# Participatory Action Research as a Pedagogical Framework for Refugee Engagement in Higher Education

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## Abstract

This essay explores the use of participatory action research (PAR) as a pedagogical framework for transformative inquiry and ethical engagement with refugees in higher education. The pedagogical practice of learning from refugee testimonies has been criticized for reinforcing power imbalances and potentially causing harm to participants (e.g., Taylor et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2008; Kahn & Fabos, 2017). We reflect on the practice of *autoethnographic reflexive interviewing* (Vang et al., 2023) in the context of two classroom-based and refugee-engaged PAR studies, which is a decolonial methodology (Smith, 2012) that involves refugee community partners collaborating in the development of the research questions that they themselves answer through interviews and journal writing. We argue that PAR provides a research and pedagogical framework that emphasizes equitable collaboration and co-construction of knowledge between researchers and community partners, ensuring that refugee experiences, knowledge, and testimonies are produced for the goal of supporting action for community well-being and justice.

***Keywords:*** Participatory action research, Higher education, Pedagogy, Refugee testimony

## Introduction

This essay explores participatory action research (PAR) as a pedagogical framework for socially-just, ethical, and transformative inquiry and creation of refugee testimony in higher education. We present research and reflections from two classroom-based and refugee-engaged PAR studies—one conducted in 2023 with refugee resettlement service providers who themselves have refugee background; and the second in 2024 with Palestinian immigrants in the United States during the still ongoing war in Gaza.

The pedagogical practice of learning from refugee testimony (Taylor, Rwigema & Sollange, 2014), for example, by staging classroom or community performances for students and community members to learn about refugee experiences by listening to individuals share their personal narratives of displacement, has been vigorously critiqued as a form of colonial extraction of community knowledge that is also potentially harmful to individuals who share their experiences (Taylor et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2008; Kahn & Fabos, 2017). Critics argue that such practices reinforce power imbalances between researchers and participants, commodifying the emotional labor of refugees for educational purposes (Taylor et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2008).

This can lead to re-traumatize, causing emotional distress and a sense of exploitation among refugee participants (Piazzoli & KIR Cullen, 2021; Low & Sonntag, 2023). Thus, Block and colleagues (2012) highlight the ethical and methodological challenges with research involving refugee-background youth, emphasizing the importance of ethical reflexivity and the need to create supportive environments that prioritize the well-being of participants.

This essay suggests that participatory action research (PAR)—employed as a research approach and as a form of pedagogical engagement with refugees in U.S. higher education classrooms—may provide an ethical framework for engaging with refugees, and for the cultivation and dissemination of refugee testimonies. Refugees are often excluded from the design and conduct of research that will impact their communities (Lau & Rodgers, 2021). In contrast, PAR is an approach to research and pedagogy that emphasizes collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge, ensuring that the voices of community members are not only heard but also respected and valued as active interlocutors (often leaders) in the research process (Anderson, 2017). Thus, PAR positions community members as equal, leading contributors throughout the research process (Vang et al., 2023). This method challenges historical and current tendencies of research to sideline marginalized voices (Smith, 2012). PAR upholds that research is not solely for experts and recognizes community members' unique insights into how to investigate problems that impact them directly (Herr & Anderson, 2014). In PAR, academic researchers act as guides and mentors, not authoritative leaders who claim power to direct the research (Littman et al., 2021).

The focus of PAR is on real-world issues that impact communities and on employing research to create an evidence-base to motivate social change (Fine, 2007). This pragmatic focus emerged from the confluence of intellectual and activist histories that are central to the genealogies of PAR (Hall, 2005; Zeller-Berkman, 2014), which includes the project of action research launched by German social-psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) and the liberation movements in Latin American starting in the 1960s (Fals Borda, 1984; Freire, 2018); and combined with later innovations in critical theory which informed research in social psychology and education research (among other disciplines; Fine, 2007). The application PAR in diverse settings, from youth organizations to higher education (Smolarek et al., 2021), has proven its effectiveness. Specifically, refugee-involved PAR projects yield more effective and culturally appropriate service designs and enhance refugee empowerment, fostering confidence, and proactive agency (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). However, because PAR is specifically a decolonial and liberatory research approach aimed at empowering marginalized communities—which themselves often lack power over the institutions that impact their lives—the action component of PAR frequently involves exposing inequalities through community-based dissemination and advocacy (Smolarek et al., 2021), in contrast with the problem-solution policy research approach characteristic of mainstream institutional policy discourse (Fairclough, 2013).

In classroom-based PAR, the instructor, students, and community partners work together to learn from each other and to design and conduct research to impact their own communities (Walker & Loots, 2017). PAR as a pedagogical approach in higher education embodies a radical and transformative pedagogy—transcending the boundaries between universities and surrounding communities, fostering a more socially responsible educational environment (Mountz et al., 2008). The core of PAR involves integrating students and community members into the research process, guiding them to address real-world issues through collective inquiry and action, as well as underscoring the necessity of deep participation and intersectional knowledge production, ensuring

that the voices of those most impacted by social injustices are centered and empowered in the research process (Fine et al., 2021). It places students and community members as active co-creators of knowledge, significantly altering their role from passive recipients of expert knowledge to engaged participants in knowledge production. By fostering an environment of mutual respect and ethical reflexivity, the PAR framework may help to mitigate the risks associated with the use of refugee testimonies in educational settings, promoting empowerment among participants (Low & Sonntag, 2023).

This essay describes the use of refugee-engaged PAR as a research and pedagogical framework for two iterations of a university-level class (2023 and 2024), with the goal of engaging refugees and other immigrants in research that documents their experiences to inform their advocacy work for their own communities. With the research mentorship of the instructor, and the support and engagement with the students, the community members with refugee background, designed and conducted research to inform and advance their projects of social change. One methodological innovation we highlight in this context is the process of what we call ***autoethnographic reflexive interviewing***, in which the community partners collaborate in the development of the research and interview questions that they themselves answer through interviews and journal writing (Vang et al., 2023)—resulting in questions that were culturally appropriate, insightful, and oriented towards the goals of community empowerment.

## Study 1: Navigational Barriers and Strategies to Higher Education for Refugees

The research collective for Study 1 comprised twelve students enrolled in the PAR course, their instructor (first author of this paper, Wolfgram) who is an anthropologist and education researcher, and two individuals with refugee-background who also serve as resettlement case-workers at a refugee resettlement program in Wisconsin (Wolfgram et al., 2024). The instructor's intention was to mentor students and individuals with refugee background in PAR and qualitative research methods, and to do work to inform and enhance the services provided by the refugee resettlement program in the community. Despite the setting of an academic university course, which imposes a hierarchy between the instructor and the students, and between them and the community partners, through mutual agreement on power distribution and shared values such as confidentiality and cultural humility (Littman et al., 2021), the course aimed to create a research team in which all participants would contribute their insights in a respectful manner. These measures recognized the diverse backgrounds of team members, considering factors like citizenship status, displacement experiences, race, and education, ensuring a collaborative, respectful research team dynamic.

Participatory design of research questions and protocol involved collective inquiry into the problems faced by refugees in the community, drawing on community knowledge to investigate the problems and action strategies to transform the situation (McIntyre, 2000); and it also involves iterations of reflection-theory-action which education theorist and adult educator Pablo Freire (2018) has called "praxis" (see also, "action research cycle" with stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The participatory design of research questions and interview protocol took place in weekly team discussions following iterations of questioning, sharing, documenting, and theorizing experiences which were then followed by work to refine questions to probe for additional sharing, documenting, and theorizing. We also documented our research process through autoethnographic writing tasks (Vang et al., 2023) and conducted an asset mapping exercise to identify the resources and

networks in the refugee communities to support social change (Lightfoot et al., 2014). The problem of barriers to school and college for refugee newcomers and the role of cultural orientation programing to support refugee education emerged through this iterative process. As refugees themselves, our community partners had themselves experienced challenges associated with education and careers, as the parents and mentors for refugee youth, and as case-workers for the refugee community. Through this process we developed the following research question: *What are the barriers, resources, and strategies that refugees experience and employ to access and succeed in higher education?*

Through a process of questioning, sharing, documenting, and theorizing, the research team collaboratively refined our interview protocol to address this question. This method allowed our community partners' experiences and insights to shape the interview questions, influencing their focus, phrasing, and structure. Thus, our community partners both participated in the co-design the interview protocol, and they were respondents for that protocol in an hour-long recorded session. This approach, which we term autoethnographic reflexive interviewing, mirrors autoethnographic writing in PAR, where team members chronicle their experiences, contributing to the project's empirical record (Vang et al., 2023). For the analysis, we employed open coding to discern themes, which the research team discussed, refined, and incorporated into analytical memos (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

While there is ample research on the educational experiences, barriers, supports, and outcomes for refugee youth in the United States (McBrien, 2005), there is a noticeable gap concerning research on access to higher education for refugee adults (Dryden-Peterson, 2010). Despite the fact that many adult refugees resettle with aspirations of continuing or pursuing education and careers (Yi & Kiyama, 2018), refugees confront numerous obstacles, including:

- Federal policies prioritize rapid employment over investing in education (Wolfgram & Van Auken, 2023).
- Refugees, especially adults, face discouragement from educators who hold deficit views (DeMartino, 2021).
- Language barriers, especially academic English, are pervasive, with some female refugees facing added social barriers to participating in learning environments outside the home (Hirano, 2014).
- The financial challenges of U.S. tuition are as real for refugees as they are for other immigrants, as well as working-class and even middle-class citizens (Lindsey, 2013).
- Accessing higher education information is challenging (Bajwa et al., 2017).
- Discrimination, including Islamophobia, can be problematic on U.S. campuses (Harper, 2020).
- Securing official educational documents needed for college applications post-resettlement is a hurdle (Wolfgram, 2020).

The ability to manage such challenges, negotiate access to resources, and navigate complex institutions involves a set of skills, dispositions, and strategies termed navigational capital (Yasso, 2005). For refugees, navigational capital is a well-cultivated set of skills, shaped by experiences

and interactions with the complex global and national humanitarian and other bureaucracies which support refugees.

The community partners in our study originally struggled with limited English proficiency and inadequate translation support, impacting their ability to communicate with educational institutions effectively. This was evident when one participant highlighted the critical nature of parent-teacher communication for educational success. Additionally, refugees often face the non-recognition of their educational credentials, forcing them to start anew despite prior qualifications (Wolfgram, 2020), with one stating "So for whatever paper [certificate, diploma, transcript, etc.] you come with here … they will not consider yours." Navigating the American educational system is further complicated by a lack of practical information and support, such as the FAFSA application process, leading some to forgo financial aid applications. Resettlement agencies provide cultural orientation training to aid in navigating institutional resources, but both participants indicated that current efforts are inadequate and oversimplified, stating "Yeah, it's helpful because there is some information there that they need to know. But you need to have other sessions to make it more detailed." The amount and usefulness of the information, "It's not helpful. No. It's nothing actually. It's nothing because we … just like telling them about school and that's it. Nothing about the system and how it's going." Refugees were presented with oversimplified success stories—the orientation materials have a slide depicting a joyous college commencement ceremony, for example—without advice on the concrete steps on how to start to pursue such a goal. The community partners indicated that appropriate and effective cultural orientation required more detailed and practical information to empower refugees with knowledge of the actionable steps towards their educational goals.

Some ways for refugees to combat this is to employ strategies like intergenerational support, social networks, and self-advocacy in order to navigate the U.S. educational system, and to resist deficit representations of refugees (Yasso, 2005). Intergenerational support is pivotal, with parents guiding children through language, cultural, and educational barriers. Maintaining a positive self-identity is crucial, as parents emphasize the importance of cultural pride and resistance against assimilation pressures, helping youth reconcile multiple identities and build navigational capital, "Because your kids need to know that they belong to this country, they need to grow in peace." Community partners argued that in the face of encounters with micro-aggressions and xenophobia, refugee youth need intergenerational support in balancing their cultural values with those of their new country. Both community partners highlighted the role of self-advocacy, such as seeking better support for English learning or other academic support from peers, advisors, and instructors. Another challenge that refugees face is getting accurate and helpful information about higher education in the United States. To address this barrier, one community partner connected with refugees across the United States via social media, accessing practical information about opportunities for education and career development which is a strategy to access educational information that has been employed in refugee camps as well (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

The findings of Study 1 indicated that refugees face significant navigational barriers to higher education in the U.S., but they employ strategies such as intergenerational support, social networks, and self-advocacy to overcome these challenges. By enhancing cultural orientation materials, providing ongoing mentorship, and formalizing educational pathways to support refugees, resettlement service providers and educators can better support refugees in their educational journeys. Following the PAR framework for research and pedagogy, the goals, questions, analysis,

and policy recommendations were designed and conducted in collaboration with the community partners, who employed the research to support their advocacy efforts for the refugee community.

### Study 2: Palestinian Life-Histories as Counter-Media Community Advocacy

Study 2 is the second iteration of the PAR course, which was conducted in the spring of 2024, starting several months after the initial escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza on October 7th, 2023. The partners for this project were the course instructor, thirteen students enrolled in the course, and three members of the Palestinian immigrant community in Wisconsin. As the conflict continued to escalate, the three Palestinian community advocates independently organized several education events in the community during the winter of 2023 with the goal of humanizing Palestinian identity and experience by telling their personal stories of occupation, displacement, and immigration to the United States.

The instructor for the PAR course proposed a collaboration, which developed through conversations with the PAR course participants and the community partners. The goals of the project became to document and narrate the community partners' life-histories, which they could disseminate and employ in their own advocacy work to counter biased media representation by humanizing the Palestinian community. Research has documented the communication strategies employed in U.S. media to dehumanize Palestinians, particularly during times of crisis or conflict escalation in the Occupied Territories (Baltodano et al., 2007; Noakes & Wilkins, 2002); and it has documented efforts of Palestinians to counter such representations by telling stories that re-humanize Palestinian identity and experience (Heywood & Goodman, 2019). In addition to the goal of developing their life-histories to employ in their advocacy work to humanize the Palestinian community, the community partners also hoped to organize an event to share their testimonies with the student community on campus.

Similar to Study 1, we developed agreements to make our values explicit and established conventions for equitable collaboration on the research team (Littman et al., 2021), designed research goals and questions employing autoethnographic and consensus-building procedures (Vang et al., 2023), and conducted a community asset mapping exercise to identify the resources and networks in the communities to support social change (Lightfoot et al., 2014). The research team conducted five hour-long life-history interviews (Adriansen, 2012) with each community partner. We transcribed the life-history interviews and identified major themes, life-stages and consequential events to highlight in the life-history narratives. The narratives were developed through a process of crafting, revising, editing, expanding, and theorizing; the narratives were checked with the community partners for accuracy, appropriateness, and style, and the feedback was incorporated into the multiple revisions of the life history narratives (Harvey, 2014).

The research team met bi-weekly throughout the semester. Meetings were conducted in a university building located on the edge of campus, which was accessible to our community partners. The first weekly session included the community partners, which would involve discussions with the team to develop interview questions; the team would then divide into three groups to conduct the life-history interviews with the community partners; and then the team would reconvene to debrief the interview and to develop, critique, and revise the interview questions for the following week. In the second team meeting for the week, the students and instructor met without the community partners present, to work on the analysis and development of their life-history narrative, which we could review and receive feedback from the community

partners in future team meetings. Again, the research team employed the method of auto-ethnographic reflexive interviewing, with community partners engaging in the development, critique, and feedback of the life-history interview questions that they themselves would answer in the following interview sessions. Through this method, we could craft culturally appropriate interview questions together that could support and facilitate the community partners' efforts to narrate their own stories in ways that could support their advocacy. Because the community partners co-designed their own interview questions, they became personally invested in answering these questions to craft their own narratives—they would often research and reflect upon their life in the intervening week and return to team meetings with their notes to support their own narration.

The community partners discussed challenges living and obtaining an education in Palestine under Israeli Occupation, especially considering the constraints on mobility and threats to personal safety that occurred after the First and Second Intifadas. They discussed the factors and experiences that caused their displacement and their ultimate resettlement in the United States, and the experiences and challenges of life in the United States as Palestinian immigrants. It was extremely important to the community partners that the narratives depict their personal dispositions of strength, resilience, courage, self-advocacy, and empowerment; and their strong sense of faith that guided them through difficult times caused by occupation, war, and displacement.

One concern that emerged in the project was that while the community partners wanted to share their testimonies publicly to support their advocacy work, they ultimately felt that the written life-history narratives provided too much detail to ensure their anonymity in a meaningful way. They all hoped to one day return to Palestine, and in consequence, they did not want to be identified with anything in print that could be interpreted as being critical of the Israeli Government. The team moved forward with the plan to organize an event on campus where the community partners should share their testimonies, which occurred at the end of the semester before a large group of sympathetic students who were eager to learn from the Palestinian community partners, and to identify ways to lend their support. The event happened simultaneously with large student protests on campus (and on campuses across the United States) to support the causes of peace and justice for Palestinians, and to force the divestment of the university from companies that have businesses or investments in Israel.

The experience of Study 2 indicates a need for new genres of narrative research to counter deficit narratives and biased media representations in contexts of war, occupation, and violent displacement. Life-history counter-narratives provide nuance and context to counter dominant narratives, although the political impact may be submerged in individual testimonies; and in the case of narratives against oppressive or violent political regimes, the risk to confidentiality and disclosure may be too great. Future research may develop creative narrative strategies to address the risks posed to participants in life-historical research in contexts of ongoing political and structural violence.

## Discussions and Conclusions

The pedagogical practice of learning from refugee testimony in higher education has been criticized as a form of colonial extraction of community knowledge that reinforces the power imbalances between researchers and communities (Taylor et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2008; Kahn &

Fabos, 2017), commodifying the emotional labor of refugees for educational purposes (Taylor et al., 2014; Gabriel, 2008); and this injustice may potentially re-traumatize refugees who may have already experienced violence and displacement (Piazzoli & KIR Cullen, 2021; Low & Sonntag, 2023). In dialogue with this ethical critique of pedagogies of refugee testimony, this paper argues that PAR provides an ethical orientation and framework needed to engage refugees and refugee communities in higher education.

This paper has presented two classroom-based and refugee-engaged PAR projects that have engaged in the co-construction of refugee testimony, for the purposes of learning from refugee experiences, but also, for the purposes of supporting the advocacy-work of members of the refugee communities. The action components involved developing a research instrument to obtain feedback on cultural orientation and other services for refugees and the dissemination of evidence-based recommendations to service providers to improve refugee resettlement services (**Study 1**) and the development and community-dissemination of Palestinian life histories to humanize Palestinian refugees and counter stereotypes about them that are promoted in the U.S. media during the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (**Study 2**). Upon reflection and revision of the procedures, instruments, and partnerships involved in the studies, we have further developed the model of immigrant-engaged PAR—involving equitable collaboration between education researchers, immigrant serving community organizations, and local refugee communities—to obtain funding and continue action research to (1) study and improve culturally appropriate mental health services for immigrants and refugees; and (2) study and address barriers to immigrant civic engagement—both of which will provide support empowerment to communities that are being targeted by the anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric and policy of the second Trump Administration (Toy et al., 2025).

The PAR approach to research and pedagogy centers the goals, knowledge, and perspectives of community members such as refugees, who are often excluded from leading and owning the research that impacts their communities. In the PAR studies presented in this paper, refugee community members collaborated with students and their instructor in the co-production of refugee testimonies, to support community empowerment. For **Study 1**, this process resulted in key insights into the barriers and community assets and strategies that impact refugee access to higher education, to inform the work of resettlement services providers, educators, and refugee community advocates who support the education and career goals of refugees.

For **Study 2**, the PAR process focused on the co-production of the life-histories of three Palestinian community advocates, to aid their work to educate Americans about the Palestinian experience and to counter negative and stereotyped representations of Palestinians in the news media by humanizing Palestinian identity. We suggest that the ethical engagement of these PAR studies was facilitated by the practice of autoethnographic reflexive interviewing, in which refugee community partners guided the research by co-designing the interview questions that they themselves would answer as a prompt to develop their own testimony. We suggest that PAR—and the methodology of autoethnographic reflexive interviewing—provides an ethical framework which centers the equitable collaboration and co-construction of refugee testimonies, both as a higher education pedagogy and as a form of empowerment and support for refugee communities.

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