

# Participatory action research and social work

## A critical appraisal

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Participatory action research (PAR) is widely endorsed as consistent with social workers' commitment to social justice (Finn, 1994; Hicks, 1997; Mathrani, 1993; Sarri and Sarri, 1992; Sohng, 1992). At the beginning of the 21st century, when widespread social injustices confront social work as never before, PAR promises to connect local action to large-scale, progressive social change. As Reason (1994: 325) contends:

As I read about the work of practitioners of participatory action research, whose emphasis is on establishing liberating dialogue with impoverished and oppressed people, I understand the link between power and knowledge . . . It seems to me to be urgent for the planet and for all its creatures that we discover ways of living in more collaborative relation with each other and with the wider ecology. I see the participative approaches to inquiry and the worldview they foster as part of this quest.

The goal of this article is to offer a critical appraisal of the promise of PAR for social workers. Such an analysis is important because in the context of popular support for this model many questions are suppressed.

In this article I will use postmodern insights to critique the assumptions on which PAR rests. In addition, I will draw on my practical experience as an observer and facilitator of PAR processes and, more recently, as an educator and consultant to PAR

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projects. Through these exposures I have become increasingly critical of the practices and potential of PAR. My concerns pertain to claims about power, confusion about research methods and the prescriptions for change that infuse much of social work's engagement with PAR. I will turn now to an overview of the historical development and core assumptions of PAR.

### **What is PAR? A historical overview**

PAR synthesizes investigation, education and action. Brown (1993: 250) differentiates between the northern tradition of PAR, which is focused on organizational reform, and the southern tradition, which is 'committed to working with grassroots groups to promote fundamental social transformations'. It is the southern tradition and its influence on social workers' understandings of PAR that is the concern of this article.

The first ground-breaking PAR studies emerged in the mid-1970s, at a time when critical theories and social change movements made inroads into social sciences and social work (Maguire, 1987: 49). PAR is strongly shaped by Lewin's (1948) theory of action research and an amalgam of critical social science perspectives. The key influences include the work of Marx and Engels (Hall, 1981: 8), Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Fals-Borda, 1980: 19; Gaventa, 1993: 93). PAR is also aligned with modern social movements such as ecological movements (Gaventa, 1993) and feminism (Finn, 1994; Maguire, 1987).

PAR is often connected with the liberation movements of the central and southern Americas (Fals-Borda, 1987; Gaventa, 1993; Lykes, 1988). The work of Freire is frequently cited as a seminal force in the development of PAR (Finn, 1994: 30; Gaventa, 1993: 34; Hall, 1981: 8; Selener, 1997). As an educator working with the poor in Latin America, Freire developed critical approaches to adult literacy education enabling 'individuals to identify and analyze their own problems and influence their own situations' (Sohng, 1992: 5). There are, of course, examples of PAR used in developmental contexts outside the Americas (Mathrani, 1993; Swanyz and Vainio-Mattila, 1988). However, the prominent position occupied by writers from this region in defining the links between PAR and development practice leaves many of the implicit cultural assumptions of the methodology unexplored. Later in this article I will highlight how some of the cultural assumptions underlying PAR constrain its application in the Asia-Pacific region.

## What are PAR's core assumptions?

Many of the core assumptions of PAR are consistent with progressive forms of social work. These include, firstly, that the original causes of oppression lie in macro-social structures, such as those associated with capitalism and patriarchy (Reason, 1994: 328). This assumption leads to a further claim that genuine change can only be achieved via the transformation of the social order and, hence, that PAR must contribute to change at this level (Fals-Borda, 1987; Hall, 1981).

Secondly, PAR draws on the conflict theory position expressed by Tandon (1981: 22): 'Broadly speaking, all societies are characterized by two sets of people: the haves and the have-nots. The dynamics of society are such that the haves want to maintain their positions of privilege and power and the have-nots want to usurp it.' Gaventa (1993: 36) refers to PAR as 'guerrilla research' because it is intended to expose and confront the powerful. Thirdly, participatory researchers advocate a radically egalitarian relation between researcher and participants (Selener, 1997: 8). Radical egalitarianism requires the elimination of differences through the equitable distribution of tasks and roles in the research process (Finn, 1994; Hall, 1981; Sohng, 1992).

Finally, PAR is intended to empower participants to take control of the political and economic forces that shape their lives. This involves well-recognized social action strategies, such as consciousness-raising and collective action (Fals-Borda, 1987: 330; Tandon, 1981: 24). In addition PAR derives from the recognition that in the globalized world knowledge is power (Gaventa, 1993). Through involving oppressed people in knowledge building, participatory researchers seek to create more holistic understandings and better maps for changes than is possible through traditional science or, indeed, unreflective forms of activism. As Selener (1997: 28) claims: 'Participatory research assumes that returning the power of knowledge generation and use to ordinary, oppressed people will contribute to the creation of more accurate, critical reflection of social reality, the liberation of human potential, and the mobilization of human resources to solve problems.'

There is considerable convergence between PAR and many contemporary social work approaches, particularly progressive forms. Both models emphasize the inseparability of processes and outcomes. Participatory researchers and critical social workers seek

to raise the critical awareness of oppressed peoples and to encourage collective responses to social disadvantage. Both are utopian in their intention to create a just social order. With the dramatic transitions occurring in the welfare state across the Western world, strategies that promote social inclusion are needed now as never before. Hence, PAR seems consistent with the urgent priorities of social workers who advocate social justice with service users.

Below I turn to a critical appraisal of the approach. The analysis will be structured on three areas of concern: power, method and processes of change.

### **But what do PAR workers do? Questions of power**

As a researcher, educator and consultant to PAR projects, I am often asked, and indeed, ask myself, what do PAR workers do. The PAR literature is remarkably unenlightening, as there are many imperatives against the recognition of researcher power in PAR. In particular, the continuing exercise of power and expertise is incompatible with the radical egalitarian stance espoused by participatory researchers (Reason, 1994). Hence, participatory researchers tend to define themselves more by what they do not do rather than by their actions. This is evident in the terminology used by participatory researchers which stresses the importance of 'working under the guidance of the people' (Mathrani, 1993: 351) and acting as a 'resource person' (Sohng, 1996: 85).

Yet in spite of the edict against the explicit use of power, PAR does call upon research workers to exercise power in a variety of ways, albeit differently from that associated with the use of power connected to traditional forms of research. As Reason (1994: 334) acknowledges: 'paradoxically, many PAR projects could not occur without the initiative of someone with time, skill and commitment, someone who will almost inevitably be a member of a privileged and educated group. PAR appears to sit uneasily with this.'

Moreover, there is considerable evidence in the activist literature to demonstrate the use of worker power in initiating and facilitating activist processes. For example, in the PAR literature, research workers are routinely invited to: initiate research (Alder and Sandor, 1990; Reason, 1994); establish the ground work for the project through preliminary consultation and evaluation of the issues (Healy and Walsh, 1997); promote participant involvement (Sohng, 1992); facilitate meetings (Mathrani, 1993); raise consciousness and promote activist attitudes (Finn, 1994; Maguire,

1987; Sohng, 1992); and initiate the sharing of power itself (Finn, 1994; Maguire, 1987). All these actions require the worker to actively influence the process and thus are illustrations of worker power.

The view that participation emerges in the absence of researcher power mutes recognition of the productive uses of such power in PAR. The failure to acknowledge the positive or negative operations of researcher power in PAR does not mean it disappears, but that such recognition is sent underground. As Phillips (1991: 134) observes, 'Power that is acknowledged can be subjected to mechanisms of democratic control; power that is denied can become unlimited and capricious.'

Ironically, too, the radical egalitarian stance can contribute to patronizing practices in which research workers downplay their role at each stage of initiating, organizing and completing PAR projects. I have witnessed the paradox between the power aversion rhetoric of PAR and the continuing realities of worker power played out on many occasions. Repeatedly I have observed researchers claim that participants assumed a primary role in the research process, even in the face of considerable contrary evidence. For instance, these claims can persist despite vast disparities in time and knowledge committed by researchers compared with other project participants. Indeed, these assertions may even be maintained when the researcher receives formal acknowledgement of his or her core role in the form of first- or even sole-author status on research products.

While the dissonance between the claims of PAR and its actuality seems lost in researchers' explication of the processes, rarely is it so for participants. For example, in evaluating a PAR project that I facilitated, participants commented on the positive and negative aspects of power that remained in spite of my commitment to reducing power differences. On the one hand, participants saw some operations of power as useful for maintaining collective cohesion and direction amongst participants. On the other hand, participants emphasized the power to which I continued to have access, such as that connected to my privileged educational status. These differences remained no matter how hard I tried to erase them. Because of the inevitability of power in PAR, Chataway (1997: 754) argues that such differences be incorporated in the research process, as she states: 'It may be inadvisable even to strive to eradicate the influence of power on the research relationship, since this is the nature of the context one is trying to understand.'

Instead the goal might be to gain a better understanding of the influence of existing power by observing its effects on the research collaboration.'

The radical egalitarian ethos of PAR pre-empts enquiry into the positive and the negative effects of power in the research/action context. Our understanding of PAR is the poorer because of it.

### **PAR and the will to power**

Given the extensive focus on negative operations of researcher power in progressive social workers' writings about PAR, it is surprising to find little reflection on even the overt forms that PAR itself produces. This contributes to a contradiction between the participatory researchers' stated desire for dialogue and their intention, as acknowledged by Selener (1997: 27), to 'disindoctrinate' the other through such dialogue. This paradox is highlighted by Rahnema (1990: 205), who asks: 'Are they really embarked on a learning journey into the unknown where everything has to be discovered? Or, are they concerned more about finding the most appropriate participatory ways to convince the "uneducated" of the merits of their own educated convictions?'

The problem is not only that the researcher holds a critical truth that he or she seeks to share or even impose. It is also that this intention is cloaked in the veil of dialogue, equality and even intimacy. Yet participants who fail to comply with the critical truth claims underlying PAR face a variety of sanctions from participatory researchers, including being viewed as uncooperative, wrong, sustaining a 'primitive' consciousness, or even as being subject to 'counter-revolutionary influences' (Rahnema, 1990). It seems that PAR, as a product of modernity, is shaped also by its categories of right and wrong. In so far as the truth claims embedded in PAR remain unproblematic for participatory researchers, the potential for dialogue is significantly constrained.

### **Method and PAR: is it science?**

Participatory researchers are committed to knowledge development. Yet exactly how they actually go about doing research tasks is shrouded in mystery if not outright contradictions. PAR is frequently described as a research method (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 1997). However, because most authors focus on processes of investigation rather than elaborate on the techniques used to gather

and analyse data, it is better described as a research methodology or theory of research. (See Crotty [1998] for an explanation of these terms.)

PAR derives from critical epistemology. This tradition challenges the scientific establishment, its claims to objectivity and methods of operation (Crotty, 1998). In PAR the knowledge of the expert and the citizen are represented as opposites and the methodology is intended to revalue the knowledge 'derived from experience, commonsense and citizenship' (Gaventa, 1993: 22; see also Hicks, 1997). As part of this quest, PAR contributes to new possibilities for analysis and presentation of information. For instance, Reason (1994) argues that one can incorporate non-traditional knowledge methods, such as the presentation of analysis via dance, drama or photographic exhibitions. Yet despite the stated openness to different ways of knowing, the majority of PAR projects reported in the social science literature depend on established 'scientific' methods, such as the use of large-scale surveys, focus groups and interview data (see Chataway, 1997; Herr, 1995; Lykes, 1988; Wagner, 1991). The problem lies not in participatory researchers' use of scientific methods, but in their failure to reflect on the paradoxes of doing so.

In the PAR literature there is inadequate enquiry into research methods and to questions about rigour in the context of the uncertainties in which participatory researchers work (Mangan, 1993; Swepson and Dick, 1993). Instead, authors advocate their position for or against established scientific methods, usually without acknowledging there is even a debate to be had. As Swepson and Dick (1993: 2) explain, 'Having had to fight against the dominant paradigm, they [action researchers] often also react belligerently towards other action research paradigms.'

### **What is the measure of change?**

Drawing on the grand critical theories of modernity, participatory researchers seek nothing less than the progressive transformation of the social order. Yet exactly what counts as transformation remains unclear. It is undeniable that PAR can contribute to social progress in local contexts. Reports of research outcomes include: social inclusion; local participation; and improved service user participation in design and delivery of services (Healy and Walsh, 1997; Chataway, 1997; Sarri and Sarri, 1992). Impressive as the reported outcomes of PAR processes are, they pale in comparison

with the rhetoric of the new social order to which participatory researchers aspire. To add to the confusion, many participatory researchers express disdain for local forms of social action as limited, if not antithetical, to radical social change (see Hall, 1981: 13). For example, Chataway (1997), who is a participatory researcher, reports on her initial reluctance to accept participants' desire to study the divisions amongst them, in part because this seemed so insignificant compared with the major disadvantages they experienced.

What is required, it seems, is a radical interrogation of PAR discourses which separate structural from local forms of change. The grand claims do not assist participatory researchers to lift their eyes from the ground; but, instead, lead to the exaggeration of the outcomes of PAR. A challenge for participatory researchers is learning to celebrate the forms of local change based on solid relationships that PAR can assist us to achieve; for it is precisely this outcome that the rhetoric of PAR precludes researchers from recognizing. As Rahnema (1990: 218) observes, 'Relationship is the opposite of . . . superficial relations. It is the mirror in which one can see oneself as one is. And one cannot see oneself that way if one approaches it with a conclusion, an ideology, or with condemnation or justification.'

### **Questions about collective identification**

Challenges can be made also to the universal prescriptions for action proposed by participatory researchers. At its most basic, PAR promotes change by encouraging the participation of oppressed people in knowledge building and action. Yet, such participation is not necessarily experienced as empowering. As Chataway (1997: 760) notes: 'One of the few powers experienced in some traditionally disempowered groups is the possession of more information about themselves than dominant group members. Giving up this information can feel like surrendering a scarce resource.'

Similarly, although collective identification may be useful when a pre-existing identification motivates participation in PAR, all too often it leads to the prescription of unity. Post-structural theorists, particularly Foucault and contemporary feminist writers (Cixous, 1981, 1994; Scott, 1994), observe that identity is constituted through language and hence identities are contextually variable. From this view, collective politics is not the expression of common true



identities, for identifications are always in construction. The formation of collective identifications is impositional in so far as it leads to glossing over differences that may be critical to participants' self-understanding (Chataway, 1997).

Post-structural insights challenge the imperatives towards group identification and taking sides that infuse the PAR literature (see Maguire, 1987: 7). The oppositional discourse of PAR assumes that the status of individuals as powerful and powerless is fixed through their position in broad social structures. While as activists we must vigilantly witness the negative expressions of structural power in the lives of oppressed people, the assumptions of PAR can disempower by refusing to recognize that even relatively powerless people participate in power (Yeatman, 1997: 137). Rahnema (1990: 216) contends that 'as long as the people remain hypnotized by a concept of power as institutionalized violence, they are disabled in their creative efforts aimed at cultivating their own life sources of power'.

### **The contemporary contexts of social work activity**

Many of the published accounts of PAR are undertaken by academics engaged in it outside their employing organization. Although academic researchers report obstacles to implementing PAR in those contexts (Sohng, 1992), the threats do not usually reach the sanctions, such as marginalization and even employment loss, that can face workers who step outside the highly constrained positions some of them occupy (Laragy, 1997). From my encounters with practising social workers in contemporary environments, I respect the need for them to be highly strategic in promoting change. As Lane (1997: 39) observes: 'perhaps as social workers, we need to become skilled at swimming with the crocodiles while accomplishing our tasks. Being an advocate for social justice requires the talent to know when to risk and when to wait.' An approach such as PAR which promotes oppositional action does not easily accommodate with this perspective.

The marginal status of social workers as researchers is a further obstacle to the use of PAR. For it is one thing to give up the status of scientific investigator, as some researchers have done, to pursue PAR; it is a much more risky thing to do if one was never regarded as a researcher, as is the case for most social welfare professionals. In addition, as welfare administration throughout the Western world is increasingly driven by market principles, social workers'

tasks are being streamlined and aspects of their work sourced to external organizations. As research has rarely been accepted as a core task of social work activity, this is an aspect of practice that is particularly vulnerable to outsourcing. In the Australian and New Zealand contexts, social workers have to compete alongside large commercial enterprises in tendering for research and service delivery programmes. Whether PAR has sufficient legitimacy to be accepted as a framework for research and evaluation, especially when contrasted with the might of research proposals based on established scientific models, remains to be seen. The circularity of participatory research processes, and its intensive time and resource requirements, put it at a competitive disadvantage in relation to the economic efficiency and measurement of outputs valued in the post-bureaucratic welfare state.

### **Cross-cultural applicability: some problematics for the Asia-Pacific region**

Advocates of PAR frequently cite its cross-cultural applicability and in many instances use its application in central and Latin American regions to justify this claim (see Selener, 1997; Sohng, 1992). What remains unacknowledged is the reliance of PAR on Western cultural traditions that recognize conflict, protest and dissent as features of social progress (Pharr, 1990: 206). For instance, Pharr (1990) asserts that commonplace expressions in Western cultures, such as the notion of clearing the air, demonstrate the accepted importance of conflict in these societies (see also Tannen, 1998).

Although the conflict theory position underlying PAR may be acceptable to certain population groups, such as some central and southern American cultures, it cannot be assumed that these values are equally applicable to other cultural contexts. In particular, the relevance of this position to the Asia-Pacific region, from which I write, is questionable. Many Asian cultures endorse values, such as respect for authority and saving face, that are incompatible with the public expression of conflict (Pharr, 1990; Martin, 1998; Chu and Carew, 1990; Tannen, 1998). In her study of Japanese cultures, Pharr (1990: 227) concludes: 'The notion that conflict is desirable – that, like bitter medicine, it is ultimately good for the body and soul, and for the State itself – is profoundly alien to Japanese, be they social theorists, politicians, or ordinary citizens.'

The insights of studies in the Asia-Pacific region invite caution in

the promotion of PAR as a cross-cultural methodology. One danger is that in its emphasis on conflict PAR can debase alternate culturally appropriate change strategies (Martin, 1998; Pharr, 1990; Tannen, 1998). Moreover, change approaches that are insensitive to these cultural differences are likely to be met with resistance from participants. As Chu and Carew (1990) advise: '[the] adherence to the view that those in authority should be heeded, also has consequences for community work as it may prove to be difficult to enable a community made up of largely Chinese people to use strategies involving conflict as a means of achieving results. Such strategies may be seen as a challenge to those in power and therefore in conflict with the teaching of Confucius. (p. 8)'

## Conclusion

In this article I have highlighted the problems of PAR that remain despite its endorsement as an alternate methodology for social workers. I recognize the potential of PAR for achieving meaningful insights and action. Yet I contend that social workers have inadequately attended to the limitations of this methodology. Participatory researchers have much to gain from the interrogation of their claims and practices as well as from encounters with some aspects of postmodern thinking. For example, post-structural theorists recognize the positive and negative effects of power (Gatens, 1996: 88). This view may free participatory researchers to acknowledge the forms of power on which their practice relies and the constraining as well as the liberatory effects of PAR. Such a questioning of PAR can contribute to its considered use, based on sober assessments of its strengths and limitations for achieving social justice in the contemporary contexts of social work. As Foucault (1991: 343) maintains: 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.'

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