

Action research international

Paper 2: Yoland Wadsworth (1998)

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Action research international is a refereed on-line journal of action research published under the aegis of the Institute of Workplace Research, Learning and Development, and Southern Cross University Press

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Yoland Wadsworth

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November 1998

About this article

For at least seventy years, some researchers around the world have been identifying what they do using terms like 'action research', or 'participatory research', or a combination of these. Some have stressed the action component,¹ while others have focused more on the participatory process.² Still others have come from the field of social science and have identified it as a means of inquiry or research per se.³

This paper came about in response to requests to speak about some of the collective wisdom that has been generated over many decades by people who have identified what they do using the term 'participatory action research'. It is the way I tell the story.

Throughout this account participatory action research is contrasted with formulations of conventional research science. For me, participatory action research is not a different and separate matter from science at all, but constitutes a formulation of how I understand all science in the wake of the wave of thinking that is popularly being called the 'new physics'. This 'new physics' or 'new paradigm science'⁴ in the natural physical world seems to me to match a 'new paradigm

science' in the social world. I identify 'participatory action research'⁵ not as an optional variant or specialist technique, but as one of the more inclusive descriptions of this new understanding of social science.

This short paper sets out to identify some of the main characteristics of participatory action research for me, and to try and show why I have come to the following two conclusions:

- 'Participatory action research' is a description of social research per se (albeit social research which is more *conscious* of its underlying assumptions, and collectivist nature, its action consequences and its driving values).
- It faces numerous barriers to its practice which mean that, even when we think we might be doing 'it', we often have our doubts! I have come to conclude that pretty much all of the research we are involved in, *is more or less an approximation* in the direction of 'it'. That is, every piece of research is more or less participatory. It more or less enables action as part of the process. And it all involves more or less critical reflexive, skeptical and imaginative inquiry.

I have found it handy to summarize its major distinguishing characteristics under the three headings which make up its name, that is: '*participation*', '*action*' and '*research*'. I commence with an attempt to outline the defining characteristics of participatory action research as research in the kind of everyday experience we have whenever we want to inquire into something in our lives. In the most tiny example can be found the same structure or logic of inquiry as in the most extensive long -term university research program.

The research framework

What do we typically do when we 'do a piece of research'? Let's take a couple of everyday examples.

We are going about our business and a piece of equipment fails to work. We are pulled up in our tracks as we experience a discrepancy between our practice and our expectations. Out of our need for it to 'work', a question arises: 'Why is it so?'. We have a look at the piece of equipment: perhaps involving a little piece of hands-on 'participant observation' fieldwork! Perhaps we employ also some 'secondary analysis' as we consult the maker's manual for their theories and advice! We may develop a hunch (hypothesis) and draw some conclusions. Then we try it out in a form of a naturalistic experiment and we 'give it a go'. Again we go about our business. The equipment works and we carry on. Or, it fails to work again and we again stop in our tracks and raise our question again, and try further fieldwork to develop yet another theory and try yet another tack, and so on.

We are looking for our daughter's shoes in the early morning scramble. We review previous 'historical data' (memories of earlier experiences!) as part of planning our 'research design'. We generate several hypotheses and move quickly into the 'field' to involve other participants and gather new data to test them! We use some observational anthropology. Two brief interviews with daughter and sibling result in reports of failed hunches! (they weren't in their cupboards or on the back verandah!); we engage in further open-ended interviews with the entire household population. Then secondary analysis of the previous day's timetable generates a further hunch (Sports Day!: shoes replaced with runners) and an additional round of observation reveals: shoes in school bag!

These trivial microcosms contain a structure which reliably:

- commences - ironically - with *stopping*. That is, we do not begin to inquire until we actually suspend our current action because of the:

- *raising of a question*; which then provokes us to go about:
- *planning ways to get answers* - ways which will involve identifying and involving 'questioners', 'the questioned' and an idea of for who or for what we desire answers;
- engaging in *fieldwork* about new, current or past action in order to get answers and improve our *experiential understanding* of the problematic situation;
- generating from the 'answers' an *imaginative idea* of what to do to change and improve our actions;
- the putting into practice of the *new actions* (followed by further stopping, reflecting and possible 'problematisation').

This is precisely the cycle of action, reflection, raising of questions, planning of 'fieldwork' to review current (and past) actions - its conduct, analysis of experiences encountered, the drawing of conclusions, and the planning of new and transformed actions - that characterizes all research endeavor. If we are to distinguish this cycle in any ways from what we 'do all the time', we find the important distinctions are in degree rather than kind. That is, in participatory action research we are:

- more *conscious of 'problematising'* an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematising it and why we are problematising it;
- more *explicit about 'naming' the problem*, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it;
- more *planned and deliberate* about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more *systematic and rigorous* in our efforts to get answers;
- more *carefully documenting and recording action* and what people think about it and in more detail and in ways which are accessible to other relevant parties;
- more *intensive and comprehensive* in our study, waiting much longer before we 'jump' to a conclusion;
- more *self-sceptical* in checking our hunches;
- attempting to develop *deeper understandings* and *more useful and more powerful theory* about the matters we are researching, in order to produce new knowledge which can inform improved action or practice; ⁶ and
- *changing our actions* as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions.

One of the ways this understanding of research differs from conceptions of conventional research or 'old paradigm science' is revealed in the diagrams below. Conventional research often sees itself as proceeding from point A to point B along a straight line - commencing with a hypothesis and proceeding to a conclusion which may then be published in a journal.

However new paradigm social science (or participatory action research) considers it critical to the success of the inquiry that the hypothesis is relevant and useful and thus asks: Where did the hunches or hypotheses come from? Are they just any old hypotheses? Or have they been carefully constructed and well-grounded, over time, from deep and engaged involvement in the field being studied? Are they plausible? Are they relevant? Are they already well-evidenced and thus already substantiate new action? (rather than having to spend time re-discovering or re-confirming the already-established).

Furthermore, new paradigm science asks: Have they been checked in practice? Findings, 'discoveries' or new ideas are not accepted until tested in action - otherwise they remain merely 'interesting ideas' or 'just academic'.

Instead of a linear model, participatory action research thus proceeds through cycles, 'starting' with reflection on action, and proceeding round to new action which is then further researched. The new actions differ from the old actions - they are literally in different places.

Interestingly, all science seems to me to follow this logic. However many 'old paradigm' scientists are unaware of their implication in this. There is *always* new action resulting - even if it is just the

same as the old (which we might describe as reproducing the ‘status quo’). Inquiry inevitably leads somewhere - even if it isn’t far from where it started, or only a small number of people are consciously aware of it. Once inquirers are aware of the implications of inquiring, they are faced with a choice. They can ignore it (or treat it as peripheral or of nuisance value), or they can resolve to work with it as a positive feature of their research environment. Action researchers, it seems to me, are really just researchers who have come to understand the practical and ethical implications of the inevitability of the value-driven and action-effects of their inquiry, that is:

- the effects of raising *some* questions and not others,
- the effects of involving *some* people in the process (or even apparently only one) and not others,
- the effects of observing *some* phenomena and not others,
- the effects of making *this* sense of it and not alternative senses, and
- the effects of deciding to take *this* action (or ‘no’ action) as a result of it rather than any other action and so on.

All research involves these kinds of decisions. Participatory action research attempts to make these decisions more consciously and in relation to more clearly-worked out purposes, and using more appropriate designs and techniques for exploring them.

The action element

All research seems to me to be implicated in action. Not only is research itself an action in and on existing situations, but it also always has consequences. Things inevitably change as a result of research - the mere act of asking questions is an intervention in a situation, and giving and hearing answers and making sense of them inevitably brings about changes in those involved. Whether people then choose to continue as before or to change course means that the new situation will either be different from that before, or it will be the same. To ‘not change’ is nevertheless action: some might call it inaction!

Participatory action research is *aware* of its inevitable intervention in the social situations within which it operates and seeks to turn these to consciously-applied effect. Most participatory action research sets out to explicitly study something in order to change and improve it. It most often arises from an unsatisfactory situation that those most affected wish to alter for the better (although it can also arise from the experience of something which works well, which provokes the desire to reproduce or expand it).

The moving to new and improved action involves a creative ‘moment’ of transformation.⁷ This involves an imaginative leap from a world of ‘as it is’ to a glimpse of a world ‘as it could be’. Where existing situations benefit or promote some but disadvantage or subordinate others, then creative change may be construed as ‘political’. As well, participatory action research does not conceptualise this as the development of predictive cause-effect theory (‘if this, then that’). Instead, as in the slogan: ‘the future is made, not predicted’, it is more like ‘what if we..., then maybe’. *Possibility* theory rather than *predictive* theory. That is, human actors are both wilful and capable of thwarting research prediction, and wilful and capable of selecting and implementing theories or probabilities they want to see manifested! Conventional science sees this as undesirable ‘contamination’ and ‘bias’. Participatory action research sees this as a goal, and the stuff of which ‘real life’ is made or enacted.

Action research, like the discovery phase of any science, knows it is coming from somewhere and going to somewhere, even though it does not know in advance where *precisely* it is going to end up or what the new state will look like. Participatory action research, unlike conventional science, does not consider this to be an embarrassment! However it can be difficult for researchers (and research funders) accustomed primarily to a formal experimental approach (the verificationist⁸ phase of science), since all that can be stated at the outset is that certain parties have noticed

certain problematic matters and have planned certain participatory processes in order to try and ‘crack it’ for a new way to approach the matter.⁹ It may be that funders need to fund iterative or emergent research in connecting stages of ‘seeding’, ‘sapling’ and ‘tree’ phases (and not with up to a year’s time lapse in between, as at present).

As there is an infinity of ‘could be’ worlds, then the action phase is crucially guided by the depth and quality of theorising achieved by the research participants. Superficial or trivial research will result in superficial and trivial ideas for practice.

The major challenge for all participatory action researchers (and indeed all researchers) is to design a process which can result in maximum creativity and imagination. Some of the most spectacular ideas have come about because researchers (or self-researchers) were able to draw on unusual sources for ideas, and then submit them to their critical reference group¹⁰ to see if they ‘resonated’. If such creative and imaginative efforts have been well-driven by a critical reference group perspective and well-grounded in an understanding of the critical reference group and their context or environment (including the effects of others and of ‘structural’ matters or opportunities impinging), then they stand a much better chance of ‘getting it right’ and ideas ‘taking off’. Pretty much every initiative we now see around us as A Good Thing happened in this way: as a product of people who ‘knew their turf’, knew who they were doing it for, and had the imagination to collectively envision a desirable new state and attract others who shared that vision.

In participatory action research, while there is a conceptual difference between the ‘participation’ ‘action’ and ‘research’ elements, in its most developed state these differences begin to dissolve in practice. That is, there is not participation followed by research and then hopefully action. Instead there are countless tiny cycles of participatory reflection on action, learning about action and then new informed action which is in turn the subject of further reflection. Every minute of every hour may see participants absorbing new ways of seeing or thinking in the light of their experience, leading to new related actions being taken on the spot. Often these will pass unnoticed and unrecorded, but with practice these too become the subject of further reflection and group self-understanding. Change does not happen at ‘the end’ - it happens throughout. A hallmark of a genuine participatory action research process is that it may change shape and focus over time (and sometimes quite unexpectedly) as participants focus and refocus their understandings about what is ‘really’ happening and what is really important to them.

The participation element

‘...action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experiences and make this experience accessible to others.’¹¹

It is not possible to do any social research without the participation of other human beings. In typical research there might be one or more ‘researchers’, there might be people who are ‘researched’, and there might be people who are ‘researched for’ - such as those who are to be informed or influenced by findings, or, at a more fundamental level, those who have a problem on which the research is to cast light. However even the research that seems to involve ‘no-one’, such as the most lone and unobtrusive academic researcher, examining written historical records of people long dead, who seems to be isolated from ‘real world practice’, and is relatively unknown to peers, *still* exists in a social world peopled by family, friends, fellow academics, academic administrators, tax-payers and politicians, funding bodies, editors of journals or thesis-examiners, as well as by the written representations of the researched (and there may also be some living representatives) which nevertheless must ‘speak’ and be ‘heard’ and understood by the researcher. These all impinge on, and ‘construct’ the research environment and its findings, regardless of their apparent invisibility.¹²

More usually there are known groups of researchers, people who commission the research, and live populations of ‘researched’ and ‘researched for’, many of whom may know of the research and want to have a say about its conduct or contribute a view about its subject-matter.

Various parties to research 'participate', but the questions become 'Who is treated as participants?', 'How much do they participate?', 'In what ways do they participate?', and 'How is their participation taken into account or not taken into account?'.

Indeed the reason why many of us have felt compelled to add the "p" for participation to the "ar" for action research has been because we have noticed that many have taken existing levels of conventional 'participation' for granted. More importantly there may have been a complacency about the adequacy of current input. Here is a chicken and egg. How do existing participants know the limits of their own perceptions without new participants being there to illuminate the relativism of the existing participants' perceptions - and how would the new participants get to be involved, invited (or tolerated) if their value is not known?

It is worth drawing out the differences between the parties to research in more detail to examine the new possibilities for participation.

In research there are typically four conceptual parties to research:

1. The researcher/s
2. The researched
3. The researched for (in the sense of having the problem the research is to resolve) - what we have called the *critical* reference group
4. The researched for (in the sense that they might benefit from better information about the situation - they may be trying to care for those with the problem, or provide, administer or fund the problematic thing or an activity or service which addresses the matter or tries to manage, treat, ameliorate or prevent it, and so on).

Participation may be for varying reasons which revolve *more* or *less* around an interest in the topic or question.

In a conventional piece of research there may be *less* apparent participation. For example, management (group iv), is puzzled or uneasy about some existing matter, or under pressure from another group (iii) or (iv) to Do Something. They might typically employ an independent researcher, (i), to go and study some of the people-with-a-problem, (iii) and perhaps also have some informal discussions with staff, (iv). They may limit their involvement to an initial briefing, the receipt of progress reports, attendance at a steering committee, and receipt of a final report. The researcher may be an academic or a private consultant with some other interests in the matter themselves, (i) and (iv). They are constrained to appear to be neutral or perhaps mildly on everyone's side. They may also be on a short term, highly paid contract with high performance expectations. They expect to get into the field, get the data, get out cleanly, write it up, add some recommendations that seem feasible and then move on to the next demanding job.

The people-with-a-problem: 'clients', 'patients', 'students', or other group of disadvantaged people, (iii), may be directly hurt or disadvantaged by the existing problematic matter, and may or may not have questioned whether there might be a reason for it, and/or a better way. This group is frequently part of 'the researched', although sometimes they may not know it. If they do, they may typically find themselves on the receiving end of a questionnaire or an interview. One of their number may be invited to sit on an Advisory Committee. Some other 'stakeholders': staff, carers, providers, (iv), may be indirectly involved. In conventional research, they may also be questionnaire or interviewed about the group-with-the-problem, or about their service to them or care of them, and perhaps even asked what they think should be changed; and they might also be on the Committee. All then await the researchers' announcement of their 'findings'.

What can typically plague the whole process of such conventional research are the consequences of non participation:

- In the first place there can be confusion or lack of agreement regarding the direction and purpose of the inquiry (for whom and for what).

- There is subsequent disagreement about the form the study should take (how, where, when, who should be involved).
- Alternatively the wrong direction is taken and dissent suppressed or ignored. The wrong questions are asked. The data is then irrelevant. And the conclusions useless.
- There can be misunderstandings about participants' perceptions (about the situation being studied).
- There can be conflict over interpretations and analyses (the 'why' and 'how').
- And there can be disagreement about what these imply for change in action (what next).
- And there can be shooting of the messenger! Or of the manager. Or mutinous troops. And critical reference groups' situations left unchanged.

There is an important point to be made here. Over many years I have observed that where the parties (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv) are more distant from each other and from involvement in the process of inquiry, trouble ensues.

Once in the past a place might have been seen for participation by the various parties at the outset on a committee, or at the end as recipients of a report. Increasingly instead they might become contributors to all stages of the research cycle - as designers, selectors of methods, contributors of 'data', 'analysers' and 'concluders', and then 'takers (or monitors) of new actions', and so on. All parties begin to operate much more as both co-researchers and co-subjects.

In participatory action research, the four conceptual categories of participants may thus in practice become much more overlapping depending on the purposes of the research, and who is 'driving' it. For example, there may be *more* participation, where a self help group (iii), self-researches (i) its own experiences (ii) and those of others (iv), for itself or for others (i or iv).

The arguments for there being *more* rather than less participation by all four parties are as follows:

- *Those commissioning or carrying out the research* These usually already participate the most since they choose the questions, decide how they will be answered, interpret the answers and decide what has been 'discovered'. Yet frequently even *they* feel constrained to disguise, restrict or eliminate their ideas and values, or refrain from putting in their experiences or their views or opinions, on the grounds the research should be 'objective' and 'unbiased', and 'value-free'. In this way, other participants may never be properly informed about the nature and purposes of the research, and the research design may begin way back 'behind the eight ball' instead of where there is a genuine unanswered question. This may truly bias or distort the research. Feminist ¹³ and other critical theory ¹⁴ research as well as so-called fourth generation evaluation ¹⁵ has begun to show a way for researchers (and those commissioning the research) to be more genuine and honest participants in and contributors to their own research.

These approaches have shown also how there can be more of a dissolution of the distinction between researcher/s and 'researched for' (the critical reference group).

- Thus, for example, a more participating researcher would be more clear about why they are interested in the research - perhaps describing their own personal experiences that have led to the questions they are wanting to ask. This clarifies the purposes for other participants, and helps each participant know where the other is 'coming from'. Further, the participating researcher/s, having identified the interests they wish to pursue, can see (and be seen in) their relationship to the critical reference group, and pursue more consciously and sceptically, alternative formulations of the situation.
- *The critical reference group*
This group conventionally participates least since professional and academic research largely researches on and *about* and *speaks for* the disadvantaged, or groups with unmet needs the research is meant to benefit. Laura Nader has called this approach 'studying down' (1972). The identification and involvement of the critical reference group, or even broad relevant critical reference 'arenas' or critical reference 'publics' however, I have

noticed leads to:

- improved relevance of the inquiry to those who share in the problem;
- sharper focusing of the research questions;
- enhanced relevance of the inquiry to those whose jobs are to do something about the problem (whether as a service provider, a carer, an administrator, a funder, etc.);
- increased effectiveness of the research design (what is asked, by whom, of whom, when, where and how);
- improved meaningfulness of the information thus gained (the researched especially have a say in whether any inquiry 'got it right' in regard to the meaning of what they said or did);
- the power and accuracy of the theory developed to understand the problem;
- the relevance, creativity and effectiveness of the new actions decided-on;
- and the commitment to observing the new actions and acting on and researching of them further.

The difficulties in involving critical reference groups and them remaining involved are numerous. The discussion of how to achieve these conditions of mutual involvement, participation and collaboration are very similar to the discussions about how to achieve 'community development'. For example, the more disempowered you are, the less hope you may have about either the value of participating or even the chances of something good coming out of it. If you are radically disempowered you may not even be able to envisage something better, when even a vague or indistinct vision is a prerequisite for pursuing one at all.

Nevertheless, members of critical reference groups who have problematised a situation are in the most strategic position to work on its improvement. Participatory action research, in its most-developed form, works to assist critical reference groups - and those who share their perspective - pursue their inquiries, by themselves and for themselves, as a community-of-interest. The role of 'outsiders' or those who are not members of critical reference groups changes radically. Rather than operating as the independent expert determiner of the truth-of-the-situation (with critical reference groups assisting the researcher in their pursuit of The Truth), the 'researcher' becomes a facilitator of or an assistant to the critical reference group's own pursuit of *their* truth (or truths).

- *Stakeholders other than the researcher/s and the critical reference group (and whether interested or hostile)*

These typically participate only at the outset: perhaps to convene a Committee or allocate a research brief or contribute funds, or just at the end: to receive a research report or hear of its findings. The pitfalls and wastage that can be associated with this level of participation are numerous. A few possible results include:

- manipulation of the research process 'off stage' (by powerful parties who never participated in a democratic process around a table with all other parties), and possible ultimate resistance by other parties when their participation proves to be pointless;
- rejection of a report by some or all because they simply never went through the same learning process as did the researcher/s and the critical reference group and never reached the same conclusions;
- frustration with a process that does not reflect their realities;
- inability to see what are the practical consequences of a set of findings or recommendations.

Service providers can specially benefit from full participation so that the link between their 'theory' (why they do what they do) is in closer connection with their 'practice' (what they actually do). Indeed, in much action research in Western countries, the primary participants are service-providers who work in small circles, examining their practice and trying out alternative ways of working. For the value of this to be maximised, participation needs to be organised around the interests of the critical reference group or driven by a critical

reference group perspective, or else the research can risk becoming sidetracked. [16](#)

- *The researched*

This may typically be the critical reference group, along with some service-providers or their representatives. However, again I have found that the more there is active participation the greater the chances of maximising both the accuracy and meaningfulness of all contributions, and also the sharing of perceptions and of emerging understandings about the value of what new actions should next be taken.

Research which involves the collaboration of people, rarely is sustained without a shared purpose, and this 'shared purpose' stems from what understandings people have together developed about what is of value. If understanding is not for 'its own sake', but directed towards understanding something 'in order to...', then the point of purposeful inquiry is action. As pointed out before, where the categories 'the researched' and 'the researchers' and 'the researched for' begin to become less distinct, this collaboration can become more cohesive.

What *kind* of action is for the parties to decide - focused by the perspective of the critical reference group. As pointed out earlier, that new action might be the reproduction of the same old action as was taken previously if it involves researchers who believe they neither are contributing (nor want to contribute) to change. This is research which may carefully reproduce the status quo. Other research, which is self-conscious about why it asked the questions it does, wishes instead to head towards a different and improved state of affairs.

What Participatory Action Research is - and is not!

Participatory action research is a term that brings together a set of assumptions underlying 'new paradigm' science and in contrast to those of traditional or 'old paradigm' science. These new assumptions underline the importance of social and collective processes in reaching conclusions about 'what is the case', and what the implications are for change which is deemed useful by those whose problematic situation led to the research in the first place.

In 'real life', actual researchers often straddle (more or less uncomfortably) the two paradigms, but the paradigms themselves are coherent bodies of thought that are not theoretically commensurable. But a paradigm addresses the unsolved problems of the previous paradigm. So while positivism arose to bring certainty and verifiability to a world construed as 'irrational', post positivism addresses the inability to handle enormous complexity in large, cybernetic, self-changing human systems. If conventional science wanted to give a group of people the power to determine 'truth' for and on behalf of others, the new science arose from a world of multiple and competing versions of truth and reality as a way of assisting people both come to the truth of their own reality, and also to embrace that of others.

The urgency of such mutual understanding is to be found in the topics selected by PAR practitioners - mostly concerned with difficult situations of social change, the loss of ways to meet human needs, the rise of anxieties and fears as we become strangers to each other, and the threat of dissolution into violence and alienation.

On such big fronts, participatory action research proceeds modestly, but it *does* proceed! For all these reasons participatory action research is not just research which we hope will be followed by action! It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, *within* the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them - whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. Paradoxically it is quite close to a common-sense way of 'learning by doing'. But at the same time it is very hard to achieve the ideal conditions for putting it fully into practice.

Essentially participatory action research is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it.

'Current problematic action' may range from the trivial to the life-threatening. Much participatory action research lies between these ends of the scale, and typically involves yourself; those who share your concerns, experiences and interests; others suffering from the problematic situation; others trying to assist it to change; and those who oversee the material resources needed to underpin the change effort (such as funds, people, salaries, services, office resources, etc.). Bringing these parties together, and absorbing new ones as the action research effort proceeds to unfold and implicate parties further afield, is not merely a side issue of 'entry to the field' but a central focus for achieving understanding and change. As well, action research is not research which sees these as 'contaminating' processes which 'bias' the scientific effort, nor does it have a problem with the 'researcher/s' identifying with 'the researched' and the 'researched for', - seeing this rather as essential to the gaining of engaged understanding.

What 'drives' participatory action research, like any research, is our 'need to know' in order to bring about desired change. We often shorthand term this our 'values' - which are our precious images of valued states or ways of being. Rather than seeing this holding-of-values as subjective and potentially a source of bias, the strength of the values we hold will determine the power and direction of our research efforts. Two key additional factors which will shape what we do is the strength of our imaginations (to theorise more creatively, deeply and imaginatively) and our scepticism (to keep our theory closely in relationship to the practices we are observing). Like any other research, the critical moment is that of 'discovery' or rather: 'invention' of a different and better way of seeing and understanding our realities. The old adage about science being 5% inspiration and 95% perspiration may hold true enough! The hard sweat and toil comprises the long hours of talking and thinking and sharing the results of our 'fieldwork' with one another. The moment of inspired thinking is when collective values are expressed in a new way of connecting ideas or a new way of 'naming' the world, that advances the collective situation of participants.

Notes

1 The field of action research deriving from education (particularly school room practice) and third world development more often have stressed the necessity of moving relatively quickly towards *new action* (see for example Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Brennan and Hoadley 1984, Brown 1988, Freire 1972a, 1972b).

2 The post-war British field of action research, drawing on theory about group psychology or group dynamics, stressed the area of *process*, sometimes involving very diverse interests from the outset (see for example the Tavistock formulations and Reg Revans, and in Australia: Fred Emery & Merrilyn Emery and other work of the Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University as well as the attention to dialogue by the Americans Argyris and Senge).

3 Examples of this are diverse. They include the classical social anthropology-trained sociologist William Foote Whyte who has moved to action research from what he now calls 'participatory research' (eg. his classic 1943 ethnographic study of an inner city immigrant American-Italian community). Another prominent American sociologist Shulamit Reinharz tells her story of moving from disembodied researching 'on' people to humanistic, qualitative and experiential researching 'with' people (1979). I, myself (Yoland Wadsworth), a Monash-trained sociologist have told of a similar trajectory (1985), moving from using standard large-scale random sample surveys analysed by the obligatory SPSS, to embracing interpretivist phenomenology to working increasingly with and for critical reference groups using a critical constructivist methodology (see for example the account of the first stage of a consumer evaluation of a psychiatric hospital, McGuiness and Wadsworth, 1991).

4 Old paradigm social science is often popularly termed ‘positivist’. This refers to a school of philosophical thought which saw the world as having a single ‘reality’ which existed independently of the observer, and which could only be discovered by an objective and uninvolved scientist through acts of pure perception, ideally in a laboratory setting where all variables could be controlled and manipulated, and exact causation determined. This account has been difficult to sustain in practice - as with Newtonian science - given the limitations of such an uninvolved science. Far more engaged research - literally ‘going native’ - yields far better understanding. As well, when the social world is encountered, it takes as many forms as there are people. That is, understanding the social world depends on the exchange and communication of interpretations about what is going on. These are multiple and may be conflicting. As with post-Einsteinian physics, the ‘observed’ is importantly constructed by ‘the observer’ - and in the social world, is then further reconstructed by the observed (sometimes in the light of the observer’s observations!). For old paradigm science this is all so much unwanted ‘bias’ and ‘contamination’. For new paradigm science it is the nature of the ‘beast’, and all so much more material for illuminating inquiry. New paradigm science also grasps the value-driven nature of inquiry and is in a position to focus its research in the interests of those who might problematise their existing undesirable situations. This offers a better chance of ‘driving’ theory towards better contributing to practice, and also avoiding the unethical and totalitarian consequences of a science which sees itself as ‘value free’.

5 More formal language which is used to describe ‘participatory action research’ as a particular philosophy of knowledge (theory of how we know, or the grounds for knowledge, i.e. epistemology) also includes ‘critical constructivist’, ‘post positivist’ or ‘critical interpretive’ methodology.

6 For example, by asking why it is *we* who are looking for our daughter’s shoes rather than our daughter! Chris Argyris has described this as moving from single loop to double loop thinking - or first order to second order theory.

7 Sue Kenny has used this term in her description of an alternative way of going about ‘needs assessment’ research (1994).

8 Egon Guba has used the terms ‘discovery mode’ and ‘verificationist mode’ (1978: Figure 1, p. 7). The better-accomplished the discovery phase, the less likely the need for an elaborate, costly, ethically and methodologically-fraught verificationist stage (excepting for the hard test of real-life practice). Where the ‘knower/s’ have become very disconnected from the ‘known’ (eg. modern mechanistic science from the effects of a drug newly invented in a laboratory, with unknown effects), then the discovery phase may no longer be ‘organic’ to the use of the drug (e.g. such as that associated with the presence of willowbark in the environment and the gradually-observed effects of its naturally-occurring aspirin). Then resort has to be made to the clumsy, difficult, but more decisive randomised control trial technique.

9 Ironically, conventional experimental science can have its own problems and ‘fail’ when an ungrounded (irrelevant and wide of the mark) hypothesis is elaborately and expensively tested, only to discover that it was a poor proposition in the first place. Alternatively, in social science, such poor propositions can survive in the literature and even make their researchers famous (and lead to high status positions!) in the absence of participatory processes or testing in practice which would supply the necessary feedback about their faulty or narrow character. The spectacular failure of European sociologists to predict the bringing down of the Berlin Wall testifies in the same way as the failure of meteorologists to predict the weather accurately. Mostly both sociologists and meteorologists (as well as ordinary people who are observant and shrewd, and who can tap their barometers and feel the aches in their bones) pretty much get it right. Newtonian science mainly works. The break downs occur when matters are enormously complex and defy ‘control of variables’. Unfortunately these may be precisely the critical times in messy complex changing human societies.

10 The concept of a critical reference group perspective is explored in greater detail in 'Everyday Evaluation on the Run' (Wadsworth, 1991: 7-11).

11 This quotation comes from a paper that Robin McTaggart of Deakin University presented to the Third World Encounter on Participatory Action Research, Managua, Nicaragua, 3-9 September, 1989. It was reprinted in the Journal of the Participatory Action Research Network (based in Melbourne) Vol 1, April, 1991; and a revised version was published as 'Principles of Participatory Action Research' Adult Education Quarterly, Vol 41, No 3, 1991:170. A summary of the 17 Principles appears also in Wadsworth, 1991: 64.

12 As well, some academic researchers claim with pride that there are no known beneficiaries of research (and not even an arena of potential beneficiaries). This is what they might call 'pure' research, or 'curiosity-driven' research 'for its own sake'. It is very important that there be time and space for curiosity and speculative forays out into unknown waters and apparently 'irrelevant' matters. However even 'idle' curiosity is always historically and socially located (eg. Fleming's noticing of the penicillin mould) and thus shaped by the social world in which the 'idle curious' have grown up, learned language, learned values, and learned to notice some things and not others. 80% of all scientists, 'pure' and 'applied' alike, just happen to be curious in ways helpful to defence establishments all around the world. On the other hand even the most apparently esoteric inquirer frequently has quite well-formed views about the relevance of their line of inquiry (for example the relationship between Jacobin clothing styles and early capitalist modes of economy, and its relevance to late twentieth century post modernity). Where researchers themselves have no insight, someone else might well be able to carry out a little 'archaeology' and suggest something. For most research in the human services area, the critical reference group is very much more readily identified as service users.

13 Feminist research utilises (more or less successfully) a participatory action research methodology and additionally works in a topic area determined by a particular critical reference group: that of women. The kind of feminist theory used will reflect and in turn determine what kind of use is made of the research, and by whom.

14 Critical theory is a school of social science which developed firstly in Frankfurt and then in the United States of America after its members went into exile before and during the second world war. It has attempted to bring together the insights of Freudian (and now post Freudian) psychology and Marxian economics, in order to understand how the personal and the structural come together into ideological forms from which some benefit at the expense of others. Its better-known theorists include Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas and Marcuse. It is now used as a term to describe a range of approaches which raise critical questions about the conditions which sustain existing forms of social life that are experienced as problematic by particular groups of people.

15 Fourth generation evaluation is a term coined by the Americans Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln to describe the application of constructivist methodology to evaluation (in the wake of three previous generations of evaluation which they have criticised on the grounds of over-adherence to a positivist epistemology and to managerialist dominance). They argued for the admission of all relevant parties to the process, and re-cast the evaluator as a facilitator of an essentially self-evaluation process.

16 See for example school-based action research where parents and students may be involved, however the primary questions identified are those of the teachers. See also hospital projects which similarly stem from nurses' concerns in the absence of patients. Or welfare research about youth suicide or single mothers without any representation of these groups in the research team or committee. Where the questions are not necessarily those of the critical reference group, the research relies on disembodied critical theory to illuminate the assumptions behind things and thus reveal new choices of more relevant topics. For example, say psychiatric nurses want to research how to protect themselves from patient violence. They could recommend regular time

off for themselves to recover from their stress. The asking of critical question, such as 'what would be also good for patients?' might lead to this particular solution being problematised however, and set in train a further search for a different solution which does not meet the needs of one group at the expense of another. If patients participate in the research, they might give their perceptions of why the violence arises, leading to a different solution which also might not compound patients' existing problems of loss of staff continuity.

Acknowledgements

A first version of this paper was written by Yoland Wadsworth for the Action Research Issues Association (Incorporated) in 1993, as an information service to the support and development of community programmes, and with funding assistance from Community Services Victoria. Further thinking about the topic was made possible by a Visiting Fellowship to the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University. Thanks are also due to the many participants in the many workshops at which these ideas were shaped over a period of three years. Special thanks to Jacques Boulet, Jill Sanguinetti and Gai Wilson for reading and commenting on the draft paper.

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* Faculty of Arts, Victoria University of Technology, WO89, PO Box 14428, Melbourne City MC, Victoria Australia 8001, and the Action Research Issues Centre, 247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne Victoria 3000

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This paper may be cited as follows:

Wadsworth, Y. (1998) What is Participatory Action Research? **Action Research International**, Paper 2. Available on-line: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>

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