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The 7 C's framework for participatory action research: inducing novice participant-researchers

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ABSTRACT

A key aspect of engaging in a large participatory action research (PAR) project is ensuring that novice participant-researchers have a general understanding of the PAR methodology. Lead researchers experienced in action research cannot expect novice participant-researchers to engage fully with the literature on PAR, but rather need a simple way to ensure their collaborative partners understand the research process they have committed to. This paper presents 'The 7Cs of Participatory Action Research' framework, a clear model that both novice action researchers and participant-researchers could use as a starting point for identifying key action research experts and identifying their own unique PAR approach relevant to their context. The framework provides a brief overview of the literature related to each concept and poses a series of questions that can inform the planning phase of the research so that participant-researchers can visualise putting PAR methodology into practice.

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Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR), a member of the family of action research (AR) methodologies (Coughlan 2019), is a proven method for collaboratively exploring change as it offers a reflective, flexible, and practice-focused means for promoting change and reflecting on research-informed outcomes. Jacobson (1993, 215) recognised participatory research as a means to 'foster self-reliance in local peoples by helping them conduct their own learning and their own research ... this process of local self-reflection and education often leads to action oriented towards change'. Similarly, action researchers value the methodology's ability to capture the lived experiences of the participants and recognise that it allows researchers to explore real social problems and human communicative interactions (Hearn and Foth 2005).

When embarking on a PAR project, the varying definitions, interpretations, and criticisms of the method can be quite daunting for a novice action researcher. An initial search of the broader AR literature reveals the complexity and variation of approaches adopted

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given its flexibility, both recognised as a strength by AR advocates and weakness by conservative researchers who challenge the perceived validity of the method (Altrichter et al. 2002; Zuber-Skerritt and Wood 2019). As a novice participatory action researcher leading a collaborative doctoral project, I struggled to find a clear framework that would help me enter the conversation on appropriate AR/PAR methodologies. Now, as an experienced participatory action researcher, I have worked on three large projects with novice participant-researchers who needed to understand the aims and methods of PAR but who did not have the time (or inclination) to engage deeply with the literature. They needed guidance on why the method is appropriate for the study they have chosen or been invited to participate in, and they wanted to know what it meant for them to be co-researchers rather than merely participants in the research process.

After reviewing a range of AR and PAR literature and definitions for my doctoral study (Feekery 2013), I identified seven key characteristics I dubbed the '7 C's of PAR': Cyclical, Collaborative, Context-specific, Critically reflective, Combining theory and practice, Change-focused, and Conversation-driven. This concept was extended to the '7Cs Framework for Participatory Action Research' following two subsequent large PAR projects. The framework provides a brief overview of the literature related to each concept and poses a series of questions that can be used in the planning phase of the research so that participant-researchers can visualise putting the methodology into practice. It is designed to encourage participant-researchers to consider key components of PAR that will support research aims and facilitate and measure change within their practical contexts. This paper outlines the development of the framework, drawing on the literature that informed it, and presents the framework as a useful tool to induct novice practitioner-researchers into PAR projects.

Overview of participatory action research

Participatory action research is a key collaborative modality that belongs to a broader and well-documented family of AR (Coughlan 2019; Herr and Anderson 2005; Lawson 2015; Zuber-Skerritt and Wood 2019). The lack of a single accepted definition of AR (Altrichter et al. 2002; Rearick and Feldman 1999) is a strength of the methodology as AR can encapsulate a wide range of scenarios; thus, its power lies in its flexibility and dynamism. A reason given for why so many different definitions, terms, and types of AR exist is because each of these 'connotes different purposes, positionalities, epistemologies, ideological commitments, and in many cases, different research traditions that grew out of very different social contexts' (Herr and Anderson 2005, 2). Bradbury (2015) identifies AR as a democratic and primarily participative methodology that empowers participants to build knowledge in action.

While other research traditions determine the methodology prior to the research starting, Herr and Anderson (2005, 69) describe AR methodologies as 'designing the plane while flying it': the research is initially planned, but there is scope within the method to adapt and modify data collection methods and research questions as the research shapes and is shaped by the context in which it is conducted. Wadsworth (1998, para 24) argues that 'a hallmark of genuine participatory action research process is that it may change shape and focus over time as participants focus and refocus with understanding about what is "really" happening and what is really important to them.'

Much is written about PAR being a relevant means of better engaging participants, improving understanding of a problem, and facilitating change through action (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle 2010; McNiff and Whitehead 2011) via inquiry conducted by and for people, rather than research on people (Altrichter et al. 2002, Bradbury 2015; Chevalier and Buckles 2019; Sagor 2011). As a collaborative form of research, PAR combines expertise from both academic and practical or professional contexts. It allows participants to research, change, and then re-research problems to improve a situation by developing new knowledge and theory through explicit examination of context (Creswell 2005; McNiff and Whitehead 2009, 2011; Seymour-Rolls and Hughes 2000; Wadsworth 1998). PAR enables non-threatening, frank, and open discussions and reflection on all aspects of the problem identified, as well as the opportunity to focus on specific areas of concern. It is designed to help people function more skilfully and intentionally within a specific context by improving practical judgement, rather than providing a scientific measure of truth (Burns 2000) and by taking purposeful action that is flexible and responsive to the required change, while maintaining the principles of social change, justice, and equality (Elliott 2013; Hawkins 2015). It also provides a check on the validity and adequacy of the conclusions drawn during the process (Dick 1997; McNiff and Whitehead 2011).

Those involved in PAR are committed to defining problems and informing, evaluating, and changing both their own and others' behaviours and practices (McNiff and Whitehead 2009, 2011; Williamson and Prosser 2002). This means that participatory action researchers:

ensure their encounters with others are opportunities for learning and growth. When they reflect on practice, they are reflecting on their relationship with others and whether the others have benefitted from the encounter. (McNiff and Whitehead 2009, 19)

Through discussion and reflection, participants identify a thematic concern (McTaggart 1997), which is then integrated into a common goal through an agreement to participate and collaborate to solve common concerns. Furthermore, Whyte (1989) argues that for a PAR project to be viable, the problem under study must be important to the key participants, and the research methods and data must be credible to the participants. The research needs to enhance the experiences or situations of those working within the research context, rather than merely enhancing the career of the academic researcher.

The practitioners' central role in the PAR process contrasts with the dominant role in decision-making by outside professional experts. As Wadsworth (1998, para 54) explains, PAR 'cannot be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them'; rather it is 'quite close to a common-sense way of "learning-by-doing" (Jacobs 2018). Therefore, it may have a greater lasting impact in practice than external research that recommends change without taking specific contexts into account (Burns 2005). Herr and Anderson provide a *Continuum and Implications of Positionality* (Herr and Anderson 2005, 31) for positioning the lead researcher in a collaborative project as an insider, outsider, or facilitator, as well as of the roles of the other participant-researchers. The tension centred on the dual role of the researcher and their role in the organisation or community under study also needs consideration to avoid ambiguity and conflict (Jacobs 2018). The complex, often multiple, and possibly shifting roles of the research partners must be clearly identified and documented throughout the research

process. Both Hearn and Foth (2005) and Rakow (2005) recognise the value of AR to overcome the traditional researcher role of objective observer, enabling them to address social and human problems by engaging in the actual experiences of those being observed. Eisenberg, Baglia, and Pines (2006) study on communication in an urban emergency room found that previous research in this context was done from an outsider's perspective. In contrast, explicit collaboration via AR with co-investigators brought valuable insider knowledge to the forefront and gave voice to employees whose perspectives are usually marginalised or unheard.

It is important to recognise that in community-based PAR, the participant-researchers may be from powerless, vulnerable, or over-researched communities. The research may benefit the researcher as they understand the situation better and can theorise from the findings, but the research findings may not immediately change the community context for the better or remedy the injustices uncovered (Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018). The community may still be facing the same struggle due to no action, ownership, or leadership opportunities embedded in the research process and may feel exploited in similar ways to non-collaborative methodologies (Bradbury 2015). For the academic researcher, the aim should always be to leave the research context better than we found it, not from an outside-saviour perspective, but from a mutually driven call to action. Elliott (2013) warns that, even in PAR, the university-based researchers tend to be the more empowered and privileged participant, who usually brings the funding, authors the final report, and influences how the project findings are conveyed to others. Therefore, relationship-building and solidarity are central to PAR collaborations, thereby reducing the professional distance inherent in other forms of traditional academic research.

A further key strength of PAR is that it acts as a catalyst to connect the expertise of community groups to academic research. Research on developing an effective drug resistance strategies curriculum for the Southwestern youth population (Gosin et al. 2003) found that participatory action research enabled earlier involvement of community participants', thereby enhancing decision-making regarding appropriate interventions and strategies for gathering community input. The researchers suggest community participants can also help formulate research questions, identify interest groups, and develop needs assessment instruments. Blythe et al., (2008), in their study of public involvement in a canal dredging project, found that PAR produces knowledge that benefits some non-scholarly community because it: considers the contextual and local; requires intervention, not simply description; advocates for a commitment to social justice; and ensures research questions and community goals are interrelated. Thus, critical PAR can provide valid and robust understandings of complex communication and organisational practices, and tools for improving those practices.

Developing the 7Cs framework

Reviewing the range of approaches and definitions for AR shows that the researcher and/or participant-researchers must clearly define AR for their particular project in terms of context, purpose, and outcomes, additional participants and justification for the methodology at the outset of the research, and as the research progresses. The focus must be on the research aspect of the project, not only in terms of how the local

context has been affected but also what can be drawn from the study to add to the general body of knowledge (which could relate to methods, content, or process). Yet, when I was a novice action researcher, I found no clear process in the literature that supported me to unpack the complexity of my doctoral PAR project. As I progressed towards becoming a lead researcher in subsequent larger projects, I began engaging with many more practitioner-researchers new to AR. I needed to ensure that they knew the key aspects of PAR methodology and what was expected of them as co-researchers in the process. However, they were already burdened with high workloads and did not have the time (or inclination) to explore AR literature. I recognised that supporting them and the PAR research process with a clear framework would likely make AR a less daunting and more accessible research opportunity for already busy people.

Research context

My first experience of PAR was during my doctoral research centred on embedding information literacy into the disciplines (Feekery 2013). The participating discipline was Resource and Environmental Planning, a professional degree where both information literacy and effective communication are essential competencies for emerging planning practitioners. This context offered insights into both the educational and professional demands of the discipline and profession. The research was change-focused and its success relied on the five participating faculty teaching six courses across a four-year degree to engage as participant-researchers in the PAR process over a two-year period from 2010 to 2012, a far more ambitious attempt to embed information literacy into the disciplines than several other studies that sought change at the individual workshop or course level (see Feekery 2013, Chapter Four: Methodology for the PAR research design used in this study). The participants were all researchers in their discipline but had not engaged in research focused on pedagogical change. Thus, PAR provided a means to explore pedagogy and practice and enhance student learning through research-supported change facilitated through deliberate action, sustained collaborative enquiry, effective communication, and purposeful reflection.

Since completing this initial study, I have engaged with a further two large complex PAR projects focused on information literacy and teacher-librarian collaboration, spanning 5 years and involving several participant-researchers (teachers and librarians) working within a range of tertiary and secondary educational contexts in New Zealand (for information on the PAR design used in these studies (see Emerson, Kilpin, and Feekery 2015; Emerson et al. 2018; Emerson, Kilpin, and Lamond 2021 and the project website: <https://informationliteracyspaces.wordpress.com/>). Given that professional development is often delivered by outsiders in the secondary school context, some participants were reluctant to engage *as* researchers. Yet, all of the participants in these projects needed to be inducted appropriately into the methodology (Heron and Reason 2006; Lawson 2015) so they could see themselves as co-researchers and not merely participants in our change-focused projects; we needed to empower them and bring them together to share their researched-informed practice. The lead university researchers initially explained PAR and what it meant for the teachers and librarians to be participant-researchers using my original 7Cs concept, but I recognised that a clearer framework was needed that was

more tangible than just discussing PAR as a methodology. Therefore, I developed *The 7Cs Framework for Participatory Action Research*, a definitive conceptual model and framework to support the induction of participant-researchers into future PAR projects.

Identifying the 7Cs

The 7Cs of PAR as a concept emerged as I sought to make sense of the PAR literature and what it meant for my doctoral project. A key challenge I faced initially was engaging others in a PAR process while negotiating the methodology as a novice action researcher. In my review of the growing body of AR and PAR literature, I sought to simplify the complexity of definitions and positioning by reducing the multiple characteristics of PAR to six of the most commonly accepted principles that would produce robust, research-informed change (Feekery 2013). After reviewing numerous AR definitions (Avison et al. 1999; Bunning 1994; Checkland and Holwell 1998; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McKernan 1996; McNiff 2002; McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 2010, 2011; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997), Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988, 5) definition captured five of the seven key characteristics that emerged as central to my change-oriented research:

Action research is a form of **collective**, self-**reflective** enquiry, undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve [**change**] the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which these practices are carried out [**context-specific**]. . . The approach is only action research when it is **collaborative**, though it is important to realise the action research of the group is achieved through the **critically examined** action of individual group members. [italicised emphasis in original, bold emphasis added]

A sixth common theme in definitions is the **cyclical** nature of the research process (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McKay and Marshall 2001; McNiff 2002; McNiff and Whitehead 2011). These six characteristics were extended with the emergence of **conversation** as a central characteristic for facilitating change in my study. These combined characteristics form the '7 Cs of PAR' conceptual framework: 1) Cyclical, 2) Collaborative, 3) Context-specific, 4) Combining theory and practice, 5) Critically Reflective, 6) Change-focused, and 7) Conversation-driven. Most early definitions and descriptions of AR identify many, if not all, of these characteristics with the exception of the central role of conversation. Interestingly, in a parallel timeline to my research, Zuber-Skerritt (2018) also identified a 7Cs model within the broader Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) framework centred on key values, strategies, and behaviours of participatory research. While communication, collaboration, context, and critical reflection are common to both of our models, Zuber-Skerritt's model also focused on behaviours including commitment to the group, competence in facilitating PALAR, and character-building through engagement in PALAR projects.

Unpacking the 7Cs framework for participatory action research

This section provides an overview of *The 7Cs Framework for Participatory Action Research*, and a detailed visual representation can be accessed via the 'Supplemental' tab on the article's webpage.¹ Each concept descriptor is informed by literature on AR more broadly and PAR specifically to highlight the key strengths of the methodology and challenge the critiques from conservative research perspectives (adapted from Feekery 2013). These

descriptors give novice researchers an entry into the conversations on PAR taking place in the literature. Similar to Zuber-Skerritt, Wood, and Louw's (2015) approach in the 3Rs/7Cs PALAR guide and Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez's (2018) practical questions for participatory approaches guide, this framework poses a series of questions emerging from my experience in leading PAR projects with novice participant-researchers that future research teams can explore as they familiarise themselves with PAR methodology and the 7Cs, and then plan their project.

C1: cyclical

A cyclical methodology allows the researcher and participants to plan, trial, reflect on, and re-trial key interventions developed to facilitate change. The theme of the AR as a cyclical process, going through a series of iterations with four to six steps in each cycle, is prominent in all discussions of AR and PAR (Checkland and Holwell 1998; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McKay and Marshall 2001; McNiff 2002; Selener 1997; Wadsworth 1998). The simplest, most often cited, cycle is Lewin's 'plan, act, observe, reflect' cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). During an AR process, researchers and participants act together on a particular cycle of activities, including problem diagnosis, action intervention, and reflective learning (Avison et al. 1999). Although the cyclical models appear linear, the iterations may be repeated and applied to new contexts (McKay and Marshall 2001).

After critiquing the linear representations of various AR models, McNiff (2002, 56) developed an alternative model that depicts a constantly evolving 'iterating spiral of spirals' that represent 'a spontaneous, self-recreating system of enquiry'. This model suggests that it is possible to focus on one key issue and address multiple other relevant issues that may arise from the research process (McNiff 2002). Some of the questions then become woven into the existing research, while others are set aside for future consideration. In some instances, more important concerns may emerge and shift the focus of the research entirely (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2019).

While many of the models focus on a single AR cycle, McKay and Marshall (2001) offer one which identifies the dual foci of action and research in separate, yet interrelated spirals, adding greater validity to the methodological robustness of AR. One cycle relates to the researchers' problem-solving interests and responsibilities, and the second relates to the research interests and responsibilities but both tend to take place concurrently, as it is difficult to separate one process from the other (see McKay and Marshall 2001, 49–52 for more information on this model). While the fundamental aim of AR is to facilitate change and improve practice, the dual research-focused aspect of the process contributes to enhanced knowledge and outcomes development (Coughlan 2019), a key attraction for researchers and participant-researchers who value research-driven change.

Questions used to determine the nature of the cycles in the PAR project centre on identifying the duration, context, and participants involved in each cycle, the number of cycles needed to explore the problem, the practical and research activities each cycle contains, the types of data needed and how these will be captured during each cycle, and consideration of how unexpected issues in each cycle will be managed.

C2: collaborative

The collaborative nature of AR is widely accepted, particularly by those who promote participative methods of AR (Creswell 2005; Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt 2013;

Selener 1997; Zuber-Skerritt and Wood 2019). Sagor (2011, ix) states that ‘the product of multiple minds is inevitably better than one. Therefore, the very act of including more people and more perspectives in a study will make it more likely that the study will be more robust.’ As a key participant in the research process, the action researcher works collaboratively as, or with, the ‘problem-owner’, sharing both the action researcher’s and other participants’ experiences, skills, and competencies (Blum 1955; Gosin et al. 2003; Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt 2013) so the research process can achieve its dual goals of problem solving and knowledge generation (McKay and Marshall 2001). Although the subjective viewpoint of the researcher has led to criticisms that the methodology is unscientific (Blum 1955; Bunning 1994), Bunning (1994, 43) argues that it is impossible and even undesirable for the action researcher to act as a ‘disengaged third party whose presence and activities have no effect on the research results’. Herr and Anderson (2005) also observe that the objective stance taken by positivist research is unrealistic when dealing with human participants.

The collaborative nature of AR also creates a more democratic form of research because it involves those who are directly affected by the problem under study as co-researchers (Jacobs 2018). This allows them to take ownership of the process and outcomes and, thus, claim the power to change their own situation, rather than having an outsider’s or manager’s decision enforced on them (Burns 2005; Gosin et al. 2003; Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt 2013; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Selener 1997). This ownership, empowerment, and engagement in decisions regarding outcomes reduces the impact of research conducted by outsiders who leave at the conclusion of the research and may leave the communities no better off than when the research was initiated (Elliott 2013).

Key questions framing collaboration within the project ask the group to consider who is leading the project, the expertise they bring to the research themes and method, and their positionality within the project. The questions also ask participant-researchers to consider their role and expertise as co-researchers. The final questions ask who else may be potential participants and how they will benefit from engaging in the research.

C3: context-specific

PAR is a methodology that recognises the significance of the findings of research conducted within a specific context. Because AR is, by nature, holistic, it cannot be easily used to study a phenomenon independent of the various layers of social context within which it is situated (Herr and Anderson 2005). Hodgkinson (1957, 75) points out that ‘no attempt is made to isolate out a factor and study it alone, divorced from the environment that gave it meaning’. In the process of AR, a real-world, often problematic situation is investigated with the goals of improving the situation and gaining knowledge from the experience (Checkland and Holwell 1998) through creating safe spaces for participants to create and share new ideas in culturally safe ways (Brydon-Miller et al. 2020). McNiff (2002) and Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2019) observe that the research may develop in unexpected ways as new questions arise from the context of the research.

AR, more generally, recognises the strengths of context-specific studies conducted in real-life situations with the practitioners themselves are involved in the process (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McKernan 1996; McNiff 2002; Selener 1997). This, along with collaboration in PAR, gives participants more ownership of the data, as previously

mentioned, and allows them to come up with solutions that are immediately relevant for their own particular context.

Two key challenges are connected to the context-specific nature of AR. First, AR studies are difficult to replicate, which can potentially negatively impact on the validity and reliability of their findings (Checkland and Holwell 1998; Feldman 2007; Herr and Anderson 2005). However, Greenwood and Levin (2007) argue that action researchers are not concerned with context-free knowledge. Checkland and Holwell (1998, 17–18) respond to criticisms around context and reliability constraints by arguing that the aim of the action researcher should be ‘to enact the process based on a declared-in-advance methodology in such a way that the process is recoverable by anyone interested in subjecting the research to critical scrutiny’. Elliott (2013) argues that the flexibility of PAR allows researchers to challenge traditional research templates and build new knowledge from new sources, thereby challenging the preconceived notions and perspectives of an outsider.

The second recognised challenge is that the contextualised nature of AR results in findings that may not be meaningful to those outside the context studied (Checkland and Holwell 1998). The difficulty in making generalisations from the findings (Argyris and Schön 1989; Bunning 1994; Oja and Smulyan 1989) means AR is seen to produce localised knowledge (Herr and Anderson 2005). In response to the criticism concerning generalisability, Checkland and Holwell (1998) argue that a robust AR process can produce ‘defensible generalisations’. While action researchers are interested in the validity of the knowledge generated, they are more interested in outcomes that go beyond the pure generation of knowledge (Herr and Anderson 2005) and instead offer practical solutions to real problems faced by those engaged in the research and community.

Questions designed to focus on the context of the project ask participant-researchers to consider the broader and specific contexts within which the research takes place. They focus participants on clearly identifying the problem, desired changes and potential outcomes within this specific context. These questions also ask the co-researchers to consider the ethical implications of the project within this context and how the outcomes will meet the needs of the community or context under study.

C4: combining theory and practice

Participants engaged in change-focused research need to feel confident that the changes are informed by theory and data collected during the research process. AR facilitates the combination of theory and practice, as it aims to pursue action and research outcomes simultaneously, while seeking to create new knowledge by finding solutions to practical problems in specific situations (McKay and Marshall 2001; Susman and Evered 1978). AR bridges the gap between theory and practice (Selener 1997); the dual focus allows any interventions to be informed by theory through a systematic study of the problem (McKay and Marshall 2001; O’Brien 2001). The combination of theory and practice contributes to participants to both take ownership of the interventions and develop confidence to independently modify any interventions designed as part of the research process under the guidance of the lead researcher once the research is complete.

To ensure that theory and practice are being combined to create research-informed outcomes, questions posed ask the lead and participant-researchers to consider the

theories that are informing both practice and data collection and analysis, including further ethical considerations related to data collection and security. They then ask how this research will contribute to both theoretical understanding and changing practice within the field. Finally, co-researchers are asked to consider measures for how they know they will have successfully met the project's aims and desired outcomes.

C5: critically reflective

Being critically reflective involves both reflection on action and engaging reflexively to examine the impact of the changes and analyse the lived experience (Robertson 2000). Thus, a central component of PAR for all participant-researchers is on-going personal and critical reflection on practice and learning (Altrichter et al. 2002; Hawkins 2015; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2019; McNiff 2002; Selener 1997) and questioning attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and influences in broader social and organisational realities reflexively (Bolton and Delderfield 2018; Bradbury 2015; Ripamonti et al. 2016). Reflection as a continuous process throughout the project involves discussion before and during the implementation of interventions, and the evaluation of change (Avison et al. 1999; Seymour-Rolls and Hughes 2000). PAR provides numerous chances to reflect on action (reflection), critically analyses the impact and consequences of the action (reflexivity), and creates new informed actions which then undergo further reflection (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2019; Robertson 2000; Wadsworth 1998). It, thus, acts as a means for participant-researchers to critically consider the implications of their interventions, gain greater self-awareness of their practice, and develop theories from reflection that can inform new actions in practice (Jacobs 2018; Robertson 2000).

Critical reflection is a key maxim in McNiff's (2002) AR definition. Reflection allows participants to explore the assumptions underlying ideas and practice. It is an on-going process that allows us to 'make changes to data collection strategies based on questions and issues that arise during on-going data analysis process' (Mills 2007, 121). In other words, we are learning about the action through the action itself (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Reflection can take many forms: journaling, blogs, vlogs, notes, emails, conversations etc.

Questions related to critically reflective practice ask participant-researchers to consider how they will capture reflections throughout the project, how this data will be shared and analysed, how the reflections connect to theories, and how the reflections can be used reflexively to improve practice, knowledge, and self-awareness as both practitioners and action researchers.

C6: change-focused

A further essential characteristic of PAR is its focus on facilitating change in the context, participants, and problems under study. While the general goals and outcomes of different approaches to AR slightly differ, the overall theme of change is common to all (Avison et al. 1999; Checkland and Holwell 1998; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, 1988; McKay and Marshall 2001; Selener 1997; Wadsworth 1998; Williamson and Prosser 2002). Change, according to McNiff (2002, 86) 'begins in individuals' minds; it develops by individuals talking with one another and taking action as a result of a collective decision.

The change in focus of PAR involves improving the situation or identified problem through the active participation of the practitioners involved (Burns 2005; Selener 1997).

The context-specific nature of any study means a system for change is generated that is unique and valid for that particular context, processes, and outcomes alone (Brydon-Miller et al. 2020). Corey (1953 as quoted in Selener 1997) believed that ‘the value of AR is determined by the extent to which findings lead to improvement of the practices of those engaged in the research’. Furthermore, changes resulting from participating may include both personal and professional growth of the participant-researchers.

The questions for this concept focus participant-researchers on the changes they hope to achieve both for the project and the broader context within which the research takes place. In taking ownership of the process and outcomes, participant-researchers are also asked to consider how they have changed their practice through their experience of becoming action researchers.

C7: conversation-driven

Although conversation is not identified specifically in the earlier AR definitions, there is an underlying assumption that conversation and dialogue (specifically in dialogic AR) leads to enhanced insights and change (Coughlan 2019; Feldman 1999; McKernan 1996; McNiff 2002; McNiff and Whitehead 2011; Tracy 2013). In earlier descriptions of PAR, the role and impact of conversation to facilitate collaboration and promote change is limited or relegated to a means of collecting data. Feldman (1999) promotes the role of conversation in PAR as valid data because the knowledge-sharing and meaning-making processes gained through conversation support deeper understanding. In later research, Kemmis (2006) argues that knowledge is collectively constructed through on-going critical conversations in PAR. Reason and Bradbury (2008) identify the importance of communication spaces that are opened and sustained through collaborative partnerships. Tracy’s (2013) short section on PAR briefly identifies the value of dialogue to produce directly useful knowledge by asking participant views on issues and incorporating participant voices and to present findings back to participants. Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2019) further argue that communication spaces and the communicative action that takes place within them are critical to PAR.

By entering into PAR, each participant-researcher is engaged in the research, which means the conversations that take place are directed and meaningful. Thus, deliberative conversation can be seen as a process of ‘oral inquiry’ which goes beyond casual talk because it involves building insights from the examination of concepts and problem solving, and captures the ways participants relate theory to practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, as quoted in Feldman 1999). McKernan (1996, 166) states that ‘since AR has discourse at its core and since discussion, rather than the written word, is the chief means of communicating throughout life, it is thus a very potent tool’. Conversations that can count as research are those which facilitate communication and consensus, exchange information, and share understanding (Feldman 1999).

While McNiff (2002) also briefly identifies the connection between conversation and change, conversation proved to be a fundamental feature of my PAR experience (Feekey 2013). Although it proved to be time-consuming to record and summarise the conversations, rather than being provided with regular written reflections, the on-going conversations proved to be invaluable for supporting changes, addressing concerns, and providing the courage participant-researchers needed to experiment and explore the potential of

the interventions developed and their shifts towards learner-focused pedagogy. Conversation proved to be the catalyst for initiating, promoting, and facilitating the change. My research experience showed that bringing conversations to the forefront of PAR enables relationship-building, increased engagement, early identification of challenges, and increased ownership of the process for participants. Thus, the 7th C – Conversation-driven – emerged as a central characteristic of a collaborative PAR process.

The final set of questions asks participant-researchers to clearly identify conversation partners they will engage with throughout the project. They ask who will engage in regular conversations, when will more formal conversations be needed, and how will opportunities for informal conversations be recorded as data. Other questions focus on relationship-building through conversation with co-researchers and other potential participants, including those who may be resistant to engaging in conversations with the research team.

Conclusion

Unpacking the complexity of PAR may be a key step in engaging novice practitioner-researchers to take up the challenges of researching and implementing research-informed change. Researchers who have adopted PAR methodologies recognise the value of the method for increasing engagement with participants as co-researchers, enabling greater participant ownership of interventions, and acknowledging the context-specific nature of change-focused interventions. In research where the desired outcome is change facilitated through a combination of theory and practice, an engagement in critical reflection, and collaboration sustained through on-going deliberative conversation, PAR is definitely a method worth exploring.

The *7Cs Framework for Participatory Action Research* offers an overview of PAR methodology and connects researchers to relevant literature underlining the seven key characteristics identified. It also promotes PAR as an effective means of researching change through deliberate action, collaborative inquiry, and purposeful reflection. The seven characteristics shape the methodology to focus researchers' energies on problem solving and knowledge generation during the change process in collaboration with those directly affected by the change. It is designed as an entry point into the PAR literature, enabling novices to enter the conversation on collaborative AR methodology. The framework is not prescriptive but rather should be viewed as a living document that can be expanded as our understanding of PAR develop through new literature and PAR experiences, and questions specific to individual projects can be added if they are not captured here.

The framework can be used by novice action researchers embarking on their first PAR project experiences, or it can be presented by PAR project lead researchers to potential practitioner-researchers to induct them into the research framework they will be working within. The descriptors give an overview of each concept, but more importantly, provide a direct connection to key voices in the AR and PAR methodology space. The questions provide a checklist that can be explored in the planning stage of the project, then revisited and adapted as the project progresses and decisions are made. They can also be used as a final checklist to see whether the project achieved its aims and to support the reflective and reflexive processes embedded within PAR methodologies.

The framework should not encourage novice action researchers embarking on their own projects to avoid engaging with the key and emerging voices in the field, but rather act as a road map of where to start and to identify which aspects of PAR matter to them. Experienced lead action researchers can share the framework with novice participant-researchers to support them to understand AR methodology and use the questions as part of the project planning and reflective phases. It can also be primarily used with practitioner or participant-researchers who lack the time or inclination to delve into AR literature themselves. To be true participant-researchers and understand what engaging in PAR means for them, the *7Cs Framework for PAR* offers a clear outline and justification for the research method selected to meet their research aims and goals. The model is now ready to be tested in practice with an opportunity for future research to report on how the framework was used and participant-researcher insights into its usefulness for inducting them into PAR projects and methodology. Feedback is welcomed from any researchers who use it or adapt it for use within their own PAR research contexts.

Note

1. See: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2234417>.

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