Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) or action research, as it is sometimes known, has in its implementation and underpinning philosophies an action purpose. This action purpose differentiates PAR from methods whose primary aim is to research or investigate. Although nearly all social research has some form of social change as motivation, only PAR has change and action as an embedded and critical element of its approach. Participatory action research has therefore been defined as having a double objective:

One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research, adult education or sociopolitical action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge …

(Reason 1998:71)

The term ‘action research’ was coined in 1946 by Kurt Lewin to describe a spiral action of research aimed at problem solving. Community involvement was important for Lewin, writing and working after World War II, and he saw participatory action research as a tool for bringing about democracy in postwar countries (Robson 1993). Lewin, as a social psychologist, felt ‘that the best way to move people forward was to engage them in their own enquiries into their own lives’. He stressed the fundamental role of democratic collaboration and participation within this project (McNiff 1988:22).

The key to PAR is in its name. The concepts of participation and action form the basics of the method.

1 Action: Research should be more than just finding out; research should also involve an action component that seeks to engender positive change.

2 Participation: Research is a participatory process that requires the equal and collaborative involvement of the ‘community of research interest’.
In other words, by its collaborative and participatory nature, PAR moves right away from the idea of the ‘outside expert’ coming into a community to examine, theorise and propose solutions. As such, PAR is:

- a form of applied research: the research is intended to have some real world effect
- increasingly popular: at the trendy end of the research method spectrum
- guided by a research topic/question that emerges from the community of interest.

**PAR: A methodology rather than a method**

The components of participatory action research make it different from other social research methods. They also delineate PAR as more of a methodology rather than a method (see chapter 1). PAR comes with its own in-built value system (axiology) and way of perceiving the reality of an issue or problem (ontology) and values the knowledges and knowledge systems of the community of research interest above others, thereby exhibiting a specific epistemology.

Its qualities of being both an active research practice and one based on the principles of democracy are what draw many social science researchers to PAR, particularly those coming from more qualitative paradigms. The diffusion, or even relocation, of power from the researcher to the community of interest is a central element of the research method. Within participatory action research the researcher is the tool for facilitating change, rather than the owner, director and expert in the research project. Or as Whyte puts it, the researcher has the role of research coach (1991:40).

The requirement for equal and open collaboration between researcher and research community is central to participatory action research. More particularly, within this collaboration it is the researched, or the subject group, who are the owners and instigators of the research rather than the researcher. In the words of Rapoport (1970:1 cited in Robson 1993:438): ‘Action research aims to contribute to both the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable framework’. As such, participatory action research as a research method/methodology is characterised by the strong and active involvement and high degree of participation of those with the research objective (Whyte 1991).

**Using participatory action research**

The use of participatory action research for social research in Australia is rapidly rising. Because of its focus on problem solving, it is particularly suited to practitioner based research. For example, a local community welfare agency uses PAR at their regular staff
meetings as the base for working through work-related problems. Participatory action research is also widely used in educational research, especially around improving teaching and learning practice. Because of its problem solving aims and its community locus of control, participatory action research is a primary method in much contemporary Indigenous research focused on solving problems at the community level. The internal development and ownership of the research, rather than diagnosis and imposition from outside, makes participatory action research a social research method far more amenable to Indigenous research paradigms and Indigenous research agendas.

Starting with the PAR problem

An essential element of PAR is that the problem that needs solving or the objective that needs reaching must arise from the community of interest. That is, it is those who have the problem or desire the objective that must decide what the problem or objective is and that they want to achieve some change. It cannot be imposed or diagnosed from outside, especially by the researcher. The action part of PAR is situational in that attempts to resolve the problem or achieve the objectives are also located within and with the community of interest.

Putting PAR into place

Although theoretical insights are gained through research practice, PAR is essentially applied research. Rather than taking a standard linear model of research, participatory action research is cyclic, working its way through various iterations of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The cyclical nature of PAR is its fundamental process feature (Wadsworth 1998). The following diagram summarises how PAR operates in an iterative, cyclical mode.

Figure 21.1: The iterative cycle of participatory action research (PAR)
The cycle takes the following steps:

- A problem, issue, or desire for change is identified by the community of research interest.
- Initial collaboration takes place between the community of research interest and the researcher and planning how to tackle the problem then begins.
- The developed plan is then put into action.
- The action and its outcomes are then observed again by the community of research interest and the researcher.
- The final stage in the first cycle is to reflect on the action and its outcomes.
- If this reflection leads to an assessment that the first action step was effective, then the process of planning, action, observing and reflecting starts again, building on this initial success.
- If the reflection deems the first action unsuccessful or not as successful as anticipated, then these outcomes are taken into consideration in the planning of new or different action in the next cycle of planning action, observation and reflection.
- The cycle continues in as many iterations as needed to resolve the problem or reach the objective. As with all aspects of PAR, the deeming of a problem as solved or an objective as reached is a collaborative one.

As demonstrated in the model, the new cycle of the PAR process does not repeat the old cycle. Rather the planning, acting, observing and reflecting of the previous cycle inform and shape the next cycle. The PAR process is therefore self-evaluative, involving a constant evaluation of its process and modifications to adjust the research problem articulation and research practice.
Evaluating participatory action research

As a methodology, participatory action research critiques the theoretical and methodological bases of conventional social research. Winter frames it this way:

it challenges a scientific method of inquiry based on the authority of the outside ‘observer’ and the ‘independent’ experimenter, and it claims to reconstruct both practical expertise and theoretical insights on the different basis of its own inquiry procedures (Winter 1989:2).

Its proponents see this radical shift away from ‘standard’ research practice as providing huge research benefits. These benefits accrue at both a practical expertise and theoretical level. It is argued that when the researcher and community of interest work together in a
collaborative and participatory way, expertise and insights develop that would not otherwise be possible. In turn, these insights and access to broader expertise provide for more workable and innovative problem solutions.

However, PAR has been strongly criticised by other social researchers. These criticisms tend to focus on how its participation, democracy and external ownership aspects can greatly reduce the validity of the research and the rigour of the methods used, and question whether PAR methods lead to good, scientific, valid, reliable, usable research outcomes. Another criticism centres on what is perceived as a moralising tone in PAR’s methodology. For example, Adelman (1989, cited in Robson 1993:440) argues that PAR’s claims, of being an ‘alternative research paradigm, as a democratising force and means of achieving informed, practical change arising from issues at the grass roots are overbearing’. The essential critique here is that PAR might be seen more as an ideology of how research should be undertaken—that is, a methodology or a paradigm—rather than a practical research method.

The other difficult issue for PAR is the research end date. Unlike most other research methods, which tend to be timed undertakings with clear start and stop periods, the iterations of PAR continue until the problem is resolved. Conceivably, this process could repeat forever. The key question here is: when is a social problem solved? In the natural sciences, finding a resolution to a problem, such as developing a formula for unshatterable glass, can often be clearcut; however, in the social world, with all its complexities, defining a problem is often difficult enough without also having to decide unequivocally that the problem is resolved.

The strengths and weaknesses of PAR are summarised in box 21.2.

**Box 21.1: Advantages and disadvantages of participatory action research (PAR)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of PAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAR is applied research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The problem solving focus means that PAR is research with practical outcomes and positive change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAR is collaborative research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involving the community of research interest with the research objective aids in producing practical outcomes that are workable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAR is committed research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The commitment of the community of interest enables the research project to access community understanding, knowledge and collective memory.</td>
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• PAR originates with the researched. The community locus of control leads to the identification of problems that are important to the community, not diagnosed from outside.

Disadvantages of PAR

• PAR has no research leader. The group involvement and democratic processes may lead to competing research agendas.

• PAR may be impractical. Categorising a group with a shared interest or problem as a ‘community’ does not automatically result in a consensus on what the problem is and how it might best be addressed.

• PAR usually has no timeline. The process, by its nature, has no set end date. The question then becomes: how do we know when a problem is resolved, or when has the process become ineffectual?
References


