

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR): REVISITING THE HISTORY, CONCEPT AND ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Action Research (PAR), a dominant mode of praxis, is increasingly gaining its status in the mainstream academia. The uniqueness of PAR, where social investigation, education and social actions converge, aimed at transforming the institutional arrangements of a society into more of an equitable form. This paper explores the historical, epistemological and ideological standpoints of PAR and explains its propositional encompassments. The debate around the philosophy of social science, especially qualitative vs. quantitative research, provides the necessary context to comprehend where PAR stands. The historical overview explicates the genesis of PAR and its contemporary status. The ethical issues in PAR indicate its inherent tensions.

Key words: Participatory Action Research, Positivist Paradigm, Constructivist/Interpretive Paradigm, Ethics in Research

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary social science discourse, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been a dominant mode of praxis which links research with a participatory solution. Being embedded into the grounded methodologies, PAR not only offers new insights to an array of complex problems but also advance the scientific knowledge in its broadest term- through 'people's participation'. The uniqueness of PAR is partly in its capacity to incorporate social investigation, education, and political actions into the process of societal transformation. It becomes so appealing to the national governments of developing countries, international donor agencies including the UN, World Bank, IMF, regional development banks as well as to the NGOs and businesses that PAR is now regarded as essential to the development process of many organizations and its use as a condition for development contracts. Contemplating its wider acceptance, this paper will explore many of the intrinsic aspects of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The paper will begin with what triggered the aspiration for what has become the development and use of PAR as a paradigm of social research. Pertinent to this discussion is the debate around the conventional social research practices that at one time was

reduced to the choice between quantitative (represents by positivist paradigm) vs. qualitative (represents by constructivism/interpretive paradigm) methodologies, and how this debate contributed to the genesis of PAR. This will be followed by defining PAR, depicting its history and its implied methodological propositions. The ethical debate around the PAR will also be discussed.

II. THE PARADIGMATIC WAR AND THE EMERGENCE OF PARTICIPATORY PARADIGM

The beginning of PAR is closely related to the 'paradigmatic war' that existed in the social science research over the relative superiority of qualitative and quantitative paradigms, vis-a-vis each other. The war of words extended over a long period, and did not always contribute to improvement in understanding the issues by either group. The early debates included the use of condescending and exclusionary language: "either relegating quantitative researchers to the status of dinosaurs or lamenting the numerical illiteracy of qualitative researchers" (Hedrick, 1994: 45). Although much of the debate was cast as the capacity and ability of the mathematical edifices of the quantitative method to unveil the "truths", the real and underground issue involved the fundamental question of the philosophy(s) of the social sciences. Especially, the epistemological, ontological and

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methodological underpinnings of social science became subject to a serious debate. The debate divided the academia into two camps: of relatively equal numerical strength - positivists and constructivists/interpretivists. Later the ramification continued that resulted in a burgeoning critical/emancipatory paradigm. Before providing details on PAR, it is imperative to provide a brief account of each stage of the arguments and differentiate the theoretical cores each contains as well as how the process evolved into the emergence of PAR.

The Positivist Paradigm and Its Shortcomings

The Positivist paradigm revolves around the philosophy of the natural sciences. Research in physical and biological sciences discovers harmonious patterns or regularity of the natural laws that explain the interrelationships. Since these laws are persistent and coherent, they should therefore be observable and predictable. Assuming that social experiences are compatible with the natural world, positivists argue for similar principles and scientific methods to discover social phenomena and to explore the 'law of general understanding'. Despite the fact that there are variations in human consciousness, the positivism assumes that there is an underlying pattern and regularity in social life which should lead to consistency in what is observed. Eventually, reliable observations enable the scientists to make accurate predictions about social behavior. Thus, the primary focus of positivist social science is to explore social 'facts' and 'laws' in ways that follow naturalists' patterns (Oakley, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (1998) indicated four criteria for the positivist inquiry of social phenomena: i) *objectivity* - which means that knowledge claims should be verifiable by anyone. The researcher's own values and biases are isolated from the research process and independent of verification (Jaggar, 1983); ii) *internal validity* - the extent to which it can be accurately stated that the independent variable produced the observed effect; iii) *external validity*- to the extent that conclusions from a sample can be generalized to a population, to other similar subject populations, to other settings, and/or to other time periods; iv) to the extent that the measurements can be replicated in other settings.

The positivist paradigm was under attack from many quarters including feminists, Marxists and others on various grounds. The topics of "objectivity", "decontextualization of subject", and "methodological rigor" became the subject of

debate and controversy. Along these lines, Hedrick articulated the limitations of positivism as follows:

"The stand of the positivists that the only valid accounts are those graced with objective, methodologically correct procedures (all other methods besides controlled, quantitative, deduction being preliminary, biased, or fallacious) is at best false advertising and self-interested. It denies the complexities of social life and the recognition of context sensitivity that even its adherents claim for their everyday lives. Its principles lead to distortion and oversimplification and sacrifice relevance for a narrow definition of causation, objectivity, and rigor. The farming of our work as objective and unbiased is more an advertisement, a statement of commerce rather than a statement about the nature of reality" (Hedrick, 1994: 42-43).

Beyond these limitations, the positivist paradigm is also incapable of dealing with the issues surrounding the etic, emic, nomothetic, and idiographic dimensions of inquiry. The incomprehensiveness in quantitative methodologies generated a new paradigm of inquiry which is labeled as constructivist/interpretive paradigm.

Constructivist/Interpretive Paradigm

The constructivist/interpretive paradigm stands against the positivism and follows a different philosophical route. Constructivism and interpretivism are somewhat similar and is often used interchangeably. Interpretivism is a broad term that contains a number of different labels and tenets. Merten (1998:11) provided the reason for selecting the label 'constructivist/interpretive' because it "reflects one of the basic tenets of this theoretical paradigm; that is, reality is socially constructed". This paradigm is heavily influenced by E. Husserl's phenomenology and W. Dilthey and other German philosopher's tradition of *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. It involves understanding the explanation from someone else's point of view acknowledging that the cultural and social forces may have influenced their outlook and interpretation (Merten, 1998).

Lincoln & Guba (1985) asserted that the constructivist/interpretive paradigm contends certain key assumptions. It assumes a relativist ontology meaning that there is not a single,

objective reality. Rather, multiple realities exist that are constructed by human beings who experience those (Krauss, 2005). It also assumes a subjectivist epistemology meaning that the researcher and the subject interact with each other and create knowledge that is transactional and subjective in nature. To comprehend a social phenomenon it is imperative to understand how knowledge has been created and transformed into inter-subjective meanings in a given context (Greene, 1990). Moreover, the paradigm assumes a naturalistic methodology which emphasizes inquiry in natural settings.

III. PARTICIPATORY PARADIGM: AN INDEPENDENT OR AN OFFSHOOT OF CONSTRUCTIVIST/INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM?

Constructivism/interpretivism is the foundation of PAR. In many respects both constructivism and PAR resemble each other and sometimes it is hard to make any difference between them (Lincoln, 2001). While explaining commonalities Lincoln (2001:129) asserts:

“...PAR and constructivism share basic epistemological assumptions, likewise, especially with respect to the relationship of the researchers and the researched. Both models depend heavily on the idea of the 'human instrument'...; both rely heavily on subjectivity as a force in understanding human system...”

These similarities create confusion and raise the question whether PAR is a distinct paradigm clearly distinguishable from the constructivism. This confusion become intensifies when Lincoln (2001: 129) raises it:

“... while action research is quite clear in its ideological focus, or its methodology, it is less clear in either its epistemological focus, or its methodology, particularly because of its need to permit both epistemology and methodology to emerge from participant interaction...”

However, despite the similarities among PAR and constructivism there is one prominent difference—that is the political commitment of PAR. Constructivism/interpretive does not have any political goal intrinsic to its ideological makeup whereas PAR is committed to its political ideology of social reconstruction. PAR believes that the social reconstruction could take place by creating new knowledge. The knowledge in PAR is not contemplated as an “objective reality” rather an

instrument for social change. Heron and Reason (1997) suggested four types of knowledge that are distinct from constructivism and pertinent to the participatory paradigm: a) experiential knowledge—generates through the direct contact with the world, be it people, events, places or things; b) presentational knowledge— emerges from the filtering of experience and its representation in concepts, metaphors and stories; c) propositional knowledge— emerges from theorizing about the world and expressed through the language; and finally d) practical knowledge is 'how to-do' knowledge and is expressed in skills and competencies (Heron, and Reason, 1997). They argue that these four types of knowledge are distinguishable from the tenets of constructivism and constitute an 'extended epistemology', extended because it reaches beyond the realm of theory into experience and practice.

IV. THE HISTORY OF PAR AND ITS ACCOMMODATING CAPACITIES

The emergence of PAR is linked with diverse groups of academicians, activists, practitioners and an array of discipline including international development, adult education and social sciences (Khanloua and Peter, 2005). The story begins with Kurt Lewin, a psychologist, who challenged practice paradigm of his contemporaries by offering alternative. Despite ambiguity on whether Kurt Lewin's work is explicit about action research, it is frequently discussed as the foundation stone on which current work is built (Peter and Robinson, 1984; Williamson and Prosser, 2002). Lewin's view was that social science should be able to improve the conditions for people by filling the gap between the social theory and social action. Lewin critiqued his contemporary colleagues who blamed “empiricist” as being “off theory” but also was skeptical about alleged speculation of empiricism without guidance by the theory. He proposed to investigate social problems to generate set of general laws and propositions and simultaneously used them to offer solutions to the problems (Brown and Tandon, 1983; Peter and Robinson, 1984).

Lewin's unorthodoxy in social research got a new shape in the 60s and 70s. The dominant positivist paradigm that focused on value-neutral investigation encountered increasing challenge for its futility to resolve the issues of real life (Borda, 2001). There was a growing demand that social research needed to be altered accordingly to contribute in the socio-political transformation of

the society. An alliance of academicians and practitioners devoted to generate practice-oriented research and institutionalize them around the globe. This process was accelerated by few events: a) *Bhoomi Sena* (Land Army) movement in India that invented the basic principles of PR; b) Paulo Friere's publication (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and its ideological contribution in civil resistance in Brazil; c) successful completion of a development project in Tanzania; and d) Columbia's peasant movement (Borda, 2001). These efforts were consolidated by the some mainstream institutions and academics through devising theoretical basis and publication. Scholars from Frankfurt school, Paris and Geneva joined in the march and provided intellectual support (Borda, 2001). Later, a network was created by bridging Northern and Southern researchers to further action research process.

During the 1990s, appeal for PAR started to grow. Traditionally, PAR was confined to be used mainly by social movements or marginalized groups. Rather than being used only at the micro level, it was scaled up and was incorporated in projects or programs that covers regional, national and sometimes global level. Realizing its efficacy, rhetoric and practices powerful institutions including governments, World Bank, development agencies, universities and multinationals have mainstreamed PAR with their organizational objectives (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001).

Participatory Action Research- Definition and Coverage

The particular form that the PAR takes is highly contextual which stands against providing a uniform definition. Yet, there is a broad consensus that PAR is a blend of social investigation, education and social action on how to go about generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the well-being of individuals, communities, and larger societies (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Balcazar et. al. (2004) suggested that PAR is both an ideology and an approach of research. In ideological front, PRA contains a set of values on the role of social science in alleviating social injustice and aims at changing communities riddled with multiple problems. In methodological front, PAR offers distinct methods of inquiry and specific guidelines for planning and implementing research project where people's participation is the standard marker. Based on purpose Balcazar et. al. (2004) conceptualized PAR in two perspectives: a) organizational and b) social.

From organizational perspective, a “sociotechnical system approach to organizational behavior” is combined with the participatory research where the “members of the organization become actively involved in the quest for information and ideas to guide their future actions. The purpose can be to improve efficiency or effectiveness in a particular operation, to improve quality, or to develop new products” (Balcazar et. al., (2004: 18-19). In this process, research is not only a process of creating knowledge, but also an approach to education and development of consciousness and mobilization for action by the members of the organization (Whyte, 1991).

In the social front, Balcazar et. al. (2004) portrays PAR as an “instrument for social change in the struggle against oppressions”. This perspective links PAR with an ideology of restructuring society whose prime focus is to ensure some form of equity. This ideological position is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Anisur Rahman and other social researcher from developing world. In this process action research is defined as “ a process through which members of an oppressed group or community identify a problem, collect and analyze information and act upon the problem in order to find solutions and to promote social and political transformation” (Selener, 1997: 7). This process is what Rahman (1993) referred as 'transformative knowledge'. In Rahman's view, the oppressive social structures that reinforce hegemony of the elite over the oppressed is characterized not only by the control of material production but also by the control of knowledge. The elites retain the power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge. According to Rahman, the way people can liberate themselves from oppressive structure is a consciousness and knowledge generated by their own efforts. To this end, PAR is a coherent attempt to retrieve and legitimate popular knowledge; “a political practice challenging not only the idea of oppression through control of material production but also domination resulting from control over the means of knowledge...” (1993: 83).

In the arena of contemporary research, PAR has been widely used. Wardsworth (2005: 276) has identified the use of PAR in many settings including social, behavioral, health and to some extent in engineering. In Wardsworth's words:

“Nevertheless, stakeholder-inclusive forms of collaborative inquiry or participatory action research were becoming commonplace in school classrooms, adult, community and

higher education, human resources and organizational development, in nursing, hospitals and health services, community services, social entrepreneurialism, youth work, family therapy, immigration and settlement work, architecture and design, in business and industrial product-development, quality assurance (such as total systems intervention and continuous improvement), developmental evaluation, adverse incident strategies, conflict-resolution and mediation processes, restorative justice, farmer-led change to agricultural practices, information technology, and environmental, indigenous, feminist and consumer activism, and international development”.

The rapid expansion of PAR in diverse areas has led to categorize it in more pragmatic term. Kemmis (2001) has offered three forms of action research in accordance with its current diversity: a) technical form- aimed at particular outcome of practice (e.g. to reduce behavior problem in classroom or to increase production in a factory); b) practical form- aims to inform practitioners for self-education as well as make changes in their practices (e.g. to change management practices with the aim to increase production in a factory); and c) critical or emancipatory form- aims not only at improving outcomes, and improving the self-awareness of practitioners, but also at assisting practitioners and the 'critical mass' to understand how particular settings are oppressive and needed to be changed (e.g. a legal aid and education program for rural women in a highly patriarchal society). However, despite these variations in the focus of action research a broad definition could be in the work of Reason and Bradbury (2001:1):

“...action research is 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 practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities”.

Strategies of PAR and Methodologies

The major objective of the PAR is to explore the “reality/realities” through explanatory models that effectively guide action(s) leading to the desired

goals of the groups involved. This requires multiple methods, and in some cases, multiple design approaches. Even though there is the wide perception that PAR is better suited to generate emancipatory knowledge and therefore it is confined to its own 'prison of investigation and action'. In fact, PAR is open to any idea that commensurate with its principles. It may entail quantitative, qualitative, or integrated designs (Khanloua and Peter, 2005). As a general outline, Kermim and McTaggart (2005) presented a few phases of PAR and suggested that these are made to form a cyclical pattern where researchers and the participants are engaged in a long-term commitment. These are: a) planning for the change; b) action and observation of the consequence of the change; c) reflection on the process of change; and d) action and observation. The cyclical pattern is not always rigidly followed. Often these stages overlap and the initial plan changes as the research progresses.

On the methodological front, PAR allows for all the possible investigating methods that could best explore the agenda of the research by following the principle of participation. It is also open to new ideas and tools. Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rapid Rural Appraisal, Participatory Learning and Action, Ethno-methodologies, Stakeholder Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Story Telling, Focus Group, and Group Discussions are widely used in the research process.

V. ETHICAL ISSUES IN PAR

In the traditional research settings ethical issues related to the integrity of the participants, informed consent, confidentiality, integrity of the data and the ethical standard of the researchers are usually given high priority (Williamson and Prosser, 2002). Especially, the issue of potential harm is a major concern in any research, regardless of time or place. These concerns result from the number of occasions in the USA and other countries when human subjects were knowingly or unwittingly exposed to physical and psychological harm (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2006). Deceptive practices in Tuskegee's Syphilis study (where study subjects were intentionally denied treatment) is an example which violated every standard of ethical consideration. Nonetheless, PAR also faces similar ethical challenges.

In facing issues related to conflicts involving participants and the 'political' consequences of disputes, Williamson and Prosser (2002) pose three

major questions: a) how can the researcher(s) avoid doing harm to participants?; b) if researchers and participants work in a collaborative manner, what is the best way to protect confidentiality and anonymity?; and c) if action research is a continuous process that evolves over time, how does the group establish relevance for the concept of “informed consent”? PAR has its own way of contextualizing and responding to those questions. Because PAR is a consensus based approach where researchers and participants co-create the knowledge and make action in a democratic process, the potential risk of ethical violation and harm to the participants is effectively minimized. Moreover, the research agenda is guided by all concerned, including the members of the community. Researchers and community members are well aware of the goals and commitments of the alliance, as well as the potential uses of the data and knowledge that result from the collaborative effort. All these indicate increasing sensitivity and compliance to maintaining a high ethical standard. Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, (2006: 120) explains it in full pledge:

“Action research, in our view, hold out much more important guarantees for the ethical treatment of human subjects than does conventional research because it: is build on voluntary partnership between a researchers and local stakeholders who form a collaborative team that determines the subject and methods of the work; learns and applies the methods together, analyses the outcomes; designs and implements the actions arising from the process; and together determine representations of that process... the major guideline that AR [action research] follows and so it stands to reason that the interest of the human subject would be respected with care throughout the process”.

Moreover, there are arguments that some of the ethical concerns have derived from the research practiced in the West. In Western societies the conventional wisdom is to put respect for individual rights ahead of scientific interests (for example, the International Convention on Ethical Standards in Medical Research). However, many cultural and social settings, especially where people live as part of an extended family and ethnic encircles, the ethical concerns have very limited appeal. Sometimes, raising certain 'ethical' issues in those societies could be counterproductive. For example, informed consent and confidentiality have profound status in the process of research in

any Western country whereas they are mostly disregarded in South Asia. This is mainly because individual privacy is considered to be less of a priority and the signing of any document carries a well-deserved suspicion among the participants. Riessman's (2005) participatory ethnography in India is an appropriate example. In her study of infertile couples on the meaning and management of infertility, she struggled to balance her adherence to the ethical concerns (confidentially, privacy and informed consent) in the face of the cultural reality. Often she has to compromise these for the sake of the research.

There lacks any evidence that PAR is reluctant to respond to the ethical issues in research. There are many settings where ethical practices are extremely important and which lead to the establishment of strict rules to protect the interest of the participants. Research in health is an example where the ethical guidelines and principles of PAR pose major challenges (Khanlou and Peter, 2005). PAR acknowledges this and emphasizes a new concept, what Riessman (2005) labeled “ethics-in-context”. This concept calls for reviewing the research issue, identifying the ethical questions that arise with it and decide where to focus on resolving this issue. The concept also calls for change in the standard format of the Institutional Review Boards, which follow the strict guideline of the positivist research when using participatory research (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2006).

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper explores PAR from its historical, epistemological and ideological standpoints and explains its propositional encompassments. Compare to other paradigms, PAR is a new venture in the discourse of social research and holds a 'minority' status among other competing paradigms. This is partly because as a burgeoning paradigm it is yet to resolve many of the ontological and methodological confusions that arise from its close association with the constructivist/interpretive paradigm. Moreover, the dominant structure of academic research limits its wider recognition. Especially, its unorthodoxy that challenges many of the positivist assumptions of what constitutes “good” science upsets many of the current institutional orders. Despite these obstacles, its status as a new paradigm is gaining gradual recognition among top educational institutions throughout the world.

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