

CHAPTER 16

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN A PANDEMIC: PRISON CLIMATES DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter discusses the utility of engaging in participatory action research (PAR) methodologies to investigate prison climates within correctional settings. In doing so, facilitators and barriers accompanying this research approach are highlighted.

Methodology/Approach – PAR methodologies were adopted to investigate living and working conditions within a Mid-Atlantic prison. In line with this approach, members of the incarcerated population and staff within the institution were selected to be members of the research team.

Findings – Following the PAR framework to studying prison climates, several barriers and facilitators in conducting this research were identified and are presented to inform continued efforts investigating prison conditions and culture.

Originality/Value – Overall, a limited understanding of prison conditions, culture, and quality of life within correctional institutions exists. Moreover, a lack of attention has been devoted to improving working and living conditions behind the prison walls. Therefore, efforts to improve the prison environment

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are limited due to a lack of data about prison conditions and quality of life within these settings. PAR methodologies provide an important framework for addressing these gaps.

Keywords: Prison reform; correctional climate; participatory action research; COVID-19; pandemic; incarceration

INTRODUCTION

Mass incarceration within the United States remains an ongoing and debated topic, eliciting scrutiny from correctional professionals, policy-makers, scholars, advocacy groups, the media, and the public at large. Calls to transform the prison system have been furthered by documented racial disparities behind prison walls, high recidivism rates, and growing concerns related to the pains of imprisonment on incarcerated populations and correctional staff (Digard, Vanko, & Sullivan, 2018; Farrell, Young, Willison, & Fine, 2021). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for reform and decarceration heightened (Kang-Brown, Montagnet, & Heiss, 2021). Accordingly, prison populations declined rapidly, which has largely been attributed to decreased admissions into state and federal correctional facilities and the release of incarcerated persons from these institutions (Carson, 2021; Kang-Brown et al., 2021). In fact, according to a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics report, there was a 40% decrease in total prison admissions from 2019 to 2020 (Carson, 2021). Despite this decline, incarceration rates remain alarmingly high. In 2020 alone, the imprisonment rate in the United States was 358 per 100,000 US residents (Carson, 2021). In other words, nearly 1.3 million individuals were incarcerated at the year end of 2020 (Carson, 2021; Kang-Brown et al., 2021).

Despite this overwhelming reliance on prisons to incarcerate members of our society, a limited understanding of prison conditions, culture, and quality of life within correctional institutions exists overall. Moreover, those who experience prison conditions firsthand – namely incarcerated persons and correctional workers – are frequently excluded from research efforts and decision-making processes (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine, 2013; Hatton & Fisher, 2011; Reiter, 2014). Rather, research investigating prison settings has historically adopted a top-down approach in which an inherent power imbalance exists between researchers and those under study (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006). Importantly, this research approach has inflicted harms upon marginalized groups within society, and in turn, has bred distrust in scientific research among these communities (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne, 2017; Payne & Bryant, 2018). As a result, our understanding of prison experiences and areas in need of improvement within correctional settings remains incomplete, further hampering efforts to promote reform, transparency, and positive social change within these restrictive realms (Farrell et al., 2021; Reiter, 2014).

In acknowledgment of the pitfalls of traditional research, more recent scholarship has raised attention to the need for greater inclusivity of marginalized

voices through the adoption of PAR methodologies (e.g., Belknap, 2015; Dupont, 2008; Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne & Bryant, 2018). PAR, a research orientation and framework, incorporates individuals from the communities and/or conditions under scientific investigation as full-fledged members of the research team (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne, 2017; Payne & Bryant, 2018), in which they are involved at every stage of the research process (Payne, 2017). In short, PAR acknowledges that the individuals who directly experience and/or are impacted by the conditions under study are the true experts (Fine, 2013), such that empowered participation serves as a key guiding principle of this approach (Farrell et al., 2021). By incorporating their voices and expertise, meaningful research as well as fairer and more credible analyses can be fostered (Cahill, 2007; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013). Additionally, PAR prioritizes social activism and informed change (Farrell et al., 2021; Payne, 2017). Thus, scholars contend that through empowering and collaborating with those most impacted by the conditions under study throughout the research process, research efforts will be better equipped to produce sustainable solutions to problem areas within the prison environment (Farrell et al., 2021; Payne & Bryant, 2018).

Accordingly, within this chapter, we draw upon participatory action fieldwork conducted within Delaware's Howard R. Young Correctional Institution (HRYCI) as part of the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative, launched by the Urban Institute with support from Arnold Ventures. The initiative marks a collaborative effort to improve the living and working conditions within prisons by promoting data-driven innovations, transparency, and inclusivity (Farrell et al., 2021). As part of this larger initiative, the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN) was developed. PRIN is a consortium of five states, including Delaware, each working to establish a model of transparency, accountability, and innovation in one prison. Therefore, this chapter seeks to share lessons learned in studying prison climates using the PAR framework. In doing so, we seek to demonstrate the utility of PAR projects within correctional settings while also providing a realistic account of encountered challenges and strengths accompanying this approach to prison research to inform future action-oriented research employed behind prison walls.

This chapter begins by introducing readers to the PAR framework, followed by an overview of extant scholarship incorporating these methodologies within correctional settings. In doing so, we highlight transformative outcomes as well as areas of concern raised by researchers engaging in this type of research. Next, findings are presented from the current study in which barriers and facilitators to conducting PAR in the prison are discussed. Lastly, we conclude with recommendations and promising directions for future research and the continued utility of PAR within correctional settings.

PAR: AN OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of the PAR framework and its guiding principles. Accordingly, we illustrate how PAR has the power to promote meaningful

change driven and informed directly by those under study, with a particular focus on how PAR frameworks have been leveraged to enrich our understanding of correctional environments.

The Power of PAR

The origin of PAR can be traced back to the early research developments of Kurt Lewin (1946), a social psychologist investigating intergroup relations and grievances through engaging individuals in the community in research efforts to influence social policy (Payne, 2017). Since its initiation, PAR has aligned with various social movements and activist agendas throughout history and has been adopted and applied widely across disciplinary fields, including public health, education, sociology, and criminology (Payne, 2017). While various iterations of PAR have developed over time (Farrell et al., 2021; Payne, 2017), shared guiding principles underlie these frameworks, including empowered participation and a commitment to action and positive social change (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017; Minkler, Garcia, Rubin, & Wallerstein, 2012; Pant, 2014).

In general, PAR projects incorporate individuals from the communities and/or conditions under scientific investigation as co-researchers and collaborative partners (Farrell et al., 2021; Payne, 2017; Payne & Bryant, 2018). In doing so, these individuals are recognized to be the true experts of their communities (Fine, 2013), such that they enrich our understanding of social conditions and phenomena, resulting in meaningful knowledge production and the ability to spur informed social change (Cahill, 2004, 2007; Farrell et al., 2021; Fields, González, Hentz, Rhee, & White, 2008). Thus, PAR calls for information and power sharing as well as joint decision-making (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine, 2013; Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003). Researchers, as a result, are expected to empower co-researchers to participate in decision-making by establishing collaborative relationships and open communication throughout the research process (e.g., setting goals, data collection, analysis, policy recommendations, and research outcomes) (Farrell et al., 2021). Scholars acknowledge that in order to build such relationships, trust and respect must be earned with community members (Minkler et al., 2003; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013), which often takes time to develop (Huffman, 2017).

Inherent within the PAR framework is the understanding that unequal power relations are likely to exist within various settings and communities, such that power sharing is recognized to be an essential component of conducting action-oriented research (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013). This requires that outside researchers confront their own identities and privilege in order to allow for those who possess unique and insider knowledge of the conditions being studied to direct and engage in knowledge production (Fine et al., 2003; Huffman, 2017; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993). With this understanding, PAR embraces increased transparency, collaboration, and training opportunities for co-researchers to mitigate power imbalances and structural disparities that have historically dominated research (Fields et al., 2008; Minkler et al., 2003).

Another key element and guiding goal of action-oriented research that sets it apart from traditional research is its emphasis on systemic change (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017; Lewin, 1946; Payne, 2017). Through involving those most impacted by the conditions under study throughout the research process, sustainable and informed solutions to ongoing problems and social issues can be fostered (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017). In fact, Fine and Torre (2006, p. 265) acknowledge, “participatory action research projects are born in dissent, strengthened by difference, organized through a bumpy democracy and motivated by a desire for contestation and justice.” Accordingly, action research orientations embrace and call for the pursuit of social justice, action, and change driven by empowered community members (Crabtree, Wall, & Ohm, 2016; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne & Bryant, 2018). Therefore, scholars have come to increasingly recognize the utility of PAR projects within diverse communities and institutions, including prisons. Not only does this framework aim to uncover social conditions through meaningful and equitable partnerships, but it also prioritizes the development of sustainable and effective solutions to ongoing social problems (Farrell et al., 2021; Payne, 2017; Ward & Bailey, 2013).

PAR in Correctional Settings

PAR conducted within the prison setting has experienced growth over time (Farrell et al., 2021). In recognition that individuals living and working within these settings possess unique experiences and knowledge within these realms, action-oriented research projects have been able to learn more about prison conditions to inform change within these settings by actively including members from these communities (Cherniack, Berger, Namazi, Henning, & Punnett, 2019; Fields et al., 2008; Fine et al., 2003; Fine & Torre, 2006; O’Gorman et al., 2012).

PAR projects conducted within correctional environments have largely concentrated on well-being, safety, and health-related topics (Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; O’Gorman et al., 2012). These efforts have played pivotal roles in illuminating social conditions within carceral systems, while also informing needed changes within these realms. For example, Fields et al. (2008) employed PAR methodologies within a women’s jail to investigate sexuality education and HIV prevention. Through partnering with and actively including women incarcerated within the institution as researchers through a series of workshops, valuable insights were fostered regarding barriers to HIV prevention, access needs, as well as the utility of a comprehensive approach to health education within the jail (Fields et al., 2008).

Other action-oriented research investigations have produced similar invaluable knowledge through the active inclusion of those incarcerated within correctional settings (e.g., Fine et al., 2003; Fine & Torre, 2006; O’Gorman et al., 2012; Ward & Bailey, 2013). Fine et al. (2003), for example, examined the impact of college on women’s experiences within prison by employing various methodologies guided by the PAR framework. In doing so, they were able to uncover the critical role of higher education in fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and transformation (Fine et al., 2003). These efforts enrich our understanding of lived experiences

and conditions of confinement behind prison walls, while also developing innovative solutions directed by those experiencing these conditions first-hand (Farrell et al., 2021). More recent correctional work has also started to investigate prison conditions through actively including correctional workers, illuminating quality of working conditions and needed improvements (e.g., Baldwin, Harvey, Wood, Bloice, & Willis, 2021; Dugan et al., 2016).

Importantly, PAR researchers (e.g., Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021; Minkler et al., 2003), in reflecting on their processes have not only shared the positive social changes and outcomes derived from the PAR framework to enrich our understanding of prison environments, but also have disseminated the limitations of this approach within these domains (Drake, 2014; Fields et al., 2008; Fine & Torre, 2006). Specifically, correctional environments are recognized as highly controlled and coercive settings, in which autonomy and agentic decision-making are largely constrained, leading many scholars to conclude that this context can make meaningful participation extremely difficult (Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006). Moreover, inherent power imbalances within carceral settings have been found to shape research projects, who participates, and what areas of concern surface and/or are prioritized (Drake, 2014; Fine & Torre, 2006). Additionally, research partners within prisons may face increased risks for participation, including but not limited to invasions of privacy, retaliation, and punishment, as well as threats to confidentiality (Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003; Fine & Torre, 2006).

Consequently, researchers caution against overpromising what outcomes and changes may arise from PAR projects (Drake, 2014; Fine et al., 2003; Weisenfeld, 1999). Several factors, including buy-in from prison leadership, access, power dynamics, and the ability to actively include those most impacted by the conditions under study throughout the research process, influence the likelihood of spurring lasting change (Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Huffman, 2017). Elements of the research process may also upset routine prison operations, which can itself elicit resistance to change (Farrell et al., 2021). However, researchers have come to acknowledge that the core guiding principles of PAR, namely empowered participation, power sharing, and a commitment to action, have the capacity to interrupt the status quo, to encourage an openness to different perspectives, and to introduce incremental changes that may culminate to produce transformations, even within the most oppressive structures (i.e., prisons) (Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003; Huffman, 2017). With this in mind, we present the lessons we have learned from engaging in PAR behind prison walls to share our own encountered limitations and successes accompanying the quest for impactful change.

LESSONS LEARNED IN CONDUCTING PAR BEHIND PRISON WALLS

Within this section, findings are presented to illuminate encountered difficulties associated with conducting PAR projects behind prison walls. Facilitators and

strategies employed to overcome such barriers are presented as well. In doing so, we strive to offer a realistic portrayal of prison PAR with the aim of enhancing transparency and informing future PAR efforts carried out within correctional domains.

Barriers

The COVID-19 pandemic produced unexpected challenges and delays to conducting action research methodologies within the prison setting. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, the PRIN project kickoff experienced great success and allowed for the assembly of two research committees comprised of 12 incarcerated persons (IRC) and 12 correctional staff (SRC). All committee members from inside the institution submitted applications to participate and were selected by members of the outside research team with guidance from the Delaware Department of Correction. Routine bi-weekly meetings were held inside the institution with each respective research committee to provide training in research methods and to begin collaboratively designing a climate survey to be administered to the entire staff and incarcerated population within the prison. However, as the situation evolved with the pandemic, increased restrictions for the protection of those inside the facility as well as outside members of the research team were introduced by the prison administration. Restrictions placed on visitation resulted in suspended entry into the facility, limitations on commingling among housing pods, and consequently, brought all in-person research activities to an abrupt and unexpected halt.

Uncertainty about when in-person research activities would be able to resume safely created increased concerns about the future of the project. Specifically, outside members of the research team began to question how extended periods of broken contact with research committees may erode trust and commitments to the PAR process. Moreover, it forced the outside research team to grapple with how to continue moving forward with the project without sacrificing the PAR framework and reverting back to a top-down approach to decision-making (Minkler et al., 2003). While safety restrictions eventually lessened and in-person research activities were able to resume safely after a period of time, this experience calls attention to a common barrier experienced when conducting research within the prison setting – gaining access to a total institution (Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005; Reiter, 2014; Wacquant, 2002).

Existing scholarship acknowledges that securing access to prisons may be fraught with various obstacles (Reiter, 2014; Wacquant, 2002). Research efforts within prison settings are largely dependent on continued access to these domains. PAR projects are no exception to this. Researchers must navigate these hurdles by investing time and increased commitment to establishing partnerships with prison leadership to ensure continued access and collaboration with co-researchers inside the institution (Huffman, 2017). This encountered barrier also reminded us of the divide separating us from the those housed and working within the institution (Fine et al., 2003). When pandemic conditions worsened, as outside researchers, we had the ability to leave the facility surrounded by barbed

wire fencing until it was safe to return, a privilege not afforded to incarcerated persons as well as many staff members considered to be “essential” to the functioning of the prison during this time. Therefore, while the PAR framework does provide important mechanisms for power sharing, prison settings characterized by increased surveillance, a lack of privacy, and greater vulnerabilities to coercion can garner this increasingly difficult. As Fine et al. (2003, p.178) conclude,

[...] we have learned that “equal participation” and responsibility does not mean the “same.” Instead, it means endless ongoing conversations, among us, with every decision always revisited, about who can take risks, who dares to speak, who must remain quiet, and what topics need never see the light of day.

Therefore, by engaging in this research, we continuously engaged in these often difficult conversations and confronted these types of questions in order to bolster and encourage honest reflection, transparency, and collaboration (Farrell et al., 2021; Minkler et al., 2003).

Another barrier that unfolded throughout the research process that necessitated increased attention and care related to the various stakeholders involved. PAR projects bring together a diverse range of groups and stakeholders, each with their own histories, experiences, expectations, and vested interests (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003; Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al., 2003). For example, in the current project, representation from the department of corrections, funding agencies, state leaders and policy-makers, community members, correctional staff, the incarcerated population, as well as ourselves, as the outside university research partners, played important roles within the research process. While having committed stakeholders and partners within this type of research venture serves as a strength in many ways (Huffman, 2017), which will be elaborated upon within later sections of this chapter, it also poses certain barriers.

PAR projects are initiated at a specific point in time, in which outside researchers enter into dynamic communities and/or conditions that possess unique histories, perspectives, and relationships that can shape interactions, and in turn, the way in which the research unfolds. For example, within the current project, the outside members of the research team were unaware of the levels of tension and/or distrust within the institution between various stakeholders (i.e., administration and correctional staff, incarcerated persons and staff, security, and non-security staff). Staffing shortages at the institution resulted in mandatory overtime being introduced, in which a person working an eight to four shift would be “frozen” and forced to stay and work the following four to 12 shift. This contributed to increased levels of stress among staff research committee (SRC) members. Moreover, it made scheduling research committee meetings increasingly difficult. In fact, many times, staff researchers were unable to be relieved from other work responsibilities and duties, forcing them to skip the research committee meetings. Staff was also hostile toward research in general. Again, understanding this requires knowledge of the history of the environment in which a study takes place. The Delaware Department of Correction experienced a riot in 2017 that resulted in the death of an officer. The follow-up investigation, labeled as “research” by correctional staff, led to policy changes the staff overwhelmingly

viewed unfavorably. Thus, when the outside research team began our fieldwork as part of the larger PRIN project, we faced suspicion from the staff. “The last time this happened, our jobs just got harder,” was one comment raised by a staff committee member that exemplified this overall sentiment.

Staff were also reluctant to open up at first due to the fear that sharing information about issues in the institution would lead to retaliation by leadership. As a result, it was common to have only four to five SRC members routinely attend meetings, leaving many voices unheard in the process. This issue illustrates not only limitations on empowered participation inherent within the context of prisons, but also the role of power differentials within this environment that shape interactions and participation in PAR projects (Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; Fine et al., 2003). In fact, existing scholarship has found that unequal power dynamics within the carceral system coupled with increased risks for retaliation, privacy concerns, and safety protocols can make empowered participation at times impossible (Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al., 2003).

The first task of the PRIN team was thus to gain trust and legitimacy. Much of this came from the simple passage of time (Huffman, 2017); staff were not being retaliated against for participating and sharing their perspectives in the SRC meetings. The team also benefited greatly from the “meetings before and after the meeting,” or what can be regarded as informal dialoguing that would occur before and after scheduled meeting times. This informal communication and networking allowed the staff, as well as the incarcerated population, to become more comfortable with the outsider university team. It should be emphasized, however, that we benefited greatly from starting this project before the pandemic, allowing us increased time to engage in these in-person activities and conversations prior to having to move online during the pandemic. Online meetings via virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams, and Skype) were unable to afford the research team the opportunity to engage in this style of informal communication that was found to be essential to the development of trust and legitimacy. It is unclear, however, whether the Delaware PRIN project would have developed in the way that it did if we had not been able to establish these face to face meetings prior to COVID-19.

Another important consideration that presented increased challenges for the research team involved the consideration of different perspectives in recognition of the varied influences weighing in on this project. Specifically, the research team needed to balance competing viewpoints and perspectives in developing question sets for the climate survey. While areas of concern and improvement were readily identified by both committees, prioritizing specific conditions, and question domains within the survey proved to be more difficult. With committee members possessing often unique and individualized experiences within the prison, personal stakes in the project could not be overlooked. This required increased care and attention to honor participant experiences while remaining aware of the project aims and restraints. For example, we collaboratively needed to set realistic expectations for ourselves through identifying shared short- and long-term goals. At times, this created tension surrounding what should be included on the climate survey as well as appropriate wording of questions, requiring increased time

and discussion to strategize agreed upon measures. Additionally, we needed to be mindful of the amount of questions due to concerns over survey taking fatigue, while also leaving enough space for a set of mandatory questions produced by the funding agency. Unfortunately, this led to the necessity of eliminating various questions constructed by the research committees, which again highlights the way in which multiple stakeholders with vested interests in the project can ultimately shape the research and subsequent outcomes (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003).

The aforementioned barriers associated with conducting PAR in the prison require researchers to devote increased time to foster trust, to build collaborative working relationships, and to develop innovative strategies to overcome these obstacles. This raises another common challenge to engaging in action research within any setting – funding and limited resources. PAR research is costly and oftentimes requires extended periods of time to produce desired changes within institutions that are not always feasible (Farrell et al., 2021; Minkler et al., 2003). Consequently, researchers and co-researchers must navigate encountered challenges in an expedited fashion in order to meet project deadlines, provide project deliverables, while being mindful of budgetary constraints. As such, it is imperative that researchers collaborate and partner with decision-makers within the prison while consistently communicating with funding agencies regarding project timelines (Huffman, 2017). As a result, the type of action research conducted will likely vary depending on institutional restrictions, stakeholder influence, and budgetary constraints (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017).

Facilitators

While barriers were encountered conducting action-oriented research within the prison, various strategies were implemented to overcome these challenges. These strategies in addition to procedural structures put into place at the initiation of the project proved to be influential facilitators overall in carrying out this type of work. In highlighting facilitators to conducting PAR in the prison, we demonstrate the importance of building rapport and trust with research partners, promoting collaboration and open communication throughout the research process, and relying upon technology and innovative resources to navigate safety regulations and restrictions.

As previously noted, traditional research has largely eroded trust in scientific research among marginalized communities (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne, 2017). In acknowledgment of this, we invested extended periods of time building relationships and trust with the research committees comprised of incarcerated persons and staff. From the beginning, we were transparent with each respective research committee about decision-making processes, stakeholder involvement, and project goals (Farrell et al., 2021). We also prioritized setting realistic expectations for project outcomes in recognition that change often takes time, leading research committees to delineate between short- and long-term goals. We inferentially built in “meeting before the meeting and meeting after the meeting” times by bringing food, either baked goods or lunch depending

on the time of day. This enabled all parties to talk informally before and after each meeting. Often members would share subjects or issues that would become formal meeting topics. For example, confusion related to grievance procedures and feedback spurred increased discussion over how to incorporate these ideas into climate surveys and research outcomes. The practice also allowed people to become familiar and open with one another, building essential trust and legitimacy, features that are vital to fostering meaningful research partnerships (Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; Fine & Torre, 2006; Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al., 2012; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013).

The legitimacy of outside research team members served as an influential factor contributing to building a partnership with co-researchers inside the prison walls. Specifically, members of the outside research team possessed first-hand experiences either working or being housed within correctional environments. Two members of the research team were formally incarcerated, one had been a correctional officer, and most had years if not decades of experience working in correctional environments. We understood the language, got the jokes, and thus were able to strengthen the team's legitimacy. These shared experiences fostered empathy, relatability, and mutual respect between research team members. Through investing time and energy into fostering these connections and crafting skill training opportunities (i.e., research methods workshop) for co-researchers inside the institution, the research team was able to collaboratively brainstorm and troubleshoot ongoing challenges related to the pandemic, data collection, and analysis, with the intent of proposing data-informed policy recommendations. These encountered strategies largely echo recommendations found in past scholarship (e.g., Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al., 2003). Specifically, transparency, reflection, and open communication are recognized as critical elements in power sharing and empowered participation (Farrell et al., 2021; Minkler et al., 2003).

Collaborative working relationships with the various stakeholders involved in the project also aided in facilitating meaningful connections. Established working partnerships between prison leadership and outside research members paved the way for open communication, information sharing, and the active inclusion of co-researchers inside the institution throughout the pandemic. In fact, prison leadership demonstrated support and commitment to the PAR framework, which was essential to navigating encountered hurdles associated with the pandemic, safety regulations, and prison restrictions. Another critical aspect that promoted effective collaborations and a commitment to the action principle of PAR (Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al., 2012) rested in the procedural structure built into the project. Specifically, a steering committee comprised of outside research team members and prison leadership was implemented in order to guide developments and to discuss the logistics of facilitating research committee meetings, initiatives, and information sharing. Additionally, an executive committee comprised of state legislators and policy-makers regularly met with researchers and co-researchers to discuss project developments, climate survey findings, and recommended innovations developed by the IRC and SRC. This structure provided a platform for empowered participation, while also leveraging research to promote change and prison transformation (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017).

Lastly, the use of technology and available resources provided researchers and co-researchers with greater opportunities for collaboration and information sharing. As the pandemic halted in-person research activities, the need to develop innovative strategies to maintain communication channels with co-researchers inside the institution was heightened, leading outside members of the research team to rely on virtual conferencing and the development of posters and additional visual aids to maintain interest in the project. In fact, monthly magazine subscriptions were delivered to each housing pod within the prison to continue engaging with incarcerated populations. Additionally, informational videos featuring SRC members from inside the institution were broadcasted on televisions within the prison to provide information about the climate survey to the broader staff prison population. Importantly, this promotional video was inspired by the ideas of staff committee members. Through actively engaging the staff and incarcerated research committee members in decision-making processes, we were able to create innovative strategies, like the informational video and magazine subscriptions, to generate interest in the project among the broader staff and incarcerated population.

Data visuals, in the form of graphs and maps, also facilitated information sharing. For example, executive committee members would join meetings virtually and representatives from the SRC and IRC would present data graphics to communicate key findings from climate surveys. Providing a platform for those most impacted by the conditions under study to communicate climate survey results and innovative solutions was critical to our PAR framework. In preparation for these meetings, we would work with members of the research team to discuss results, to work on their presentations, and to produce meaningful ways to communicate findings from the data. By investing time and energy into this essential component of the project, we were able to foster empowered participation and power sharing (Farrell et al., 2021), while pursuing and promoting action items and innovative solutions to ongoing issues within the prison. From these experiences, we recognized the importance of remaining flexible during times of uncertainty and change. Through partnering with our co-researchers inside the institution, we were able to draw upon available resources and innovative strategies to overcome obstacles to collaboration and information sharing. A failure to do so could jeopardize the guiding principles of PAR research: information and power sharing, empowered participation, and ultimately action (Farrell et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

PAR offers a unique lens through which to understand a researched environment. Providing an opportunity for impacted communities to have a voice in a structured way allows unheard voices and unseen perspectives to emerge (Cahill, 2004; Farrell et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003; Huffman, 2017; Payne, 2017), but it is not easy. One cannot simply walk into an institution and ask people to discuss their world without garnering trust and legitimacy (Huffman, 2017; Minkler et al.,

2012; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013). This requires time and effort (Drake, 2014; Farrell et al., 2021). Researchers represent their own community and possess their own perspectives and language that they bring to any situation (Fine et al., 2003). Doing PAR in the correctional world requires researchers to set that aside, to welcome different views, voices, and perspectives (Huffman, 2017). Thus, it is vital that researchers empower community members to share their perspectives, in recognition that they possess insider knowledge of the prison world that we, as researchers, do not possess (Fine et al., 2003, 2013; Park et al., 1993).

Accordingly, doing PAR work within the prison entails checking part of one's ego, including the assumption that "we're the experts," and allowing the process to flow and the resulting knowledge to emerge from meaningful collaborations (Farrell et al., 2021; Huffman, 2017). Ultimately, it is through these partnerships that innovative ideas and solutions are created that work in *this* world. It is important to note that the literature is saturated with failed academic ideas regarding criminal justice system improvements. Therefore, it is imperative that scientific researchers recognize that we do not hold a monopoly on knowledge, and certainly not on practice. Without this understanding firmly embedded in the team's philosophy, PAR projects can easily turn into the voice of the researcher dominating decision-making practices, and in turn, silencing the voices of those most impacted by the conditions under study through exclusionary practices (Farrell et al., 2021; Hatton & Fisher, 2011; Reiter, 2014).

While PAR projects employed within correctional settings are likely to encounter unexpected challenges and difficulties due to the nature of the prison context (Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; Huffman, 2017), as illustrated throughout the current project, researchers can benefit from engaging in various strategies to mitigate some of these issues. Specifically, we found that by investing time and energy into forging relationships built on respect and transparency with co-researchers as well as prison leadership, we were able to pave the way for more meaningful and collaborative partnerships. Not only did this help us to navigate and break down barriers accompanying this work (e.g., pandemic restrictions, eroded trust in scientific research, power dynamics, and stakeholder interests), but it also allowed for co-researchers inside the institution to play a central role in knowledge production, decision-making processes, and the construction of innovative solutions to ongoing problems within the prison environment. Accordingly, we echo the sentiments of past scholars engaging in action-oriented research within these restrictive realms, in that the PAR framework represents a powerful platform for promoting the inclusion of often marginalized voices to inform understandings and to catalyze social change (Cahill, 2004; Farrell et al., 2021; Fields et al., 2008; Fine et al., 2003; Huffman, 2017).

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