful, a program that is practical and effective remains embedded within power relations and may indeed reinforce unequal relations of power. As Bordo (1993) astutely warns us, any analysis of the "beneficial" effects in the change of power relations should carefully examine the underlying historical, social, and cultural context in which this change is embedded. In this case, a poststructuralist reading of "nutrition" and "fitness" informs us that these concepts are both mechanisms of power and constitute a "healthy" gendered subject who is in shape, lean, firm, and is appropriately muscular (Bordo, 1993; LeBesco, 2011; Lupton 1995, 2012). Feminist scholarships further uncovered how slenderness is associated with better self-control, health, and wellbeing, whereas fatness is associated with laziness, unhealthiness, and illness (Bordo, 1993; LeBesco, 2011; Lupton, 1995, 2012). "Nutrition" and "fitness" are thus embedded within particular discourses and practices, which constitute an embodied subjectivity of health that is slender, strong, and young.

In their project, Martin et al. described using, among other methods, "Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q) (...) and body measures (weight, chest, hips, body mass index and waist-to-hip ratio)" (p. 144), as well as personalised food charts and exercise

program card to track participants' progress. Embedded in practices of self-surveillance and self-discipline, these tools may provoke feelings of failure and sadness if participants are unable to conform to scripted ways of becoming healthy. They may be especially problematic as incarcerated women's health status is produced by the intersection of poverty, abuse, racism, and incarceration: women's bodies bear the mark of this intersection in their ageing, sick, and mutilated bodies (Frigon, 2012, 2003). In other words, incarcerated women's embodied subjectivities may indeed be far from the "healthy" one, and the possibility of achieving a healthy, slender and young body is uncertain, as its scripted idealized forms are very limited in terms of age, height, race, etc. (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 1995).

In addition, many authors (e.g., Smith (2000); Robert & Frigon (2006); Robert, Frigon & Belzile (2007)) have argued that the health system and the prison institution are intimately connected; they intersect to constitute the "healthy" prisoner who takes charge of her health, who is a vector of "healthy behaviours," and who does not only follow a healthy lifestyle and take responsibility for her health, but also promotes it to her community (Smith, 2000). When incarcerated women fail to attain scripted healthy embodied subjectivities (by still being "addicted", "obese", etc.), they may be perceived as engaging in "unhealthy lifestyles," "resistant" to health promotion and practices, as well as a resisting to attempt to engage in rehabilitation, in taking care ("appropriately") of themselves, their health issues embodying their failure to conform.

Many questions can be raised about the effects on participants of getting involved in the pilot program developed by Martin et al., (2013): did participants feel shame and guilt in failing to improve their health because the program relied on one form of embodied subjectivity? Inversely, did they benefit from having the tools to enact a new embodied subjectivity, the one of prisoners as vectors of health who conforms to the neoliberal imperative of taking charge of oneself? These questions cannot be answered without at least interviewing participants and academic researchers who were involved, and by contextualising the use of these tools: were they used to satisfy funders or prison officials' expectations or requirement? Were they chosen by incarcerated research participants themselves? How were they presented and discussed with participants during the pilot? One may hypothesize that the institutional contexts of this research (carceral, academic) may have precluded the exclusive use of tools that would have included the possibility of fluid, unfixed embodied subjectivities, in which the meaning of "fitness" and "health" would have been co-built with and by participants. In short, there is a potential pitfall in using tools such as body measurements and tracking charts that are informed by neoliberal scripts and constitute fixed embodied subjectivities, but it would be unfair and impossible to claim that Martin et al., (2013) only deployed neoliberal scripts of fitness within their project, especially since members of the research team discussed the issue of fluidity and instability in subjectivities in the research process.

While writing about the same study, Meyer and Fels (2009) discussed how their embodied subjectivities as researchers were destabilised in the first steps of the PAR project. As incarcerated participants interpreted narratives on prison, Meyer and Fels (2009) raised

the question of who is the expert, who is the learner? What is being learned, and by which processes? Which “knowledge” is acknowledged, recognised, integrated, and what is left out, ignored, unsaid? They explored how the initial embodied subjectivity – “experts” in academic research – was renegotiated within the research process, despite the discomfort and ambivalence they felt. They reached a subject position of “engaging in a particular set of actions and relationships of inquiry within a spirit of reciprocity and respect that offered hope and possibility” (p. 287), and in doing so, demonstrating how PAR opens the door for the consideration of subjectivities as different possibilities. As Lennie et al., (2003) argued the ambivalence brought about in the unfolding of a study can in fact be potentially constructive. The following section will explore the question “How might a PAR project be designed to “operationalize” fluid embodied subjectivities experienced by university researchers and participants?”

EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION

In PAR literature, participation is discussed in terms of its epistemological and political ramifications. Epistemologically, participation aims to reverse the Cartesian divide between the researcher and the object of research, as researchers and participants are considered to be co-researchers. PAR thus relies on a “democratization” of knowledge: through participation, all forms of knowledge—lay knowledge, experiential, academic—are put at the same level, and researchers and participants are involved in the process of knowledge-making (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2004; Israel et al., 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Politically, participation implies that not only are participants involved within the research process, but also that participants’ rights and abilities are put forward, so participants can be involved in the knowledge-generating process, as well as in the process of transforming the issue at stake (Israel et al., 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). The intended effects of such participation is that participants become “empowered,” as power is understood as a commodity that can be “owned” and redistributed, and, thus, effectively become better equipped with the skills and confidence to face future challenges (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). In brief, participation is a methodological strategy that bridges inequalities in knowledge and in roles, so the research can be “working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4).

Relying on poststructuralist theory, Kothari (2004) and Cleaver (2004) challenged the assumptions that participation in research or in development projects necessarily benefits participants by challenging existing power relations. By focusing on the connection between knowledge/expertise and power, Kothari (2004) demonstrated that participatory techniques are methods of knowledge accumulation that maintain expert knowledge, rather than challenge it. Consensus-building crystallizes what is considered “local knowledge,” and, through repetition and reiteration, this knowledge acquires a “common sense” status, the official version of the community; ultimately, it reinforces social norms and makes them objectively “truthful.” Moreover, participants are constrained by pre-scripted norms of participation: the ways in which they must take turns talking, answer questions, engage in discussion at certain times and about certain topics, take notes, or

reflect on their own experiences, etc. Cleaver (2004) challenges the rationality of participating, which is that potential participants should participate, and that a failure to do so demonstrates a lack of “rationality” or “motivation.” She highlighted how the engagement and disengagement of participants should be addressed by recognizing the changing and multiple identities of participants, and how they frame their choices of whether or not to participate.

Kothari (2004) and Cleaver (2004)’s critiques focused on the constraining aspects of power, as well as its effects, but they provide one side of the story. In order to excavate the creative potential of PAR, the challenge here is to simultaneously tackle power’s constraining and enabling aspects, as well as its effects. As we are all produced as free subjects (Rose, 1999), taking action to preserve and foster one’s health, one’s environment, one’s community, and one’s country is considered as a “duty”, and the only possible “ethical” position (Lupton, 2012). Citizens are simultaneously held accountable for the wellness and development of their environment, but also entitled to exercise their freedom by getting involved in their collectivities, their communities, or their cities (Gordon, 1991; Petersen & Bunton, 1997; Rose, 1999). Neoliberal governmentality thus produces participating subjects, with different effects. As Kothari (2004) and Cleaver (2004) outlined, it can keep participants in disadvantaged positions (e.g., by excluding them from “true” knowledge) or constrain them within specific forms of subjectivities (e.g., the ideal subject). Yet— and this side of the story has been explored less—enabling participants can also destabilize relations of power and have a freeing effect for participants. In such cases, participation “create(s) a space in which marginalized individuals can invent new subjectivities by critically reworking present ones” (Golob & Giles, 2013, p. 365).

To illustrate how PAR can have enabling effects for participants, I will turn to Fields et al., (2008), who conducted PAR in the San Francisco County Jail for Women. The researchers’ objective was to bring forward the concerns and insights of the participants to illuminate and challenge the roles that incarceration, criminalisation, gender, HIV, and race have on the sexual lives of incarcerated women. Their theoretical framework was informed by intersectionality, focusing on gender and race, while paying close attention to gendered inequalities that characterize women’s paths to incarceration. Drawing from the popular education tradition in PAR, the researchers developed a series of four workshops on risk and HIV. The workshops were adapted by and for incarcerated participants as the study moved along. During the workshop, participants had to interview each other, take notes, identify themes, and plan the next workshop: research methods thus constituted participants as “incarcerated researchers.” As a new round of workshop started, insights from past workshops were integrated in the new round. These workshops became sites to provide critical sexuality education in which academic researchers, public health workers, and incarcerated women extended the definition of HIV risk beyond bodily fluid exchanges, in order to address the different levels of vulnerability that incarcerated women must navigate and live with.

Based on Fields et al., (2008) account, one of the main and unforeseen effects of the workshops was that participants adopted different roles: educators, as they educated their

peers; researchers, as they used various research methods to investigate HIV and risk; and students, as they learned about research methods and risk as defined by public health experts. What Fields et al., (2008) defined as a “role” can be described as various subjectivities, as they referred not only to women’s behaviours, but also their senses of self, feelings, and reflexivity. Talking about her role as a “researcher,” one participant stated: “I like taking responsibility to listening to others’ stories and then take a look at my own life” (p. 77). Fields et al., (2008) argued that participating in the workshops was routinely recognized as valuable and desirable: as they were able to engage in alternative embodied subjectivities within the workshop, participants felt understood, heard, supported, and connected to each other. For instance, one participant stated: “now I see we are all here not only to serve time but [also] to support each other” (Fields et al., 2008, p. 80).

Embodied subjectivities described by the participants of Fields et al., study (2008) clash with correctional discourses and practices of incarcerated women, as well as with the “silenced” subjectivity of marginalized groups in society. Prison studies abundantly demonstrate how incarcerated women are constituted by institutional discourses and practices as “criminal” women, “flawed” and “dangerous” (for instance, see Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Pollack, 2005; Maidment, 2006b). They must conform to rules, orders, and procedures, and are coerced to do so if they express any form of resistance or if they are unable to conform as prescribed. Institutional rules and procedures produce a climate of insecurity and mistrust, both between prisoners and staff and among prisoners (Bosworth, 1999). Moving beyond prison’s walls, there is a need to critically recognize that the notion of “crime” is shaped by social and historical processes, and that women who are the most vulnerable—those who are street-involved, who engage in sex work, and/or who have mental health issues—are at a higher risk of criminalization and incarceration (Maidment, 2006a; Pollack, 2015; Wacquant, 2009). As in other marginalized groups, including Aboriginals, homeless people, etc., criminalized women “take on” the weight of deprivation, inequalities, racism, and sexism, and interpret their failures to work, study, get off the street, and stay out of prison as another sign of their personal worthlessness (McNay, 2012). Through technologies of the self, neoliberal governmentality relies on the internalization of feelings of failure, shame and inadequacy when subjects fail to attain neoliberal ideals (Cruikshank, 1993; Lupton, 2012; McNay, 2012). Thus, feelings of disconnection, depression, inadequacy and anger are a sign of the locatedness of the subject within the power relations that dominate their lives. In other words, the disadvantaged position a person occupies in power relations made “invisible” and “unhearable:” what is “readable” and “apparent” instead are low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness (Cruikshank, 1993). In sum, by participating in research, women in the Fields et al., (2008) studies were able to adopt and deploy other subjectivities, subjectivities marked by feelings of connection, of sharing common distresses, and of having the capacity to alleviate others’ distress. By enabling the participants to access these subjectivities, Fields et al., (2008) reconfigured the relations of power, constituting participants’ subjectivities in a different matter.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I attempted to explore how PAR practice and theory can be understood using a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework. Specifically, by exploring how embodied subjectivities are constituted through participation and action, I described how PAR can have normalizing and disciplinary effects, as well as constituting a site for participants to question and frame their subjectivities in new and alternative ways. In doing so, I aimed to describe how a poststructuralist theoretical framework can account for ways of participating and acting that are enabling and restraining, and which can have the effect of maintaining or destabilising existing relations of power. In writing this, I am informed by a study I conducted with formerly incarcerated women, where I observed the adoption of alternative subjectivities through participation (Chesnay, 2016). For instance, one of the participants involved in the development of a collection of testimonies by formerly incarcerated women for incarcerated women stated: “I’m doing this [project], because we are wild animals—but we are also women who have something to say” (Nikita). In her statement, Nikita challenged her subjectification as an “animal” —instinct-driven and dangerous—by her womanhood, reclaiming the legitimacy of her voice. Although small, I think such reconfigurations may have destabilizing effects on power relations that may benefit participants.

Rather than being discouraging, this article intends to invite all PAR enthusiasts to critically consider the ethical claims of PAR and to question its potential normative and coercive effects in addition to its potential to transform existing power relations—thus embracing its complexity rather than shying away from it. In the words of Foucault, “my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. So my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism” (Foucault, 1983, p. 231).

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