Is Participatory Action Research Relevant in the Canadian Workplace?

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Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR), with its emphasis on grassroots empowerment and local control, has a long history as the research method of choice for marginalized communities. However, unsettling questions remain about the nature of power and the promise of PAR as a truly participatory and empowering methodology. In this paper, we summarize the key theorists, principles, methodology, researcher's role, strengths and limitations of traditional PAR. In the subsequent section, we review current critiques and revisions of PAR. Finally, Khan proposes an adjustment to PAR that reflects the strengths and limitations of PAR and the implications of applying PAR within the bounds of a capitalist social-economic structure.

Introduction

With its emphasis on grassroots empowerment and local control, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has long been touted as the method of choice for conducting research with marginalized communities. However, troubling questions about the nature of power have challenged the promise of PAR as a truly participatory and empowering methodology. In this paper, we reflect upon the strengths and limitations of PAR through the example of work with racialized workers. First, we review the key theorists, principles, methodology, researcher's role, strengths and limitations of PAR. Then, in keeping with the tradition of PAR and the significance of self-reflexivity, Khan shares her personal reflections and we examine our title question through a case example of working with racialized workers in a Canadian workplace. Finally, Khan proposes an adjustment to PAR that accounts more pragmatically for structural power imbalances in racialized, Canadian workplaces operating within the bounds of a capitalist social-economic structure.

A Review of Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Action Research (AR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) are interpretive and qualitative methods that attempt to fracture away from traditional social science methodologies (Brydon-Miller, 2001; Mctaggart, 1991). The basic definition of these methods is that they are integrated activities that "combine social investigation, educational work and action" (Hall cited in Brown

[1] Candy Khan conceptualized this paper after reviewing and synthesizing the literature on PAR for Donna Chovanec and then connecting it to her own experience with racialized workers. During the writing process, we worked together to systematically organize, clarify, deepen and extend Khan's ideas, especially her concept of neo-PAR which appears later in the paper.

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education, 2010, 5(1), pp.34-44
ISSN 1718-4770 © 2010 University of Alberta
http://ojs.educ.ualberta.ca/index.php/jcie/

& Tandon, 1983, p. 279). Researchers utilizing these methods identify a social problem along with participants and carry out a process of fact finding, conceptualization, planning, implementation and evaluation to simultaneously solve problems and generate new knowledge.

Participatory Action Research can be traced to Kurt Lewin's theory of social action, developed in the 1940s, which emphasizes a strong link between theory and practice. Action Research (AR) can be categorized as "a family of research processes" (Dick, 2000) which give equal weight to both research and action. The role of the researcher in action research is that of a facilitator who works collaboratively to involve the stakeholders in every aspect of the research process (McTaggart, 1991). Developing trusting relationships with key stakeholders is a key aspect of the research process requiring negotiation and reciprocity. The relationship between the researcher and other participants should be one of co-researchers thereby allowing input not only into results but also into the definition of the problem or issue to be researched. Proponents of AR embrace the notion that knowledge is a social construction, that all research is embedded within a system of values, and that research promotes human interaction.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) define Action Research as:

> A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others, in the pursuit of solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p. 2)

Action Research was developed in the context of industrialized countries where social problems were investigated primarily by a lead researcher in a joint collaboration with authorities (see for example, Pasmore and Friedlander's [1982] project with factory workers). The assumptions are that both workers and owners are motivated and have an equal, vested interest to solve social problems.

In contrast, Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerged in the 1970s in the work of Marja Liisa Swantz in Tanzania, Orlando Fals-Borda in Columbia and Rajesh Tandon in India (Brydon-Miller, 2001). It is closely related to AR, however, PAR methodology involves a cyclic, rather than linear process of planning, acting, observing and evaluating, is dedicated to ensuring that both researcher and "researched" remain partners throughout the research process and that participants are "authentically involved" and have personal agency. McTaggart (1991) defines PAR as a systematic and collaborative project between the academic and marginalized/oppressed members in collecting evidence on which to base group reflection and in planning change.

The research process generally begins with building a basis for participation by developing relationships and negotiating roles and responsibilities. PAR researchers argue that the research process must be democratic, equitable, liberating and life enhancing. PAR breaks away from traditional research and forms alliances with individuals with the least social, cultural and economic power. PAR often uses the term "researcher" to refer to both the outside academic and the participants.

Since proponents of PAR cater to "conflict theories of society" that emphasize fundamental differences of interest among social groups, the research process emphasizes examining political economy, distribution of power, authority, economic factors, allocations of resources and cultural factors. PAR is committed to Paulo Freire's (1974) suggestion that the key to social change is through dialogue and "conscientization" wherein marginalized people engage in critical analysis and also organize action to improve their situation. Furthermore, researchers commit themselves to a form of research that challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices. The research process is intended to be a liberating and transformative experience (Brydon-Miller, 2001). Research conducted using PAR is risky because one can expect resistance from dominant groups and authorities.

PAR draws from phenomenology, ethnography and case-study method and it focuses on the subjective experience of oppressed/marginalized members of society. A distinguishing feature of PAR is that the problem identification originates in the community. Methods include observation, interviews and document review conducted in a naturalistic setting in which authentic participation is achieved via dialogue and member checking. PAR researchers are advised to link theory and practice, use everyday language and avoid academic imperialism (McTaggart, 1981).

However, PAR researchers are adamant that the methodology should remain flexible and responsive toward the participants and the research process. Therefore, rather than the kind of structured and detailed methods employed by positivistic approaches to research, PAR is based on a set of guiding principles that focus on the following key points.[2]

- The change process includes simultaneous change in the individual and in the culture of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong.

- PAR is a collaborative process that includes all those who are affected by the issue being researched.

- PAR practitioners serve as guides and facilitators.

- PAR practitioners ensure that participants, not just researchers, engage in theorizing and in gathering compelling evidence for validation of their practices.

- The PAR approach involves a continuous action/reflection spiral of planning, action, observing, reflecting and then re-planning and so forth.

- PAR is a political process. Continual critical analysis of the distribution of power and the expression of resistance, playing out both within and between groups, is required throughout the PAR process.

[2] There are perhaps 20-25 principles cited in various books on PAR, however, we have synthesized and narrowed them down to six major themes (see for example Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Critique and Revisions of Participatory Action Research

On the surface, PAR appears to be holistic, participatory and empowering. However, the methodology has been criticized and revised over the years.

Cook and Kathari (2001) are key theorists who challenge the entire premise and foundation of traditional PAR, that is, consultation, collaboration and social change. Using the term "tyranny of participation" as the title of their edited book and their fundamental critique, they refute the process of "participatory" consultation that leaves the status quo intact. Authors in this volume accuse traditional PAR practitioners of being obsessed with the local and failing to examine broader systemic oppression. They urge practitioners to avoid the illusion of participation wherein PAR is conventionally presented as an antithesis to the top-down development approach (Mohan, 2001), yet experts manipulate "new knowledge" (Moose, 2001) overlook power relationships, do not address political activism and are poorly prepared for cross-cultural management (Hailey, 2001). Moreover, these authors exhort academics to avoid colonial imperialism wherein Euro-centric ideals are the yardstick and groups are treated as homogenous entities. Further, they advocate attention to individual agency but not solely the empowerment of individuals (Cleaver, 2001) without an analysis of empowerment itself and of the role of structure and agency in social change. In their view, it is unrealistic to expect that participatory projects can transform existing patterns of power relations.

Summarizing the views of the authors in their edited collection, Hickey and Mohan (2004) challenge Cooke and Kothari's notion of "participation as tyrannical." Rather than doing away with PAR altogether, these revisionists advocate exploring new approaches to participatory work. The first step under this new paradigm is to re-conceptualize participation, empowerment and development.

Hickey and Mohan point out that participation means different things to different people. Hence, it should be evaluated according to the meaning ascribed by participants. Revisionists recognize that marginalized people have limited control, influences and access. Therefore, the PAR practitioner should promote citizenship as a normative goal of participation. Weaving active citizenship into participation results in participants working towards local interventions (micro level) but also impacting larger structural/systemic oppressions (macro level). Moreover, the facilitator/researcher serves as an advocate on behalf of marginalized community members.

In relation to empowerment, these authors advocate the Foucauldian notion of power wherein power permeates all levels of the system. As such, they remind practitioners that, in development, power does not flow only one way. Rather, there is always contestation and resistance – powerful mechanisms of push-back against oppressive power. They also raise concern about power within groups, suggesting that attention to internal group dynamics can be just as important as external social structures. They point out caution about the "tyranny of the group" wherein those with more power speak for others. In fact, such revisionists charge traditional PAR for failing to recognize how people are different, changing, have multiple identities, and how individual agency is often suppressed in group work.

According to these authors, definitions of development should also be contested. Outsider experts may recognize that social change is a long-term and non-linear process. However, when socially and economically marginalized people are directly involved in decision-making, those participants may be more motivated by more immediate outcomes.

Through their edited books, Cook and Kathari (2001) and Hickey and Mohan (2004) provide compelling critiques and revisions to PAR. However, neither deals specifically with gender. For this, we turn now to feminist contributions to this debate.

Feminist Action Researchers (FAR) are also critical of traditional PAR albeit sharing many of the same principles as AR and PAR (see for example Brydon-Miller, Maguire & McIntyre, 2004). For example, FAR strongly adheres to and has extended the idea that the researcher should remain both distanced and immersed in the research simultaneously, constantly cognizant of her own subjectivity and positionality including her social position, privilege and power as well as underlying ideologies, biases, assumptions and prejudices (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). PAR and FAR are also committed to a liberationist movement and to honoring the lived experience and knowledge of the participants (Brabeck, 2004; McTaggart, 1991). Both caution the outside researcher to ensure that all voices are included in the research.

However, Feminist Action Researchers argue that the ideals of liberation and transformation are often short lived and that, in excluding women's personal experiences and narratives, both AR and PAR are androcentric (Brydon-Miller, et al., 2004) and gender and race blind (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Women must be trusted to theorize about their own lives and experiences and act in a self-directed and consciously political manner to change their own conditions (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Unger (2004) cautions researchers to be aware of "gatekeepers" who have more power and privilege and who may steer the discussion and action. Hence, proponents of FAR suggest storytelling and personal experience as methods to ensure that all voices are heard. While storytelling may be risky for certain members in society, it also allows other group members and the researcher to examine multiple oppressions and identities. Proponents of FAR further add that outside experts should not only study the situation, but also serve as activists (Brydon-Miller, et al., 2004). Having reviewed and critiqued PAR from the standpoint of the literature, we will now use a case example from Khan's work to examine our title question: Is PAR applicable in the Canadian workplace?

Challenges in Carrying out PAR: A Case Example

A multinational, private, non-unionized food production and transport company in Edmonton is experiencing high staff turnover and labour shortages. Upon pressure from the "social committee," the human resource manager invites a job developing manager from a non-government, immigrant-serving agency to assist her in attracting and retaining non-traditional employees.[3] The job developer is invited to attend a joint meeting between the company's Human Resources department and the social committee that is set up to examine the current hiring practices, identify gaps and promote the company's profile to newcomers to Canada. The social committee consists of seven members: three females, all members of visible minority groups who work on the production line, and four Caucasian male drivers. The main role of the committee is to organize key holiday events and cultural days such as "Chinese New Year" and birthdays for employees, in particular for supervisors and managers. The H.R. manager joins the monthly meetings of the social committee which are held in the boardroom rather than on the production floor.

[3] In this situation the non-traditional groups are: women, members of visible minorities and Aboriginals.

While the thematic concerns (common areas of concern) are similar between the H.R. manager and the social committee members, they examine the problem of staff turnover and labour shortages from different positions of power within the organization. The H.R. personnel want to hire temporary foreign workers in both production and transportation at a lower wage and without health benefits. The social committee members, on the other hand, are opposed to hiring temporary foreign workers. The drivers are contesting because, from their perspective, internationally-trained drivers are taking away jobs from the local job seeker, have poor English skills and no Canadian experience. The women at the meeting remain silent during most of the meeting but eventually break silence at the end of the meeting. They voice their concerns over the high employee turnover which, in their perspective, is due in part to sexism, racism and discrimination.

The production line workers are mostly women of color and the supervisors, drivers and administration are all White workers. The production workers are working long hours and doing duties that are beyond their mandate. For example, these women are expected to lift heavy cartons from the parked trailer to the warehouse (a job that clearly falls under the driver's contract). The women have voiced their concerns to their immediate foreman and supervisor to no avail. The H.R. manager is oblivious to the situation and suggests that certain topics be postponed for a future date. She clearly wants to exclude the outside visitor/job developer from this discussion and closes the meeting abruptly. There is contestation from the social committee members because they clearly want to discuss these sensitive issues in the presence of the "outsider." Finally, the manager agrees and a date is scheduled to reconvene the discussion. However, the meeting never materializes. Subsequent to the meeting, the consultant tries to contact the Chair of the social committee without success. In the absence of another invitation, the job developer is not able to return to the workplace for further follow-up.

In this situation, it is evident that the social committee members are aware of their difficult situation and seek assistance from an external source. Their attempts to resolve the problem internally have not been successful; hence, they want the field expert to provide them with direction. While the human resource manager has certainly provided the "space" for the workers, she is unwilling to deal with the real issues such as sexism, racism and discrimination in the workplace. Because the company is classified as a Federal Contract Provider,[4] it is regulated under the Employment Equity Act but it has no specific guidelines to attract, promote and accommodate diversity. While there is a general policy for workplace safety, and several paragraphs on sexual harassment, there are no policies that address discrimination and racism in the workplace.

Why is there more space allocated for workplace safety and standards? We believe that violation of workplace safety is covert, easy to measure and quantifiable. Companies do not want to deal with lawsuits and monetary fines that could tarnish their reputation. Furthermore, Canadian employers generally view racism as something that happened in the past, done by other nations; hence, racism is not a Canadian problem (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). This case example exemplifies Lopes and Thomas's (2006) description of institutionalized and internalized racism,

[4] Federal Contract Providers, i.e, contractors that are contracted by the federal government to provide goods and services of $200,000 or more, are required to certify in writing their commitment to employment equity, for example, hiring from the four designated groups (women, visible minorities, Aboriginals and persons with disabilities).

where employers are uncritical of their practices and, although they insist on hiring a diverse workforce, are oblivious to the existence of racism in their workplaces.

Another explanation is "defensive complacency" whereby employers simply do not take the time or the initiative to investigate complaints that are raised by the racialized worker, then complacently conclude that there is no racism in their workplace. The non-recognition of organizational racism is also due to White workers' lack of awareness of their class/race privilege and power (Hurtado & Stewart, 1996). Furthermore, the rhetoric of Canadian Multi-culturism, sentiments such as "Canada is a savior" and "Canadians embrace and celebrate diversity," lead employers to believe that their business policies and practices are color-blind, benevolent and innocent. This innocence, however, must be critiqued and problematized because, left unchallenged, it leads to reproduction of racial privilege (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Denial of organizational racism is possibly to avoid guilt, ownership and responsibility and, in fact, may be a type of backlash.

Perhaps the employers in this case example do witness racism in the workplace, but the "code of silence" and "White solidarity" (Hurtado & Stewart, 1996) keep them from exposing wrongdoing. We concur with Lopes and Thomas (2006) who suggest that organizational racism is mostly internalized racism; hence, we should investigate how "White Power and privilege work in the ordinary, daily moments of organizational life" (p. 1). Employers often claim that they are open to diversity which, they believe, means they are open to anti-racism education. Calliste & Dei (2000) caution us against this naivety as they clarify the difference:

> Multiculturism works with the notion of our basic humanness and downplays inequities of difference by accentuating shared commonalities. Anti-racism shifts the talk away from tolerance of diversity to the pointed notion of difference and power. It sees race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy and defend spaces. (p. 21)

Thus, employers are reluctant to place anti-racism education under "good business practices" because it would require an open dialogue around issues of racism, including examining one's own position, privilege and power. Therefore, it is much safer to adhere to a discourse on multi-culturalism and celebrate the 3ds: dress, dance and dinner.This is precisely the dynamic Khan witnessed at the meeting examined in this case example.

Implications for Participatory Action Research: Introducing neo-PAR

One of the distinguishing features of PAR is to create space for marginalized members to examine power relationships and conflicting interests. However, the great ideals of liberation and transformation intended by this process of conscientization are often short lived especially when it comes to the application of PAR in the Canadian workplace. In our case example, it is evident that the principles identified by PAR researchers never reach fruition, unless the researcher has "buy-in" from the H.R. manager. The PAR researcher must then compromise her principles and liberatory methodology, and revert to the more neutral stance of Action Research. However, following the methodology and principles of AR may result in the owners having a greater voice, more decision making power and implementing policies that are more beneficial for the company than for the workers. The marginalized workers are not guaranteed that their voices are included or that any changes are made to their working environment. Moreover, although the workers have personal agency, they cannot be expected to organize and raise voices collectively against the owners without a personal cost. Before researchers embark on this task, they must ask

themselves: Who will represent the worker? Whose voices are included and excluded? Which policies are implemented and discarded?

Suffice it to say that application of PAR in an industrialized country poses multiple challenges for academics and other researchers and it is an area worth investigating. Perhaps PAR revisionists are accurate when they caution us to avoid this type of superficial research where we give people the illusion that they are being consulted, yet those in power continue to perpetuate social injustices such as sexism, racism and discrimination.

The rhetoric of Action Research, Participatory Action Research, and Feminist Action Research may be appealing to novice researchers – as was the case for Khan when she first started utilizing a qualitative methodology in Canadian workplaces. However, a closer examination and actual application of PAR in working with racialized workers in the Canadian context discloses its limitations.

Having carefully considered PAR through its diverse traditions, critiques and revisions against her own experience with racialized workers, Khan is in the process of crafting a methodology which she has termed neo-PAR. In neo-PAR, she attempts to maintain the liberatory purpose of traditional PAR, incorporate some of the critique and revisionist principles, and pragmatically consider the structural constraints within which she works.

Neo-PAR is based in a radical empowerment discourse drawn from Freirian pedagogy (1974) which argues that both individual and collective action are needed to radically transform structures of social subordination. Neo-PAR practitioners allow space for people to share their personal narratives, histories and backgrounds and to work on local interventions (micro level). Simultaneously, practitioners and participants concentrate energy on larger systemic oppressions (macro level). To work toward these aims with racialized workers in the Canadian workplace, Khan proposes the following neo-PAR principles:

- Neo-PAR is a practice of deep self-reflexivity on the part of the practitioner. We must critically examine our social locations, prejudices and biases before embarking on workplace projects. We problematize taken-for-granted terms such as: authentic participation, development, collaboration, empowerment, social change, systemic racism, equity and equality.

- We weave active citizenship into participatory projects. Simply providing space for dialogue is not sufficient. There must be an opportunity for racialized workers to have some control over their immediate situation. We assist workers to determine how they can participate in making changes at the ground level in their workplace and also to be part of workplace governance (e.g., committees). We also encourage workers to participate in agencies, boards, committees and social movements in the community.

- We hold the Foucauldian notion of power so that racialized workers recognize that they may be relatively powerless as individuals in the workplace but that they have power in solidarity and that they have power in other arenas (e.g., community, religious spaces).

- We take care that marginalized workers are protected. In other words, if we tell them "how to rock the boat, we also show them how to swim in deep waters" (L. Schultz, personal

communication, February 2008). We find space for workers to explore possible options without the presence of management. We act as an advocate with management while continuously working directly with the racialized workers. Together with workers, we identify key areas of concern and plan and execute training for both staff and management. Both workers and practitioners educate other staff members.

- We remember that management might only be interested in a "mechanical fix" (e.g., need to hire more workers). However, racialized workers are working from a different paradigm. Although they too are keen on attracting and retaining qualified workers, they place greater emphasis on equity, diversity and a racism-free work environment.

- Finally, we work with employers to ensure that anti-racism workplace policies are part of larger company policy (alongside workplace safety/standards and sexual harassment policies) and that employment equity, anti-racism/discrimination and cross-cultural awareness are part of the orientation for new employees (including both front line and senior management).

Summary

In this paper, we discussed key concepts of Action Research and Participatory Action Research. Although these traditions emphasize community involvement, grassroots empowerment and a strong link between theory, practice and action, they have different origins. For example, Action Research was born in an industrialized workplace setting which paved the way for an outside researcher to partner primarily with owners/funders. Participatory Action Research took root in rural non-industrialized settings. Moreover, PAR is grounded in both Marxist theory (conflict theory) and a Frerian approach to empowerment. Hence, partnership with the marginalized and disenfranchised is paramount.

We also reviewed the current critiques and revisions of PAR – based on Cook and Kathari (2001), Hickey and Mohan (2004) and Feminist Action Research (Brydon-Miller, Maguire, &, McIntyre, 2004) – and we reflected upon the strengths and limitations of PAR via a case study in the Canadian workplace. It is important to keep in mind that the case study was selected not because it illustrated solutions, but because it showcased multiple challenges in applying the principles of PAR.

Finally, Khan proposed an adjustment to PAR, which she has titled neo-PAR. In so doing, she suggests that researchers need not "do away" with the entire practice of PAR, but rather draw from both traditional PAR and PAR revisionists, thereby, creating a unique methodology that emphasizes action on multiple levels, from re-envisioning the power of the individual worker to developing workplace policies that deal directly with racism in the workplace.

Khan's last word: Although neo-PAR provides some hope for me, the effectiveness of the methodology has yet to be practiced in the Canadian workplace. At this juncture, it is fair to say that I am searching for an approach that will allow me to work in an empowering way with racialized workers, to serve as their advocate and to collectively resist oppression and unjust social practices. I believe that neo-PAR is the first step in my search.

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