

Participatory Action Research



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Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a stance, not a method

“Participatory action research represents a stance within qualitative research—an epistemology that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action. With a long and global history, participator action research (PAR) has typically been practiced within community-based social action projects with a commitment to understanding, documenting, or evaluating the impact that social programs, social problems, or social movements bear on individuals and communities.”

Fine et al.,
“...From within and beyond bars,” 173



What are the aims of PAR?

- A broadly inclusive approach that demystifies the research process so that the study does not remain in “expert” (outsider) hands.
- Intentionally represents the (insider) voices of the dispossessed, disenfranchised colonized other in the research process.
- Employs appreciative inquiry (“*what’s working here?*”) in addition to deficit inquiry (“*what’s wrong here?*”).



What are the aims of PAR?

- Asserts that knowledge and expertise are kinds of power and power must be shared to achieve realistic results.
- Local knowledge deserves respect and must be included in the study.
- Local populations are best situated to identify and address their challenges.
- Outsider scholars can assist but not replace insider intelligence.



Origins of PAR

“From the 1940s onward, with vision, critique, and intellectual courage, [Kurt] Lewin dared to assert participant knowledge as foundational to validity; democratic and participatory research as foundational to social change.

At the core of Lewin's project was ... a refusal to separate thought from action; an insistence on the integration of science and practice.”

Fine et al.,

“...From within and beyond bars,” 174

“The exploited, the poor, and the marginalized should participate as knowers in the entire research process, which includes defining the research issue, collecting the data, analyzing and interpreting the data, writing the report, and disseminating the findings... with the aim of empowering them to have a greater control in decision-making about various aspects of their lives. ”

—Chilisa Bagelle
Indigenous Research Methodologies





“Participatory action research crucially depends upon the active involvement of the community at every stage of inquiry. It begins with asking the community to identify the issues of greatest importance *to them*—and creating an ethical structure for collaboration, protection, and principles of partnership. Community leaders and members are included in research design and proposal writing; recruiting participants and keeping them involved; and selecting the most culturally sensitive action or intervention. They are named as co-authors in the final report.”

—Chilisa Bagelle

Indigenous Research Methodologies



Designing a PAR Study

- Which theories guide the conceptualization of the central research question or aim?
- How is the interview guide produced: whose questions are they?
- Do the research questions inspire participants to open up or do they shut them down?
- What methods and theories are used to accurately hear marginalized voices?
- Which theories guide data analysis?



Local knowledge and doing Participatory Action Research

- Uses numerous sources of data including
 - Art forms such as songs, poetry, dance, clothing, furnishings, and meaningful features of the communal landscape;
 - Spiritual beliefs reflected in myths, legends, and folktales;
 - community rituals and practices.
- Researchers must be flexible, patient, and respectful, willing to be taught by the insiders in whatever form insider expertise takes.

“In the participatory research propounded here, the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the master of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world.”

Fine et al.,

“...From within and beyond bars,” 175



“Designing a PAR study “involves identifying and inviting community members to participate in the research, forming partnerships with all stakeholders, bringing about full participation of community members in defining research questions, and also planning the research design and data collection methods...

It is a process of doing, reflecting on the action, drawing conclusions, and then reflecting again on the process.”

—Chilisa Bagelle
Indigenous Research Methodologies





Fostering full participation

- Researchers need to keenly observe social relations within the group to note who speaks and who remains silent.
- To promote inclusivity in the study, what strategies might outsider scholars use to invite “full participation” by the insiders?
- What skills might outsider scholars need to explicitly and/or implicitly address uneven participation?



The role of reflection in PAR

- Includes self reflection by everyone involved in the study, researchers and participants.
- All identify what they have learned from the study.
- All reflect on their general willingness to be influenced and to change.
- All examine whether the specific findings of the research will transform the way they think and do things in the future.

“It is a more scientific method of research in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality. The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research, that is, a militant rather than a detached observer.”

—Chilisia Bagelle
Indigenous Research Methodologies



Does Participatory Action Research always produce change?

It produces knowledge, the
prelude to change—but does not
guarantee change.

Jung would say that the courage
to know *and* the courage to change
require the “Luciferian virtue” of
engaging in conflict.



“The stirring up of conflict is a Luciferian virtue in the true sense of the word. Conflict engenders fire, the fire of affects and emotions, and like every other fire it has two aspects, that of combustion and that of creating light. On the one hand, emotion is the alchemical fire whose warmth brings everything into existence and whose heat burns all superfluities to ashes ... But on the other hand, emotion is the moment when steel meets flint and a spark is struck forth, for emotion is the chief source of consciousness. *There is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion.*”

C. G. Jung, CW 9, i, para 179



Opportunities to practice the values inherent in participatory action research are abundant, span multiple disciplines, and is already happening all over the world.



“At its best, conservation starts with humility and understanding. At WWF, that begins with examining ecosystems and listening to the genius of communities so we hear their knowledge of their environment and understand their culture, economy, and governance. ...

Conservation will last only if it's based on keen understanding of a place, built on the knowledge of the people who live there.”

Carter Roberts, President and CEO
World Wildlife Fund
June 2019



“Too often, the money and decision-making power needed to address a crisis rest in faraway offices that deploy far-flung consultants and contractors to affected areas. It’s no surprise that these responses without community leadership tend to make matters worse. When communities have resources to build on local strengths and buy-in, they come up with effective, durable, and creative solutions to address short-term crises and long-term inequities.”

“We need to trust the locals”
Mark Ruffalo & Rahwa Ghirmatzion
Time, 27 July 2020

