

Participatory Research Methodology and Its Intersection with Social Work, Special Education Services, and Resilience

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Participatory research is a broad category for research methodologies, including participatory action research, community-based participatory research, and other methods that bring the facilitator and co-researchers together related to an inquiry. Together they look to define, analyze, and address social problems through a cooperative process. This essay seeks to examine the axiology, ontology, and epistemology of participatory research. A diverse set of researchers use participatory research in many contexts. This essay looks at the intersectionality between participatory research, social work, students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, and resilience.

Keywords: Participatory Research, Research Methods, Social Work, Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities, Resilience

Participatory research (PR) is a methodology that allows the researcher to conduct a rigorous qualitative evaluation that has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to a quantitatively inclined scientific community. This contribution to the academic community is a staple of research methodologies. Participatory goes further than this contribution and looks towards potentially making a positive impact on the co-researchers through social action and process completed together as co-researchers. This dual focus of PR is to connect science and practice into a methodology for understanding problems persons with disabilities. Bergold and Thomas (2012) describe PR as a “methodology that argues in favor of the possibility, the significance, and the usefulness of involving research partners in the knowledge-production process” (p. 192). This essay looks at what PR is and the underlying paradigms it has along with the intersection between PR and social work, special education services within a K-12 setting, and resilience.

Participatory research contributes to social action in co-researchers’ everyday life and generating basic knowledge in social sciences (Cochran et al., 2008). This concentration makes some of the fundamental principles of PR relevant components to consider in its implementation. First, as a precondition for participatory research, it must be understood in the context of a democratic approach in its execution and in the systems that allow it to be engaged. The very nature of

a participatory evaluation is at least democratic in how it facilitated. The inclusion of participants from under-privileged demographic groups and the social commitment required by the researchers is only possible if there is a political framework that allows it. Second, the facilitators must keep the group as a safe space. Intending a prominent level of participation for the co-researchers, the facilitator must implement practices that encourage engagement and participation. Participatory research groups include a facilitator who leads the group. Paradoxically, along with the facilitator’s leadership, is that that co-researchers also must be granted opportunities to lead the group through expressing their desires or anxieties. When participants trust each other, they are willing to express their views. Third, the community needs to be able to be defined. Participatory research has gone into many different community sectors and with diverse populations. To understand the outcomes and concepts expressed by the participants. The researcher must also understand the nuances and context of the participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Paradigmatical Aspects of Participatory Research

Many interrelated research methodologies surround PR. These different methods each have nuance and difference between them. This essay is grouping all of the related PR subtypes. These subtypes include community-based participatory research, participatory action research, feminist participatory action research, and social action research. As a research method, PR has a particular way of viewing and seeing the world. It is essential to understand the axiology (or main ethical view), the ontology (or reality), and epistemology (knowledge and relationships with what can be known).

Participatory research often includes persons who are from vulnerable populations. Balcazar et al. (1998) discuss

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some special considerations that should be taken in looking at participatory action research with persons who have disabilities. They encourage researchers to have individuals with disabilities articulating the problems they are experiencing and participating directly in the process of defining, analyzing, and solving those problems. This direct involvement of persons with disabilities in the process makes for a more authentic and accurate understanding of their social reality. The engagement that the persons with disabilities show can increase their awareness of their strengths and resources. The goal of the research is to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

The considerations for doing participatory action research with persons with disabilities connect with the axiology of PR. Axiology addresses the ethical nature of a research methodology (Killam, 2013). Lincoln et al. (2011) describe that participatory research and the postmodern research methods have the subjects' voices present in the study. Those voices need to be understood through the three principles of deciding for others and with others and for one's self. It is about a "practical knowing how to flourish with a balance of autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy" (p. 111).

Participatory research views and understands reality, or its ontology, through an understanding of multiple realities. Lincoln et al. (2011) describe this as a participatory reality or a subjective-objective reality. The co-researchers co-create that ontology. Each person has their worldview and way of understanding events, context, and both individual and group experiences. In the cooperative process, they determine and define the problems they are analyzing and develop the group's worldview.

Participatory research looks at a co-created set of findings between the research facilitator and the co-researchers who are participating in the process. Killam (2013) defines epistemology related to the relationship between the researcher and the knowledge as we discover it. It is how the researcher comes to know what they know. Participatory research includes knowing both through practical and experiential applications (Lincoln et al., 2011). The co-researchers who are participating in the process of PR many times might not be previously trained in research methods. The process is designed to draw out the participants' experiences and inner wisdom as a procedure for defining a group's needs as a group and then using the group to analyze and address those needs. Lincoln et al. (2011) also describe it as being a critical subjectivity. Within the critical methodologies, they make understanding group power dynamics a key point. They also work to address social change or action through the research process.

Positionality of Participatory Research and Areas of Inquiry

Participatory research has been used in a variety of fields and to address a diverse set of needs. There are some fields and areas of inquiry it is most readily able to be used to implement. My own academic and professional career has been in the field of social work where PR seems to connect to my and my profession's set of values firmly. My initiation and first exposure to participatory research was through my experience working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a K-12 educational setting. This focus on students with disabilities. The area of inquiry I am most interested in is related to understanding resilience and growth and development.

Intersection of Social Work Values and Participatory Research

Social workers follow a code of ethics that was ratified by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Committee in 1996 and then revised in 2017. It is focused on identifying core values and summarizing ethical principles related to social workers. It helps social workers to identify professional obligations and address ethical concerns. The *NASW Code of Ethics* categorizes six core values embraced by social workers. These include service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competency.

The core values of social workers align with the practice of PR. At their core, social workers are about service. Council on Social Work Education (2015) describes a both bachelor's and master's level social work students need to be able to demonstrate competency in what they term practice-informed research and research-informed practice. This interchange of practice and research is in line with the various action research-oriented models. One of the primary outcomes of participatory research is the change of systems for its clients through social justice. Lincoln et al. (2011) describe that one of the quality criteria for PR is that it leads to action in the service of human flourishing through a transformation in the world.

The dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships also have a secure connection to PR. Bergold and Thomas (2012) explain that there is both closeness of the research participants and very personal reactions that can come from participating in the inquiry. The conditions that are conducive to participatory methods require openness and an accepting attitude from the co-researchers. The democratic nature of these types of group also requires the ability to engage the group members with dignity and worth consistently. The identification of participants as co-researchers is an attempt to pay homage to the individuals uniting to solve their problems. Consideration of co-

participants versus research subjects is in sharp contrast to the majority of research methods that separate the researcher and the participants.

In developing a safe space for the co-researchers to conduct their study, being able to reflect their viewpoints with integrity is a vital skill for the facilitator in the process. There are several competencies required to be able to facilitate a participatory group. Burdine et al. (2010), in a discussion of community-based research partnerships, elaborates on components needed for the development of community health. These include elements such as building relationships, identifying priorities, defining problems, capacity building, knowledge transfer, information dissemination, and planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions. Each of these components requires a diverse set of skills and competencies to be performed effectively.

Intersection of Participatory Research and K-12 Special Education

Along with participatory research's connection with social work values and ethics, one of the reasons for my interest in it as a methodology is related to previous experience engaging with a type of PR. Within my role as a program social worker working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, I support a set of classrooms K-12 working with students who have the most severe behavioral difficulties in the district. This population can be an extremely challenging group to know how to best support both the students and the staff who are working with them. One activity my school district engaged was to bring in a consultant to assist with assessing program needs and provide professional development for staff. The evaluation process this consultant used is an evidence-based program evaluation, a Participatory Evaluation Expert Review for Classrooms Serving Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (PEER-EBD). Tsai et al. (2013) describe the psychometrics and process of this evaluative process.

The general format for the participatory portion of the evaluation is through a questionnaire that staff complete individually that reviews 19 practice indicators and 93 specific sub questions related to practice behaviors that align with research-based best practices for engaging with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The facilitator brings together the school team, which includes district and building administrators, school psychologists, special education teachers, paraeducators, and other staff working with the students in the program. The facilitator guides the team to come to censuses each of the practice indicators. Along with the facilitated team meetings, there is an expert review of the classroom looking for the same practice indicators in practice. Finally, based on areas of strengths and weaknesses, a set of recommendations can be developed and implemented to facilitate programmatic growth.

The PEER-EBD is not the only participatory research that has been done in a K-12 educational setting. There have been many, but as a program evaluation, it has been implemented in different school districts around the nation more often than other individual participation research inquiries.

Intersection of Participatory Research and Resilience

Psychological resilience is a topic that has been looked some through models related to participatory research methods but appears not to have been pursued to its fullest extent. Often it has been examined through the lens of violence. Vindevogel et al. (2015) used a participatory research method in war-affected communities in northern Uganda. Ellis and Abdi (2017) report on how community-based participatory research can assist participants in overcoming cultural barriers, prevailing against stigma, and being able to build trusting relationships with fellow participants as ways that PR can directly connect to developing resilience.

Shaw et al. (2016) encourage resilience workers to expand their methodological and analytic toolboxes to include tools such as community-based participatory research. In relationship to resilience, the PR helps to ground researchers with the partnerships they have in the community. It is also a method that allows explicit attention to be drawn on systems. Participatory research facilitates precise attention on systems understanding of psychological resilience.

Conclusion

Participatory research is concerned with both adding to the scientific knowledge base, but also in creating direct real-world change. It is aligned with social worker values. Both in K-12 educational systems and resilience research, there has been limited implementation of a participatory research method to understand the complex set of problems.

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