

WHAT IS OLD IS ALSO NEW – PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a powerful methodology that has grown in popularity in the Global North primarily over the last fifteen years. Emerging from a critical paradigm, it offers a relevant and appropriate approach to studying disenfranchised and vulnerable populations as well as a way to help address racial, ethnic, socio-economic and health disparities. Today, it is considered one of the methods that leads to knowledge transfer. It is being used in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and in Translational Research projects. Having roots in Brazil and Colombia, Participatory Action Research is a particularly significant method for scholars in those geographical areas to further develop theoretically and methodologically. The purpose of this editorial is to point out the currency of Participatory Action Research, (and other collaborative, and participatory methodologies), and to argue why these methods are especially relevant and important today for nurses in Brazil and throughout Latin America.¹

Prussian born Kurt Lewin is called the “Father of Action Research” and sometimes linked in the same way to Participatory Action Research. However, Lewin focused primarily on action and action science and less on participation within the action. Participatory Action Research with its critical and emancipatory roots is clearly a product of Latin America. Montero notes that “as soon as it [Action Research] was put into practice in Latin America, it became quite a different thing”.^{2:131} Indeed, it became both participatory and action-oriented. The Latin American interpretation of PAR (sometimes called the Southern strand of PAR) has a well-defined emancipatory character that is intended to be a vehicle of liberation. Tied to both critical theory and liberation theology, Southern PAR lends to notions of democratization and of conscientization.

Participatory research methods originated in Brazil and Columbia and have been used in Latin America for several decades. A critique of the positivist model of science and a refutation of the idea of science as neutral, unbiased and pure contributed to the shift toward participatory methods in the South in the early 1960’s. The political economic climate in Latin America at that time was an important element in spurring social as well as academic and intellectual discourse. This rich tradition and exchange of knowledge was a vital part of the cultural and social fabric of Latin American society during that time period.

This information is common knowledge in Brazil, Colombia and other countries in Latin America. Today, Participatory Action Research as well as the movement which drove its development may seem outdated and obsolete for some. I argue here that the Southern strand of PAR is not obsolete. On the contrary, it offers an ideal platform for Latin American nurses to further develop and align with the current climate of today (e.g. neoliberalism, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, globalization, corporatization, migration and structural violence).

Let us ask “what is the relevance of Participatory Action Research today, why is it taking hold in the Global North and how is it being interpreted?” To fully comprehend Participatory Action Research and other participatory research methods it is imperative to have a foundation in critical social science and critical political economy. It is not sufficient to learn the method alone out of context. It is more than a procedure to follow. A paradigm shift away from the positivist model of science is needed to understand participatory methods. This shift can come only after developing an understanding of critical theory and having some familiarity with critical social science.

The development of qualitative methodologies in U.S. nursing did not emerge from a critical or emancipatory paradigm. Qualitative studies in the USA are often not connected to a critical lens. Moreover, the critical lens is not well understood in U.S. nursing. On the other hand, from Latin American authors we know that the development of qualitative nursing research in Brazil and Colombia emerged mainly from “theoretical, critical positions in the social sciences, and from studies and experiences of Action Research, and Participatory Action Research”.^{3:478-9} This was due to the seminal works of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Orlando Fals-Borda in Colombia and also to the broad critical social science and philosophical backgrounds embedded in the educational systems there.

Today, nursing scholars emanating from these traditions and who understand a critical perspective can be in the forefront of knowledge translation. Latin American nurse theorists and methodologists are

ideally prepared to lead globally by conducting studies using participatory research methods. Also, they can further develop the methods by creating new mid-range and practice-based theories for health care professionals both inside and outside of Latin America.

The evolution of qualitative research in Latin American nursing was prompted by four main factors: (1) the contribution of Master's and doctoral programs at the postgraduate level; (2) the empowering of nurse researchers; (3) the consolidation of research groups; and (4) the recognition of nursing as a social science.^{3:478}

What is the potential role of nurses in the use of Participatory Action Research to enhance nursing research, theory and practice? What are some possible ways Brazilian nurses can use the strengths now present in the organization of research groups to advance the participatory and collaborative research methods that originated close to home? The infrastructure in place for multi-centric research projects, the availability of public funding sources for nursing research and the vibrancy of research based doctoral nursing programs in Brazil as well as other countries in Latin America all support the viability of successful theory-generating research.

Some consider Participatory Action Research a part of Latin America's past. It is. PAR is a foundational part of the past and yet it is also a promising path to the future. Participatory Action Research may be old, but it is also new.

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