

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version: Juujärvi, S. & Lund V. (2020). Participatory action research as a value-based approach to community development. In Nikula, K., Sarlio-Siintola, S. & Kallunki, V. Ethics as a resource. Examples of RDI projects and educational development. Laurea julkaisut | Laurea Publications, Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

Available at: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-799-580-1>:

7. Participatory action research as a value-based approach to community development

Soile Juujärvi & Virpi Lund

Participatory action research (PAR) is a well-known approach in social sciences but is seldom used in urban development projects. It represents a community-focused approach that is deeply grounded in ethical values, especially that of social justice. This paper analyzes experiences from two PAR projects, conducted in a disadvantaged municipal district. We worked as project managers and researchers in the projects Caring and Sharing Networks (2013–2015) and Participatory Budgeting in Neighbourhood Development (2016–2018) in the city of Espoo. In this article, we share the lessons learned from PAR. In particular, we focus on the question of how to reach, motivate, engage and empower citizens to participate in community development. Participant empowerment is crucial for successful PAR projects. This means that priority should be given to participants' voices at all stages of the project, and researchers must acknowledge and reflect on values underlying and guiding the research process. This makes PAR a fundamentally ethical enterprise.

BACKGROUND OF PAR

PAR has two main historical roots: the traditions of participatory and action research. Firstly, it originates from liberation theology and neo-Marxist approaches to community development and liberal human rights activism emphasising empowerment through collective action. In contrast with mainstream research in human sciences, PAR research acknowledges that research is not 'objective' but guided by values and states that it should serve ethical aims. Following Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1970), PAR is aligned with the values of social justice and inclusion, with the aim to promote positive social change for disadvantaged people. (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Secondly, PAR traces back to the action research approach initiated by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) in academic settings. Lewin proposed iterative cycles of problem-defining, fact-finding, goal-setting,

action and evaluation to simultaneously solve problems and generate new knowledge. Whereas the above-mentioned cycle depicts action research from an external point of view, there is also a parallel iterative cycle of self-reflection, describing researchers' internal processes: planning, acting, observing and reflecting, replanning, and so on; here, acting refers to concrete, not abstract practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

While participatory research gives PAR its ethical values, action research provokes the demand for scientific rigor, and those should be integrated into the research process. PAR combines participation, which means that research is not done on people but with them, and action, which means concrete problem-solving. According to this, participants should become co-researchers and agents for change through participation. In practice, this means enacting local, action-oriented approaches to investigation and applying small-scale theorizing to specific problems in particular situations (Stringer, 1999; Berg, 2007). PAR often starts as a bottom-up process and gradually fosters a collaborative enterprise, which is characterized by shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward social action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). In other words, PAR strives to share researchers' power with participants; therefore, researchers need to adopt equality, rather than scientific authority, as a primary attitude towards participants.

Our experience with PAR is based on two projects that aimed to enhance residents' participation and residents' and stakeholders' collaboration in terms of community and urban development. The projects took place in one of the suburban areas within the city of Espoo. In light of social and economic indicators, it represented the least-advantaged district in the city. These projects were initially motivated by two main observations: low levels of resident involvement and a lack of systematic collaboration among stakeholders in various previous community development endeavours. Within the first project (Caring and Sharing Networks), residents, civil servants, NGOs, and enterprises were invited to develop new forms of collaboration for enhancing positive urban development (Juujärvi 2016). Within the second project (Participatory Budgeting in Neighbourhood Development), residents were engaged to brainstorm and develop ideas for community development (Lund & Juujärvi, 2018a; 2018b). Engaging citizens was the most critical and time-consuming task in the both projects. We have reported the process and outcomes in detail elsewhere (Juujärvi, 2016; Juujärvi & Lund, 2015; 2016, Juujärvi, Lund & Salin, 2019, Lund & Juujärvi, 2015; 2016; 2018a; 2018b; Lund & Kerosuo 2019). In this article, we elaborate on the ethical aspect of PAR: values and their realization in the research process.



Picture 1. We invited people to join the project at a local event (Photo: Anna-Leena Mutanen).

VALUES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

What makes PAR different from the mainstream of community research is that it relies on the so-called critical paradigm that, in contrast to positivist and hermeneutic paradigms, aims to create social change, rather than maintain the prevailing state of affairs in society (see Habermas, 1971). Knowledge that results from such research seeks to comprehend unsatisfying or difficult situations as outcomes from human choices and considers how things could be reconstructed to enable different choices for those involved, leading to improvements in situations (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) have identified four core principles underlying research within the critical paradigm PAR. These principles reflect the underlying values of PAR that needs to be acknowledged by researchers and participants. First, *self-determination* and *participation* mean that research is focused on empowering disadvantaged people through different methods. Research should begin by mapping the disadvantaged experiences and concerns and striving for maximizing their participation in all aspects of the research. Qualitative interviews provide a valuable tool for creating contacts with residents and other stakeholders and offer a channel for participants to express their opinions, as well as an opportunity to enhance interviewees' sense of self-worth and to be taken seriously as informants. The primary objective of social change is to amplify the voices of silent citizens, which succeeds best through collaborative methods such as workshops.

The second set of principles, *community* and *inclusion*, means that research strives to develop authentic and supportive relationship among researchers, disadvantaged people and other stakeholders. Researchers need to enhance trust and solidarity by inviting participants and creating a welcoming and open atmosphere for participation and to facilitate communication between different groups (Stoecker, 1990; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin & Lord, 1998). Adapting the role of research expert to that of collaborator means a shift towards a more equal relationship between researchers and participants, which creates a more balanced exchange of knowledge. This further means that results must be delivered as a part of the ongoing research process and must be communicated in understandable language, free of research jargon (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

The third principle, *social justice*, should be practiced at all levels of research, including project planning and funding. In the most successful cases, the research budget is directed at increasing training, education and employment opportunities for the disadvantaged, and research results are utilized for creating social change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Researchers must be sensitive to the needs and opinions of participants and help them to become agents of change through a participatory process.

Finally, the fourth principle, *reflexivity*, encapsulates well what is special about PAR practices and its scientific reasoning. Researchers need to be aware that knowledge is not neutral but value-laden, and they therefore need to practice continuous self-reflection and transparency with regard to their own values and social positions. All relevant stakeholders must be involved in the interpretation of findings, generating recommendations and choosing lines of action for promoting preferred change. It is also strongly recommended that they co-author and co-present research reports to reach wider non-academic audiences (Nelson et al., 1998; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). For example, in our projects, we have regularly published co-written articles in local bulletins to inform residents about project achievements.

Enhancing social justice is a fundamental purpose of PAR. Academic literature speaks about the least advantaged or disadvantaged people as a main target group. We would like to emphasize that while doing so, we refer to people's social positions rather than their personal characteristics. As examples, language barriers, poverty across generations and unemployment influence an individuals' possibilities for well-

being and prospering, fostering instead passivity and isolation. PAR's major strength lies in its emphasis on empowerment of lay people as participants, which is crucial for social mobilization in suburban areas. Empowerment can be defined as a socially shared process by which people gain mastery over their lives, acquire a critical awareness of one's situation, and the capacity to act on that awareness (cf. Lundy, 2004). Within PAR, it begins with engaging potential participants in research activities in local settings. According to our experiences, reaching, engaging with and empowering lay people is a great challenge, but it can succeed with careful planning and perseverance (Lund & Juujärvi, 2016).

PHASES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Phases of PAR can be conceptualized as self-reflective and repeated cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (see Figure 1). In practice, the cycles are intertwined and difficult to understand without one another. The aim of the projects used for the research was to promote innovative social initiatives (Juujärvi & Lund, 2016). Next, we focus on describing the processes and methods for bringing residents and stakeholders together to express their thoughts about developmental issues, raise their consciousness of the current state of the neighbourhood and enhance solidarity and sense of responsibility.

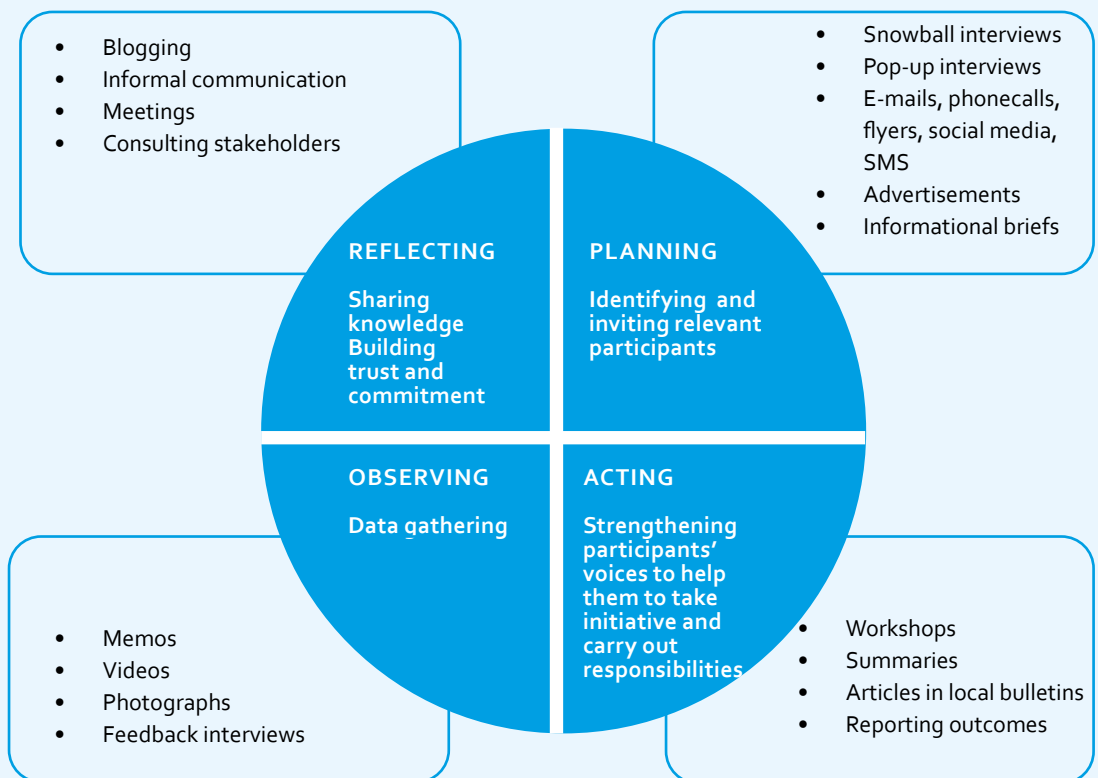


Figure 1. PAR phases and examples of methods in community development

PLANNING

Participants need to be involved in PAR in the planning phase. From the perspective of community development, the most important groups to reach are those for whom achieving the project's goals are highly relevant and whose lives will be affected but who are not active participants in civic society. The second most important groups are stakeholders for whom goals are highly relevant and who are already active. Stakeholders and people with low relevance but who are active in stating opinions must be taken into careful consideration: their opinions should not give too much weight, because otherwise they will overrule silent citizens. People with low degrees of relevance and activeness may participate but should not be granted an abundance of energy or resources (Langlet, 2011; see Friedrich, Karlsson & Federley, 2013). In our projects, we identified immigrants, especially women, as the most important and hardest group to reach.

We recommend snowball sampling as a method of identifying and engaging relevant participants for the project. With snowball sampling, people denote and refer to others that might find the project useful and meaningful and would be interested in joining. Interviews based on snowball sampling help engage potential citizens, groups and stakeholders (including residents, city planners, public servants, NGO representatives, and development managers). Advertising at public meeting places, through email and on social media is necessary but challenging due to the mass of information people usually receive. We also distributed flyers in public places such as day-care centres, schools, offices, cafeterias, NGO meeting places, libraries and even in a swimming hall. We conducted informal 'pop-up' interviews at the local events in order to raise interest in current issues in community development and succeeded to get them involved in the project. In addition, we provided briefs on the project at a local library.

ACTING

Workshops played a major role, lending a voice to participants and engaging them in developmental activities. They were designed to be bottom-up processes that would capture residents' interests and document their needs for neighbourhood development. They were scheduled to allow enough time for participants' group tasks, reflection and socializing. Workshops were facilitated by researchers. Still, we aimed to keep the researchers' talk to a minimum and allow residents to talk freely throughout the sessions. The outcomes of each workshop were summarized by researchers and delivered in a timely fashion to participants. We also wrote articles for a local bulletin to feature the outcomes of project, raise the spirit and improve the image of the neighbourhood.

Through this process, we gradually encouraged participants to take initiative and responsibility in one's own hands. They were encouraged to invite their acquaintances and other people who might be enthusiastic about the issue to join the process. In the active phase of the project, they innovated and experimented with new ways and tools for community development (Juujärvi, 2016). As a part of this process, some participants grew into co-researchers; for example, they wrote the notes as homework and performed observation, either photographing or interviewing as a part of their project responsibilities. Finally, participants were encouraged to take further steps and establish interest groups in order to continue their initiatives with other stakeholders.

OBSERVING

In terms of PAR, observing refers to gathering different types of documented data that are analysed later. In our projects, participant observation has proved to be a key method for a successful PAR process. Participant



Picture 2. Team work at the workshop (Photo: Anna-Leena Mutanen).

observation refers to a method where a researcher is involved in real-life settings as a 'natural' participant and also carries a role as a researcher conducting observation and making notes (Berg, 2007). Researchers participated in the workshops as group facilitators and were members of a local multi-stakeholder group, which reported on workshop outcomes. To ensure trustworthiness of observations, workshops were video-recorded and materials produced by residents (schemes, illustrations) were photographed. Stakeholder meetings were recorded as well. Finally, all participants were interviewed by telephone in order to get feedback and check the validity of observations. Nuanced data-gathering was time-consuming but inevitable for tracking different types of bottom-up processes for research reporting.

REFLECTING

Reflection is a vital part of PAR, and it took place at multiple levels throughout the project. First of all, participants with similar interests found each other and co-planned the following steps of the project: visiting local places and offices, carrying out small surveys and organizing meetings with stakeholders. Feedback interviews revealed that the participants had especially enjoyed encounters with new people, and a high degree of mutual trust was formed during those encounters. Disclosing in-depth thoughts with each other seemed to strengthen participants' commitment to continue the project.

Shared reflection among researchers took place informally at workshops and team meetings, but, additionally, blogging by researchers was another valuable tool for sharing knowledge with a wider audience and pondering about further lines of action and their possible consequences. The blog proved to be a convenient tool for intertwining empirical observations with some theoretical viewpoints. Regular team meetings provided a forum for planning and re-planning, based on shared observations and reflections. In

addition, reflection took place through informal discussions and official meetings with stakeholders. Timely delivery of research findings to stakeholders (civil servants, city planners) made them eager to support the project and join activities. Stakeholders gradually became a vital part of the research process, because they assumed responsibilities to implement the project outcomes and uphold innovative methods for future collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The strength of PAR lies in its capacity of getting lay people engaged in developing their neighbourhoods and communities. Our projects have evidenced that PAR is well suited to induce and guide a bottom-up process in which residents and stakeholders are stepwise engaged and goals gradually clarified from various interests in neighbourhood development.

Successful projects, however, require that researchers be aware of and reflect on the values and principles underlying PAR, which emphasize empowerment, flexible designs and shared knowledge. This makes PAR a thoroughly ethical approach that stretches beyond the limits of conventional research ethics. PAR supports the development of community belonging, participants' involvement in joint activities and access to knowledge, and it gives a voice to participants as local experts. Therefore, it builds long-term social sustainability in communities.

As a research approach, the PAR cycle offers a valuable device for organizing the phases of research and sorting results. The societal impact of PAR can be measured in terms of how it succeeds in empowering the most disadvantaged groups and in engaging citizens in joint activities to create social cohesion. The ultimate goal of PAR is for participants to grow into the role of co-researchers and become activists in their lives and surroundings.

References

Berg, B. 2007. Qualitative research methods for the social sciences. 6th edition. Boston: Pierson Education Allyn & Bacon.

Freire, P. 1970. The pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Herder & Herder.

Friedrich, P., Karlsson, A. & Federley, M. 2013. Report 2.1 Boundary Conditions for successful Urban Living Labs. <https://www.ivl.se/download/18.4b1c947d15125e72dda353c/1452527645173/C152.pdf>

Habermas, J. 1971. Knowledge and human interests. Boston: Beacon Press.

Juujärvi, S. 2016. Välittämisestä vaikuttamiseen Espoon keskuksessa [from care towards agency at Espoo Centre] In Tutkusti parempi lähiö [Evidence-based better neighbourhood] (pp. 97–106). Research publication of Development Programme for Residential Areas, Helsinki: ARA. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/159846>

Juujärvi, S. & Lund, V. 2016. Enhancing early innovation in an Urban Living Lab: Learnings from Espoo Centre, Finland. Technological Innovation Management Review. Technology Innovation Management Review, 6 (1), 17–26. <http://doi.org/10.22215/timreview/957>

Juujärvi, S. & Lund, V. 2017. Participatory Action Research as a practice of empowerment in deprived communities. Association for Moral Education Conference Proceedings. Santos, Brasil. <http://www.fecilcam.br/revista/index.php/anaisame/article/viewFile/1344/824>

Juujärvi, S., Lund, V. & Salin, O. 2018. Osallistumista toimintaan: menetelmällisiä ratkaisuja kaupunkikehittämiseen. [From participation to action: methodological solutions for urban development]. In M. Kortessalmi & T. Hirvikoski, T. (Eds.), Tulevaisuus tehdään yhdessä kehittämällä: teknologiaa ja osallistamista kuntien murroksessa (pp. 11–23). Laurea Publications 99. Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Vantaa. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-799-500-9>

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. 2000. Participatory action research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 567–607). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lund, V. & Juujärvi, S. 2015. Change Laboratory as a method of innovation management in an Urban Living Lab. In ENoLL Research Day Conference Proceedings 2015 (pp. 68–78). European Network of Living Labs, Istanbul. <https://www.laurea.fi/globalassets/tki/hankkeen-dokumentteja/change-laboratory-as-a-method-of-innovation-management-in-an-urban-living-lab.pdf>

- Lund, V. & Juujärvi, S.** 2016. Asukaspajat osallisuuden edistämisen välineenä Espoon keskuksessa. [Residents' workshops as a tool of participatory planning at Espoo Centre] *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu* 54 (1). <http://www.yss.fi/journal/asukastyopajat-osallisuuden-edistamisen-valineena-espoon-keskuksessa/>
- Lund, V. & Juujärvi, S.** 2018a. Residents' agency makes a difference in volunteering in an urban neighbourhood. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29 (4), 756–769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-9955-4>
- Lund, V. & Juujärvi, S.** 2018b. The role of digital tools in the Participatory Budgeting process in the development of a neighbourhood. In E. Aarrevaara, E. & Harjapää A. (Eds.), *Smart Cities in Smart Regions 2018: Conference Proceedings (92–103)*. Publication Series of Lahti University of Applied Sciences, part 39, Lahti University of Applied Sciences. URN:NBN:fi:amk-2018091815195
- Lund, V. & Kerosuo, H.** 2019. The reciprocal development of the object of common space and the emergence of the collective agency in residents' workshops. *Learning Culture and Social Interaction*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2019.100327>
- Lundy, C.** 2004. *Social work and social justice. A structural approach to practice*. Toronto: Broadview
- Langlet, L.** 2011. Medborgardialog som del i styrprocessen. Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting. Available at: <https://webbutik.skl.se/sv/artiklar/medborgardialog-som-del-i-styrprocessen-2.html>.
- Lewin, K.** 1946. Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues* 2, 34–46.
- Nelson, G. & Prilleltensky, I.** 2005. *Community psychology, In pursuit of liberation and well-being*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nelson, G., Ochocka, J., Griffin, K. & Lord, J.** 1998. Nothing about me, without me: Participatory action research with self-help/mutual aid organizations for psychiatric consumer/survivors. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26, 881–912.
- Stoecker, R.** 1999. Are academics irrelevant? Roles for scholars in participatory research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42, 840–854.
- Stringer, E. T.** 2007. *Action Research (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.