Methodology Paper:

What is Participatory Action Research and how can it be used in
Health Promotion Research?

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1. Introduction

"If we want more evidence-based practice, we need more practice-based evidence." Lawrence W. Green[1]

Mertens (2005) offers several reasons the transformative paradigm emerged, one of which was the need for a link between theory and practice. She says that there is a need for practitioners to work in partnership with researchers to conceive of and carry out research and evaluation studies. "For research to be meaningful it must be forged from the felt needs of the practitioners who are sophisticated enough to work as partners in the research process" (p. 20). In the following paper, I hope to demonstrate the importance of participatory action research (PAR) as a methodology to bridge the gap between theory and practice. I will begin by describing action research, participatory research, community-based research, and PAR in an attempt to situate the latter in relation to the first three research approaches. I will discuss issues surrounding the evaluation of PAR and arguments to defend it as a valid, dependable methodology. I will then discuss knowledge translation and the role PAR plays to help ensure theory is applied in practice. I will conclude with a discussion of PAR and health promotion, in particular the utility of PAR for the capacity building framework which has been recently gaining ground in the health promotion literature. I hope to make a case for the viability of PAR in health promotion, a field of research which, when approached from a qualitative perspective, can struggle in the predominantly post-positivist domain of health and medical research.

2. Action research, participatory research, participatory action research, community-based action research…

Action research is based on the assumption that the mere recording of events and formulation of explanations by an uninvolved researcher is inadequate in and of itself. (Stringer, 1996, p. 7)

Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in participatory world view which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solution to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1)

The above two quotes demonstrate that action research (AR) requires the researcher to be involved in a collaborative problem-solving process which aims to develop practical knowledge that is grounded in both theory and practice. However, these definitions also illustrate some inconsistencies in the literature. The second quote says that AR is participatory. Is participation always a part of action research? How is participation defined? Does it mean the same thing when discussing participatory research (PR) or PAR? What is the extent of the involvement of the researcher in AR as compared to PR or PAR? AR addresses problems that are of a particular concern to people. Does a research issue need to originate in the community for the study to qualify as AR? Does this aspect also apply to PR and PAR? What elements actually distinguish AR, PR and PAR from each other? These are just some of the questions I sought to answer in doing the research for this paper. I will begin by offering descriptions of action research,

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[1] Retrieved from www.lgreen.net/index.html March 15th, 2008.

participatory research, participatory action research and also community-based research. I will attempt to point out similarities between the 'definitions' of these terms and also underscore distinguishing features.

2.1 Action research

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) write that the first generation of action research is credited to the social psychologist Kurt Lewin who, in 1946, proposed a cyclical research process of planning, acting, observing, and evaluating. This model recognizes the need for flexibility; it allows for changes in plans of action as the participants and researcher learn from experience and collectively reflect on the process to inform subsequent action. The objective of AR is to help practitioners improve their practices (Balcazar, Taylor, kielhofner, Tamley, Benziger, Carlin, & Johnson, 2004; Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; Stringer, 1996; Udas, 1998). According to Johansson and Lindhult (2008), AR has roots in positivism, but in the 1970's critically oriented researchers recognised AR as a way they could engage themselves in the emancipation of underprivileged groups by helping them, through reflection, to recognise and understand dominant and oppressive structures. Some authors have divided AR into two traditions: the pragmatic/technical/experimental and the critical/enhancement/empowering (Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; Sturt, 1999). The pragmatic tradition focuses on the Lewinian model, whereas the critical tradition focuses on the emancipation of the disenfranchised. This emancipatory orientation of AR is often associated with PR and PAR. Somekh (2006) for her part, defines AR very broadly and bases her definition on eight principles: 1) AR integrates research and action in a series of flexible cycles like that which Lewin (1946) proposed, 2) AR involves a collaborative partnership between researchers and participants, 3) AR involves the development of unique knowledge and understanding, 4) AR starts from a vision of social transformation and aspirations for greater social justice for all, 5) AR involves a high level of reflexivity, 6) AR involves exploratory engagement with a wide range of existing knowledge, 7) AR engenders powerful learning for participants, and 8) AR locates the inquiry in an understanding of broader historical, political and ideologue contexts. As will be shown, some of these principles overlap with those of PR and PAR.

2.2 Participatory research

Participatory research, according to Park (2001), differs from basic and applied social research in three ways: 1) people's involvement in the research process, 2) the integration of action with research, 3) the practice-based nature of the knowledge which is entailed. When considering the description of AR provided above, how does PR distinguish itself from AR? Park contends that the difference between PR and AR is in the central role non-experts play in PR. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) specify that the distinction lies in the shared ownership of research projects, the community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action. For their part, The Royal Society of Canada has defined participatory research as "systematic investigation, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change."[2] Additionally, the Participatory Research at McGill (PRAM) group indicates that "participatory research is a way of conducting research where researchers are in partnership with the intended users of the research - which may be individuals, organisations or entire communities."[2] Taylor, Jason, Keys,

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[2] Retrieved from http://pram.mcgill.ca/ March 26, 2008

Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, Durlak, and Holtz Isenberg (2004) indicate that participatory research refers to a wide range of approaches that empower community members to engage in research that increases their power and voice. According to Hawkins (2007): "the term 'participatory process' emphasises the fact that research need not be done 'on' subjects but can be a collaborative practice" (np). These definitions imply that the participatory researcher's goal is to educate and/or effect social change. Therefore, he or she engages in a systematic investigation involving meaningful collaboration with the intended users of the research findings in such a way as to ensure participants' perspectives are heard and used.

With respect to the objective of PR, it differs somewhat from that of AR. The purpose of participatory research is to bring about change by improving life conditions of participants (Park, 2001). In other words, the objective is not just to understand reality but to change it. PR emphasizes the achievement of local, consumer-driven goals over the traditional aims of positivist science (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004).

In 1981, Hall[3] outlined seven characteristics of PR, as cited in Hagey (1997)

1. The problem originates within the community or workplace itself.

2. The research goal is to fundamentally improve the lives of those involved, through structural transformation.

3. The people in the community or workplace are involved in controlling the entire research process.

4. The focus of PAR is on oppressed groups whose issues include inaccessibility, colonization, marginalization, exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.

5. PR plays a role in enabling by strengthening people's awareness of their own capabilities.

6. The people themselves are researchers, as are those involved who have specialized research training.

7. The researchers with specialized training may be outsiders to the community but are committed learners in a process that leads to fighting for change rather than detachment.

These characteristics seem to clarify what distinguishes PR from AR: participants control all aspects of the research process. Moreover, this author stipulates that the focus of PAR is necessarily on oppressed groups. However, two years later, Vandenberg and Fear (1983) classify Hall's model as radical PR in comparison to what they refer to as utilitarian PR. For Vandenberg and Fear (1983), utilitarian PR aims for social change for the benefit of participants but also theory building for the benefit of the researcher. Moreover, the researcher is seen as an expert collaborator. The radical form of PR, on the other hand, sees the researcher as merely a catalyst to the research process. The benefit of the research is solely for the participants who retain total control over the process. These two categories of PR are not dissimilar to the two categories of AR recently proposed by Johansson and Lindhult (2008).

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[3] Hall, B. L. (1981). Participatory research, popular knowledge and power: A personal reflection. *Convergence: An International Journal of Adult Education* **14**(3): 6-19.

2.3 Community-based action research

Stringer (1996) explains that community-based action research (CBAR) is a participatory approach to inquiry. It is collaborative, democratic (enables participation of all people), equitable (acknowledges people's equality of worth), emancipatory, and life enhancing. Moreover, a fundamental characteristic of CBAR is that it starts with a problem of a group, community or organisation. The purpose is for participants to understand their situation, thereby enabling them to solve the problems or difficulties with which they are confronted. According to Cheadle, Sullivan, Krieger, Ciske, Shaw, Schier, and Eisinger (2002), a distinguishing feature of CBAR is that it results in a concrete, sustained impact in the community where the research is being conducted. This description of CBAR is essentially the same as the description of PAR which follows, with the exception that it does not stipulate that participants are marginalized or oppressed.

2.4 Participatory action research

Balcazar *et al.* (2004) propose that PAR can be divided into two categories depending on its purpose. These two categories of PAR are essentially the same two categories of AR discussed earlier. The first is to enhance the effectiveness or efficiency of practitioners. This is achieved by involving practitioners in all stages of the research process. The second purpose is to help members of an oppressed group to identify and understand problems, hence enabling them to promote structural transformation. For Taylor *et al.* (2004), PAR is different than PR in that it incorporates Lewin's (1946) concept of action research. However, systematic inquiry and action are included in the definitions of PR presented above.

Although the definition and distinguishing features of PAR may not be clear from one author to another, certain characteristics seem to be fairly agreed upon. PAR seeks the development of theoretically informed practice for all parties involved (Hagey, 1997; Udas, 1998). As with AR, it involves critical reflection, for example, questioning assumptions on which practice is based (McTaggart, 1991; Udas, 1998). Furthermore, PAR is concerned with social justice (Udas, 1998). It focuses on oppressed groups and the research goal is for all members of the research team to work together to facilitate social, organizational or political change, thereby improving the lives of those involved through structural transformation (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004; McTaggart, 1991). In other words, this approach to research requires that those who were previously research 'subjects' participate directly in research processes; all participants do research on and for themselves. Udas (1998) specifies that PAR requires the participation of all affected community members with all members functioning as equals. Practitioners must be involved in each phase and *guide* every major decision pertaining to project direction and application of findings. This is a somewhat more supple view than that of Hall (1981) who says participants must *control* all phases of the research endeavour. Moreover, all processes should be applied in ways that benefit participants. Finally, with PAR initiatives, the improvement or change being sought is one which originates in the community and which the researchers and participants agree upon (Hagey, 1997; Hall, 1981; McTaggart, 1991). Table 1 summarizes seven key features of PAR as outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005).

Table 1. Seven features of PAR

Feature	Description
PAR is a **social process**	PAR is a process followed in social settings. It involves people (individually and collectively) trying to understand how they are formed and reformed as individuals *in relation to one another* in various settings.
PAR is **participatory**	People of a group try to understand how their *knowledge* frames and constrains their actions. PAR is research on oneself, *not* on others.
PAR is **collaborative**	People of a group examine their *practices* so as to improve their social *interactions*.
PAR is **emancipatory**	A goal is to help people of a group free themselves from social structures which limit their self-development and self-determination.
PAR is **critical**	People of a group deliberately question and try to change constraining ways of interpreting and describing their world.
PAR is **reflexive**	A goal is to help group members investigate their reality so as to alter it.
PAR aims to **transform theory *and* practice**	PAR articulates theory and practice in relation to one another. It aims to transform the theories and practices of those whose perspectives and practices shape the life conditions of people in a particular setting.

The above descriptions demonstrate that there is considerable overlap between AR, PR, CBAR and PAR. In particular, the degrees of participant control and involvement are somewhat nebulous. Before addressing this concern, I would like to turn to paradigmatic issues of PAR. Hopefully, this discussion will explicate PAR more fully.

3. The paradigm of PAR

The above description would seem to indicate that PAR lies somewhere between the critical theory and participatory paradigms as described by Lincoln and Guba (2003) or the transformative paradigm as described by Mertens (2005). Following is a discussion of the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of PAR.

3.1 Ontology of PAR

PAR projects are context driven and PAR findings are unique. Thus, PAR opposes the positivist view that an objective universal reality may be apprehended; reality is socially and historically situated. Moreover, PAR researchers recognise the influence of various societal structures and power struggles in the construction of reality (Udas, 1998). As such,

> "the product of participatory action research is not just knowledge but also different histories than might have existed if participants had not intervened to transform their practices, understandings, and situations and, thus, transformed

the histories that otherwise seemed likely to come into being. We look for the products of participatory action research in *collective action* and the making and remaking of *collective histories."* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 597, emphasis original)

3.2 Epistemology of PAR

In PAR projects, there is value in both the process and the outcomes (Udas, 1998). Challenges and the ways by which they are overcome constitute research findings. Moreover, PAR is explicitly value laden because it embodies an imperative for change (Somekh, 2006). The goal is to collectively improve or change practices, not to construct theory (Udas, 1998). As such, practice based, realistic, pragmatically useful knowledge is co-created by participants and researchers (Hawkins, 2007; Park, 2001). Thus, there is an interaction between the researcher and the participants. In fact, according to Fine *et al.* "PAR signifies an epistemology that underpins the belief that knowledge is embedded in social relationships and is most influential when produced collaboratively through action" (as cited in Hawkins, 2007). This collaboration must be based on mutual respect, trust, potential benefits, and acceptance of each party's responsibilities (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Stringer, 1996; Udas, 1998). McTaggart (1991) describes this collaboration as not mere involvement on the part of participants but rather an 'authentic participation'. This requires that the oppressed group with which the researcher works, participates in setting the agenda of the inquiry, in collecting and analysing data, and that they have control over the use of outcomes and the whole process. It is the participants who carry out the actual change. In other words, group members are responsible actors in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice. With regards to the collaborative role of the PAR researcher, he or she is a catalyst and a facilitator for change (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Stringer, 1996). Participants learn together and from one another (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004). Yet, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) caution that it is naïve to think that the facilitator can be an equal co-participant given that he or she has special expertise. Finally, researchers and participants may take on a variety of roles at different stages. Therefore, the line between the knower and the would be known is blurred.

3.3 Methodology of PAR

Given its ontology and epistemology, PAR lends itself to dialogic and dialectic methodologies. According to Udas (1998), the overall methodology must be participant-centred and non-alienating. This will serve to improve the communication within the social interactions which are central to PAR. Although quantitative methods are often used, PAR methodology is essentially qualitative relying heavily on methods of ethnography, phenomenology and case study (McTaggart, 1991; Mertens, 2005; Udas, 1998). Art, photography, video, oral history, storytelling, music, dance may all be used to help uncover the more submerged and difficultly articulated issues involved (Park, 2001). Moreover, given that PAR projects vary with the changing contexts and also as participants learn and evolve, the researcher/facilitator must be ready to employ a variety of complementary methods. In fact, this flexibility is the natural consequence of participants deciding which methods are most appropriate (Udas, 1998).

3.3.1 Reporting findings

Before closing this discussion, it is pertinent to consider how findings are reported or disseminated in PAR. Should we agree with McTaggart (1991), participants own the research

completely and must retain the results. Moreover, PAR participants are the intended users of the knowledge produced. Therefore, the modality for reporting research findings must be directed by, and meaningful to, participants (Udas, 1998). This means that the language used must respect cultural specificities (McTaggart, 1991). Involving participants in the dissemination phase of the research and ensuring that the method, language, and overall presentation of findings is coherent with the culture and the values of participants, will help to decrease the gap between the outsiders (academics/researchers) and the insiders (participants). As Lemke (1995) says: the textual and the political are interdependent and ideology links the two. The core idea of the concept of ideology is that there are certain meanings which we have come to take as common sense, but which support dominant-dominated relationships between various social groups. One goal of PAR is to reduce disparities and work as equals. This requires formulating research findings from the standpoint of the intended users of the research, so they are meaningful to them. To disseminate results only in scientific journals, a form of communication exclusive to the dominant elite, is incongruous to PAR.

4. Questions about control and participation and the possibility of a continuum

Some authors have proposed that PR and PAR are part of the family of AR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Others have discussed typologies of AR (Hart & Bond, 1996; Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; Sturt, 1999). However, this form of classification implies clear, agreed upon distinctions between the different research approaches. Yet, there would seem to be no such clear distinction. The main area of confusion seems to concern the issues of control and participation. These issues are a part of each of the four traditions discussed and warrant further consideration.

In considering the degree of control we relinquish as researchers and the degree of participation we require from participants, I think we need to ask ourselves what our goal is and also what the best way to achieve it is, given the specific context in which we are working. In fact, just as Allen and Hutchinson (2009) raise in their conclusion, I question the feasibility and necessity of putting the control of all the phases of research into the hands of the participants. Does the subject of the inquiry warrant participants' authentic participation? Is this degree of participation what they need? Perhaps the community just needs to collaborate with researchers so as to generate solutions which are specific to its context. Perhaps the process of generating and applying knowledge through an involvement rather than authentic participation will be sufficient to empower participants and to effect change.

Many authors stipulate that PAR is not about doing research on people but rather people doing research on and for themselves (Hagey, 1997; Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; McTaggart, 1991; Udas, 1998). But, are the two mutually exclusive? Suppose a researcher acting as a facilitator helps an oppressed community to act on a problem it perceives, to empower the community to continue to take action, and to disseminate the findings into the community in ways which are meaningful to community members. This researcher would be conducting PAR in the way McTaggart (1991) describes it or conducting PR in the way Hall (1981) describes it. However, should this researcher also document the process from the perspective of doing research on the community and should he or she publish the findings in scientific journals, is this researcher no longer conducting PAR? Ultimately, if the community participates to varying degrees in generating the knowledge and if the community retains access to this knowledge, has

the researcher not overcome the ethical difficulties associated with 'hit and run' (Hagey, 1997) research?

McTaggart (1991) emphasises that PAR is about individuals working collectively to change on an individual level, a group level, and eventually, a societal level. According to McTaggart, it follows that for this change to occur, it must be a goal of the participants. This implies that participants perceive themselves as part of the 'problem' from the outset. This requires an 'unmasking of hegemony' (Reardon, 1998). Hegemony is central to PAR because the community must recognise how it contributes to its own oppression before it can begin an empowerment or emancipatory process (Green, Poland, & Rootman, 2000; Hagey, 1997). However, considerable work may be necessary to bring a community to this level of critical awareness. Kelley, Plested, Edwards, Jumper-Thurman, Comello, and Slater (2003) proposed a model of community readiness to help design interventions to move communities along a scale of readiness to change. Should a researcher work with such a model so as to bring a community to a stage where it can begin the empowerment process sought through PAR, who is really in control of the research process?

One last nebulous issue strikes me. In reading McTaggart (1991) or Hagey (1997), one could assume that the defining characteristic of PAR is that it implies working with oppressed or marginalised populations. However, not all authors mention this condition—though most contend that PAR stems from the work of Paolo Freire (1970) and the critical theorists (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McTaggart, 1991; Somekh, 2006; Stringer, 1996; Udas, 1998), so perhaps the requirement of working with oppressed groups is to be implied. Yet, what about the researcher who collaborates with a community not typically considered oppressed, but which participates authentically and controls the process in the way McTaggart (1991) describes, does this study not qualify as PAR?

Given that the lines between the four traditions discussed are considerably blurry and given the questions regarding the feasibility and the necessity of participants controlling the whole research process and participating authentically, I find it would be more appropriate to consider a continuum. Some authors suggest a continuum defined by the degree of control the constituents of the study hold (Boutilier, Mason, & Rootman, 1997; Danley & Langer-Ellison, 1999; Hart & Bond, 1996; Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). On one end of the continuum, the researcher maintains control of the study and participants are involved only to a small degree. On the other extreme, participants have full control, participant authentically and the goal is emancipation. Between the two extremes, control is shared by researcher and participants, participants engage in the process to varying degrees and are empowered to varying extents (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004). Ultimately, PAR seeks to provide a means of enabling people to re-establish power and control in their lives and to realize their power as a member of a collective community (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004). Thus, it would appear the main concern is that the research benefits the participants and that the researcher does not merely use the community for his or her own academic benefit (Hagey, 1997; McTaggart, 1991; Udas, 1998). As McTaggart (1991) says, "if we decide that something is an example of participatory action research, we are suggesting that it is likely to have improved the lives of those who have participated."

5. Evaluating (and defending) PAR results

5.1 Internal validity

According to many, PAR is a qualitative methodology that seeks not only to understand, but to take action so as to transform social interactions and enable emancipation. Positivists and post-positivists believe action is a form of advocacy or subjectivity and it should remain the domain of communities other than researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). However, "doing research of any kind commits the [researcher] to a certain social relation" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 15) and the researcher's experiences matter to the research. Knowledge and ways of knowing are socially situated and one's own experiences establish one as a subject well placed to study oneself (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Gamson, 2003). Moreover, action is a powerful means to ensure that research results are, first, tied closely with the needs of the field for which they are intended and, second, that they are applied and produce the desired outcomes (this issue will be addressed in more depth in the section on knowledge translation). Furthermore, positivists and post-positivists believe that "the objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 61). Yet, according to Merriam (1998), there are six ways to enhance the internal validity of a qualitative study and involving participants in all phases of the research, from conceptualisation to dissemination of findings, is one of them. Finally, the value of PAR projects is measured by the extent of the improvement in practices, processes, and also specific outcomes of an intervention (Udas, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (2003) developed some criteria which may be used to judge the processes and outcomes of constructivist inquiry and are also highly appropriate to action research and participative inquiry. They include catalytic and tactical authenticities criteria which refer to "the ability of a given inquiry to prompt, first, action on the part of research participants, and second, the involvement of the researcher/evaluator in training participants in specific forms of social and political action (…)" (p.278), and also fairness which is defined as deliberate attempts to prevent marginalisation.

5.2 External validity

Given that PAR generates highly contextualised knowledge, study results can be discredited due to their 'lack' of external validity. However, the very fundamental nature of PAR is that it must be conducted locally; it is for the specific participants involved. In this sense to be able to generalise findings is not a goal of a PAR project (Udas, 1998). Further, Balcazar *et al.* (2004) indicate that with PAR, theory is built on an accumulation of knowledge from repeated field experiences. The combined experiential knowledge of PAR studies helps to better understand the ways in which communities or organisations function, the nature of the interactions under study, and the contextual and personal factors that intervene in the process. In other words, from the accumulation of case studies, trends can be uncovered (Somekh, 2006). In fact, Merriam (1998) mentions that naturalistic generalization is one way to conceptualise generalization in qualitative studies. This refers to the fact that rich, thick descriptions allow people look for patterns in data to explain and inform their own realities. Outcomes can even be predicted in similar situations (Balcazar *et al.*, 2004).

5.3 Reliability, dependability, consistency

Given that PAR projects are contextualised, reliability is somewhat of a misnomer. Lincoln and Guba (2003) suggest discussing the dependability and consistency of the data.

Triangulation is a way to confront findings with one another and, as such, verify their dependability and consistency. As mentioned previously, PAR researchers must be flexible and use a variety of complimentary methods. Observation of changes of practices over time, interview data from a variety of stakeholders which are collected at various different stages of the research are some ways triangulation may be achieved. This use of multiple data collection techniques is, in fact, a strength of PAR.

6. PAR and Knowledge Translation

> [Knowledge translation is] the exchange, synthesis, and ethically-sound application of knowledge— within a complex set of interactions among researchers and users— to accelerate the capture of the benefits of research for Canadians through improved health, more effective services and products, and a strengthened health care system. CIHR[4]

Knowledge translation is of particular concern to me. Physical activity promotion programs which are shelved rather than being diffused among practitioners and, more importantly, tailored to practitioners' specific contexts, ultimately represent a waste of time and money. In recent years, the importance of knowledge translation has become increasingly recognised. In fact, CIHR now offers an annual knowledge translation award to recognize teams or organizations which have achieved excellence in this field. PAR is a methodology which lends itself perfectly to knowledge translation. I will address this matter by presenting an organising framework for a knowledge transfer strategy (Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, & Abelson, 2003) and discussing its parallels with PAR.

The Lavis *et al.* (2003) framework consists of five main strategies. First, it is necessary for research organisations to transfer actionable messages, or in other words, concrete ideas upon which participants can act to improve their practices. This strategy is directly related to Somekh's (2006) discussion on generating knowledge through action research. To quote this author:

> Action research provides a means whereby research can become a systematic intervention, going beyond describing, analysing and theorizing social practices to working in partnership with participants to reconstruct and transform those practices. This presupposes that it is possible to generate actionable knowledge which is trustworthy in providing the foundation for improvement (Somekh, 2006, p. 27)

Moreover, this first strategy of the framework reminds the PAR researcher to work on minor changes which individuals can manage and control. This is consistent with McTaggart (1989)[5] who contends that PAR should start small.

The second element of the framework is that the target audience must be clearly defined, and the message must be tailored to the audience members, their contexts, and their issues. PAR projects stem from a specific community's needs. The communication of information which is adapted to the community is a natural part of the PAR process, as facilitators and participants collaborate throughout the complete process. Knowledge is co-created and therefore mutually

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[4] Retrieved from http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/24213.html March 31, 2008.
[5] Retrieved from http://www.caledonia.org.uk/par.htm March 15, 2008.

understood. Moreover, given that participants have full control over the dissemination of findings, or at the very least are taken into consideration because they are the intended users of the findings, the knowledge developed through PAR projects is necessarily transmitted to participants, and other members of the community, in ways which are meaningful to them.

The third element of the framework concerns the credibility of the messenger. Even if the message is tailored to a specific audience, the information will not be received and used if the messenger is not perceived as credible to the audience. PAR is based on equality between researchers/facilitators and participants. Ideally, participants will come to realise that the researcher/facilitator is working both with and for them, and as such, will be perceived as credible by participants. Furthermore, in many cases it will be preferable to transfer the knowledge to various categories of stakeholders. This would entail changing the messenger to ensure maximum credibility among each audience. Participants themselves may be called upon to act as messengers. Their direct connection to the issue with which the PAR project deals and their direct involvement in the research process will afford participants the credibility needed to successfully communicate study findings.

The fourth aspect of the framework deals with how knowledge should be transferred. Lavis *et al.* (2003) assert that passive methods of knowledge translation are inefficient. They recommend an interaction between the clinician and the 'expert' (or the participant and the researcher/facilitator in the context of PAR). The authors explain that over the long term, the participant and the researcher/facilitator can learn from one another which will help to create an environment conducive to efficacious knowledge transfer from the researcher/facilitator to the participant and also, appropriate and efficient usage of the knowledge by the participants. This type of collaboration is central to the PAR approach.

Finally, Lavis *et al.* (2003) discuss the effect with which knowledge should be transferred. As previously mentioned, PAR is a cyclical process involving critical evaluation of actions taken. Evaluating knowledge translation is also important. Assessing whether or not the knowledge is used in direct or indirect ways can contribute to the critical reflection advocated by PAR and hence, inform subsequent action, and improve the outcomes of the project and also the transmission of the results.

The above discussion demonstrates the compatibility of PAR with knowledge translation strategies. In fact, it shows that PAR methodology can make a significant contribution to knowledge translation. This contribution offers one justification of the viability of this approach to research. Furthermore, this knowledge translation framework justifies involving participants in the various phases of the research process. It is also essentially an educational framework and according to McTaggart's 16 tenets of PAR[5], education and learning are central to this methodology.

7. PAR and Health Promotion

PAR is a viable methodology for health promotion for two main reasons: the contextualised results and the collaborative approach. From the perspective of a policy maker, contextualised results are seemingly incongruent with Public health. Policy makers require gold standard results on which to base their decisions regarding social policy and/or legislation (Lather, 2006) and PAR results cannot be generalised in such a way as to qualify as a gold standard. Health promotion research can verify the utility of certain frameworks like social

marketing[6] and capacity building[7] and generalise these findings to various social groups, but the application of these findings, in other words the program development and implementation, must be tailored to the specificities of the social groups for which they are designed (Green & Kreuter, 1999). Yet, as already discussed, naturalistic generalization can be achieved using the PAR approach. The resulting rich, thick descriptions can allow the reader to recognise similarities and transpose certain elements to his own reality. In the case of physical activity promotion research conducted with a PAR approach, this would include describing the physical activity promotion program, as well as the processes used to develop it, the challenges the relationships with various actors posed, the aspects of these relationships which contributed to the success of the intervention, the changes in practices and outcomes, etc. Findings such as these can be used by future researchers and practitioners. They are valuable because they represent the outcome of the application of theories and models in real life situations. Researchers can only uncover such findings by collaborating with participants and helping them to adapt and apply knowledge in their settings. Thus, a shift in the definition of 'gold standard' is needed.

The collaborative approach advocated by PAR further justifies the use of this methodology in health promotion. More often than not, Public Health initiatives aim to educate the population with regards to various healthy and unhealthy lifestyle habits. These education initiatives are developed from Public Health's standpoint and, for the most part, they reach the more highly educated social groups (the more powerful, elite who are literate with regards to Public Health's common sense). In the case of many social groups (particularly marginalized ones), the cultural distance between Public Health values and their own is too great for the education to be effective. Thus, PAR initiatives would be ideal. The participation of those affected in all aspects of the research process, and also the importance given to process, critical reflection, and learning through doing could have significant impacts on the success of health promotion interventions. PAR also includes an element of continuity; ideally it is an ongoing process. As such, PAR methodology could help researchers begin to overcome the difficulty of health promotion program sustainability. Capacity building is a framework recommended for program sustainability and it is compatible with PAR methodology. This will be the focus of the next section.

7.1 PAR and Capacity Building

Program sustainability is a current issue in health promotion research. Sustainability, or program continuation, is a dynamic process which relies on the ability of a program to adapt to its environment over time (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). Capacity building is a framework which can help to equip communities with the necessary tools to ensure the sustainability of their initiatives. PAR methodology is highly compatible with this framework. Actually, it has been suggested that universities collaborate and develop partnerships with community organizations to help them build the capacity to adapt their programs to changing environments (Wetta-Hall, Ablah, Berry, Oler-Manske, & Molgaard, 2004).

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[6] social marketing is the application of commercial marketing concepts and tools to programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences where the primary objective is to improve the welfare of the target audiences and/or the society of which they are a part (Retrieved from http://www.social-marketing.org/papers/intersectortransfer.html April 4, 2008)

[7] This framework will be explained fully in the subsequent section.

Oliveira and Garcia Bengoechea (2006) conducted a review of capacity building literature in health promotion and outlined ten key strategies of this framework. Below is an outline of these strategies and their consistency with PAR.

1. *Engaging people and community*: it is important to identify and involve key community leaders as well as other community members. This will allow community members to empower themselves and develop the skills to take collective actions. Moreover, this strategy can lead to the development of partnerships which can work as a mechanism for social change. Four aspects of this capacity building strategy are in direct relation to PAR and its objectives: participation, action, empowerment, and social change.

2. *Challenging individuals' ways of thinking:* critical thinking and problem solving are central to PAR. "Individuals develop consciousness when thinking critically about the solution for their problems, which will generate awareness about their functioning society, and probably lead them to more active social roles" (Oliveira & Garcia Bengoechea, 2006, p. 16)

3. *Responding to individual needs first*: Udas (1998) states very clearly that PAR must serve the local participants first. Specifically, as Hagey (1997) points out, the issues investigated with PAR originate in the community and the goal is to improve the lives of those involved. PAR is about responding to the needs of participants.

4. *Using the appropriate language*: effective communication is crucial to the capacity building and knowledge translation processes. Language which respects cultural differences is essential. This aspect of capacity building parallels the PAR approach in the sense that the intended user of results is in the forefront of any PAR researcher's mind. Participants are meant to retain and use research findings and the dissemination methods used reflect this.

5. *Building trustworthiness*: the attempt for the researcher/facilitator to maintain equality between the research team and the participants is a means to create trust and maintain credibility.

6. *Building local capacity*: developing participants' skills so they may assume ownership of the research intervention is central to PAR.

7. *Building new networks*: networking in a community is fundamental to developing new partnerships and transferring knowledge which in turn can help to develop skills in increasing numbers of community members. This can lead to a greater number of community members feeling empowered to take action for social change. Again, these elements constitute the nature of PAR.

8. *Offering rewards and incentives to entice greater community participation and commitment*: PAR requires long term authentic participation. Participants must feel they are gaining something from their involvement if they are to continue. The researcher/facilitator must ensure that participants see concrete results of their actions and are praised or rewarded.

9. *Ensuring other people get credit and recognition for actions taken*: closely related to the previous point, recognition is important as it is a motivator. Moreover, it can help to increase participants' self-efficacy which can lead to feeling of empowerment and hence greater action and emancipation, two goals of PAR.

10. *Working invisibly*: this strategy applies directly to the researcher/facilitator. Giving credit to participants rather than claiming it for him or herself, is important for building trust and self-esteem. Moreover, it can lead to greater commitment on the part of participants and hence a greater chance that the initiative will be sustained. I find this a particularly interesting aspect with regards to PAR. As we have seen, many PAR authors advocate for relinquishing control completely to participants with regards to all aspects of the research process yet there are instances where this may not be feasible, necessary, or preferable. This aspect of the capacity building framework would seem to give PAR researchers the 'right' to maintain some control but in a very discrete manner. Such a tactic can allow for the goals of PAR to be achieved and the reality of the researcher and the research to be addressed.

8. Limitations of this paper

It is evident form the research I did for this paper that PAR has its roots in critical theory and specifically the works of Habermas and Haubert, as well as Freire's work on critical pedagogy. I did not discuss this aspect as given my current lack of knowledge in the area the discussion would have been beyond the scope of my comprehension. This paper, however, has piqued my interest to read further in the area of critical theory and critical pedagogy. I feel that expanding my knowledge in these areas will be particularly helpful to me in my future career in physical activity and health promotion, given that I am interested in contributing to reducing social health inequalities.

Moreover, partnerships are central to PAR. An analysis of the literature on partnerships would certainly contribute to the discussion of PAR, its value as a methodology and its pertinence to health promotion. However, I felt this would be beyond the scope of this paper.

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