

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Advancing social justice and democracy through participatory research

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/51j5t3nx>

Journal

Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

ISSN

0143-4632

Author

Bucholtz, Mary

Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.1080/01434632.2025.2553736

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Advancing social justice and democracy through participatory research

Mary Bucholtz

To cite this article: Mary Bucholtz (11 Sep 2025): Advancing social justice and democracy through participatory research, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2025.2553736](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2553736)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2553736>



Published online: 11 Sep 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 116



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

COMMENTARY



Advancing social justice and democracy through participatory research

Mary Bucholtz 

Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

Situating this special issue on “Participatory Approaches in Researching Multilingualism: Democratisation and Social Impact” in the current global moment, this commentary discusses the intellectual and political stakes of participatory research in anti-intellectual, undemocratic times. The discussion draws on insights from the introductory essay and the contributors’ research articles to explore the various ways that the authors answer the question: What does it mean to participate in research? Answers offered by the papers raise issues of researcher and participant positionality; participation as a matter of degree; the dialogic and discovery-based nature of participatory research; and the temporalities of participation. The commentary then considers two challenges facing scholars doing participatory research: inequity in the research relationship and institutional inequities that devalue such work. The essay concludes by enumerating some of the ideals of participatory research illustrated in and inspired by the special issue.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 August 2025
Accepted 22 August 2025

KEYWORDS

Academic justice;
collaboration; democracy;
equity; participatory
research; social justice

Introduction

When I was invited to join this special issue two years ago, the world – and especially my corner of it, in the United States – was a different place. Since then, the concerns that animate the contributions in these pages have only become more urgent, and the authors’ strategies and insights have become more needed than ever. At a time when leaders and their acolytes around the globe seem hell-bent on dragging us all into an undemocratic, anti-intellectual, violent, and hate-fueled future, the participatory approach called for and exemplified in the preceding articles offers us a hopeful and even powerful alternative. These days, I often find myself reminding my disheartened students (as well as my disheartened self), ‘Research is resistance’ – and participatory research is even more so. Embracing inclusive, equitable, and democratic processes makes our research better, both intellectually and ethically, and it also makes our world better. I make this claim not out of a naïve sentimentality, but as a simple statement of fact: The more justice and democracy we bring into our work, the more justice and democracy we bring into the world, even if our impact seems slight compared to the scale of the problems we confront. In a participatory approach, our goal as researchers concerns not scholarly knowledge production so much as the creation of a shared space where community experts – the language users who participate in our research as our collaborators in one way or another – partner with us to produce knowledge alongside us, in accompaniment (Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee 2016), in their own ways, for their own purposes. Centring the expertise, agency, and self-determination of those we work with and for is one of the most pressing tasks confronting linguistics as well as the academy at large, particularly at a time when these core aspects

of what it means to be human are under relentless attack from the highest echelons of power. In this context, the articles in this special issue help us not simply to imagine but also to work purposefully towards a different future, one we aim to enact in microcosm in our own research relationships, and yet one that is often difficult to bring into being due to the unjust, inequitable, and exclusionary practices and structures of traditional research and of contemporary academia.

In an earlier dark period not so long ago that served as prelude to the current global crisis, my coauthors and I pointed to the ideological narrowness within linguistics that needlessly limits its relevance and utility to anti-racist and other social justice efforts. Addressing those who hold such restrictive views, we asked, 'Why is your linguistics so small?' (Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz 2020a, e312). This special issue on participatory perspectives on multilingualism is precisely the sort of 'big linguistics' that we had in mind – not because of its international scope and vast array of research settings, but because of the breadth of its vision and the depth of its commitment to social justice. In other words, the 'big linguistics' that is needed is a democratic, socially just linguistics that places the self-determination of marginalised communities at its heart. This is also necessarily a 'slow linguistics' (in a much broader sense than that called for by Kabatek 2019): It requires extensive time to build trust-based university–community partnerships, to carry out socially meaningful research, and to share the findings in a maximally inclusive and equitable way. And it is a 'humanizing linguistics' (cf. Paris and Winn 2014) as well, in that it seeks to dismantle the usual hierarchies and divisions separating researcher and researched in favour of human connection and collective inquiry and action. The 'big linguistics' that this special issue envisions and brings to life is also big in another way: in its generous international and interdisciplinary scholarly engagement. Where linguistics has often jealously guarded and policed its disciplinary boundaries (Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz 2020b), the authors of these articles take up ideas from across the academy and around the world, including from the Global South and other marginalised perspectives. This democratisation of the academy is imperative for scholars working within participatory frameworks.

As the co-editors discuss in the introduction (Bodó, Fazakas, and Szabó 2025), the process that led to this special issue was also participatory. I was invited into the project after it was under way, and the authors and editors warmly welcomed me and generously made space for me to engage in extensive dialogue with them as part of that process; my contributions included facilitating group meetings as well as one or more individual meetings and/or email exchanges with most authors and at least one round of detailed written comments on each paper. I thank the contributors and editors for their forbearance with my copious comments and exuberant level of engagement with their work, which were no doubt rather overwhelming. (Anyone who has shared their writing with me can attest that the 'Mary Bucholtz treatment' is often an intense experience of receiving feedback!) Upon reflection, I have come to realise that due to my positionality as a senior US-based scholar I likely crossed the line a number of times from constructive input to prescriptive or even colonising imposition, by forcing a particular kind of US academic discourse on authors who come from a wide range of scholarly traditions, both disciplinarily and linguistically. Although the authors and editors were too polite to point out my missteps, I appreciate this opportunity to critically reflect on my own shortcomings in fostering academic justice as I pursue my ongoing goal to advocate for and provide more transparent, informative, and collaborative scholarly feedback and exchange. I am also very grateful to all the editors and contributors who provided thoughtful comments, helpful corrections, and valuable suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.

My task in discussing these papers is a challenging one, as the editors and authors are already authorities on this topic, many of them having been part of a recent collective effort to establish participatory sociolinguistics as a distinctive perspective (Bodó et al. 2022, 2023), and others having extensive experience doing research that is aligned with or adjacent to participatory approaches. The papers also draw from and contribute to other participatory frameworks from various disciplines, including participatory action research, citizen science and citizen sociolinguistics, linguistic citizenship, collaborative anthropology, community-centred, critical, and decolonial perspectives,

and more. In this commentary, echoing some of the key points made in the editors' introductory essay, I consider some of the most significant issues that emerge across this collection of articles, which illuminate different facets of the realities, benefits, and challenges of participatory research. I first summarise several key characteristics of participatory research as exemplified by the papers: participation and positionality; participation as a matter of degree; participation as dialogue and multidirectional discovery; and the temporalities of participatory research. I then address the ongoing challenges of inequity, both within the research relationship and with regard to institutional inequities that disadvantage researchers who take a participatory approach. Finally, I suggest that these common threads woven through the articles enable us to reflect more deeply on the democratic nature of participatory research and also demand that we rethink the way that research is done on every level.

What does it mean to participate in research?

This special issue raises the fundamental question: *What is participatory research?* or better, *What does it mean to participate in research?* I find the latter framing useful in order to centre community members rather than academic researchers, since the displacement of researchers' authority and agendas in favour of community members' agency and goals is a key aspect of participatory research. Each of the papers offers a slightly different answer to this question, but all of them share a vision of participatory research as a necessary corrective to conventional scholarship.

Participation and positionality

As the articles compellingly demonstrate and argue, participation is first and foremost a matter of positionality – and this applies as much to academic researchers as to our community partners (cf. Bucholtz et al. 2023). Both in our meetings and in my feedback on preliminary versions of the papers, I encouraged the authors to critically reflect on their own positionality, not only as scholars but also simply as people, and to consider how their subject position benefited the research in some ways and constrained it in others. As Gani and Khan (2024) point out, pro forma positionality statements can reproduce colonising and other oppressive relational structures between researcher and research participant, while ethically responsible reflections on researcher positionality start from a perspective of humility rather than certainty or self-absolution. Such discussions are necessary for at least two reasons: as a means of ethical accountability and because they compel us to step out from behind the protective façade of our researcher identity and make overt to ourselves and our community partners our reasons, both personal and professional, for doing the work we do, and the benefits and limitations of our positionalities in the research process. At the same time, acknowledging our vulnerabilities in print can be tricky or even risky. It is therefore important for senior and professionally secure academics to take the lead in establishing a scholarly norm of critically reflecting on our positionality in our writing in order to make it safer for more junior and more vulnerable academics to publicly discuss their positionalities as well. In light of this risk, it is particularly noteworthy that several contributors were PhD students at the time of the research. For instance, Szabó (2024) provides a thoughtful account of his complex positionality as a researcher/learner who gradually, through ethnographic engagement, became a full-fledged member of the diasporic group of Hungarians in Catalonia who were the focus of his doctoral research. Of particular note is the way that the lines between research relationships and friendships blurred over time, thanks to the convivial social space that the research provided during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As this example shows, our positionalities as researchers are always defined in relation to other people – most significantly, the community members who participate in our research. Ideally, participatory research creates opportunities for academic researchers and our community partners to reflect on the different perspectives we bring to the project and to strategize how to avoid

reproducing hegemonic social and research hierarchies in our work together. This commitment is illustrated in the article by Csanád Bodó, Noémi Fazakas, Blanka Barabás, Veronika Lajos, and, among others, Angela, Ceci, and Gina, community language experts from Lészped in the Moldavian region of Romania (Bodó et al. 2024). Rejecting the hierarchical relationships that structured their previous research with the language experts, the academic researchers committed to a more democratic approach that prioritised their community partners' goals and expertise, leading to the collaborative creation of a tabletop game that they collectively decided can be played only in the presence of the language experts, rather than a more traditional research output. In the same way, in Lexander and Thyness's (2024) paper on using innovative participatory methods to study migrants' multilingual digital communication in workplace and educational settings in Norway, the authors share Thyness's critical reflections on her previous experience as a teacher, and particularly the negative emotional impact of being unable to implement inclusive language practices in that context; they note that her experience directly informed the research project. In this case, researcher positionality helped shape the structure and goals of participatory research, but other authors discuss the ways in which a participatory approach can instead unsettle researchers' positionalities and particularly our professional status as academic experts. Pujolar and Puigdevall (2025) critically reflect on the challenges of bringing their disciplinary expertise to a collaborative project in Catalonia that trained volunteers to teach Catalan to immigrants. As they describe, their community partners, who were professionals and experts in complementary areas, recognised and valued the researchers' expertise but sometimes critiqued or sidelined the researchers' sociolinguistic perspective due to their own goals for the project; as a result, the authors write, they often felt uncertain of their role in the collaboration. Indeed, all of the authors demonstrate in various ways that participation is closely connected to affect (cf. Bucholtz 2021).

Degrees of participation

The papers also exemplify a second characteristic of participatory research: Participation is a matter of degree. As they show, a key consequence of giving up some of our authority as academic experts and democratising the research process is that our own participation takes a different form than in traditional research. However, participation by our community partners does not mean simply taking up the role usually inhabited by an academic researcher; instead, collaborative contributions are necessarily of diverse kinds, and one of the most important roles an academic researcher can play in participatory research is to take on the logistical and institutional tasks that we are best positioned to perform so that our community partners can focus on the aspects of the work that only they can do. In other words, equitable participation doesn't mean that everyone does the same things in the same ways to the same extent but that each collaborator contributes to whatever extent and in whatever ways are most valuable and feasible for them and for the project. Thus, in their citizen science project with Finnish and Polish youth, Laihonen, Deutschmann, and Molek-Kozakowska (2025) found it necessary for teachers to play different roles at each partner school: While Finnish teachers were compensated for their participation and could actively collaborate, Polish teachers did not receive additional funding or time for the project, and therefore an active collaborative role would have led to an inequitable situation for them. Similarly, Hooft and Arnaut (2024) discovered in the course of their multisited collaboration in Belgium with migrant learners of Dutch and their teachers that educators and other professionals were more able to participate than learners, due both to the latter's schedules and to their lack of experience with formal meetings. The authors note that finding ways to facilitate learners' participation in meaningful and comfortable ways is a crucial next step in their continuing research. The article by Heltai and Tarsoly (2024) offers valuable insights in this regard. The authors created a series of workshops to foster dialogue between their long-time Roma collaborators and interested non-Roma residents in a Hungarian town divided by racial tensions. Crucially, the workshops were carefully designed to produce new interactional possibilities and thus were held in centrally accessible public spaces and

structured to disrupt dominant (in)securitised narratives. Such research demonstrates the importance of considering how physical spaces, the involvement of other participants, and the discursive structure of project activities may foster or inhibit full participation.

Participatory research also varies in scale and thus in the degree of direct interaction between academic researchers, especially those at more senior levels, and our community partners, particularly those who occupy structurally precarious or vulnerable positions on the basis of race/ethnicity, migration status, language background, and/or other factors. In the large-scale projects carried out by Laihonon, Deutschmann, and Molek-Kozakowska and by Pujolar and Puigdevall, the lead academic researchers trained students or interacted primarily with non-academic professionals or volunteers, who in turn worked directly with learners. Studies of this sort, where academic researchers mostly orchestrate project activities behind the scenes, contrast with those conducted by other contributors to the special issue, who generally worked directly with the community members most immediately involved in the research. While both types of projects have advantages and disadvantages for democratic inclusion, in either situation the nature of the lead academic researcher's participation is ultimately less significant than the nature of the participation of community members, whose involvement is the *sine qua non* of participatory research.

Participation as dialogue and discovery

This upending of the traditional research hierarchy is motivated by the recognition that academic researchers have a great deal to learn from our community partners. Centring dialogue and participant knowledge is thus vital in all aspects of a research project. For example, the language learning initiative that Pujolar and Puigdevall discuss was organised around the liberatory Freirean principle that all participants are both teachers and learners, and interactions between migrants and volunteer tutors were therefore conceptualised as conversations rather than classes. Moreover, the value of participation is intellectual as well as political and ethical; participatory research is higher-quality research precisely because it centrally involves multidirectional learning and discovery. Hooft and Arnaut discuss in detail how extensive dialogue with the teachers/practitioners participating in their project strengthened the research. They also note their community partners' surprise and appreciation that the academic researchers were so open to their input, an indication that their efforts to dismantle institutional hierarchies and centre participant expertise were effective. Lexander and Thyness's mediagram methodology involved the participatory building and sharing of knowledge in two different ways: First, as a participatory method, it entailed the iterative, dialogic creation of a co-constructed research object by academic researchers and their community partners; second, it constituted a valuable tool for further knowledge sharing between employers and employees in the study's workplace site and between teachers and the researcher in the school site. Likewise, Laihonon, Deutschmann, and Molek-Kozakowska, working within the framework of co-creative citizen science, emphasise the ethical risks of traditional citizen science, which often treats participants as data sources rather than as knowledge producers in their own right, and challenged such an orientation by creating opportunities for the young people in their study to share their projects with their peers as well as to present their work in a formal university setting.

Such participant-centred dialogue is crucial because, as Heltai and Tarsoly point out, the traditional process of academic research is often alienating to non-academic participants; hence it is important for us to find engaging and accessible ways to collaborate with our community partners (The authors have clearly succeeded in this goal, given that they regularly coauthor with their community partners in ways that are rewarding for all parties; e.g. Heltai and Tarsoly 2023.). For Szabó, this process entailed summarising in plain-language Hungarian his preliminary analyses, which were originally written in English-language academic style, and inviting his community partners' responses in group feedback sessions. As he shows in his analysis of one such session, the resulting dialogue yielded insights not only into his research findings but also into his own positionality,

when one key participant finally began to orient to him as an insider rather than as a newcomer in the Hungarian diasporic community in Catalonia.

Bodó and collaborators offer multiple examples of learning as an omnidirectional process in their study. To begin with, the academic researchers provided ‘Hungarian classes’ to their Moldavian community partners, who in turn provided ‘Csángó classes’ to them. (The scare quotes are the authors’ and may suggest some scepticism both about conceptualising these exchanges as formal classes and about viewing Csángó and Hungarian as entirely separate languages.) Further, the design of the collaboratively created game combined the community partners’ local knowledge with the academic researchers’ understanding of language ideologies. Finally, and most strikingly, multidirectional discovery was evident in the unexpected outcome of the game as an ideological intervention: Despite the knowledge shared by the Moldavian community language experts regarding Csángó’s multilingual interactional practices, most players embraced the ideology of Csángó as an ‘endangered’ Hungarian variety rather than as a contact variety or a form of translanguaging, even when it led them to lose the game, thus revealing to the academic researchers the difficulty of dislodging this deeply held ideological perspective. (I had the opportunity to participate in this study as a game player, so that I too became part of this network of multidirectional learning – and also fell into the ideological trap of trying to ‘save’ Csángó!)

Time and participation

A final characteristic of participatory research observed in these articles is the often complex temporalities involved in such work (see also Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee 2020). Time is a scarce resource under neoliberal conditions and thus was a condition of participation in many studies, with some potential participants marginalised or limited in their activities due to a lack of available time. And because participatory research is almost inevitably slow research, many of the projects are multi-year in scope and still ongoing. In some cases, research that was not originally conceived of as participatory in nature became more participatory over time (Szabó 2024); in other cases, researchers report that they are seeking ways to broaden the participatory nature of their research as it continues (Hooft and Arnaut 2024; Lexander and Thyness 2024). Moreover, a challenge for many researchers who use participatory methods is the conflicting temporalities between academic time and the timeflows that structure the lives of our community partners. Pujolar and Puigdevall, for instance, note how the sociolinguistic content they provided to the trainers of the volunteer language tutors had to be ‘squeezed into’ the tightly scheduled training programme – and was sometimes squeezed out again by harried or confused trainers.

Inequities in participatory research

The previous discussion indicates that the characteristics of participatory research explored in these papers present challenges as well as opportunities. In the remainder of this commentary, I call attention to two such challenges, both involving different aspects of inequity in such work, and how the authors navigated them.

Inequity in the research relationship

The overarching challenge of participatory research, as addressed in these papers from different angles, is the problem of inequity between academic researchers and our community partners. Researchers embark on participatory projects with a host of structural advantages and institutional resources that community members rarely have access to, and it can be easy to slip into traditional research-driven patterns of interaction even when deliberately setting out to do equitable participatory work. Avoiding such pitfalls therefore requires constant vigilance and active effort on the part of researchers. For Hooft and Arnaut, this issue led them to embrace the Hymesian concept of

ethnographic monitoring as a way to ensure a democratic process of collaboration. Heltai and Tarsoly's strategy was to make a concerted commitment to amplify the perspectives of community partners as 'the voice worth hearing' in the workshops they co-organised, thereby institutionalising dedicated spaces for community-centred dialogue. Meanwhile, Bodó and collaborators worked to overcome this issue by focusing their project on a topic selected by the Moldavian community language experts; the tabletop game emerged from this decision-making process and was led by the community partners rather than the academic researchers.

This process of giving up power is a theme in several articles. Laihonon, Deutschmann, and Molek-Kozakowska note that learning 'how to loosen control' over research processes and outcomes was a key aspect of their collaboration as part of a large international team of academic researchers, university students, high school teachers, and pupils. As they report, this experience led the research into unexpected and fruitful directions, such as when a group of Polish pupils decided to launch an awareness campaign about the youth mental health crisis, prompting the research team not to redirect them to a more traditional linguistic topic but rather to guide them to explore the social and linguistic dimensions of this issue. The resulting campaign so impressed a group of visiting Finnish pupils and teachers that the Finnish school emulated it the following year. Giving up power, however, is not necessarily easy or comfortable. As Pujolar and Puigdevall write regarding the title of their article, 'The expression 'moving aside' highlights our continued feeling of being bereft of the steering wheel, having to follow the lead of our partners and adapt to developments in many practical aspects'. Among the challenges they confronted were how to appropriately address the problematic ideologies towards migrants held by some of the volunteer tutors and how to manage resistance to learning about language and sociolinguistics on the part of volunteers with professional expertise in other areas.

In participatory work, power inequities are at play not only between academic researchers and our community partners but also between different kinds of community members. Lexander and Thyness found that the mediagram method was effective in generating productive dialogue between migrant employees and their employers but less effective in the school setting, where migrant parents viewed the research as extractive: While they shared information about their multilingual digital communication practices with their children's teachers, the teachers did not share information with them. Yet the authors rightly observe that in a more reciprocal arrangement, the methodology has great potential to reduce inequities between parents and teachers as a tool for fostering communication and mutual understanding.

Less explored in these papers, and in the field, is whether 'studying up' – that is, doing research that focuses on elites and structurally powerful groups – is possible or desirable in a participatory framework. This question looms large in the present moment in the United States and elsewhere, where genteel bureaucratic power has given way to an unbridled and unapologetic lust for raw power. The risk of ideological or institutional capture may be too great in such a context, although it is worth pondering under what conditions, if any, such a collaboration might be useful for a social justice-oriented research agenda.

Another aspect of inequity in the research relationship is confronted by all the contributors due to their commitment to participant-centred qualitative methods and often specifically to ethnography. On the one hand, ethnography by its very nature positions the researcher as learner and co-participant in the everyday life of the community, thus creating some of the conditions conducive to democratic research; on the other hand, ethnography is not inherently democratic, given its origins as a product of colonialism that all too often has been used as a tool for exploitation, surveillance, and domination. Moreover, the disciplinary fetishisation of audio- and video-recorded linguistic data in our discipline can lead to subtle or even overt violations of participants' privacy and self-determination. It is refreshing in this regard to see that several of the articles (e.g. Bodó et al. 2024; Hooft and Arnaut 2024) rely largely or entirely on ethnographic reflections and/or fieldnotes, data sources that unfortunately are often devalued in linguistic scholarship as somehow less 'real' or

less ‘objective’ than recordings. Finding alternatives to methods that participants may experience as invasive is crucial to creating a truly equitable participatory research relationship. Yet as other papers in this issue demonstrate (e.g. Heltai and Tarsoly 2024; Szabó 2024), recordings are important tools for representation and can be inclusive rather than intrusive when participants are full partners in the research process.

Institutional inequities in doing participatory research

Beyond inequities within the research relationship, a second type of inequity arises in participatory research that is not necessarily directly discussed in all of the articles but has almost certainly been a factor in every project: the institutional inequity facing academic researchers who are committed to participatory work. Simply put, participatory research is harder than traditional research. It is more logistically difficult, it requires more time, it is more emotionally intense, and many things can (and do) go wrong at every stage. Funding programmes are rarely well aligned with the pace and processes of such research, and work of this kind may not be viewed by academic gatekeepers as research at all but instead as mere ‘public service’, with correspondingly less material support, prestige, and professional reward. Moreover, the results of participatory research are often not even recognisable as such within the neoliberal structures of constant accountability that regiment contemporary academics’ lives. How does a neoliberal productivity matrix assess a tabletop game (Bodó et al. 2024) or a mediagram (Lexander and Thyness 2024)? How does it assess research impacts that are affective (e.g. pupils’ deep engagement with the issue of mental health in Laihonon, Deutschmann, and Molek-Kozakowska’s study) or affiliative (e.g. community members’ continuation of Szabó’s group after the research ended and he left Catalonia)? The contributions of participatory research to scholarship as well as to partner communities are far greater than can be measured via metrics based on traditional ‘deliverables’ such as academic publications. In many cases, their impact can only be fully appreciated in the contexts in and for which they were developed rather than being ‘generalizable’ or ‘scalable’, as the neoliberal academy demands. In short, the new forms of academic work produced by participatory research require new forms of academic recognition, support, and reward.

In light of this situation, it is unsurprising that both the researchers and the participants in these studies identify disproportionately as female; not only are cis men less likely than people of other genders to be involved in service professions such as teaching or social work, but as several of the articles observe, participatory research is often more appealing to women in our partner communities. The feminisation of qualitative and ethnographic research (cf. Philips 2010) is closely connected to its institutional devaluation. Thus, materially and symbolically valorising such work is an essential step in undoing inequities both within and beyond academia. This is not to say that gender balance should necessarily be a goal for every project, but rather that we as researchers need to be attentive to the ways that participatory research can exclude as much as it includes, for both institutional and structural reasons.

Further, because these articles are based on research carried out in languages other than English, all of the authors faced the fundamental linguistic injustice of being forced to choose between having less space to make their argument and omitting the original language in order to make their work accessible to an English-language readership, a decision that individual contributors dealt with in different ways. This is an inequity that goes well beyond participatory research, but it is especially troubling for researchers doing participatory linguistics, who due to arbitrary and inequitable space constraints in publications must literally excise the words of research participants and replace them with English-language translations. Normalised yet arbitrary academic practices of the sorts discussed here limit the potential of participatory research to undo structural and institutional inequities. At the same time, participatory research is well positioned to expose and challenge these inequities and advance academic justice in our own universities and disciplines.

Conclusion: goals for socially transformative participatory research

I conclude this commentary by proposing what I consider some of the ideals of participatory research. These emerged during my reading and re-reading of these inspiring articles, as I pondered their implications for transforming the very nature of scholarship and knowledge production via participatory research. The papers engage these issues in varying ways and to varying extents – like participation itself, participatory research is a matter of degree. The following is thus not a checklist but a starting point for critical reflexivity and dialogue for all researchers who aim to use our work to foster equity, justice, and democracy.

- (1) Setting aside our own goals and expectations in order to centre the self-determination of our community partners is fundamental to equitable participatory research. Participatory research therefore ideally starts not with a research question, a research site, or even the concept of research itself; instead, it begins by creating connections and building relationships of trust, care, and reciprocity within a community. This requires us to unsettle our assumptions about what we think we know and what we imagine we can contribute to the well-being of our community partners – an extremely difficult task for most academics (myself included).
- (2) Relationship building begins with human connection – *Who are we to each other?* – and then turns to joint problem-solving. In this process, academic researchers involved in participatory projects must follow the lead of our community partners, a commitment that requires us to develop new interactional roles and practices. The researcher's role is to suggest, not to direct or impose. Our initial role is to ask questions: *What do you want to change? How can I help?*. Our subsequent role is to listen carefully to the answers, both explicit and implicit, that our community partners share with us.
- (3) The previous ideal notwithstanding, a healthy human relationship is one where critique and alternative perspectives are shared. Academic researchers have a responsibility to respectfully disagree with our community partners when we feel it is necessary, and conversely, we have a responsibility to invite and respectfully consider our partners' critiques of our own perspectives. Both situations are the starting point for further dialogue and deeper collaboration.
- (4) Participatory research requires academic researchers to be creative, open, flexible, and willing to move outside our comfort zone. This may mean undertaking projects that go far beyond linguistics as usual, learning new skills, finding additional academic or non-academic partners with needed expertise, or simply re-envisioning what linguistics can be. Here it may be useful to mention a principle of community-centred collaboration that I have proposed elsewhere: 'Anything we do in our capacity as linguists is linguistics' (Bucholtz 2025; original English).
- (5) Relatedly, participatory research requires us to reimagine what counts as 'research' or knowledge making as well as to consider the best way to disseminate the results of our collaborative work. We have a great deal to learn from our community partners, who may not find research publications as useful as other, locally more meaningful and accessible ways of circulating knowledge.
- (6) Researchers who enjoy greater structural and institutional power need to advocate for more resources and rewards for participatory research. Change starts in our own departments, universities, and professional organisations, in our reviewing activities for journals and granting agencies, and in our evaluations of candidates for academic positions or for promotion. We should also listen to and learn from our students and our less structurally secure colleagues when seeking to making institutional change – their ideas and experiences are often transformative.
- (7) Finally, throughout our work with our community partners, academic researchers must remain mindful of the politics of participation: who is and isn't able to participate in specific ways (or at all) and why, what equitable participation looks like, the constraints and possibilities that our own participation creates, and how we can work either within or around those limitations.

I emphasise that the above principles are ideals to strive for and perhaps also to debate, and they may not always be achievable or even desirable in every project; I myself have often fallen short of these ideals in my own research. A truly democratic participatory research project cannot be created from the top down, mechanically following a set of criteria. Ultimately, what constitutes equitable and meaningful participation and collaboration is determined not by us but by our community partners. Our work together must centre the concrete, the specific, the local, and it requires a focus on process over outcomes. As this invaluable special issue makes clear, participatory research can only be carried out in slow, ‘small steps’ (to echo one of Heltai and Tarsoly’s community partners) – but taken together, these steps eventually add up to a bigger, better, and more just linguistics and also make our discipline and the world a bit more democratic, even in these undemocratic times.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Mary Bucholtz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7343-3374>

References

- Bodó, Csanád, Blanka Barabás, Isabela Botezatu, Noémi Fazakas, Judit Gáspár, János Imre Heltai, Petteri Laihonon, Veronika Lajos, Gergely Szabó, and the Csercsetáre-Invitees. 2023. “Participatory Sociolinguistics across Researchers’ and Participants’ Language Ideologies.” *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 22 (2): 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2023.2288814>.
- Bodó, Csanád, Blanka Barabás, Noémi Fazakas, Judit Gáspár, Bernadett Jani-Demetriou, Petteri Laihonon, Veronika Lajos, and Gergely Szabó. 2022. “Participation in Sociolinguistic Research.” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 16 (4): e12451. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12451>.
- Bodó, Csanád, Noémi Fazakas, Blanka Barabás, and Veronika Lajos. 2024. “Language Experts on a Sinking Island: Critiquing Language Endangerment Rhetorics through Participation in and around a Tabletop Game.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2337249>.
- Bodó, Csanád, Noémi Fazakas, and Gergely Szabó. 2025. “Towards Participation: Collaboration, Responsibility, and Shared Knowledge Production in Doing Multilingualism Research.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2524067>.
- Bucholtz, Mary. 2021. “Community-centered Collaboration in Applied Linguistics.” *Applied Linguistics* 42 (6): 1153–1161. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amab064>.
- Bucholtz, Mary. 2025. “A társadalmi igazságosság előmozdítása a szociolingvisztikában – A közösségközpontú kollaboráció hatása.” In *A szociolingvisztikai kutatás társadalmi hatásai*, edited by Csanád Bodó and Gergely Szabó, 17–38. Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó. <https://doi.org/10.21862/szociolingvisztika/2024/8122>.
- Bucholtz, Mary, Eric W. Campbell, Teresa Cevallos, Veronica Cruz, Alexia Z. Fawcett, Bethany Guerrero, Katie Lydon, Iní G. Mendoza, Simon L. Peters, and Griselda Reyes Basurto. 2023. “Researcher Positionality in Linguistics: Lessons from Undergraduate Experiences in Community-Centered Collaborative Research.” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 17 (4): e12495. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12495>.
- Bucholtz, Mary, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee. 2016. “Beyond Empowerment: Accompaniment and Sociolinguistic Justice in a Youth Research Program.” In *Sociolinguistic Research: Application and Impact*. Routledge, edited by Robert Lawson and Dave Sayers, 25–44. New York: Routledge.
- Bucholtz, Mary, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee. 2020. “Resisting Racism and Neoliberalism in Critical Language Research and Activism with Racialized Youth.” In *Critical Youth Research in Education: Methodologies of Praxis and Care*, edited by Arshad I. Ali and Teresa L. McCarty, 21–39. New York: Routledge.
- Charity Hudley, Anne H., Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz. 2020a. “From Theory to Action: Working Collectively toward a More Antiracist Linguistics (Response to Commentators).” *Language* 96 (4): e307–e331. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2020.0081>.
- Charity Hudley, Anne H., Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz. 2020b. “Toward Racial Justice in Linguistics: Interdisciplinary Insights into Theorizing Race in the Discipline and Diversifying the Profession.” *Language* 96 (4): e200–e235. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2020.0074>.

- Gani, Jasmine K., and Rabea M. Khan. 2024. "Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies." *International Studies Quarterly* 68:sqae038. <https://watermark.silverchair.com/sqae038.pdf>.
- Heltai, János Imre, and Eszter Tarsoly. 2023. *Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Heltai, János Imre, and Eszter Tarsoly. 2024. "Local Participants and Uninvolved Citizens: Life beyond Participatory Research." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2311713>.
- Hooft, Hannelore, and Karel Arnaut. 2024. "Revisiting "Ethnographic Monitoring" as a Force for Democratisation and Social Impact in Adult Literacy and Language Learning." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2351586>.
- Kabatek, Johannes. 2019 "Slow Linguistics – a Manifesto." *Texto! Textes et Cultures* 24 (1): 1–10. http://www.revue-texto.net/docannexe/file/4191/texto_slow_linguistics_a_manifesto_final.pdf.
- Laihonen, Petteri, Marcin Deutschmann, and KatarzSeeyna Molek-Kozakowska. 2025. "Enabling Engagement and Activism through Co-creative Citizen Science: Insights from Three Years of School Projects on Multilingualism." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2449064>.
- Lexander, Kristin Vold, and Hilde Thyness. 2024. "Innovative Methods in Collaborative Research: Mediagrams in the Study of Digital Multilingual Workplace Communication and Home-School Interaction." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2334745>.
- Paris, Django, and Maisha T. Winn. 2014. *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Philips, Susan U. 2010. "The Feminization of Anthropology: Moving Private Discourses into the Public Sphere." *Gender and Language* 4 (1): 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v4i1.1>.
- Pujolar, Joan, and Maite Puigdevall. 2025. "Moving Aside: Positioning Sociolinguistics in a Political Economy of Expertise." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2492776>.
- Szabó, Gergely. 2024 "Collaborative Research Practices in the Study of Diasporisation: Chronotopes of Dispersion among Hungarians in Catalonia." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2357143>.