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Demonstrating the impact of Participatory Health Research

Participatory Research (PR)

- an approach designed to ensure, and establish, structures for participation by communities affected by the issue being studied, representatives of organizations, and researchers in all aspects of the research process

Defining characteristics

The aim is to maximise the participation of those whose life or work is the subject of the research

“in all stages of the research process, including the formulation of the research question and goal, the development of a research design, the selection of appropriate methods for data collection and analysis, the implementation of the research, the interpretation of the results, and the dissemination of the findings”

The label

- Participatory Action Research
- Participatory Health Research
- Participatory Social Research
- Community Based Participatory Research
- Design methods research
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Why participatory research?

- Ethical
 - Political
 - Methodological
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- Cook, T (2011) Authentic Voice: The Role of Methodology and Method in Transformational Research

ethical

- To exclude the voices of those with lived experience in relation to the issue or practice being researched challenges our notions of the moral, the fair and the just.

methodological

- Knowledge can only ever be partial if it is constructed without the authentic voice of those with lived experience.
- Engaging with the voices of others disturbs - leads to loss of certainty but provides space for new seeing – for learning together – the impetus for action

political

- If authentic voice is not afforded to those with experience, issues relating to their lives can be overshadowed by the voices of others who may have different experiences, needs and interests
- Who decides on the meaning drawn from research, and how it is disseminated, distributes power.
- Being excluded from knowledge production reduces opportunities to inform, shape and transform practice for improving lives.
- Designed to make a difference, make a change – to have impact.

The impact agenda

- Governments
- Funders
- Universities

Pat Thomson: EARJ Vol 23 (3)

-might be forgiven for thinking that, in this context, their moment in the sun had finally arrived. The idea that research might make a difference is integral to our field.

Traditional methods

- Researcher (person without experience of what is being researched) sets the questions from their understandings of a situation.
- Participant answers the questions, learns from that articulation, but lacks opportunities to delve into depths of own tacit assumptions and knowledge – lack of critique
- Bias is seen as something to be removed
- Data analysis is carried out by 'external' researchers who are more likely to make sense from their perspective

PHR.

- Is not
 - based on applying inflexible templates for enquiry
 - based on replicability procedures
 - focused on measuring the measurable
 - validated through distancing
 - geared to eradicating complexity and bias
 - expecting to find a fixed and given truth
 - of linear design – where impact is produced at the end

Articulating impact: key issues

- Definition of impact driven by approaches that elevate the canons of positivistic enquiry
- What impact is, where and how it occurs need to reflect the values, function, purposes and processes of PHR.

Key issue

- **The attempt to measure impact as a concrete, visible phenomenon that is fixed in time and space, that one part does to another party....whereas deep co-production is a process often involving a gradual, porous and diffuse series of changes undertaken collaboratively.**
- Pain et al (2015) Mapping Alternative Impact: Alternative approaches to impact from co-produced research

Impact and its repercussions (ICPHR draft paper on impact)

- Individual and community transformational learning
- Building personal and organisational capacity
- Strengthening organisational structures
- Social innovations – extending relationships and acquiring new partners
- Creation of new and multiple forms of local knowledge and evidence
- Advancement of existing theories or development of new paradigms
- Social capacity – individual and collective empowerment to make decisions
- Policy change and social movement

Impact: ICPHR Draft

- the intended and unintended consequences of PHR process
- occurs throughout the research process and continues after it is completed.
- can be both positive and negative
- involves some form of change within the local or wider complex socio-ecological system or set of systems in which the research is a taking place.

Change

- can ripple out and take place in different subsystems and levels..
- is emergent from the interactions amongst those involved in the research.
- is as dependent on the previous history of relationships as it is contingent upon research context.
- can be assessed over time from the different perspectives of all involved, individually and collectively.

Evidence of impact

- Not well documented in papers
 - Difficulties in conceptualising and articulating the types of impact that ensue from participatory research approaches.
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- APRIL Project (Cook et al 2012).

Accessing Participatory Research Impact and Legacy: the issues

- Prevailing paradigm for reporting created a wariness of documenting less tangible impacts.
- Changes in thinking tend to emerge cumulatively as part of the process of learning during the project. People may not, therefore, recognise their own learning (change) – not observable
- The unexpected impacts (often considered most important) are not reported as not set out in original documentation of expected impacts

- Short timescales for research funding meant that changes in practice as a result of changes in thinking, tend to be longitudinal (beyond the dedicated lifetime of projects)
- Complexity of context means that researchers are reluctant to take credit for impact, even if it is an expected outcome of such research - tendency for those working in this way to want to attribute change as a process of shared endeavours

Group work: 30 mins

- How do we know we have impact in participatory health research?
- What demonstrates that impact?
- What facilitates and what hinders achieving and articulating impact in PHR?

References and links

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- Thomson, P (2015) Action Research with/against impact . Educational Action Research Vol 23 (2) 309-311
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