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Abstract

In this review of the book, Participatory Action Research (PAR) by author Alice McIntyre, I write from the perspective of a PhD student at the beginning of her doctoral social work program and who is considering using PAR in her future research. I highlight McIntyre's description of PAR, its application as a research technique, the challenges that confront the researcher, and the rewards that could result from the PAR approach.

Keywords

Collaboration, Participatory Action Research, Relationship-Building

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Collaboration in Action: A Book Review of Alice McIntyre's *Participatory Action Research*

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*In this review of the book, *Participatory Action Research (PAR)* by author Alice McIntyre, I write from the perspective of a PhD student at the beginning of her doctoral social work program and who is considering using PAR in her future research. I highlight McIntyre's description of PAR, its application as a research technique, the challenges that confront the researcher, and the rewards that could result from the PAR approach. Keywords: Collaboration, Participatory Action Research, Relationship-Building*

In this review I offer you the perspective of a beginner PhD student on Alice McIntyre's book *Participatory Action Research* published in 2008 by Sage Publications. It is the 52nd book in the Qualitative Research Methods Series by Sage Publications.

Alice McIntyre is a Professor and Chairperson of the Elementary Education Department at Hellenic College. She has been engaged in activist research and education for many years. Dr. McIntyre's approach to research is participatory, transformative, and grounded in the lives of research participants. She has authored three books and co-authored another, all of which discuss PAR as an approach to engaging people in processes of reflection, education and change.

McIntyre achieves her objectives. On the back cover it is stated that the text is ideally suited for "graduate courses in participatory action research (PAR), qualitative research, and various types of action based research." In this short comprehensive book McIntyre uses simple, clear language to give an historical account of PAR as a research methodology and explains the steps that are integral to the process. I found her thoughtful and effective approach particularly encouraging as a novice qualitative researcher intending to conduct a collaborative project with Caribbean immigrant women who have experienced marital sexual violence. The book has given me a balanced view of the research process by highlighting both the challenges and the rewards that are likely to emerge at different stages.

In the introduction the author engages our attention by highlighting two PAR projects in which she participated as the researcher. The first was a 3-year project that focused on the activities of a group of diverse students at the Blair Elementary and Middle Public School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The project-related activities were intended to support the "the young people's goal of informing their community about the effects of violence on themselves, their schools, and their environment" (p. x). The second was a 2-year study that focused on the experiences of a group of women of the Monument Road community in Belfast, The North of Ireland. The women invited McIntyre to "collaborate with them in designing a project aimed at exploring issues that affect them as mothers, daughters, wives, partners, caregivers, and the primary stakeholders in community life" (p. xi) in a war-torn country. The author's choice of these two projects for a PAR application confirmed my early belief that there is much value in using the approach to investigate pressing social issues.

The author illustrates that collaboration is the essence of PAR and clearly identifies herself as "a member of the team" and "a participant in both projects" (p. xiii). At the same time she acknowledges that even as a team, roles and responsibilities are specific to

researchers, participants, and collaborators. Further, she emphasizes the need for respect for diversity and the importance of engaging and working with marginalized peoples to help them recognize their personal strengths and capacity to change their socio-economic circumstances. McIntyre also invites us as practitioners and participants to acknowledge that PAR has the “potential to explain and interpret reality so as to change it” (p. xvii). I am of the view that her emphasis on respect for and the engagement of marginalized groups iterates the essence of social work values. Being a social worker myself, I note the significance and relevance of using PAR in my own future research with diverse minorities. Further, I understand the importance of applying those values in any work with minority groups.

Chapter 1 provides the historical background of PAR. The author cites some of the early projects such as those of Kanhare (1980) and Tandon (1981) in India, Fals-Borda (1985, 1987) in Columbia, Vio Grossi (1982) in Chile, and Mduma (1982) in Tanzania. Marx’s critical reflection theory, Friere’s theory of conscientization, feminist theories, critical theory and critical race theory have all been used to inform PAR projects with oppressed populations working to change or improve their social, economic, political, and cultural conditions. McIntyre claims her approach to be based on a combination of Friere’s and feminist’s beliefs because of the active roles of participants and researchers in the co-construction of knowledge and the promotion of self- and critical awareness (p. 5).

As academic researchers, we are asked to be aware of our position in relation to participants in PAR projects because of the challenges that can emerge by virtue of our privileged higher education. McIntyre encourages us to engage in ongoing reflexivity to negotiate our role as academic practitioners just as she did, in order to enhance our ability to listen. She effectively illustrates, using the Bridgeport example, how practitioners who stereotype participants fail to develop strategic relationships with them thereby compromising the research process. Ethical guidelines are critical to treat with any challenges to the PAR process and the author lists nine ethical considerations, the application of which she suggests should always be initiated by the practitioner whenever that need arises. The author’s approach fully supports my own views on the co-construction of knowledge and the role of ethics and reflexivity in research. I am reminded that in order to build healthy relationships with participants, I need to always demonstrate ethical behaviour, put aside preconceived notions about any given population, and engage in ongoing self-reflection.

Chapter 2 focuses on participation, what it means and how it works. We are informed that PAR is a recursive process in which “various aspects are braided within one another in a spiral of reflection, investigation, and action” (p. 6). McIntyre uses the rich narratives from both of her projects to illustrate that irrespective of the nature of the project or the issue being investigated, participants’ understanding of the definition of *participation* and of their *roles and responsibilities* in the PAR process is important. The choice of tools used to collect and construct knowledge is equally important. She shows us how challenging it can be to connect “*meaning of participation to the actualization of participation*” (p. 17). Essential questions for participants include: *What is the purpose of the project? Who benefits from the study? What is my commitment to the project and team? What is an acceptable level participation? What rules guide the process?* McIntyre offers good guidance: practitioners and participants alike should be flexible, willing to redefine “participation” as the process moves along and prepare for unexpected occurrences if the research process is to be sustainable.

Chapter 3 opens with a quote from Kidd and Kral (p. 189), “The definition of action . . . is essentially limitless. Any concerted effort to remove some impediment that hampers the growth of a group . . . could be defined as action within the scope of PAR” (p. 33). Here again, McIntyre uses rich excerpts from the numerous narratives of the Bridgeport youth and the women from Belfast to demonstrate how existing knowledge should be questioned, how

new knowledge is constructed, how data are to be collected and interpreted and how that information is then used to make positive changes at the personal and environmental levels.

However, through her own personal reflections, the author reminds us that it is acceptable when participants fail to take action on everything that emerges in the collaborative process. “There is an ebb and flow in PAR projects” (p. 46). Some participants hesitate before taking action. Citing Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), McIntyre iterates that participants are expected to live with the consequences of their actions hence their hesitation is understandable.

In Chapter 4 we are asked to reflect on the fact that since PAR is context-specific, practitioners need to consider the use of qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and other creative means to actively engage participants in knowledge-construction. Different methods require correspondingly different analytical methods. McIntyre lists “photographs, paintings, collages, interviews and group dialogue” (p. 49) as means of interpreting the youths’ and women’s experiences. She identifies a number of guiding questions that would help participants to review, discuss, summarize, and analyze research data.

The author discusses the relevance of social constructionist grounded theory in PAR projects as a means of giving meaning to the individual realities of participants. The theory provides a framework for practitioners to be reflexive about where they situate themselves in the research process, their relationship with participants and how different techniques they use can influence their data analysis. In other words the theory informs practice. McIntyre explains that the participants in her projects reflected on their own practices, reviewed and analyzed their data from different perspectives, and demonstrated that collaborative effort can result in change. Here again, I am reminded of the importance of self-reflection and collaboration in research.

Quoting Fals-Borda (p. 111) that “PAR is a philosophy of life as much as a method, a sentiment as much as a conviction” (p. 61), McIntyre offers us concluding reflections in Chapter 5. She reviews the factors that underscored both projects and gives us pause to be cautious about how we assess the success or failure of projects. Success does not necessarily mean that all expected outcomes have to be realized, participants need only to believe that their participation in the research process influenced some action and they feel better about themselves as was the case with the Bridgeport youth. The author reminds us that ethical considerations should govern every stage of the process if collaboration between researcher and participants is to be meaningful. She also emphasizes the significant contribution of PAR to social science research. It presents a theory of possibility, provides the opportunity for people to become researchers for their own cause and “it affords groups of people the freedom to explore and value how they experience their individual and collective realities” (p. 68).

As a new doctoral student and novice researcher I am intrigued by PAR. Dr. McIntyre has helped to further put the process in proper perspective for me. The overriding theme throughout her book is collaboration. As a social constructionist I believe that multiple realities exist based on the lived experiences of persons and thus I regard collaboration and the full participation of all stakeholders as the keys to successful and sustainable projects. Ultimately, the participants become researchers in their own right, become empowered, take ownership of the process and transform their lives for the better, even if only incrementally in the beginning. The book stressed this point and emphasized how rich a process PAR is notwithstanding the frustrations that could ensue. It is for this reason that I endorse this book as a must for the researcher’s toolbox and more so for the novice who is embarking on an exciting and rewarding research journey.

Reference

McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author Note

Jacqueline Fields is an MBA graduate of the University of Surrey, Guildford, England. She completed her BSW in her home country of Barbados at the University of the West Indies and is currently in the first year of doctoral studies in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Her research interests include intimate partner sexual violence, social justice issues, and community development. Ms. Fields has worked extensively, and led several large projects, in business development, youth addictions, and ex-inmate rehabilitation. She may be contacted by e-mail at jafields@ucalgary.ca

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