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## Editorial:

### Participatory action research: some strategies for publication of findings

The purpose of this editorial is to briefly describe a research approach, participatory action research or PAR, and then provide some ideas for researchers wanting to publish their PAR studies.

PAR is a public health research process, based on a cycle of reflection, data collection, and actions. Researchers who want to engage in studies to improve health and reduce health inequities, and who see the value in involving people in actions to improve their health, will find PAR an exciting, sometimes challenging, research approach. PAR has its roots in critical social theory, and has been used extensively in education<sup>1</sup> but increasingly has been used in public and community health research, including primary health care projects.

As the name implies, PAR has an emphasis on participation and empowering people. If you are thinking of using PAR, you need to adjust your thinking about power relationships between yourself as the researcher and those people you are researching. In most research people are traditionally thought of as subjects or participants. In PAR, people are *partners* in the research. They may help to frame the research question(s), plan the processes, collect the data, decide on actions to be taken, and are often involved in implementing these, as well as taking part in the project evaluation. Quite often a cycle of data collection, reflection, and action is undertaken several times until a health issue is resolved, or actions are implemented and evaluated. Thus, in PAR people are not seen as subjects to be experimented on or as passive participants.

Nurses and other health professionals need to remember that undertaking PAR also means being willing to empower people to be active members of the research process and help them to make changes to their own situations and contexts. People pay attention to matters that are important to them, and are thus more likely to see value in being involved in projects that make a difference to their lives, and therefore more likely to become true partners in the research.

Research settings can be in educational, industrial or commercial settings, communities, and many other places where there are health problems or inequities. Empowerment can be done in a variety of ways, often through initial training or working with identified leaders in a specific context. They in turn work with others on an issue or become trainers of others (also known as 'train the trainer'). For example, workers in a factory or elders in a community can be taught to identify problems regarding health, safety or the environment, to help collect and analyse data, and work with the researchers and resources to help find solutions to problems, and later to evaluate outcomes. A good place to start learning about PAR is Baum *et al.*<sup>1</sup> whose article is free online and which has a good reference list of resources. Look at some articles in this Journal or other nursing journals for examples of PAR projects to give you an idea of what we are talking about. You might also search in public health, community health or primary health care journals. An example of a published PAR project involving the development and evaluation of an HIV prevention program for early adolescents in 10 schools in Northern Thailand is by Fongkaewet *al.*<sup>2</sup>

In a PAR project a wide range of qualitative and quantitative approaches can be used. For example when thinking about how to overcome a high incidence of diabetes in a community group, a PAR project could involve an initial situational analysis or needs analysis, and use focus groups, community meetings, in-depth interviews, collecting health statistics from literature and other media, designing or adapting questionnaires for local use, holding public meetings, creating action plans based on information, undertaking education and training sessions, evaluating outcomes of various aspects and so on. Naturally in such projects, often over a long period of time, a lot of data is generated, thus researchers need to think carefully about how and where they are going to publish their findings.

#### **Implications for publishing a PAR study.**

A big issue for researchers is the decision-making about publishing their PAR studies. This issue causes concern, not just among novice researchers like PhD candidates, but also for more experienced researchers who might not have tried to publish PAR studies before. We are aware of several large and important PAR studies in Thailand that unfortunately have not been published because the researchers have been at a loss to know how to write up their complex study or have had their manuscripts rejected. Editors may reject PAR manuscripts simply because the authors have tried to fit too much information into one short paper. Remember that a quality research paper is not necessarily based on the quantity of data. Trying to describe a large study and its findings in only 4–5,000 words can be difficult enough. However, when a range of methodologies, (qualitative and quantitative) has been used to collect a lot of data, and there is a range of findings to be discussed, it is often better to work out a strategy to write more than one manuscript.

**Some publishing strategies:** Like trying to publish any sort of research findings, PAR researchers need to do some preliminary thinking about the publication of their work. At the outset of your project, think about how many publications you could strive for, who will be on the authoring team, and what position each of these people will have in paper attributions. The first name on the paper means that this person takes the largest responsibility for the paper. Think too about the collaborative nature of PAR. It might be that a leading participant is also offered a role as author. Sometimes in PAR it is difficult to try to ascertain in advance how many stages and what research methodologies will be employed. These may be finally decided sometime into the project, for example after conducting a needs analysis, and collaborating with participants.

**So how do you decide the number and the content of each PAR manuscript?** This needs focused discussion among the researchers, and if necessary advice from a well-published person. A decision about the eventual number of manuscripts might be based on one of three different approaches:

1. *Dividing up the various phases and outcomes of the PAR processes.* For example, a project in a factory might involve workers in developing, implementing and evaluating a model for health and safety measures to reduce worker injuries and improve worker well-being. Two manuscripts could be written: the first describing the needs analysis of the factory setting and the various methodologies to develop a preliminary health and safety model; and the second, a description of the research processes and findings related to implementation and evaluation of the model and the health and safety measures involved. Both of these papers could have combined research methods. For example the needs analysis may have utilized both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to collect data.
2. *Dividing up the research questions.* If your project has two or three different research questions that stand alone, involve different research approaches, and have significant and different data collection methods, and findings, then conceivably you could write a manuscript on each of these research questions.

3. *Dividing up the research approaches.* If your PAR study has substantial quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data collection and findings then you could write two different manuscripts, one qualitative, one quantitative. It is very hard work to try to discuss substantial findings from a study that has a significant number of in-depth or focus group interviews, as well as uses quantitative data collection methods from a range of questionnaires or other research instruments. The richness of the data, and its implications, cannot be described easily in one manuscript.

The approaches described above are examples of the ways you might think about dividing up your manuscripts. There might be other useful ways to approach the problem of trying to fit too much into one study. However, whatever approach you and your research team choose to write up your PAR study, remember that each manuscript must stand alone. You cannot expect that your manuscript will be published if you duplicate material in two or more manuscripts. You are in danger of breaching copyright and this is simply not good science. Each manuscript must be different in its presentation of literature, the collection of data, the findings, discussion and recommendations. There will no doubt be some similarities in the description of the overall study and the study setting, the participants, and some of the methods (for example, ethical considerations) but as mentioned, each manuscript must stand alone.

We hope that these ideas encourage researchers to use PAR in their projects, and help them in their manuscript writing for successful publication.

**Professor Sue Turale DEd, RN, FACN, FACMHN, Editor**  
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**and Editorial Board Member**

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