



PARTICIPATORY  
ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)  
WORKING TOOL FOR  
ART.SCHOOL.DIFFERENCES  
AND CO-RESEARCHERS

For the work of *Art.School.Differences*, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is fundamental in defining our own work as well as any collaboration with co-researchers or other allies. In our research we aim at a deconstruction of the subject-object relationship to install a joint cooperation with equal participation by everyone. This allows for an effective questioning and reorganizing of the production of knowledge. Moreover, we consider PAR to be helpful in conceptualizing the development of higher art education as more inclusive, democratic and pluralistic and to introduce notions of social change if implemented. «The challenge for PAR researchers who are serious about social change is to think through how to effectively provoke action by research that engages, that reframes social issues theoretically, that nudges those in power, that feeds organizing campaigns, and that motivates audiences to change both the way they think and how they act in the world.»<sup>1</sup>

The following text is a compilation of entries to the blog «participation» on wordpress. The site has been created as part of a PhD course into research methods and had the goal to investigate PAR and to assemble resources, both theoretical and practical, for those considering using a PAR approach.

1 Cahill, C. (2007). Participatory data analysis. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, & Kesby, M. (2007). *Participatory action re-search approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Routledge studies in human geography, 22. London: Routledge.

## DEFINING PAR

(Source → <http://participaction.wordpress.com/> Last access: 7.8.2014)

There are a number of definitions of PAR – which reflect that PAR is more of an approach than a method of inquiry.

A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview....[and bringing] together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and communities.<sup>2</sup>

It [PAR] is about jointly producing knowledge with others to produce critical interpretations and readings of the world, which are accessible, understandable to all those involved and actionable.<sup>3</sup>

Participatory action research is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations. It is an ongoing organizational learning process, a research approach that emphasizes co-learning, participation and organizational transformation.<sup>4</sup>

What this research tradition provides is a shared commitment to fundamentally disrupt conventional hierarchies of knowledge production: who decides on the questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to theorize the world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: SAGE.

<sup>3</sup> Chatterton, P., Fuller, D., & Routledge, P. (2007). Relating action to activism: Theoretical and methodological reflections. In S. Kinson, R. Pain, & Kesby, M. (2007). *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Routledge studies in human geography, 22. London: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Greenwood, D. J., Whyte, W. F., & Harkavy, I. (1993). Participatory Action Research as a Process and as a Goal. *Human Relations*, 46 (2): 175.

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of BC and Ugnayan Kabataany Pilipino sa Canada/Filipino- Canadian Youth Alliance, (2007). *Working with migrant communities: collaborating with the Kalayaan Centre in Vancouver, Canada*. In S. Kinson, R. Pain, & Kesby, M. (Ed.). *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Routledge studies in human geography, 22. London: Routledge.

From these definitions we can see that PAR has some key components:

- a focus on change – commitment to participate with people to improve and understand the world by changing it<sup>6</sup> although there are differences between researchers as to the scale of that change and the degree to which it is focused on promoting democracy and reducing inequality;
- context-specific – it is generally targeted around the needs of a particular group although this can vary in size from small teams to projects encompassing entire communities;
- emphasis on collaboration – researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better, although there are differences in opinion as to how much collaboration is possible or necessary;
- a cyclical process – an iterative cycle of research, action and reflection<sup>7</sup> underpins the research process although it is not always clear how this happens in practice;
- participants are competent and reflexive and capable of participating in the entire research process although researchers may adopt different standards as to the level of participation that 'qualifies' as PAR;
- knowledge is generated through participants' collective efforts and actions;
- liberatory – PAR seeks to 'liberate' participants to have a greater awareness of their situation in order to take action, although for some researchers the emphasis on liberation will be tempered;
- PAR is not just another method – more an orientation to inquiry – this means that many different methods are possible (quantitative and qualitative);
- success is some personal or collective change – for some researchers it «depends on the credibility/validity of knowledge derived from the process according to whether the resulting action solves problems for the people involved and increases community self-determination»<sup>8</sup> but for others the emphasis is on developing theories and practices that can be shared.

6 McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory Action Research*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

7 Kindon, S. L., Pain, R., & Kesby, M. (2007). *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. *Routledge studies in human geography*, 22. London: Routledge.

8 op. cit. p. 14

## THE P IN PAR

Participation is the central ingredient of this research approach. The label «participatory» signals «a political commitment, collaborative processes and participatory worldview»<sup>9</sup>. The impact of stressing participation is that all those involved in PAR projects are known as participants, not subjects or informants, who actively engage in research that is motivated by and focused on meeting their needs.

The difficulty is that the term «participation» covers a multitude of different levels of engagement. Participation may describe an active involvement in all aspects of a PAR project or be limited to particular stages and times. Who participates, how they participate, when they participate and why they participate are questions that expose real differences amongst researchers and this is reflected in the wide range of diverse projects that identify themselves as PAR.

To create some clear blue water between researchers who evoke participation in tokenist ways to those who seek to collaborate throughout the research process leads to the development of participation continuums. The ladder model of Arnstein<sup>10</sup> distinguishes between co-optation, compliance, consultation, cooperation, co-learning and collective action, reflecting increasing levels of participant control and benefit. Pretty et al.<sup>11</sup> start with passive participation and move towards more interactive participation and finally self-mobilization (Kindon et al, 2007 have a great diagram on this on page 16). Biggs<sup>12</sup> draws a line between contractual, consultative, collaborative and collegiate participation. These make a lot of sense but seem to represent ideal types. In practice, it seems that researchers often have to deal with different levels of participation as the interest and priorities of the group shift and change, as well as take into account the skills within the group. Greenwood et al.<sup>13</sup> point to the importance of distinguishing between the participatory intent of the project and the reality.

In addition, there is a danger of viewing participation as a single activity – ignoring the interactions between the diversity of individual interests, assuming that the group has a clear and consistent identity and that the goals of the project are coherent and uncontested. Exploring the relationship between participation, power and

politics within the group and the effect of the participatory process on external stakeholders needs to be considered. What seems to unite the participatory approaches though is that the researcher is not the primary actor. The participants, to varying degrees, shape and mould the research process to their own ends.

9 op. cit. P. 11

10 Arnstein, S.R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4): 216–224.

11 Pretty, J. N. (1995). A Trainer's guide for participatory learning and action. IIED participatory methodology series. London: Sustainable Agriculture Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development.

12 Biggs, S. (1989). Resource-poor farmer participation in research: a synthesis of experiences from nine national agricultural research systems. The Hague, Netherlands: International Service for National Agricultural Research.

13 Greenwood, et al. Participatory Action Research as a Process and as a Goal.

## THE A IN PAR

The word «action» in PAR signals that the research is to encompass and generate activity and change. However, there are considerable differences in the emphasis given to action in the research including its orientation (e.g. internal or external, personal or collective), scale (local or societal) and frequency (episodic or systemic), all shaped by the context and intentions of the participants.

Some writers would prefer the term «participatory research» over and above «participatory action research» because, they argue, action research is not as orientated towards social change<sup>14</sup> and does not necessarily engage participants directly in the research process<sup>15</sup>. An alternative view is presented by Chatterton et al<sup>16</sup>. They argue that it is not the word «action» that needs replacing but that it needs re-energizing as too much focus has been placed on research at the expense of action. They assert the need for «putting the activism back into action» and the importance of «academic activists».

Significant social transformation does not come through using participatory techniques or appraisal methods to elicit the views of a community facing the construction of a proposed dam by the World Bank, for example. Social transformation requires working with that community to understand how World Bank policy works, so as to resist and possibly reverse the dam's construction<sup>17</sup>.

## THE R IN PAR

PAR adopts a very different approach to conventional research in the way it actively engages participants in the research process, from research design to dissemination. Deborah Tolman and Mary Brydon-Miller<sup>18</sup> argue that PAR challenges a positivistic approach of science where the focus is on knowable truths, eliminating bias and subjectivity, quantifying constructs into measurable units, and prediction and control. Instead PAR, they propose, in rejecting the possibility of a neutral stance to research, is concerned with the subjectivity of participants, a commitment to research that

has implications beyond publication in peer-review journals, and an acknowledgement of the relationships between researchers and participants. So PAR challenges not only the status of researchers as experts but also raises questions about how knowledge is generated.

The view that trained researchers should enter a field with predefined sets of hypotheses that have emerged out of past findings, to collect data using «objective» methods, leave with minimal disruption and not contaminate the site or

14 e.g. Stoecker, R. (1999). Making connections: Community organizing, empowerment planning, and participatory research in participatory evaluation. *Sociological Practice*, 1. 209–232.

15 Kindon et al. Participatory action research approaches and methods.

16 Chatterton et al. Relating action to activism: Theoretical and methodological reflections.

17 op. cit. p. 218

18 Tolman, D. L., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2001). From subjects to subjectivities: a handbook of interpretive and participatory methods. *Qualitative studies in psychology*. New York: New York University Press

their results in order to develop theoretical insights, primarily for other academics, hardly fits with the PAR model. PAR research is messy, with research questions generated by the participants – both of which can change over time. PAR researchers are not dispassionate about those they are working with and often they create strong relationships with people immersed in a process to help change their circumstances. It is through the interactions between participants that they believe that knowledge is generated. The goal isn't research for its own sake – it's research focused on making a practical difference to the participants. This means that the actual research methods used can vary significantly with each PAR project – PAR researchers use both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

However, there are some significant issues with the «research» component. First, few PAR projects have full involvement of the participants in the entire research process. For example, data analysis is often done by the researcher on their own which may be due to the time constraints of the participants, trust in the researcher skills or a recognition that full participation in data analysis can create vulnerability in a group that may be damaging<sup>19</sup>.

Second, research in academia is often associated with the development and refinement of theories. In PAR projects the research is not primarily theory development per se and refers more to the practice of collecting and presenting information to inform and mobilize collective action. New theories may emerge from this process but the emphasis is on generating local knowledge that improves conditions. This can create real tensions for academic researchers who need to navigate meeting the needs of the participants and their own needs to develop ideas that might have application in other contexts.

Third, for some academics PAR is not research at all. It is consultancy or political activism in disguise that uses the term «research» to provide its proponents with a cover of legitimacy and credibility that hides the highly subjective nature of its design, data collection and analysis. To cope with such criticisms requires researchers with significant tenacity and the ability to navigate the often vastly different worlds in which their research takes place and that of academia. For example, disseminating the findings of a PAR project for a community may be through websites, drama productions and informal conversations in contrast to peer-reviewed journals, conferences and formally taught courses. This is not an approach to research for the faint-hearted or those who prefer to work alone!

19 Cahill, C. Participatory data analysis.

## PAR ETHICS

PAR raises some interesting ethical challenges. Lynne Manzo and Nathan Brightbill<sup>20</sup> argue that PAR can be «more riddled with dilemmas than other forms of research» and point to the following issues:

- Participant anonymity cannot be guaranteed in community group work;
- Giving participants a voice can reveal «survival strategies» to those that oppress them;
- Shared control over the research process «creates ethical conundrums that emerge throughout the process and not easily predicted at the outset».
- «Participation will not, in and of itself, make research «ethical»; the approach can be deployed to support a researcher's pre-existing agenda, or to further the interests of a particular group.»<sup>21</sup>

Manzo and Brightbill examine current institutional ethical guidelines and argue that they are inadequate to deal with a PAR approach. Ethics Boards assume that research can be planned at the outset and follows in a fairly predictable pattern and yet PAR approaches in seeking to share control with participants have an inbuilt need for flexibility. In addition, Ethics Boards assume that power differentials between researcher and researched will remain constant throughout the process and yet PAR seeks to transform this relationship. The emphasis of ethical guidelines is to enter and exiting the field with minimal disruption but for PAR the active engagement of participants to change their situation means that disruption is not only inevitable but desired. Manzo and Brightbill argue that there is a need to move towards a more «participatory ethics» where Ethics Boards recognize how the PAR approach meets existing criteria and raises the bar. This means that for example, in terms of representation, PAR's commitment to participant involvement ensures that the research is less likely to misrepresent a community and in terms of accountability, the PAR model actively scrutinizes the activities of the researcher and knowledge is tested in action.

### FOR FURTHER REFERENCES PLEASE CONSULT

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<sup>20</sup> Manzo, L. C., & Brightbill, N. (2007). Toward a participatory ethics. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, & Kesby, M. (Ed.). *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Routledge studies in human geography, 22. London: Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> op. cit. p. 39.