

A peer-reviewed open access journal indexed in NepJol; ISSN 2542-2596

Published by Molung Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal

Article History: Received on 6 December 2021; Accepted on 16 April 2022


DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v12i01.45941>

**Participatory Research: Working with Vulnerable Groups in  
Research and Practice Book: A Book Review**

Sanjeev Dahal

Boston College School of Social Work

**Author Note**

Sanjeev Dahal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5571-1043> is a Ph.D. Candidate in Social Work at Boston College, Massachusetts, USA. His work focuses on child protection, particularly juvenile justice. Dahal has worked with several non-government organizations, which have worked in community engagement, and taught in various social work colleges in Nepal.

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Sanjeev Dahal, Boston College School of Social Work. Email: [dahalsanjeev@gmail.com](mailto:dahalsanjeev@gmail.com).

Book title: Participatory Research: Working with Vulnerable Groups in Research and Practice Book

Author: Jo Aldridge

Year of Publication: 2015

Publisher: Policy Press, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ISBN: 9781447305644 Hardcover

Pages: vi, 192

Price: \$38.83 (e Textbook), \$47.68 (paperback), \$114.24 (Hardcover)

Participatory Research: Working with Vulnerable Groups in Research and Practice illuminates the link between participatory approaches and techniques and vulnerable sections of the society, particularly those “who are excluded from society or who are not necessarily connected to, or part of, a recognized organization, locality or community, and who might otherwise be overlooked in research studies that use conventional approaches (because the nature of their vulnerability or marginalization may make them hard to reach and recruit onto studies using conventional methods)” (p. 10). The vulnerable groups that the book chapters engage in are aligned with the author’s prominent research experiences. Aldridge directs the Young Carers Research Group, which is known for its pioneering work with young carers, and work with young carers forms the bulk of the second chapter. Aldridge also spent considerable time working with people with learning disabilities, which is covered in chapter three. Chapter four discusses working with women victims—survivors of domestic violence—an engagement embossed in Aldridge’s CV. Aldridge has reflected sensitivity by only dealing in areas where she has significant experiences; this adds to the author’s credibility. This credibility is augmented by the generous references she draws from other scholars with substantive experiences in using participatory research (PR) methods in their work with vulnerable groups.

The organization of the book, per se, is appealing. The introductory chapter establishes the meaning of participation, discusses the dynamism in vulnerability, and engages with the ‘voice’ of the participants within participatory research. The introduction builds a solid foundation for chapters two through four about working with relatively specific vulnerable groups. Chapter 5 embraces all the earlier chapters to discuss the careful considerations to be made in interpreting the data and representing and transforming the participants through participation in the research. Chapter six provides closure to all the earlier discussions and goes

a step further to flag areas of participatory research needing attention to improve its rigor as well as to push the science forward.

In the introductory chapter, Aldridge highlights that “Despite these advances in methods terms and the opportunities offered by PR, critical questions remained (and remain) about the nature and extent of participation in these new types of approaches and their relevance to research with vulnerable or marginalized populations.” (p. 9). Following up on this issue, she discusses a continuum of participation in the concluding chapter through a model of participation aimed at helping researchers better align their projects in relation to particular domain/s within the model itself; she does so while acknowledging the range of participation that researches might have and emphasizes the need to move away from tokenistic ‘participants as objects’ methods to emancipatory methods where participants are ‘subjects of research’ led by themselves. This sincere follow-through on questions raised in an earlier chapter is a notable strength of this book.

Aldridge’s model’s commitment to the principles and objectives of participatory research, rather than adherence to a strict set of rules to be followed, also impressed me. Commitment to the broader principles and objectives leaves ample space for methodological discussions and decisions among the research participants, including academics, practitioners, and people whose lived experiences contribute to the research –an important aspect of participatory research highlighted throughout the book. The model is also helpful in distinguishing true participatory research from those who merely claim to be participatory by providing a framework to present the ways in which it is participatory clearly. The inter-weaving of the chapters that I pointed out earlier as the book’s strength is also reflected in this model’s discussion. The model presented in chapter six integrates the studies described in chapters two through four; this allows deeper engagements with the model in light of known studies.

Although a chronological following of the book chapters provides a natural flow to the reader, each of the chapters can be read independently – another beauty of the book. Furthermore, except for chapter 5, which has to be read after chapter 4 (because it contains the interpretation of Rosie’s narrative letter from chapter 4), all other chapters can be read in any order. This proves helpful to readers who want to jump into any particular chapter that draws their interest. Despite having a defined focus, each chapter provides ample discussions on participatory research with marginalized/vulnerable groups in general, and thus the careful reading of each of the book chapters is helpful in working with a wide range of vulnerable groups. The book's thesis is that research participants who agree to share their lived experiences need to be engaged in most, if not all, stages of research as long as they feel comfortable and are willing to. This allows both the participants and the data to speak for themselves to some extent and offers insights into their subjective experiences. There is a lot of repetition of information on participatory methods, how to ensure their effectiveness, and how to live up to its ideals, thus making this book an invaluable resource, particularly for new researchers who plan to take up participatory research.

I thoroughly enjoyed the book and have only minor suggestions for improvement. A thick description of the methodologies used in the research cited in the chapters would provide concrete opportunities for the learners to draw from. The chapters reflect the author’s deep engagement in PR with vulnerable groups (particularly chapters 2-4) and would benefit from the inclusion of more examples from their research. For example, I loved the fourth chapter on participatory research with women victims-survivors of domestic violence, the narrative account of one of the participants, Rosie, and an additional discussion on its interpretation in chapter 5. In one breath, I read Rosie’s unedited letter to her former abuser [written as part of the research]. Rosie’s letter—a vivid account of her experiences presenting a clear picture of what she had gone through—is a

wonderful example of the impact participatory research can have on the participants. In Rosie's own words, "I'm writing this letter to you as a form of closure on the seven years I spent with you." Moreover, this closure of an abusive relationship is a notable outcome of the research engagement. Although the letter does not preclude the researcher's engagement with Rosie, I believe they would have spent considerable time with Rosie for her to feel comfortable opening to such an extent. Apart from briefly arguing that building relations is intuitive, requires insight and empathy, and is difficult to formulate, the book does not discuss the processes that the author engaged in building relations with the research participants to facilitate the intended research; this is a limitation of the book.

Additionally, I feel this book on PR is at a loss for not paying enough attention to Participatory Action Research. A discussion on emancipatory and action research examples would be a great addition to the book. A minor limitation of the book is the presence of typos in a few places, e.g., the words "they saw glimpses" on page 112 are quoted as "the saw glimpses" on page 129. Since it is the book's first edition, these errors can be undone in the next editions.

Throughout the book, the author is conscious of reminding the readers about taking a step back in research relationships and prioritizing the voices of the research participants over the researcher's perspectives, reiterating the book's thesis. The bulk of literature on PR discusses the researcher's perspective, whereas this book presents the participant's perspective of PR. I feel such a presentation is unique and clearly aligned with the essence of PR. Along the same lines, the author emphasizes reflexivity in PR with a heightened focus on providing research participants with opportunities for reflection and opening up avenues for them to reframe, rephrase, and revise what they want to share through the research rather than the academic researcher's reflexivity. The essence of the relationship between the researcher and the participants in PR is captured by these

statements from the author “...it also demands recognition of the point at which authorial, analytical and reflexive expertise and precedence must be conceded to others who are the research participants, and whose voices must be prioritized, especially if participants’ lives and experiences – and data – are to be more faithfully presented rather than re-presented.” (p. 139). Additionally, the author flags that participatory research should incorporate the reflection of the participants on the methods used, including how they felt using the method and how well they felt their lived experiences were captured through the method—an often-overlooked aspect of PR.

In conclusion, I contend that this book is a good resource for researchers planning to use participatory research methods in general and with vulnerable groups in particular but are new to them. Much repetition of the ideas is mainly related to the essence, purpose, and characteristics of participatory research. The book deeply discusses participatory methods and helps the readers engage with their essence in each chapter. The repetition of information helps the readers to build clarity on the topic rather than give a feeling of redundancy. I believe this book will help inculcate the values of participatory research in its readers, and I firmly believe integrating these values into a researcher is non-negotiable eligibility for undertaking participatory research.