

# Participatory Action Research: International Perspectives and Practices

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In 2017, Norman Denzin, Editor-in-Chief of this journal, raised a call for inquiry "that addresses inequities in the economy, education, employment, the environment, health, housing, food and water, inquiry that embraces the global cry for peace and justice" (p. 8). It is at Denzin's invitation that we have organized this Special Issue on Participatory Action Research, which we see as an opportunity to bring the knowledge and experience of participatory action researchers from around the world into closer dialogue and collaboration with qualitative researchers interested in finding ways to take up his challenge.

## **How We Came to Define Ourselves as Participatory Action Researchers**

### *How I Lost the Epistemological Battle and Learned to Love PAR (Mary's Story)*

Having spent my early academic life swimming in the positivist sea that was—and in many cases still is—the field of psychology, my first encounter with the notion of social constructivism and the possibility of a more engaged form of social research

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was unsettling to say the least. I had read Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/1966) as an undergraduate and so had some notion that our basic ways of understanding the world could change dramatically. But it was Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) that really made my head spin. Constructivists were offering deep explanations on how knowledge actually emerges among people in everyday action and interaction, which called into question fundamental notions of objectivity, value neutrality, and accurate measurement. My very view of myself as a scientist was giving way to uncertainty and a great deal of angst!

And yet...I kept going back for more. I would make appointments with my professor, Howard Gadlin, who was one of the chief instigators of all of this epistemological flailing around. I was struggling to convince him that the principles I was trying so desperately to hold onto were correct by reasserting the positivist claims I'd been raised on. But at the same time, I was clearly sensing something deeply resonant in this new way of understanding the nature of knowledge and my relationship to scholarship and activism.

And then there was Paulo Freire and there was no going back. Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000) and having the opportunity to work with Freire when he was a visiting faculty person at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the early 1980s provided me with a language and a community that have defined my role as a scholar/activist. Specifically, it was his ability to integrate a deeply thoughtful theoretical framework with a practical and very human approach to working alongside others to address critical social, economic, and political issues that has guided my work ever since. I tell my students "if you can find a way to work that you still feel passionately about 35 years later, you're in the right place." That place for me is the world of Participatory Action Research—a global network of community and university-based researchers committed to working together to create positive change. A world I happily share with the contributors and readers of this Special Issue.

### *Learning About PAR From Indigenous People (Michael's Story)*

Like Mary, I was first trained in positivist psychology. When I did my first PhD in the early to mid-1980s, qualitative research was not even an option. I had not heard of it. I learned about Participatory Action Research as an Indigenous methodology from Inuit in Arctic Canada. It was 1994 and I was at a suicide prevention conference in Iqaluit, Nunavut Canada. I was asked to be on a panel looking at research on suicide in the Arctic. Most of the audience was Inuit, and the panel (I was the only non-Inuit on the panel) asked audience-members what their ideas were for understanding and preventing suicide. Many Inuit spoke and I was taking notes. Then we asked the audience how we would go about getting more of this information on understanding and preventing suicide. Audience members talked about participation and collaboration, and having youth and elders, Inuit adults, and white researchers from the South who have worked in the Arctic on the team. Soon after, an Inuit woman formed an Inuit steering committee and I formed an interdisciplinary research team from across a few

universities. We worked together for the next few years developing a project on suicide, suicide prevention, health, and well-being. And our research questions were those from the Inuit audience at the conference.

One project led to another, and I have been doing Participatory Action Research with Inuit in Nunavut for over 25 years now. Unlike Mary, I cannot point to specific books that influenced me, but I have read a ton on PAR since. My favorite course as an undergraduate was in community psychology, so I was already somewhat of a rebel back then. I moved from being a clinical to a community psychologist, and community psychology is where PAR is very much alive. Today I teach a graduate course on PAR, and it is a lot of fun. Doing PAR is also fun. It is fun because of the collaborative nature of this work.

### *Ortiz, ¿Dónde Estás Tú en El Dibujo? (Alfredo)*

I walked over my newly sketched action research design to Juan Carlos Giles, my coresearcher and long-time collaborator in NGO change processes. I explained how we would be responsive to the needs of the activist and community development organizations we were working with (in Perú), and still test out Soft Systems Thinking (SST)—an action-oriented theoretical framework I had learned and become excited about in my budding PhD journey! I was on my PhD quest because I had become frustrated with my previous 9 years as an organizational development facilitator working for a U.S. NGO, mostly in Latin America, in which I felt like many of our methodologies generated superficial engagement and didn't engage deeply problematic power relationships. SST, with its focus on worldviews, culture, and power (Checkland, 2000), was going to lead me to the light! After congratulating me on my breakthrough, Juan Carlos soberly asked me (and not for the first time!): "Ortiz, where are you in the picture?" After acknowledging his concern and explaining to him that my PhD studies had indeed made me more aware of power relationships, reflective practices, the need to become a coparticipant in the change process, and the need to relinquish my role as a supposedly "neutral" facilitator, Juan Carlos persisted: "Ortiz, literally where are you in the picture? Show me where you are in this sketch. What risks are you taking, where is the methodology applied on you—where are you in the picture?" I suddenly realized that while I knew what he meant, I didn't have the methodological awareness or skills to really draw myself into the picture. Juan Carlos then proposed something: "We need to 'Reflectear' (Reflect-ize) your design, to help you enter your own picture, to empathetically engage with *those* people you are trying to change."

Juan Carlos was referring to Reflect Action, a methodology that combines Freirean thinking on the politics of literacy with user-generated, creative, often visual methods from Participatory Rural Appraisal (Archer & Cottingham, 1996, 1997; Chambers, 2015). And Reflectear we did! We drew and shared family trees and personal change spiders (a metaphorical analysis on how we change over time), had coffee and ate together, and engaged in playful ways. Organizational members also introduced reflective, fun, heart-engaging, and other "senti-cuerpo-pensante (SCP)" (feeling/embodiment (touch)/

thinking—building on Orlando Fals Borda’s notion of “sentipensar”) action research methods that “engage emotions, senses, and thinking to understand identities, motivations, and barriers to change” (Giles Macedo & Abad, 2009, p. 1). We got to know each other better, and in the process the organizational participants also got a better idea of who I was and why I was really there.

I share this story because it was when I learned to see myself in relation to others—to put my personal experiences and motivations on the table and take action with others—that we were able to generate deep knowledge in support of what we each hoped to change. I went from an intellectual to an embodied understanding of PAR that continues to inspire me and help me reinvent my praxis in relation, coparticipation, and negotiation with other collaborators today.

## Participatory + Action + Research

The actual term Participatory Action Research—attributed to different scholars, including both Orlando Fals Borda (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991) and Marja-Liisa Swantz (2015)—has been used to frame an approach to knowledge generation that was both collaborative and focused on achieving positive social change. But the move toward creating more participatory, problem-oriented, and politically engaged approaches to research was developing at the same time in the African continent (Hall, 2005; Swantz, 2015), India (Tandon, 2005), Bangladesh (Rahman, 1993), Australia (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), Scandinavia (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006), Spain (Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Greenwood & Santos, 1992; Karlsen & Larrea, 2016), the United Kingdom (Chambers, 2017), the United States, and Canada (Park et al., 1993).

Distinguishing Participatory Action Research from other forms of research are a respect for people’s knowledge and ability to participate as equal partners in the research process and a commitment to taking action leading to positive social change (Pant, 2014; Williams & Brydon-Miller, 2004). In this Special Issue, we acknowledge the fact that there are multiple forms of research that combine these principles of participation, action, and critical knowledge generation and that share a common commitment to using research to promote social justice. Critical Utopian Action Research (Egmore et al., this issue), for example, draws upon a very different set of foundational influences from those of Fals Borda, but nevertheless reflects the core values and tenets of PAR. Similarly, Community-Based Participatory Research (O’Brien et al., this issue), Participatory Health Research (Groot et al., this issue), Systemic Action Research (Oosterhoff & Burns, this issue), and Action Science (Friedman et al., this issue) all use somewhat different terminology and theoretical foundations but are also grounded in a commitment to engaged scholarship that demands broad and inclusive participation and a focus on positive change.

The *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) includes over 100 action research-related methods and methodologies reflecting the rich and varied options available to researchers interested in finding ways to engage community co-researchers as true partners and generate more actionable findings from

the research process. The researchers whose work is gathered together in this Special Issue draw upon a variety of influences to inform their understanding of the research process. Friedman and his colleagues, for example, ground much of their work in the writings of Kurt Lewin, whose discussion of field theory provides the basis for their self-in-action model of participatory research. Critical Utopian Action Research, described here by Egmosse et al., also draws upon Lewin's work but builds much of its methodology around the work of Robert Jungk who first developed the Future Creating Workshop process. Indigenous methodologies serve as another important foundation for Participatory Action Research projects such as the work described here by O'Brien and her colleagues.

In some ways, PAR is not a method but rather an attitude (Kidd & Kral, 2005) or a shared values stance which includes a "respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action" (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 15). The recognition of democratic practice as a core aspect of PAR appears throughout this Special Issue along with a willingness to engage as active contributors to positive change. Along with Egmosse et al., we are willing to ask "How do we really want to live?" We are ready to work to make the answers to this question a reality.

## **Creating Space for Change Processes to Take Place**

Participatory Action Research has traditionally focused on work in communities that have been marginalized based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, and poverty. But PAR can also be grounded in an asset-based model that acknowledges the value of local knowledge and the ability of communities to address critical issues (Brydon-Miller, 2001). In order to engage community partners in a meaningful manner, research processes must create spaces in which participants feel they can express their knowledge safely and explore ideas in creative and culturally relevant ways. This "free space" as it is described by Egmosse et al. or "enclave" as Friedman and his coauthors describe it creates opportunities for dialogue with the goal of using this space to create change in the larger organization or system. In some cases, this space is designed to reflect and celebrate the language and culture of the participants in order to honor Indigenous forms of knowledge (O'Brien et al., this issue) and to acknowledge the deep connections between language and different ways of knowing. But as Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer make clear, this is also a space of uncertainty in which we must continually test whether or not knowledge and change can actually emerge. Creating this kind of free space is challenging and requires us to be willing to give over control of the research process to enable new ways of communicating and problem solving to emerge. PAR asks all researchers and other power brokers: *Are you willing to give up or share control of your methodology?*

Participatory action research creates a variety of unique ethical dilemmas around issues of ownership and control of research processes (Wright-Bevans & Richards,

this issue); the tensions between assumptions of confidentiality versus giving credit for participant contributions (Levinson, this issue); and opening participants up for scrutiny and critique (Groot et al., this issue). Tackling these situations with humility and a willingness to actively question our own assumptions, motives, and actions can enable us to go beyond the tick-boxing of most human subjects review processes to genuinely engage in the nuanced and evolving ethical challenges encountered in the Participatory Action Research process (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2019).

## **Where Is Change Happening?**

Participatory Action Research is an emergent process in which learning and change are embedded in both the processes and outcomes of the research. Change can, and hopefully does, take place at multiple levels in a Participatory Action Research process. It takes place on a personal level where participants gain new skills and new knowledge that enable them to be more informed and skilled advocates for themselves and their communities (Groot, this issue; O'Brien et al., this issue; Wright-Bevans & Richards, this issue). At the organization and community levels, the Participatory Action Research process brings people together around a shared interest or concern with the possibility of forming relationships and alliances with other groups that support sustainable efforts to continue to work for positive change, even after a formal PAR project may end (Egmose et al., this issue; Friedman et al., this issue). PAR can also lead to action at local, regional, national, and even international levels with impacts on policy and practice. A particularly powerful approach to achieving this kind of larger scale change is reflected in Systemic Action Research, which calls for coordination across multiple projects focused on the same problem or concern (Osterhoff & Burns, this issue). And because the goal of any research is to provide new knowledge and understandings that transform practice more generally, creating opportunities to publish and present our work as Participatory Action Researchers can enable others to develop actions and interventions in their own contexts (Levinson, this issue; Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, this issue). Our goal for this Special Issue is that it will have just this impact on our readers and we hope that this initiates ongoing conversations and a rich exchange of ideas.

## **Links to Critical Qualitative Inquiry**

Participatory Action Research is not simply a form of qualitative research. PAR can and does incorporate both quantitative and qualitative forms of data generation and analysis (Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, this issue), but it has a distinct ontological and epistemological stance. Although there is significant diversity among Participatory Action Researchers, in general, we tend to be ontological constructivists and epistemological pragmatists—critical in both in order to be open to other ways of understanding change and reflective in order to stay grounded in a clear ethical stance. At the same time, there is much that we share with our qualitative research colleagues, in

particular with Critical Qualitative Inquiry (Denzin, 2017) and other explicitly transformative approaches to qualitative research (Mertens, 2009; Wright-Bevans & Richards, this issue). This includes a recognition of the reality and legitimacy of multiple forms of knowing and an openness to exploring research methods to reflect this diversity of perspectives. For example, individual accounts through autoethnography, memoir, and testimonio offer ways to approach what we would refer to as first-person action research (Friedman et al., this issue). PAR also draws upon multiple arts-based methods including participatory theater and skits (Groot et al., this issue; Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, this issue), poetry (Levinson, this issue), as well as photovoice, digital storytelling, and other visual methods (Osterhoff & Burns; this issue; Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, this issue). Each of these PAR practices engages knowledge in slightly different ways, allowing myriad expressions of experience all with a focus on co-ownership of research and active participation in and steering of change processes.

## Our Invitation to Qualitative Researchers

It is our hope that our personal narratives and the research included in this Special Issue make clear that PAR offers a robust platform from which to move inquiry into action and broad participation—as well as a close network of scholar/activists committed to deepening practice and creating opportunities for professional growth and enriching personal engagement.

We as Participatory Action Researchers have felt welcomed over the years to the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry which, thanks in part to our late friend Susan Noffke, has always created space for various forms of action research, including PAR. And we have learned much through these opportunities to engage in dialogue and to explore creative and often challenging approaches to qualitative research. We extend the same welcome to you to join us at one of the many action research-focused conferences and meetings<sup>1</sup> and look forward to continuing the conversation we hope is generated by the work in this Special Issue.

## Note

1. See, for example, the Collaborative Action Research Network conference (<https://www.carn.org.uk/>), the Action Research Group Ireland (<http://www.argi.nmhs.ucd.ie/>), Action Research Network of the Americas (<http://arnawebsite.org/>), Action Learning Action Research Association (<http://www.argi.nmhs.ucd.ie/>), and the Action Research Action Learning conference (<https://www.araldsu.net/>), as well as a wealth of other local and regional gatherings.

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