



Indexed in NepJOL  
JPPS Star-Rated Journal

Journal of NELTA Gandaki (JoNG)

(A Peer Reviewed Open Access Research Journal)

ISSN: 2676-1041 [Print]

E-ISSN 2822-1559 [Online]

Vol. VI Issue (1-2) November, 2023, pp. 66-77

eJournal site: [www.nelta.org.np/page/gandaki](http://www.nelta.org.np/page/gandaki)

## Participatory Action Research in Social Sciences and Education

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### Abstract

*Participatory action research, as other qualitative methods like phenomenology, ethnography, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and case studies, has emerged as a distinct field of study and established itself as a research design in the field of social sciences and education. This methodological conceptual paper presents a review of participatory action research papers highlighting their meaning, purpose and use in research along with their definitions, the process of conducting research through participatory action research as a methodology, its guiding principles, strengths, weaknesses and challenges, applications, misconceptions and analysis of previous studies through participatory action research in various disciplines and contexts. This paper also highlights how participatory action research elevates the marginalized communities involved in the research process, solves their workplace problems and transforms their identities throughout the research by reviewing a few sample studies through participatory action research. The findings show that participatory action research has been immensely used in the*

*social sciences and educational research for creating new knowledge as well as improving the existing situation. This paper might provide some significant insights into understanding and employing participatory action research to the teachers, teacher educators, and researchers who opt for using research as part of their academic degrees.*

**Keywords:** Participatory action research, research design, cyclical process, emancipatory

### Introduction

Many researchers (De Oliveira, 2023; Klocker, 2012; Koshy, 2005; Pain et al., 2019) have used the participatory research approach as a methodology for systematically exploring phenomena and taking necessary actions to improve them. Participatory research has been widely used as a research design, method and overall framework (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). It follows the practice of collaboration with the participants connected to the issue of being studied for action or change. Participatory researchers often use methods and tools suggested in the framework in a participatory and democratic way during the research process. Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) introduced the participatory research methods including the holistic picture of participatory research, the specific terminologies across disciplines, the basic elements that make research engaging, and models with the options to be chosen for the beginner researchers. Participatory research is action-oriented and emphasizes the direct involvement of local priorities and perspectives (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Cornwall and Jewkes defined participatory research as the research strategies that focus on a sequential process of reflection

#### Article History:

Submitted: 28 June 2023

Reviewed: 20 August 2023

Accepted: 2 September 2023

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Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3126/jong.v6i1-2.59713>

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Association, Gandaki Province

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Publisher

Nepal English Language Teachers'

Association Gandaki Province,

Pokhara, Nepal

Email: [neltagandaki2018@gmail.com](mailto:neltagandaki2018@gmail.com)

URL: [www.nelta.org.np/page/gandaki](http://www.nelta.org.np/page/gandaki)

and action to acknowledge local knowledge and perspectives (p, 165). This shows that participatory research is an overarching terminology for research designs, methods and frameworks. It highlights the co-construction of research through direct partnership with the participants/community people. In participatory research, unlike other conventional methods such as quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods, the process of involving the participants in every step of the research process includes facilitative participation, shared decisions and mutual learning (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). The methods of conducting research necessarily include the data collection process, analysis, interpretation, dissemination of data and enacting changes.

Various participatory research designs are available in the practice, such as action inquiry (Torbert, 2004), action learning (Pedler, 2011; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020), action research (Adelman, 1993; Altrichter et al., 2002), action science (Friedman et al., 2004), appreciative inquiry (Watkins et al., 2011), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Israel et al., 2019), Educational Action Research (Mertler, 2019), teacher inquiry (Mertler, 2021), Emancipatory Research (Oliver, 1997), Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Baum et al., 2006) Practitioner Inquiry (Anderson et al., 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). These participatory research frameworks have variations in practice such as action reflective learning, critical action learning or unlearning, cooperative inquiry, and dialectical inquiry, along with arts-based, critical, feminist, first person, systematic, organizational development, community-based, teacher-initiated, emancipatory, youth participatory, practitioner-oriented, and critical practitioner action research. For example, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed can be taken as one of the participatory action research products for community engagement and emancipation (Freire, 2020) Despite the variations, they have common premises that they value 'genuine and meaningful participation' (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 5). The methods which offer "the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a person with the right to express yourself and to have the expression valued by others" (Abma et al., 2019, p. 127) can be the transformative and empowering methods. The researchers have the choice points in each step of the research process (partner, design, collect, analyze, disseminate, and act). These choice points can be functional for informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering the participants (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). In a nutshell, participatory research methods are expected to fulfil the double goals: knowledge creation and change in real-world action democratically and collaboratively (Young, 2006). The researchers must deeply engage the stakeholders and also the community at each stage of the research process which eventually benefits the participants for collective wisdom and change.

In the context that many researchers often get confused about whether research conducted through a participatory action research approach is easily accepted as a part of their higher education degrees, this paper reports how participatory action research could be applied to the research and what opportunities and challenges could occur in the research journey. Studies showed participatory action research projects would engage, empower and emancipate the research participants. This paper might contribute to the academia's understanding of participatory action, its definitions, guiding principles, processes and the opportunities and challenges while applying it as a research methodology.

### **Defining Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research has been defined differently in different contexts. Bassey (1998, p. 93) described it as 'an enquiry which is carried out to understand, to evaluate and then to change, to improve educational practice'. Similarly, Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 192) (as cited in Rose and Grosvenor, 2013) described the emergent nature of action research while defining it. They explained action research as the procedure designed to solve the immediate concrete problem that occurred in the existing working situation. Following a step-by-step process under sincere monitoring, the practitioners

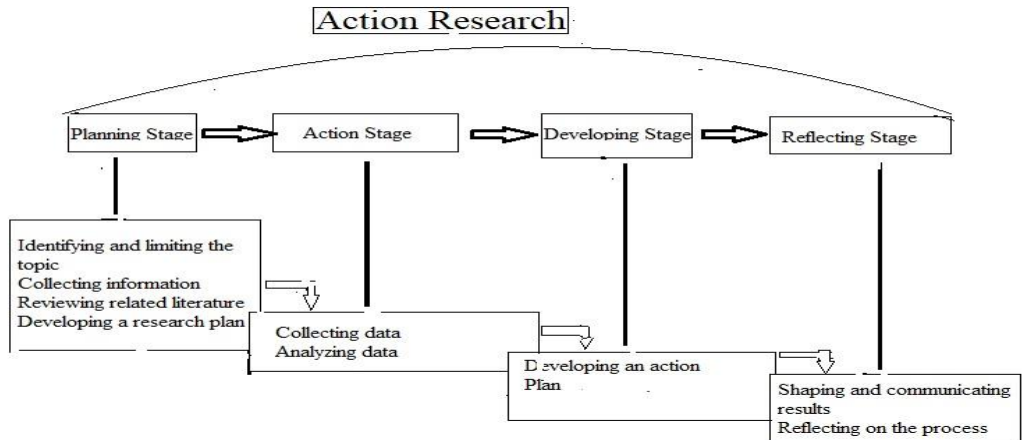
employ a variety of mechanisms such as questionnaires, interviews, diaries, field notes, and reflections over some time. The process of research always encompasses feedback to improve the situation and bring about some changes modifications or redefinitions. Action research is all about researching own practice or the people involved together rather than people out there. It is participatory and emergent. It can also be useful for real problem-solving. It is situation-based and theory-building from the practice. Moreover, it deals with individuals or groups of people who have a common purpose to improve their practice involving analysis, evaluation and reflection.

### Action Research Processes

Many studies (Ciampa & Reisboard, 2020; De Oliveira, 2023; Klocker, 2012; Koshy, 2005; Pain et al., 2019) have given various stages/procedures for the participatory action research method of research. Particularly it is known as a cyclical/spiral process in which a complete cycle completes and is repeated time and again. One cycle has four stages: the planning stage, the acting stage, the developing stage and the reflection stage.

Figure 1

*Stages of Action Research* (adapted from Mertler, 2020)



Action research involves recurring stages of planning, observation, action and reflection along with the evaluation. These stages are recursive in almost all the action research process. The influence of Lewin's original ideas continues to organize action research works in the spiral of stages that comprises observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). These cyclical stages are recurring even in another cycle. Reviewing many research and research reports through an action research approach reports a common framework for participatory action research that undergoes a "cyclical process of fact-finding, action, reflection, leading to further inquiry and action for change" (Minkler, 2000, p. 191). The contributory writers on participatory action research, Kemmis and McGaraat (2005, p. 276) also emphasized the recursive steps in PAR such as plan, act, observe and reflect and repeat the same process of plan, act, observe and reflect until the situation is improved.

Likewise, Kelly (2005) suggests that the beginning of action research is followed by collaboration with the community partners in three cycles: planning, acting, and reviewing. In the same line, Valsa Koshy (2005) suggested a list of stages to be followed in the conduction of participatory action research. These states are identification of topic and context setting, review of related literature, emphasizing the topic research question or hypothesis, careful planning of the activities, collecting required data, analyzing the data and fixing the problems, implementing the plan, reflecting on the results

and reporting the changes. In the literature on action research, many action researchers (Acosta & Goltz, 2014) often mention the basic common four phases involved in action research assessment, planning, action, and reflection. Among the processes mentioned and suggested by the previous studies, Clark et al. (2020) provided clear steps for conducting action research in the educational setting. These steps are almost similar to many other scholars such as topic identification in a particular educational context, literature review, revision of the topic, construction of research questions, planning of research activities, collecting data, analysing them, doing real action, reflection, reporting, sharing and documenting. These processes can be useful for conducting action research in the classroom setting as well. Aligning these steps of action research to the rigorous process of educational research, these steps can help the researchers.

### **Participatory Action Research as a Research Methodology**

Pain et al. (2019) provided the participatory action research toolkit for conducting PAR as an approach to learning, research and action. They have defined it as “collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social or environmental issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it. (p. 2). PAR is different from other traditional research approaches in the sense that it is initiated by participants at workplaces rather than an outsider, funders or academicians. Moreover, it offers a democratic and practical model of producing, taking ownership, and using the knowledge produced themselves it is collaborative at every stage in nature that involves discussions, reflections and applications intending to bring about changes or improvements in the issues researched. Since PAR is a research approach to explore and improve the practices with a set of principles and practices for identifying issues, designing plans, conducting activities, analyzing and acting, it can also be used as a research methodology. It is not a single method but an integration of multiple methods such as group discussion, interviews, observations, videos, diagramming, and photography. It has a typical and cyclical stage of action and reflection from the beginning to the end of any PAR project. In the toolkit offered by Pain et al. (2019, pp. 4-8), it is said to include a set of questions at every stage of PAR. For example, they said to include various questions for collaboration (who will be involved in conducting this research? what roles will they have? do we need to invite outside experts? what principles will we agree on in working together? How will we work? Who will facilitate the meeting? How will we plan the details of the research? How will we generate the opportunities, reflect as well as plan and act?), knowledge (what questions are most important? what different kinds of knowledge are going to be important? what methodological process do we need to employ to answer our research questions: what kinds of skills will be needed?, what each person present contribute to the research process?), power (who usually conducts the research and decides on the issues identified? Does our research allow others to plan the research? Are the people involved in the functioning group represent the wider group affected by that particular issue? Are there other people who are not involved, but need to be involved in the research? How will we maintain the hierarchy and harmony in the group so that everyone listens to each other in the meetings? How will we address the disagreement, confirm that we don't gloss over differences, but discuss and work through different opinions?), ethicalities (Do individual participants or the group desire to be anonymous? How do we maintain accountability? How do we maintain the storage security of the information so that participants feel secure? What might be possible harms the research may cause in the future and how do we avoid them? What can be the potential benefits of the research and how can we increase them?), theory generation (How can we keep records of all the ideas, discussions and developmental progress of the research? How will we reflect on the achievements and shortcomings of the research during the process? Who is responsible for analyzing and understanding

the findings of the research? Who is involved in the meaning-making process and what does that mean? What outputs will we expect from the research?), taking action (what changes are required based on the research findings? Who will implement the findings? Who can show the ability and time to conduct follow-up activities and what resources can help to do that? How will we share and promote the research findings? Who will support and communicate the results and stimulate changes?), and researchers' well-being and emotions (Is the topic of the research relevant on which the people care passionately or directly affects their well-being? How will we make sure that our workplace is comfortable and hospitable for participants? How can we manage the negative emotions of the participants in the meetings? How might the results of the research affect the outsiders in the participatory action research? Do we have alternative strategies to overcome such problems that arise during the implementation of the research results? These toolkits could be utilized to guide the research methodology through PAR.

Lewin (1946) stated, "You cannot understand a system until you try to change it". As expressed by Lewin, only the talk, exploration, and discussion may not be possible to bring about changes in the existing situation. PAR as a research methodology can be an alternative qualitative approach to improve/solve practical problems. The main aim of qualitative research is to describe and understand the phenomena rather than to predict and control them (MacDonald, 2012). PAR is considered a subset of action research which is the "systematic collection and analysis of data to take action and make change" (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p. 264) by generating practical knowledge (MacDonald, 2012). Action research embeds myriads of other terminologies such as participatory action research, participatory research, community-based participatory research, participatory inquiry, practitioner's research, and classroom-based research which might be confusing for novice researchers to distinguish and conduct action research (Macaulay et al., 2001). The common purpose of all research is to bring social change with a specific action as the ultimate goal (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). By involving researchers and community members who desire to improve their situation, action research often opts for social change

The philosophical underpinning of participatory action research is the change-oriented action that is value-laden and morally committed (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Therefore, participatory action researchers try to understand themselves and the phenomena being intervened concerning other individuals in social contexts along with the epistemological assumptions underlying action. Participatory action research also aims to create knowledge as an active process, knowledge being uncertain and the object of the enquiry (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 206). Action researchers believe that the philosophical underpinnings of participatory action research are similar to "postmodern tradition that embraces a dialectical of shifting understandings whereas objectivity is almost impossible and multiple or shared realities exist" (Kelly, 2005, p. 66). The philosophy of PAR embodies the idea that the people in the community must have the right to determine their development and participate meaningfully in the process of analyzing the results or solutions by recognizing the needs of local people for sustainable development (Attwood, 1997, p. 2). In participatory action research, the role of participants remains the co-researchers since they engage in the research process from the beginning to the end for co-constructing the knowledge.

### **Guiding Principles for Action Research**

The theory of participatory action research is guided by two reasons: the first one is that it is an effective way of imparting knowledge acquired from the experience of participants in the workplace (McTaggart, 1994). McTaggart (1994), further, states that the guiding principles are descriptive as well as prescriptive, whereas, in the second reason, the recipients should perform an educative function.

Lewinian approach (1946) to cyclic action research emphasizes the need for an action plan to be flexible and responsive. Two works were substantive in Lewin's work: group decisions and

commitment to improvement. Participation means taking ownership of the knowledge. Tandon (1988) identified many determinants of actual participation in research. These determinants were listed as participants' active role in setting the agenda of research, their participation in the process of data collection and analysis, and their dominance over the utilization of the results and the entire research process. It is visible from the literature that PAR engages participants from the academic fields and workplace with unique relationships.

Participatory action research is democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing because it selects the participants based on the criteria given with equal access to them and helps them to transform through action. McTaggart (1989) outlined 16 tenets of PAR such as the active approach to improve social practices, real participation of the individuals; collaborative self-reflective learning communities; and involvement of practitioners for theory building, record-keeping, making critical analysis, political, initiated from small cycles and groups. Likewise, De Oliveira (2023) identified seven components that characterize participatory action research such as originating from the problem in the community, oriented to a drastic change of social reality and improvements in the lives of participants, full and active participation of the community, engagement of a range of powerless groups of individuals, creating greater awareness in individuals and mobilizing them for self-reliant development, and making self-determined participants, initiators, facilitators and learners during the process.

Participatory action research shapes the identity of the individual and groups through the collective project which improves their work and the way it is understood (theorization). Furthermore, it increases the collaboration with the individuals within their institution and beyond for understanding the situation, solving the problems and developing their own professional space. It attempts not only to change the individuals but also the culture of the groups, institutions, and societies where they belong, bringing changes in the ongoing discourses, practices and organizational context from the perspective of the distribution of power, unifying the intellectuals and the project, engaging the politics of research and action (McTaggart, 1991).

### **Strengths of Action Research**

The PAR always identifies and values the people as social beings within the broader social, political, and economic context. It also seeks to address the issue of significance concerning humans and their communities. In participatory action research, participants are not only treated as the subject of study rather they are treated as active participants and contributors to the research. It attempts to rebuild the participants' capacity as creative actors in the world, engage them in the decision-making process and empower them by being involved in the research process. Since it as a collective inquiry, develops the ownership of the participants in the research and its outcomes. Moreover, it empowers oppressed individuals to partner the social change. It also provides the opportunity to collaborate the individuals with diverse knowledge, skills and expertise during the process of research. In this research design, individuals learn by doing. The process in PAR is transformative, empowering, liberating, and consciousness-raising for its participants. Furthermore, it provides critical understanding and self-reflection to the researcher and participants. PAR enhances the collective consciousness and the democratization of the participants (De Oliveira, 2023).

### **Applications and Benefits of Action Research**

Action research has been useful in understanding the problem and improving it directly being involved in it since it is the 'systematic inquiry into one's practice' (Johnson, 2008). In the field of education, it is the process which supports teachers to study their classrooms and improve the quality or effectiveness of teaching-learning. Mertler (2020) provided six ways of making PAR and teacher inquiry critical in any profession. They are constructing teachers' knowledge base, developing skills, enhancing

teachers' agency, teacher empowerment, improvement of educational practices and professional growth. Among them, Vaughan and Mertler (2020) highlighted teacher empowerment, the improvement of educational practice and professional growth as the important ones. The first application of action research is directly concerned to lead to the improvement of educational practices because the researchers or educators study their practice by critically examining and reflecting on their problems related to their contexts. The action researchers identify their problems, collect the data and finally engage in the process of data informed and practical decision-making. Professionals, teachers and teacher educators get the solutions to their presenting issues at the workplaces and solve them through the process of action research.

Similarly, through action research or teacher inquiry, teachers can grow themselves successfully in their profession. (Vaughan et al., 2019; Mertler, 2013). The application of action research has become the alternative to professional growth for many teachers and teacher educators. Action research has been considered one of the major means of in-service teachers' professional development in education. For example, in school education in Nepal, the provision of granting one mark for one action research each year has been made just for promotion. In this regard, Oliver (1980) contended that in-service teachers benefit from action research as a key component of professional development since it promotes the culture of posing questions and findings solutions to solve their immediate problems.

Action research and teacher research can be highly effective tools for teachers' empowerment. When teachers engage themselves in the process of research- identifying issues, collecting data by using various tools, making subsequent decisions based on the data and taking necessary interventions for the action and change, they experience, get knowledge and empowerment. That also helps them to innovate, create and apply to their education contexts. The whole process becomes truly empowering themselves. The studies suggested various benefits of participatory action research in education such as empowerment, collaboration, engagement, change, professional community building, and emancipation (Klocker, 2012; MacDonald, 2012; McTaggart, 1989; Minkler, 2000).

There are various advantages to using action research as a method of research. MacDonald (2012, p. 39) provides five characteristics/benefits of action research. First, it is open to all the competing possibilities in the educational context because it rejects the positivistic notion of objectivity, rationality and truth. Second, it invites the practitioner's reflective and interpretive subjectivity and develops localized theory and pedagogy. Third, it provides opportunities for educators to self-realize and understand their practices by exploring and analysing the existing situation. Fourth, it links reflection and action encouraging the educators or researchers to overcome the problems for pedagogical changes through the systematic exploration into the educational context. Finally, it involves deep consideration of theory and practice and also demonstrates critically reflective action by developing and organizing knowledge with the practice.

### **Sample Studies on Action Research**

Many dissertations and articles through participatory action research are available online and offline repositories. Journals, such as the Journal of Teacher Action Research, Action Research, and Educational Action Research publish articles based on participatory action research. For example, one recent study on action research: exploring the teaching of English and academic writing as a social practice in a British Malaysian University by Alison Abraham at the College of Education, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia in 2016 followed the PAR as research methodology. The purpose of that study was to analyze and improve English for academic purposes in the Malaysian university setting. Taking an academic literacies perspective, the study attempted to capture the complexities of teaching and learning academic writing within a tertiary classroom. The researcher used post-method pedagogy

to guide a teacher while implementing the action plans. The researcher used action research with 117 voluntary students in six cycles (semesters) over two years and collected data from various sources such as teacher diaries, interviews with colleagues and students, students' letters, email exchanges, and assignments. In the study, the researcher's journey of becoming a critically reflective teacher alongside the student's growth as academic writers has presented the findings. The study reports the findings that power mismatches can be reduced through negotiated interactions, students' autonomy was increased after the knowledge gained from the study, and students were engaged in learning after ensuring the relevance of social and cultural context (Abraham, 2016).

The researcher engaged in teaching the students for two years long time and kept records of all the documents, analyzed and presented in the form of a dissertation. The analysis of the power conditions, knowledge conditions, and socio-cultural conditions have been developed as the main themes/results of the study in the narrative form. It shows that action research can be applied along with narrative inquiry.

Many studies (Campbell, 2023; Kemp, 2023; Sanna, 2021) have also applied participatory action research as a research methodology for completing their formal university degrees. Campbell's study uses PAR methods for the professional learning community to investigate trauma-informed practices with six co-researchers (participants in the American context. Sanna's study (2021) also used participatory action research as a method to explore the experiences of bilingual teachers at an elementary school in the professional learning community. The study found that the participants in the professional learning community enjoyed the safest spaces for learning, group work and reflection. Participatory action research methods in the field of social sciences and education were found for the participants' engagement, knowledge construction and immediate use of the research findings in the practice.

### **Misconceptions and Criticisms of Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research is not what academics and workers normally think about. It is more systematic and collaborative in gathering the data on which to base the reflection and plan change. It is not only problem-solving. It is also problem posing where it finds the values and plans realized by the work in real-life situations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). It is oriented by the quest to improve and understand the problems by getting involved in it and making some changes. PAR is not research conducted by outsiders but research by practitioners on their practices. It treats the people as independent, responsible change agents who can solve their problems themselves, make their histories and construct knowledge. It never makes the people subject of study but encourages them to engage in the research and improve the existing situation. It is also not the method or technique for policy analysis and implementation because it never accepts the truths created by outsiders. Moreover, it is not the scientific method of any social work because it does not test hypotheses using hard data. It further works in the natural setting. It is systematically evolving, a living process changing through living dialectics of researcher and research (Carr & Kemmis, 2009).

Kemmis and McGarrat (2005) illustrated four types of myths, misinterpretations and mistakes in critical participatory action research. They grouped them into four clusters:

“... exaggerated assumptions about how empowerment might be achieved through action research, confusions about the role of those helping others to learn how to conduct action research, the problem of facilitation, and the illusion of neutrality, the falsity of a supposed research-activism dualism, with research seen as dispassionate, informed, and rationales and with activities seen as passionate, intuitive, and weakly theorized. An understatement of the role of collective and



how it might be conceptualized in conducting the research and in formulating action in the project and its engagement with the public sphere in all facets of institutional and social life” (p. 284).

Similarly, Clark et al. (2020) stated three criticisms commonly occurred in action research practices. The major criticisms they discussed were the lack of rigour and trustworthiness in comparison to other research methodologies; the generalizability of the findings to other contexts and the deficit model as its basis (pp. 34-36). As they explained in the article, these criticisms can be minimized by maintaining rigor throughout the research process from selecting issues to collecting and reporting.

### **Challenges in Doing Participatory Action Research**

There are several challenges, for example, diversity in meanings of PAR and interchangeable use of terms such as action research, participatory action research, practitioners' research, and novice researchers might get confused. Since there is a lack of a comprehensive and balanced way to learn about the diverse origins, theories, methods, motives and problems associated with the related field (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), the researchers may remain in dilemmas about whether to follow PAR as a research methodology. Another challenge can be the inclusion of community members in the research team because they may have problems maintaining commitment throughout the research since PAR requires time, knowledge and sensitivities on the part of researchers to participants' agenda. Moreover, there may be a divergence of perspectives, values and abilities among the members (Macdonald). The next challenge can be the balance of power and establishing the relationship in PAR. Issues of power imbalances and the establishment of egalitarian relationships must be addressed before initiating PAR research (Gillis & Jackson; Maguire, 1987). There may be misunderstanding among the people involved, lack of agreement, wrong perceptions, directions and questions resulting in irrelevant data (Wadsworth, 1998).

While using PAR as a methodology, the researchers need to be sensitive because the researchers may have to prove its legitimacy to others. Those conventional researchers who are not used to open-ended research designs might criticize it. The most criticized aspect of PAR from a scientific perspective is that it is a soft method of research (Young, 2006). Therefore, other researchers might challenge it for employing as a research methodology as it emphasizes “voice and everyday experiences” and not hard data (Young, 2006, p. 501).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Participatory action research as it aims to transform the existing situation and emancipate the research participants, has been widely applied in the field of social sciences and education for exploring workplace issues and overcoming them through collaboration, participation and action. Its cyclical and transformative nature has also fascinated many emerging researchers to adapt it in their research as a methodology. Moreover, the critical review of its origin, features, and practices shows that participatory action research can bridge the gap between theory and practice as it is always oriented to generate practical knowledge and also to practice the knowledge created in the local context. Furthermore, participatory action research engages the community people in the process of research and takes ownership of the knowledge or change that occurs. Although it is often criticized for being loosely designed and not systematically/scientifically conducted to produce true scholarship, scholars have suggested ethical considerations and quality standards for its rigour. Its popularity has tremendously increased as the qualitative approach to coping with local issues and theorizing the knowledge produced by the practitioners. This paper might be helpful to understand and apply participatory action research in the field of social sciences and education as a research methodology. Moreover, this can be insightful to the teachers, researchers and policy makers for taking into practice.

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