


Chapter 14

Tackling the Thorny Issue of Positionality in Participatory Action Research

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the central place of positionality in Participatory Action Research (PAR). A background of the PAR is highlighted. The concepts of positionality in the context of interpretive research is explored. The chapter shows that reflection and reflexivity are intended to enhance the validity of interpretive research in general and in PAR in particular. The binary approach to research as epitomised by Outsider/Insider approach, which is located in a western perspective of doing research is interrogated using the intersectional, standpoint and embodiment theories. Finally, the chapter concluded that although positionality as manifested by reflexivity is vital, it must be conducted within the context of postmodern theory as opposed to modernism, by underscoring the multivocal nature of PAR.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key criticisms against qualitative research is the bias that emerges from the role of the researcher in the study, which may be implicit or explicit within the research impacting on its trustworthiness and credulity of research findings. In order to address this potential bias in Participatory Action Research (PAR), the chapter

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argues that the researcher has to assert their positionality in terms of the research topic, data collection, data analysis and reporting. Researcher positionality refers to the worldview, beliefs or ideology a researcher brings to the research process (Kitagawa, 2023; Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Bukamal, 2022; Yip, 2024). A researcher worldview may be shaped by multiple social markers such as gender, nationality, race, language, social economic status among many other variables. In order to address this problem of positionality impinging on the research process in PAR, the chapter review the use of reflexivity and reflection, which can help a researcher to be aware of the potential influence of their background on the study. The chapter will therefore present an overview of action research in order to situate the study in a proper context. The background will explicate the origins of PAR, which will then be followed by theoretical grounding of PAR, reflexivity and positionality, among many other items.

BACKGROUND

In this section, a background of the chapter is presented starting with the origins of Participatory Action Research (PAR), before the issue of bias in PAR specifically and qualitative research in general is addressed. The genealogy of PAR is not linear, but tends to be multiple, bringing together various traditions from groups such as social work, health and social justice movements from all over the world. Action research in order to transform organisations was propagated by Kurt Lewin who advocated learning about organisation's social systems in order to change them (Adelman, 1993). The origin of Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been attributed to many scholars and has been used to encapsulate an approach to research that promoted collaboration and social transformation (Brydon-Miller et al., 2020).

The community development approach has its genesis in Latin America in the work of concepts that emanated from Paulo Freire and other radicals and has affinity with concepts of empowerment, conscientisation and nurturing of critical thinking (Cornish et al., 2023). This approach had wider application in places which included Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America and Europe in rural and urban development endeavours (Brydon-Miller et al., 2020). The objective of the approach was to tackle challenges that communities were confronting, at times in authoritarian spaces. A number of institutions have been identified as adherents of this approach such as International Council for Higher Education, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, and was also propagated by governments such as in Tanzania (1961-85) and Nicaragua (1979-1999) (Selener, 1999).

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