What techniques and tools can facilitate meaningful participation in participatory action research?

The case of OpenEmbassy

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Abstract

This thesis responds to the challenges of meaningful participation in Participatory Action Research (PAR), a critical issue that existing literature highlights. Scholars emphasize that meaningful participation depends on the ability of participatory action researchers to critically reflect on power and positionality, and to incorporate diverse forms of knowledge. Through a case study of OpenEmbassy, an organization that conducts PAR with marginalized communities, I explore practical tools and techniques that support meaningful participation in alignment with the priorities identified with the literature. My research is in the form of engaged fieldwork, participant observations, and interviews, and it identifies key tools and techniques that OpenEmbassy researchers use, alongside their reflections. The findings are presented in the form of a guidebook that bridges the gap between theory and practice, showing what techniques and tools can facilitate meaningful participation across different PAR methods. This thesis provides an accessible resource for practitioners that connects theory to actionable tools, and a comprehensive contribution to the ongoing development of ensuring meaningful participation in PAR.

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Chapter 1:
Introduction

Power produces structural and relational inequalities, both within society as a whole and within academic research[1]. When individuals and communities are marginalized, society puts them in precarious positions and exposes them to a great deal of harm. Oppressive structures self-reproduce and survive through silencing and dismissing marginalized perspectives[2]. This applies to the political process, where marginalized groups are less represented and thus limited in how much they can influence policy to meet their needs and improve their lives[3]. It also applies to scientific research, where dominant perspectives shape what is researched, what knowledge is accepted as valid,[4] and how people are represented within research. Even when research focuses on the needs of marginalized people, it often perpetuates inequalities and extracts knowledge without helping the subjects of the research[5].

Participatory action research (PAR) has emerged as an approach to challenge these inequalities and enable marginalized people to take more ownership and agency within academic research, with implications for also transforming policy. It is an approach that aims to strengthen and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. PAR has two key characteristics. Firstly, it cultivates knowledge in a *participatory* way, by involving participants as active collaborators within the research, rather than extracting data from them. Secondly, PAR combines knowledge with taking *action* to change the systems being researched[6]. It is an approach that places the voices of the marginalized at its core, giving them opportunities to advocate for themselves and influence knowledge and policy alike, depending on the research's goals.

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[1] Lynch, Richard A. 2014. "Foucault's theory of power." In *Michel Foucault*, pp. 13-26. Routledge.

[2] van der Ree. n.d. "What is it like to inhabit social structures? The psychology of power." *Unpublished – Work in Progress by a scholar at Utrecht University*.

[3] Schierup, C., Alund, A. and Likić-Brborić, B. 2014. "Migration, Precarization and the Democratic Deficit in Global Governance," *International Migration* 53, no. 3: 50–63.

[4] Harding. 2021. "Feminist Methodologies." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, edited by Catherine Cassell, Ann L Cunliffe, and Gina Grandy, 1:138–53. SAGE.

[5] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J.. 2021. "Introduction to the handbook: Navigating the complex and dynamic landscape of participatory research and Inquiry." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:3–16. SAGE Publications Inc.

[6] Ospina, and Anderson. 2014. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*. Edited by David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller. Vol. 18–21. SAGE.

However, no research approach is immune to the epistemological and methodological issues created by power imbalances, which affect people also on a subconscious level[7]. One challenge that PAR literature grapples with is how to ensure that PAR methods provide meaningful participation, which is necessary for the objectives of PAR. The leading perspectives within the field argue that PAR needs to include conscious reflection on positionality and power, and different forms of knowledge, such as embodiment and emotions. Specific PAR methods are criticized or supported based on the extent to which they succeed in this, but overall there is a gap in assessing practical techniques to achieve meaningful participation. This is why this thesis asks the research question “What techniques and tools can facilitate meaningful participation in participatory action research?”.

Research focus

My research conducts a case study of the PAR conducted by OpenEmbassy – an organization which provides support for the integration of newcomers in the Netherlands and advocates for better integration policies. OpenEmbassy has a decade of experience in conducting PAR, and it has reached 25% of Dutch municipalities (including the 4 biggest ones). It works together with the central government and various other stakeholders, helping thousands in their integration process and using knowledge to advocate for systematic change[8]. In studying OpenEmbassy’s work, my research identifies how the priorities identified within PAR literature and theory can be realized through practice. I present my findings in the form of a guidebook that makes specific techniques and tools accessible for practitioners within the field, regardless of the exact PAR method they work with. It is important to note that each research stage has unique needs and elements that also require different techniques. OpenEmbassy’s PAR is focused within the data collection stage, so this is also the stage within which my research focuses, specifically by analyzing how PAR meetings are hosted by action researchers. This provides a good groundwork to examine the practice of facilitating meaningful participation, as the data collection stage is where the interaction between researchers and participants is most salient[9], and where power

[7] van der Ree (n.d.)
[8] Open Embassy. “About Us - Open Embassy,” February 6, 2024. https://www.openembassy.nl/en/about-us-2/.
[9] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021)

imbalances and other obstructions to meaningful participation can be observed and addressed most directly[10].

The research design is heavily influenced by principles identified within PAR literature. The main research question "What techniques and tools can facilitate meaningful participation in participatory action research?" relates one of the key challenges PAR scholars identify to the practice of resolving this challenge. To answer this question, this thesis looks at theory to understand how power imbalances limit meaningful participation. Then it turns back to the case study to identify what techniques and tools help hosts recognize that participants are unable to participate fully, and what techniques and tools can help participants feel safe enough to participate meaningfully.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The literature review section of this thesis will provide a review of PAR literature and the main challenges that PAR methods need to address. PAR scholars argue that PAR methods need to include reflections on power and positionality, and feminist epistemologies. Based on these needs, I will use several theories. Firstly, I focus on power as a relational concept, through including the theory psychology of power, which provides a framework to understand how power shapes people and their relations with each other[11]. Secondly, I will include theoretical approaches to holding space for emotions and embodiment as a way to bring in alternative forms of knowledge in the research process. Furthermore, I will look at how emotions and embodiment are an integral part of removing obstacles to meaningful participation which are created by power imbalances.

Methodological approach

My research design is guided by a critical interpretative paradigm, and by a feminist epistemology, which challenges traditional academic approaches with the objective of undermining the reproduction of power and dominance that often comes with traditional

[10] Pettit. 2020. "Power Analysis for Social Change: Participatory Learning and Action." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:276–90. SAGE Publications Inc.
[11] van der Ree (n.d.)

scholarship[12]. It centers a participatory approach to research, which is reflected in the engaged fieldwork I conducted and the way I structured it. My specific methods were a combination of participant observations and interviews.

In both data collection and analysis, special emphasis is placed on the body. Embodied methodology is a part of feminist epistemology, which argues for bringing in that which is usually excluded from research (in this case the body). Additionally, embodied methodology also provides a way to study how powerlessness and empowerment impact the body and are thus revealed by paying attention to the body[13].

Objectives

Answering my research question has several objectives. Its primary purpose is societal impact and social change. By answering it, this thesis will seek to provide a practical guide for researchers in working with marginalized communities. This will also fill an existing knowledge gap within the current literature on PAR, which is in establishing tools and techniques that can work across different PAR methods to facilitate meaningful participation. Finally, this thesis seeks to enhance organizational practices by transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to aid an organization within their social impact work, and providing a practical resource for other organizations.

[12] Harding (2021)
[13] Lynch (2014)

Chapter 2:
Literature Review

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is

PAR is a broad field with multiple different methodologies and specific approaches. What they hold in common is the shared values and objectives listed above, but they differ greatly in application. PAR methodologies also continue to develop and seek ways to improve their participatory character, mainly focusing on three specific challenges. These challenges are how to ensure meaningful inclusion, how to scale without diluting the participatory process, and how to ensure transformative, sustainable change[14]. Each of these challenges can be the focus of its own study, but for this paper I will focus on the first. This is because it is the most prominent challenge in PAR literature, and successfully solving it is a pre-requisite to addressing the other two challenges – meaningful inclusion has to be achieved in the inherent PAR process, otherwise neither its scaling, nor the change it produces will meet its core objectives. The challenge of meaningful inclusion specifically relates to addressing power imbalances and integrating different types of knowledge as valid. It is most visible within the interactions between researchers and participants: not just which participants are invited to the table, but also how are they able to participate, and how the researchers can facilitate this participation or exacerbate obstacles to it[15].

Problematized assumptions

PAR literature problematizes several core assumptions that are widespread in much of the methodology, in regard to meaningful inclusion. Firstly, that PAR processes are inherently democratic by virtue of their participatory character[16]. Secondly, that participation itself is inherently good[17]. And finally, that once a process is made participatory, participants will

[14] Burns, D., Howard, J., and Ospina, S. (2021)
[15] Burns, D., Howard, J., and Ospina, S. (2021)
[16] Pettit (2020)
[17] Pettit (2020); / Roberts, 2020. “Section Introduction: Digital Affordances in Participatory Research Methods.””In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:276–90. SAGE Publications Inc.

experience increased control over all of its stages[18]. Taking these assumptions for granted, PAR methods can be well-meaning but often reproduce power inequalities and hurt the communities they aim to help.

Arnstein and Fung' contributions to PAR literature expand the definition of what participation is and where it is present. Arnstein provides the framework ladder of participation, which shows the different levels of participation possible within political and research processes[19]. Starting from the bottom of the ladder, there are several levels of non-participation and tokenism. In them, researchers extract information from participants who lack agency and power. While in non-participation this is clear, in tokenism there is a false pretense. The extractivism is obscured as the process claims to provide participants with agency, without actually doing so. Finally, at the top of the ladder, there are levels that provide citizens with genuine power and meaningful participation, from shared partnership to complete re-distribution of power and control over the knowledge and meaning-making process[20]. Fung's democracy cube expands this framework by arguing that there are also different stages of participation, as the degree of participation might vary between different stages of the research[21] and/or policy-design cycle[22]. Finally, Fung's cube also shows that identity plays a role in participation, and that "different participants are included or excluded at different stages of the research process, and different participants have different levels of control over the research process at different stages"[23].

Cooke and Kothari argue that power is embedded in the structure of participatory approaches, which makes them liable to reinforcing existing power inequalities and oppression[24]. They identify several challenges to meaningful participation, from how research is designed and which community members are invited, to whose voices are heard. Even when marginalized groups are formally included in participatory processes, they are still systematically excluded or silenced by informal hierarchies, constrains by external actors, and intentional co-option of participatory methods. Especially when people challenge dominant power structures, their true opinions may be watered down, misrepresented, or

18 Roberts (2020)
19 Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A ladder of citizen participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4): 216–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225.
20 Arnstein (1969)
21 Roberts (2020)
22 Fung, A. 2006. "Varieties of participation in complex governance." *Public Administration Review* 66 (s1): 66–75. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00667.x.
23 Roberts (2020); p.485
24 Cooke, B., and Kothari, U. 2001. *Participation: The New Tyranny?* Zed Books.

ignored by those with more power than them[25]. Ospina et al. argue that the language of progressive changes is often co-opted by those who hold power and seek to maintain it, and that the language of participation is equally vulnerable to this co-option[26]. This can turn participatory processes into a way to reinforce power imbalances, coerce support from marginalized people for policies against their interests, and a way to dilute and disempower resistance by integrating into formal structures[27]. Both Cooke and Kothari, and Ospina et al., urge for researchers to critically reflect on their positionality and how power operates within participatory processes, intentionally clarify criteria that make participation meaningful, and regularly question if their research is perpetuating power imbalances and reinforcing existing inequalities[28]. Ospina et al. suggest the following criteria of meaningful participation and validity of PAR: research that addresses power imbalances; establishing a relationship of collaboration, trust and mutual respect between a researcher and the participants, co-creating knowledge that participants agree is important and useful, and creating space for participants to grow their confidence and agency[29].

Finally, originating from a de-colonial criticism against epistemic dominance, much of Latin American scholarship heavily problematizes what knowledge is accepted within research in general, including PAR[30]. Epistemic dominance is the assumption that there is only one correct epistemology and way of knowing, namely Western rationalism, which is enforced over other types of knowledge. This criticism argues that knowledge and power are interconnected, and that epistemic dominance can reinforce power imbalances[31]. Gaventa and Cornwall argue that PAR needs to recognize that there are different ways of knowing, and that knowledge can be generated in a range of ways – not just through cognition, but also through feeling, telling, or artistic performance[32].

The core of these criticisms, and how PAR literature suggests overcoming it, stems from the integration of feminist methodologies with the PAR field. Feminist scholars and

[25] Cooke and Kothari (2001)
[26] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021)
[27] Cooke and Kothari (2001)
[28] Cooke and Kothari (2001)
[29] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021)
[30] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021); / Macedo. 2021. "Feeling-Body-Thinking Approach and Methodologies: Towards Transformation in Intercultural Justice." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:393–411. SAGE Publications Inc.
[31] Macedo (2021)
[32] Gaventa, J., and Cornwall, A. 2015. "Power and knowledge." *The SAGE handbook of action research* 3: 465-471.

activists heavily stress the need of reflexivity regarding positionality and power, and the need to challenging traditional epistemology by, for example, making space for embodied experiences, emotions and authenticity[33]. Although scholars within the field widely accept the value of PAR methodologies in striving for transformative change, they stress that, regardless of form, each PAR process must be cautious of the above challenges to meaningful participation.

Literature gap

Current PAR literature takes two different types of approaches to discussing meaningful participation. The first approach is critical literature like the texts discussed above, which identify key principles that PAR needs to deliver. The second approach are individual and comparative case studies on very specific PAR methods, and evaluating the extent to which they deliver these principles. What can help further the field is establishing a practice-oriented resource for participatory action researchers. Through connecting principles and theoretical approaches with specific tools that transcend individual methods, the field as a whole can gain a better capacity in facilitating PAR.

To fill this gap, this thesis studies specific tools and techniques used by participatory action researchers to foster meaningful participation within the data collection stage. It then presents the findings in the form of a guidebook – a learning resource that can help practitioners start or improve their hosting of participatory data collection.

Finally, there are specific theoretical approaches to satisfying the criticisms posed above. I will briefly outline these theoretical approaches in the next sub-section, but the main explanations of these theories are also placed within the guidebook. This is because teaching tools and techniques cannot be divorced from the theoretical reasoning to use them. Readers of the guidebook also need to see the theory to make sense of the findings and to understand why these tools are so important. During interviews for this thesis, the practitioners I interviewed reflected on the reasoning behind the way they do research, and, although not always explicitly using terminology or citing theories, much of their reasoning expressed similar values and goals as the criticisms within PAR aim to achieve.

[33] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner. 2021. “Holding Space for Emotions in Participatory Action Research: Reflections from the Experiences of a Youth Organisation exploring PAR through Creative Practices.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:263–75. SAGE Publications Inc.

Understanding power and positionality

Pettit, another PAR scholar, argues that participation is only meaningful and ethical when researchers acknowledge their own positionality, power and biases, and when they respect the knowledge and framings of those the analysis is meant to benefit[34]. He cautions that people can easily focus on power 'out there' and dismiss its role in their own lives, especially when they exercise it[35]. This is why it was necessary to include a theoretical approach to guide practitioners in reflecting on power and to interpret the findings through a focus on how they overcome or perpetuate power imbalances.

Power itself is a highly contested concept with various definitions. The main approaches can be divided in two – formal and informal power. Formal power is a resource, an active choice to exercise agency[36]. Dahl, a prominent scholar on formal power, defines it as the coercive ability to force someone to do something[37]. On the other hand, informal power, as argued by Foucault, is omnipresent and permeates all levels of society[38]. It is not centralized in institutions or resources held by individuals and groups. It takes shape in the form of socialized norms and beliefs, and it is embedded in values, norms and belief systems[39]. Power is not just something a person can possess and choose to use – it is relational, and it shapes the way individuals view themselves, each other, and the world[40].

Formal power offers a more direct path to empowerment of marginalized groups – power is seen as a resource, akin to capital, which can be redistributed in a fairer and more equal manner. However, when informal power is present, empowerment can only be achieved through identifying, revealing and deconstructing every way in which it shapes the subconscious[41]. Conceptualizing power in its informal dimension reveals why marginalization continues even when institutions and other formal systems become more equal[42]. For example, giving women equal rights has not removed misogyny as a form of oppression – not because institutions enforce a patriarchal society, but because specific ways

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34 Pettit (2020)
35 Pettit (2020)
36 Pettit (2020)
37 Lukes, S. "Robert Dahl on power." In *Robert A. Dahl: an unended quest*, pp. 115-125. Routledge, 2017.
38 Lynch (2014)
39 Lynch (2014)
40 van der Ree (n.d.)
41 van der Ree (n.d.)
42 van der Ree (n.d.)

of thinking are still embedded within social structures. Pettit argues that PAR methods easily incorporate mechanisms to address formal power, as it is more visible and easier to correct[43]. The real challenge in facilitating meaningful participation is to engage with informal power, which is invisible and embedded in our social norms[44].

For this reason, this thesis focuses on informal power. The exact theoretical approach to reflecting on power is through van der Ree's theory on psychology of power[45]. This theory originates from Foucault's definition of power as relational and omnipresent. Its starting point is standpoint theory – the idea that marginalized groups view social relations from a different standpoint because of how their marginalization has shaped their lived experiences[46]. Originating from feminist scholarship, standpoint theory argues that people's experiences of oppression or privilege shape their understanding of the world, and that the perspectives of marginalized groups are often hidden or ignored by dominant groups[47]. Psychology of power furthers this approach by analyzing how power shapes people in a psychological way[48]. It provides pathways to understanding what it is for people to inhibit positions of marginality and of dominance. It addresses the fact that marginalized people face a higher price for speaking up and being authentic[49] - which directly inhibits meaningful participation. It also identifies how inhibiting positions of dominance produces fragility – a limited capacity to hear marginalized perspectives that people must consciously challenge in themselves[50]. I chose this theory because it provides an accessible entry for practitioners to reflect on their positionality and understand how power imbalances directly impact marginalized people's sense of safety and perceived risks associated with participation. It also offers multiple entry points for challenging informal power structures and mechanisms for people inhibiting a dominant position to overcome their fragility and improve their allyship.

Feminist epistemology – embodiment and emotions

Feminist epistemology forms the core within PAR literature of identifying what is needed for meaningful participation. Its main principles are a focus on the subjective and

[43] Pettit (2020)
[44] Pettit (2020)
[45] van der Ree (n.d.)
[46] Harding (2021)
[47] Harding (2021)
[48] van der Ree (n.d.)
[49] van der Ree (n.d.)
[50] van der Ree (n.d.)

personal, a reflexive approach to the researcher's own positionality and the ethical impact of their research[51]. According to this epistemology, the main objective of research should be to empower and bring about change. Another important part of feminist epistemology is the criticism that language is shaped by and used to support dominant groups[52]. Thus, marginalized groups have to use language which does not encompass their experience. Consequently, feminist research pays special attention to what is not said, and what is expressed in ways other than words[53]. Two ways of doing this are through involving embodiment and emotions in research.

Embodied research is a holistic approach to studying people, because it begins from the perspective that people are not separate from their context[54]. Anthropological studies show that cultures "restructure persons at the level of the body", and that oppression and socialization can both be observed by the imprints they leave within a person's posture, muscle tension, and other expressions of body language[55]. Feminist scholars within PAR argue that the body holds knowledge which the mind might be unaware of[56]. Pettit argues that experiences are first processed through the body, while the analytical mind sometimes lacks the capacity to consciously understand them[57]. According to Foucault, power also has an embodied dimension, as institutions and norms shape bodies and people internalize behaviors and attitudes expected of them[58]. Augusto Boal, who developed the PAR method Theater of the Oppressed, centered his work on the physical embodiment of oppression and how resistance and liberation can be achieved through a body-focused approach[59]. He argues that memories of social experiences are subconsciously physically expressed through defensive bodily postures and restricted patterns of movement and gestures. By paying attention to the body within PAR, internalized oppression and past negative experiences can be externalized and challenged in various ways[60].

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51 Harding (2021)
52 Harding (2021)
53 Harding (2021)
54 Michel. 2021. "Researching Bodies: Embodied Fieldwork for Knowledge Work, Which Turns Out to Be Embodied." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, edited by Catherine Cassell, Ann L Cunliffe, and Gina Grandy, 1:253–69. SAGE.
55 Michel (2021); p. 255
56 Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
57 Pettit, J. 2013. "Power Analysis: A Practical Guide". Stocholm: Sida
58 Lynch (2014)
59 Boal, Augusto. 2000. *Theater of the Oppressed*. Pluto Press.
60 Boal (2000)

Feminist epistemology also argues for the inclusion of emotions in research. Allan and Arber argue that traditional research dismisses and overlook emotions, but they still influence both researchers and participants, and shape the research process and outcomes[61]. Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner criticize the traditional false dichotomy between emotion and reason, arguing that being attentive to emotions and authentic connections within research allows for resilience and empowerment to emerge, and for traditional power structures to be challenged[62]. They also argue that social structures sanction and encourage different types of emotional responses, which is often internalized in what emotions people allow themselves to feel.

These core ideas from feminist epistemology appear within the guidebook, but the specific theory that is most present is Aabye et al's approach to building brave spaces[63]. This theory argues that power dynamics infuse every space, so it is impossible to establish a completely safe space. Instead, they propose brave spaces, where the focus is on building trust, showing that anything present is allowed to emerge, and welcoming emotions, tension, and all forms of self-expression[64]. Through this theory, PAR hosts can become more informed about emotional reflexivity, holding space for emotions, and even allowing space for embodiment.

Hosting

One approach to PAR is the art of hosting framework, which is heavily intertwined with practice. Sandfort and Sarode define hosting as intentionally "bringing people together to engage in dialogue and discussion around issues that really matter to them" and holding space for the co-creation of new understanding and knowledge[65]. They argue that art of hosting methods are part of PAR and that they promote deep participation and reflection by way of dialogue. The specific art of hosting methods present within the guidebook are based on Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering*, which focuses on facilitating meaningful gatherings

[61] Allan, H., and Arber, A. 2017. *Emotions and Reflexivity in Health & Social Care field research*. Springer.
[62] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[63] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[64] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[65] Sandfort, and Sarode. 2021. "Art of Hosting Frameworks & Methods as Participatory Research." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:412–26. SAGE Publications Inc.; p. 416

within a broad context[66]. It is a practical guide based on professional experience, case studies, and observations, drawing insights from conflict resolution and group facilitation. The reason to include this specific approach to hosting is that the main principle within *The Art of Gathering* – defining a clear purpose for gathering – is embedded within OpenEmbassy's work and approach to hosting.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Epistemology and research strategy

My research design is guided by a critical interpretative paradigm[67]. This is necessary due to the focus on power as a relational concept, where individual experiences, interactions and interpretations produce different meaning and understanding. Secondly, my research is centered on amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. This paradigm takes a concrete shape through a feminist epistemology[68]. It is an epistemology that begins from the criticism that the traditional academic approach, which elevates rationality, objectivity, and distance as the crucial pillars of research, originates from typically male stereotypes. According to this view, the traditional researcher operates in a hierarchical, detached way, and thus takes on a position of power and authority, which further reproduces extractive dynamics of power and dominance. This is also reflected in traditional academic standards around the focus of research and academic language. Feminist epistemology problematizes the existing separation between the public sphere, where traditional 'objective' research focuses, and the private sphere, which is ordinarily considered a subjective matter. It also argues against the usage of language which is inaccessible and disembodied. The main feminist epistemological principles are a focus on the subjective and personal, a reflexive approach to the researcher's own positionality and the ethical impact of their research. According to this epistemology, the main objective of research should be to empower and bring about change. Other ways in

[66] Parker. 2018. *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. Penguin Books.
[67] Ennis, C. and Armour, K. 2017. *Routledge Handbook of Physical Education Pedagogies.*
[68] Harding (2021)

which feminist epistemology is present within my research are discussed within the literature review itself, namely the focus on emotions and embodiment.

Participatory approach[69]

Feminist epistemology argues for conducting research in a participatory way. A core assumption in this epistemological approach is that the voices of research participants should be listened to, and their experiences should be incorporated into every stage of the process. Consequently, I decided to conduct my engaged fieldwork with intentional participatory design. Primarily, this was because I wanted to challenge the traditional researcher-participant hierarchy, and PAR offers the best approach to achieve this and disrupt the unequal power dynamic and share ownership over the research with my participants. Additionally, I was inspired by the organization I was working with, and as their PAR became my focus, it felt important to ground my findings by getting personal experience with PAR.

My participatory approach extended throughout the full research design process, mainly through member checks. The initial research focus and question were developed from consideration of the needs and interests expressed by OpenEmbassy members. Several team members expressed that they felt OpenEmbassy needed to make its methodology more explicit and transferrable, and that they were interested to further develop their hosting practices of PAR. This idea resonated with me, but I only finalized it after checking it with the team. Prior to beginning data collection and analysis, I also shared my research proposal and incorporated feedback they gave me on it. Within data collection, I conducted participant observations and interviews. When I faced new ideas or challenges in the research process, I did member checks to see how to proceed in agreement with the organization. I also did member checks throughout the data analysis stage, and shared preliminary research results on a regular basis, usually during a bi-weekly team check-in. This was all with an intention to increase transparency and give my participants control over the research process, thus sharing the decision-making process. My main priority in how I approached my thesis (and my fieldwork for OpenEmbassy) was to avoid extractivism, and instead work the participants in my research, and produce knowledge that could serve their needs and further their social impact. This is also what guided the main objective of my thesis – that of social impact – as I

[69] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021)

focused on going beyond knowledge production, and instead in making sure that my research will benefit my participants and their work.

Distinction between participants

As I conducted a participatory research design, an important distinction needs to be made between the participants of my research, and the participants of OpenEmbassy's PAR. While conducting my fieldwork, it became clear that it was not feasible to involve OpenEmbassy's own participants in my research beyond observing them in the participant observations. When attempting to interview OE's participants, a key obstacle emerged – while hosting sessions, OE members were building trust with their participants that was allowing participants to open up and be vulnerable. However, as a participant observer, I had removed myself from that trust-building process, so the insights their participants shared with me were limited and less personal than information they were sharing with OE members. After careful consideration, and consulting OE members, we came to an agreement that it was not feasible to extend my participatory design to their own research participants or conduct interviews with valid findings, due to a lack of time and opportunities to build trust with them.

Data collection

Participant observations

I conducted 13 participant observations of OpenEmbassy researchers hosting different meetings, primarily PAR ones. These observations followed several projects of hosting people from marginalized communities, with a different degree of participatory design. The main sample were observations from two "experts pool" projects where OpenEmbassy brings together participants from communities of newcomers to Dutch society. The participants are positioned as the experts on their own experiences and challenges, and are asked for insights about what their communities experience and what solutions could help them. These insights are then used in design sessions with municipalities. I also observed other meetings with newcomers hosted by OpenEmbassy, which provided further insights regarding their hosting practices and how they relate with their participants and build trust. Those came from three different projects. The first is the KOLO community project, in which OpenEmbassy has built and continues to support a community for Ukrainians in the Netherlands, where people can find mutual support in various topics, from economic opportunities to talking about mental health. The second project is the Welcome Meetings project, which also provides community-building and mutual support for newcomers of different cultures who have just arrived in Amsterdam, and the third is the MAP project, which supports newcomer integration in the Dutch labour market. All three projects are grounded in prior PAR research that OpenEmbassy conducted, and currently focus on using those findings to support newcomers and help them in overcoming specific challenges identified within the research. The projects also continue to be a source of insights about the needs and challenges of newcomers in the Netherlands, as people come together in spaces where they can share the issues they struggle with and seek help from others.

During the observations, I focused on how the host(s) approached the act of hosting through what they say and how they say it, and how participants experienced being hosted, how they responded to different hosting techniques, and what changes their responses provoked in the host(s)' approach on the spot. The observations also included an embodied dimension, through focusing on non-verbal communication. Furthermore, experiences of safety and bonding with others (two integral aspects of hosting) are primarily felt on an emotional and physical level. An embodied focus allows for drawing direct insights about these experiences, as opposed to verbal communication, which can lead to rationalizing and obscuring what people sense.

In terms of my own role as a researcher, I positioned myself as a moderate participant, by maintaining a balance between my role as an insider and my role as an outsider. My position within OpenEmbassy through the engaged fieldwork already fostered an easy integration as an active participant (full member of the group). Both roles provided ample opportunity to build rapport and gain deeper insights, although inhibiting a role that is partially outsider can also create limitations, such as the ones addressed above.

Interviews

First, I conducted two group interviews with OE members to get an initial understanding of how different team members define hosting and various other aspects of their work, and to see their perspectives on skills that are important for hosting, the relationships they build with participants, challenges they face, and things they would like to learn further. The insights from these interviews provided focus for the data analysis of participant observations, and highlighted key points of attention.

As a follow-up to the participant observations, I also conducted 9 interviews hosts of the meetings I observed. The questions for those interviews were designed based on the insights from the participant observations, and they aimed at specifically focusing on provoking reflexivity and verbalization of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge refers to implicit skills, experience, and insights of individuals, and it is difficult to articulate or write down, as people often experience it as intuitive knowledge built through experience[70]. Making tacit knowledge explicit happens through articulation within dialogue and collective reflection, largely through metaphors and storytelling[71]. This was also part of the design behind questions asked in interviews, as I prompted interviewees to share stories and reflect on *why* they do specific things.

I also conducted another 3 interviews – one with the founder and director of OpenEmbassy, and two with past members of the organization – with an action researcher, and with one of OpenEmbassy's previous co-directors. The insights of past members, whose hosting skillset is spoken of highly by current members, helps retain knowledge within the organization. It also adds a different layer of reflection, as past members can evaluate their experiences with an added distance of time and experience in other organizations, which deepens their reflections by contrasting them with other perspectives and ways of doing things. Interviewing the founder and a past director provided insights into the history and values of the organization, revealing the roots underlying current approaches, and why choices were made to have these approaches, further contributing to making OpenEmbassy's tacit knowledge explicit.

Finally, after consultation and agreement with OpenEmbassy members, I also interviewed an external expert – a teacher from Utrecht University – who specializes in power and positionality, and their role in hosting. The insights from interviewing them contributed to my understanding of these phenomena, allowing me to deepen my analysis of OpenEmbassy's hosting practices and identifying possible ways to improve them.

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[70] Schön, D. 2017.*The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Routledge.
[71] Hugo-Burrows, M. 2002. "Converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge in organisations: a communication challenge." *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa* 21, no. 1: 61-81.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted alongside participant observations and interviews, in an iterative process that allowed for deepening the research focus during the data collection stage. I took on an inductive approach, through which I analyzed what emerged from the data and how it relates to theory, as opposed to testing a specific theory with a deductive approach[72]. Theory was used as a starting point, but diverse possible explanations were analyzed to find the best way to understand the phenomenon, before recontextualizing it within literature. Finally, I relied on coding to conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach that focuses on the meaning across a data set, allowing for patterns of collective or shared meanings and experiences to emerge[73]. When thematic analysis is done with a predominantly inductive approach, codes and themes are derived from the content of the data. Inductive thematic analysis operates with the assumption that the world is knowable and prioritizing data-based meaning[74]. My data analysis included generating initial codes and then constructing themes from the similarities and overlap between the codes. This was followed by reflecting on the themes and checking them alongside the data itself, before finalizing the formulation of the themes and planning out how to include them in the guidebook. The final themes and categories are included in the table below, while the specific results (including more quotes from interviews) are in the guidebook.

Theme	**Categories**	**Example quotes**
hosting mindset	values "ego at the door" learning from mistakes authenticity energy agency	interview: "This is important. You know, the really big mistakes or, the things that really were terribly wrong, are very important to learn. So, when

[72] Clarke, V., and Braun, V. 2017."Thematic analysis." *The journal of positive psychology* 12, no. 3: 297-298.
[73] Clarke and Braun (2017)
[74] Clarke and Braun (2017)

	purpose flexibility	you're starting hosting, trying to avoid mistakes is the worst thing you can do, because otherwise you won't learn. So you have to take risks.”
sensing – are people feeling comfortable?	body language engagement disengagement check-ins atmosphere silence	interview: “It's listening to what people say, but also what people don't say. And listening to the… what you would call the music of the group. [...] I really thought “Okay, this is going in a very good direction” because the sound of the people, not the words, but the sound of the people talking to each other during the break was exactly as I wanted.” participant observation: “After the round for photos, people enthusiastically ask what chairs to take away and to where. [Host] gives them directions, they start cleaning together.”
establishing safety	“everything is welcome” encouragement appreciation tone body language check-ins	participant observation: “The group is silent, nobody volunteers to speak. [Host] reminds them: “There is no right or wrong answer”.”

	vulnerability humor personal examples the quieter voices consent icebreaker before the session	participant observation: “[Host] asks one of the participants a follow-up question, then says “Wow!” with an excited tone.” interview: “Everyone has a pen, you know? And everyone can speak at the same time with a pen. And with drawing… some people are less able to express things in words.” – from interview
logistics	preparation teamwork managing content and time physical space	interview: “To create this intimacy, it should be a closed figure, we’re all equal. It's also about the height... the length of the chair […] No one is sitting above someone else. […] When the person sits next to the empty chair, [they might] feel abandoned. Or I would as a host need extra attention for this person just to bring them back to the group discussion.” – from interview

Table 1: Themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis

Quality criteria

As I approached my research in a participatory way, I decided to use the same quality criteria that emerged from my literature review on PAR. Namely: research that addresses power imbalances; establishing a relationship of collaboration, trust and mutual respect between a researcher and the participants, co-creating knowledge that participants agree is important and useful, and creating space for participants to grow their confidence and agency[75].

To meet this criteria, I reflected on my own positionality within the research and I emphasized heavily on informed consent during data collection, including giving repeat reminders to people that they can stop answering at any point if I sensed hesitation or reluctance from them to share a response. Throughout the research cycle, I also conducted regular member checks with OpenEmbassy hosts, as discussed within the participatory approach sub-section of this chapter. Those checks provided a mechanism of sharing decision-making power and collaborating with the participants. The entire focus of my research, and especially the form of reporting the findings through a guidebook that OpenEmbassy can use and share with new members and partner organizations ensured that the knowledge we co-created through this thesis has a practical implication that supports team members in their work. I also received feedback from multiple people that my approach to interviewing them helped them identify good practices they do and to grow more confident in their own ability to reflect and justify the choices they make as researchers. Some team members also shared that, in introducing the theory of psychology of power, I provided them with language and concepts that enabled them to go deeper in their reflections and discussions of power and positionality.

[75] Ospina, S., Burns, D., and Howard, J. (2021)

Chapter 4:
Findings

Most of the key findings emerged first from participant observations. Each finding was then discussed with interviewees to understand the reasoning behind it and find out other ways specific tools and techniques can be used, as well as other forms they exist in. Four main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the findings.

The first theme is that there is a specific mindset in hosting PAR that is the bedrock of decisions made by hosts when it comes to including participants meaningfully. This mindset contains specific values and principles that guide decisions before and during a research session.

The second theme is about sensing comfort and discomfort in the participants – both in individuals and in the group. It relates to different techniques that a host has to identify when they have established an atmosphere of trust and engagement in the group, and how to spot moments when participants are not feeling comfortable enough and facing barriers to participate meaningfully.

The third theme, establishing safety, is about the tools and techniques hosts apply to create this trust and engagement in the group. Both as a general approach, but also as a way to respond to moments when participants are struggling and repair the trust within the group.

The last theme, logistics, is all about the contextual details within which a research session is happening, which impact how participants feel and participate.

The structure of presenting the themes within the thesis was different from the layout presented here and within the table on page 23. This is because the guidebook aims to teach hosts how to apply these findings, so I prioritized presenting them in an order that would allow the insights to build on top of each other in a way that supports the learning process of the reader, and makes it easier for them to apply the knowledge within each chapter. The guidebook is organized in three sections, which present all of the findings, while also relating them back to the theory.

Section I

The first section, “The building blocks”, is about all of the decisions and reflections that need to be made before a host comes in contact with the participants. Chapter 1, “Your own mindset as a host”, presents the most important findings of the first theme. It is based on interviews, and specifically on the reflections interviewees shared after probing them to dig deep into the reasoning behind their decisions, and the meaning of the work they do.

Chapter 2, “Power and positionality within hosting” is the most theory-based chapter of the guidebook. It is placed in the beginning as a way to frame the findings that come after and connect the findings with the original focus of meaningful participation. It is a chapter dedicated to helping new hosts identify why they need to take specific actions to establish trust and safety with the participants, and how to identify what barriers they need to overcome. I discussed the theory of this chapter with OpenEmbassy during the engaged fieldwork, and found that it provided accessible, helpful language and ideas for people to reflect on.

Chapters 3 and 4, “Purpose of the meeting” and “Preparation”, present findings that have a more subtle connection to the research question. They provide hosts with a framework in designing and approaching meetings in a cohesive way. These are findings that emerged from the interviews, also as a response to questions about the reasoning behind how hosts approached situations and especially challenges within meetings. These findings relate back to the themes of mindset and logistics, and they are presented here because of their role as a decision-making guide to when and which tools and techniques should be used.

Chapter 5, “Co-hosting and teamwork”, is a transition chapter between sections. It is about the work between different people from the same research team, and it covers decisions and reflections prior to a session, while also presenting specific findings about things to consider during a session. Although some findings in the chapter come from participant observations, the majority are based on interviews. Interviewees reflected on the support and tensions that they face within their teamwork, and how that can be integrated into reflecting on their own positionality and what it means for their work as researchers.

Section II

The second section, “Connecting with participants”, presents most of the findings from the second and third themes. The reason to combine them within the same section is that these themes form two sides of the same process – building a relationship between the host and the participants, in the moments of direct contact between them. The findings, which can be described as specific tools, within this section were first identified through the observations. Interviewees were asked to reflect on them and provided additional background to understand how those tools can be applied. This also prompted interviewees to give other examples and forms of these tools, from their experience outside of the sessions I observed.

Chapter 6, "Sensing", contains all of the key findings from the second theme, while also relating them to the theoretical background of embodied approaches. Everything else within the section relates to the third theme. Starting the section with this chapter, and the second theme of the findings, is key, because this chapter implicitly leads the reader to ask two questions. These questions are "What do I do when things are going wrong?" and "What do I do to get things right from the start?". The implicit answer of both these questions comes with the tools in the rest of the section.

Chapter 7, "Everything is welcome", presents findings about specific tools that encourage participants to speak up, and about making sure that every person feels welcomed to speak up. This chapter gives the tools that can show participants that everything they want to share is allowed and welcome, and looking out for participants who might face more obstacles to participating. This chapter also relates to the theoretical framework of establishing brave spaces.

Chapter 8, "Authenticity and vulnerability", is about the other side of the sharing process. It shows findings which relate to what the host needs to express – vulnerability - to build trust in the group that everything they want to share will be safely received. It also connects back to a finding within the theme of mindset – that of authenticity, which is something hosts need to willingly embrace within themselves before entering a session. This finding had to be combined with this specific chapter, as it was the core of the reasoning provided by interviewees when reflecting on the specific ways they showed vulnerability. For example, this chapter includes a finding from the observations – that humor is frequently used by various hosts. This prompted me to ask how and why hosts utilized humor, revealing that they employed it intentionally to achieve particular objectives during sessions, and that it was ultimately a form of vulnerability and relating to the participants,

Chapter 9, "Consent", is also a partner chapter of chapter 7. Where chapter 7 is about inviting participants to bring up everything they want within the meeting, chapter 9 is about providing space for participants to refuse to participate. It shows how enabling participants to exercise agency allows them to participate more meaningfully. It is more based on interviews than other chapters in the section, largely following critical self-reflections that interviewees made regarding their power as researchers.

Chapters 10 and 11, “Icebreakers” and “Hosting starts before the schedule starts”, provide specific structural tools about building connections with the participants. These tools are largely meant for the initial moments of hosting a session. They come at the end of the chapter, because the core findings of chapters 6-9 need to be applied within 10 and 11. For example, people need to be able to opt out (consent) from an icebreaker, while talking to participants before the schedule starts is a good moment for a host to check-in on how they are doing (6) and also show a less formal side of themselves (8).

Section III

The third and final section, “Logistics”, relates directly to the theme of the same formulation. It is about the context around the connection between the host and the participants, specifically factors that influence participants which the host can change. All four chapters are based on results identified within the participant observations, mainly specific challenges hosts faced, and include deeper reflections and ideas that emerged while asking interviewees to reflect on them.

Chapter 12, “Starting the schedule on time”, relates to a challenge within 11 out of the 13 participant observations – latecomers. Every host handled this challenge differently, and some of the hosts had two different approaches in two different sessions. Interviewing hosts about these differences revealed a trade-off in including every participant, or choosing to prioritize making the most out of the session for the participants that arrived on time. Context, and the purpose of the meeting, also proved highly relevant in how this trade-off should be approached. This shaped the chapter as another ‘framework to making decisions’ style of chapter, making it into an indirect extension of chapter 4.

Chapter 13, “Coping with distractions”, tackles a challenge that appeared within 13 out of the 13 participant observations, in very different forms. It presents findings about the ways hosts approached distractions, but highlights especially the reflections they expressed during interviews that allow them to successfully handle distractions.

Chapter 14, “Physical spaces”, returns to a theoretical framework of embodiment. It combines different findings from observations and interviews together with theory to show the ways in which the space participants are in affects their comfort and ease of communication and participation. For example, in one of the observations, a participant left early and the host immediately removed their chair. When I interviewed that host and asked her about this action, she explained how leaving the empty chair would have affected the participants next to it negatively.

Chapter 15, “Digital spaces”, presents findings about meetings in digital spaces and the unique challenges hosts face within them. It is based on 2 participant observations of digital sessions, and 2 interviews that included reflections on the challenges hosts notice within an online environment.

Chapter 5:
Discussion and conclusion

Contribution of this research

This thesis presents a practical guidebook designed to bridge the gap between PAR theories and practical tools that allow their application in practice. Within the guidebook, researchers can find various techniques and tools that address the challenge of meaningful inclusion in participatory methods. While existing literature emphasizes on the importance of reflecting on power and positionality, and including different forms of knowledge, the guidebook this thesis produces offers specific, practical tools that practitioners can use to achieve these objectives. The tools are also applicable through different methods of PAR research, which makes them widely accessible and helps further the participatory character of PAR research in general.

While writing the findings into the guidebook, it became evident that explicitly linking the tools to theory was essential to guide practitioners into understanding why these tools are important. Introducing the theoretical framework of the psychology of power into the guidebook itself was key to show practitioners, from a theoretical perspective, how power imbalances impede meaningful participation. This allows for an easier integration into practice of the tools and techniques afterwards, as it becomes clear what problem they help address. Adding theoretical approaches from feminist methodology helped ground some of the specific tools that came up as findings. The style of the guidebook makes the theory accessible for a wider audience, as opposed to separating it by including it in chapter 2 of this thesis.

The guidebook is also written in accessible language, while still grounding the tools and reflections in specific theoretical concepts. This allows practitioners outside of traditional academia, who may lack the time or expertise in academic discourse, to still engage deeply with the ideas of PAR and implement them within their own research.

The thesis identifies several key findings in how meaningful participation can be facilitated. One of the most important themes within the research is the importance of the mindset and values behind hosting PAR, namely a host's ability to approach the process with authenticity, selflessness, openness to self-reflection, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Another significant theme is the emergence of specific techniques to recognize and address moments when participants may feel unsafe. The guidebook pairs this with theory-backed ways to reflect on power and positionality, so hosts can recognize ways in which participants might feel unsafe due to specific power imbalances. These imbalances can generate internalized feelings of danger among participants, and it is not enough for hosts to simply avoid exacerbating these feelings. Instead, they must actively demonstrate a commitment to the safety of the participants. This ties into the next theme of the findings, involving concrete tools in establishing safety within the group. Firstly, hosts can invite meaningful and in-depth participation when they show that everything participants would like to bring is welcome, through appreciation, encouragement, and making space for difficult emotions and dissent. Secondly, hosts can establish trust and mitigate power imbalances by showing vulnerability and authenticity, through sharing personal examples and making jokes.

Beyond these primary findings, the guidebook presents additional tools, such as the importance of embedding consent within the process, allowing participants to set boundaries, and using icebreakers to facilitate participation. Attention to logistical details, such as the physical space in which research occurs and how it impacts the body, is also emphasized.

The contribution of this guidebook to the literature is that it answers the research question "What techniques and tools can facilitate meaningful participation in participatory action research?". It does so by identifying specific tools and techniques used by OpenEmbassy hosts that support participants in feeling comfortable and safe enough to exercise their agency and speak in-depth about their experiences. These tools and techniques, and the underlying decisions and reflections the guidebook guides the reader through, are not dependent on a specific PAR method. They can be applied within multiple contexts and across various PAR methods, in line with objectives and challenges identified in PAR literature.

Limitations

This research faces several limitations. Firstly, as discussed within the methodology section, the research design focused primarily on the experiences of practitioners and how they think about the tools within this guidebook. It provides a useful framework from which other practitioners can learn. The limitation is that the research participants of OpenEmbassy were only included through participant observations. To improve the generalizability of the findings, there needs to be future research that actively involves them also in the participatory element of the research and gives them opportunity to reflect on how they experience the tools mentioned here, beyond what is visible in the observations.

Secondly, the guidebook does not include issues of accessibility, specifically when it relates to disabilities. This omission is intentional, as existing literature, namely Wickenden and Franco's disability inclusive approach already provides a comprehensive answer to this question[76]. The data collected in this study did not offer new insights in this area, but it is vital to note that accessibility is an important facet of meaningful participation.

Finally, the thesis also does not address the role of conflict within participatory action research. Conflict is an important aspect of challenging structural power imbalances, and it can provide opportunities for resistance, dissent, and empowerment, when managed in a way that protects vulnerable participants. However, the field of PAR lacks a robust framework to manage conflict, as at the moment there is a tendency within PAR to orient towards consensus-building and dialogic methods[77]. Conflict is usually sidestepped, rather than addressed constructively. This is an important question, but the data within this study did not provide enough insights to meaningfully address it, so it too must be left for future research.

[76] Wickenden, and Franco. 2021. "Don't Leave Us Out: Disability Inclusive Participatory Research - Why and How?" In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:321–38. SAGE Publications Inc.
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Appendix:
Interview guide

Prior to the interview:

- Remind participants of the thesis topic and the structure of the interview.
- Ask for oral consent to record the interview and inform participants how the recording will be used for the purposes of the thesis, how their data will be stored, and that you will ensure full confidentiality of anything they share.
- Inform the participants that they can refuse to answer any question, or answer only to the depth they feel comfortable. Inform them that the interview can also stop at any time at their request.

General questions asked during the group interviews:

- What does hosting mean to you?
- How do you prepare for a specific hosting?
- How would you describe your relation with the participants in meetings you host?
- What do you think is a good host?
- What is the biggest challenge to being a good host?
- What would you like to learn or develop regarding your hosting?
- What does participatory action research mean to you? How does it relate to the work you do in OpenEmbassy?

General questions during individual interviews:

- What are specific things that you do to connect with participants?
- In what ways do you build confidence in your participants that you want to hear what they have to say?
- How do you encourage participants to open up about their experiences?

- How do you make sure all participants have a chance to speak? How do you moderate between different participants if some are more active and others are more passive?
- How do you sense tension among participants, and what do you do when you sense it?

Specific questions based on observations followed a structure of sharing what was observed with the interviewee, and then asking them a variety of questions in the style of:

- Why did you decide to use this tool?/Why did you do X?
- What were your thoughts while Y was happening? Can you walk me through them?
- Can you tell me about other times you used this tool and how that went?

Appendix 2:
Interviews – Participant profile

Date of interview	Interviewee's role
08.05.2024	action researcher
13.05.2024	group interview: I-support (main action research) team
22.05.2024	group interview: Learning Solutions team
24.05.2024	past co-director of OpenEmbassy
12.06.2024	external expert, professor at Utrecht University
11.07.2024	action researcher
14.07.2024	past member and action-researcher
15.07.2024	second interview with action researcher (same as 08.05.2024)
15.07.2024	action researcher
17.07.2024	founder and director of OpenEmbassy
22.07.2024	action researcher
22.07.2024	action researcher
31.07.2024	action researcher
02.08.2024	team lead

Appendix 3: Guidebook

Hosting participatory action research:

an OpenEmbassy guidebook of best practices

Ani Popova

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Introduction

In the movie How to Train Your Dragon, there is a scene in which the main character Hiccup is trying to learn how to ride a dragon by trying to follow notes he wrote from safe tests on the ground. At first, it's easy, as he practices while remaining on a hill where it's safe. But when his dragon Toothless takes flight for real, in the open sky, the notes become impossible to follow, crumpling under the pressure of the wind. There is no time for Hiccup to consult them as he faces obstacles and must make split-second decisions. Hiccup abandons the notes and lets himself be guided by instinct and knowledge. He doesn't get it perfectly - in fact, he flies into quite a few rocks, at the grumble of his dragon. But he gets into the air, and he gets them through safely, becoming a dragon rider.

Good hosting is a lot like this. You can read all the literature you'd like, spend all the time preparing meticulously and making sure you've planned for everything. And yet, the reality will still make you feel like you've been thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool. You will face challenges and situations you never could have thought about. You will have to make split-second decisions without time to reference the things you've read, or time to consult others and get a second opinion[78].

No hosting experience will be the same as another. There are too many variable factors – who the participants are and how diverse or homogeneous the group is, what the theme of the session is and the individual activities it requires, what kind of location you are at, your own mood and the mood of the group, what day of the week it is and how much energy people have, important news and events at the time that might affect people… These factors and more make every meeting unique, and you cannot control them[79].

So, what now? How to do well at hosting, and how to develop your skills if circumstances will change so fluidly that you cannot have strict rules?

Hosting, and learning how to host, is a process that requires going inward - looking inside yourself and starting from your own personality and innate strengths, as well as weaknesses, and seeing them as puzzle pieces. With enough care, you will find ways to assemble them into an approach to hosting that produces a beautiful picture.

This guidebook is meant to help you in that process. Within it, you will find a vault of knowledge and experience from professionals who do action research at OpenEmbassy. There is no single right way to host - instead, this guidebook will provide you with tools that others have found to be helpful, and prompts to help you reflect on which of these tools suit your innate style of hosting. There are many common pitfalls and challenges that hosts face in their work - and although there is no one solution that always works, this book will help you learn about some of the solutions others have found and methods that can enhance your work as a host. But most important of all, this guidebook will pose critical questions like why you even want to host and who you are as a host, and it will help you identify what *you* need to grow further as a host. The practical tools offered are only some of many possible answers you can find to those questions and needs. Hosting is a living breathing thing, and each person does it differently. In honor of that, this guidebook claims no ultimate answers - only aid in helping you reflect and grow. At the

[78] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[79] Insights from interviews with practitioners

end of the day, your own lived experience and ideas are what works best for you. This guidebook is simply an aid in helping ease the process and in giving you further inspiration.

It can be good to grab a journal and a pen (a really nice set, because that will make you feel excited to actually use it) and have them by your side as you read this, in case inspiration strikes and you decide to write down your reflections at certain points.

What even is hosting?

It is the act of providing space for guests to come as they are. It is holding space for them so that their needs are met, and their safety is guarded - all by the host[80]. It is not an accident that the word for hosting a meeting is the same as the word for the physical act of hosting guests at your home. Traditional physical hosting involves preparing your space so that the guests feel comfortable in it. It's about your own attitude, of openness and invitation, so that your guests feel that they can be themselves in your home without judgment. It's also about providing enriching conversations and activities, so that the experience stays with the guests long after they leave[81].

In a similar way, hosting meetings with participants involves creating a good space for them, and then holding it and guarding it throughout the meeting. Space here refers to many things - physical space, space for emotions and discomfort, space for good conversations and reflections, and above all - space where people can be themselves.

What makes hosting special for action research?

The focus of this guidebook is on hosting action research and working with marginalized people. This type of hosting requires a special emphasis on making sure that participants feel equal, safe, included, and empowered[82]. A very important aspect of action research is making sure that participants have agency in the research[83]. It breaks through traditional power relations where the researcher has all the decision-making power and extracts knowledge from participants, and instead it sets up a collaborative process where participants feel more equal[84]. Hosting of action research then needs to be very mindful of power differences and how the host relates to the participants.

By nature, action research also often centers the voices and perspectives of marginalized people. This often means working with people who are used to being dismissed or silenced, and who have learned that they need to guard their own safety, sometimes at the cost of expressing

80 Insights from interviews with practitioners
81 Parker. 2018. *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters.* Penguin Books.
82 Ospina, Burns, and Howard. 2021. "Introduction to the handbook: Navigating the complex and dynamic landscape of participatory research and Inquiry." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:3–16. SAGE Publications Inc.
83 Pettit. 2020. "Power Analysis for Social Change: Participatory Learning and Action." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:276–90. SAGE Publications Inc.
84 Ospina, Burns, and Howard (2021).

their truth[85]. Good hosting then requires ensuring that participants feel safe and included, and showing them that their voices are valued and they will not be punished for sharing their truth[86].

Most of the tools you will encounter within this book are tools that support these specific aims. Although no space can ever be made perfectly safe, or a research relationship – perfectly equal, this guidebook aims to bring forward both the mindfulness and the approaches that can increase the safety and equality when hosting action research. Some of the chapters will also give you accessible theoretical context behind the tools you encounter and help frame why specific decisions are important to make. The theories were selected to address challenges in participatory action research[87] and in response to reflections shared by the interviewed practitioners.

About the guidebook's structure

There is an intentional decision behind the order of specific chapters and themes. This is to allow different insights to build on top of each other and support you in your learning journey. Some of the themes and theories explained in earlier chapters heavily inform what you will find in later chapters. Following the original order is not obligatory, but it is recommended.

The first section, "The building blocks", is about all of the decisions and reflections that need to be made before a host comes in contact with the participants. Chapters 1 and 2 will invite you to reflect on the meaning of your work and the possible barriers between you and the participants. Chapters 3 and 4 will provide you with a framework in how to design specific sessions. These four chapters are the most intensive in reflection, and they form an important foundation from which you can make decisions about everything else you meet throughout the rest of the guidebook. Chapter 5 serves as a transition chapter between sections, inviting you to reflect on the support and tensions that come within teamwork, and the meaning this holds for your work in general.

The second section, "Connecting with participants", is more practice-oriented. It focuses on the moments when you have direct contact with the participants, and how you can build a good relationship with them. Chapter 6 will help you learn how to notice what participants are feeling and what the group needs. There are two questions that should come up after you learn how to spot signs of discomfort and tension - "What do I do when things are going wrong?" and "What do I do to get things right from the start?". The rest of the chapters within this section (7-11) will give you the tools and resources to answer those questions. It's best to read chapters 7, 8 and 9 first, as the principles and ideas within them also need to be applied to the tools of chapters 10 and 11 for those to work well.

The third and final section, "Logistics", is about the context around the connection between you and the participants, specifically factors that you as the host still have influence over. Chapters 12 and 13 present widespread challenges within any meeting, and the things you need to keep

[85] van der Ree. n.d. "What is it like to inhabit social structures? The psychology of power." *Unpublished*.
[86] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[87] Burns, Howard, and Ospina. 2021. "Challenges in the Practice of Participatory Research and Inquiry." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:17–34. SAGE Publications Inc.

in mind to resolve them in a way that supports the participants. Chapters 14 and 15 are about the setting your meeting takes place in, and how to adapt it to support your meeting.

Enjoy the read!

I The building blocks

The background of hosting research – reflections and decisions to consider before getting in contact with the participants.

1. Your own mindset as a host

There are no right or wrong answers to hosting. Most successful hosts you speak to will explicitly tell you there is no textbook that can teach you how to be a good host, but there is one thing good hosts have in common. That is their attitude towards their participants, the mindset that they host from.

Why do you want to do this work?

Why do hosting, and research, in this way? Why this work? If the goal is money or fame, there are easier ways to get them, for example by hosting extravagant gallas. If the goal is simply generating knowledge, regular qualitative research or even statistical surveys can work just fine. So why do you want to do action research, and why do you want to do it with marginalized people?

Go to the core of who you are. The center of your values. This is work that accepts no shortcuts – you have to be fully present and conscious about who you are and what you stand for. You need to be willing to face your own emotions and get comfortable with sitting with them, to become experienced with holding space for the heavy feelings others might share. Doing this type of work holds a special place – when you do it the right way, you get the gift of being able to witness the stories of people and becoming a trusted confidant. It gives you a chance to make a difference and get closer to righting injustices in the world.

The first impact of action research is simple - when you approach marginalized people with genuine curiosity and care, you support them in taking up space that the world usually denies them[88]. You hear them, where many others before silenced them. There are many steps afterwards that determine how much other impact can be achieved, and how much change can be made from cultivating knowledge through action research. But the first *first* step is that if you do it right, you will empower people by holding the space that they are usually denied. How does this resonate as a reason why to do it?

What is not meant for hosting action research with marginalized people?

Be cautious of doing it for an ego-boost. It's tempting to hog the spotlight by stepping in front of an audience, especially one that is in a more vulnerable position and has a stronger need for the hosting you provide. It's tempting to seek their attention, appreciation, celebration. It's a very human, deeply psychological, hunger. If it's there inside you, even a little bit, it's okay to accept that you have it. But you need to identify it and recognize that *this particular work* will not feed it.

[88] Insights from interviews with practitioners

There are better (more effective, less harmful) ways to shine. This work, it's work with people who are already used to not being heard or seen by others. You risk causing further harm if you stand in front of them with the goal of meeting your own need to be heard.

It's just the page and you - you can be honest for a moment. Is there a voice inside that wants attention? A wounded inner child? Tend to them, give yourself that attention you seek. I admit there are much better books, and hopefully also therapists, available to you that can help with this. Why I bring this to your attention, as heavy as it might be to think of, is because understanding this need for attention can be a lesson. If you have it, it doesn't necessarily make you a bad host - just the opposite, you can learn from it and understand it, so that you can look at your participants with awareness of their needs and how to help *them* feel seen and heard, how to give *them* the validation and appreciation the world might have denied them. It is a human need to be seen and understood, and one of the first steps to healing any wounds caused by oppressive systems[89].

Reflection prompt
Step 1: Identify if you have this hunger, and how present it is. Step 2: Do the work to feed it, or at least, in the bare minimum, recognize it needs to be put away from hosting action research because it's not the place or time for it. Step 3: Learn from your own need to be seen and heard. What helps you feel that way? How can you give that to others? If you recognize how good it feels to meet that need, you will have an easier time finding ways to meet it for others.

Are you willing to leave your ego at the door?

To be a good host, you need to recognize the responsibility and trust you've been given to hold space for your participants. You need to leave your ego at the door, step into the room, into the group's space, and give them all your focus and attention. You need to attune yourself to the group's needs and adjust as you go, adapting to what they show you they need. For good hosting, you need to dedicate yourself to what you're doing and recognize what the participants need. And when issues arise, you need to be willing to question your own role in them and figure out what you can adapt in your approach - to improve, to solve, to repair. As a host, you're coming into sessions with a considerable degree of power, as you're the one who's shaped what the meeting will be like, who will attend, and what the target outcome is at the end. As much as you draw participants in the process to collaborate, you are the one primarily in charge of designing it, and you need to be open to reflecting on your own role when something goes wrong. Sometimes it's outside of your area of control, of course. But to see the difference and be able to guide the meeting successfully, you need to be willing to quiet down your ego and

[89] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner. 2021. "Holding Space for Emotions in Participatory Action Research: Reflections from the Experiences of a Youth Organisation exploring PAR through Creative Practices." In *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*, edited by Burns, Howard, and Ospina, 1:263–75. SAGE Publications Inc.

look at things honestly. Ignoring mistakes you might have made to protect your self-confidence doesn't erase them – it only hurts your participants more in the long-term.

Accept mistakes and forgive yourself

> *"This is important. You know, the really big mistakes or, the things that really were terribly wrong, are very important to learn. So, when you're starting hosting, trying to avoid mistakes is the worst thing you can do, because otherwise you won't learn. So, you have to take risks."*
> - from interview with a practicing action researcher

We live in a culture of perfectionism - we are well accustomed to asking a lot from ourselves. This guidebook is not a psychology book that will help with overcoming perfectionism. But it is important to give a warning here – you will make mistakes. This is unavoidable. When hosting, you work with others, and that is inherently unpredictable. You cannot control what others will do, or how they will respond or feel - you can only invite, nudge, guide, provide. It might be painful to accept, but to host successfully, you need to give up the need to control every factor and accept that things will never go as you expected. You also need to accept that you are human, and we are imperfect by default. Sometimes that's a good thing, and it brings unexpected insights and beautiful moments. Sometimes it's a challenge - one you might meet head on and defeat, and one you might fail. That is okay. As long as you are self-reflective and open to feedback, it will be a learning experience, and you will do better next time.

It is scary and unpleasant to think you might fail. Not just for yourself and your image, but also for the people you work with. Especially when working with marginalized groups, the last thing you want is to let people down or to give them another bad experience. And yet. If you let the fear of failure overwhelm you, this will only lead to more troubles. You might become so overtly self-conscious and stressed, that you bring more tension that bleeds into the session, or you overlook important details as stress often makes us go tunnel-vision.

Alternatively, you might become stagnant in your hosting and only stick to very specific approaches and ideas that you know have worked before. This is unfortunate, as it will often reduce the potential of meetings as you force them to contort to what you know best, rather than adapting to what the meeting itself needs. It will also rob you of opportunities to experiment with new approaches, which is one of the best ways to discover and learn new things, and improve as a host. Finally, it might even put you off attempting to host at all, which is even more unfortunate – if you feel called to do this work, if you value it, then it's much better to try and learn from mistakes you make than never attempt to help people at all.

Why does all of this matter?

Will it really impact your hosting that much? Do you really need to do all of this emotional work and be so open to difficult self-reflection? The answer is yes. You can have all the tools. Prepare all the speeches. But you have to mean it. You have to know, at your core, why you're doing this. If you don't, you will not achieve the necessary depth for meaningful research[90].

People can tell if you're authentic or not. Especially marginalized people, who are often forced to live in survival mode and must be vigilant, checking every situation and interaction to make sure they are safe. This type of vigilance, especially when embodied for long enough, will make people naturally more observant and attuned to subtle body cues outside of your control, and thus more likely to determine if you are honest or not.

How you react when something unexpected comes up; the tone and body language you use; your caring curiosity when you ask people about their experiences… These are key parts of successful hosting of action research - they are very important in making people safe and getting them to open up and trust you. And they are all heavily influenced by your reason for doing this work. So, what is *your* reason?

[90] Insights from interviews with practitioners

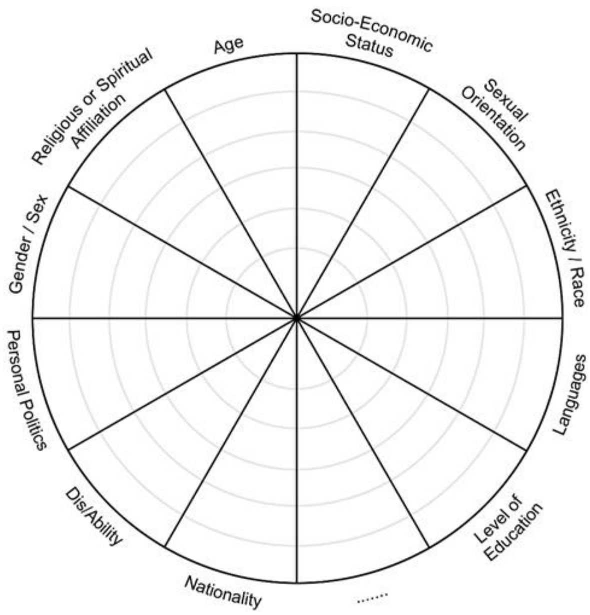
2. Power and positionality within hosting

Power imbalances are visible in every layer of how our lives are structured. To work with marginalized communities requires a willingness to question your own positionality, and to acknowledge and mitigate power differences between you and the participants. Understanding power imbalances requires seeing the full complexity of how power affects people - beyond the structural dimension of legal rights, and institutional and economic limits. It requires understanding the relational dimension of power[91], and understanding how it is present between a host and participants.

Reflecting on positionality

All of us have different identities, backgrounds and lived experiences, which place us in different positionalities within society. Positionality is, simply put, identifying our place within existing structural power relations and hierarchies[92]. These are not default positions that we are meant to inhibit, but social constructs shaped by the current social and political context we live in. Relational power is intrinsically tied to positionality, so understanding our own positionality is the first step to noticing where in our lives we have power and where we lack it. So, in this part, I invite you to reflect on your positionality before reading the next part and understanding how it impacts your hosting. Tools like the social identity wheel below offer a good starting point to reflect on different aspects of your identity and how they shape your positionality.

Reflection prompt – social identity wheel[93]



- How do these identity markers describe you?
- Which aspects of your identity do you think most often of?
- Where do you feel tension between your identity and the world around you?
- Which markers are less noticeable in your life?
- Where do you feel you fit in with the majority around you?
- How have the individual aspects of your identity shaped your experiences and perception of the world?
- How do different aspects of your identity intersect with each other?

Are there aspects of your identity that protect you from the usual challenges you might experience in a different aspect of your identity?

What about the opposite, are there aspects of your identity that increase the challenges you face within other aspects?

The psychology of power

91 Lynch, Richard A. 2014. "Foucault's theory of power." In Michel Foucault, pp. 13-26. Routledge.
92 van der Ree (n.d.)
93 https://www.uu.nl/en/education/inclusive-curriculum-and-learning-environment/tools/inclusive-teaching-toolbox

Guiding theory: Psychology of Power - Gerard van der Ree[94]
Power has a relational dimension: it shapes people and their relations with each other on a psychological level. Social structures, and positionalities, socialize us into developing different perspectives of the world and the people around us. In different parts of our identities, we inhibit dominant and marginal positions. They are relational structures – we experience dominance or marginality in relation to others who have an opposite dominance or marginality from us. It's in the differences between how the world treats us that these positions emerge. We are usually most aware and sensitive to the aspects of our identities where social structures marginalize us. These are usually the positions where we experience the most tension with the external world, and face more challenges, obstacles, and hurt. And where social structures support us, we inhibit dominant positions, usually in identity aspects we often don't have to think about. These parts of our identity face few challenges from the world, and we often experience privileges in them – not just benefits that help us, but also the absence of obstacles. All of us, at any stage of our lives, inhibit both positions of dominance and of marginality, which intersect in unique combinations. These are not active choices we make, but rather social constructs that are made for and applied to us by various social institutions. Where we inhibit dominant positions, we still passively benefit from privilege in the places we have it, even if we don't actively seek out to abuse it. Both in dominant and marginal positions, our positionality still has an effect on how others perceive us. It shapes what kind of assumptions they make, what they expect from us, how they think they should behave around us.

Relating to practice

Reflecting on positionality and learning how to address power imbalances, especially where we inhibit dominant positions, is very important work in hosting. As hosts, especially when we work with people who are marginalized in relation to our specific positionality, the most important part of our work is to support and amplify their voices.

One of the ways in which oppressive structures self-reproduce is by silencing the voices of marginalized people. Individuals and communities who are marginalized already work hard to challenge these structures and to voice their experiences. They try to take up the space society denies them, causing ruptures in power structures where possible. They create these ruptures both through active defiance and through simply daring to exist as they are, within structures that reject anyone seen as 'other'. But this is often met with backlash, dismissal, or even further traumatization. What we can and should do, when operating from dominant positionalities, is to work to reduce this price of speaking up, and to amplify the voices of marginalized people. To provide an environment where they can voice their experiences without facing resistance, and instead go deeper, knowing their truth is being listened to.

Inhibiting marginal positions

[94] van der Ree (n.d.)

Guiding theory: Psychology of Power - Gerard van der Ree[95]
When people experience marginality, this impacts their sense of safety. Oppressive social structures quickly teach marginalized people that they face risks if they voice their needs or express criticism. These risks apply even when a person is just authentically themselves – if the dominant majority perceives someone as too "other", it may respond violently – from daily microaggressions to horrible hate crimes. So, people in a marginal position learn to expect harm, and to adapt their own behavior to minimize the risk of that harm, to protect themselves.

This is where the narrative of "not all men" can serve as a helpful explanation. When a woman is walking on the street late at night, and there is an unknown man walking behind her, she will most likely be afraid. It doesn't matter how good this man is in his life – if he is kind and respectful to women, if he's never done a violent act, if he is an outspoken feminist that regularly goes to demonstrations for women's rights. It doesn't matter, because the woman in that situation doesn't know him, doesn't know these things. She has no idea what to expect from him or what he's capable of – only that many women before her in this situation, walking alone at night, have experienced violence from men they don't know. It doesn't matter if not all men would commit such violence – only that, to this woman, at that moment, there is no way to tell what she can expect from this man.

To the extent of this hypothetical scenario, the man hasn't done anything. How the woman perceives him is simply based on the dominant position he inhibits. And so, the woman will be on guard, and she will take extra measures to protect herself.

This is a rather binary example – a lot of other cases are far more complex than this, especially at the intersection of different identity aspects. In many cases, how people inhibit marginal positions and adapt their behavior is not even about physical danger. How society constructs these positions usually relies on separating, stigmatizing and shaming what is seen as "other", as different from the dominant[96]. As a consequence, marginalized individuals usually face more barriers in being accepted within dominant social circles, or in succeeding in education and furthering their careers. And it's these barriers and constructs that force individuals to adapt their behavior to the world around them to ensure their own safety.

Guiding theory: Psychology of Power - Gerard van der Ree[97]
Inhibiting a marginal position thus forces people to constantly see the world from their own marginalized perspective, but also from the dominant perspective, which holds more power and is usually reinforced by society. This is a form of **double consciousness** – of being yourself, but also being aware of how your identity is perceived and might be used against you. This creates an ever-present choice for marginalized people, where they have to decide: to what extent they can be authentically themselves; what risk and negative reactions from the dominant majority can they bear; how much of their identity and what makes them "other" should they hide or at least

[95] van der Ree (n.d.)
[96] van der Ree (n.d.)
[97] van der Ree (n.d.)

minimize to stay safe. No two individuals will make the same choices within their own positionalities and situational contexts – but every person in a marginal position has to make a choice when it comes to this.

As a host, you need to be aware of these choices and perspectives. This is especially present when you inhibit specific dominant positions, while the research participants inhibit marginalized positions in the same identity aspects. All these structural barriers limit how much marginalized people can show their authentic selves. Their participation in any structure, including your research, is always accompanied by an inner self-editor that is deciding what is safe and what is too much of a risk. When they walk into the room of your meeting, they carry the weight of thousands of prior experiences that have shaped their expectations and perception of how you could treat them, of what danger you can be capable of. When they walk into your meeting, people don't know you or what kind of person you are. So, to support authenticity from them and to enable them to participate fully and share their in-depth honest experiences, you need to show them that they can let down their guard around you. That what they share will not be used against them, and that they will not receive harsh reactions for being authentic. That they can stop self-editing, because you will not hurt them, or that, if you do make a mistake that causes hurt, you will strive to learn from it and do better.

The essence of this guidebook is to provide you with tools that can help you do that, but the first and most important part is to reflect on your positionality and power, and how it is present within your relations with different participants.

A note on inhibiting dominant positions

Guiding theory: Psychology of Power - Gerard van der Ree[98]
When people struggle with double consciousness, it forces them to learn reflexivity and self-awareness about their positionality, and to develop emotional capacity to cope with tensions. Dominant perspectives, however, are rarely challenged by the world, and do not come with the same lessons. When a person inhibits a dominant position, they can easily discard the experiences shared by marginalized people – this is a direct by-product of relational power. Simply put, people in a dominant position can choose whether they want to learn about their positionality or not. This provides comfort and safety, which often limits the emotional capacity to work through challenges to that identity aspect. It is very important that we pay attention to where our perspectives are dominant, and that we actively seek out conflicting perspectives and learn how to reconcile them with our own. Not doing this work produces **fragility** - emotional discomfort and defensiveness that is triggered when the dominant perspective is challenged, and we lack the tools to cope with it. This fragility can show up as a tension in the body, as an urge to jump up and dismiss the voice that has triggered it, to prove it wrong. When we respond from that triggered place, we use our power to deny a marginalized position. When we resist it, and work on developing our emotional capacity and tools for handling conflicting perspectives, we do the

[98] van der Ree (n.d.)

work of supporting marginalized voices.

Reflecting on your positionality is part of this work. One way to make it easier is to learn from the aspects of your identity where you inhibit marginal positions. Most people inhibit a mix of dominant and marginal experiences, so there is room for your dominant sides to learn from your marginal sides. Reflecting on how you are shaped by your marginality and the struggles you face there can help you become a safer ally within your dominant sides.

3. Purpose of the meeting

Okay, you know why you want to host action research. The next step is to decide what the purpose of a *specific* meeting is – the reason behind hosting it. Why *this* meeting? What is the primary goal?

Guiding Theory: The Art of Gathering - Priya Parker[99]
For a meaningful gathering of any context, we need to identify the purpose behind bringing people together. Without a clear purpose, we naturally turn to old templates and static formats of gatherings we have been to before. When we borrow from past gatherings and formats, we follow what others came up with in response to their own needs and purposes. For a memorable and transformative gathering, we need to start from a clear purpose and choose the structure and activities based on that purpose. A meaningful gathering purpose engages participants, and it guides us as a decision-filter. To find the authentic purpose of a gathering, hosts need to move from *what* they organize to *why* they organize it. Every time another, deeper reason comes up, it is good to ask why again, and keep asking why until a core belief or value is identified. Another way to find this purpose is to start from the outcome – what a host wants to be different because the gathering happened, and work backwards from it to find the purpose.

Knowing the answer to this question is of key importance, because the purpose should be the deciding factor behind every single decision about your meeting. The purpose of the meeting, when chosen accurately, can and should guide what form the meeting takes. It will decide which activities to include, how to structure the schedule, and the physical space. It will also decide how you screen the participants - who do you let in, and who do you leave out?

What kind of knowledge do you aim to cultivate?

Who is giving you the research project and what do they plan to do with the knowledge afterwards? **Very often, your primary purpose is related to answering a specific research question set by the client.** But you are still doing action research, so you need to dig behind the research question and identify how it relates to the community participating in the research. You are doing action research for a reason, so what is this research truly aiming to achieve?

Reflection prompt
• What knowledge do you seek to cultivate? • Which participants do you need to collaborate with? • How will this knowledge be used? • How can you make sure your participants' needs are represented – that the knowledge you cultivate is not just something taken *from* the participants, but will actively help them? • What is the desired outcome of the meeting? • Does the design of the meeting correspond with the purpose of it?

[99] Parker (2018)

Public officials and municipalities will offer constraints to your research approach. Often, they will ask you to focus on specific parts of the research, or to prioritize specific objectives over others. The purpose is intrinsically related to understanding where these limits are and how to adapt to them. It's important to note that, when public officials ask for specific knowledge, that is often about areas where they see the most potential to change things – where they are aware they can make changes within the current system. When you structure your meeting to meet the research needs that they present, you make it more likely for the findings to achieve a change.

At the same time, public officials' ability to make informed decisions and create effective policies is often limited by the quality, scope and availability of the information they have access to[100]. If the data they rely on is incomplete, biased or lacking in diversity, their decisions may not fully address the needs or realities people face. Even when trying to expand the information they have through research, public officials see only part of the picture and are not aware of everything a specific community is dealing with. This means that they might not even know what questions to ask, as they don't realize specific problems exist. For truly transformative action research, it's good to make space in the schedule for participants to bring forward experiences that they believe are important to voice to policymakers[101].

In presenting your findings, you will have to walk a fine line between making sure the client's research question is answered and offering other important findings as they come up. It's important to justify why these findings are relevant for decisions that impact the community at the center of the research. You don't have to walk this line alone – during the data analysis stage, it's good to consult both with research participants and the client in determining where this line is and how much of each type of findings to include. These consultations will also make your research more participatory.

What impact do you want to achieve on the spot?

Action research offers a direct impact, which can come in multiple forms. When you include participants in the research as your equals, this empowers individuals, by showing them that there is space for their voices to be heard and valued. When individuals are brought together to share experiences and offer suggestions, this can build a sense of community and self-sustaining support networks, as they find like-minded individuals with similar experiences. Alternatively, a well-designed session that brings together conflicting sides and perspectives, can help mediate conflict and foster mutual understanding. These are all ways in which your research will already bring a positive change, regardless of what happens after the data collection stages.

Be careful not to take on too many goals, as this risks all of them falling through. Be intentional with the impact your action research aims to achieve. In the end of the day, this is research that will produce impactful knowledge, and which includes participants in an empowering way. When you understand your participants and the community you are working with, you are more equipped to shape your action research in a way that supports a specific on-the-spot impact

[100] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[101] Fung, Archon. 2006. "Varieties of participation in complex governance." *Public Administration Review* 66 (s1): 66–75.

(while remaining conscious that this is not the primary purpose of your research, but rather a consequence of your method).

Communicate the purpose explicitly

A very important part of choosing the purpose is to communicate it to your participants and make sure you're on the same page[102]. Do this first when you invite and confirm participants, so they know what they are signing up for. Then always start a meeting by introducing yourself and your team, and then *reminding* people of why you've all gathered today. If the group moves off-topic, don't hesitate to remind them of the purpose, and to bring them back to it. That way you can also stop off-topic discussions early, and park them for later, so that participants don't feel like those parts of their experiences are not valued or seen, but rather that there just needs to be a different space and time for them.

[102] Parker (2018)

4. Preparation

Designing the meeting – let the purpose guide your decisions[103]

Reflection prompts
• What form will your meeting take to support the purpose you chose? • Which activities do you *need* to include to achieve the purpose? • What else do you *need* to fulfil the purpose?

For every detail, ask yourself why you actually want to include it. Is it a cool activity? Does it make you excited? Is it how things are done typically (in which case you are falling back to familiar ground and habitual structures or forms)? While all of these reasons can make for a nice activity, none of these answers would actually fit fully with the main purpose. When you include an activity (or another detail), it needs to be *because it fits the purpose of your meeting and brings you one step closer to fulfilling it.* The more aware of the purpose you are, the easier it is to tell what is actually needed and what is not.

It's okay if the different activities have different sub-purposes, as long as they build into one cohesive overarching purpose. For example, an ice breaker does not produce knowledge about a research question (usually). But it can have a specific purpose - to connect the participants, to build trust, to make it easier for them to share their perspectives in later activities. A break does not produce knowledge, but it allows participants to refresh and come back to the meeting sharper and more focused, so that they are more active and present in other activities. Food sustains and motivates people to be present, and it allows for building a community.

Specific activities can help answer different parts of a research question. For example[104], let's take a research question that aims to evaluate how the integration policy in municipality X should improve. One activity could lead the group to map out what resources the current policy provides – what works and supports people, and what is needed, but missing from these resources. The next activity could invite people to dream about the future, and from there – identify what obstacles they face to achieve this future, and what can remove those obstacles.

Both types of activities are important - those directly related to the research question, and those focused on facilitating the session itself. How much time you dedicate to specific activities, and the priority you place in ensuring they happen regardless of changes that come to the schedule, depends on the main purpose for this specific meeting. One way to ensure all the activities support the cohesive overarching purpose is to have a separate column while you design the program where you write down the exact reason why a specific activity needs to be included – its sub-purpose. If the sub-purpose is to gather knowledge, also include the research question and sub-questions that it answers. This will allow you to trim and remove anything that does not fit the purpose.

Bonus tip: If there is an activity you really like but does not fit the meeting enough to justify including it, don't delete it completely. Instead, save it somewhere else in a different file, so you can return to it for a future meeting that is better suited for it. Having a space to park ideas instead of erasing them makes it easier to decide what can be removed from a specific plan.

[103] Parker (2018)
[104] Insights from a participant observation

Making the schedule: How much time should activities get?

Or, alternatively: How optimistic are you?

Time management is one place where you really need to ask yourself that question. Most people tend to fall victim to the *planning fallacy,* meaning that they underestimate how much time completing a task or an activity will take. It's a cognitive bias where the time assigned to an activity is based on a best-case scenario where every single thing goes according to plan and there are no outside influences[105]. This fallacy disrupts projects and individual tasks, but it is especially dangerous when planning meetings with other people, where you always have many unpredictable factors, and you are highly dependent on the participants.

So be honest with yourself. How optimistic are you, exactly? Are you someone that gets excited at the potential of many cool activities and overpacks to a tight-on-time schedule? It's okay if you feel enthusiastic and optimistic in your planning - it comes from a good place. And feeling excited about the activities is a good sign for your hosting - after all, if you were bored by the activities, why would you wish to subject your participants to them?

However, this optimism comes with a drawback - if you make the schedule too tight, you run the risk of having to rush through activities to still meet the time pressures. And then you won't get the results you want out of any activity, while your participants will feel rushed and frustrated. Rushing an activity because you over-planned is one sure-fire way to limit how much people can contribute and deepen their reflections, which will hurt how much knowledge you can cultivate together. It also makes it extremely easy to fall into patterns of silencing people or only relying on the most active participants for opinions, as they're likely to share them first.

So, if you are an optimist: How to avoid overplanning?

Meet buffer time: your new best friend. The more optimistic you are in your planning, the more buffer time you should put into your activities. It's okay to be conservative in the estimate and even double the time you estimate an activity would take, even if you're confident it'll take less.

Try not to worry about running out of activities or things to do during the meeting. Any research topic always has more content to it, and people always have more experiences to share than what can be covered in a few hours. So even if you run through the schedule faster than expected, that just leaves you with more time for discussions and people to share their experiences based on the existing prompts, and that is okay. It's better to plan less, and buffer time is key to making sure you keep the meeting (and thus your participants) safe from the pressure of time.

But if the idea of having to come up with extra questions on the spot feels too stressful, it can help to prepare some back-up questions and activities, just in case they're needed. You can even keep the file where you parked ideas earlier at hand to help with this.

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[105] Buehler, Roger, Dale Griffin, and Johanna Peetz. "The planning fallacy: Cognitive, motivational, and social origins." In *Advances in experimental social psychology*, vol. 43, pp. 1-62. Academic Press, 2010.

With time and experience, you'll get used to how much time specific activities take, and you'll be able to reduce that buffer. To get that experience faster, it can help to actively track how long activities take. This is also a task you can easily handover to the note-taker, if you have one. If you have to do it yourself, it's something you can note while participants are engaged in individual/small group tasks. It will also prompt you to make it a habit to keep an eye on the clock while hosting, which is key to making sure you're staying within time.

Bonus tip: it's better to rely on a big, visible clock in the room, or have a hand watch, instead of checking your phone, which can be distracting for you and distancing for the participants.

Finally, you are not alone in planning a meeting. Your best resource is your team members, so this is one area where it helps to actively seek out feedback, especially if you have team members that are experienced and accurate in their timing of activities. Proactively ask them to check if your planning is realistic, and if it's not - to help in suggesting what to cut or where you can substitute with a less time-intensive activity that still achieves the purpose of the activity you included.

Learn your schedule by heart, but do not get attached to it

The big secret of hosting: Prepare very well before the meeting. But be fully willing to throw the plan out the window in service of the purpose.

Successful hosting, in most cases, starts from extensive preparation before the meeting. However, all successful hosts have to be willing to sacrifice this labor of preparing the meeting. This is because unexpected situations will arise, and adapting to participants and their needs requires sensitivity and flexibility. In-depth knowledge of their program from beginning to end allows a host to know which parts of it can be sacrificed in the interest of time. Realistic time-management is important in preparation, but even then, it won't always match how things turn out in the meeting and challenges you have to deal with – if you start lacking for time, you need to know your schedule so well that you can easily choose what to abandon on the spot to make sure the purpose is achieved.

Being flexible on the spot is really about knowing and protecting the purpose. The better you know your program and why specific activities are in it, the more you can discard, shift around, or add new elements to the hosting on the spot, as the purpose will guide your approach and choices. At the end of the day, you will need to be sensitive to your participants' needs and moods. Maybe something unexpected arises, and you need to make space in the session to address it. Maybe the participants need more time to warm up and feel safe. Maybe a certain activity lands badly with the group and needs to be abandoned, and you need to make space for repair of the emotional space. These are some of many challenges you can't predict, and to handle them you need to be flexible. Knowing the ins and outs of your schedule but being willing to sacrifice it all is how you can navigate these challenges and adapt the session to achieve its purpose regardless of unexpected challenges.

5. Co-hosting and teamwork

> *"If you have the chance, to have someone there [as a co-host] who also has a similar background, it really helps [...] with preparing, or with understanding how is it like for these people to be here, when do people feel uncomfortable, [...] what's their relationship with authority figures?"*
> - from interview with a practicing action researcher

Many challenges in hosting become easier to handle when you have a co-host (or at least other team members). You get more hands to take care of logistics and coordinate subgroup activities. You get more eyes, to catch things you missed and improve how attuned you are to individuals' needs. And it gives you more space to prioritize what you want to focus on as a host, instead of paying attention to everything. You also get more perspectives and voices, in designing sessions, in analyzing the data, in reaching people. It can be especially helpful to have a co-host (or someone else helping you) who embodies different positionalities from you and/or shares characteristics with the group that you yourself don't. This provides deeper perspectives and allows you to have someone who can check your blind spots and point out things you might not notice, helping adjust the session to the participants' needs.

There are several things to pay attention to for a successful co-hosting that maximizes the value of the experience and is also considerate of potential power imbalances within your co-host team.

Clear role division[106]. Prior to having a session, you need to have a very clear role division for what each team member will be doing during - logistics, technical support, organizing the space, cultural mediation and translation, note-taking, leading the plenary, etc. Every person needs to know their responsibilities and *why* those responsibilities are important. It's fine, even great, if, on the spot, a task needs more assistance or someone notices something and they go beyond their role to resolve an issue or offer support. But it cannot come at the cost of sacrificing their own tasks - as the roles are divided for a reason.

Open communication[107]. If you have any issues on the spot, or you want to make any last-minute changes (for example reordering how you ask questions, decreasing the time of a session, switching things around, introducing something new), make sure you communicate that to the rest of your team, especially to the note-takers. You don't need to walk them fully through every part of a decision, but if something affects their work directly, it's good to inform them on the spot as changes happen, as that makes it easier for them to do their work, or give you input that something needs to change even further. The team is in this with you, and they need to know where they're going to be able to do their roles. Plus, more heads think better together, so it can help in finding better solutions for problems.

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[106] Insights from participant observations and interviews
[107] Insights from interviews

Be transparent with your communication[108]. It's okay to suggest things to your co-hosts in front of participants, or to openly acknowledge problems as they happen. In fact, it's much better to have these discussions in front of participants wherever possible, and in a language the majority can understand (and cultural mediators can translate at least in summary). Being honest about the process will help participants feel that they are your partners in the research. Trying to save face and hide problems from them through non-verbal communication or other subtle ways to resolve things with your team, will only make participants lose trust in you, as they will likely still think that something is being hidden from them.

Of course, if it relates to sensitive or private information, and/or a specific participant, it's okay to take the discussion private and away from the group, but in that case it's better to step outside and try to extract yourself from the group as naturally as possible.

Check-in during and after[109]. It's always good to have specific check-ins with your other team members - to get a feel for how they're doing, if you need to rebalance anything at the last minute or just give someone a confidence boost, or to identify if something's going wrong. And to have a check-in afterwards, especially if there were heavier points in the session or anything felt wrong - don't gloss over this aspect of your teamwork. Having a designated check-in moment after co-hosting a session can make it much easier for people to bring up any problems or discomfort they experienced.

"Create a space in which vulnerability and reflexivity are part of the daily vocabulary, so don't allow a meeting to be like... let's go to business. Always have check-in. Always bring in space for reflecting on ourselves, but also our dynamics. [Be] very attentive to who has how much voice, and how do we balance it?

[...]

Whose voice is sort of sociologically the weakest? How can we, what can I do to create space for that? And that means that I also actively need to practice shutting up. Even though I think I have great ideas.

[...]

"Hmm, maybe I should listen first". And not listen until I get an opportunity to speak. But listen to a perspective that is not mine, but it might, if I listen properly, change my great ideas about things."

- from interview with a *practicing researcher and hosting expert*

Power and positionality within the hosting team[110]. One way to improve how you handle power imbalances is through critically reflecting on how you show up in your hosting team – in the present, but also looking back at past teamwork experiences. This can be a helpful learning

[108] Insights from participant observations and interviews
[109] Insights from participant observations and interviews
[110] Insights from interviews

ground, as you have longer and closer cooperation with people. That makes it easier to build trust over time and receive continuous feedback, when you consciously work for it.

Be mindful of any extra power you hold within the team, from your identity and background, but also power (and authority) that comes from having more professional experience or a higher formal position. It's good to establish regular check-in moments specifically for reflecting together on positionality and the challenges people face.

Reflection prompts: team check-ins
• Is everyone able to fully take the space they want within meetings? • Does everyone feel that their boundaries are being upheld? • Is there a way you can amplify and support the voices of other co-hosts, especially those that have less power than you?

II Connecting with participants

Tools and techniques to use while hosting research to connect with participants and support their meaningful participation.

6. Sensing

One of the most important skills to develop as a host is the skill to sense how the group is doing. Do people feel comfortable? Are they engaged, or excited? Do they need a break? Is there a problem that needs to be solved? To be a good host, you need to be flexible and adapt on the spot – but you can only do that if you are able to identify when the meeting is going well, and when it is not. This can be done through verbal check-ins, but it also requires paying attention to body language, and how the atmosphere in the room sits.

Verbal check-ins

Verbal check-ins are important. They acknowledge the agency of participants to know what they need, while also making it easier to express those needs. Verbal check-ins are both a way for you to get a sense of how people are doing, and a way to show participants that you care about making sure they are comfortable.

"Before we even assume that [participants] need help, I feel like we should ask them "okay but what is it actually that you need?" And how can we adjust to that, how can we adhere to your needs, etc.

[…]

I actually need to solve this problem right now. But wait, hold on. Let's actually ask this person, what do they need? Why are we assuming [what they can and can't handle]?"

- from interview with a practicing action researcher

There are many moments in which it's good to do check-ins:

- At the beginning of the meeting: to get a sense of what energy the participants are walking in with. Also, a good time to double- (and even triple-) check if participants are sitting with the correct culture mediator and that those who need translation have access to it.
- At the end of the meeting: to get a sense of how the meeting affected the participants.
- During the meeting: When the group energy drops at any point, to check if people need a break.
- After you give instructions to an activity, to check if people understood them or have questions.

    - In many cultures, people hesitate to ask questions and to show they didn't understand something, because they are worried this will make them seem stupid. Inviting questions repeatedly throughout the meeting is an important step to show that people can ask questions, and it won't be held against them.
- To check if people are ready, or if they need more time to complete an activity.
    - This check-in is best phrased by giving an exact number. Instead of an open "how much time do you still need?", which can cost more time than your schedule has space for, it's better to ask something like "How's it going, are you okay or do you need 2 more minutes?"[111]. That way you still give space when needed, but it also helps frame it so participants know when they need to finish up so the program can continue.
- Whenever you notice any signs that a problem is happening, to check what support is needed by the group or specific individuals. If you try to solve it on your own, you might go in the wrong direction and create unnecessary work for yourself, while not resolving the problem. Work together with the participants – they know their needs best, and in this way, you will acknowledge their agency and role as your collaborators.

What is not being said, but expressed by body language?

Guiding theory: feminist epistemology **the limitations of language**
Feminist epistemology argues that language is shaped by and used to support dominant groups[112]. As a consequence, marginalized groups have to use language which does not encompass their experience. Silence and what is half-said are then symptoms of an oppressed otherness[113]. This highlights the need to pay attention not just to what participants say, but also to what is not said, and also moments when participants struggle to express themselves – moments of hesitation or stumbling over words. "This halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals [...] where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting"[114].

Language in general might fail to provide the expression a marginalized person needs. Also, especially in moments when people feel uncomfortable or unsafe, it's possible that they also lack the baseline safety that's necessary to express their feelings verbally. It's scary to tell a person that they made you feel unsafe. So as a host, it's important that you pay extra attention to signs of safety or lack of it. That you notice tension and unease on time, so you can respond and adjust.

[111] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[112] Harding. 2021. "Feminist Methodologies." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, edited by Catherine Cassell, Ann L Cunliffe, and Gina Grandy, 1:138–53. SAGE.
[113] Harding (2021)
[114] Harding (2021)

Reading body language is an important part of noticing that participants don't feel safe, when they can't or don't want to express this verbally. However, specific body language can differ between cultures and ways people have been socialized. For example, crossed arms and legs are often taken as a sign that people are holding back or feeling uncomfortable. But many cultures socialize women to sit with their legs crossed by default, and that not doing so is impolite[115]. As another example, eye contact is often seen as proof that someone is paying attention. In some cultures, however, direct eye contact is considered rude; and there are individuals in any culture that struggle with maintaining eye contact due to neurodivergence, nerves, or other reasons[116]. If you understand the specific body language of the people you are working with, then it can be helpful to rely on reading it. But in general, be mindful of how you interpret body language in relation to culture. And beyond culture-specific norms, there are still specific signs of tension that you can observe.

Guiding theory: feminist epistemology
embodiment within research

Our bodies experience the world we live in in a way our rational thinking can't fully recognize[117]. The systems we inhibit place us in repeat experiences and circumstances, and they condition our bodies to behave in specific ways, establishing norms for what is "acceptable"[118]. Oppression and stress take a visible toll on the body, from how they coil the muscles to the position of the spine[119]. People who inhibit marginalized positions may adopt defensive bodily postures and restricted patterns of movement without consciously realizing it. Slouched shoulders, hesitant movements, or trying to escape being noticed, are all internalized responses to social conditioning, and a way for our bodies to protect themselves[120]. The more unsafe a situation feels, the more common these responses become.
When we experience danger or threats for a prolonged time, we become hypervigilant. Subconsciously, we scan for danger, and our muscles tense up when we experience things that make us feel unsafe[121]. Safety and comfort are only present when we also feel them on a physical level - when we are able to relax from our stress responses and survival mechanisms and *feel* safe[122].

Paying attention to embodiment – what is present in the body - is then an integral part of understanding a person's story and experiences, and of noticing whether they feel safe. Providing space within research for participants to safely tune into their bodies and encourage them to reclaim control over their bodies and how they take up space, including in a physical way, goes a long way to challenge and transform the way power impacts people[123].

[115] Insight from interviews with practitioners
[116] Insight from interviews with practitioners
[117] Pettit (2020)
[118] Lynch (2014)
[119] Boal (2000)
[120] Boal (2000)
[121] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[122] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[123] Boal (2000)

This serves to explain that paying attention to embodiment is an important source of knowledge about the experiences of marginalized groups, and it is also one of your biggest indicators of whether participants feel safe. When they feel unsafe, you can notice this by how much tension is present in their bodies. It's visible in how people hold themselves – there is a certain rigidity in their pose, and their hand gestures and articulation can be either very limited and closed-up, or the exact opposite – overexaggerated and over-the-top to cover up the tension. These are all subconscious mechanisms that our bodies use to help us hide what feels vulnerable[124].

You can find out more about going beyond learning from the body and actually challenging this conditioning within chapter 14 - on physical spaces.

What is the atmosphere in the room?

> *"It's listening to what people say, but also what people don't say. And listening to the... what you would call the music of the group. [...] I really thought "Okay, this is going in a very good direction" because the sound of the people, not the words, but the sound of the people talking to each other during the break was exactly as I wanted."*
> - from interview with a practicing action researcher

The easiest way to understand how the group is doing is by paying attention to the atmosphere in the room. Positive signs are when participants interact a lot with each other, especially int he breaks – when the program doesn't expect interaction from them. Another great sign that the group has bonded and is engaged is if they help, unprompted, when you are rearranging the space, for example by bringing materials or refreshments, or taking things away and cleaning up[125].

Listen to the flow of conversations and the tone of voices. The more energetic and vibrant they are, the more comfortable participants feel. On the other hand, when participation becomes limited, and participants become very quiet, it's a sign that people aren't feeling safe anymore.

> *"I could sense the heaviness [...] a dull heaviness, like a dark, grey kind of heavy."*
> - from interview with a *practicing researcher and hosting expert*

If you pay careful attention to the atmosphere, and your own emotions, you can sense these shifts in energy. Noticing and responding correctly to this atmosphere becomes easier with experience and learning to recognize patterns. Sometimes it's also possible to sense a specific feeling in the room by also paying attention to how you experience it. Part of getting better at it also involves doing conscious work to get better at reading your own emotions and paying

[124] Insights from participant observations and interviews
[125] Insights from participant observations and interviews

attention to your environment[126]. Tools like mindfulness and meditation can be helpful in teaching you where different feelings show up in the body and how to identify them.

[126] Allan, Helen T., and Anne Arber. 2017. *Emotions and Reflexivity in Health & Social Care field research*. Springer.

7. Everything is welcome

The current chapter is a practice-oriented approach to addressing power imbalances. It provides specific tools and approaches that you can use to provide a space where participants feel supported to speak up and express their experiences.

The most important idea here is the aim behind these tools – to show participants everything they have to say is welcome and that you are curious and excited to hear their authentic responses. To show them that you are holding this space for them to take.

Guiding theory: brave spaces and emotional reflexivity - Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner
Although safety is often identified as a priority when working with marginalized people, it is important to realize that it is actually almost impossible to establish a completely safe space. This is because power dynamics infuse every space and relation. Important boundaries can be crossed both by intention and by carelessness. Even when power imbalances are addressed and challenged, there is still a likelihood of people who are more assertive or outspoken taking space away from people who find it harder to express their opinions and feelings[127]. It is important to strive to make participants feel safe, while also recognizing that no space is ever completely safe. Instead, a more realistic and helpful framework can be establishing **brave spaces**. "A brave space allows for the emergence of anything which is present in the process[128]" - from heavy emotions and tensions, to ideas and perspectives that challenge what has already been shared in the group. Establishing a brave space requires building trust among the participants that researchers have the capacity and willingness to receive any form of expression without judgement and hold space for it[129]. Heavy emotions can be uncomfortable to hold, but it is important to identify them and allow them in. They can serve as messengers, indicating topics that request our attention, or wounds from the past that we must come to terms with, process and let go of. The awareness of emotions as integral to human experiences and thus, a valued source of knowledge, is part of what allows for empowerment within participatory approaches. In developing emotional reflexivity and holding space for our own emotions, we can learn to bear the discomfort of heavy emotions in general and to hold space for others.

Give encouragement

Consider adding the following phrase into your vocabulary: "There is no right or wrong answer"[130]. Use it freely and often in your meetings. Any moment when you notice hesitation or uncertainty from the participants, remind them that all that matters is the answer they want to give. People might feel like you expect a specific answer from them, especially if you are doing a project that comes from an official government institution[131]. So, it's especially important to remind them that you are present for their truth, whatever shape or form that takes. It's also

[127] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[128] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[129] Aabye, Gioacchino, and Wegner (2021)
[130] Insights from participant observations
[131] Insights from interviews with practitioners

good to remind people that it's okay if they don't have an answer, or if the answer is that they don't know. It can be difficult to admit this, as many people might have been shamed for this in the past. Making space for this shows people that they can be honest, without judgement.

If people hesitate to speak or cut themselves off while giving an answer, encourage them to talk without pushing. The balance is in reminding participants that if they feel comfortable answering and they want to share, then you really want to hear it.

Verbal reminders are important here, but so is non-verbal communication. Note that these are things you can (and should) pay attention to, but most of them also come naturally when you are fully present in the meeting and working from a mindset of curiosity and care:

- *What is your tone like?* When it's warm, light, or excited, you show participants that you are curious and open to hearing them.
- *What is your facial expression showing?* It can help to give participants an encouraging smile or a nod, to invite them to keep talking and show them they have your attention.
- *What are you expressing through your body language?* You can try paying attention to your posture, and especially your hands – if you appear relaxed, with more open body language, it invites people to speak and to ask questions.
- *How are you moving throughout the room?* Leaning in when participants speak is a subtle way to show that you are listening attentively. If a participant is quiet or more timid, you can show them that you really want to hear their voice also with your movements, for example by coming closer to them as they speak, or giving them our undivided attention.

Finally, when an activity is happening, allow flexibility wherever possible. Especially with more creative or physical activities, participants will naturally gravitate towards different ways of completing the activity, as different people prefer different ways to express themselves. Allow space for that – even encourage it when participants ask you if it's okay that they are doing things in a different way.

Show appreciation

Notice when participants share vulnerable truths. Pay attention to how people express themselves, or the skills they show. Whenever possible, openly acknowledge and thank them for trusting you with their truth. If a participant makes a funny joke, or a good suggestion, or helps with solving a problem for the session – also show appreciation, tell them you enjoyed their contribution or that they helped you a lot. This is subtle and doesn't take much space from a session, but it goes a long way to show that you care about people, and that you recognize how precious it is that participants are trusting you with their truth and collaborating together with you. After meetings, you can also reflect on moments that touched you and write to the participants to express that.

"I take notes every time something is happening that I am reacting to myself. I am taking a note of the skill or the place or the physical reaction, and when I

have a space for that, I say out loud to the person. So they can feel that "Oh, I'm seen here. Oh, the way I am expressing myself is valid here".
- from interview with a practicing action researcher

Look out for the voices that speak the least

In every group, there will be people who are more comfortable with speaking, either from their natural personality or through inhibiting more dominant positions than other participants. The more diverse the group is, the bigger the differences between participants. As a host, you need to pay attention to providing space for every voice, instead of letting individual participants dominate the discussion. If you notice that specific people are not participating in the discussion, find a way to invite them individually. You can point to them directly and say that you are curious to hear their thoughts on the topic. It's important to mind your tone and phrasing – you are aiming to invite, but not push. Many people hesitate to claim space but have a lot of interesting thoughts and perspectives to share once they are invited to take the space and shown that their perspective is wanted[132].

It's also possible that a participant is hesitating to share their views because they disagree with what has already been shared, especially when the group has established a consensus that this is the common view. As a host, you need to also make space for dissenting and contrary perspectives, and invite them in. Good questions to ask here can be "We've heard this view from several people, but what are some other experiences?" and "Is there anyone here who has had a different experience?"[133]. This also places emphasis on the fact that every individual has unique experiences and perspectives, and that expressing differences and disagreements is not personal or invalidating of what has been shared by others – rather, it acknowledges the diversity and richness of lived experiences within the group.

There are also different exercises you can do to support the quieter voices in the room[134]. Firstly, you can make it a practice to give people two minutes to think about their answers before starting to share them with the group. Some people struggle to come up with things on the spot, or to articulate them, so giving them time to prepare what they want to say takes some of the pressure from speaking.

Secondly, you can switch from a discussion activity to a drawing activity. You can invite participants to take a pen and paper and spend time drawing their perspective individually. After that, you can invite them to share with their neighbors, and from there gradually ease people into sharing what they drew and what it means to them.

"Everyone has a pen, you know? And everyone can speak at the same time with a pen. And with drawing... some people are less able to express things in words."
- from interview with a practicing action researcher

[132] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[133] Insights from participant observations and interviews with practitioners
[134] Insights from interviews with practitioners

Thirdly, you can split groups into sub-groups and divide the participants into groups yourselves. A good opportunity to provide more space for people who have spoken less, is to place them together, while placing all the highly active participants in a different group.

Finally, you can design discussions to have multiple sharing sessions. You can start with sharing circles of 2-3 participants per sub-group, and gradually invite participants to form bigger and bigger circles before coming together with the whole group. The number of rounds depends heavily on the size of the whole group, but having several rounds can help people gradually warm up to share their perspectives without being intimidated by the idea of having to speak in front of the whole group. This can also allow space for collective reflections to emerge from the movement from smaller circle to bigger circle.

As a final note – sometimes a specific participant will keep drawing attention to themselves and leave little space for other participants, despite your best efforts in managing activities and looking out for those who speak less. The solution here can be counterintuitive – give them more attention and space. It's good to recognize that in some cases people who try to take up a lot of space might feel that they lack it in their lives. Even if they appear callous to others, it might be a simple unmet need. Try giving them an extra 5 minutes of space to speak, and personally show appreciation for what they've brought, compliment it. Giving them that space and recognition often feeds that hunger and allows them to calm down and pay more attention to what others bring. Denying it, on the other hand, can pull you into a subtle tug-of-war game with them, triggering the feeling of being unheard and making them pull harder.

Of course, at other times, this can be a direct expression of power imbalances within the group, as someone within more dominant positionality might not recognize they are taking space away from others. In those cases, remember to protect the group's wellbeing – entering the tug-of-war game (especially as the host, where you face less risks than a marginalized participant) might be needed. If you approach it with vulnerability and authenticity, you can handle the conflicts that arise from this.

Redirecting back to the topic

Even as you welcome everything participants want to bring, you need to be mindful of the limitations of your own meeting, so it doesn't lose its form or purpose. Sometimes participants will go off-topic. This is natural, as different ideas and issues can be pervasive and call their attention at all times. There is a fine line that you need to walk between protecting the meeting's purpose, while also making sure that participants feel that they can share what is important to them and that their voices are valued, even when they get distracted with a different topic.

As a host, you can fall in one of two traps here. The first trap is the one most of us think about – if we respond too harshly and quickly cut off someone to get back to the main topic, this dismissal can discourage them from speaking at any later point. But in avoiding this trap, there is another one – that you might let the discussion get too far away from you, with specific participants taking up all of the space at the expense of other participants. Your hesitation, born out of a fear of not taking any space away from the participants, might instead make the meeting lose its purpose and waste their time.

To navigate these traps, you need to remember that your own role as a host involves keeping the implicit promise made with the meeting – that you are gathered for a purpose, and it needs to be achieved. In hosting a meeting, you hold a power to moderate the discussion and guide its focus – and the more clear you have been about the purpose of the meeting, the more participants will accept this guidance. Falling back to the purpose will make it easier for you to decide to intervene, and also easier for participants not to take it personally. Redirection becomes not a rejection of their perspective, but simply a reminder that this discussion and space has a purpose, and what they've brought is better fitting somewhere else.

Do acknowledge, especially to yourself, that these off-topic contributions are usually still important. Even when it is not the right place for them, tame any instinct to get annoyed or frustrated – remember that people talk about what is important and personal to them, and it's highly possible that your meeting touched a nerve of a different emotional experience that they've had. So, however you decide to redirect, it's important to do it without making participants feel ashamed or like they did something wrong.

This is why a subtle approach to redirecting is better. Redirecting is a way to bring attention back to the main topic without telling a participant "no, this is not right" – instead, it's a "not now" response. Whatever you say, lace it with appreciation that helps the person feel seen for what they have said. You can compliment their idea or highlight the importance of the topic. You can even express a personal connection to the topic, for example indicate that it's a topic you'd love to talk about for hours but that just for now you have to focus on something else. The best way to redirect is to make it without jarring topic shifts. Look for ways to relate what's been brought up back to the rest of what was shared – can you connect it to the topic explicitly? Is part of what the participant said relevant to what needs to be discussed next? Express that connection, and people will naturally go with the flow of the conversation.

Try to always leave an open angle for an off-topic issue to return. Also think to yourself - if something keeps coming up outside of the main topic, what does that mean? Is it an important issue that your research question has neglected? Is it a key need for the participants that has to be met, but isn't reflected in your expectations and preliminary research? Can you create a different space for this, for example a different meeting for that purpose, or a short discussion after the main session for those interested? This will also help participants for whom this issue is very pervasive to set it aside for the time of your meeting.

Repair after conflict

As participants bring different perspectives, and power imbalances affect spaces, conflicts might emerge, or mistakes might happen. An important aspect of handling it when it does, is to prioritize creating space for *repair*.

To do that, you need to acknowledge – to yourself and to the participants – that something has happened, and it has hurt people. Don't gloss over it or act like it didn't happen – that will only leave the participants feeling irritated, unsafe, and eager to leave. Repair begins by acknowledging and addressing issues openly.

Question what your role was in the conflict or mistake and take accountability if it's needed. When we make mistakes, there's an urge to defend ourselves and excuse them away, but that only makes those we've hurt feel worse. So, taking accountability can be a vital part of reestablishing trust with participants.

Seek feedback actively. This will help you in identifying your role in the conflict or mistake, and it will also show participants that you are willing to do better and that you care about their wellbeing. To get honest feedback, show that you are open to listening and that you are someone that is safe to share feedback with.

Pause the schedule and provide a break for people if emotions get too intense and the group or specific individuals are struggling with them. Often taking a moment to pause can help us calm down, to be mindful in our reactions and better hear the other perspective, and it also allows you as the host to take stock and see what you can do after the break to address the conflict. Any changes that you might have to make to the schedule are worth considering – repair, and ensuring the safety of the group, needs to take priority over the intended content of the session, because we are all human first, participants second.

Don't push repair where it's not needed or wanted. If the group is resisting having open discussions about a conflict, or returning to a heavy topic, don't push them back into it. Offer space for it but allow people to choose whether it meets their needs or whether they can do it. If someone is refusing a conflict-resolution conversation, accept that they are in charge of their needs and their boundaries need to be respected, even if it means that tension might remain. Your role is to provide the space and guide – not push or force.

Finally, learn for next time. A mistake can be either a lesson that allows you to do better, or a tragedy that begins to repeat. Your willingness to learn is what sets the two apart.

8. Authenticity and vulnerability

The importance of vulnerability

Within research, there is another power imbalance between the researchers and the participants outside of the imbalances addressed within chapter 2. Researchers inherently have more control over the research process and thus the participants' experience, even when they try to make this process more equal by redistributing the control in a participatory manner. Researchers also have more formally recognized knowledge and experience, and usually have an official academic or governmental institution backing their research. All of this places researchers within a role of authority within the research process. Even when researchers focus on conducting research ethically, this power imbalance is still present and shapes how participants view and respond to researchers[135] - similarly to other imbalanced dynamics covered in chapter 2.

When you host participatory action research, you have an opportunity to challenge this imbalance and strive to make the process more equal. To do this, you need to actively seek out ways to equalize the field between the participants and you, to show them that they can trust you with their truth, their authenticity. One important way is to be vulnerable with participants and present yourself as human first, and researcher second[136].

As mentioned in chapter 1, you need to consciously set aside your ego and the need to protect your image. Public speaking and hosting often come with the expectation that the person doing it needs to project confidence and strength, but these norms can create more distance between you and the participants, reinforcing power imbalances. When you walk into a meeting with your guard up, it signals to others that they should do the same. If you want participants to share their truth and to voice the full depth of their pain, their anger, and the struggles they face, then you need to lead by example[137]. When you lower your defenses and show people your own emotions and moments of weakness (where it is appropriate to share them), you place trust in participants that they won't use your vulnerability to hurt you. This encourages reciprocity by showing that there is room for expression of emotions. Because of how group dynamics work on a psychological level, participants will naturally mirror the energy and engagement of the host[138], and the depth of their vulnerability will only ever go as deep as you yourself are willing to go[139].

While hosting, there are many moments that are an invitation for authenticity and vulnerability. From acknowledging logistical challenges within the session, to admitting if you feel nervous or tired, any moment of tension can be a chance to prioritize vulnerability over a (falsely) perfect image. Any challenges and moments where you feel yourself hesitating and closing down are actually an invitation to go against learnt responses and dare to be vulnerable[140]. But if it feels too unsafe to express your vulnerability, that is an important signal that you haven't established enough trust within the group. If you, with all the power and authority as a host and as a

135 Harding (2021)
136 Insights from interviews with practitioners
137 Insights from participant observations and interviews with practitioners
138 Insights from participant observations and interviews with practitioners
139 Parker (2018)
140 Insights from interviews with practitioners

researcher, feel that you can't risk opening up, then how can you expect it from the participants, who generally have less power than you?

It's worth it to make space for connecting on a human-to-human level and identifying experiences and values that you have in common with the participants. Communicating challenges in a transparent way and inviting participants to collaborate in solving them shows that you value them as equal contributors. All of this allows you to build a shared relationship of trust and collaboration, and you can lessen the impact of power imbalances on that relationship.

Including personal examples

For people to feel safe to open up and be vulnerable, they need to see that their truth is safe with you, that it will be received with care, and it won't be used against them, or dismissed carelessly. Showing present emotions is one way to do this. Another way is to speak of your own lived experience. When you give examples of issues you faced, you trust participants with your vulnerability, and you show them that you are also a human who has struggled with systemic issues. One of the most powerful ways to connect with participants is by showing them that you understand their experiences and pain through relating to it from your own experience. It's also a way to give helpful advice, because people tend to listen more to what comes from personal experience.[141]

It's important to be cautious - remember *why* you're sharing this experience. Is it to connect, or does it come from a triggered place? At the end of the day, action research is about protecting a space for the participants to share their stories. Are you sharing to help set the space and make it safe, or are you taking it away, by speaking too long/often about your own perspective? It's a fine line between remaining a researcher but showing your own humanity and vulnerability, versus commanding the room and centering your own experience[142].

Relying on your personal lived experience is still an important tool to empathize with participants and display vulnerability, even when you don't share similar experiences with them.

And you can show understanding for the experiences they bring up in other ways. For example, you can show that you validate their experiences by expressing what you recognize from previous research and from what you have heard from other people with their background. It can be a way to show them "I hear what you are saying, and I see that you are not alone in this experience"[143].

However, it's important not to overdo it by extensively recounting what others have said about similar experiences. In most cases, the participants are already aware of this. The urge to overexplain might stem from wanting to prove that you are someone who listens and creates space for marginalized voices, but this is also an ego response to avoid. Remember why you are sharing this – to validate their experiences and show you're making an effort to understand. It's about building connection and demonstrating recognition, even if you haven't personally experienced what they have.

141 Insights from participant observations
142 Insights from interviews with practitioners
143 Insights from interviews with practitioners

Including humor

Being authentic and vulnerable doesn't mean only sharing heavy emotions and the parts of us that are sensitive. It is also important to make space for joy and to make things light where needed, as this helps people connect and is also a way to challenge and lighten the pressure power imbalances add within relations.

Humor is one of the most helpful tools you can use as a host. A good joke breaks the ice. It can put people at ease and transform emotions like anxiety or worry into joy. Laughter (when genuine) signals to the body "hey, I'm safe here"[144]. It can help relax and let go of tension. It can smooth over otherwise difficult parts of hosting like transitioning between activities, getting people's attention, or interrupting, by making them in a lighter tone that signals to people "don't take this personal, let's work together"[145].

Humor is also a powerful tool to show participants that you are on their side, that they can trust you with their stories and experiences and you won't use what they share against them. This works when you make jokes about the "system", a.k.a. any social or institutional structure that a marginalized community experiences tensions with[146]. This type of tension often creates a perceived binary of the system/structure vs the participants. Through jokes, you can position yourself on the side of the participants and show them that, to whatever extent you are working with systems, you are still someone who is critical of the structures hurting participants and that you are there to work with them to make things better. When individuals experience systemic marginalization, they often distrust institutions and people representing structures that have harmed them in the past. That's why it's important to show that you, the researcher, are on the side of the participants[147]. When you express joking criticism towards the structures in place, this shows participants that they are safe to express their own criticism, both seriously and through humor. Authenticity is important here as well - these jokes need to come from a sincere place, otherwise the group will sense that you don't mean it, and it will break the atmosphere of trust you've been establishing.

As a general rule, do everything you can to avoid lying to the participants under any condition. This would be unethical, and, if they realize you lied, it will completely break the trust you've established.

Another type of jokes you can make are about yourself. These can (and should be) harmless jokes that don't undermine your own role, but simply show a more human side of you (for example, joking about feeling hungry before a food break). This can help break through power imbalances and put chunks in the protective armor your role as a researcher provides you. Through this, you can show participants that, at the end of the day, you are all humans on the same side and that you can have fun together.

Do jokes come naturally to you?

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144 Insights from participant observations and interviews with practitioners
145 Insights from interviews with practitioners
146 Insights from participant observations
147 Insights from interviews with practitioners

For some people who are more comfortable with their sense of humor, making jokes comes naturally. Knowing your program and feeling comfortable in your role as a host allows you to be lighter on your feet. It gives you more room for flexibility, and thus – creativity, so you are more likely to come up with a good joke on the spot.

But if coming up with jokes on the spot is difficult, it's okay to prepare some jokes in advance and have them in your head in case a good opportunity arises. Of course, note here that the timing is important – even if you have a nice joke, saying it without the right context for it won't work.

Another trick is to borrow jokes from other hosts and contexts. If a joke made you laugh in a meeting, remember it and keep it for your own future use. A good overall rule of thumb is to pay attention to your own experiences as a participant – reflect on what things you enjoy and what doesn't work for you, and *why* you feel that way. This is a big part of improving as a host.

What is your audience's culture and sense of humor?

Answering this question is important within preparing for a session. Sense of humor is one factor that varies a lot from culture to culture. If the group has a cultural background that's different from yours, it's important to check-in with cultural mediators and other people from that culture prior to your meeting, to get a sense of what jokes you shouldn't make, and what jokes people will find funny.

Exercise caution in when you joke and what jokes you make

There are two important points of caution to make here. Firstly, there are also risks in how humor affects the way you are perceived. In most research with marginalized communities, jokes can help lessen the weight of your power and authority as a researcher by showing that you don't take yourself too seriously. But in more formal settings, for example when public officials are involved at different points of the research, jokes can make people perceive you less seriously, as humor is less accepted in those settings.

Secondly, be very mindful with your jokes. Make sure that you are laughing *with* the participants, not *at* them. Jokes at the expense of systems are largely good and safe, because they provide an outlet for people to express the pain these systems cause. There is also no harm to any specific individual at the end of the day. Jokes at the expense of marginalized people, on the other side, *only* cause harm.

9. Consent

"I do not intervene because I think there's something that was touched that was too intense and I'm not going to push people [...] You can invite a group into the heavy and painful [but] don't push. Don't."
- from interview with a *practicing researcher and hosting expert*

A very important part of hosting action research is to intentionally provide people with opportunities to give or withdraw consent, and to remind them to notice and uphold their own boundaries. This is one area where the power difference between a researcher and the participants is most present, and this is a very important opportunity you need to take in establishing a more even dynamic between yourself as the researcher, and the research participants.

When you design your research, you have the freedom and power to decide what you do with it, and where your boundaries lie – what you're willing to do and what not. It takes conscious, intentional effort, to provide the same freedom and power to participants.

Be mindful – what kind of pre-existing pressure are you navigating?

In many cultures, consent within social settings is not practiced extensively[148]. Oftentimes, cultural norms and social etiquette dictate that we abandon our own boundaries for the sake of preserving the peace. Try to look back at your social life – how many times have you stayed at a gathering after you wanted to leave because you didn't want to offend the host or break the social code? What about more formal settings – how many times did you feel uncomfortable in a formal setting, but stayed because it's considered rude and offensive to leave midway through? Peer pressure doesn't even need to be explicit, oftentimes it's codified into culture[149]. And when you're from a marginalized group, there is even more pressure to follow the implicit social rules, to avoid the risk of aggravating those with more social power than you[150].

Consent, in social settings, is mostly taken as a blanket yes-or-no at the beginning. If you show up to any gathering, then you have to do everything involved in the gathering, and stay until the end, or at least until it's considered polite for the type of gathering you are attending[151].

This is a type of socialization that you need to consciously work against, if you'd like to empower your participants to stand as your equals. In a way, think of it as explicitly giving participants permission to break away from norms and honor their own boundaries before any cultural norms or expectations of politeness. This is a tricky way to frame it, of course. In a perfect world, you shouldn't be able to give or remove permission for this. However, in our world, people are used to social settings where upholding boundaries over following norms is frowned upon and perceived as transgressive behavior. You are fighting a conditioning that differs from person

[148] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[149] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[150] Lynch (2014)
[151] Insights from interviewed practitioners

to person and culture to culture[152] – so when you give permission to people to prioritize their boundaries, you actually make it clear that they are safe from potential negative consequences.

How to embed consent throughout your action research?

"I try to remind people of their power also to say "No, I'm not gonna do this exercise".
[…]
Remind yourself during hosting, to remind people to take care of their own boundaries.
[…]
Often the person deep down knows how far they can go and what is healthy for them. But it's then important to give [the participants] this space and time to recognize "can I be daring?" [or] "oh, I don't want to share this story right now, it doesn't help me"."

- from interview with a practicing action researcher

Take time in the beginning of the meeting to affirm this "permission" to participants. Make it clear, for yourself and for them, that they are always in full control. That they can choose when and what they share, how deep they go into experiences, or even to exit the room if a particular activity or conversation crosses a boundary for them, even while it is ongoing. Encourage participants to notice and express their boundaries at every step, and that they can step in and out based on their own comfort and safety. This needs to be a no-questions-asked permission: part of being able to uphold these boundaries means not having to explain why something is a "no" – just that it is. It's good to also state that you are available to hold space and offer support for participants if they would like to discuss why they left[153]. If someone does leave during an activity and returns for another, you can follow up with a non-invasive check-in (so checking how they are feeling but not why they left) and a reminder that they can talk to you if they need it.

When planning the meeting, look carefully at your schedule. Which activities are more emotionally heavy, or more likely to bring out very personal, painful experiences from participants? As a rule of thumb, when you are giving instructions for those activities, it's good to briefly remind people again that it's okay for them to uphold their boundaries.

As we experience pressure and social conditioning to systematically neglect our own boundaries, we stop noticing them[154]. So, it's good to help participants focus on their boundaries. Ask people to check-in with their own emotions and their bodies - how does their energy feel, how does their breathing change when they think about the activity? Do they feel safe? Do they feel worried but open to trying something new? Or are they starting to feel frozen, or heavy, heart beating loudly?[155] Doing this check-in with participants and pointing out body

[152] Lynch (2014)
[153] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[154] Insights from interviewed practitioners
[155] Insights from interviewed practitioners

cues can help them identify when they are close to their limits. That makes it easier for them to protect those limits before they are crossed.

These reminders and check-ins can also be applied on the spot, if you sense that the energy in the room is getting heavier. Or that people are hesitating or avoiding eyes and trying to fade into the background. Any signs of tension or discomfort during an activity are signs that you need to remind them they can opt in or out of their own choice. That they still have the control, the power to decide how they participate in the research. That they alone can decide what they want to share and be more daring with, and what feels unsafe or unhelpful to share.

It's possible that the meeting has external limitations to this. For example, the research client might be offering compensation for the participants' time and travel costs. If this compensation comes with specific conditions, such as participants losing the compensation if they are not present for the full session, communicate it to them. Make it clear what the external limitation is but affirm that there will be no other repercussions outside of that, and that you encourage them to prioritize their boundaries. And to remind them again that they can also choose to be silent in a specific activity, if they don't want to participate but are able to stay in the room.

What if nobody participates in anything?

> *"I see the incredible impact that consent has. People learning to say no. And then discovering that their 'no' is their 'yes'. Because if you don't have a 'no', then you don't have a 'yes' [...] not a full 'yes'."*
> - from interview with a *practicing researcher and hosting expert*

All of this probably sounds a bit scary. You might wonder – if you are continuously reminding participants they can leave, won't they just get up and leave before you're done, and then you get no data? Precisely because so many of our social settings rely on implicit rules to force people to stay, the idea of giving away so much control can come across as scary, and as a risk of your research failing.

But firmly showing people that they can safely chose what they consent to actually tends to have the opposite effect. The simple truth is, when people are not able to say "no" (for any reason), that means they also are not ever really saying "yes". When you make it safe, even encouraged, to say "no", you are empowering people and providing them with agency. When people feel consciously in control of where the limits are, they can step in more completely and wholly. Having the power to decide where the line is enables people to more accurately decide how deeply they want to go in sharing their experiences, or in trying new things. It also makes it easier to step outside of the comfort zone – when you feel pushed to leave the comfort zone, every step outside of it can feel like danger, because you have no choice or control[156]. But when you are the one who decides how far to step out, a lot of the anxiety goes away, and you get a much bigger area between the end of comfort and the start of danger – an area where you can experiment and try new things or express what you otherwise might really struggle to express. It is in giving people permission to say "no" that you make them feel safe enough to give a genuine "yes".

[156] Insights from interviewed practitioners

And when they do exercise their “no”, that is a good thing. It means they feel safe enough with you to express this boundary, and that you’re not unknowingly harming them by triggering them. Most likely, people will be exercising their “no” when genuinely needed. After all, you are doing action research together and they consciously chose to be present and participate, so they are interested in achieving the goals with you. And precisely because they are from marginalized groups, they probably feel a deep need to be listened to, to have their experiences recognized, so they will share, as long as they feel safe to do so.

If the only reason they stayed and participated in your research activities is because they felt like they couldn’t say no while feeling unsafe or retraumatized, then you are just doing damage and hurting them. It is through affirming their power to consent that you achieve an empowered collaborative relationship, that your research becomes action research.

10. Icebreakers

Icebreakers are a tool that is widely beloved by hosts, but generally hated by participants and the butt of a lot of jokes. Icebreakers have a bad image, because many of them fall through. When executed poorly, they lead to a tense and awkward atmosphere that leads to more distance between people. Participants feel put on the spot and hyper aware of themselves while paying little attention to others.

Despite these issues, icebreakers have persisted as a tool, because (when done right) they offer a very important function – bringing the group together and making it more comfortable for individuals to speak. It lets participants get to know each other and the host and offers them a low-barrier opportunity to speak, warming them up to talking regardless of any nerves and shyness[157]. Prior to any meeting, participants will have had all sorts of experiences and moods in their day, and different things going in the background. Icebreakers also help participants get the energy level needed for a good meeting and offer them a way to mentally step into the meeting and leave everything else outside. Icebreakers are that important moment of connection which transforms individuals into a group[158].

So, what icebreakers should you choose? How to do icebreakers to get the benefits without the issues? Start by reflecting on your own experiences as a participant. Take a look at the rest of this chapter *after* you have done this reflection on your own personal experiences.

Reflection prompt: icebreakers you experienced as a participant
Think of meetings you participated in - what were icebreakers you hated? Write them down on paper. Why did they not work for you? What felt wrong with them? Knowing what makes an icebreaker fail is key in finding good icebreakers. Now think of icebreakers you enjoyed and also write them down. Why did you enjoy them? How did they make you feel, when they were first introduced, while you were doing, and afterwards? Do you feel that they helped you connect with the other participants? What about the icebreaker shaped that connection?

A (non-exhaustive) OpenEmbassy toolkit of icebreakers[159]

Introduction prompts:

- "Share your name and a fact about yourself that you don't usually share".
- "Share your name, and your favorite [Dutch] word".
- "Share your name, which city/neighborhood you live in, and what's your favorite thing about where you live."

For more engagement and to make it more active, all of these icebreakers (and any other "introduce yourself" type of icebreakers) can be played with a ball that participants throw to the next person they pick to speak after them. That speeds up the pace of the introduction round, while also introducing an active element of play which energizes and connects the group.

[157] Insights from participant observations
[158] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[159] Insights from participant observations

Introduction round activities:

- "The last one will sing."[160] Let the participants introduce themselves as normal but tell them that the last one to speak will have to sing their introduction. This motivates people who are usually shy and go last, to rush to go earlier, and speeds up the pace of the introduction in a way that energizes people. It's best to encourage participants to clap and provide a melody for the last person who sings, as this can make it less scary for the singer and also bring the group closer together.
- While everyone sits, stand up and remove your own chair. Go in the middle of the circle and share a fact about yourself. Everyone that relates to this fact should also stand up and walk to a different seat. The last person standing in the circle is the next one to share a fact about themselves, and new people who relate stand up and walk to a different seat. This is a good icebreaker that helps people find traits in common with each other, while also giving them something slightly competitive to do, turning it into a light game.
- Print decks of 10-20 pictures related to a theme (it can even be your research question), one deck per participant. Ask each participant to pick 1 or 2 pictures that answer a question related to the theme. Then instruct the participants to go around and share their name and chosen pictures with other participants. This is an especially helpful icebreaker for mixed-language groups where few people speak the same language, as it allows the group to connect visually, rather than verbally.
    - An example to visualize this: OpenEmbassy did a research project where the research question was about what people need to feel at home in their new municipality. The pictures were related to different representations of home and participants were asked to pick what home means to them and show it to others. Multiple people who couldn't understand each other's language found themselves connecting over a shared image of home.[161]

Energizer activities:

- "If you feel good, stand up/jump. If you feel okay, clap. If you don't feel good, sit down". Ask people to express how they are doing today by following the instructions. After everyone has chosen their action, tell them that you'll name the different moods in random order, and everyone should do the action for that mood. Start calling out good-okay-not-good in a random order for a few rounds. People will move a lot, and it will mix up and amplify the energy in the room.
- Ask participants to stand up. Together with them, pick three cities. It can be the biggest cities in the country, or the cities most people have been to, or any other arbitrary way to decide. Attach a different action to saying the name of each city. For example, city "A" can be clapping, city "B" can be jumping, and city "C" can be spinning around in a complete circle. Do a test round of naming each city once and letting people match the action. Then start calling out cities in random order and gradually speed it up. Finally, end by pointing to individuals and asking them to name the city/action. This is a good energizer that gets people moving, while also allowing them to still stay in the same part of the room, without getting into each other's spaces or feeling observed.

[160] Parker (2018)
[161] Insights from participant observations

Take this toolkit, and the icebreakers you listed, as a starting point to read the next part. It will give you a potential ingredient list for good icebreakers – things which make the icebreaker work. It is non-exhaustive and, just like a recipe for a meal, you are free to substitute - but some ingredients may be harder to replace than others. Try to see which of these ingredients are present in your own experiences, and how you can include more of them in your future sessions.

Ingredients for a good icebreaker:

- Know what the main goal of your icebreaker is – is it getting people to know each other, or helping the group connect, or energizing? This depends on where in the session you do it, and what is needed at that time.
    - *Bonus tip on energizers:* It's good to have 1-2 types of energizers prepared in case they are needed, but not specifically plan them in the schedule. The best way to decide when and which energizer to use is by paying attention to the energy levels of the group.
- As the host, bring a lot of enthusiasm and energy into the icebreaker. If you feel awkward or bored by the icebreaker, it's the wrong icebreaker. The more enthusiasm you start it with, the easier it will be for people to get into it without feeling self-conscious.
- For introduction prompts, give people a moment to plan what they'd like to say before you start with introductions. Otherwise, participants will miss out on the first few introductions because they will be too busy worrying about what they'll say when it's their turn.
- Know that you as the host set the tone and model the icebreaker. You have to start first. If you give the instructions but ask someone else to go first, you are, unintentionally, showing participants that you don't feel comfortable doing it yourself, which will only make them feel more awkward about doing it. Starting yourself shows that it's not a big deal to do the activity, and it takes the pressure off the first person to start. When it comes to introductions, such as the one about the unusual fact, you also need to be very intentional. The type of answer you give will model what kind of answers the rest of the participants give, as they will take it as an example of what the instructions are asking for. They will match the direction you take, and especially the depth you go into with your answer. They will only go as deep and personal in their introductions as you, the host, are willing to go – not further.
- Get people thinking and moving. If people are working on a task together and focusing on doing something "correctly", like following where a ball is, or doing the correct action when you call out a word, that focuses their attention on the task instead of on being self-conscious and thinking of how others perceive them.
- Be gentle in getting people moving, and pay attention to the energy of the room. The timing of an energizer is important. It can help boost the energy of the room, but it can also be too intense or awkward if people are not comfortable with each other yet.
- You can speed up the pace of icebreakers by telling participants to pick who goes after them at the end of their own turn.
- If someone seems more hesitant and anxious to participate, encourage them with a smile and a nod, or even stating that you are curious to hear their introduction. Or if you

notice they are hesitating or stilted while speaking, compliment their introduction afterwards to show them they are not being judged, and that their participation is appreciated and valued. This will help them ease into participating in the main activities afterwards.

11. Hosting starts before the schedule starts

Good hosting of a meeting starts much earlier than the start of the meeting. This is because connecting with people and building trust is work that takes time. There are many tools to build trust within a group session, but it's important not to overlook the individual connections. You can have 1-1 contact with the participants already before the meeting starts, and that initial contact can actually go a long way about setting a good foundation for your action research.

Recruitment stage

This initial contact doesn't have to be elaborate - it's just a moment of touching base with each other and letting them get to know you, showing them that you are happy they will be at your meeting, and that you are interested in hearing their perspective, showing that you value their individual contribution. When you recruit participants for your research, be mindful – you are already stepping into a hosting role, even if the meeting hasn't started. This is the first moment of contact where you have a chance to show them that they are safe with you and that you want to treat them as a valued partner with agency in your research. If you have this connection established already, participants will feel more committed to showing up at the meeting, but they also will feel less nervous, as they will already know there is a friendly face there that cares about them - you, their host.

Welcoming people before the schedule starts

"You have then the moment where the program starts, but that's not where the conversation starts
[...]
always, I try to create the space for relating, for laughing, for getting the right music out of the out of the group beforehand, before the program starts."
- from interview with a practicing action researcher

The time before your session starts, when participants walk in, is a very important time in your hosting, where you can establish individual connections with participants. Try to greet each participant individually and strike up a short conversation where you express genuine curiosity about them. It can easily take the form of a simple check-in about how their day was, or how their travel to the location was like, or how they are feeling about the session itself. This is a key moment to approach participants with warmth and openness, to make them feel welcome. It also gives you a chance to tune into the energy of people as they walk into the room and get a sense of their needs at the moment, their personalities, and the way they express themselves. It's also a good moment for you to step into the room consciously and tune into the meeting prior to the start, so when the program starts, you're already fully tuned in.

Prepare your energy

Even prior to arriving at the meeting, it's important to be mindful of your energy on the day of the meeting. Guard the hours before the meeting carefully and protect your time from tiring tasks or intensive group meetings. Try to get enough sleep, and to eat well. Your energy and mood will have a strong impact on the group, so stack the odds in your own favor. In the hour or two prior to the meeting (and this is prior to starting the logistical preparations on the spot), try to clear your head and give yourself some time and space to just relax. This will allow you to gather in your energy and focus it, so once you go into the meeting, you are able to pull it all in, instead of struggling to step away from other concerns and tune into the meeting.

If it feels difficult to hold your boundaries about these prior hours, just remember that you are not only doing this for yourself - but also for your participants, and for the quality of your research. Resist the temptation to do much in little time - instead, focus on what you need for a quality meeting.

> *"And also the whole group dynamic, depends on the host's emotional situation a lot. [I had several meetings] when I was super busy during the day and then the whole [hosting] was all over the place, it was very disorganized. It was very difficult for me as well, to gather together with the group."*
> - from interview with a practicing action researcher

III Logistics

Your interactions with participants happen in context – physical and digital spaces, with external limitations of time and unexpected distractions. Being mindful of this context, making the right decisions and choosing the right tools to adapt to it, can go a long way to ensure that your research succeeds.

12. Starting the schedule on time: including or excluding participants that arrive late

One of the biggest challenges of hosting any meeting, even outside of action research, is to start the schedule on time. Have at least one person from your team show up early and plan time for things to go wrong. Especially when traveling to a different city or a location you don't normally work in, it's good to give yourself an extra hour or two on top of the time needed to prepare the place, for any issues that arise.

Communicate start times and remind participants to show on time, even asking them to come a bit early, to minimize latecomers. But even with all the reminders and helpful tips to minimize delays, you will likely still have latecomers. Unexpected issues happen to everyone, and you don't know what people are dealing with. It's good to provide a certain level of acceptance for people to be late, but still be able to join your meeting. And if participants are running late, it's good to give them a call to get an idea of how late they will join, so you can still plan ahead and prepare.

There are several decisions you need to make regarding latecomers, ideally while designing the meeting already.

How much are you willing to delay the start?

It can be tempting to delay the start until everyone arrives and you can start with a full set. Resist this temptation and have a pre-set allowance for how much you are willing to wait for participants before starting. Between 5 and 10 minutes is considered a good standard, more than that poses risks.

It's kind to want to include latecomers and make sure they don't miss out on anything. But you need to also be considerate and respectful of everyone who showed up on time. Those participants likely put more effort into making sure they are on time and able to give you their full attention. If you delay the start of the meeting too much, it will likely cause frustration for them and make them feel like they wasted some of their time by showing up when you asked them to.

Also, the allowance you give to latecomers sets future expectations. If a person shows up on time to a session, but it starts 20-30 minutes late to wait on someone, then in a future session with the same host, this participant will not prioritize being on time – they might themselves come 30 minutes late, thinking others will be late and that the host and the meeting will wait for everyone.

So when you decide how much time you will give to latecomers, don't forget to also consider the needs of the rest of the group and of future meetings. The needs of your own schedule also matter – if delaying the start for latecomers brings frustration and rushes meaningful activities, is the delay worth it?

Where do you draw the line for latecomers to still be considered participants? How will you include them and bring them up to speed?

Latecomers will join at different parts of the schedule, rarely when it's convenient for you. Critically examine your schedule: which parts can you easily catch a latecomer up to speed on, so they are still able to join the group and participate meaningfully? If they miss the ground rules and values of the meeting, will you be able to take them aside and brief them in 5 minutes while the group does a different activity? If they miss the icebreaker and introductions, are there opportunities later in the session to connect them with the rest of the group? Where is the line after which including them, risks breaking the trust the rest of the group has established? Where is the line in the content and activities, where they will have missed too much to be able to meaningfully participate? At what point will the client who gave you the research project no longer recognize them as a full participant? What if you are hosting several sessions with a group, and a participant misses the first session? Would you be able to safely introduce them to the rest of the group and connect them?

There are no fixed answers to these questions. The answers will differ from meeting to meeting and from group to group. How you answer one question can also influence the answer to another question. For example, if you are able to easily include a participant later in the session, then you can eliminate any delay of the start time. But if it's impossible to include participants after the start time, then it might be worth delaying it a bit further to give everyone a chance to be included.

The decisions you take regarding these questions should first be shaped by the purpose of your meeting, and by understanding the needs of participants. For example, a session oriented more towards community-building would suffer if participants join after the start time, since trust will need to be reestablished. A session with many small sub-groups makes for an easier inclusion of a latecomer, as they can connect more quickly with just 2-3 people.

In any case, it's important to make these decisions before your meeting, otherwise you will face a lot of pressure to figure it out on the spot. If you make specific accommodations for a participant because you are aware they face more barriers to show up to the meeting than the rest of the participants, it's good to communicate with the group that you have a good reason to give this accommodation, while maintaining the privacy of the participant and not sharing the details.

13. Coping with distractions

Distractions offer challenges that happen outside of your control. You cannot plan for them, but you need to handle them as they arise. This chapter will provide a few questions and tips to guide you in handling them.

Rely on the role division - is it your job to handle this, or is it someone else's?

Resist the temptation to jump into fixing issues that are not yours to address and trust your fellow co-hosts and team members. This will allow you to make the most out of your own role. You can offer help, but don't try to take things in your hands when it's not requested – this will undermine your team members and distract you from your own tasks.

Who can you ask for help?

Sometimes it might be better to delegate the task of handling a distraction to a different team member. For example, if it's a technical issue or something related to the space you're in, you can ask a different person (or even someone from the location) to solve it, and you can readjust your program to work around the issue, so you can still continue the session and make the most out of the time you have with the participants.

What you can also do is to ask the participants how they want to handle the issue or if they can help you. This is not applicable in all cases, of course, but in the ones that it is, it can actually acknowledge the agency of participants and include them in the process as valued collaborators.

What is causing the distraction?

If it's something external, whether continuing or momentary, it's best to acknowledge it directly, and only then continue with the session as if it didn't happen. You might want to skip over it to protect the time for your session, but not acknowledging it lets it steal more attention from you, by making participants wonder about it. Just as in regular life, ignoring an issue only makes it grow bigger, at least in people's thoughts. If you acknowledge it instead, and then move on, it will show participants clearly that it's not a problem and it's not something worth paying attention to. And, if you handle it with humor and lightness, it can turn the distraction into a momentary rest from the topic at hand, recharging the energy of the group.

If the distraction doesn't have an external cause, it can be more difficult to figure out where the issue is. If you are losing the attention of the group without a specific reason, you usually have one of two problems.

Problem one: It's been too long without a break.

Attention spans have a limit, and that limit can become significantly shorter from factors like the temperature being too hot or cold, harsh lighting, less air in the room, people getting hungry, etc. Check-in with people and add a 5-minute break if needed. The rest of the session will only benefit from it.

As a general note, make sure not to forget about breaks, regardless of how much time pressure you are under. People are more involved, concentrated and engaged, and work better when they get breaks when needed. You can either plan those breaks, or keep them in mind and do check-ins. It can help to know the schedule and track the group's energy levels (and your own) - take stock at the end of every activity, because that's the perfect time for a break. But if you are someone who gets wrapped up in activities, or you struggle in sensing your own limits, or you get stressed out by time pressure - do yourself a favor and schedule the breaks, so you don't have to think about them on the spot. Even a 5-minute break every hour can already make a big difference.

Problem two: You went too fast.

If you try to rush the group, it will cost you their attention. This is most visible in how well the group follows instructions. If people ask you to repeat instructions, or they struggle to follow through and complete activities, it might be a sign that you went too fast in your explanation. In many cases, people won't admit that they didn't understand, and instead they will get distracted and engage with other things, often to hide the fact that they didn't understand.

"I speed it up and then the group immediately reacts,
[…]
all over the place and then it takes so much more energy to collect [their attention] back.
[…]
No one, no one likes to feel stupid, but it's very also difficult to admit that they did not understand and ask to repeat. You know, it also takes some inner power. So, I, as the moderator, the host, have to admit that it all started with my way of explaining. It's not that the person did not understand or that they are stupid. It was me who was hurrying up so I have to change the whole atmosphere right now."

- from interview with a practicing action researcher

You are in danger of having this problem when you are running behind on schedule. What you have the most control over, and can most easily speed up, is your own explanations and instructions. But there is a reason why the usual way of giving explanations – calmly, step by step, works. A calm pace ensures that everybody has space to process information or ask follow-up questions without feeling like they have to interrupt to ask them. If you are nervous about falling behind on schedule, it is better to communicate that with participants and ask them to work with you to catch up, without hurrying your own explanations. When you go too fast and lose the group's attention, breathe out, take a step back, and explain things again. Work together with the participants to refocus and catch up.

If it’s not one of these problems, then rely on open communication to figure out what the problem is and how to adjust the program on the spot to better fit participants’ needs. This is also a good point of attention for reflecting after the session - where did you lose participants’ attention and why did the activity not work for people?

14. Physical spaces

Working with physical spaces is a very broad topic with many, many things to consider. This chapter focuses only on elements that came up during the research for this guidebook, and which are directly related to making participants feel more comfortable. But please note that there really are many more issues to cover within this topic, and which are addressed in various other texts and resources.

How should you organize the space?

To answer this question, you need to define what you want the relationship between the participants and yourself to be, and what you need from the space around you to support those relationships. When it comes to action research, it is important that this relationship focuses on openness, connection, collaboration, and presenting people as more equal.

Guiding theory and suggested further reading: embodiment and the body as a site of resistance – Augusto Boal
As covered within chapter 6, our bodies remember the experiences we go through. We internalize and adapt social conditioning on a physiological level. This is a natural response of the body, which comes from our survival instincts. There are various approaches within participatory action research that approach the body as a site of resistance and liberation from oppression. Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed is the most formative approach in shaping this idea. His work offers great resources for any researchers that would like to include activities that directly center the body. He includes multiple activities and tools for externalizing oppression and breaking conditioned patterns of movement and posture. Within Theater of the Oppressed, individuals can reconnect to their bodies and reclaim autonomy.

The focus of the guidebook you hold is on universal tools and techniques that you can apply within multiple action research methods, regardless of the research questions you work with. Within this focus, there are specific aspects that you can include from embodiment, which still allow you to challenge social conditioning and empower participants, even when this is not the center of your research and not part of your research question. You can do this by paying attention to how the structure of physical spaces affects the body.

Room layout

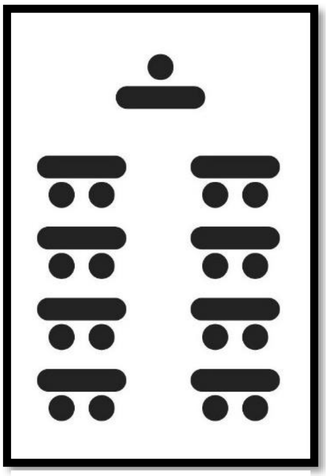
Guiding theory: embodiment – Michel Foucault
Each room layout has a story, and our bodies remember, and respond to the story. So much of our lives are spent within institutional environments with specific dynamics (mainly teacher-student and employer-employee, but it can also be seen in other systems, like doctor-patient). These environments rely on different disciplinary measures to condition people into fulfilling the roles the institution needs them to take. These roles are shaped by the norms and expectations within the institution, and by the broader norms and values of the society around it[162].

[162] Lynch (2014)

Returning to a specific room layout is a very strong physical cue that triggers the conditioning within our bodies, subconsciously guiding us to fall back into the roles we have been conditioned in. A different room layout can instead prime our bodies for having a different experience – it can lessen the subconscious effect of social conditioning and instead prompt new ways of inhibiting a space and consequently a meeting.

There are many ways to understand room layouts and physical spaces, but a helpful starting point can be in paying attention to how people are physically positioned relative to each other, and the positioning of desks. For example, educational sciences have found that classroom design strongly affects the nature of the relationship between students and teachers, and how education conditions people[163].

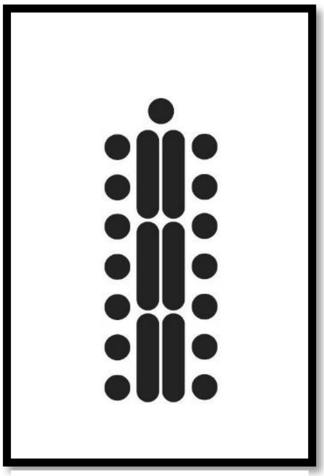
Here are some of the most common room layouts, with the interpretation of how they relate to action research.



Layout 1: Traditional rows

A layout where tables are arranged in rows and face the front of the room, emphasizes the most traditional teacher-student dynamic. It immediately elevates the person at the front, the host, as someone who will transmit knowledge to participants, and that that the role of participants is to receive this knowledge. Within classrooms, this set-up promotes passive learning and individual work,[164] which makes it detrimental for action research. It puts distance between the researcher and the participants, and it signals that there is no collaboration and mutual respect for different types of knowledge[165]. Your first priority, if you ever use a room like this for your research, should be to rearrange the tables.

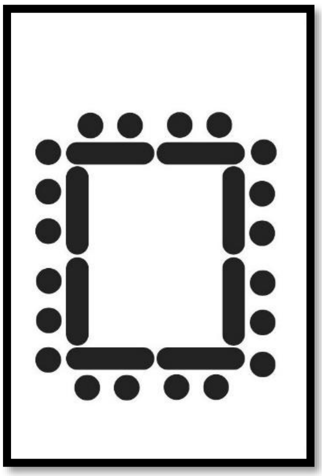
[163] Biesta
[164] Biesta
[165] Insights from engaged field work



Layout 2: Desks together, host at the helm

One possible set up is to turn the tables and push them in, so you make one giant table with participants sitting together. Within this layout, you bring participants closer together and enable them to look at each other. This allows for more interaction between them. Notably, the second layout still places someone at the head of the (row of) tables, which creates an implicit impression that the host is the head of the meeting and that their word holds more weight.

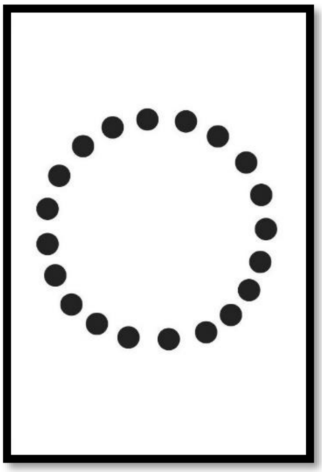
This is one way to rearrange the tables, so people are still facing each other, and it invites collaboration between them, but there is no clear "head of the table" position. This makes the dynamic between people more equal, by not having a clear seat that separates the host from the participants.



Layout 3: Circular arrangement

Layouts 2 and 3 still have some limitations. Firstly, they only work for small groups – with big groups, you will either run out of space to fit everyone, or you will place participants too far away from each other, limiting how much they can collaborate. Secondly, when rearranging the room in those layouts and connecting tables and desks in ways they are not originally designed for, there is a risk that some participants will end up in awkward positions relative to the legs of a desk. This is not very impactful for what you do in a meeting, but it will be a constant source of low-grade annoyance and frustration for those participants – emotions which are good to avoid causing. Finally, having objects between people, especially desks, can serve as a mental and emotional barrier that puts more distance between people. Desks also limit how much participants can move around the room and go in smaller, and different sub-groups. The more obstructive tables are, the less participants will want to move, as moving will require more effort and feel more disruptive.

The common issue in all these limitations is the desks. Desks can be necessary when your meeting is centered around writing or drawing activities, or food or games. But in preparing your physical space, be very mindful about the extent to which they help you and whether you need them enough to justify dealing with the limitations above. A possible adjustment could be to have a separate area where participants can use tables for the activities to require them but to have a different layout for the main activities of the group – one without desks.

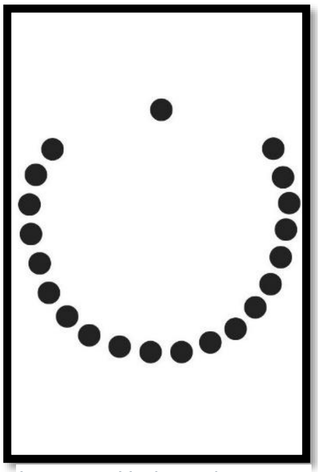


Layout 4: Closed circle, no desks

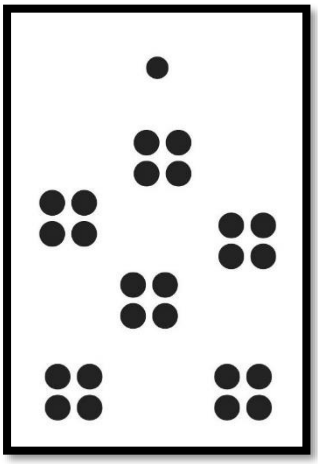
This is the layout that allows for the most collaboration and communication, positioning participants as equals to the researcher. There are no physical barriers, and everyone is sitting together. No seat stands out as more important than the rest, and more people can fit together in the same room, as there are no desks taking up space anymore. Or if desks are in the room, they are pushed to the corners.

This layout has two drawbacks. Firstly, if you have a presentation that is key to running the session, there will be people sitting with their backs to it who will constantly have to turn around to balance between watching the presentation and engaging with the group. Secondly, for singular sessions and/or big groups, it can obscure your role as the host and make it difficult for you to get people's attention and guide the session. As a layout, it is most effective when you are hosting smaller and more intimate group sessions. It also works really well for big groups that meet in multiple sessions. In both of these cases, it is easy for participants to recognize that you are the host.

Within singular sessions and/or big groups, or when you have a presentation, you can opt for a U-shaped arrangement. That way you get all the benefits for easy communication and collaboration of the circle layout, but you as the host are singled out and draw attention naturally. Because there is no desk, you are less imposing or authoritative, but any form that separates you from the group will still highlight inequalities between you and the participants.



Layout 5: U-shaped, no desks



Layout 6: Scattered clusters

Finally, if you have many different groups per language, or your program relies on many sub-group activities where participants should stay within the same group, it can help to scatter the groups within clusters, with or without desks. Spread the sub-groups throughout the space as evenly as possible, so no group is singled out or feels isolated. Make sure each sub-group has good visibility of the other sub-groups, so that people stay connected to the bigger group. At the same time, avoid placing sub-groups too close to each other. As each sub-group has its own discussion, if they are too close, noise can become an issue as sounds clash into each other.

Other points to consider when designing a physical space

- When you have a bigger group with rows or lines of seats in some form, arrange the chairs in a curved line, rather than a straight one. Within a straight line, participants have to twist around a lot to talk to their neighbors, while a curved line makes communication easier. By placing participants in seats that enable them to look at each other more directly without moving, the barriers for them to talk are also lessened.

- If you have a smaller group and someone leaves early, take away their chair and invite people to come in closer, to close the gap. Otherwise, people around it might subconsciously feel left behind. They will also be more isolated, since they won't have a partner to talk to on one side. This creates more work for you and for them to connect to the group.
- Be careful with podiums. Many rooms have them, and they can be tempting to make it easier for everyone to see you and pay attention to you. But the podium also elevates you physically and creates a stronger impression of power difference. So especially if you have a big podium, check if you can still host and be seen by everyone if you simply stand or sit *in front of* the podium, so you are on the same ground as the participants.
- Having different types of chairs is completely okay, but try your best to have all of the chairs have the same height for the seats. Uneven seating can also disrupt dynamics and implicitly position participants on higher seats as more important than those on lower seats[166].
- Avoid seating participants by open windows, where they might experience the draft of air. Also avoid seating people with their backs directly to the door, especially if the door stays open. This will be a source of distraction, as people are naturally drawn to paying attention to exits and areas where unexpected movement can come from. Finally, if you have a table with refreshments, avoid seating participants too close to it, as the group will walk over their space too much in getting refreshments.
- See what else you can do to make the space feel cozy. Don't hesitate to play around and test things and adjust them prior to the meeting. If you are using an external location, that can limit how much you can change, but there is always room for creativity. Check what the lightning is like and what décor you have within the room – some of it might be distracting or inappropriate, while other pieces can help make the room nice to be in. Also check the entrance of the space – is there a way to make it more inviting and welcoming?
- Avoid seating participants by open windows because the air draft might make them feel uncomfortable. Also avoid seating them with their backs directly to the door, as it will pull their attention away. Especially if the door is open, any noise or movement will cause them to turn around and look for it, as a natural self-defense reaction. Also don't put them too close to the table of refreshments, since you don't want people walking over them.

Is the space difficult to find? If it's difficult to find, or transport is a struggle on that day, this might delay the start of the program as more participants run late. Also, when people are running late, this often triggers frustration and anxiety in them, which is not a great mindset to enter a meeting from[167]. So, in advance - if you anticipate something will slow down participants, communicate it with them, so they prepare more time for getting to the location and have more tips on how to get there with less hassle. You can also make signs that lead participants through the building or ask a colleague to wait for participants at a designated easy-to-find location and lead them to the meeting[168].

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[166] Insights from interviews with practitioners
[167] Insights from participant observations
[168] Insights from participant observations

15. Digital spaces

Online sessions can be more accessible for people who are unable to join in-person (for example due to health reasons, time or travel constraints, or other reasons). They also come with unique challenges. Namely, you have less senses to rely on in sensing the energy of the group and tuning into their needs. You also have to fight harder for people's attention, as they are joining your meeting while staying in their own personal world, with its own usual pressing concerns. There are a few tools that can help with smoother online hosting.

1) Be very proactive in picking people to speak during introductions and moments where a question is posed to the whole group. In person, this might make people feel singled out, but online it is invaluable. Because our ability to read body cues is limited online, many people wait longer to speak up in online meetings because they want to be polite, and they can't gauge if other participants would like to speak. So, if you pick who speaks next, it allows you to speed up the meeting significantly, and it also draws people's attention more as they know they might be called to speak when they don't expect it. Alternatively, you can ask participants to pick who speaks next after them, for the same effect.

2) Encourage people to turn their cameras on. You can even make jokes about not wanting the group to leave you out to dry as the only one without a camera – ask them for solidarity, and people will come through. Congratulations – now you can rely at least a bit on facial expressions and body language. Peer pressure is a strong force – the more people turn their cameras on, the more will follow. When most cameras are off, most of the participants will avoid having their own cameras on, because otherwise they feel like they are being observed by a silent majority.

At the same time, make sure you are not pressuring or singling out individuals who still have their cameras off after most people turn them on. This is one subtle way to allow room for participants to consent and determine their own limits.

3) Utilize breakout rooms. Smaller groups are much easier to engage with online, and this will help participants warm up to deeper discussions and really flourish.

If you have a bigger group, it is possible that you might lose some more passive participants during the breakout, as they feel too pressured to participate. You can mitigate that by reminding people they can decide how much to speak even in smaller groups.

4) Run a tech check of everything prior to the meeting. What things will you be doing? Are you confident you know how to do them? Always double check, you don't want to be stuck doing an update to your software or drivers when you are supposed to be hosting.

5) Go heavy on the reminders. Online meetings are easier to forget, as they don't require people to plan for the physical act of getting there. Make sure to send out more invites and reminders than you might for an in-person meeting, including reminders on the day of. That improves the chances of more participants attending your meeting.

6) Online meetings offer a unique opportunity to communicate quickly with your team, so try to utilize it. Set up a separate channel that everyone knows to monitor. It's a great space to quickly get information out and ensure that problems are getting handled. For example, you can continue taking care of the actual hosting, while someone else from your team is looking up how to fix a technological issue, all without interrupting any participant who might be speaking at the moment.