What is Participatory Action Research and What's a Nice Person Like Me Doing in a Field Like This?

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I was invited to talk to a Sociology class not long ago about what the instructor called the "Why" question. "Why do I do participatory action research?" I turned the question back to the group of graduate students in the class and asked them "Why" they had decided to study Sociology. As we went around the room, student after student responded with some variation of: "Because I want to make a difference."

I suspect if I went around the room here I'd get a similar response. "I decided to become a Psychologist because I wanted to make a difference." After all, it's really the reason SPSSI was founded in the first place, and it's our common commitment to social change that brings us all here today. And we would not be alone in this sentiment. As I was preparing these remarks I happened to receive the latest issue of American Psychologist, in which Lawrence LeShan quotes Clark Hull in 1941 as saying, "The task of the psychologist is to make a difference". Also in that issue, the new president of APA, Philip Zimbardo, voiced the same belief in launching his new initiative which he has titled "Psychology Makes a Significant Difference in Our Lives".

But the Sociology students I spoke with also talked about their frustration with the field…their sense that it offered them very little in terms of tools for actually achieving positive social change and instead tended to hobble them with pretentious theories and the minutia of data analysis all distancing them further and further from people and communities and from the real social issues they face. And ultimately leading to little by way of action. I suspect many of us here today share this sense of frustration with our own field as well. Despite the early hope that psychologists would, through their research, be able to bring about a more just, more caring society, it is difficult to look at the record and see much that reflects the fruits of these labors.

There are, of course, differences of opinion in the field of Psychology regarding our efficacy and even regarding the legitimacy of this commitment to social change. There are those who say that direct action is not, nor should it be, the responsibility of social scientists. Our goal should be to "generate knowledge", and leave it to others to implement change. And there are those who see the

relationship between psychology and social change as mediated by politicians, policy makers or the media. To do otherwise would be to contaminate our practice as scientists.

They would claim, as one graduate school advisor once told me, “You can’t mix your politics and your psychology.” To paraphrase W. C. Fields, “It’s the only thing I have to thank him for.” I thank him because that comment forced me to examine my own reasons for being in the field of psychology and how this intersects with my political and social values. In desperation, I went to another faculty member with my doubts and he reassured me, “It’s okay…you can be a Psychologist.” But there was a significant caveat—“you just can’t define yourself by APA standards.” So what does it mean that a psychologist who chooses to work for social justice, who engages in social activism, who sees her political and psychological personas as inextricably linked, and who believes in the ability of people to understand and address their own problems, has somehow violated the standards of her field?

In the twenty years since I was that graduate student, what has changed? Well, for one thing I’m a lot ornerier and a lot less worried about what other people think. But apart from that, I’m tempted to say, “Not much”. But the fact that we are here today focusing on our approaches to social activism and challenging these traditional notions of the place of psychology in the social change process, belies my cynicism. Much has changed…although there is much left to do.

Let me begin with what has changed. While positivism still has a fairly substantial hold on the field of psychology…some would say a virtual strangle hold…nonetheless, critical theory and the pioneering work of many feminist scholars in the field, like Rhoda Unger and Pat Maguire who are here with us today, have begun to create a space for the consideration of other ways of understanding the world, and of effecting change. And thanks to these theoretical frameworks and their offspring, we have begun to question the ability of traditional positivist research to bring about social reform, we challenge the assumptions of objectivity and neutrality, and we actively interrogate the role that privilege and power play in shaping our research agendas and outcomes. So, there is a chink in the armor…now how best to take advantage of that opening?

Participatory action research, for those of you unfamiliar with this approach, is an explicitly political, socially-engaged approach to knowledge generation. By combining popular education, community organizing, and issue-based research, this practice demands that the researcher play simultaneous roles as scholar and activist. Participatory action research operates within communities that have traditionally been oppressed or marginalized and through a process of democratic dialogue and action provides members of those communities with the opportunity to identify issues of concern to them, gather relevant information, and explore and implement possible solutions. The knowledge and skills of the academic researcher are put in the service of the community and a major focus

is on providing the training and resources that will allow the community to act on its own behalf in the future.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) have articulated the values shared by those of us who engage in this practice which they call action research, “A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.” (2) This goal is served by a research practice which is, again quoting Reason and Bradbury, “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.” (1). These statements reflect two of the characteristics I appreciate most about this group of researchers--our unrepentant optimism and our willingness to think big.

Fields as diverse as urban planning, nursing, anthropology, organizational development, sociology, education, literacy**,** environmental studies, as well as psychology have developed some form of participatory action research, or approaches which reflect the same basic values and issues. Within the field of psychology our practice is grounded in the work of Kurt Lewin and others who saw the important role that psychologists could play in addressing social issues. But rather than rely on the intervention of experts to address such concerns, participatory action research recognizes the ability of people and communities to understand and to address their own problems and focuses on developing the skills and resources necessary to make this possible.

Participatory action research is by its very nature a form of social activism and a political act. Far from seeing my practice as removed from politics, I embrace the political nature of my work and would suggest that, in fact, all social research is inherently political…it’s just that participatory action research is explicit about its political position while others hide their partisanship behind a false veil of objectivity. So in the end it is a question of which social agenda you choose to support, the one that continues to maintain the existing social hierarchies and endeavors to fit people to the system, or the one that believes that people have the right and the ability to reshape their lives and their communities?

My own work as a participatory action researcher began with a project focused on accessibility self-advocacy with a group of individuals with physical disabilities. Working with this group initially involved conducting interviews to identify significant concerns, then bringing the group together to discuss priorities and possible directions for shared action. Eventually, the group decided to work together to make the local shopping mall more accessible. After a number of

years and seemingly countless trips to Boston in a very unwieldy van, we eventually won a state Supreme Court case focused on architectural accessibility. This final victory was achieved only after I had completed my graduate studies and had taken a position in another state. But the community activists with whom I worked continued to be involved in this and related initiatives. They now understood how the system operated and were able to advocate on their own behalf…I had worked my way out of a job. The members of the group had become experts in their own right, insuring the sustainability of local efforts to address problems of accessibility and other forms of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

I have also worked with elder activists on issues of health care reform. Specifically I worked with a number of grassroots organizations to develop the computer and communication skills needed to tie these local advocacy groups into an effective state-wide coalition. Before this these groups communicated through the state agency responsible for elder affairs, and as a result, the discussion of reform was guided by mandates generated by the very body responsible for providing services and guarding the pursestrings. Linking local groups across the state directly to one another created a strong foundation for activism and provided a united front capable of challenging conservative state-level leadership. Even now, I continue to receive reports from activist friends about the latest ups and downs of their efforts to insure quality health care for the state's elderly population.

Currently, I am engaged in working with recently arrived young Sudanese refugees on developing literacy skills and on a project linking local fiber and textile artists with refugee women, a project funded by the Kentucky Foundation for Women. And I am working with a colleague in art education to explore how best to involve young people in a community art project designed to help to address issues of racism in the urban area in which I now work.

Each of these projects brings its own challenges and rewards. But as I'm sure is clear from my descriptions, working with these groups has inevitably meant that I spend most of my time working as an outsider. Tracey asked each of us to address the way in which our practice deals with the disparity between researcher and researcher participant. It would be easy to claim that in participatory action researcher there are no distinctions, that we all serve as co-researchers and that all those participating bring individual experience and expertise to the process. This would be true to a point, but it belies the fact that even in a process in which the co-generation of knowledge is the explicit goal, differences of power and privilege maintain a hold on all human interactions. As Wildman and Davis have observed, "to end subordination, one must first recognize privilege" (1996, 20). I don't believe that any of us can ever fully rid ourselves of the legacy of discrimination nor can we truly resolve the issues of power and privilege that continue to affect our interactions with others. To assume otherwise is to fall into the trap of believing that we are done, have

moved beyond, and this hubris blinds us to the new challenges we face in our attempts to confront these issues in our daily lives and in our work. We cannot transcend nor escape our cultural context and the myriad ways in which we have been socialized to respond to one another, we can only hope to remain vigilant and open to instruction. But for too many of us, this recognition of privilege with its attendant challenges to our ability to accurately represent the experience of less-powerful others, leads to immobilization.

These themes of agency, voice, authority, power, and privilege are common in feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory. The problem for many of these theorists is that they recognize the problem…but haven't a clue what to do about it. Participatory action researchers, however, can take these theories and through individual and shared reflection and community dialogue uncover and engage structures of power and privilege. It's not going to be perfect, these issues continue to plague us and our work, we're frustrated and often ineffective, we screw up royally. However engaging in this process can, and often does, result in concrete and sustainable social change. And that makes it all worthwhile.

I believe that each of us has the power to effect real social change and that there are as many ways of doing this as there are people willing to try. My own choice to work as a participatory action researcher is driven by many factors. In part it is a matter of sharing the values that I described earlier, in part a matter of personality, and in part a result of the opportunities I have had to see this practice in action.

I have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with wonderful, committed community activists and to be a part of organizations like the Grey Panthers, the Community Accessibility Committee, and Migration and Refugee Services in which I learned to value the ability of community groups to articulate common interests and to work together to achieve their goals. And I was lucky enough to have be able to work with and be mentored by both Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, remarkable teachers who helped me and many other participatory action researchers to shape both our practice and our sense of purpose.

Now for those of you who are feeling swayed by my description of the joys of participatory action research (and they are many), let me discuss for a moment the personality piece of all of this and you can see if it sounds like a good fit, because we're always ready to welcome new participatory action researchers to the fold. First and foremost, participatory action researchers enjoy being with people and I think in general tend to be outgoing and sociable. PAR isn't a practice for people who are happiest being alone or who would prefer to sit back and observe. It's also important to have a real respect for people and a genuine interest in learning from their experiences.

Being a good participatory action researcher requires a mixture of patience and pushiness. To be honest, I probably err on the side of pushiness, because I also like to get things done. I get myself in trouble sometimes by going too fast and jumping the gun before other people involved in the project are ready to go. In fact, there are people here today who can attest to that. But this can also be helpful in moving the process along (at least that's what I tell myself). You have to be able to balance the two. I've seen a lot of PAR projects fail because they never got beyond process….and probably an equal number fail because there was too much focus on what and not enough on how.

You also have to be willing to be wrong. To trust that other people know their own lives and their own interests better than you do. This comes hard to those of us who have been trained to believe that we are smarter than everyone else and, believe me, I've learned this the hard way.

Exs. Community accessibility project
Bosnian women's "art" project
Steve's project

Finally, PAR is not something that's easy for those who like to have a sense of control. It requires flexibility and a willingness to deal with uncertainty. Uncertainty about what's going to happen. Uncertainty about who will show up. Nevermind the constant uncertainty about having a job!

Which brings up an important point, there are real constraints on those of us trying to do this kind of work, especially in the field of psychology. It is difficult to get funding for projects, human subjects review committees tend to respond with skepticism to our work, and journal editors are likely to respond with something like, "Of course I understand participatory action research, but your sample size is too small and your results are not statistically signficant."

But I do think some of this is changing and SPSSI has been in the forefront of much of this shift within the field, as evidenced by the openness of editors from both JSI and ASAP to this kind of work, not to mention the willingness of the organization to fund our conference on feminisms and participatory action research last year. I should also note that we're very grateful to Greenwood Press for their willingness to publish a volume based on that conference. In addition, Sage Publications recently published the Handbook of Action Research and is also in the process of launching an Action Research journal beginning next summer. So there is hope that some of these constraints are beginning to give way.

Despite the constraints, however, I have to conclude by saying that doing participatory action research is exciting, rewarding, and more often than not, fun. So the simplest and most honest answer to the question, "Why do I do participatory action research?" is "Because I couldn't do it any other way."

Because, I too, want to make a difference, and for me this is the most compelling, most fulfilling way I have found to do so.

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