



Paradigm Shift in Social Inquiry: Participatory Action Research in Qualitative Research Methodology

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Participatory Action Research (PAR), a qualitative research method that emphasizes collaboration and democracy. It traces the historical roots of PAR, including the influence of figures like Kurt Lewin and Paulo Freire. The research examines the core principles of PAR, highlighting its democratic, liberating, and transformative nature. Furthermore, it analyzes the strengths, challenges, and ethical considerations involved in using PAR methodology. A key aspect of PAR is the mutual engagement between researchers and participants. This paper investigates these distinct roles and the collaborative nature of the research process. Additionally, it explores the practical tools used in PAR, such as focus groups, participant observation, and interviews. By examining these tools, the research offers insights into how PAR is implemented in real-world community interventions. The study further explores the fields where PAR is most beneficial. These include education, health, and community development. By focusing on both the principles and practical applications of PAR, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of this methodology and its potential to enact social change.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how researchers can gain a deeper understanding of human experiences? Qualitative research offers a window into the "why" behind human behavior, using methods like observing, interviewing, and analyzing data to paint a rich picture (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Leininger, 1985). Unlike studies that seek to predict or control, qualitative research focuses on describing and comprehending the complexities of human experiences from the perspective of those who live them.

Think of it like this: qualitative research allows us to see the world through someone else's eyes. Lincoln (1992) emphasized that these methods are like natural conversations, revealing the lived experiences of individuals. Our realities are not one-size-fits-all, but rather shaped by our unique backgrounds and situations (Wuest, 1995). The goal here is to interpret and document experiences from an individual's point of view, understanding the meaning they hold (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997).

Similarly, Gilbert (2001) stressed that qualitative researchers aim to experience the world alongside participants, delving into their feelings, views, and patterns without imposing their own interpretations (Leininger, 1985). This approach values subjectivity, meaning it acknowledges the importance of individual perspectives. It's also holistic, meaning it considers the whole picture, and relativistic, meaning it recognizes that truth can be relative to one's experiences. Additionally, qualitative research fosters a two-way street of learning between researchers and participants.

But what if research could not only describe experiences but also empower change? This is where Participatory Action Research (PAR) comes in. PAR is a type of qualitative research that stands out for its democratic, liberating, and enriching nature (Kach & Kralik, 2006). Unlike traditional methods, PAR involves a unique partnership between researchers and participants (Gibson, 2002). Throughout this chapter, we'll delve into the world of PAR, exploring its history, principles, strengths, and challenges. We'll also discuss how to use methods like focus groups and interviews to collect data within a PAR project, and how it can be a powerful tool for positive change in education and beyond.

Empowering Change Together

Imagine research as a journey of discovery, not just for the researcher, but for everyone involved. Participatory action research falls under the umbrella of action research, a process where information is

gathered and analyzed to create practical solutions and drive positive change (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). PAR is one of many terms used in action research, and it can be confusing for newcomers. But at its core, all action research aims to transform situations through concrete actions.

McIntyre (2002) suggests that PAR can create spaces where participants and researchers can explore how their communities are shaped by political, social, economic, and family contexts. Attwood (1997) explains that PAR is built on the idea that people have the right to shape their own development. It acknowledges the importance of local communities actively participating in finding solutions that matter to them, solutions over which they have control (or share control) to ensure long-term success. This philosophy aligns with a "postmodern" view that embraces multiple perspectives and acknowledges that there is no single, objective truth (Kelly, 2005).

In the world of PAR, knowledge is seen as an ongoing process, constantly evolving as participants and researchers learn from each other (McNiff & Whitehead). Action itself is considered valuable and morally driven, with researchers understanding themselves as part of the social fabric they are studying. Ultimately, PAR is about pooling knowledge to define and solve problems collaboratively. It involves researchers and community members working together to improve their situations. Data collection and analysis are crucial parts of the process, but the ultimate goal is to use these insights to take action and test solutions in the real world.

PAR is a dynamic and educational approach to social inquiry. It can be used to address a wide range of issues and can even spark social and political change (Stringer, 1999). Unlike traditional research methods that prioritize universal truths, PAR values the local context and the lived experiences of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It challenges the traditional researcher-participant hierarchy, shifting towards a collaborative model that respects people's realities. PAR questions the idea that scientific research is the only source of credible knowledge. Instead, it follows a cyclical process of discovery, action, reflection, and further inquiry, aiming for positive change through collective and self-reflective exploration.

The Roots and Journey of Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) boasts a rich history, drawing inspiration from various thinkers and movements. Here's a closer look at its key influences:



- **Action Research Pioneered by Kurt Lewin:** In the 1940s, Kurt Lewin, a social scientist who fled Nazi Germany, is credited with laying the groundwork for action research (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). He believed involving people directly in addressing issues at work would boost their motivation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Lewin's concept of action research involved studying social issues while actively working towards solutions. He focused on solving problems faced by communities, such as segregation and discrimination (Stringer & Genat, 2004). His cyclical approach of observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification continues to influence PAR today, with these cycles building upon each other for ongoing improvement.
- **Paulo Freire and Empowering the Marginalized:** Paulo Freire, an adult educator and author, is another crucial figure in PAR's development. He stressed the importance of critical reflection as a catalyst for personal and societal change (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2002; Selener, 1997). Freire's vision for PAR centered on empowering marginalized communities by involving them in issues like literacy, land reform analysis, and tackling local challenges (Freire, 1970). He challenged traditional education systems' power imbalances, advocating for "critical consciousness" as a driver for social change. This concept involves individuals understanding political, social, and economic inequalities, and taking action to transform oppressive structures.
- **PAR Emerging from Social Movements:** It's important to recognize that PAR emerged from movements fighting for a more just and equitable society. These movements were active across various fields, including international development, social sciences, and adult education. PAR resonated with three key trends: first, reformist and radical approaches to international development aid; second, the rise of adult education as an empowering alternative to traditional methods; and third, ongoing discussions within social sciences about dominant research paradigms. This confluence of ideas led to the expansion of PAR. For example, feminist researchers broadened its scope by exploring gender-based power imbalances and fostering collaboration between researchers and participants.
- **Beyond Research, Towards Collaborative Action:** Researchers like Wadsworth (1998) emphasized the significance of historical, political, economic, and geographical contexts in comprehending issues and experiences that necessitate action. PAR is not simply research followed by action; it's a dynamic process where participants themselves critically evaluate and adjust actions within the research framework. Whyte (1991) highlighted the crucial role of active community or organizational involvement throughout the entire research process. This includes collaborating closely with professional researchers, from the initial stages of research design to

presenting findings and discussing implications for action. In PAR, participants are not passive subjects but active knowledge seekers who use their insights to inform future actions.

- **Feminist Perspective on PAR:** Maguire (1987) offered a feminist perspective on PAR, emphasizing the integration of social investigation, education, and action as a collaborative process. The social investigation aspect involves "a method of jointly investigating issues with the active participation of those facing oppression" (p. 29). PAR is viewed as an educational journey for both participants and researchers, fostering collective dialogues and interactions to identify the root causes of problems. Maguire highlights that the action component of PAR allows researchers and participants to "stand together in solidarity, engaging in collective action for significant social change" (p. 29). Ultimately, PAR aims for three types of transformation: cultivating critical awareness among all involved, improving the lives of research participants, and transforming social structures and relationships.

Fundamental principles and traits of Participatory Action Research

At its core, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that emphasizes participation and action by the very communities it aims to study. Researchers like Stringer (1996) have highlighted core principles of PAR, including democracy, where everyone has a say; equity, where everyone's voice is valued; and liberation, where people are empowered to improve their lives. McTaggart (1989) goes a step further by outlining 16 key features of PAR. These include a focus on changing social practices for the better, genuine participation from the community, and collaboration between researchers and participants. PAR also encourages self-reflection within the community and empowers people to analyze their own experiences critically. It's important to note that PAR is inherently political, questioning existing systems and aiming for positive change. McTaggart emphasizes that PAR starts small, allowing participants to learn and document their efforts as they go. They are also encouraged to explain their actions to others in a clear and logical way.

Several researchers have identified key components of the PAR process. Selenger (1997) outlines seven essential elements. The first is that the community itself identifies the problem they want to address and actively participates in defining, analyzing, and finding solutions. The ultimate goal of PAR is to bring about positive change in the community, making them the main beneficiaries of the research. This is achieved through active participation from the community at every stage of the research process.

Importantly, PAR includes marginalized groups, such as those who are exploited or oppressed, in the research. Another key aspect is helping communities identify their own strengths and resources to become more self-sufficient. PAR goes beyond being just a research method. It allows the community to be active participants, leading to a more authentic understanding of their situation. Finally, the researcher becomes a facilitator and learner alongside the community, actively involved in the process rather than a detached observer.

Strengths of Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) stands out because it values people's experiences and recognizes the social, economic, and political forces that shape their lives. It's a research approach driven by a desire to tackle real issues affecting people, communities, and the environment.

In PAR, people aren't just research subjects; they're active partners involved in every step of the research process. This approach helps people rediscover their ability to make positive changes in their communities and participate in important decisions.

PAR fosters collaboration and a sense of ownership over the information gathered. It removes the mystery surrounding research and builds trust between participants and researchers.

The ultimate goal of PAR is to empower people who may feel unheard or powerless to participate in creating social change. It helps everyone involved develop and strengthen their skills. People with different knowledge, backgrounds, and expertise come together to share ideas and learn from each other.

PAR is a hands-on approach. People learn by doing, which builds their confidence in their abilities and resources. They develop skills in collecting information, analyzing it, and using it to make a difference. Through PAR, people gain valuable insights and critical perspectives on social issues, leading to greater awareness and a sense of empowerment. Ideally, the community group, working alongside the researcher, identifies the most pressing issues they want to address and work towards positive change.

Challenges in Participatory Action Research

While Participatory Action Research (PAR) offers many benefits, it also presents difficulties for both researchers and participants.

One initial hurdle is the confusion surrounding PAR itself. Terms like "action research," "PAR," and "participatory research" get used interchangeably, which can be overwhelming for beginners. There's often a lack of clear and comprehensive resources explaining the various origins, theories, methods, and complexities of PAR according to Greenwood & Levin (1998).

Another challenge is keeping community members engaged throughout the research project. PAR relies on their active participation, which requires a significant time investment from both the researcher and the community. The researcher needs to understand the community deeply and be sensitive to their goals and concerns to maintain their commitment.

Disagreements can also arise due to differences in perspectives, values, and abilities among participants. Reaching a consensus on which issues to address and the timeline for change can be difficult. Establishing fair and balanced relationships with participants is crucial from the start, addressing any power imbalances that might exist. Misunderstandings about the issue being researched and how data is interpreted can also occur, as noted by Wadsworth (1998). Uncertainty about the research direction can lead to asking the wrong questions or pursuing irrelevant information.

According to Gillis & Jackson (2002), different leadership styles are needed at various stages of the research project, and everyone involved needs to be adaptable. For instance, the researcher might lead the data analysis, while community members take the lead in implementing solutions. It's important to be upfront with participants about the time commitment required for PAR to ensure everyone is invested in the process. Additionally, proper education and preparation are essential for full community involvement, allowing the cyclical nature of PAR to function effectively (Gillis & Jackson).

Gaining access to the community, especially for researchers who are unfamiliar or from a different cultural background, presents another hurdle. Imagine a researcher wanting to do PAR in an Aboriginal community for the first time. Building relationships and acquiring local knowledge are essential steps before even starting the research.

Finally, researchers using PAR methods may face difficulties gaining acceptance from traditional researchers accustomed to more rigid research designs. PAR prioritizes real-world experiences and participant voices, which can be seen as a "soft" research method from a strictly scientific perspective (Young, 2006). Researchers employing PAR may need to explain and justify their approach to those unfamiliar with its unique strengths.

Gathering Information in Participatory Action Research

In PAR projects, researchers work alongside participants to solve real-world problems. This means they need to gather information in a way that's both helpful and fair to everyone involved. There are many ways to collect data, and in PAR, it's best to use a combination of approaches to get a well-rounded picture. Let's look at three common methods used in PAR: focus groups, participant observation, and interviews.

- **Focus Groups: Brainstorming Together:** Imagine a group discussion where everyone shares their thoughts and experiences on a particular topic. That's essentially a focus group! In PAR, these groups are usually small, with 7 to 12 people who have something in common with the issue being studied. The researcher acts as a guide, keeping the conversation flowing and making sure everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas. Unlike a regular chat, though, the discussion is focused on specific questions developed together by the researcher and participants. This collaborative approach helps ensure everyone's perspective is valued.
- **Participant Observation: Seeing the Bigger Picture:** Sometimes, the best way to understand a situation is to experience it firsthand. That's the idea behind participant observation. Here, the researcher becomes part of the group they're studying, observing how people interact and what happens in their everyday lives. They take detailed notes about their experiences, like a detective piecing together clues. This method helps researchers see things they might miss in a simple interview and gain a deeper understanding of the social environment. For example, a researcher studying a youth group might join their activities and observe how they interact with each other and their leaders.
- **Interviews: In-Depth Conversations:** Interviews are another way to gather detailed information from participants. Unlike a focus group, interviews are one-on-one conversations. This allows participants to share their personal experiences and opinions in more depth. The researcher asks open-ended questions, encouraging participants to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. It's important to remember that, in PAR, the interview questions are developed with the participants' input. This ensures the conversation stays relevant to their experiences and allows them to share what matters most to them.

By using a combination of these methods, researchers in PAR projects can gather rich and meaningful data that reflects the perspectives of everyone involved. This information is then used to work together and find solutions to the problems being studied.

PAR: Applicability and relevance

Participatory action research (PAR) is a flexible approach that can be used in many different fields. Some examples include education, healthcare, community development, and even agriculture. What makes PAR unique is its focus on empowering people who might not normally have a voice. Through collaboration and participation, PAR projects allow community members to define the problems they face and work together to find solutions. Researchers become partners with the community, not outsiders coming in to tell them what's wrong. PAR can be especially helpful in addressing health inequalities, getting people involved in their communities, and helping individuals feel empowered to make a difference. In healthcare, for example, PAR can be used to develop new programs or improve existing ones based on the shared knowledge and experiences of both researchers and community members. The ultimate goal of PAR is to take action that leads to positive change, whether it's creating new practices, transforming existing ones, or evaluating how well things are working.

Initiating Participatory Action Research (PAR) Projects in Communities

A key aspect of conducting research using Participatory Action Research (PAR) is establishing strong partnerships with communities. An article by Kelly (2005) titled "Practical Suggestions for Community Interventions using Participatory Action Research" offers a helpful guide for researchers embarking on PAR projects.

The article highlights the importance of clear steps for researchers. Unlike some PAR resources, Kelly (2005) outlines a practical framework, making it easier for newcomers to understand the process. This framework emphasizes several key steps:

1. **Community Assessment:** Before taking action, researchers should gain a thorough understanding of the community's needs and challenges. This initial assessment forms the foundation for the project.
2. **Finding Partners:** Building strong relationships with community members is crucial. These partners will provide valuable insights and ensure the project aligns with community priorities.
3. **Resource Identification:** Researchers should assess available resources within the community and identify any additional resources needed to implement the PAR program effectively.
4. **Ethical Approval:** Obtaining proper ethical approval is essential to ensure the research is conducted responsibly and respects the rights of participants.

One area Kelly's (2005) article doesn't address is gaining access to unfamiliar or marginalized communities. Researchers may face challenges entering these communities and building trust. Consulting Vollman, Anderson, and McFarlane (2004) can be helpful here. They emphasize the importance of engaging with key community informants who can provide valuable information and bridge the gap between researchers and the community.

The planning cycle in PAR involves striking a balance between research ideas and community priorities. Researchers should collaborate with community groups to define the project's goals and strategies. This phase involves actively engaging diverse community members and meticulously documenting discussions, interviews, and observations. While Kelly (2005) emphasizes including all voices, the article doesn't detail how individual roles are determined within the research team or how data will be collected.

The acting cycle focuses on achieving social change through collaboration. The researcher and community work together to address mutually agreed-upon goals. Kelly (2005) highlights the importance of hearing everyone's voice and reaching consensus, but doesn't specify how to reconcile the research goals with the community's desired outcomes.

Finally, the review cycle involves reflecting on the research process and its impact. Researchers and participants collaborate to assess the effectiveness of the project. While Kelly (2005) mentions sharing data with participants, the specific methods for data dissemination are not elaborated on. One potential approach is reflexive critique, where both researchers and participants discuss alternative explanations for events and experiences, promoting deeper understanding.

By following these steps and addressing the gaps identified, researchers can initiate successful PAR projects that benefit both the research community and the target communities themselves.

Ethical Considerations in Participatory Action Research

Conducting research alongside participants, known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), requires careful attention to ethical considerations. Winter (1987) identified some key principles for researchers to follow.

First, it's important to get the go-ahead from everyone involved. This includes individuals who might be affected by the research, any committees that oversee research in your field, and any relevant governing bodies. It's also important to respect the right of people to choose not to participate.

Second, PAR should be a collaborative effort throughout the entire process. The research questions, methods, and even the final report should be developed together with the participants. Everyone involved should have a say in how the research is conducted.

Third, because the research is a shared effort, there's a shared ownership of the data and information collected. This means you should get permission before looking at any documents or making observations that weren't created specifically for the research project.

Fourth, before publishing anything, you need to discuss how the work of others involved in the research will be described and presented. This includes getting their approval on how their contributions are portrayed.

Finally, confidentiality is essential. Throughout the entire research process, you need to protect the privacy of everyone involved.

O'Brien (2001) built on these principles by emphasizing that decisions about the research direction and outcomes should be made together by everyone involved. From the very beginning, researchers should be open and honest about their own biases and interests. O'Brien (2001) also stressed the importance of designing the research process in a way that allows everyone to participate as fully as possible.

Concluding perspectives

Imagine a research method where researchers and the people they study work together. This is the core idea behind participatory action research, or PAR. Unlike traditional research where experts dictate the questions and analyze the findings, PAR emphasizes collaboration and empowerment. Researchers and participants become partners, working side-by-side to understand and address community issues.

PAR is like a three-way tool. It's educational, helping everyone involved learn new things. It's investigative, using a systematic approach to gather information. And it's action-oriented, aiming to solve real-world problems. This unique approach has made PAR popular in fields like education, healthcare, and social work.

In education, for example, PAR can be used to improve curriculums, develop better teacher training programs, and even influence school policies. By breaking away from traditional research methods, PAR challenges the idea that all knowledge comes from experts. Instead, it promotes a "do-it-together" approach to knowledge building, where everyone involved reflects on their experiences and works collaboratively to create positive change.

While conducting PAR can be challenging, it offers a powerful way to make a difference. Researchers interested in taking action and driving real-world improvements in communities should consider using this valuable research methodology. To get started, it's important to understand the history, principles, and strengths of PAR, along with the potential challenges and practical tips for its application.

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