

## UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OPTION

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### ABSTRACT

*Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a qualitative research methodology option that requires further understanding and consideration. PAR is considered democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualitative inquiry that remains distinct from other qualitative methodologies (Kach & Kralik, 2006). Using PAR, qualitative features of an individual's feelings, views, and patterns are revealed without control or manipulation from the researcher. The participant is active in making informed decisions throughout all aspects of the research process for the primary purpose of imparting social change; a specific action (or actions) is the ultimate goal. The following paper will contextualize PAR in terms of its history, principles, definitions, and strengths, as well as discuss challenges and practical suggestions for using PAR. In addition, it will examine focus groups and interviews as methods for data collection, the role of PAR in education, and the types of research for which PAR is best suited.*

*"You cannot understand a system until you try to change it" (Lewin, 1946)*

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one option in qualitative research methodology that should be considered and understood. Qualitative research integrates the methods and techniques of observing, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting characteristics, patterns, attributes, and meanings of human phenomena under study (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Leininger, 1985). The purpose of qualitative methodology is to describe and understand, rather than to predict and control (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Qualitative methods focus on the whole of human experience and the meanings ascribed by individuals living

the experience; broader understanding and deeper insight into complex human behaviours thus occurs as a result (Lincoln, 1992; Mason, 2006). Lincoln (1992) argued that qualitative methods are naturalistic, participatory modes of inquiry that disclose the lived experiences of individuals. Consequently, “there are no single, objective reality, there are multiple realities based on subjective experience and circumstance” (Wuest, 1995, p.30).

The primary goal of qualitative research is to interpret and document an entire phenomenon from an individual’s viewpoint or frame of reference (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1985; Mason, 2006). Greenhalgh and Taylor (1997) contended that researchers who employed qualitative research sought deeper truths while aiming “to study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them” (p.740). Similarly, Gilbert (2001) maintained that qualitative researchers aspire to uncover the world through another’s eyes, in a discovery and exploratory process that is deeply experienced. Qualitative features of the individual’s feelings, views, and patterns are revealed without control or manipulation from the researcher (Leininger, 1985). Qualitative research reflects the values of subjectivity, individualism, holism, relativism, and interpretation (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Further, it permits information sharing between the researcher and participant, affording both an opportunity to share and learn. This paper discusses participatory action research (PAR), one option for conducting qualitative research. PAR is a qualitative inquiry that is considered democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing (Kach & Kralik, 2006), and which remains distinct from other qualitative methodologies, particularly concerning the roles played by the researcher and the participants (Gibson, 2002). This paper will present an in-depth literature review of PAR, as well as discuss the use of focus groups and interviews as methods for data collection. It will further contextualize PAR in terms of its history, principles, definitions, strengths, and challenges, and conclude with practical suggestions for using PAR and the role of PAR in education.

### **PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Participatory action research (PAR) is considered a subset of action research, which is the “systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change” by generating practical knowledge (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.264). Action research discourse includes myriad terms, such as: participatory action research, participatory research, community-based participatory research, and other forms of participative inquiry, which may seem ambiguous for novice researchers intending to conduct action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Gibson, Gibson & MacAulay, 2001). Ideally, the purpose of all action research is to impart social change, with a specific action (or actions) as the ultimate goal (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kach & Kralik, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

As a novice researcher, I have decided to use PAR to inform my doctoral studies, which focus on Aboriginal women and their experiences with Pap smear screening. The purpose of this qualitative PAR research study is to explore Aboriginal women’s and primary healthcare providers’ experiences with accessing and obtaining Papanicolaou (Pap) smear screening in two rural First Nations communities in Eastern Nova Scotia, and to consider

the broader historical, economic, and socio-political contexts that shape those healthcare experiences. Acquiring new knowledge and understanding in this area will assist in the promotion of greater equity in accessing respectful and effective Pap smear screening services while promoting overall improvements in healthcare services for Aboriginal women.

Action research is regarded as “systematic and orientated around analysis of data whose answers require the gathering and analysis of data and the generation of interpretations directly tested in the field of action” (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p.122). Action research involves an action researcher and community or organization members who are seeking to improve their situation. Therefore, action research is concerned with an agenda for social change that embodies the belief of pooling knowledge to define a problem in order for it to be resolved (Greenwood & Levin). Yet, ontological commitments that underpin action research encompass action being value laden and morally committed. Thus, action researchers view themselves in relation to other individuals in their social contexts (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). While, the epistemological assumptions underpinning action research embrace knowledge creation as an active process, knowledge being uncertain and the object of the enquiry is the “I” (McNiff & Whitehead, p.26).

The philosophical underpinnings of PAR are congruent with “postmodern tradition that embraces a dialectic of shifting understandings” whereby “objectivity is impossible” and “multiple or shared realities exist” (Kelly, 2005, p.66). Attwood (1997) explained that PAR’s philosophy embodies “the concept that people have a right to determine their own development and recognises the need for local people to participate meaningfully in the process of analysing their own solutions, over which they have (or share, as some would argue) power and control, in order to lead to sustainable development” (p. 2). By using PAR there may be the formation of public spaces whereby participants and researchers can reshape their knowledge of how political, social, economic, and familial contexts in communities may impact daily life (McIntyre, 2002).

Participatory action research is variously termed as a dynamic educative process, an approach to social investigation, and an approach to take action to address a problem or to engage in sociopolitical action (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch & Kralik, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; McTaggart, 1989; Morris, 2002; Selener, 1997). According to Stringer (1999), the traditional social sciences are challenged by action research, which seeks full collaboration by all participants, who are often engaging in sociopolitical changes. By maintaining commitment to local contexts rather than the quest for truth, PAR liberates research from conventional prescriptive methods, and seeks to decentralize traditional research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Thus, PAR is considered an alternative approach to traditional social or scientific research, as it moves social inquiry from a linear cause and effect perspective, to a participatory framework that considers the contexts of people’s lives (Chandler & Torbet, 2003; Kelly, 2005; Young, 2006). Moreover, PAR involves a cyclic process of research, reflection, and action (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Selener, 1997) that “offers a critique of, and challenge to, dominant positivist social science research as the only legitimate and valid source of knowledge” (Maguire, 1987, p. 10). A common

framework for PAR encompasses a “cyclical process of fact finding, action, reflection, leading to further inquiry and action for change” (Minkler, 2000, p.191). PAR then offers a radical alternative to knowledge development in its mandate to remain a collective, self-reflective inquiry for the purpose of improving a situation (Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Maguire, 1987).

### **THE HISTORY OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

The origins of PAR can be traced to the work of Kurt Lewin (1944), who is considered the founder of action research (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). Lewin, a Prussian psychologist and a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, embodied the philosophy “that people would be more motivated about their work if they were involved in the decision-making about how the workplace was run” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p.36). Lewin also introduced the term ‘action research’ as a tactic to studying a social system while attempting to impart changes at the same time, and emphasizing the importance of client-orientated attempts at solving particular social problems (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). Lewin’s form of action research addressed problems of segregation, discrimination, and assimilation and assisted people in resolving issues and initiating change while studying the impact of those particular changes (Stringer & Genat, 2004). Lewin’s original ideas continue to influence researchers to organize their work and reports in a cycle of steps which include observing, reflecting, acting, evaluating, and modifying (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). These cycles can repeat themselves and thus turn into another cycle (McNiff & Whitehead).

The roots of PAR can also be traced to Paulo Freire, who believed that critical reflection was crucial for personal and social change (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2002; Selener, 1997). The participatory action research approach of Freire was concerned with empowering the poor and marginalized members of society about issues pertaining to literacy, land reform analysis, and the community (Freire, 1970). Freire was an adult educator and author of critical works of pedagogy who challenged social relationships in traditional education that were based on dominance and power (Freire). He further emphasized the significance of critical consciousness to social change (Maguire). Critical consciousness development requires the individual to be knowledgeable about political, social, and economic contradictions, and to take action to change the oppressive elements of reality, thus liberating oppressed individuals (Freire, 1970).

Participatory action research has also emerged from movements that shared a vision of society free of domination (Maguire, 1987). These movements occurred within the fields of international development, the social sciences communities, and adult education. Participatory action research was linked to the following trends: 1) the radical and reformist approaches to international economic development assistance; 2) the view of adult education as an empowering alternative to traditional approaches to education; and 3) the ongoing debate within the social sciences over the dominant social science paradigm (Maguire, 1987; Selener, 1997). For this reason, other groups of researchers, such as feminists, extended participatory research by analyzing power differences on the basis of gender, and supported the importance of collaboration between the researcher and participant (Maguire, 1987).

Participatory action research (PAR) has been defined in a variety of ways by researchers from disparate fields of inquiry, such as sociology, anthropology, social psychology, philosophy, feminist research, and community-based research. PAR has been utilized in agriculture, industry, education, social work, and health (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Maguire, 1987; Selener, 1997). According to McTaggart (1991), there is diversity in the meaning of PAR, which is understandable as “any literature search using the descriptors “participatory research”, “action research”, and “participatory action research” identifies a confusing and meaningless diversity of approaches to research” (p.169). Due to the multiplicity of fields in which PAR has developed, it can have different meanings and at times be contradictory. “PAR was developed as a means for improving and informing social, economic, and cultural practice” which “in principle is a group of activities” whereby individuals with differing power, status, and influence, collaborate in relation to a thematic concern (McTaggart, 1991, p.169).

Participatory action research has been defined as “a philosophical approach to research that recognizes the need for persons being studied to participate in the design and conduct of all phases (e.g., design, execution, and dissemination) of any research that affects them” (Vollman, Anderson & McFarlane, 2004, p.129). According to Vollman et al. (2004), the purpose of PAR is to foster capacity, community development, empowerment, access, social justice, and participation.

Wadsworth (1998) further added to the definition of PAR by incorporating the reflection of historical, political, economic, and geographic contexts in order to make sense of issues and experiences requiring action for changing or improving a situation. PAR is not only research that is followed by action; it is action that is researched, changed, and re-researched within the research process by the participants (Wadsworth, 1998). Whyte (1991) maintained that individuals in a community or organization actively participate in collaboration with the professional researcher throughout the entire research process, from the initial designing to the presentation of results and the discussion of action implications. In PAR, participants are not passive as is the case in other conventional models of pure research but “actively engaging in the quest for information and ideas to guide their future actions” (Whyte, 1991, p. 20).

Maguire (1987) defined PAR from a feminist perspective combining the activities of social investigation, education, and action in a collective process. The social investigation activity of PAR included “a method of social investigation of problems, involving the participation of oppressed and ordinary people in a problem posing and solving” (p. 29). PAR was also perceived as an educational process for the participants and researcher, by analyzing structural causes of identified problems through collective discussions and interactions (Maguire, 1987). Maguire emphasized that the action activity of PAR was “a way for researchers and oppressed people to join in solidarity to take collective action, both in short and long term, for radical social change” (p.29). Further, participatory action research involves three types of change, including the development of critical consciousness of the researcher and the participants, improvement in the lives of those participating in the

research process, and transformation of societal structures and relationships (Maguire, 1987)

### **PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Although the development and definitions of PAR are varied, common principles and characteristics of PAR resound. According to Stringer (1996), PAR is democratic, thus enabling the participation of all people; equitable, as it acknowledges equity of people's worth; liberating, in that it provides freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions; and life-enhancing, which enables the expression of people's full human potential. McTaggart (1989) outlined 16 tenets of PAR: an active approach to improving social practice through change; congruence on authentic participation; collaboration; establishing self-critical communities; and involving people in theorizing about their practices. In addition, PAR requires that people put the practices, ideas, and assumptions about institutions to the test, involves record-keeping, requires participants to objectify their own experiences, involves making critical analysis, and is a political process. McTaggart (1989) articulated that PAR starts with small cycles and groups, and allows participants to build records while allowing and requiring participants to give a reasoned justification of their social (educational) work to others.

Selenger (1997) identified seven components to the PAR process. The first component acknowledged that the problem originates in the community itself and is defined, analyzed, and solved by the community. Secondly, the ultimate goal of PAR research is the radical transformation of social reality and improvement in the lives of the individuals involved; thus, community members are the primary beneficiaries of the research. Thirdly, PAR involves the full and active participation of the community at all levels of the entire research process. The fourth component of PAR encompasses a range of powerless groups of individuals: the exploited, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Selenger (1997) cited the fifth component of PAR as the ability to create a greater awareness in individuals' own resources that can mobilize them for self-reliant development. PAR is more than a scientific method, in that community participation in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality. Lastly, PAR allows the researcher to be a committed participant, facilitator, and learner in the research process, which fosters militancy, rather than detachment.

### **THE STRENGTHS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Participatory action research recognizes and values that people are social beings, within political, economic, and social contexts (McTaggart, 1991). PAR "is strongly value orientated, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate" (Reason & Bradbury, 2002, p.xxii). Consequently, participants are not subjects of research, but rather, are active contributors to research who participate in all phases of the research process (Chandler & Torbet, 2003; Kelly, 2005). The process of PAR helps rebuild individuals' capacity "to be creative actors on the world" while being active participants in meaningful decision-making (Maguire, 1987, p.30). In PAR, collective inquiry builds ownership of

information, and therefore, the research process becomes demystified, creating space for trust to be developed (Maguire, 1987; McTaggart, 1991).

The ultimate aim of PAR is the empowerment of oppressed individuals to partner in social change, which encourages capacity development and capacity building of all who participate (McTaggart, 1997). The collaboration of individuals with diverse knowledge, skills, and expertise fosters the sharing of knowledge development. Individuals also learn by doing, which strengthens their belief in their abilities and resources, as well as further develops their skills in collecting, analyzing, and utilizing information (Maguire, 1987). The PAR process is potentially empowering, liberating, and consciousness-raising for individuals, as it provides critical understanding and reflection of social issues (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; McTaggart, 1997). Ideally, it is the community group, in collaboration with the researcher, which determines what the existing social issues are, and which one(s) they want to eliminate or change (Maguire, 1987).

### **THE CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Although PAR has a number of strengths, it also presents a number of challenges for the researcher and the participants. The first challenge relates to the diversity in meanings of PAR, and the interchangeable use of terms such as 'action research,' 'PAR,' and 'participatory research.' This may be confusing for novice researchers and others first learning this type of research approach. Greenwood & Levin (1998), stated that "there is generally lack of access to a sufficiently comprehensive and balanced way to learn about the diverse origins, theories, methods, motives, and problems associated with this complex field" (p.5).

PAR can also be challenging due to its inclusion of community members in the research team, who may struggle to maintain their commitment to the research project over time (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). PAR requires time, knowledge of the community, and sensitivity on the part of the researcher to participants' agendas (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Young, 2006). Moreover, there may be a divergence of perspectives, values, and abilities among community members; consensus for determining what social issues require attention and the timeframe anticipated for the change might thus be difficult (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Issues of power imbalances and the establishment of egalitarian relationships must be addressed prior to initiating PAR research (Gillis & Jackson; Maguire, 1987). There may be misunderstandings regarding the participants' perceptions and the social issue to be addressed, as well as conflict about the interpretations and analysis of the research (Wadsworth, 1998). Wadsworth (1998) noted that there can be uncertainty or a lack of agreement regarding the direction and overall purpose of the inquiry, which can lead to the wrong questions being asked, or the wrong direction taken, resulting in irrelevant data.

According to Gillis & Jackson (2002), all members of the research team must be sensitive and responsive to the different forms of leadership required at different times in the

research project. For instance, it may be necessary for the researcher to lead in the area of data analysis, whereas community members may be required to lead in implementing strategies for improving the identified social issue. Participants must be informed that PAR is time-consuming and requires the commitment of the research team. Education is required for all to participate, and time must be allotted to enable full community participation, for all the cyclical process to proceed as intended (Gillis & Jackson). Further the researcher must gain access into the community of interest, which may present a challenge, especially if the researcher is not familiar with the community or from a different cultural background. For example, a researcher conducting PAR for the first time in an Aboriginal community should be aware that time, relationship building, and knowledge is required before PAR can be fully implemented.

Because of employing the PAR methodology, researchers may have to prove legitimacy to other, more conventional, researchers who are unused to working with open-ended research designs. One of the most frequent criticisms of PAR is that, from a scientific perspective, it is a 'soft' method of research (Young, 2006). Therefore, those employing a PAR methodology may be challenged by other researchers not familiar with PAR to legitimize their research, as "PAR focuses on voice and everyday experiences" (p.501) and not hard data.

#### **METHODS EMPLOYED IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Various methods for data collection have been used in PAR. For each specific issue or situation, the researcher and participants collaborate to establish the appropriate methods of data collection (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Stringer & Genat, 2004). However, it is recommended that at least three selected methods be used to transcend the limitations of each individual one, so as to triangulate data generation and produce more effective problem-solving, (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Focus groups, participant observation and field notes, interviews, diary and personal logs, questionnaires, and surveys are effective methods of data generation employed in PAR (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Stringer, 1999; Stringer & Genat, 2004). However, for the purposes of this paper, discussion will focus on the three most commonly cited methods in the literature: focus groups, participant observation, and interviews.

*Focus groups.* Focus groups are considered a socially orientated process and a "form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between the research participants in order to generate data" (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299). A focus group generally consists of seven to 12 individuals who share certain characteristics relevant to the focus of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The small number of individuals in a focus group facilitates an environment for optimal communication amongst all participants, thus increasing the potential for useful data to be generated. During a focus group, the researcher creates a supportive environment in which discussion and differing points of view are encouraged (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Ideally, in PAR, all participant viewpoints are recognized and valued, as all participants have an opportunity to communicate (McTaggart, 1991).



Through collaboration among the researcher and the participants, the topic(s) for discussion during the focus groups are decided; in PAR, all involved in the research process are active participants throughout the entire research process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Gillis and Jackson (2002) noted that even though the topic of discussion is left up to the focus group, “the facilitator typically provides some structure” (p.235). According to Morgan (1997), combining participant observation with focus groups is useful in gaining access to the group, focusing on sampling, and site selection, while also useful for checking tentative conclusions and possible changes to be implemented.

*Participant observation.* Participant observation is an innovative qualitative research method of inquiry and a rich source of data collection that is commonly employed in PAR (Dargie, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stringer, 1999). It provides the researcher with privileged access to research subjects in a social situation and captures the context of the social setting in which individuals function by recording subjective and objective human behaviour (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Mulhall, 2003). The researcher becomes part of the process being observed and immersed in the setting, hearing, seeing, and experiencing the reality of the social situation with the participants (Marshall & Rossman). Thus, the researcher as a participant-observer not only observes activities, participants, and physical aspects of the situation, but also engages in activities appropriate to the social situation (Spradley, 1980).

Participant observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviours, and objects in the social setting through the use of detailed and comprehensive field notes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researcher attains first-hand knowledge of social behaviour as it unfolds over time in the social situation (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). As a result, the researcher obtains a broader view of what is occurring and has the opportunity to detail what is communicated and what is implicit in the situation (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995).

*Interviews.* Interviews are a method used in PAR which “enable participants to describe their situation” (Stringer, 1999, p.68). Interviewing is a theoretical approach to data collection, an engaging form of inquiry, and an appropriate method for collecting data regarding human experiences (Kaufman, 1992; Kvale, 1996). According to Reinhartz (1992), “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, rather than the words of the researcher” (p.19). The researcher explores a few general topics to assist in uncovering the participant’s perspectives, but demonstrates the utmost respect for how the participant frames and structures the responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Ultimately, an interview is “a face-to face verbal interaction in which the researcher attempts to elicit information from the respondent, usually through direct questioning” (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.466). Both the researcher and the participant share and learn throughout the interviewing process in a reciprocal manner. Again, throughout the PAR process all participants are active in the development of the interview guide, as well as data analysis. It is essential that interview questions “be carefully formulated to ensure that

participants are given maximum opportunity to present events and phenomena in their own terms and to follow agendas of their own choosing” (Stringer, 1999, p.70).

### **FOR WHAT TYPE OF RESEARCH IS PAR METHODOLOGY BEST SUITED?**

Participatory action research is suited for research in a number of disciplines, such as education, health, community development, adult education, organizational development, agriculture, industry, university-community development, and research with groups of oppressed or marginalized individuals (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993; Selener, 1997; Young, 2006; Maguire, 1987; Varcoe, 2006). “If PAR is to serve social change, democratic forms of interaction and decision-making leading to empowering and democratic ends to benefit the powerless” are imperative (Selener, 1997, p.237). Since PAR places emphasis on collaboration through the process of participation, community members become empowered to define problems and find solutions (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). Accordingly, community members are considered co-investigators throughout the entire PAR process (Gillis & Jackson).

Combining PAR with other qualitative approaches has the potential to address health inequities, promote community participation, and foster individual empowerment (Bailey et al., 2006). In the health literature, PAR is seen as transformative, an empowering process whereby researchers and participants co-create knowledge while developing a sense of community, educating each other by negotiating meanings and raising consciousness (Fals Borda, 2001; Green et al., 1995; Kemmis & Taggart, 2003). Action in which mobilization tends “to change, generate, or evaluate practices and policies” (Young, 2006, p.500) is the anticipated outcome of PAR.

### **THE ROLE OF PAR IN EDUCATION**

Participatory action research has played a pivotal role in educational change, particularly in the development of teachers and teaching (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1991). Activities such as educational research, curriculum development, teaching, and evaluation are fundamental aspects of an action research process (Elliot, 1991). Elliot (1991) cited action research as “a form of creative resistance because it transforms rather than simply preserves the old professional craft culture of teachers” (p. 49). Consequently, the primary aim of action research is the improvement of teaching practice, rather than the production of knowledge (Elliot). According to Elliot (1991), knowledge production and utilization are subordinate to, and conditioned by, the improvement of teaching practice. Action research has been found to improve teaching practice by assisting the teacher in developing a capacity for discrimination and judgment in complicated human situations, unifying inquiry, and assisting in improving performance and professional role development. In essence, action research broadens the professionalism of teachers by presenting opportunities to participate in educational research and curriculum theorizing (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Carr and Kemmis (1986) contended that there is a ‘teacher as researcher movement,’ whereby teachers engage in research that encompasses “school-based curriculum development, research-based in-service education and professional self-evaluation projects” (p.1). This movement has resulted from a response to political

pressures, social conditions, and professional desires, considered largely uncoordinated, pragmatic, and opportunistic for teachers (Carr & Kemmis).

Carr and Kemmis (1986), in *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, provided theoretical rationale and philosophical justifications for teachers' role in research; they argue that the most conceivable manner in which to construe educational research is through critical social science. The aim of the book was to present teachers, educators, and educational researchers access to the discourse supporting "the claim that professional development of teachers requires that they adopt a research stance towards their educational practice" (p.2). The authors explored critical social science in the context of educational research, and then proposed the notion of a critical educational science as a research for education. A critical educational science embodies a belief in active participation of teachers, parents, students, and school administrators in critically analyzing their own educational situations with intentions of transforming and improving those educational situations for teachers, students, and society (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Drawing on the work of Habermas and the "process of enlightenment," Carr and Kemmis (1986) maintained that participants must reach understandings of their situation. Undoubtedly, a critical educational science necessitates that teachers conduct research into their own practices, understandings, and situations (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Clearly, to accomplish this end, Carr and Kemmis (1986) recommended educational action research as an approach to improving education, curriculum, and professional development, improving educational programs, and system planning and policy development. Educational action research offers teachers, parents, students, and administrators a means to take "collaborative responsibility for the development and reform of education" (p. 211).

### **SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS USING PAR**

Kelly (2005), in an article entitled, "Practical Suggestions for Community Interventions using Participatory Action Research," described the background steps that researchers can employ when conceptualizing and initiating a research project with community partners using PAR. Suggestions for initial steps and planning stages in PAR research were presented, with literature to support each suggestion. The purpose of this article was to bridge the theory-implementation gap by summarizing the principles of PAR; it then suggested steps for nurse researchers to employ for the development and implementation of a PAR project. Kelly (2005) maintained that PAR provides a methodology for nurses to use to guide community interventions and address issues of injustice while engaging in research that increases knowledge and informs changes in community conditions.

The major strength of this article was its series of steps that were general guidelines for developing and implementing a PAR project. Many of the articles and texts relating to PAR do not describe the steps involved in the PAR process, which makes it difficult for novice researchers to learn the process. Kelly (2005) suggested that PAR has initial steps, plus planning, acting, and review cycles. The initial steps of PAR included: a community assessment as the basis of action, finding a community partner, considering existing resources that are available for implementing a PAR program, and ethical approval. Although the author discussed finding a community partner, gaining entry into

communities that are unfamiliar to the researcher or marginalized communities that may be difficult to access was not addressed. There was no mention of approaching key community informants as a way to form relationships and gain access to a community. Key informants in a community have much to offer a research team, as their insights can be helpful in providing information that is unable to be captured by other methods (Vollman, Anderson, & McFarlane, 2004).

The next step in PAR, according to Kelly (2005), is the planning cycle, which “involves a balance between presenting ideas developed from a formal community assessment and working with community groups on the creation of priorities or strategies” (p.69). Essentially, the focus of the planning cycle is the identification of community members and the involvement of as many different individuals and groups as possible (Kelly, 2005). It is in this step of the process that the meticulous recording of discussions, interviews, and field notes assists in clarification of the program philosophy and the type(s) of programming required by the community (Kelly, 2005). However, Kelly (2005) does not address the roles of each of the individuals in the research process, suggest how to determine individual responsibilities, or mention data collection methods.

The goal of the acting cycle is “to create consciousness and social change by working together with the target community to address an agreed-upon goal” (Kelly, 2005, p.70). Although the acting cycle requires that all community members’ voices be heard and that the development of goals must be collectively agreed upon, the author does not communicate how to balance the demands of the research process with the need for outcomes. Finally, during the review cycle, the participants and researcher collaborate to assess the process of the research and the outcomes of any health promotion efforts. Outcome evaluation documents are completed and the group determines how to share the data (Kelly, 2005). Although Kelly (2005) does allude to data being shared with the participants, it is unclear as to what the mechanisms for sharing the data are. Reflexive critique, one such mechanism, is a process of enabling the participants and researcher to make explicit, alternative explanations for events and experiences (Gillis & Jackson, 2002)

#### **ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Winter (1987) outlined a number of ethical principles that researchers must consider when conducting PAR. First, the researcher must ensure that all relevant persons, committees, and authorities have been consulted, and that the principles guiding the work are accepted prior to commencing the research. All participants must be allowed to influence the work, and the wishes of those who do not wish to participate must be respected. Furthermore, the development of the work must remain visible and open to suggestions from others throughout the research process. The researcher must also ensure that permission is obtained prior to making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes, as there is a shared ownership of the research. Descriptions of others’ work and points of view must be negotiated with all those who participated in PAR before publishing any of the work. Finally, the researcher must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process.

O'Brien (2001) added to the ethical principles of PAR by stating that decisions regarding the direction of the research and probable outcomes are collective. It is imperative that the researchers be explicit about the nature of the research process from the beginning, including all personal biases and interests, while ensuring that there is equal access to information generated by the process for all participants. It is also important, according to O'Brien (2001), that the outside researcher and the initial design team create a process that maximizes the opportunities for involvement of all participants.

## CONCLUSION

Participatory action research is considered a mode of systematic inquiry, an action research methodology that focuses on social change (Fals Borda, 2001; Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). PAR is a qualitative research methodology that fosters collaboration among participants and researchers. Thus, PAR is empowering, as it promotes capacity development and capacity building in all who participate (McTaggart, 1991). PAR has been cited as an educational process, an approach to social investigation, and a way to take action to address problems and issues in communities and in groups of individuals (Hall, 1981).

PAR is gaining popularity in a number of disciplines, particularly education, health, community development, agriculture, and social work (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Maguire, 1987; Selener, 1997). In education, PAR has been used as a methodology to improve curriculum and professional development, educational programs, and system planning and policy development. PAR liberates research from conventional prescriptive methods and seeks to decentralize traditional research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). PAR offers a radical alternative to knowledge development as a collective, self-reflective inquiry for the purpose of improving a situation in a community or in a marginalized group of individuals (Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Maguire, 1987). Although there are some challenges to conducting PAR research, it is a valuable research methodology to be considered by any researcher wanting to take action and make changes. However, understanding PAR in terms of its history, principles, definitions, strengths, and challenges and practical suggestions for using PAR is imperative.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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