**INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Participatory action research evolved in response to growing dissatisfaction with existing research paradigms. In particular, according to many scholars

* existing scientific knowledge is often confined to powerful academics rather than utilized to benefit communities
* but vast experience in a setting, such as a community, is a legitimate and powerful source of insight that is frequently overlooked.

These beliefs inspired some communities to contribute to the research of their surroundings or circumstances. To illustrate, Freire (1972) encouraged members of deprived communities to investigate the systemic causes of their oppression. In these studies, a community is defined as a group of individuals who share a common interest, work in the same organization or profession, live in a similar location, and demonstrate some other characteristic in common.

**Distinct features of participatory action research**

 Participatory action research is hard to define, partly because this approach overlaps with other methodologies and is also very diverse. Nevertheless, participatory action research, often called PAR, comprises several distinct features.

* Participatory action research entails participation—that is, involvement of the community in which the research is conducted. The distinction between the researchers and participants are blurred. All participants become researchers or partners
* Participatory action research entails action—that is, the implementation and evaluation of some change in policy, procedure, or practice
* Participatory action research entails frequent reflection about the research practices; that is, to improve the effect of their actions on the community, the researchers and participants often reflect upon their behaviours.
* Participatory action research entails rigorous, systematic methods
* Participatory action research embraces both critical theory—that is, the attempt to redress inequality and injustice—as well as constructivism—that is, the realisation that knowledge is constructed by participants rather than a source of insight to be discovered.

Freire (1972) promulgated a simultaneous blend of action and reflection. According to Freire “reflection without action is sheer verbalism or armchair revolution and action without reflection is pure activism or action for action’s sake” (pp 41).

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| **Should I apply participatory action research?**  |

 Participatory action research is a useful approach whenever a particular set of criteria are fulfilled. In particular, this approach is useful if

* you would like to **facilitate change** to improve the lives of a specific community
* you would everyone in the **community** to be **granted opportunities to contribute** to the development of research questions, design of research methods, implementation of research methods, analyses of the results, communication of the results, and other activities.

This approach offers several key advantages (see Israel et al., 1998). For example

* the participants are more likely to perceive the research and results as useful—and thus more likely to apply and utilise the results
* the participants—and hence the researchers—are more likely to apply diverse skills, enhancing the creativity, originality, and utility of solutions
* the participants are more likely to reflect upon their behaviour, develop self-awareness, and thus develop as individuals and teams
* the participants develop research skills they can apply in the future
* distinct stakeholders, such as communities, universities, and governments become more likely to appreciate the values and perspectives of one another, overcoming cultural misunderstandings
* individuals who often marginalised are granted more opportunities to express their concerns and perspectives

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| **Main activities**  |

Every participatory action research program is unique. Broadly, participation action research comprises a repeated cycle of actions, data collection, and reflection. More specifically, many of these programs comprise the activities that appear in the following set of tables. These tables were derived from the work of Kindon, Pain, and Kesby (2007).

**Collaboratively identify the priorities**

Sometimes, participatory action research is initiated by a community, such as people who live in a small township or work in a specific organisation. On other occasions, a research candidate or research academic, who wants to collaborate with a specific community, initiates the research. Indeed

* the researchers might not have initially planned to conduct participatory action research
* instead, as the project unfolded, the researchers may have decided to seek more community participation
* hence, the project gradually evolves in participatory action research.

Researchers who are not members of the community will need to establish relationships with a subset of members. They will then need to convene opportunities that enable the community to prioritize the problems they want to solve, as the following table shows.

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| Activity | Examples or details |
| Consider the community with whom you would like to collaborate.  | * Usually, you would be at least somewhat familiar with this community
* The project should not be entirely managed by the university; otherwise, participation may be impeded
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| Establish relationships with these stakeholders | * You might, for example, discuss the reason you would like to collaborate with this community
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| Identify a subset of members who may want to steer the research, like a steering committee | * The members of this steering committee might change over time, depending on the demands and interests of members
* The steering committee should be representative of the community. If one demographic, such as elderly members, are under-represented, other avenues will need to be explored to seek the feedback and contributions of this demographic.
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| Collaboratively decide on the problems or matters to address | * You and some members of this community might discuss shared interests
* Or, the community might assemble without you to discuss their priorities
* The nominal group technique—or other brainstorming approaches—could be used to uncover these priorities

One of the most common methods that is used to clarify which problems to address is called participatory needs assessment (see Ross, 2006, for an example). Members answer questions like* what do you perceive as a key problem to be solved in this community
* how does this problem affect your life?
* what is the cause of this problem?
* what avenues can we pursue to solve this problem?
* what are the barriers to these solutions?

These questions can be posed in surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other formats. The answers can be subjected to grounded theory, thematic analysis, or other methods. Other documents on the CDU webpage on “choosing your research methodology and methods” describe some of these methods |
| Consider the limitations of past research in this community  | * For example, in the past, perhaps research had been conducted on a similar matter
* However, this past research may not have applied participatory action research and, therefore, may have overlooked the knowledge and needs of local individuals
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**Plan the research**

 Once the priorities are identified, you, the steering committee, and other members of this community need to plan the research. In particular, you and these individuals need to ascertain the design, methods, and ethics of this research as well as allocate responsibilities.

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| Activity | Examples or details |
| Clarify the research knowledge, capabilities, and experience of members  | * That is, the steering committee should ascertain the skills, knowledges, and capabilities that members would like to utilise to explore the problem or issues
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| Contemplate individually, and then discuss as a group, the research methods that could be applied to address the problem of interest | The steering committee might invite members of the community to discuss * the range of methods that could be suitable in these circumstances
* which methods may be most effective and feasible
* the locations and dates in which these methods might be applied

When conducting participatory action research, researchers can apply a variety of methods to collect and to analyse data such as * critical incident interviews, in which participants discuss facets of some critical incident or event (e.g., Hill et al., 2007)
* photovoice (Baker & Wang, 2006; see participatory visual methods in Learnline or on the web)
* thematic analysis to analyse the data, or
* any of the methods that are discussed in Learnline or on the CDU web
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| Contemplate and then discuss ethical issues around the research | The steering committee, as well as other interested members, should discuss ethics and risk (see also Khanlou & Peter, 2005). Members of the community are not passive respondents but active researchers. Yet, they do not operate within academic boundaries. Therefore, they cannot be equated to typical participants or typical academics. Ethical practices that apply to participants or academics may not be relevant in these instances. To illustrate* Sometimes, the motivation of members to promulgate their perspectives to other institutions, such as government, might override or dominate concerns about privacy and confidentiality. Thus, participants should be granted opportunity to express their opinions publicly rather than anonymously.
* The data should be managed by the community but still maintain privacy when appropriate. Often, on data files, codes might replace names. But, which individuals can access the file that converts the names to codes needs to be approved widely.
* Because the project may evolve unpredictably, ethical considerations may need to be revisited several times
* Occasionally, participatory action research will pursue agendas and implement practices that counteract the interests of dominant segments of society, such as local government. The risks of this advocacy thus need to be considered and recognised
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| Continue to build relationships with members |  |
| Discuss some possible roles and responsibilities of interested members | For example, the steering group, coupled with other interested members need to clarify* who will construct the relevant materials or methods
* who will seek the participation of all members
* who will conduct the analysis of data
* who will evaluate progress and operations
* who will communicate the results to other members and stakeholders
 |
| Collectively design research tools and processes | * Although the academic researchers may contribute their expertise to this conversation, the tools and methods should understood by the majority of members
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**Optimise the plan**

 Further consultation and contemplation is needed to optimise this plan. In particular, the researcher and steering committee need to be granted opportunities to reflect upon the plan and to improve this plan

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| Activity | Examples or details |
| Decide whether expertise needs to be sought from outside the community to improve the research question, design, and methods | * Specialists from outside the community may be engaged to train member on research skills or apply challenging methods, for example
* The steering committee need to consider methods that mitigate the effects of dominant individuals, including themselves, on the practices or results: Participatory action research needs to be as democratic as possible
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| Discuss potential outcomes of this research | * That is, consider the actions and changes this research could inspire
* For example, determine which bodies you would like to influence and inform
* The aim of participatory action research is often to demonstrate that existing authorities, such as government, may have overlooked local constraints and complications
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| Contemplate and then discuss how to optimise the working relationships across members | * Perhaps the steering committee might need to construct a shared agreement and seek approval from key representatives
* The agreement might include a data management plan—such as storage and ownership of data—as well as a communication plan

For example, the members might need to discuss* how frequently will they meet?
* how many hours will they dedicate to this project?
* who will facilitate meetings and record minutes?
* will the responsibilities of members rotate over time?
* how can the project team explore, rather than dismiss, differences of opinions across the members
* standard agenda items for each meeting, such as reflection upon the activities that were initiated during the last week
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**Conduct the research**

 After the plan is refined, the community is ready to implement the research. Nevertheless, after the research starts, members may become attuned to complications and improvements. The research may thus need to be adjusted iteratively and frequently.

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| Activity | Examples or details |
| Conduct a community forum | Sometimes, the research team may organise a community forum in which everyone can attend. During this community forum, * after welcoming all participants, the research team outline the history of this project so far—such as how the collaboration evolved, the problems or issues the individuals wanted to address, and the progress until now
* the research team outline the purpose of this forum—usually to both inform the methods as well as to collate insights about solutions to the problem
* the research team might then apply the Freirian approach in which they first ask individuals to imagine a relevant scenario and, in small teams, engage in a role play
* during the role play, the individuals demonstrate typical interactions or circumstances that epitomize the problem
* after the role play, either alone or in teams, individuals answer questions like “How is this scenario similar or different to your experiences”, “What did you like or dislike about your experiences”, and “How could your experience have been better?”
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| Work together to collect the data | * attempt to increase the number of members who participate in data collection
* a subset of individuals may need to train these members
 |
| Work together to analyse the data | * while analyzing data, members might decide that more data needs to be collected
 |
| Work together to plan the next actions |  |

**Communicate and evaluate the research**

 After the data have been collected and analysed and the researcher, steering committee

* contemplate and then discuss whether these actions have been successful—such as whether everyone was granted opportunities to participate
* decide how to communicate the research back to all interested parties
* collectively identify future research and activities

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