Practicing Participatory Action Research

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This article provides an overview of several core theoretical and practical aspects of participatory action research (PAR). An effort is made to define PAR and the types of work that fall under that rubric. Historical underpinnings, roles of the individuals involved, contexts, methods, and the challenges and benefits of this mode of inquiry are discussed. The authors argue that the approach and mindset of the researcher, referred to here as a type of "attitude," are key in the development of a successful and genuine participatory process. The authors situate PAR methodology within psychology and, more specifically, propose it as an approach to knowing that has the potential to make significant contributions in areas relevant to counseling psychology.

Keywords: participatory action research, qualitative, counseling psychology

It is really good that you actually understand that. So many people don't get that we know what is going on, and coming from the outside, you can't really know what is happening. You might have ideas, but the only people who know what is really going to work and how to get at what is really going on is us. But, that is important to me to hear that you are looking at things this way. This makes me feel. . . I don't know. . . good that you want me to help out like this. This is stuff that I have thought about doing since I was little, and it sounds like I might actually get a chance to do some of it. To help people. (Angela, 19, homeless, New York City, November 2003)

Interpreting Participatory Action Research

In both practice and meaning, participatory action research (PAR) is what the name implies: *participation*—"to have a part or share in something"—and *action*—"the bringing about of an alteration"—using research as a tool (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004). The complexity of the ideological and methodological nuances subsumed under the term *participatory action research* belies an approach to inquiry and action that on the surface seems natural, human, and intrinsically sensible. Put colloquially, you get the people affected by a problem together, figure out what is going on as a group, and then do something about it. Angela, in responding above to the description of a project that Sean Kidd was proposing (which could be described as PAR), nicely summed up the key elements of this approach to inquiry: understanding, mutual involvement, change, and a process that promotes personal growth. Reason (1994) described the two primary objectives of this type of inquiry as being the production of "knowledge and action directly useful to a community" and em-

powerment through "consciousness-raising" (p. 48). PAR is, ideally, a process in which people (researchers and participants) develop goals and methods, participate in the gathering and analysis of data, and implement the results in a way that will raise critical consciousness and promote change in the lives of those involved—changes that are in the direction and control of the participating group or community (Reason, 1994). An emphasis on emancipatory change at a larger sociocultural/structural level is often implicit to this inquiry process, as well as targeting change in the lives of the participants (Fals-Borda, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

PAR is a dynamic process that develops from the unique needs, challenges, and learning experiences specific to a given group. Methods and modes of action are formed over time through dialectic movement between action and reflection (Smith, 1997), and the understanding and change that evolve through PAR occur as a function of this reflexivity. Reflexivity can be described as a self-criticality among researchers (Marcus, 1994). The reflexive approach makes every PAR project a "custom job" and results in vagueness and ambiguity when the need arises to describe methods that can range from the traditional systematic survey (e.g., Camardese & Youngman, 1996) to storytelling, sharing of experience, and drawings (Ornelas, 1997). PAR is not a method per se, at least not at the micro level (McTaggart, 1997), but rather the creation of a context in which knowledge development and change might occur—much like building a factory in which tools may be made rather than necessarily using tools already at hand. In this sense, PAR may be seen as a macro method, as setting the stage for the development of a research project. PAR falls most closely within the critical theory paradigm, as presented by Ponterotto (2005). While also constructivist, PAR is dialogical and proactive, typically focusing on empowerment and with researchers' and participants' values both being central to the planning process.

The creation of such participatory contexts is far from the norm. As Angela's comment implies, disempowered groups are seldom given the opportunity and, arguably, are discouraged from this type of action because of many factors, including a lack of respect for the knowledge of stigmatized peoples (Fals-Borda, 1991). Further compounding this problem is the tendency for established

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forums (e.g., academia) to claim exclusive ownership of methods of knowledge gathering and avenues for change.

Though rarely used in mainstream social science research, participatory approaches have been explored to varying degrees in a number of fields, including psychology. The starting point for PAR was in the late 1960s, within a more general questioning of positivism and calls for member participation in research aimed more toward practical benefits for the people in communities and organizations (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2001; Fals-Borda, 2001; Susman & Evered, 1978; Whyte, 1991). During this time, professionals such as Saul Alinsky (1971) initiated participatory community organization among disadvantaged members of society, whereas writers such as Frantz Fanon (1963) and Paulo Friere (1970) articulated a liberationist ideology for the disempowered. Fields such as social psychiatry and public health began to develop. In psychology, this movement has been most amply demonstrated within the subfield of community psychology. Community psychology was founded on the belief that significant causes of and solutions to human problems can be found in the social environment rather than in the individual, and community empowerment became a goal and an agenda (Rappaport, 1977, 1990; Zax & Specter, 1974). Methods of research within community psychology have included the collaboration of organizations, including university–community links (Himmelman, 2001), action research for social justice (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), and PAR, such as the tribal participatory research described by Fisher and Ball (2003), for work within Indigenous communities.

Recently, a larger transformation has been taking place across the disciplines in which PAR finds a home. This includes a focus on human agency, the global human rights movement, an increasing emphasis on subjectivity in the human and social sciences paralleling the growth of qualitative research, Toulmin's (1988) view of the move away from distant-covering laws (i.e., theory uniformly applied to all contexts and peoples) toward a more practical philosophy, and the intellectual turns affecting social science such as those labeled feminist, linguistic, interpretive, reflexive, historical, cultural, and critical (see Hill & Kral, 2003). The addition of PAR within the methodological framework of psychology thus reflects the discipline's membership within this new intellectual community.

Situating Method

The Attitude of Participation and Becoming Involved

Paulo Friere (1982) used "conscientization" to describe the developing awareness that occurs among people engaged in self-inquiry. It is the implicitly empowering process in which a group of people become aware of the nature of their disenfranchisement, the mechanics through which inequity is perpetuated, and their ability to change their circumstances (Fals-Borda, 1991). We, in our own work, as well as others (e.g., Ornelas, 1997; Reason, 1994), have found that the researcher experiences and needs to experience an ongoing development of a critical consciousness similar to the *conscientization* process described by Friere. This consciousness entails the researcher to take on more "epistemological responsibility" and be willing to question and challenge established methodological tenets. It is similar to the new genre in anthropology, moving toward "native ethnography" or autoeth-

nography, in which one takes a cultural approach to study one's own people (A. Jackson, 1987; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Feminist ethnographies are particularly concerned with leveling power relations in research by using "bottom-up" accounts and methods while addressing the ethics of respect and reciprocity (Harding, 1998; Olesen, 2000; Skeggs, 2001). Increasingly, some ethical principles of research, such as those written by agencies concerned with Aboriginal communities, see community participation as an ethical responsibility on the part of the researcher (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 1998; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993). All of this is a move that encompasses issues concerning reflexivity, representation, and resistance, of who speaks for whom and how this comes to be. The subject/object, sociopolitical, and role assumptions embedded in traditional research designs (and hence made invisible) are thus critically examined and reconstructed in PAR research. What can make this process difficult is that the sharing of power, and the approaches and issues attendant to that sharing of power, potentially require the researcher to alter beliefs that are entrenched in Western culture (e.g., the ratified expert deferring to the decisions of persons with no "training," as training is defined by dominant culture).

Putting aside the range of philosophical and practical implications underlying conscientization for the moment, we refer to the need for the researcher to develop and maintain a particular kind of "attitude" to engage in PAR. We agree with Chataway (2001) that general principles rather than specific methodological tools are the best way to inform someone about this type of research. The attitude she recommends is a "commitment to full democratization of both content and method" (Chataway, 2001, p. 240). This attitude is a frame of mind that includes respect, genuineness, and a good dose of openness to experience. It brings the researcher into the participatory process, allowing her or him to better perceive situations in which PAR may be helpful, more readily hear and respond to requests by groups of people wanting to improve their lives, negotiate difference and commonality concerning goals and methods of a study and, in general, have in mind a framework for action that can be broadly applied.

The initiation of a PAR project is typically a perceived need for action in some area for people whose current means of knowledge gathering and change are not adequately addressing a problem or problems (Fals-Borda, 1991; Reason, 1994). The identification of a potential project may be through a coincidental meeting of a researcher with group members facing a dilemma, or researchers perceiving a problem and approaching the persons involved to suggest using PAR to address that problem as it is understood by participants. Ideally, it is the request of the participants that initiates the PAR process. If, however, the project is initiated by a researcher who conscientiously applies PAR ideology, power and ownership are readily assumed by the participants (Yeich & Levine, 1992). Regardless of how the project is initiated, success depends on joint commitment and responsibility.

The researcher, in deciding to become involved in a group's struggle (if not involved already), then enters a situation that may or may not be familiar as a catalyst for a dynamic and evolving experience of understanding, growth, and action. This is the beginning of a process in which the participatory attitude of the researcher is crucial, as all participants leading the project must ideally be open to multiple perspectives while being committed to

a shared vision. The researcher's preconceptions regarding the goals, means, methods, and actions must be amenable to change as she or he negotiates the delicate balance between bringing rather than imposing knowledge, while incorporating knowledge from those being studied. This openness to learning and an equitable sharing of ideas occurs as a function of respect for the legitimacy of the participants' knowledge and for the means of knowledge production, as well as an understanding of how that knowledge can inform action (Rahman, 1991).

Participation, Action, and the Generation of Knowledge

PAR can be understood to be a self-reflective spiral composed of multiple sequences of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing (McTaggart, 1997). In Mary Brydon-Miller's (1993) work with persons with disabilities, for example, the group planned demonstrations and attended hearings regarding access while meeting regularly to examine their experiences, building on the knowledge gained, and planning further action. *This process is, in effect, the method*. As a part of a given project/study, the researcher is very much in the middle of the lives of the people involved. She or he must be prepared to care deeply and personally, be confused and frustrated, and be quiet when necessary (Maguire, 1993). The researcher must have both an open and critical attitude. Building from that attitude, the PAR project may quickly take on a life of its own or take years to develop under profoundly challenging conditions, as has been the case with a large proportion of PAR work that has taken place in third world countries (e.g., Rahman, 1993).

Often the first task is for the researcher to organize a forum in which dialogue is initiated and experiences are shared. Brydon-Miller (1993), for example, after meeting individually with a number of persons with disabilities, organized a workshop focusing on shopping mall accessibility, a topic chosen by participants as an area of concern. Committees were formed, regular meetings scheduled, experiences shared, speakers invited, and action formulated and taken. In another instance, focus groups composed of persons with AIDS designed to generate research hypotheses unexpectedly led to further focus groups. It became a cumulative knowledge-generating process that ultimately became participatory and action oriented, resulting in changes in a vocational program attended by the participants (O'Neill, Small, & Strachan, 1999).

The meanings and modes of participation will range and in some ways will also be unique to each project. When there is a clear distinction between the professional researcher and the people being studied, the latter can participate in many different ways, and their control of this process can also vary quite a bit. When a study is more mutually collaborative, control is shared even though each person and/or group brings different types of expertise (including expertise derived from the lived experience of the people being studied). Evers and Toelken (2001) presented examples of participatory research between Native American and non-Native American using Indigenous oral traditions as the central method. These authors noted that, increasingly, the people being studied have the most control. Participants have initiated the research and/or funded it and are themselves defining the nature of collaboration with professional researchers, in some instances even hiring them. In other contexts, the most that may be possible is a more constricted form of participation and action. Many homeless youth, for example, face challenges and live in transient circumstances that will not allow for the regular meetings and organization needed for an ideal PAR process. In such instances, the researcher and participants may need to address the relevant constraints and seek ways of having voices heard and action taken that maximizes the principles discussed here.

So what is participation? We have stated that, at its center, it is a sharing of power. A genuinely participatory attitude will guide the development of such sharing. Our recommendation is that each study make explicit how its particular form of participation was defined and took shape. From the development of a shared understanding of how participants were involved in the study to a description of the results of the PAR process, it is important to acknowledge the range and complexity of "participation" and how each group's version of involvement influenced and was influenced by their work together.

Knowledge generation in PAR is inextricably linked to action. Participants are not likely to be interested in simply knowing about a problem but, rather, wish to generate collectively developed action (Kroeker, 1996). Indeed, the success of a PAR project is best measured by changes in the lives of the participants, and the larger group represented by the participants, resulting from the project. PAR involves an emphasis on the need to go beyond "fact gathering," or the recently criticized tendency for psychology to regard knowledge as an end rather than a means (Prilleltensky, 1997). The definition of action, in terms of how it is expressed in both scope and focus, is essentially limitless. Any concerted effort to remove some impediment that hampers the growth of a group of people, be it structural or ideological, could be defined as action within the framework of PAR. Ideally, it is the start of a catalytic process of action and growth that becomes a part of local culture, and the "PAR" element essentially disappears.

In line with the action emphasis of PAR, the focus is less on a research question or questions (and the attendant emphasis on knowledge gathering) and more on a problem to be solved. Knowledge is thus derivative. Rather than driving the project, areas of inquiry will be explored and the process examined to determine whether that inquiry effectively informs action, with some questions seeming and being crucial in the beginning of the project proving fruitless, replaced by others that emerge later (McTaggart, 1997). The first question may be, What are the questions? becoming more specific as group members work together (e.g., How do we deal with discrimination in the workplace? How does employment contribute to wellness? How can we have a stronger voice at the next policy meeting?). The exploration of these questions is the research component of PAR.

In contrast to what Bakan (1967) referred to as the "methodolatry" of psychology, in which research questions are built around methods, in PAR the method is formed around the problem. Local methods for knowledge gathering must be recognized as valid, as should local processes for coming to consensus and taking action. Researchers learn something about the lived experiences of the participants: how they perceive problems and strengths, ways that they can know about each other and their community, and how change is experienced, as both active agents and those receiving the benefits of positive change. It is an access to the expert knowledge of the participants—their expertise of their world. Participants, through the researcher, are given access to expert knowledge regarding research and political action that was with-

held or unknown previously (Yeich, 1996). The knowledge brought by the researcher and the knowledge of the people can then combine to help people to understand and alter systems that were previously invisible or perceived as formidable or insurmountable barriers (Fals-Borda, 1997).

The particular approach for generating knowledge may range from the traditional survey (Camardese & Youngman, 1996) to drawings and storytelling (Ornelas, 1997). Typically, however, the critical and practical knowledge developed in PAR emanates from an understanding of meaning and is thus often better suited to qualitative methods (Smith, 1997). Qualitative research is usually an inductive process, generating theory through data. As Ponterotto (2005) indicates, in qualitative research, a problem is first identified and then questions of an exploratory nature are developed. What PAR adds is the inclusion of some of the people being studied in the identification of the problem and research questions. Although there is a close fit between qualitative research and PAR, quantitative methods are not ruled out. In a PAR study in which Michael Kral took part, the Aboriginal group he was working with suggested adding an anonymous questionnaire as an additional source of data for teenage members who might be uncomfortable disclosing personal and possibly disturbing information face-to-face. Although he and his colleagues interviewed many teenagers, they also received a large number of completed questionnaires. It is important to keep in mind that PAR is neither antimethod nor antipositivism. It is a continuing conversation.

Critique

Keeping a Critical Awareness in the Face of Ambiguity

PAR often entails a high level of personal connection and involvement, and it is precisely this involvement that exposes the researcher to risks and problems from which she or he is usually protected and, alternately, to remarkably positive experiences that are often not possible in traditional paradigms. The area in which both challenges and benefits arise, as is evident in the following discussion, lies primarily in the meeting ground between the understandings and beliefs of the persons living the problem and the external (usually academic) action researcher. Seeking a symmetrical dialectic tension between these two sources of knowledge is both the greatest challenge and the most powerful source of new knowledge and change (Fals-Borda, 1991; Kuhn, 1977).

The cultivation, development, and maintenance of the aforementioned participatory attitude and the attendant critical focus on our side of the dialectic poses some substantial challenges. Given the centrality of power in PAR, at all levels from conscientization to the gathering of knowledge and action, researchers must be prepared to engage in what can be a very personal struggle with their own deeply embedded beliefs. The researcher can, in very subtle ways, silence voices and undermine the entire process (Rahman, 1991). Indeed, the potential frustrations, anxiety, and ambiguity of many PAR contexts are breeding grounds for researcher insecurity and the temptation to fall back on the comfort of one's power and social position. Mary Law (1997), in her effort to identify the environmental challenges faced by children with disabilities, struggled to keep her expert role as an occupational therapist in the background while tolerating "uncertainties" and "not knowing where the research process would lead" in working

with a group of parents of disabled children (p. 53). It took her some time to become comfortable with uncertainty and open-endedness, and, later, she became intrigued by this unconventional (to her) way of generating knowledge and change. Further compounding this potential problem is that most groups who engage in PAR are themselves acculturated into traditional understandings of relational hierarchies; they may resist the sharing of power that the researcher offers (McTaggart, 1997; Rahman, 1991).

The opposite of the above discussion is also true with reference to the delicate balance of maintaining a critical awareness, sharing power, and developing projects in situations that are often highly ambiguous in the initial stages. This is the problem of losing track of our own perspectives and not being critical of all perspectives, including those of the participants. The potential intensity of the contexts and relationships that occur in PAR, particularly when the researcher is in the field, can lend itself to a kind of immersion in which critical ways of knowing can be difficult to maintain. In most instances, the reason the researcher is engaged in this process is because of the participants' understanding that the researcher brings a valuable perspective and knowledge to share with the group and the ability to create linkages at regional and national levels. To lose our own perspectives in the research process can likewise damage the project, as it is in that critical meeting place between the two sets of knowledge that the potential for action and change lies (Fals-Borda, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Bruner's (1990) advice is worth heeding: Be open-minded, but know your commitments.

Disagreement and Constraint

Difficulties can arise in the relationships that develop between members of PAR groups. The researcher may be faced with a group that forms goals, research processes, and actions that are fundamentally different from those of the researcher (e.g., Seymour, 1997). In some of these instances, researchers are faced with the question of whether or not they are willing to continue to facilitate a process to which they feel in opposition. Similarly, the participants may irrevocably disagree with one another, and the researcher may be unable to facilitate the development of group understanding and action. Or, participants may disagree with the researcher. Cultural differences are likely to arise concerning views of the phenomena under study, and discussion is essential so as to minimize misunderstandings and come to agreements. Equally as debilitating as conflict and disagreement are a loss of motivation and commitment, and a sense of resignation, among participants. When the bulk of the work and energy comes only from one or a few people, the PAR process is fundamentally challenged (though in practice, at least in certain points of the project, this may tend to be more often the case than not and can be a constant struggle and source of frustration). In each of these instances, there is a temptation for the researcher to fall back on a power imbalance to reestablish a project that may have involved a substantial commitment of time and energy and from which she or he may be reluctant to withdraw. Although quickly withdrawing may not be seen as an optimal response, as points of conflict may contain the potential for new knowledge generation that could better inform future actions, there are times when a project simply may not be feasible because of any number of reasons. Finally, the participatory researcher must closely attend to a group process that

appears to lack diversity and tension to guard against the potential problem of what has been termed "consensus tyranny" (Smith, 1997). In such instances, individual perspectives are silenced, and adverse social processes (e.g., groupthink, intimidation) can undermine true participation (Cooke, 2001).

Numerous difficulties can also arise in the various sociocultural contexts that intersect in participatory projects. The context of mainstream academia presents several challenges for the PAR researcher (for discussion, see Fals-Borda, 1997; Heaney, 1993; Maguire, 1993). One central problem is a lack of knowledge regarding PAR (and qualitative methods in general) within the field (see Kidd, 2002). This lack of a knowledge base extends into issues of training, research supervision, and evaluation of research projects and reports. Students may not be able to find adequate instruction, support, or supervision in the development of master's theses and dissertations using these methods, although there are some indications of efforts to address the application of PAR in graduate student research (see Herr, 2005). For individuals interested in attaining faculty positions and promotions, problems exist on several levels. Peers may not recognize PAR as a valid approach to inquiry (Brydon-Miller, 1997) or simply not know enough about it to support decisions regarding hiring or tenure. This may similarly extend to the decisions made by sources of research funding and journal editors. Additionally, the size, nature, and scope of the PAR project itself present problems in the present academic culture. As Fals-Borda (1991) commented, "There are no fixed deadlines in this work, but each project persists in time and proceeds according to its own cultural vision and political expectations until the proposed goals are reached" (p. 7). Such lack of constraints is not well suited to positions involving large teaching and supervisory workloads, situations in which funding is constricted or significantly time limited, or in a "publish or perish" environment. Changing commitments may likewise take researchers or participants away from the project, which may falter if they are leaving before the community transformations sought are firmly embedded in the local culture (Kral & Idlout, in press; Maguire, 1993). Participation may also change because of the transient nature of the population being studied, or even because of political factors sometimes encountered when conducting research in non-Western countries. Some authors recommend that academic and funding organizations anticipate the parameters of PAR in budget and time allowances (Rogers & Palmer-Erbs, 1994), though the limited resources faced by many researchers make it questionable whether such allowances may actually occur.

What Is "Good" PAR?

Attendant to the general lack of knowledge regarding qualitative methods, and often a point that makes psychology researchers cautious about qualitative methods (Kidd, 2002), is a perceived lack of criteria for evaluating this kind of work. PAR may be particularly susceptible to such caution because it is not a research method in the way that methods are usually understood. In such a case, it could be easily perceived that issues of methodological rigor are irrelevant. This is not the case. As trained researchers, psychologists have a responsibility to ensure that high standards of reliability and validity are maintained. Given that much of PAR may be qualitative and community based, the criteria will differ from that of controlled experimental designs. What are the criteria

on which to judge PAR studies by the scientific community? Sarason (2003) asked this question of community intervention studies and recommended that the primary focus be on process rather than outcome, with replicability being an important criterion. The process of PAR may be as complex as a community intervention, and, to an extent, PAR is one. The underlying goals and foci from which each participatory project develops, however complex, can provide guidelines for others to use and develop (Kral, Burkhardt, & Kidd, 2002).

Although validity in PAR has not received as much attention as other qualitative approaches, other authors have suggested various means through which validity can be enhanced and projects evaluated. The concept of evaluation must be used with caution, however, because it can potentially mask efforts (intentional or not) to devalue local modes of knowledge, action, and evaluation, as well as restore established roles within various (possibly academic) power hierarchies. Smith (1997), in discussing validity in PAR, drew from Lather (1991) in describing the importance of triangulation by using multiple perspectives, face validity to the participants, and catalytic validity in that the participatory process catalyzes elements for change. Smith went on to describe how PAR reports need to carefully place the participatory experience in its local context, give "thick" (detailed) descriptions of the participants and their various roles, reflect on the emergent knowledge, and reveal the changes (or lack thereof), both structural and personal, for the people involved, including the researcher. Addressing the discipline of psychology, Brydon-Miller and Tolman (2001) recommended that validity in qualitative research address issues of description, interpretation, theory, evaluation, and generalizability. Construct validity is also applicable to PAR, following the principle of "learning more about something" through inductive reasoning and integrating multiple indicators through configural methods (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955, p. 290; Meehl, 1959). The meaning of a construct here is determined by engaging the research participants in its definition, assessment, and interpretation. Finally, there should be evident a genuine adherence to the process and principles of participatory change (Park, 1993; Smith, 1997). This, too, can be an important focus of research, examining the social changes/transformations assisted through PAR (see Maton, 2000). Stated differently, the interaction of PAR with local culture can itself be a source of study along with the more specific course and outcome of groups' efforts.

The Rewards

Despite all of the challenges that exist at personal, group, and sociocultural levels, PAR can be as rewarding as it can be frustrating. It has been our experience that, in return for the control and preconceptions that we divest, we gain many different but very palpable forms of power. One salient way this is felt in the research process lies in access. The researcher, as a part of the group, often gets access to contexts, people, and knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible using traditional methods. For example, many North American Aboriginal communities have, in recent years, reacted strongly against mainstream researchers conducting studies perceived as having little or no relevance to the community (Darou, Hum, & Kurtness, 1993). In such contexts, participatory action approaches are likely the best way to generate knowledge and action that is meaningful for the people involved (Rogers &

Palmer-Erbs, 1994) and make it more likely that researchers may be invited to contribute to those communities. Unfortunately, some researchers, cognizant of such barriers and unwilling to recognize the myriad reasons underlying these changing perspectives, use the label *PAR* as a way of gaining access without a genuine intent to engage in a process that will benefit the community (Heaney, 1993). In our experience, such projects have failed. In addition to access to a variety of contexts, PAR also allows the researcher to access the understandings and narratives usually overlooked or discounted through mainstream academic approaches. It is a "living knowledge" that can be gained through PAR that can educate the researcher (Friere, 1982), inform action in other areas, and potentially greatly extend the field of inquiry through discovery of new and important information (Fals-Borda, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Another obvious benefit of PAR is the action component. This is an approach that merges well with recent calls that psychology attend to issues related to social justice and move beyond understanding to taking a more direct role in informing change through understanding (Prilleltensky, 1997). It emphasizes a gathering of knowledge for and about groups who are not well represented by dominant understandings, making them more broadly visible and informing their capacity to act (Gaventa, 1991). It also must be stated that, similar to Angela's experience, PAR "feels good." PAR involves the development of human relationships and friendships with participants as opposed to the supposedly objective disinterest of traditional paradigms. It can be a genuine connection, an "authentic participation" that is motivating, contributes to personal growth, and reduces the barriers between peoples (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Fals-Borda, 1991; Maguire, 1993).

Applications and Prospects

A number of factors, both in the field of psychology generally and, more specifically, in counseling psychology, point toward PAR as having the potential to facilitate important and relevant contributions. In recent years, psychologists, increasingly freed of the more dogmatic aspects of traditional methodologies, have begun to call for an examination of our various roles in society. Given counseling psychologists' expertise in working with individuals and groups and their understanding of individual and social psychological processes of change, the ethical implications of being "value-free" observers have been called into question. Psychologists are being called to examine the larger sociocultural contexts that underlie individual problems and to use interventions that facilitate social action and empowerment with participatory strategies. This critical examination of psychological research and our various roles therein is highly relevant to counseling psychology, which has a long history of working with and for disadvantaged persons in a range of settings and of considering the importance of the individual in context. Counseling psychologists have been encouraged to bring social justice and action more explicitly into their teaching and research through participatory and empowering approaches such as PAR (Vera & Speight, 2003). The momentum that is building around these issues builds on streams of humanistic and community psychology and multicultural counseling that have long influenced the field.

In concert with shifting perspectives on topics of social action, involvement, and participatory research within the field of psy-

chology, a number of groups frequently encountered in the work of counseling psychologists are questioning (if not rejecting outright) the utility and relevance of traditional approaches to research and intervention while embracing more participatory approaches. PAR has been successfully applied in a number of instances to facilitate understanding, better service, and more cooperative relationships between service providers and consumers/survivors (Camardese & Youngman, 1996; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998; Rogers & Palmer-Erbs, 1994). Though more often associated with psychiatric services, the strengths of this approach in empowering consumers and improving knowledge and communication regarding services would likely transfer well to counseling and community mental health centers. PAR and participatory approaches have also been successfully advocated for and used with homeless persons (Whitmore & McKee, 2001; Yeich, 1996), persons with disabilities (Brydon-Miller, 1993; White, 2002), minorities (T. Jackson, 1993), survivors of domestic violence (Maguire, 1993), and in a variety of health promotion contexts (Oliver & Peersman, 2001).

The use of PAR by counseling psychologists is, to date, relatively limited. There has been a call for increased use of participatory methods in the counseling of persons with disabilities (Walker, 1993), echoing the work of Mary Brydon-Miller (1993), with Cantrell and Walker (1993) using PAR to empower a group of persons with disabilities to identify concerns and actions that were to be brought into the disability policy process. There has likewise been a compelling call for counseling psychologists to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons, using PAR as a potentially effective and much needed means of bringing these marginalized groups into the research dialogue (Morrow, 2003). PAR has also been used to enable persons with AIDS to share and build understanding of their experiences and use that knowledge to inform improved services at an employment counseling center (O'Neill et al., 1999). Finally, an example of PAR used in the arena of multicultural counseling research is in the work of Herr (1995), who, in her capacity as a school social worker, helped enable minority youth to examine and develop an understanding of discrimination in their school and advocate for better awareness of racism on campus. In each of these examples, PAR approaches meshed well with the contexts and viewpoints of counseling psychology, a central tenet of which "is the idea that individuals are the agents of their own empowerment and liberation" (Morrow, Rakhsha, & Castañeda, 2001, p. 589).

For participatory and action-oriented research methods to become more widely accepted as a valid mode of inquiry for counseling psychologists, there likely must occur a process of education and exposure within counseling psychology to PAR and the development of criteria with which to evaluate this type of work. It must be noted, however, that although psychologists struggle to situate the various qualitative methods within the field (Kidd, 2002; Rennie, 2002), PAR as a research approach may well prove to be among the most difficult to establish and integrate. As we have discussed throughout this article, to be able to be a part of participatory processes, researchers will likely have to face numerous personal and professional challenges. Indeed, if the early stages of PAR in other fields are any example, then the students, teachers, and researchers forming the vanguard of persons using this approach in psychology may have to have some element of the "rebel" in them, depending on their particular context (Law, 1997).

Lastly, several authors, including ourselves, perceive a need to sound a note of caution regarding the development and use of PAR. Embracing a particular political and ethical/moral stance, while increasingly becoming regarded as necessary, must be approached critically and cautiously. Prilleltensky (1997) has described a need for constant vigilance and interrogation of our various motives and moralities in this type of work. Others have similarly noted the potential subtle and obvious abuses of approaches labeled *participatory* and the limitations of the group processes therein (Cooke, 2001; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Rahman, 1991). Pertinent issues include decisions made about who requires "help," "advocacy," and "justice"; why we as researchers and practitioners think a particular group needs our "help"; and the various definitions and implications of these terms. A variety of personal and group agendas are inevitably difficult to bring to awareness during processes of inquiry and change, becoming evident only in hindsight (if at all). A number of progressives of the turn of the last century, for example, acted as agents for what they viewed as positive social change in the name of science, though the form and direction of change were often taken for granted as being morally "right" at the time (e.g., eugenics) and dictated in a "top-down" manner by socially powerful individuals working for a powerful state (Burnham, 1988; Scott, 1998). To make the PAR approach genuine, it must truly be enabling of multiple, critical voices and cooperation.

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