

Participatory Action Research can be complicated

Some questions to ask yourself and others before moving ahead

The goal of Participatory Action Research (PAR) is to have community members participate in every stage of the research. The research process is described as community building and transformative for the participants, as well as effective in creating change. For years I have struggled to achieve these goals through my research with marginalized communities living in dire poverty. While each project had its successes, I consistently felt that none was truly participatory.

I began to wonder just how realistic PAR was for my work with the street community and other marginalized groups struggling with poverty, mental health issues and active addictions. How could individuals who faced significant barriers to participating fully in society be expected to participate fully in a social research project?

I came to several conclusions. The first is that PAR is too often romanticized as the all-empowering alternative to traditional research, regardless of the research question or community's interests. The second conclusion is that much of what is being called PAR — isn't. What was once called a consultation is now being called participatory. Finally, I realized that PAR could be redefined. Rather than asking how can we get communities to participate in research we could be asking how can we get researchers to participate in communities?



Bruce Wallace

Instead of romanticizing PAR, we need a more realistic awareness of the real life struggles involved in putting this valuable theory into practice. With that goal in mind, I have created the following questions to ask before starting a PAR project in a marginalized community:

Is it relevant? Is this research project relevant to the community? How does the project fit into ongoing community processes? Are the research goals consistent with the goals of the community and are they relevant to what is currently occurring in that community? Most often an issue is relevant when it comes from the community to the researcher, rather than from the researcher approaching a community. Most of my research is the result of community groups identifying a problem, wanting to take action and asking me if I can help.

Will I be a drain? Community research is supposed to build on community assets, not be a drain on them. There should be a considerable transfer of resources to the community if the community is being asked to participate in a funded research project. There are

too many examples of projects that seek participation without compensation. Often people “living the issue” are expected to volunteer their time as well as afford transportation and meals.

Even for salaried participants, participating in the research means taking time away from clients or other agency priorities. I find that academia can sometimes idealize community participation, using words such as transformative, empowering and consciousness-raising. I have more limited expectations of the benefits of participating in research.

What are the barriers to participation? If community participation is a goal of the research process, then brainstorm possible barriers to participation and ways to overcome these barriers. In my experience, the greatest barrier is poverty. The most obvious way to overcome this barrier is to financially compensate community members for their participation. It is also more than a lack of money. Living in poverty may mean the person lives without a phone, without an alarm clock, unable to cash a cheque without a bank account or proper identification, and unable to legally earn money while receiving welfare.

Addressing some of these barriers could mean providing incomes or honorariums for participation, child care (and caregiver) expenses, food at all meetings, and bus tickets. Finally, all of these should be advertised ahead of time and presented in a

way that assures that these are the explicit benefits of participation. For example, people should not have to ask for their bus tickets, they should be offered generously. Remember also, that social service staff can be poorly paid and that they may face some of the same barriers that their clients face.

How much participation? This is a two-part question: how much participation at each stage of the process and also the degree of participation. Some research proposals state that they will include research participants at every stage of the research — from defining the issues, collecting the data, analyzing the data, writing the report, developing action. More often, there are various levels of participation at the various stages of research. This must be made explicit and not assumed.

Next is the degree of participation — **how meaningful will the participation be at each stage?** Participation can mean many things to different people. Are you talking about consultation, collaboration or participant control? It needs to be made clear to community participants what the limits are on their power and access to resources and decision-making.

Often the researcher needs to remain in control of the research process because they are responsible — they are accountable to the Ethics Office, to the funder, for deadlines, and ultimately it will be their name on the report. If this is the case, the

participants need to be very aware that there are limits to their control over decisions.

What will the participants bring to the process? I find that when researchers seek community participation they inadvertently expect the community participants to be like-minded researchers. Community participants are distinct from researchers. Whereas researchers bring their research skills and knowledge of the subject area to the project, the community participants bring their life experience, experiences that are most often expressed in their stories. This difference must be respected. What does it mean to value the lived experience of a marginalized community participant? It means that a meeting includes time for people relating their stories; that this is as “on topic” as the agenda of the researchers. It may also mean allowing for anger within a meeting and many other emotions that result from marginalization and victimization.

There are obvious power dynamics between the researcher and the participants — but be equally aware of possible power dynamics between participants. People within a community may marginalize others, be oppressive or have “power-over” roles.

What are my limitations in this project? Who are you in the research project? Are you part of the community participating, or an outsider? What is your conceptual baggage? How much time, energy and resources do you have for this project?

At what point do you plan to leave the process? Will you stick around for the action component regardless of how long it takes, or are you there for the research phase and leaving the action part to the community? Researchers can leave a considerable negative wake behind them when their project ends and they remove themselves and their resources from a community. If a PAR project is successful in creating actions, there should be consideration to ensuring these actions are sustainable.

Be clear about your limits and roles. In traditional research texts there is considerable attention to the research stage known as “entering the setting.” Researchers experienced in PAR may find that they have little difficulty entering the setting and instead struggle on how to exit the setting after the research is completed.

How flexible is this project? Expect that if “real” people are participating in the research

process that there will be “real” unexpected issues arising throughout the process. Just as the community is being asked to participate in the research process, the researcher should be able to participate in the community processes or in the issues arising for individuals participating in the project. This is especially relevant for participants from marginalized groups.

Too often researchers seek the views of marginalized people, such as the homeless, without being able to address the homeless individual’s immediate needs. What happens when a participant loses their housing or welfare? If there is a participant that is helping your research; can you help them? Involving participants with active addictions is not just difficult but potentially dangerous. Their ongoing participation may require support that extends well beyond the definition of the research project.

What are the possible negative impacts of this project? There are many possible negative impacts on a community and individuals that should be considered at an early stage. False expectations are a very real risk of community research. If people participate in an action research proj-

ect, they may actually expect action; they may expect change. Unfortunately, the research may be too slow to meet the immediate needs of participants and the research may even misdirect the community’s efforts to meet these needs. Ask how can the negative outcomes be eliminated or reduced?

To conclude, I think that PAR is a valuable methodology for research with marginalized communities but not a simple one. This research methodology is currently guided by the question “how do we get communities to participate in research?” The problem with this question is that it places the burden of change on the already marginalized community — it is those people who could participate in my research. PAR has great potential when we seek to change the researchers more than the communities. Therefore, rather than asking “how can we get communities to participate in research?” I think we should be asking “how can we get researchers to participate in communities?” ■

Bruce Wallace is the Research Coordinator at the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) and a sessional instructor at UVic’s School of Social Work.

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