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## **Participatory Action Research and Community Psychology**

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In this chapter I will review the theoretical background and relevance of participatory action research (PAR) for community psychology, outline the key ingredients of PAR and illustrate some examples of PAR in community psychological work that has gone well and not so well.

PAR is a process rather than a method. Any form of social scientific enquiry can be deployed as part of an action research process. This can include traditional methods such as questionnaires, interviews and so on, or more innovative recent methods such as participatory theatre, open space technology, visual and other creative methods. The key difference between PAR and other research processes is the extent to which members of the community determine the issues to be addressed, the methods to be used, and the forms of dissemination of findings (Wadsworth, 1998). From a community psychological perspective, another key difference is that the goal of the research or the purpose served by the research lies in the interests of progressive social change or greater social justice.

### **Background of PAR**

Brydon-Miller (1997:658) suggests that PAR is a practice in which:

*the distinction between the researcher and the researched is challenged as participants are afforded the opportunity to take an active role in addressing issues that affect themselves, their families and their communities*

We can trace the origins of PAR from a number of different sources. These include:

- Social development practice
- Action research traditions
- Critical pedagogy and critical sociology
- Community based participatory research
- Community operational research
- Emancipatory disability research
- Community organising

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### *Social development practice*

Swantz (Swantz et al., 2001; Swantz 2007) worked on social development projects in Tanzania in the 1960s and 70's drawing on the knowledge and expertise of community members in designing and running locally controlled development projects. This method of working became the standard for social and community development work (see Chambers, R. 1994) and directly influenced subsequent developments in Latin America, as Fals Borda visited the Tanzania projects before promoting the process known as participatory action research (Swantz, personal communication, 2003).

### *Action research traditions*

Reason and Bradbury (2001:3) remind us that action research has its roots in pre-scientific, indigenous approaches to knowledge and invention. However, in Western psychology, conventional histories of action research identify its social psychological and clinical origins, all of which in one way or another derive from action theories, particularly those of action research Lewin (1946) and action science Argyris and Schon (1989). (It is worth noting Montero's (2000) point that the dominant Anglo-American history of action research fails to account for traditions in other parts of the world that were developing in parallel). The early interest in action research in community based and organisational research declined in Anglo-American social psychology during the 1950's to 1970's. However the 'crisis in social psychology' of the 1970's and the advent of *new paradigm* research, with an anti-positivist call and non-reductionist emphasis in research (Gergen, 1982; Reason and Rowan, 1981) opened the way for its re-emergence. Action research in community psychology is now most often associated with qualitative research, with linked assumptions about the constructed nature of social knowledge and the emphasis on rich understanding of personal experience (Kagan et al., 2008). The boundary between action research and PAR is a blurred one, and many action researchers were working participatively before the label of PAR was applied.

### *Critical Pedagogy and critical sociology*

Latin American influences on the role of participation and change in social research were powerful influences on the field of PAR.. In particular the critical pedagogy of Freire (1972) and the critical (militant) sociology of Fals Borda (1979; 1985) was influential. Their work was firmly based on the assumption that people's participation was a necessary part of the processes of 'conscientisation' and it was only through participation that people and communities would be able to engage in the social action necessary for social change and liberation. The work stemming from this tradition had a strong emphasis on power and powerlessness and empowerment through participation.

### *Community based participatory research*

Community based participative research is a term used to describe many different applications of PAR. However, it is most commonly used nowadays to refer to participative work in the field of health and to describe university-community engaged research (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). It is also used in the field of evaluation, originating in the work in India of Tandon

(Fernandes and Tandon, 1981), but now extending more widely (Suarez, Springett and Kagan, 2009).

#### *Community Operational Research*

Community operational research links organisational practices with participatory community practices. Indeed Fals Borda was on the editorial board of one of the prominent systems journals, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*. Total systems interventions and soft systems methodology are employed in organisational studies, community development and community psychology (Burns, 2007; Clarke and Lehane, 1997; Foster-Fishman and Behrens, 2007; Francescato, 1992). Rather than these perspectives being confined to conventional organisational processes, the Community Operational Research field applies the thinking and the practices to working with community organisations. Thus there are overlapping interests in total systems interventions, participatory action research and community psychology.

#### *Emancipatory Disability research*

For some time now, disability researchers have been calling for the involvement of disabled people in participating in every stage of research connected to disability (Barnes, 1996; 2003). The most radical exponents of participatory approaches to disability research argue for total control of all aspects of the research process. Barnes (2001:5) describes the process.

*Above all the emancipatory research agenda warrants the transformation of the material and social relations of research production. In short, this means that disabled people and their organisations, rather than professional academics and researchers, should have control of the research process. Also, that this control should include both funding and the research agenda.*

#### *Community Organising*

Community organising as a practice is often attributed to Saul Alinsky (1989). His approach to community organising is centred around employing collective power for social change and justice (Chambers, E., 2003). Working in Chicago in the United States, Alinsky promoted a 'backyard revolution' to restore dignity to poor communities by showing them how to organise against organisations with power. Community organising is a community based practice, but does not contain the action research element of PAR.

These routes into PAR are not independent from each other and there is considerable crossover between the different practices. More recent exponents of the different practices are all informed by social constructionist and feminist epistemologies (Genat, 2009; Maguire, 1987).

#### **What is PAR?**

Hall (1981) outlined the requirements for research to be considered participatory, these were summarised by Brydon-Miller (1997:661). These are:

- The research originates in communities with populations that have traditionally been exploited or oppressed.
- PAR works to address specific concerns of the community as well as the fundamental causes of the oppression, with the goal of achieving positive social change;
- PAR is at once a process of research, education and action to which all participants contribute their unique skills and knowledge and through which all participants learn and are transformed (see also Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991).

Genat (2009: 103), more specifically, adds to this list:

- PAR investigates the action of research participants in a specific local context;
- PR includes cycles of action-reflection that produces (the) experiential learning;
- The emergent experiential learning creates a shared conceptual framework, theory or local knowledge amongst a particular group of research participants regarding phenomena in their local context.

The emphasis on local context and the shared construction of knowledge and understanding (reflecting what Maiter, Simich, Jacobson and Wise (2008) call the ethic of reciprocity), resonates particularly well with community psychological practice.

Participatory research can, then, be described as 'systematic enquiry in collaboration with those affected by an issue for the purposes of education or action for change.' Furthermore, it seeks to "de-elitise and de-mystify research thereby making it an intellectual tool which ordinary people can use to improve their lives". (Tilakaratna , 1990).

As Tilakaratna points out, participatory research must be sharply distinguished from conventional *elitist research*, which treats people as objects of the research process, and in which the questions, methods, analysis and dissemination are all conducted by outside researchers, gazing in on the topic of investigation. Data are extracted from participants for a researcher's purpose and those who did participate are unlikely to ever see the results of the study, or recognise their own contributions to it. In PAR, people are positioned differently:

- ◆ people are the subjects of research: the dichotomy between subject and object is broken
- ◆ people function as organic intellectuals

- ◆ people themselves collect the data, and then process and analyse the information using methods easily understood by them
- ◆ people use the knowledge generated to promote actions for change and for life improvement, which ensures there is an built-in mechanism to ensure authenticity and genuineness of the information

Most importantly, in PAR, the knowledge belongs to the people and they are the primary beneficiaries of the knowledge creation. Decisions about what to do with the knowledge created have to be negotiated and ultimately control should lie with the participants. As with all progressive forms of action research, research and action in PAR are inseparable, leading to a praxis where, through action-reflection , knowledge creation supports action.

### **The key processes of Participatory Research**

The promotion of participatory research is basically an exercise in stimulating the people to:

- ◆ Identify the issue or concern
- ◆ Collect information
- ◆ Reflect on and analyse it
- ◆ Use the results as a knowledge base for life improvement, and whenever possible to document the results for wider dissemination ie for the creation of a people's literature

### **Examples of PAR**

I will illustrate some of the challenges of using PAR processes in some of our community psychological work. In particular I will discuss some work with (i) people living poverty in the UK ; (ii) intergenerational conflict amongst migrant communities; (iii) work with an organisation supporting families with disabled children in India.

#### **Work with people living poverty: research with community activists**

Participatory research in poverty has ranged from giving poor people a voice (e.g. Narayan, Patel, Rademacher, Scafft and Koche-Smith, 2001) to projects which give greater control to poor people over the research process and the messages to be conveyed (Beresford , Green, Lister, and Woodard, 1999). In addition there has been work that emerged from partnership between poor people and others (Commission on Poverty, 2000; ATD Fourth World, 1999).

Whilst the ideal for PAR, as outlined above is for full participation and control of all aspects of the research process, in practice, not everyone wants this degree of involvement. We have found it useful to think of participatory research as a continuum, ranging from giving voice to full control of the research process. Different circumstances, and different interests of the people with whom we are working, at different times, means we may be working at different points on the continuum.

1. Voice
2. 1 plus: Partnership in decision making
3. 2 plus Collaboration in the process
4. 3 plus Involvement in analysis
5. 4 plus Research directed and controlled
6. 5 plus Research fully owned

During 2005, the community psychology team at MMU was approached by the Chair of a local residents' group (Angela). The group represented people who lived poverty in an area of the City that was characterised by multiple deprivation. She wanted to undertake some research to record and celebrate the work of community activists who worked tirelessly for improvement in people's lives. This idea had emerged firstly from the fact that some long life-long community activist friends had recently died and their testimonies had gone untold; secondly from the 60th birthday celebrations of another life long activist, during which people had celebrated her achievements; and thirdly from her experiences of trying to encourage more people to become activists. Angela and I had worked together on a number of projects previously, and she thought that maybe her idea could be turned into a research project, with a member of the community psychology team, or with some community psychology students. After some discussion, it was agreed that the idea would make a good project, but the immediate problem of finding time to work together on the project (especially from University staff) seemed irresolvable.

It happened that a postgraduate community intern (Simona) was to spend 9 months with the community psychology team. Her placement objectives included 'to work participatively with a community group on an issue of importance to the group'; 'to gain skills in executing a qualitative research project', and 'to use different sources of information in order to develop understanding of an identified neighbourhood characterised by multiple indicators of deprivation'.

This seemed like an ideal opportunity - a community issue identified by a community group, and the possibility of building in some analysis of the neighbourhood, using multiple sources of information.

Whilst there was a long history of collaboration and joint projects between the residents and the community psychologists, Simona was new to this kind of work. It was, therefore, necessary to spend some time for Angela, Simona and me to get to know each other and to clarify whether or not a productive project would be possible, and if so, what roles each should take. This 'getting to know you' stage, is fundamental to PAR in order to build trust between the researchers and the people. It cannot be rushed.

Simona met Angela and other members of the group and spent several visits discussing the research possibilities presented by the idea. During this time I also explored with them both how they might all work together, especially as I would be unable to be centrally involved. It was agreed that the project would be an interview based project with a small number of activists. Each interview

would be filmed and an edited film made of them giving their accounts. Simona would work, initially as an assistant to Angela, helping her to refine the interview questions, securing the necessary equipment and ensuring that they were both able to use it. Angela would get other activists involved, brief them as to the purpose and nature of the study and be the interviewer, whilst Simona operated the camera and recording equipment. Both of them would have a post-interview discussion with each participant. I was to act as an academic supervisor for Simona and occasional discussant for Angela.

It was not clarified at the outset, how the analysis would take place. However, through negotiation a process for doing this was agreed.

Angela, Simona and other participants identified central themes within each participants' account. Simona then transcribed and undertook a preliminary thematic analysis across all participants, discussing the process of doing this with me. Simona and Angela then refined this analysis and decided together how to structure the empirical part of the report and which sections should be edited for the film. Simona did a first edit of the film and then Angela discussed it and together they refined it. They both planned and organised the celebration event and dinner involving everyone connected to the project (Raschini et al., 2005). Over the next few years, Angela sent the film and the report to lots of different people, gave talks (sometimes with me) to residents' groups, professionals and academics, in order to stimulate interest in community activism and understand some of the pressures activists were under.

Thus, this research was research in which community activists:

- had the idea;
- identified the research issue;
- secured resources in partnership with the University;
- worked collaboratively to identify and recruit participants;
- decided the research design and format of outputs,
- constructed an interview schedule as a means of collecting accounts,
- collected data,
- analysed data,
- edited film,
- arranged celebration event,
- engaged in dissemination for further action and change....

### **Intergenerational work with men in migrant communities**

A different kind of example of a PAR project relates to intergenerational conflict in migrant communities. This was research where we were involved as partners with a community based community psychology project (Fatimilehin and Dye, 2003): I and a doctoral community psychology student had the role of evaluating the work and acting as 'critical friend' to the project.

In one of the large cities in the North West of England, a problem had arisen between men of different generations in Somali and Yemeni communities. There was conflict between older men and their sons that resulted in considerable family and community tensions. The issue had come to light through some work that community psychologists had been doing with women from the communities over a number of years. Families do not live in a vacuum, and in both communities there were community organisations as well as public sector services that were in contact with the families. It was important to ensure that these organisations were involved in any action research designed to create change: if they were not, there would be a strong possibility that they might sabotage (not necessarily intentionally) the work. So before any work could proceed, it was important to undertake a stakeholder analysis: to ask the questions who might have an interest in this issue beyond the women who had identified it in the first place? And what might their interests be? and how can these be harnessed to help the change process? Not only were other organisations important stakeholders to take into account, the older and younger men (and other family members) that had not raised the issue initially, were obviously of central importance. Having done the analysis, it was then necessary to work to build relationships and understanding of the issues: only then was it possible to work collaboratively with the men on a PAR process for change.

After several months of discussions, a group of older and younger men decided they wanted to explore the intergenerational conflict and take action for change. They worked with the community psychologists, exploring different ways that the issue might be explored and together they agreed that a storytelling process might be a useful way forward. It was the community psychologists who secured resources to undertake the PAR project. Together, the community psychologists and community members designed and prepared for some narrative workshops, which then took place over a meal. Both these aspects of the project (storytelling and food) were important culturally appropriate and relevant processes, valued by the men. During the workshops, older and younger men were able to exchange accounts of their experiences as migrants or British born, and the concerns each had over the other generation. The research could have stopped at this point, but all agreed they wanted to take it further (Kagan et al., 2009).

Additional action research cycles were developed, participatively. The younger Yemeni men wanted to make a film about identity and belonging. The younger Somali men decided to produce a magazine about being Somali in Britain (Kagan and Duggan, in press). Both groups of older men wanted more discussions about the tensions of parenting across cultures. The researchers worked with each of the groups, negotiating resources and helping them acquire investigative and creative skills so that they could produce high quality film and magazine, and have informed and relevant discussions. They worked participatively to design dissemination events for communities and professionals more widely, and to design and secure resources for further educational work building on this research.



Thus, this research was research in which community members identified the problem to be addressed. However, this was the women from the communities and the focal research was with the men. Men from the communities:

- negotiated how the issue might be explored;
- participated in initial explorations and the identification of subsequent research cycles;
- decided the research design and format of outputs (film, magazine, parenting discussions),
- learnt about and used different ways of obtaining information as a part of the investigation, including historical research, interviewing)
- collected data,
- analysed and organised data,
- edited film, and magazine
- arranged and participated in dissemination events,
- identified further action required and worked to secure additional resources

The researchers

- ◆ Secured the resources for the research
- ◆ Negotiated specialist training for the magazine production and film production
- ◆ Facilitated learning about the gathering of data and its analysis
- ◆ Facilitated discussions and learning within the parenting groups
- ◆ Facilitated the continuing joint-community forum to take further action

Initially the research was not fully owned: the narrative workshops, whilst participative and designed collaboratively could not be considered PAR. However the subsequent stages of the research were PAR. This illustrates an important point about how participative research processes can change over time. As community psychologists committed to working as participatively as possible, we need to remain open to the possibilities for moving to more participative ways of working where possible.

### **Indirect work with families with disabled children living in the slums of Kolkata**

Over a long period we have had close links with the Indian Institute for Cerebral Palsy in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). This is an organisation that has done some leading edge work with families of disabled children in rural and urban parts of Bengal. Their work has developed with strong participation of disabled people and family members. A review of the work of the Institute revealed that although they had good ways of working with poor people in rural areas, they had not worked with families in the poorest urban areas. Thus the project was established to meet the needs of disabled children and their families in urban slums. The Institute was new to working in these neighbourhoods. However, there were already various health projects working in the slums and it made sense to work with them to support families

with disabled children. The participatory element of the PAR project was, then, not directly with poor people living in the slums but with the health agencies that were already working in the neighbourhoods.

The same elements of PAR were involved. These included identifying the stakeholders, working to develop trusting relationships, working to jointly assess need or identify the problem or issue to be addressed. In this way the expertise of the health agencies, with their long experience of working with families, was combined with the expertise of the Institute, with their long experience of working with disabled people and their families. This co-created expertise, in turn was combined with the community psychologists' expertise which included long experience working with action research and facilitating the process of issue identification, data collection and analysis, reflection and further planning (Kagan and Scott Roberts, 2002). Part of the community psychological facilitation was always to ask of the agencies 'is there a way of doing this that includes the participation of the people'?

Most of the health workers were 'barefoot health workers', unqualified and often doing the work in a voluntary capacity. (This was not true of all the agencies, some of which were supported by faith projects with trained nurses.) We were able to help the two groups of workers see that there were ways of working participatively with disabled children and their families, and that in doing this, ideas and solutions to problems were far richer than if the agencies had implemented their normal ways of working. Some of the families, for example, had creative ideas about how their disabled children might be included in neighbourhood play. Equally, some of the health workers had creative ideas about how the needs of disabled babies and children might be included in the general health checks that were common in the slum areas. Without the discussions and joint collection of data and its analysis, the Institute would not have introduced some of the innovative practices into work with urban poor that they were now in a position to do so.

One criticism of this kind of indirect PAR (ie social action through the work of others) is that it keeps those most marginalised (in this case the families) in positions of oppression. However, it is important to note that in this case most of the health workers were from the same areas, and were also part of the urban poor, although they did not have disabled family members. Through the PAR process they gained skills and understanding and were then able to mobilise for action and improved health care in the slum neighbourhoods. In addition, because of their links with health agencies, these health workers could ensure that changes were introduced beyond the immediate locality and the lessons learned from the project extended to other areas. They were crucial stakeholders, in positions to make change happen, and through the PAR process to learn about how they could implement change in participation with families (Sen and Goldbart, 2005). It would have been foolish of us to have to have tried to work directly with families and the impact of the work would have been limited by comparison.

This project raises the question in PAR of 'participation with whom?' The answer to this question is often 'more than one group of people'. There is a

need to ensure that whatever the participatory relationships within PAR, those most marginalised, vulnerable or oppressed are not disadvantaged by the process. Instead, we must be vigilant about the purpose of the research, and really challenge ourselves and others about how to work participatively. In the case of the project described above, the goals of the research remained to improve through social action the lives of disabled people and families living in slums. The processes through which we worked enabled our partners to learn about the value of full participation and about ways of ensuring this happened more and more in the future.

Thus, this research was research in which those working and living closely with community members identified the problem to be addressed. The partner health organisations

- negotiated how the issue might be explored;
- participated in initial explorations and the identification of subsequent research cycles;
- decided the research design and format of outputs (a film, training workshops, reports, presentations to professionals and policy makers),
- learnt about and used different ways of securing participation as a part of the investigation)
- collected data through personal journals,
- analysed and organised data collaboratively in workshops,
- arranged and participated in dissemination events,
- identified further action required and worked to secure additional resources
- learnt about action research and the possibilities of participation in all aspects of their work

The partner disability organisation

- ◆ Secured the resources for the research (with the researchers)
- ◆ Negotiated specialist training for the health workers using specialist knowledge and skills
- ◆ Facilitated learning about the gathering of data and its analysis as well as ways of gaining participation
- ◆ Facilitated discussions and learning through organisation of training programmes
- ◆ Facilitated the partnership to extend the reach of the project and take further action
- ◆ Learnt about action research and the possibilities of participation

The researchers

- Secured the resources for the research (with the disability organisation)
- Facilitated learning in the field about participation
- Facilitated reflections and learning from the action research process
- Worked in partnership for dissemination in different arenas
- Learnt about living in slums and the possibilities for empowerment of families

It is, however, not always possible to undertake PAR and the process can be disrupted in various ways.

## **Obstacles to PAR**

### *The power of gatekeepers: participative arts and mental health*

We were working with some participative arts projects which aimed to work with people marginalised through mental ill health and living in areas of deprivation (Lawthom, Sixsmith and Kagan, 2007). We had been commissioned to undertake a participative evaluation (which itself is part of a PAR process). There were several different projects, all run by different artists. The major stakeholders were the project participants, the artists, people commissioning this kind of work and the arts umbrella organisation that had asked us to evaluate the work. Our initial starting point was to get to know the artists and discuss with them how we might move on to get to know the project participants in order to discuss how the research might proceed participatively. We spent time with different projects and in discussions with artists, and encountered tremendous resistance from the artists to participative ways of working. They were most concerned to 'protect' their participants and were reluctant to permit the researchers access in order to talk with them about the research. This reluctance arose from the framing of the research in terms of mental ill health (even though this was the focus of the arts projects). The artists believed that we all have mental health difficulties and we cannot position project participants as different from artists or researchers and should not be asking how participation in the arts impacts upon mental health. We were in danger of reaching an impasse. In order to proceed at all, we undertook some Appreciative Inquiry workshops which served the purpose of artists and researchers together exploring values and understanding. We were able then to move on with the research, but not to do it in fully participative ways. We were able to work participatively with the artists but not with those they worked with. In this case the project participants had been prevented from taking part in early discussions and were unable to influence the research. Whilst ideally it would have been the participants themselves who would have come up with the idea of the research, there are always issues of power to consider where there are intermediaries, or 'gatekeepers' between the people and the researchers.

### *Attempted control over findings: intergenerational evaluation teams*

We have been involved over the last year, and were employing PAR to work with, work-less people living in difficult circumstances within the City. The project was an empowerment project which aimed to enable people of different ages to come together and explore the use of creative methods for the evaluation of community projects. Through the project it was anticipated that participants would gain confidence, skills and the ability to use these skills in capturing the impact of other community based projects. We worked with a number of organisations across the city to raise awareness of the project and stimulate interest in becoming involved. This took about nine months and

during this time we forged partnerships with some community and youth organisations who were keen to collaborate with us. Through the awareness raising processes and with the help of the partner organisations, a number of people volunteered to take part in the project. The 'getting to know you' period involved everyone who was interested, and the researchers, meeting together over food, going bowling together and going out for a meal together. The researchers then worked with the participants to decide which creative methods they wanted to explore and to arrange skills workshops. The intergenerational groups (ages ranging from 16-83) undertook poetry; photography; film; video diary; and creative writing workshops. They then decided how they wanted to continue. One group, all from one area that was undergoing extensive regeneration, decided they wanted to consolidate their skills and understanding by looking at life in the neighbourhood. Partnerships were formed with the local housing trust, community association and basic skills centre. An opportunity arose for them to mount an exhibition in the local community centre and they worked with the researchers to produce three films, a display of poems and photographs. The researchers managed to secure resources to have work displayed to a high quality and to have poems printed on postcards which were available to visitors to take: each project participant had a pack of postcards to give to their friends.

In a short period of time they put on the exhibition and invited local politicians, professionals and residents to view it. The sense of pride that participants showed in the exhibition and in their work was enormous. After the exhibition, the researchers were contacted by the Housing and Regeneration workers. They wanted a block on all distribution of material from the exhibition or resulting from the research as the content of the films and particularly the poems 'reflected badly on the area and gave a depressing impression of living here'. They argued that it undermined the work they were trying to do to regenerate the area. The research team were taken aback a little by this reaction as these partners had been fully involved in the project and knew what was going on. We had to explain that the work was PAR and that we did not control the content of the findings or what was done with them (and nor could they!). We have to do some more work to help the agencies understand that with PAR they cannot censor findings or control what is done with them. We will be facilitating discussion between the project participants and the agencies and to supporting development of the project to bring more people in. We will also be working with the agencies to help them see how they might learn from local people's expressed feelings about the area and that they cannot create positive sense of place by just insisting upon it!

#### *Reluctance to participate: forced labour and migrant Chinese workers*

There is growing concern across Europe (and indeed worldwide) about the growth in forced labour or modern slavery and the sometimes life threatening risks involved. We are nearing the end of a project working with a local Chinese Women's organisation about the experiences of forced labour amongst Chinese migrant workers (Kagan et al., 2010). Over the years the Chinese Women's organisation has supported many people in situations of forced labour and approached us to develop a participatory research project,

for which we then secured funding from a funding body that supports participatory work. The plan was to work with migrant workers attending the Chinese Women's Society language classes. We had a co-researcher model where we would work closely with the migrants to identify the research format, collect, analysis and disseminate information. This co-researcher model is an empowerment model, and we argued that this process, for working with people in positions of vulnerability, participative methods are the least damaging.

We held discussions about the project and the nature of forced labour with potential participants. We went on trips to other towns for enjoyable days out, as ways of getting to know each other and to enable more informal discussions about the project and to help people begin to reflect upon their lives. We held a number of workshops with migrant workers exploring the issue of forced labour and the nature of research and different ways of collecting and analysing data. These workshops were conducted in Mandarin, were in a safe venue and included food (again, really important in the building of relationships). The researchers and Chinese Women's Society workers worked together to facilitate the workshops. In the end not one person wanted to participate as co-researchers, although most were happy to participate as research informants. The main reason for this was that most of those we worked with were illegal migrants and were either awaiting decisions about claims for asylum or had had their claims turned down. They were all anxious not to increase their visibility, due to their status. We were unable to reassure them that their participation would not be visible to the authorities and that the research would not expose them to greater risk. However they were not convinced. For people living in situations of vulnerability, there are real risks in being seen to take action. Pynch (2007) draws attention to the wider issues of fear in society and the ways in which PAR processes might be an antidote to those oppressive forces that lead to fear.

In this project we had to abandon the co-researcher participatory part of the research process, although we are still working in a fully participative manner with the Chinese Women's Society.

### **What can we learn when PAR does not go according to plan?**

We rarely find that PAR goes ahead as planned and that issues of power and powerlessness in the research process are ever present. However, when PAR is disrupted, we believe we learn important things about the context in which the research is taking place and the social realities of the lives of those we are working with.

In these circumstances we think of the process as one of 'prefigurative action research' (Kagan and Burton, 2000). Through prefigurative action research, we can:

*Simultaneously create images of what could be possible while exploring and documenting the actual limits imposed by the current system (Burton, 1983:67).*

Through reflection and learning about attempts to introduce PAR, we are able to learn about the freedom of movement to create progressive social forms and about the constraints the current order imposes.

In all our examples of PAR not going according to plan, we can see how power and the more powerful – whether this is via the operation of gatekeepers, those agencies with direct influence over people's lives or the power of state institutions and the construction of fear. Power can be wielded through actions, symbolism or expectations.

This knowledge about the constraints of a system can be used to design further PAR projects or to devise different tactics for change. Central to this learning is continual reflection and open-minded thoughtfulness along with the humility to accept when things have not worked as planned.

One of the many challenges in using PAR is to find ways of engaging the people in research. Conventional research activities are not always engaging and it can sometimes be hard for people to see what they might get out of participating. We need to think of creative ways of engaging people so that they continue to participate and – crucially – enjoy their participation. We have described, above, some of the methods we have used for participation. These include storytelling over a meal; going bowling; going on trips to other places, working with visual methods such as photography, video cameras; working with creative methods such as poetry, creative writing and drama. Social action itself is also a means of collecting and organising data. These activities demand a wider range of research and facilitation skills than those normally expected of psychologists. Most important of all, they demand a willingness to be open, flexible and share parts of our lives with others. In extractive research, where researchers obtain information from others, there is no need for sharing. However, participatory methods all require participation, not just by the people, but also the researchers. It can be exhausting. However, it is not only exhausting for researchers; participation can be exhausting for the people, many of whom may have few personal resources on which to draw (Kagan, 2006). In PAR we have an obligation to look after ourselves, ensure we have support (best achieved by working in teams), but also to support those other participants. This might mean recognising that people cannot always sustain high levels of participation and might alter the intensity of their participation over time.

### **Overview of participatory research**

Not all research, or all action research, can and will be participatory. In large part this depends upon the interest and willingness of the non-researchers. For work that is about lived experience, I suggest it is good community psychological practice to at least explore the possibilities for participatory research.

Contact, collaboration, developing trust. preparation, support, training if necessary, discussion, collaboration and reflection at all stages, are key ingredients of PAR. The role of the researcher or as Tilrakaratra describes the 'outside knowledge professional', might be in:

- Helping people identify and refine an issue or idea
- assisting people to collect data and then to process and analyse the information using simple methods which enables them to systematise their material
- helping to manage the process of investigation
- linking the local situation (which the people know best) to the larger external situation (about which the outside knowledge professional may know more)
- improving people's access to new information and formal knowledge (eg technology, including methods)
- introducing local people to experiences from outside their environment
- throwing up relevant issues or problems for local people to reflect on and analyse and then assisting them in coming to their own conclusions
- disseminating to wider audiences (including policy makers and intellectuals as well as participation workers seeking to facilitate local participation)
- in all this, self-reflection and understanding is vital, especially if the benefits of the joint insider-outsider status are to be maximised.

The important thing, he argues is that " *the interaction between local people and the outside professional must primarily benefit the people concerned by enabling them to articulate and systematise their own thought processes and thereby enhancing their knowledge base so that they can pursue independent actions.*"

The advantages of PAR, in addition to enhancing authenticity of information and findings, are to do with conscientisation, capacity building (Hanley, 2005) and enabling greater autonomy as well as the de-mystification of research. This demystification then makes it possible for local people to use research as tool for further life improvement. Participatory research can, in itself, be considered a community psychological intervention.

Participatory research, as we have seen, may further critical consciousness; it brings together committed and sensitive researchers with local people, and between local people, in new roles and relationships; links between researchers and local people, or between groups of community self-researchers, can become a strong force for change and a challenge to the status quo; research skills and understanding are transferred to local people through participatory working relationships.

Participatory research is, however, not fully accepted (Khanlou and Peter, 2005). In a recent meeting with some regeneration professionals, who highly value the participation of local residents and have created lots of different and



creative ways of involving local people, strong opposition to participatory research was expressed. In part this was, they said, because local people did not want to be their own researchers, and difficult and complex dynamics would be set up between them and their fellow citizens if they adopted researcher roles. Yes, participatory research, as all resident participation, does create new roles and introduce new interpersonal dynamics between residents and between the outside professionals and local people (Minkler, 2004). But this can be recognised and worked with (another role for the outside professional, perhaps). However, part of the objection to participatory research in the meeting was what could be described as the adherence to research as a process of mystification. The evaluation officer said: “*what is the point of research training and doing a PhD if it’s all so easy. There’s skills to research. It’s hard enough to retain distance as trained researcher – it would be impossible as a resident.*”

Nobody suggests an abdication of expertise, but rather an exchange of knowledge between the outside agent (researcher) and insiders (the people) and a systematic returning of the knowledge produced during the research to those who co-produced it (Montero, 2000:141). It is a move from extractive research, benefiting the researcher and the status quo through people’s participation, to co-produced research benefiting the people and improving their lives through action.

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