

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

How Academic Researchers Align Values and Methodology: A Qualitative Inquiry of Equity-Informed Micro-Practices

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Keywords: Equity-Informed Micro-Practices, Everyday Resistance, Workarounds, Equity-Enhancing Practices, Institutional Constraints

<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.167184>

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

Vol. 7, Issue 5, 2026

Background

Academic researchers conducting participatory research often navigate complex institutional, administrative, and funding constraints that limit their ability to actualize commitments to equitable practice. In response, many researchers adopt informal ad hoc strategies to subvert these constraints. We refer to these strategies as equity-informed micro-practices.

Objectives

This study aims to 1) examine the institutional and structural challenges that limit participatory research, 2) identify examples of equity-informed micro-practices, and 3) discuss limitations of equity-informed micro-practices.

Methods

A total of 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with federally funded academic researchers who conducted participatory research between 2013 and 2018. Interviews were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Results were synthesized by a team of students, community researchers, and academic faculty.

Findings

Participants described several challenges related to competing demands between universities, funding bodies, and communities. These included rigid hiring systems, administrative bureaucracy, and restrictive funding guidelines. Participants responded to these challenges through a range of equity-informed micro-practices, including: 1) engaging in community-centric research design, 2) dialogical approaches that emphasized transparency and shared decision making, and 3) workarounds to institutional policies to better support communities. Despite these efforts, challenges persisted, including those related to administrative barriers, resource constraints, and communication difficulties.

Conclusions

Discrepancies in structural level support result in the absorption of administrative, financial, and emotional risks directly onto academic researchers who seek to enact equity in their work. Equity-informed micro-practices

represent important forms of everyday resistance; however, their unsustainability underscores the need for reforms that ensure that equitable practice is supported by design.

Background

Calls for increased equity, justice, and accountability in academic research have culminated in growing momentum for participatory research, an umbrella term for collaborative inquiry, over the last few decades (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participatory research encompasses a wide range of research approaches across disciplinary and geographical boundaries, including action research, community-engaged research, citizen science, decolonizing methodologies, and patient-oriented research (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Wallerstein, 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). The diversity of approaches is related to two distinct participatory research traditions (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Lewin's 1940s *Northern Tradition*, out of which action research originates, encompasses a pragmatic strategy for engaging communities in the pursuit of transformative systems change (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Conversely, Freire's 1970s *Southern Tradition* encompasses a strategy for engaging communities experiencing marginalization in challenging systems of political domination, with liberatory and emancipatory aims (Freire, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). While a combination of both traditions characterize contemporary participatory research, particular research approaches diverge in their precise alignment (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Despite variation in participatory research nomenclature, participatory methods converge in their shared engagement with community in collaborative ways that transcend specific research methods, emphasizing equity, co-creation, community empowerment, and actionable inquiry (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). These essential values are often positioned as necessary correctives to extractive models of academic inquiry.

Researchers doing participatory research navigate complex institutional processes, administrative regimes, and funding mechanisms that constrain the scope of participatory practice (Mertens, 2020; Nyden, 2003; Papoulias & Callard, 2022). Participatory research frequently engages community members in enhanced research roles; however, community researchers are rarely integrated into formal, sustained employment arrangements (Greer et al., 2018, 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2021). These neoliberal systems are often at odds with the relational and iterative nature of participatory research (Nyden, 2003). Misalignments in values between community researchers and neoliberal systems result in several challenges, including employment precarity, compensation difficulties, and human resource constraints, that collectively amplify experiences of marginalization for communities (Greer et al., 2018; Guta et al., 2013; MacKinnon et al., 2021; Papoulias & Callard, 2022; Soklaridis et al., 2020). Existing inequities highlight how participatory

researchers find themselves caught between competing demands. On one side, universities, funders, and ethics boards impose bureaucratic, financial, and procedural constraints on how research can be conducted and resourced (Guta et al., 2013; Israel et al., 2005; Vander Kloet & Wagner, 2024). On the other, maintaining relationships with community requires responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability (Israel et al., 2005). The disconnect between institutional systems and community needs may produce professional and emotional strain concerning how to act justly within unjust structures. In response, researchers may choose to engage in ad hoc strategies to subvert, bypass, or soften institutional constraints in service of more ethical and relationally grounded research. We refer to these informal strategies as *equity-informed micro-practices*. In our conceptualization, we acknowledge that these practices do not resolve structural issues at play, however, they represent meaningful and situated efforts to enact justice within the boundaries of institutional constraints. Equity-informed micro-practices are necessary correctives when institutions fail to create the conditions for equity in participatory research.

Equity-informed micro-practices can be understood through the lens of Scott's (1985) concept of "everyday resistance". Everyday resistance highlights how individuals engage in acts of resistance against hegemonic systems through small actions aimed at subverting power hierarchies without direct confrontation (Scott, 1985). Across academic contexts, Ahmed (2012) explores how feminist scholars engage in institutional passing, strategic silence, or outright refusal when navigating hostile university environments. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2014) explore how Indigenous scholars methodologically employ refusal strategies in response to extractive research practices that commodify Indigenous communities. In each case, equity informed micro-practices enable academics to resist systemic complacency in favor of more equitably enhancing practices.

In a participatory research context, everyday resistance may involve efforts that challenge the conventions and requirements of academic knowledge production, including those related to grant timelines, ethics review, and authorship. This idea is explored by van der Riet and Boettiger (2009), who argue that adaptations in participatory research stem from situated negotiations shaped by tensions between institutions and communities. Academics contend with these tensions and make necessary adaptations that are both politically and ethically salient (van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009). Our conceptualization of equity-informed micro-practices situates them as a form of everyday resistance, and frames them as active, politically charged acts intended to embed equity within research practices (Scott, 1985).

Study Rationale

Equity is often positioned as a central value in participatory research; however, the institutional and structural conditions that underpin this work undermine its full scope of practice (Israel et al., 2005). Existing scholarship offers systemic critiques of the larger participatory research ecosystem, often

highlighting structural challenges related to realizing commitments to equity and justice (Greer et al., 2018; Guta et al., 2013; MacKinnon et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2025). Less attention has been paid to the tactical and pragmatic decisions researchers make when navigating these challenges in everyday research practice.

There is a pressing need to critically examine applications of equity-informed micro-practices for two central reasons. First, equity-informed micro-practices necessarily entail the absorption of institutional risk by individual researchers. This is particularly concerning given that these practices are often conducted by those already marginalized by academic systems, whose personal and political labour goes underrecognized in larger institutional narratives (Papoulias & Callard, 2022; Vander Kloet & Wagner, 2024). Second, while these practices may enable temporary relief from institutional burdens, they may inadvertently prop up unjust systems by allowing for work to continue as usual without challenging the underlying systems of inequity. This study helps address these concerns by examining the everyday resistance practices academic researchers engage in to support equity in participatory research. Understanding how equity-informed micro-practices operate offers insights into how justice is practiced and constrained within institutional systems.

Research Questions

This study aims to 1) explore the structural and institutional challenges associated with participatory research, and 2) identify examples of equity-informed micro-practices. Specifically, we ask the following research questions:

1. What are the structural and institutional challenges that create the conditions for equity-informed micro-practices?
2. What do equity-informed micro-practices look like within Canadian participatory research?
3. What are the limitations of equity-informed micro-practices in participatory research?

Methods

Data Source

This project sits within *Shift: Working for Change in Participatory Research*, a national research initiative focused on examining Canadian participatory research practices. The broader research initiative is comprised of two phases. Phase one, which occurred between 2019 and 2021, involved conducting a national survey of principal investigators holding federal research funding, with the expressed goal of mapping the participatory research landscape. A detailed account of these methods is provided by

Marshall and colleagues (2025). As part of the first phase, survey respondents were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview about their experiences conducting participatory research. The current study is part of phase two and draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of consenting survey respondents.

Study Population and Sample

From the 1,793 academic researchers who responded to the survey, 288 indicated their willingness to participate in a follow up interview. Our literature review identified employment and compensation of community researchers as key structural barriers in participatory research (Greer et al., 2018, 2020; Guta et al., 2013). As such, for the scope of these interviews, we drew from a subsample of 1,356 researchers who reported compensating community researchers as employees or self-employed contractors to better understand how researchers potentially navigate institutional barriers.

Participant recruitment was conducted using a purposeful stratified random sampling approach to prioritize the inclusion of researchers from historically marginalized groups within academia, including women, racialized, and Indigenous faculty (Crenshaw, 1991; Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Palinkas et al., 2015; Parsons, 2017). This approach reflected evidence that suggested that individuals marginalized within academic systems often engage in personal and political labour within their work that may therefore make them more likely to engage in equity-informed micro-practices (Papoulias & Callard, 2022; Vander Kloet & Wagner, 2024). Recruitment emails were sent in batches of 25 between November 7 and 21, 2023. In total, 50 recruitment emails were distributed, and 19 researchers agreed to participate in the interviews.

Sample size was guided by the principle of information power, which holds that sample adequacy depends on the extent participants can provide rich, relevant, and meaningful insights relative to the study's aims; a sample of 15 to 20 interviews was deemed sufficient given the specificity of our research questions (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online using the video conference software Zoom® (version 5.16.0). Semi-structured interviews enabled the research team to conduct interviews flexibly, accommodate academic participant's language needs (e.g., use of interpreter), and respond to emerging threads of inquiry alongside the formal interview guide (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Velardo & Elliott, 2021). Interviews were co-conducted by two members of the research team to ensure that active debriefing, improved atmosphere, and enhanced support was available for research team members (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). In four cases, interviews were conducted without the presence of a co-interviewer due to scheduling conflicts.

Data Analysis

This participatory research project was conducted by a diverse research team, including student trainees (BA, BM), community researchers (FW, KG, KJ), and academic researchers (TC, ZM). The interview guide was developed collaboratively by a team of community researchers (FW, KG, KJ), a student trainee (BA), and academic researchers (TC, ZM). The interviews were co-facilitated by BA and a combination of community researchers (FW, KG, KJ) and academic researchers (AS, ZM). All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim in English, and evaluated using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, which foregrounds construction rather than the discovery of pre-existing patterns.

As part of the reflexive process, a debrief between co-interviewers was held after each interview. This supported memo writing, which highlighted emerging ideas and areas of analytic interest that would later inform the coding process. BA and KG conducted pilot coding on two interview transcripts and created a shared codebook for analytical use. BA completed data analysis using this codebook. As part of this process, codes were iteratively re-labelled, expanded, and collapsed to reflect ongoing understandings of the data. Codes were organized using NVIVO's native parent/child node functions to form conceptual clusters (groups of semantically and contextually related codes) to support visual hierarchies and the iterative construction of themes. BA shared high-level theme maps that denoted working versions of themes constructed from the interview data with the larger data analysis team. These maps helped guide the synthesis process. Overall findings were co-developed collaboratively by BA, KG, and ZM.

Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary (REB #23-1218), the Research Ethics Boards at Wilfrid Laurier University (REB #6640), and the University of Victoria (REB #23-0500).

Results

Demographics

A total of 19 individuals participated in our study ([Table 1](#)). Of these, 14 participants (73.68%, $N = 14/19$) identified as women, 5 (26.32%, $N = 5/19$) identified as men, and none identified as trans, nonbinary, or gender diverse ([Table 1](#)). The mean age of participants was 55.2 years, with a range from 40 to 70 years. Over half the sample (57.89%, $N = 11/19$) identified as racialized and/or Indigenous. While stratified racialization/ethnicity data were collected, they are not reported here to attempt to preserve participant confidentiality. The remaining 42.11% ($N = 8/19$) of participants identified as white or of European descent. In terms of academic position, most

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics

	Categories	N = 19	%
Gender	Men	5/19	26.32%
	Women	14/19	73.68%
	Gender Diverse	0/19	0.00%
Age	Years (Mean)	55.2 (range = 40 - 70 years)	
Racialized/Indigenous	Yes	11/19	57.89%
	No	8/19	42.11%
Academic Status	Full Professor	8/19	42.11%
	Associate Professor	4/19	21.05%
	Assistant Professor	2/19	10.53%
	Director	2/19	10.53%
	Other	3/19	15.79%

Note. Table represents the demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 2. Challenging Contexts Facing Researchers Attempting to Align Values and Methods

Themes	Subthemes
Challenges Related to Conducting Participatory Research and Juggling Competing Demands from University, Funding Body, and Community Actors	University-Level Barriers to Participatory Research
	Funding-Level Barriers to Participatory Research
Academic Researchers Engaged in Participatory Employment Combat Tensions Caused by Competing Demands Via Equity-Informed Micro-Practices	Community-Centric Research Design Approaches
	Dialogical Approaches
	Workarounds in the Interests of Communities
Participatory Research Challenges Persist Despite the Integration of Equity-Informed Micro-Practices	Administrative Challenges Within Community Partner Organizations
	Resource Constraints and Employment Precarity
	Challenges Related to Communication with Communities

Note. Figure represents an overview of the thematic analysis.

participants held senior roles. Specifically, 42.11% ($N = 8/19$) were full professors, 21.05% ($N = 4/19$) were associate professors, and 10.53% ($N = 2/19$) were assistant professors.

Thematic Analysis

Three overarching themes were identified. Below we discuss themes related to: 1) conducting participatory research and juggling competing demands from university, funding body, and community actors, 2) equity-informed micro-practices, and 3) challenges that persist despite the integration of equity-informed micro-practices ([Table 2](#)). Throughout our analysis, we use the term ‘ethical commitments’ to refer to researchers’ expressed values of equity, reciprocity, and community empowerment that are foundational to the participatory research paradigm, and ‘bureaucratic requirements’ to encompass the procedural, administrative, and financial rules that govern how research is resourced and conducted.

Challenges Related to Conducting Participatory Research and Juggling Competing Demands from University, Funding Body, and Community Actors

Across interviews, participants reported a complex web of structural and institutional constraints when engaging community researchers in participatory research. Navigating the competing demands of universities, funding bodies, and community actors, whose priorities often diverged, was identified as a persistent challenge (Latour, 2005). Participants reported feeling ill-supported when trying to reconcile ethical commitments to equity and reciprocity with bureaucratic requirements, resulting in dissonance.

University-Level Barriers to Participatory Research

Participants consistently described universities as ill-equipped to facilitate participatory partnerships in ways that honoured community expertise, experience, and labour. Bureaucratic processes, particularly related to compensation and hiring, were perceived as rigid and premised on the notions of traditional employment; these norms did not often reflect the structural realities of many community researchers. One participant described their challenge with navigating these assumptions as follows:

When you incur expenses, you put it on your credit card, and you get reimbursed. You have a claim form. [The people I worked with] didn't have credit cards. They wanted cash and the university, of course, wasn't really set up to do that.
(Participant 07)

This account was further corroborated by another participant, who reflected on how universities are designed to actively discourage equitable research with their presumptions and limited scope of practice. They described the ways “institutional policies and practices presume only particular sorts of people enter those spaces, particularly in an employment capacity,” and how they feel that “...there are many institutional barriers that make it extraordinarily difficult to appropriately engage with community” (Participant 26).

Collectively, these experiences speak to how universities operate on a series of implicit assumptions related to who might be employed by a university and their degree of adherence to conventional academic norms including working a regular schedule, owning certain technologies, and being consistently available. These assumptions are particularly difficult to navigate for community researchers who may be living with disabilities, balancing caregiving responsibilities, or may otherwise be precariously employed.

Other commonly reported challenges included the systematic devaluation of community expertise or minimizing the importance of the broader participatory research framing. While challenges varied by the participant's project, institution, and academic status, they served the function of limiting

the emancipatory potential of participatory research. In matters related to compensation, participants noted barriers linked to the timely distribution of payments, excessive documentation requirements to process payments, and an inability to compensate people equitably if community researchers did not have specific educational credentials. For some, the administrative requirements proved so onerous that they directly undermined relational trust. One researcher reflected on their discomfort in asking community researchers to comply with the university's extensive administrative compensation requirements, explaining:

I won't get into university policy, but ... it's so clunky. I've had to show up in communities with all these forms, and say, 'give me your Social Insurance Number', it's just awful. And it used to be a lot easier where I could show up with an envelope of cash. (Participant 04)

Participants also reported that, in certain instances, compliance with university policies was a detriment to equitable collaboration. By forcing compliance, some participants were unable to substantiate their theoretical or paradigmatic orientations towards equity. The practical limitations imposed by universities were a source of significant tension, as illustrated by one participant:

... I feel like the institutional barriers within my institution are so extreme that I actually don't feel like it's ethical to engage folks as peers in that capacity and invite them into our institution. I think there's more harm than good that comes out of that. (Participant 26)

Funding-Level Barriers to Participatory Research

Participants positioned funding bodies as introducing a parallel set of structural constraints that limited equitable participatory research practices. Challenges included budget constraints, narrow definitions of allowable expenses, inflexible timelines, and limited long-term sustainability. These limitations often placed researchers in positions where equitable pay was not possible within the scope of their research, and compensation remained mismatched with the perceived value of community labour. As one participant summarized:

... compensation is nearly impossible with the monies that we're given, by any funder, to say, 'I'm going to pay you equally to what I'm making.' So, the act of compensation is always prickly ... It's never commensurate to the work that is done. (Participant 19)

Another challenge related to unsustainable funding allocations across longer-term projects, especially when those projects were investing in large scale capacity bridging with systemic and social implications. While participants often positioned their research as driven by a social mission, they grappled with the fundamental precarity of their employment arrangements with community researchers, which was further impacted by lack of information about the funding landscape, and which research areas or topics funders would prioritize. One participant shared that “the main challenge is sustainability in terms of the funding, since we’re building capacity and we don’t know what’s the plan from the government in terms of short-term, medium-, or long-term [timelines and funding duration]” (Participant 23). Limited, time-sensitive funding allocations further hindered participants’ abilities to accommodate variability in community researchers’ schedules. One participant reflected on how their work, which engages people living with disabilities, is not structured to accommodate these fluctuations, and asserted that:

In an ideal world, I would be equipped to accommodate [fluctuations in availability to work]. In the real world where I have grant funding that is time limited, there is no flexibility in the budget for me to be able to give people paid leave... I can’t really accommodate it... I don’t know a solution to that, given that these are very precarious contracts. [Community researchers] don’t have any benefits, disability or otherwise. (Participant 26)

The combined effects of university bureaucracy and funding body rigidity stand to entrench inequities by compelling researchers to operate within frameworks that are not designed to meaningfully attend to the diverse structural realities of community researchers. A summary of these barriers is presented in [Table 3](#). Despite facing structural and institutional barriers, many researchers employed strategies to navigate these constraints without abandoning their commitment to equity. As such, several equity-informed micro-practices were identified and actively practiced, particularly in the presence of larger, misaligned systems.

Academic Researchers Engaged in Participatory Employment Combat Tensions Caused by Competing Demands Via Equity-Informed Micro-Practices

Participants reported employing what we call *equity-informed micro-practices* to combat tensions caused by the competing demands of university, funding body, and community actors. These practices were not uniform, and emerged from researchers’ values, relationships, and material resources. Furthermore, the use of equity-informed micro-practices was largely responsive to community histories, capacities, and expectations. In the cases we observe, equity-informed micro-practices constitute deliberate acts of

Table 3. Detailed Summary of Some University and Funding Level Challenges in Related to Conducting Participatory Research

Challenges Related to Conducting Participatory Research and Juggling Competing Demands from University, Funding Body, and Community Actors		
Level	Main barriers identified	Examples
University	Administrative rigidity and assumptions about labour	- University reimbursement systems assumed access to credit cards; this did not reflect the financial realities of many community researchers (i.e. preference or need for cash payments, or no access to a credit card). - Community researchers who are living with disabilities or received social assistance were limited in what they could accept as compensation. - People who were precariously employed had trouble navigating administrative systems, including related to submitting invoices.
University	Institutional norms that undermine participatory research ethics	- Universities valued formal credentials and education over lived experience as it related to compensation, structural devaluing community expertise in turn. - Institutional engagement processes were perceived as sometimes causing harm to community researchers, resulting in tensions between institutional compliance and participatory ethics. - Academic affiliations positioned researchers as administrators or bosses rather than relationally-centered or activist collaborators.
University	Bureaucratic hiring and compensation practices	- Excessive documentation requirement (i.e. requesting social insurance numbers and multiple forms) - Delays in processing payments created barriers to timely and equitable compensation
Funder	Restrictive funding structures	- Funding allocations were insufficient to allow compensation commensurate to the labour provided. - Narrow definitions of eligible expenses limited researchers' abilities to respond to community research needs. - Difficulty obtaining funding that allowed for accommodations including paid leave, disability supports, or flexible participation arrangements.
Funder	Inflexible timelines	- Time-limited grants constrained researchers' ability to accommodate fluctuations in community researcher availability. - Short-term grants ran counter to the commitments to relationality and capacity-building that underpinned the participatory engagement process.
Funder	Funding precarity and sustainability challenges	- Uncertainty regarding future government and funder priorities, casting doubt on the sustainability of long-term participatory employment. - Challenges in maintaining partnerships and collaborative infrastructure once grant funding ended.

resistance intended to ensure greater degrees of equity within a given academic practice. Equity-informed micro-practices usually took the form of intentional rule bending, process adjustment, or a reprioritization of resources to align with community interests.

Community-Centric Research Design Approaches

A prominent equity-informed micro-practice involved designing and conducting research in the spirit of community centeredness; this practice allowed researchers to better align with the most emancipatory levels of the participatory paradigm. In our sample, community-centric design encompassed a range of pragmatic and tactical decisions about the need to conduct research in ways that align with community voices. This was intended to reposition research towards community authority. Considerations of justice and equity manifested as expressed commitments to relinquishing power and enabling the co-design and co-construction of community-identified outputs. One participant illustrated this shift by highlighting how “you work with people to set up the staging, but they are on center stage, taking things over. So, it’s about being community run, led ... it should be driven by community’s needs and exigencies” (Participant 03).

In this vision of research, building relational trust over time was central to ensure that research applications remained responsive to the expressed needs and interests of the community across a project's life course. Fostering trust and developing relationships were deliberate outcomes, cultivated through flexibility, active listening, and adaptability. In practice, this might involve choosing timelines, meeting structures, and project deliverables that embody local preferences, rather than institutional convenience. Another participant asserted that while engagement can occur across a continuum, it must be responsive to an individual's level of comfort.

[Research] could involve different levels of participation by a range of people, but it all depends on what and how people feel comfortable participating. I don't like it to be prescriptive. People have an opportunity to say how they want to be involved... to say what they're comfortable with, but also to make sure that they understand the benefits and the risks.
(Participant 07)

Pragmatically, community-centric design included crafting elements of the research project with specific attention to the challenges that people experience and constructing methodologies that meaningfully “confront” the issues “...that people are often interested in exploring” (Participant 03). For some participants, particularly those working with populations that experience barriers to traditional employment, attending to local issues involved ensuring that compensation for engagement with academic research went beyond solely material benefits. As such, compensation involved opportunities for skill-building, networking, and professional and interpersonal growth. The idea of providing multiple benefits was grounded in a desire to enrich the engagement experience and provide “something that might be beneficial to that person” (Participant 07). Another participant positioned their community-centric micro-practice as a direct response to the “legacy of inequity ... and taking without reciprocity” (Participant 17). Here, community-centric design involved resisting extractive models of engagement by actively contributing to confidence building, leadership development, and strengthening relationships. This investment in people created lasting connections that transcended the scope of the project. One participant highlighted this sentiment, sharing “we’re friends, we’re colleagues, we continue to work and dream together ... we had such a wonderful dynamic with everybody in relationship with everybody ... almost everybody would continue because it was such a positive experience” (Participant 17).

Dialogical Approaches

Another equity-informed micro-practice involved employing a dialogical approach when engaging with communities (Freire, 2020; Montoya & Kent, 2011). In our sample, this involved acknowledging existing power differentials within participatory research and centering the material and salient issues of

community researchers when co-creating partnerships (Freire, 2020; Montoya & Kent, 2011). This creates a thematic universe that situates partnerships within specific truths and understandings (Freire, 2020; Montoya & Kent, 2011). Using this strategy, academics would engage in candid dialogues with community partners about various elements of the research process, from compensation to conflict mediation. This cultivated increased transparency and fairness, while further developing mutual accountability in the project. By conversing about the research process openly, increased trust was fostered over time. One participant framed budgeting, which is often constrained by financial limitations, as an opportunity practice dialogical relationship building. They shared that “we do collaborative budgeting. The budget is always completely transparent, and we discuss it transparently. Everybody knows who’s getting paid what, all the time” (Participant 11).

By inviting community into budgetary conversations, researchers can better contextualize where constraints come from and negotiate trade-offs collectively. Another participant highlighted this, stating that:

I work a lot with community organizations. The organizations themselves will say, ‘Here’s what we charge for translation services. Here’s what the value is, here’s what we anticipate...’ And we’ll work alongside community to figure out what works best for them. We’ll work with them around rates and that. (Participant 04)

Financial constraints posed significant challenges in the engagement space. In some cases, participants reported that approaching this conversation with openness could help to temper expectations, enabling community and academic researchers to better align project goals with available resources.

Workarounds in the Interests of Communities

Given the perceived rigidity of institutional and funding structures, participants reported intentionally engaging in “workarounds” that bypassed formal policies with the aim of better serving communities. Many of the workarounds involved ensuring that communities were compensated in a timely, dignified, and contextually appropriate manner. For example, one participant indicated that, to pay community researchers at the agreed upon payment rate, they opted to log more papered hours than what was worked. This researcher highlighted that pay gradients at their institution were proportional to formal education attainment; as such, they could not compensate community researchers, who presented valuable lived experience without formal credentials, beyond a certain amount. Hence, they used a workaround to better ensure equitable pay. Another participant described their experience of prepaying community researchers despite there being no mechanism in place to allow such transactions to occur. This participant explained as follows:

... let me just say that we work the system to prepay [community researchers] even though the system doesn't allow us to prepay them. It's no big deal for me to pay out of pocket a couple hundred bucks, but... that's not possible for other people. (Participant 01)

This account highlights how an academic researcher might employ an equity-informed micro practice to ensure that community researchers do not face the consequences of bureaucratic and inefficient systems. By fronting the expenses themselves, the researcher was able to absorb some of the consequences related to delayed payments. Another participant described a more strategic maneuver they employed involving paying in alternative forms requested by communities. They described their experience as follows:

... we wanted to provide compensation to the school [community partner]. The principal said, 'that's messy for us, but you can buy books for our library.' So, we would pay in different ways. It was like, 'here's X amount of dollars, here's my Credit Card, go to Scholastic and spend \$X.' We've done that before, too, as workarounds. (Participant 04)

In some cases, workarounds were about negotiating the confines of allowable costs to better ensure that payment was fair and grounded in considerations of equity. One participant argued that in their practice, compensation was not a fixed rate, but a contextual judgement made in relation to the populations engaged and their expressed needs.

... what is fair is based on the context of the population that you're working with, the resources available to you... For the context of [vulnerable] populations... I tend to say, 'let's go higher for those populations,' because supporting the needs ... is much more complex. (Participant 20)

In each example, these workarounds, while small in scale, were conceptualized as critical to sustaining engagement. Researchers committed to equity-informed research were also positioning themselves as advocates within their institutions, willing to take on the "dirty work" of navigating systems so communities did not have to (Participant 17). The existence of these equity-informed micro-practices illustrate how researchers balance complex misalignment between institutions, funding bodies, and community priorities. These practices operate as forms of everyday resistance and are grounded in an expressed commitment to care, reciprocity, and responsiveness (Scott, 1985). Equity-informed micro-practices stand to create opportunities for more equitable research practices by actively bending or subverting policies that challenge this principle. However, these strategies are not without their risks. Equity-informed micro-practices are often individualized, lack formal codification in institutional or funding policies,

and require researchers to personally absorb risk to create more equitable practice. While broadly standing to reduce harm, improve relationality, and cultivate trust with community researchers, these practices do not directly dismantle the systems that necessitate their existence in the first place. As such, despite these interventions, barriers in equitable practice persist.

Participatory Research Challenges Persist Despite the Integration of Equity-Informed Micro-Practices

Participants described a variety of equity-informed micro-practices they employed to navigate and mitigate institutional and funding body constraints. However, these efforts were both situational and highly contingent on each individual researcher's discretion, resources, and positionality. Without formal institutional mechanisms to support equitable participatory research, structural barriers remained. Consequently, administrative, resource, and communication challenges persistently undermined the sustainability of equity-informed micro-practices.

Administrative Challenges Within Community Partner Organizations

Equity-informed micro-practices were often deployed within the context of a researcher's local institutional context; considerably fewer emerged when working outside of these contexts. While participants reported multiple problems related to university and funding body bureaucracy, logistical challenges within community partner organizations were also identified, specifically when community organizations were operating with limited administrative infrastructure. Challenges were amplified when working with multiple partners across geographies. Issues included delays in processing payments, communication difficulties, and unclear chains of responsibility that complicated engagement. One participant described the ethical strain of watching community absorb the brunt of administrative delays:

... the staff didn't get salaries for two months, and they're coming to us, and we can't do anything because we've given the money to the [community] organization. and they're [community organization] saying, 'Well, we'll get it to them, we're just trying to get caught up...'. That was challenging, because ... there's a sense of responsibility, from our perspective (Participant 03)

These delays run the risk of damaging relationships built on trust and reciprocity, and place researchers in the same systems that complicate equitable compensation, regardless of which party controls the distribution of finances.

Resource Constraints and Employment Precarity

Enduring resource limitations within universities, funding bodies, and community organizations complicated opportunities for equitable employment. Participants identified situations where community researchers lacked the tools, internet access, or administrative support to fulfill invoicing or reporting requirements. These challenges led to delays in payment or incomplete work allocations. One participant described how:

It's been a real challenge to get people to submit their hours. I have this larger accountability to the community, and part of that accountability is that I need to manage my budget properly. And if people aren't telling me how many hours they're working, then I can't actually manage that. (Participant 26)

The time-limited and project-based nature of participatory research further compounded these issues. In the absence of formal employment benefits, paid sick leave, and disability accommodations, community researchers faced increased insecurity and employment precarity that influenced relationship sustainability over time.

Challenges Related to Communication with Communities

Some participants reported communication gaps that created barriers to meaningful engagement with communities. Breakdowns in communication stemmed from differing understandings of research roles, timelines, and expected deliverables. For example, one participant found that:

Still, it's harder with the community... because they don't realize when you're doing your project, that it's more academic, right? So, it's very different than ... [the community is] not used to putting in so many forms. You know, someone from the community who has not done this, was not used to this, it's really, really hard for them to do that, you know.... (Participant 09)

Generally, participants described communication as continuously practiced over time. One researcher further described how, as part of this process, working with the community researcher's broader network was a reality of sustaining partnerships:

When you bring any peer researcher [on board], you're bringing their network and their family and their connections. It's like when you meet a partner you're going to marry, you're marrying everyone... you also bring the connection of people. Knowing how to speak with them, knowing who's going to return your calls, who's going to think of you as reliable, trustworthy. (Participant 19)

Misaligned expectations may also arise from different understandings of how institutional cultures shape researchers' roles. One participant highlighted how:

There's such prescribed roles... I have to behave differently in different places... I'm asked to behave more like a boss, an administrator, and a researcher, and less than an activist.... I'm forced into those roles, because that's what the institution expects. (Participant 19)

These role shifts can inadvertently create distance between researchers and community partners, especially in contexts where institutional demands take precedence over relationality.

Discussion

Interpretation and Significance of Findings

This study sought to explore the structural, institutional, and relational challenges academic researchers face when engaging community in participatory research. We also examined adaptive strategies, termed equity-informed micro-practices, that are used to navigate these challenges. Our findings highlight a complex interplay between competing demands from universities, funding bodies, and community actors (Latour, 2005; Sénécal, 2012). Neoliberal bureaucracy, including administrative, compensatory, and structural level policies, often resists methodological, paradigmatic, and epistemological ways of knowing that meaningfully engage communities (Greer et al., 2018; Guta et al., 2013; Nyden, 2003; Vander Kloet & Wagner, 2024). These tensions are amplified by structural level deficiencies in participatory research, including considerations of racism in academia, beliefs about community research value, and entrenched hierarchical ways of doing research (Nadeau et al., 2022; van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009).

Our work provides insights into how researchers use small-scale, values driven acts to imbue equity within constrained systems. These equity-informed micro-practices build on Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance, highlighting the extent to which researchers employ strategic efforts to reconcile disconnects between academia and community (van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009; Vander Kloet & Wagner, 2024). This work also emphasizes the extent to which researchers seek to uphold central participatory values and resist the encroachment of neoliberal ideals. In explicating these practices, our work invites institutional recognition of their usage, and seeks to legitimize equity-informed micro-practices as a form of scholarly praxis. In our study, key examples include practices aimed at ensuring community-centered research practices, efforts to support dialogical processes, and workarounds to bypass institutional red tape.

In Sherry Arnstein's (1969) *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, participatory research is often presented as a continuum that assesses engagement based on the extent to which it empowers community to meaningfully affect research

outcomes. Components of this continuum range from nonparticipation to tokenistic engagement and community power (London et al., 2020). Community power engagement strategies represent the highest form of active involvement and authority, where community partners determine what questions are asked, which methods are used, and the applications of the research (Arnstein, 1969). London and colleagues (2020) forward the notion that good community engagement optimizes, rather than maximizes, the degree of community involvement relative to community interests and contexts. In our conceptualization of community-centric design, equity-informed micro-practices enable this degree of responsiveness by explicating this commitment. This is further enforced by dialogical process and intentional workarounds to support equitable practice.

Despite using equity-informed micro-practices, challenges persist, especially regarding administrative logistics, resources, and communication. Moreover, the implementation of equity-informed micro-practices varies tremendously by researcher, project, and resource availability, reflecting discrepancies in structural level supports. The absence of systemic support makes equity-informed micro-practices unsustainable over time, and places emotional, financial and administrative risks directly onto academic researchers. These findings underline the importance of implementing systems that will sustain more equitable research practices. As such, there is a pressing need to explore alternative strategies that ameliorate these risks while better supporting equitable participatory practice.

Future Directions

Problems with how equity-informed micro-practices operate necessitate novel interventions, models, and policies that recognize and integrate these practices into the formal infrastructures that support participatory research. For example, funding body reforms may enable researchers to explicitly budget for equitable compensation, benefits, and competitive rates for community researchers, bypassing traditional pay grids and outdated compensation guidance that perpetuate inequities. Institutional policy shifts may further streamline payment systems, reduce administrative hurdles, and move towards acknowledging lived experience as a form of valuable expertise. Social enterprises or co-operatives that act as intermediaries between research institutions and community groups may further support more sustainable partnerships by stewarding best practices. A full list of recommendations for next steps is provided below ([Table 4](#)).

Additional work may seek to explore how equity-informed micro-practices vary across researcher positionality, disciplinary orientation, and institutional contexts. Comparative work exploring these factors may strengthen understandings of systemic enablers and challenges to equitable participatory practice. Moreover, integrating diverse perspectives, including community, administrator, and institutional leadership, stands to provide a more holistic picture of equity enhancing practice. It is important to acknowledge that this study only captures the perspectives of academic researchers; the experience

Table 4. Lessons from Equity-Informed Micro-Practices: Actionable Recommendations for Equity-Enhancing Participatory Research Stratified by Interest Holder Group

Interest Holder Group	Recommended Actions
Participatory Research Teams	• Employ dialogical approaches to budgeting and compensation. • Adopt community-centric design principles that focus on local needs, timelines and priorities. • Advocate for institutional policy reform. • Document equity-informed micro-practices to help build collective knowledge.
Universities	• Streamline compensation mechanisms to encompass community researchers. • Adequately value lived expertise in hiring and pay structures. • Reduce the administrative burden on community researchers. • Develop institutional mandates that explicitly support and resource participatory employment practices. • Explore alternative models of employment to support community engagement in research.
Funders	• Reform grant structures to include budget items related to equitable compensation, equitable rates, and employment benefits for community researchers. • Allow flexible timelines that reflect the iterative and relational nature of participatory research • Fund infrastructure and capacity-building alongside direct project costs.

Note. Recommendations are drawn from study findings and identified equity-informed micro-practices in the data.

and impact of equity-informed micro-practices from the perspective of community researchers remains unanswered in this work. How community researchers interpret, engage with, and are affected by equity-informed micro-practices remain critical questions that warrant dedicated future inquiry. A companion piece centering on the experiences of community would meaningfully extend these findings.

Outside of academia, other sectors are developing their own approaches to equitable governance and co-production; cross-sector learning may offer insights into potential directions for participatory reform. Future scholarship exploring these avenues will allow us to move beyond participatory research's reliance on individual acts of resistance and towards systems that promote more equitable participatory practice for all.

Strengths and Limitations

The first strength of this study involves the introduction of the concept of 'equity-informed micro-practices' as a form of everyday resistance employed by researchers in participatory research contexts. This framing allows for small-scale actions to be acknowledged as active, intentionally equity-enhancing efforts. The second strength of this project relates to sample diversity. In employing a stratified random sampling methodology that prioritized the participation of researchers from equity-deserving groups, we were able to ensure that our sample reflected the voices of academic researchers with lived or living experiences of structural marginalization. This enriched our findings by allowing us to explore structural factors, dimensions of injustice, and inequities institutionalized within our social structures and systems.

There are two main limitations of this study. First, our recruitment strategy was limited to participants who responded to the *Shift* survey sent out in 2021 and agreed to be contacted for a follow up interview. Participation in the survey was voluntary and uncompensated; as such, our sample likely consisted of people with a deeper interest in participatory research relative

to the average academic researcher and may have been more likely to engage in equity-informed micro-practices. Second, some participants in this study had interacted with members of the research team previously outside of this specific research project. These existing relationships and interactions may have made it easier to divulge challenges and workarounds to the research team. To account for this possibility, we ensured that research team members did not conduct any interviews with people they knew.

Conclusion

Participatory research is characterized as being values and relationship driven. However, our findings reveal challenges within institutions that constrain the scope of participatory practices. Our findings situate participatory researchers as active agents that resist these institutional norms through equity-informed micro-practices that uphold commitments to structural change. Despite these practices, challenges persist that necessitate the exploration of new models and systems that ensure that equitable engagement is supported by design, rather than contingent on the capacity, ethos, and risk tolerance of individual academics.

Submitted: November 03, 2025 EDT. Accepted: June 01, 2026 EDT. Published: September 18, 2026 EDT.



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