

Definitions, Goals and Principles of Participatory Action Research

Definitions

There is a dizzying array of definitions of participatory research, just as there is an array of terms to describe this “family” of research approaches. The following definitions come from the most recent body of work on community-based participatory research (CBPR) in the public health field, but applies similarly to any field utilizing a participatory approach to research:

“Community-based participatory research (in health) is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community (health)...”

*W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Community Health Scholars Program, 2001 quoted in Minkler and Wallerstein (2003: 4)*¹

“Participatory research is defined as systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change.”

*Green et al (2003:419)*²

Goals

In *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada* (1993)³, Budd Hall provides several quotes by well-respected scholars and practitioners of the participatory research approach that help encapsulate its overall goals:

“Participatory research attempts to present people as researchers themselves in pursuit of answers to the questions of their daily struggle and survival” (*Tandon 1988: 7*).

“Participatory research attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action (*Gaventa 1988: 19*)

“...to enable the oppressed groups and classes to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage as expressed in specific projects, acts and struggles...(Fals Borda and Rahman 1991: 4).

Principles

In an extensive synthesis of community-based and participatory research literature, Israel et al (1998)⁴ propose the following key principles of community-based research widely accepted in the field of public health. These can be taken as a starting point but are by no means definitive:

1. **Recognizes community as a unit of identity.** This research should work explicitly with communities, which may be defined by a geographic area, or defined as a community of identity that is geographically dispersed but members hold a sense of common identity and shared fate.

2. **Builds on strengths and resources within the community.** This research should explicitly identify, support and reinforce social structures, processes, and knowledge already existing in the community that help them work together to improve their lives.
3. **Facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research.** This research should involve community members in every phase they want to participate in, including but not limited to: problem definition, data collection, interpretation of results, and application of the results to address community concerns. This may involve applying skills from outside the community, but should focus on issues identified by the community and create situations in which all parties can truly influence the entire research process.
4. **Integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners.** Though the research project itself might not include a direct action component, all parties must have a commitment to applying the research results to a social change effort intended to benefit all partners.
5. **Promotes a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities.** This research should recognize the inherent inequalities between marginalized communities and researchers, and attempt to address these by emphasizing knowledge of community members and sharing information, resources and decision-making power. Israel et al offer the example that researchers learn from the knowledge and local theories of the community members, and community members acquire further skills in how to conduct research.
6. **Involves a cyclical and iterative process.** This research should involve trust-building, partnership development and maintenance in all phases of the research.
7. **Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners.** This research should disseminate information gained in a respectful and understandable language that acknowledges all participants contributions and ownership of the knowledge production.

Footnotes

1. Minkler, Meredith and Nina Wallerstein. 2003. *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
2. Green, Lawrence W.; M. Anne George; Mark Daniel; C. James Frankish; Carol P. Herbert; William R. Bowie and Michel O'Neill. 2003. "Appendix C: Guidelines for Participatory Research in Health Promotion," in Minkler, Meredith and Nina Wallerstein(eds), *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
3. Hall, Budd. 1993. "Introduction," in Peter Park, Mary Brydon-Miller, Budd Hall, and Ted Jackson (eds.). *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
4. Israel, Barbara; Amy Schultz; Edith Parker and Adam Becker. 1998. Review of Community-Based Research: Assessing Partnership Approaches to Improve Public Health. *Annual Review of Public Health* 19: 173-202.