


Chapter 10

Participatory Action Research in Adult Education: Methods in Vivencia, Praxis, and Conscientization

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) is an embodied form of inquiry that engages those most affected by an issue or problem in creating knowledge and developing solutions. PAR epistemology intersects with a critical approach to adult education in its belief that programs, methods, and content must be relevant to learner needs and challenges and ought to lead to greater social justice. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a review of three critical, participatory inquiry methods that are connected to the ontological and epistemological anchors of PAR. The authors present readers with a useful description of how to enact these onto-epistemological anchors through these methods in diverse contexts. They conclude that these methods have great potential for critical educators to live out their own onto-epistemological commitments, better understand and meet learner needs, and facilitate positive social change.

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INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) is an embodied form of inquiry that engages those most affected by an issue or problem in creating knowledge and developing solutions (Gaventa, 1991; Wood & McAteer, 2017). As such, it explicitly seeks to upend traditional/positivist research paradigms and hierarchies, privileging the knowledge of the community – particularly those marginalized and oppressed by dominant social structures (Freire, 1990) in “a shared process of discovery” (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 207). This process calls for a “critical and humanizing pedagogy” (Wood & McAteer, 2017, p. 253) entailing “inclusion, democracy, and respect for local knowledge emanating from lived experience of the specific context and culture” (p. 252). The goal of this pedagogy is not to reproduce the status quo but to democratize knowledge and society (Wood & McAteer, 2017).

PAR proponents attest that research must be conducted and disseminated with an in-depth understanding of the social and political context, which requires consulting local community members (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). This approach seeks not just to document human experience but “to improve the human condition” (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 214) through problem solving and, ultimately, meaningful social change (Wood & McAteer, 2017). The resulting transformation must be horizontal, from and for the people, not from above, and power relations must be fundamentally reshaped rather than simply shifting the oppressed to the position of oppressor (Glassman & Erdem, 2014).

These ideas and ideals held by PAR practitioners are at once ontological, in that they connect to one’s understanding of what can be known or learned, and epistemological, as they are rooted in one’s conceptualization of how we know or come to know. PAR, then, is more than simply a method that can be transferred from one research design to another with little to no thought as to why it is engaged. Rather, PAR is an ontological and epistemological stance because it represents a major ontological and epistemological challenge to traditional, positivist approaches to knowledge creation (Cahill et al., 2019; Call-Cummings et al., 2019; Kindon et al., 2007; Torre & Ayala, 2009). Those who practice PAR take a firm stand against neoliberal knowledge production processes that, intentional or not, serve to reproduce and re-present systems and structures of dispossession, injustice, inequity, and violence.

Core Concepts

PAR is grounded in the core ontological and epistemological concepts of *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization* (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). *Vivencia* goes beyond observation or documentation to sharing in the lived reality of community members, “a

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