Contemporary Approaches
to Participatory Action Research
in Aotearoa/New Zealand:
Lewis’ story

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Contemporary Approaches to Participatory Action
Research in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Lewis Williams and Carmel Cervin

Introduction: Setting the scene

Participatory action research (PAR) has been utilised for a number of purposes in a broad range of settings. These include educational and training purposes, institutional settings in which the intent is to improve organisational practices, agriculture and rural development, and more latterly in health settings as a research strategy. Ambiguity continues to surround the term Participatory Action Research, which simply distilled, represents a synthesis of two traditions: action research and participatory research.

The term “action research” was introduced by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s to denote a pioneering approach to social research. Lewin was concerned to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to solve practical problems through an action research cycle of planning, action and investigating the results of action (reflection) (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Often referred to as the “Northern Tradition” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003), action research tends to be collaborative and utilisation-focused, with practical goals of systems improvement. Common applications are organisational settings such as work sites or schools. This tradition most broadly emanates from the sociological theory of Talcott Parsons which assumes social progress to result from the rational application of ever increasing scientific knowledge and largely ignores the social and power relations involved in the production of knowledge (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003).

Participatory action research retains Kurt Lewin’s action research cycle and emphasis on challenging conventional positivist views regarding the production of knowledge. Its historical roots, however, are also located in the tradition of participatory research that arose within Latin America, Asia and Africa from the 1970s onwards, often collectively referred to as the “Southern Tradition” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Much of its impetus derives from the structural crises of underdevelopment, liberation theory and the search for new practice by the adult education and development fields in
how best to work with communities vulnerable to globalisation by economically and culturally dominant societies (De Koning & Martin, 1996; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Originating in Marxist social theory, the Southern Tradition has encouraged/endorsed social progress through mass movements that challenge inequitable distribution of resources. More recently it has incorporated post-Marxist approaches that highlight the non-economic, cultural and social forms of oppression.

Diverse definitions of PAR have been proposed (for example, Hall 2001; Park 2001), but the definition offered by Reason & Bradbury (2001) most closely resonates with our understanding of PAR:

[Participatory Action Research] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p.1)

Given our interest in PAR as an approach to social action, we emphasise its participatory aspects, particularly with respect to its potential to give voice to more traditionally marginalised groups. As Budd Hall (2001) writes:

Participatory research fundamentally is about the right to speak … Participatory research argues for the articulation of points of view by the dominated or subordinate. (p. 62)

PAR is underpinned by a cyclic process of inquiry through which participants move through successive phases of action and reflection, with each phase informing the next. This method involves extensive collaboration among all participants (including those who may be traditionally defined as the “researchers” and “the researched”) from research planning to the dissemination of results, and a reciprocal education process between all those concerned (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

A number of key points distinguish PAR from other commonly used methodologies. The evolving process of PAR and the inclusion of action steps contrasts to projects that can be tightly planned and are linear. The ex-
plicit focus on changing a social practice or situation, not just understanding it, starkly contrasts with traditional positivist researchers who do not expect the way in which their respondents see and live their lives to alter (Hart & Bond, 1995). PAR is often future orientated, concerned not just with what is but what should be, and judging and advocating for proposed solutions. PAR rests on a philosophy and process of collective, rather than individual knowledge creation and ownership. Being centred within communities, PAR projects place considerable emphasis on maximising participation. This collective epistemology, or way of knowing, provides the key difference between PAR and other qualitative methodologies. Communities re-claim their right/power to create their own knowledge, enabling them to participate effectively in decisions that affect their lives.

As a process, PAR intersects to varying extents with a number of research paradigms. With respect to its epistemological and ontological orientations, PAR has least in common with positivism. Although it may employ quantitative methods at times, PAR poses major challenges to positivism with respect to the construction and interpretation of knowledge, and relationship between researchers and what is being researched (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). PAR more closely aligns with social constructionist approaches to knowledge creation, which view knowledge as being socially constructed between researchers and the researched. Realities are multiple, local and specific in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). However, constructivist evaluators and researchers have often seen their primary role as utilisation-focused rather than political (Guba, 1990).

The strong emancipatory aspect of PAR draws on critical theory which views knowledge as historically and socially constructed and mediated through the perspectives of dominant groups in society. This emancipatory orientation also resonates with feminist theory’s emphasis on challenging oppressive structural power relations. Feminist participatory research, however, has also challenged the exclusion of women through the use of universal language of “the oppressed” (and the lack of attention to gender differences of participation in data collection and analysis) common in earlier, more Marxist-based approaches to PAR (De Koning & Martin, 1996; Duran & Wallerstein, 2003).
PAR shares a number of central themes of feminist methodologies. For example PAR and feminism are orientated towards action through personal and structural change; both take political standpoints (instead of purporting to be “value-free”); and both strongly intend to work for social justice and democratisation (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lather 1991; Maguire, 2001). PAR and feminism share an emphasis on telling stories as a strategy of empowerment by listening to, affirming, and reflecting on personal experiences. PAR and feminist methodologies also embrace experience as a source of legitimate knowledge and seek to challenge traditional knowledge-creation monopolies.

Although a number of action research projects have taken place in professional education and nursing settings in Aotearoa/New Zealand, PAR projects with communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand appear to have been slow to develop. This may reflect the struggles community groups faced in the 1980s-1990s and may also reflect a lack of resourcing for PAR in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is not easy for students to establish long term relationships with community groups and historically there were few links between academic institutions and community groups to provide a space for PAR projects to be encouraged or supported in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

**Introduction to our projects and reflections**

Our involvement with PAR is based on a concern for social justice and orientation to taking action on real life issues, a participatory ethos, and an intent that the research process will promote the redistribution of power in the direction of the disenfranchised.

The projects we discuss are based in Aotearoa/New Zealand. They are premised on the value of PAR as a practice carried out by communities for communities to realise aspirations and address issues central to their self-determination.

Lewis worked on one in-depth PAR project for 16 months with a group of migrant Tongan and Samoan women living on low incomes in an Auckland suburb. The Women’s Advocacy Group formed as a result of Lewis’ persistence in seeking out a community of people living on low incomes who would be interested to engage in policy advocacy activities aimed at greater self-determination. Lewis’ reflections are largely based on experi-
ences that required her to traverse many boundaries of power and culture as a PAR practitioner and doctoral researcher.

Carmel has worked on three concurrent action research projects for four years with well-established community groups. These were the West Auckland Women Centre project “Women and Retirement Income,” the Homebuilders Family Support project “Rural Living Standards,” and the Auckland Branch of the Autistic Association of New Zealand Inc. project “Needs and Gaps in Services.” In this monograph she explores key themes and differences of interest in action research between academics and community members.

The research projects therefore develop from two different but complementary standpoints. Lewis inquires into empowerment for communities at the economic and cultural margins. Community development was investigated as a method of self-determination. As described earlier, PAR was an obvious choice as a research methodology for operationalising the concepts of community development and empowerment. Carmel’s research primarily addresses the action research process, informed by her experiences with the three different community groups she worked with. The research and policy advocacy undertaken by each of these three groups provide the basis for Carmel’s discussion of PAR.

Each discussion, however, is implicitly one of the fluid and unpredictable nature of PAR, as academic researcher and community researcher (traditionally “the researched”) work together with the mutual intent of transforming power relations. Together they weave a narrative of the challenges and possibilities encountered in projects of this nature from the perspective of academically-based researchers.

We do not aim to provide a step-by-step guide to action research. In many respects this would be the antithesis of PAR as a process that demands from its participants ongoing critical analysis, a fine-tuned responsiveness, and ensuing fluidity in project directions. Rather we have chosen to hone in on specific themes of particular importance in our respective experiences. In doing so, we anticipate that many of these will also be significant issues for other researchers engaged in social action approaches to PAR. We also stress that each project is unique with its own sets of issues, answers and “rites of passage” for all participants as co-researchers. Accordingly, the monograph is largely structured around our individual accounts, each of
which uses a number of headings to identify the themes encountered. Where the “fit” between our experiences has been sufficient we have used similar headings. In “comparing notes” which follows, we select two particular themes for discussion: cultural context and the operationalisation of PAR values, and communities’ power/knowledge relationships with the University. This dialogue makes apparent the simultaneous mutuality and diversity inherent in our experiences. The monograph concludes with a bibliography for further reading.
LEWIS’ STORY

Ideals and excitement: Getting interested in PAR

My interest in PAR was first sparked several years ago when I was writing my Masters dissertation about Manukau Healthy City’s (MHC) actions to tackle the problem of child hunger (Williams, 1996). The task I had set myself was to evaluate the initiative’s actions to date and to assess future opportunities for increasing its effectiveness in policy advocacy around this issue. At that time a number of public meetings had been held with politicians, members of the public and other key players to see what could be done about the problem. While the issues received much media attention, after two years or so of advocacy, little had been achieved by way of policy change at the national level of government – where it was deemed that the underlying structural causes could be addressed. Also noticeably absent, in my view, was the input of low-income families into this debate.

Around the time I was pondering these issues, my thesis supervisor introduced me to a book written by Graham Room on anti-poverty action research initiatives being carried out in Europe (Room, 1993). I was both surprised and delighted to learn that such projects existed, as I was not aware of any such initiatives in Aotearoa. I began to conceptualise how such an approach might be adapted to the MHC’s work in the area of child poverty and policy debate, specifically around the issues of public participation and strategy evaluation.

Feeling a deep resonance with the ideals of PAR, I concluded my dissertation with a recommendation that the MHC initiate an action research project for the purpose of ongoing evaluation and action in their work of public policy advocacy to address child hunger. The idea of a PAR project was never taken up by the MHC. I remained undeterred, however, and the ideals and excitement of what might be achieved through PAR remained very much alive for me. Embarking on my doctoral research several years later, I had the opportunity to put some of these ideas and theories into practice (Williams, 2001).

I tell my story as a Palangi/Maori, feminist researcher, undertaking doctoral research with the intent of further informing community empowerment practice (“Palangi” is the Tongan term for a person of European de-
scent). The areas I have chosen to highlight are key issues or areas of tension that I encountered in my experience of carrying out PAR with the Women’s Advocacy Group (WAG). I am aware that the participants also keenly felt some of these tensions. Where possible, I have included their comments regarding these. Some issues discussed are commonly experienced in other PAR projects; however, their particular shape and form remain unique to the circumstances and locale of the project. Other issues encountered are perhaps less common and more the result of my particular locations within the University as academic Palangi/Maori, lesbian, undertaking a PAR project with Tongan and Samoan women whose day-to-day realities and cultures were significantly different to mine and those of the University. Overall, my goal is to illuminate PAR as a diverse and evolving practice, its future development yet to be more fully informed by the entirety of contexts and participants that, in reality, constitute any one PAR project.

**Getting started**

By 1997, neo-liberalism had become truly entrenched in Aotearoa, and there were dramatically widening social and economic inequities between different cultural groups in the country (Blaiklock et al, 2002; Howden-Chapman & Tobias, 2000; O’Brien, 1998). Previously marginalised groups such as Maori, Pacific peoples, women and children had become further disenfranchised as a result of social and economic reform – often tending to be the scapegoats of, rather than active participants in public policy debates regarding these issues. As I considered how my doctoral research might contribute to addressing increased poverty rates, I was particularly struck by the dominance of such discourses about the “poor” and the superior ability of powerful groups aligned with “new right” interests to assert these. For example, in 1998, the National government introduced the Code of Social Responsibility that proposed particular economic, social and moral responsibilities that all people living in Aotearoa should meet in order to earn their citizenship rights. During the Code’s public consultation phase, the government indicated that the Code would be used as a benchmark to ensure that “state dependents” – i.e., welfare beneficiaries such as single mothers – were meeting their responsibilities to society (Williams, 2001). Fortunately, the Code did not become policy. Discourses of this nature,
however, fuelled my passion for social justice via participatory and meaningful public debate, and a desire on my part that my doctoral research might contribute to this. I envisioned such a process as enabling marginalised groups to create their own discursive space or place of power from which to speak. Feeling strongly that my doctorate must have some practical outcomes for the communities it was intended to assist, I set out to see if my research could be part of such a process.

In the early days of the inquiry, the goal posts were continually shifting, as were the research questions. This is quite in keeping with PAR as a flexible and unfolding research process. The question that I finally settled upon as over-arching the inquiry was: **how can economically (and culturally) marginalised communities act to shape and determine their futures, thus increasing control over health and well-being?** However, it was not until some way into the inquiry that I recognised the significance of culture and so included this concept in the research question. This occurred because the research results were highlighting the centrality of culture in two respects. Firstly, as the research progressed it became evident that poverty was much more than lack of money for the members of WAG. As low-income migrants and women, the experience of poverty also encompassed cultural alienation, loss of land, family, low social status and political exclusion. Secondly, ongoing analysis of research findings revealed the cultural dominance of economically powerful groups and the relative powerlessness of (ethnic) cultural minority groups to assert important cultural values and practices. In Samoan and Tongan cultures, for example, these included the centrality of the notion “we” and reciprocity and economic structures based on extended family rather than the individualist tendencies of white, patriarchal norms associated with economically powerful groups.

From the onset I was clear that in addition to elucidating knowledge about empowerment processes, a major objective of the research was that participating communities would strengthen their capacities to be self-determining as a result of having taken part. I envisaged this occurring through community development that would draw on Paulo Freire’s “transformative education” approach to social change with rural peasant classes in South America throughout the 1960s – that is to engage participating groups in “critical” dialogue concerning conditions of poverty (Dickson & Green, 2001; Freire, 1968). The overall goal of this process is to increase people’s
agency or their ability to act for change and transform social structures. Key elements include the relevancy of educative issues to people’s lives, problem posing, and genuine dialogue in ways that draw out existing knowledge and value the collective knowledge of the group (Freire, 1968). Freire’s approach to liberatory pedagogy, however, is articulated predominantly in class terms. It does not recognise the “simultaneous contradictory positions of oppression and dominance” (Weiler, 1991, p. 453), and the contingency of experience on changing relations of power and culture, such as, ethnicity, class, gender, from context to context (Williams, in press; Williams & Labonte). These latter points which proved to be significant for the research are taken up further in the sections that follow.

**Standing up to scientific scrutiny: PAR and research theory**

In the early days of the research, particularly as I was scoping the study and writing my research proposal, I was concerned with understanding as much about the action research process as I possibly could. Methodologically I needed to structure a research proposal that could stand up to scientific scrutiny. I also needed to be able to understand something of its nature “out in the field,” both for the purpose of the ethics proposal and in preparation for the sorts of issues I might encounter as a researcher once the fieldwork began. As experienced PAR practitioners in Aotearoa are rare, international literature largely informed this preparation process.

Given that PAR is often deemed “scientifically other” – i.e. it is located outside of more dominant research paradigms such as positivism and has often had its scientific integrity challenged – it was important that I be able to ground and defend the research methodologically. For some time, I was unsure whether my work lay in the critical theory or social constructionist camps. The emancipatory potential of critical theory was appealing. However, I was also uncomfortable with its traditional tendency towards metanarrative and the notion that critical dialogue with “the people” would ultimately lead to the dismantlement of false consciousness and discovery of “the truth.” This is discussed at some length by Weiler in her critique of Paulo Freire’s work (Weiler, 1991). As a feminist, I was also rather guarded against elements of postmodernism that emphasise deconstruction only and so do little to challenge and change the status quo of economic and cultural
power relations. In the end I realised it did not have to be an either/or decision and I decided on the epistemological orientation of social constructionism with a critical edge. This was because while social constructionism acknowledged the multiple and changing subject positions of participants, critical theory made visible the power relations that also structured these processes, thus giving the research some emancipatory potential – in other words oppression was not just in people’s imaginations! This fitted PAR’s concern to honour people’s realities and achieve social justice outcomes. A number of writings by Schwandt (1990; 1994; 2000) and Guba and Lincoln (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000) were very helpful in assisting me to distinguish these finer, but fairly critical methodological points.

Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) also provided an excellent account of PAR and an important discussion on the tensions between this methodology and achieving scientific rigour. To see my own concerns regarding the possible conflicts between systematic investigation and the timely production of evidence for social action purposes reflected in the literature was affirming. Later in the research, I was to learn that it was not so much a matter of solving these tensions, but rather learning how to dance with them. Finally, Patti Lather’s discussions around “research as praxis” as a democratised process of inquiry characterised by negotiation, empowerment and reciprocity (Lather, 1991), was critical in aiding my consideration of what might constitute valid research in PAR terms. Working at the methodological margins of research inquiry, I found that these books/articles helped me translate what I was proposing and doing as a researcher into the dominant language of the research culture.

These readings contributed to my ability to prepare an ethics proposal that would be acceptable to the Massey University Ethics Committee. I wrote the proposal at the time when I was initially making contact with organisations to ascertain their interest. At the time of writing the proposal I had had a couple of meetings with WAG to discuss the type of project I was proposing. My approach to the proposal was to outline the type of project, processes, principles and types of methods that would be utilised throughout, stating that because of the nature of PAR I could not be more specific about the exact activities. The Ethics Committee gave ethics approval on the con-
dition that I re-submit another proposal should the research change significantly.

Preparing for being in the “field”

Patricia Maguire’s (1993) experience as a doctoral student carrying out action research with women in Gallop, a small town in mid Western America, was a position I could easily identify with and proved a very grounding starting point. Writings by Marion Martin (1996) and Annie George (1996) were very insightful in so far as issues of power and participation are concerned throughout action research. Martin deepened my understanding of power within research as a dynamic and fluid force, not located exclusively within either the researcher or the research community – an issue upon which I shall elaborate later. George’s experience of researching sexuality with women in Bombay pressed the need for reciprocity within the research process – this later proved to be crucial in enabling me to name what it was I was instinctively doing in the fieldwork. I also enjoyed reading other “in the field” writings such as Susan Yeich’s (1996) article on PAR in a social action project with people who were homeless. All these writings were invaluable for giving substance and validity to the less chosen path I was taking by engaging in PAR. However, what was to subsequently eventuate in the field pushed the boundaries both theoretically and in terms of my own pre-conceptions around PAR.

Finding an entry point with communities: Framing social action as PAR

Finding community groups of people living on low incomes and organisationally supported to engage in policy advocacy around issues of low income was not easy for several reasons. Firstly, community development is not well developed or funded in Aotearoa and so few organisations attempt it. Secondly, most organisations working with low-income communities are contracted to provide social services rather than provide advocacy. When advocacy is undertaken it is largely done by the organisation on behalf of these communities. PAR is itself also unusual in that it is a prolonged and often intensive engagement with communities. This requires a willingness to engage in relationships, activities, and roles that are often challenging and
require people to move out of their comfort zone. As a participatory action researcher, I soon realised that I was asking people to come along on a journey whose destination was unknown and means of getting there was only roughly defined.

I decided that my most likely entry point to low-income individuals and families was through the leaders of those communities. When meeting with interested community leaders, I’d explain that I was doing some research for my doctorate and that I wanted to work with an advocacy group interested in speaking out and taking action on problems to do with living on a low income. Given that PAR is an approach rather than a distinct method, my networking to find communities to work with was somewhat like presenting them with a very sketchy road map. Firstly, I’d describe in broad terms the type of destination I was thinking of: advocacy aimed at policy change in an area of their choosing. Then I’d talk about the sorts of signposts we might use to see if we were on the right route: community-defined markers of progress that would be utilised in the evaluation phases to assist in planning future actions. The destination would therefore be a negotiated process, with the particular roads to be taken decided together en route.

**Overview of the research context and project**

After several months of hectic networking, and receiving rather lukewarm responses, I was eventually introduced through a community developer, whom I shall call Mary, to a small group of migrant Tongan and Samoan women living in a low-income Auckland suburb, hereafter referred to as Hilltown. Mary was a Roman Catholic member of clergy and affiliated to a community development project, Goodworks (not its real name) run by her order. The primary objective of this project was the empowerment of Hilltown residents and community workers through skills development and increased input into public policy, which dovetailed neatly with the research project’s questions.

Hilltown is an ethnically diverse area with large Maori, European, Pacific people and other migrant communities living in it. It has a large concentration of state-owned houses, high unemployment rates and some serious social problems. Kinship networks, churches and community organisations provide a sense of community and belonging for many Hill-
town residents. At the same time, ethnic and religious factions exist within the community and some residents are isolated by issues of poverty through lack of ability to participate in social and community activities and associated feelings of shame.

Relationships between the women who gathered at the commencement of the group reflected those I have just described in the wider community. Most of them had migrated as young adults and were now mothers of quite large families. Levels of formal education were generally low and opportunities for further learning were highly prized. Some worked very long hours, being engaged in low-paid work outside the home in addition to performing all the household duties. Church also played an important role in the lives of these women, which provided the entry point, through Goodworks, for the project.

From this community an advocacy group of eight women was formed, out of which a four-phase PAR project evolved. The project’s development was also assisted through the formation of a planning group, consisting of two WAG members and myself, and a community advisory group comprised of two Goodwork’s representatives, two WAG members, two organisational representatives from Hilltown, and myself. The project phases are summarised in figure one on the following page.
Phase one: project formation (June – August 1998)
- Establishment of project structures
- Establishment of the Women’s Advocacy Group – i.e., purpose, ground rules and relationship-building

Phase two: story-telling (September – December 1998)
- WAG members tell own life-stories with a focus on culture and identity
- Evaluation of phase two, reflections, planning and celebration

Phase three: skills development (February – June 1999)
Group work on a variety of areas that included:
- Story-telling around the operation of power in Tongan, Samoan and Palangi cultures
- The broad identification of improving local state-owned housing conditions as an advocacy goal and preliminary research
- Undertaking structural analysis of related conditions
- Development of media advocacy skills
- Evaluation of phase three, reflections and planning

Phase four: housing advocacy and action (July – October 1999)
- WAG members undertake research training
- WAG members carry out a child health and safety survey of 42 state-owned houses in Hilltown
- Release of survey results at a public meeting, media advocacy and meetings with key housing policy players and organisations
- Evaluation of phase four and the project as a whole

Figure one: Overview of phases and activities of the Women’s Advocacy Group.
Overall, the housing advocacy achieved a number of changes in empowerment domains for members of WAG and the Hilltown community more generally. Evaluation data collected from phases two, three and four revealed changes in individual and community capacities, and changes within the socio-political domain (Williams, Labonte & O’Brien, 2003; Williams & Labonte, 2003). These changes, including a number of outcomes such as reports, media releases and meetings with policy makers, are listed in Appendix A.

**Building relationships and understanding**

Most of these women were well known to Mary as they had participated at some time or another in personal development, sewing and cooking classes run by her. This latter point is quite crucial as I believe their trust in Mary was largely the reason they were willing to be introduced to me and kept coming to the group in those early weeks – particularly as our purpose as a group was unclear at that point. It was Mary’s belief in the idea of an advocacy group that got women along to the first meeting. She was the bridge and the translator between the community and myself, particularly in those initial weeks and months.

I was rather nervous at that first meeting, as I think the other woman were also. There was a feeling that none of us really knew the territory we were entering into. On their part, research, the university, the idea of political advocacy and this Palangi were all unknowns. For me, I felt very much an “outsider,” and I was, with very little knowledge of their cultural worlds and day to day realities. I explained that I was doing research at Massey University around poverty and public policy advocacy. As a part of the research I was interested in being a member of a women’s advocacy group who spoke out about problems of low income and that took some action to improve the living situations of their communities. I added that I wanted the research to have some good and practical results for people facing issues of poverty. Some of the women in the group were immediately very responsive. We spent several weeks discussing the sorts of issues they faced in relation to living on low incomes, talking about the idea of a women’s advocacy research group and getting to know one another. It took some time to arrive at a mutual understanding of what the advocacy research project could
be about and there were uncertainties, apprehensions and other tensions within this process. On reflection, I think it was the integrity of the idea and the presence of Mary that sustained us as a group in those early days.

Together, we set about making the group our own, setting ground rules, establishing a working structure and developing our ideas (constructing the vehicle) for how we might go about our advocacy research project. This was to be a journey that we would take together as a group; one of the most emotionally intense, challenging, nerve-wracking and rewarding journeys I have ever taken – the terrain ever-changing and unpredictable, demanding that I be awake and responsive to what might ever arise.

**Listening and letting go: PAR as a co-created project**

Overall when I think about PAR, it strikes me that it is a lot about being prepared “not to know.” Particularly in those early days of working with the group, it was like feeling my way along a corridor in the dark, never being quite sure what I was going to bump into next. As a co-created process, it also demanded a willingness to do some letting go over many aspects of the research, and to be truly prepared within my being that the research may not go where I wanted it to. This willingness to let go was truly tested in the later stages of the research as we were embarking on the housing advocacy, by which stage we’d all invested an enormous amount in the project. Over several weeks I noticed the low energy levels of group members and wondered if they really wanted to keep going. Given the empowering intent of participatory projects, I knew the question of whether they really wanted to keep going must be openly and spaciously asked. This required that I be open as a PAR researcher to the possibility of discontinuation.

Often critical information would surface by accident or when I was least expecting it, as in the case of informal conversations. This would throw plans into chaos, until seeming order was restored, albeit temporarily. An example of this was the decision taken by the group to engage in storytelling activities in which we all told our life story with a particular focus on our identities and cultures. (My original plan had been to follow the Freirean model of social change and critical pedagogy, outlined earlier, in which group members would tell stories around a particular issue to do with living on a low income, providing the basis for critical dialogue and, perhaps, en-
suing advocacy issues). This new direction was chosen as a result of women in the group at various times expressing their sense of loss or disconnection from their cultures as migrants. Such unexpected new directions would invariably happen, just when I thought I had it “sussed” and under control. The learning for me at these times was to stay listening and connected to the process, despite the unsettledness this might produce in me as a social change researcher and doctoral student.

Periods of confusion and struggle, which were common, tended to elucidate some of the richest findings in the inquiry. For example, the dissonance experienced between myself and other WAG members regarding our perceptions of my appropriate role (leadership) as researcher/community developer in the group, revealed the incompatibility of traditional values of hierarchy and authority within Tongan and Samoan cultural systems (Williams, in press) and the commonly accepted PAR practice of power redistribution. These findings, which I shall elaborate on shortly, proved to be a very rich part of the inquiry.

**Role negotiation: A delicate balance**

I approached my role with the Women’s Advocacy Group with a belief that we all have our own sense of knowing, inner truth and life experience to draw on and contribute in our activities with others. Different kinds of specialist knowledge, such as research skills on my part, and the local and cultural expertise of the participants, could work in a complementary manner to promote shared leadership and more equal power relations among participants. This is consistent with feminist and PAR approaches to inquiry (De Koning & Martin, 1996; Green, George, Daniel, Frankish, & Herbert, 1995; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). My expectation was a more or less linear process of group members gradually gaining confidence and skills and eventually taking up stronger leadership roles. This did not happen according to plan!

During my initial meetings with the group, there was a strong expectation for me to take a directive role. I emphasised continually the ideas of partnership, sharing knowledge and skills and co-participating in planning and research activities. However, I quite quickly became aware that most of the group members wanted me to take up more of a role of imparting knowl-
edge. One woman said: “We expect you, the lady from the university, what we would be expecting from you, is that you are going to teach us.” Some of the group members felt unsettled by what they saw as a lack of structure, concrete information and a directive role on my part. It was often expressed to me that I was from a “very high place” (the university) and that they wanted me to teach them concrete skills and impart knowledge (field notes B1). I noticed over the first few months of our meeting that group members showed some confusion and frustration at my insistence that they also had knowledge to share. Reflecting on her experiences of this many months later during a presentation at the Public Health Association of New Zealand’s Annual Conference, one participant said:

So myself and the other mothers in the group thought that Lewis would be teaching us skills and things. But Lewis said “No. You got knowledge, I got knowledge – we will teach each other.” I thought to myself “but what knowledge have I got?” So I was confused and the other mothers in the group were confused too. And we said to each other “Why doesn’t Lewis teach us some skills?” So we wondered if it was worth coming at all.

These experiences were contrary to the ideal of the “co-creation of knowledge,” a central premise of PAR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). I did have some knowledge that would be useful to share with them, and in that way (as they said) I was a kind of a “bridge to their futures.” However, I also became aware that their leadership expectation of me was also bound up in the issue of authority. In their eyes, because I came from a university, I had an authority in relation to knowledge that they didn’t have. These experiences are consistent with PAR literature that notes the depreciation of popular knowledge, even by “the people themselves” (Gaventa, 1993). However, given the fixed and highly stratified nature of Tongan and Samoan societies relative to the flatter social structures associated with Westernised societies from which PAR literature emanates, the tensions between PAR ideals and reality were particularly evident.

The differential authority accorded to me was problematic to the other group members taking up leadership roles as well as challenging my construction of issues according to dominant Palangi norms. I sensed that the
reluctance of research participants to question my “expert researcher authority” could also mean that when we were engaging as a group in processes of validating research findings, my initial interpretations (if incorrect) could go unchallenged. I was also aware that if the authority and leadership (power) stayed with me throughout the research process, other research participants were less likely to feel energised and increase their capacities as researchers.

From my perspective as the research coordinator, issues around authority and inner knowing repeated themselves in numerous ways throughout the research process. The way that I dealt with this was to challenge these assumptions, continually create leadership opportunities for others and use research and development methods that drew on members’ knowledge bases. The issues of authority and leadership impacted less on the research process as it evolved. This was because the research itself came to rely more on their localised knowledges as the investigation progressed and other group members began to challenge my assumptions as the trust between us built and we got to know each other better.

Balancing community needs with scientific rigour

From the onset of the research process, WAG members wanted to see practical and tangible benefits for themselves and other community members. Some also made it clear that they definitely wanted to do research themselves and wanted this process to begin more or less immediately. For example, on the third week of the group meeting one woman wanted to know “why the group hadn’t done any research or taken any actions to date?” I explained that I was waiting on permission from the ethics committee of the university and that “good research” that people considered credible was planned and systematically carried out (field notes B1).

It was initially hard for members to understand the research culture of ethics and systematic inquiry. This resulted in some initial tensions as we struggled to gain a mutual understanding of what this advocacy research group could be about. In other words, what were and could be our areas of commonality? From my perspective, how could a research process that had to meet the scientific requirements of the academic community and was controlled by the institutional needs of the university fit with the needs of this community? From their perspective, how could their desire to improve
the conditions of their lives fit with the set of rules from the university that this researcher had to obey to get this qualification called a PhD? From the perspective of communities (particularly those whose cultures are not represented within dominant social structures), knowledge is both accessed and legitimated through the scientific community, many of whom reside in academic institutions (Gaventa, 1993). The everyday knowledges within communities at “the margins” have a much better chance of advancing their causes if legitimated through scientific rigor – thus their reliance on the “academic expert” to transform these into legitimate knowledge claims (field notes B1-B2).

A further example of such tensions occurred in the later stages of the advocacy research project, when the group was carrying out its own housing research. The group’s target number of houses to be surveyed had been agreed upon as 40. However, one member went well over her quota and when asked to stop surveying houses expressed her frustration: “Why shouldn’t I carry on if there are so many people that want their houses surveyed!” (field notes E2). However, a balance had to be struck between the group’s resources (skills and time) to analyse all the findings in a scientifically rigorous manner and the scheduled timing of the release of the research. Such challenges are not uncommon within PAR aimed at social change. At times PAR “sacrifices methodological sophistication in order to generate timely evidence that can be used and further developed in a real life process of transformation” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 591).

The tangibility and immediacy of outcomes from the research desired by community members meant that a delicate balance needed to be struck between the trustworthiness of the research and the need of people to see immediate and tangible benefits. Initially, from one week to the next (as we discovered and negotiated our common ground), I did not know if I would still have a research group. Throughout the entire research process, I continued to hold the tension point between the requirements of the research culture and the needs and requirements of the community I was working with. As our trust grew and common ground became more established my experience of these tensions lessened, although always remained. I was in a bridging role between two quite different cultural communities and their sometimes divergent needs. Throughout the research with WAG, I contin-
ued to balance the needs of the other advocacy group members with the requirements of the academic community.

**Professionalism and authenticity**

While PAR constitutes a research process, located within specific sets of paradigm relations, with various values, norms and ethical requirements, it is not in itself a profession. Rather, PAR values of democratic decision making, power sharing, and the importance of community knowledge are not compatible with traditional professional models that see knowledge and skills as the exclusive properties of the professional. However, many PAR researchers either have been or are actively practising professionals such as nurses, social workers, or community psychologists, used to practising the traditional hall marks of professionalism within “professional-client relationships.” Although it is discussed by some community development theorists (Labonte, 1996; Williams, 2001), debate on this subject is not yet widely evident in the PAR literature.

As a qualified Social Worker I was familiar with exercising various aspects of this professional role, although not uncritically, in my past jobs as a social worker. However, I was also aware that PAR required something different of me than the role of a traditional social worker where I held the balance of control over things such as meeting place, purpose, duration, and degree of self-disclosure. However, with PAR, boundaries of time and space are more permeable, interactions more fluid, and the intent to achieve redistribution of power between researcher and the traditionally researched, more deliberate. Significantly, the successful negotiation of this role on the part of the participatory action researcher requires a fuller integration of self with associated roles. This issue of authenticity and PAR was evident for me in a number of ways, one of which was particularly poignant for me was around the issue of my sexual identity and the research.

As a lesbian, I am familiar with homophobic responses from some people when they learn of my sexual identity and realised that this was a possibility with the other co-participants – particularly as they had strong religious affiliations. Being unfamiliar with Tongan and Samoan cultures and Roman Catholicism, I found it hard to guess what their response might be and whether it would be safe to “come out.” On one hand, the method and
integrity of the research design demanded that as a co-participant, I should authentically reveal who I was. I intuitively felt that my ability to build and maintain a relationship relied upon my authenticity and that disclosing information about myself would shift the balance of power in a more equal direction. On the other hand, I felt concerned that by coming out I could lose my participants and “blow the research.” The paradoxical situation in which I felt caught caused me some paralysis as a researcher and group member. The field notes recorded by myself during our story-telling provide a synopsis of my experience:

*Being a lesbian amongst this group is a challenge – and a part of me that I have not been open [to the group] about. I haven’t felt safe to in case I blow the research. Or rather that because of homophobia, the group decided they wouldn’t work with me. Rather an irony, as the nub of the research is about identity, visibility and speaking out. … When I tell them is actually crucial. Better to let them see more of me [first] so that my lesbianism is easier for them to integrate, rather than coming out sooner. But timing is crucial. If I don’t come out to them, I know I’ll lose them in a subtle sense anyway (field notes B2).*

Lather discusses the need for reciprocity within the research process as implying a “give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power” (Lather, 1991, p. 57). The concept goes beyond negotiation of research design and methods, to include the more personal aspects of relationship between the researcher and those who are traditionally researched. This refers more broadly to the notion of “reciprocity” between researchers and community members with regard to information exchange, partially aimed at making power relations more equitable between these groups (Martin, 1996).

As the weeks went by within WAG, other group members grew more curious about my life. I began to feel increasingly alienated from the group, as I felt unable to “put my whole self in” as they seemed to do in our group discussions. I grew increasingly anxious about losing the research – either through not being authentic or through homophobia (field notes B3, C1).
I finally sought assistance within cross-cultural supervision with a Tongan/Fijian woman who was able to give me the information I needed to find my way through this issue with the other group members. Eventually I came out to the group within the context of telling my life story, as we were all taking turns to do. Having worked together for three months already, locating my sexual identity within the context of my life-story, in a structured process, was for me a safer way of coming out to the group. We had had time to get to know each other and build relationships. Therefore, I reasoned that they were more likely to see “more” of me as a person and associated perceptions of myself were less likely to be framed by dominant and discriminatory social constructions of lesbians. My impressions (I did not collect data from WAG members around this issue) are that this turned out to be the case. While one or two women appeared to be initially more distant, after I told my story, they, like the rest of the group seemed able to integrate this new information as time passed.

The PAR project may have been compromised had I not been open about this central part of my identity with participants. Expecting them to talk about their culture, identities and life herstories whilst holding a major part of mine back would probably have engendered distrust and feelings of disempowerment. Had these conditions prevailed, I doubt very much whether I would have been able to develop the open and trusting relations required to develop the basis for a successful social change project.

**Outsider/insider: Included or excluded?**

As mentioned previously, I had some identification with the community I worked with, both as a woman and as someone who has a personal interest and investment in marginalised groups creating their own place of power from which to speak and act. More far reaching in terms of its influence on the research process was my positioning as “outsider” by the community I worked with. I was an outsider as an educated Palangi, a researcher from the university, a non mother, a lesbian and someone who lived out of the geographic community. These differences were communicated in many ways: I had a car that was warranted and registered, wore more than one pair of shoes, and invariably had to report that “no I hadn’t been to church on Sunday” when I’d been asked what I’d done at the weekend.
Particularly in the early days of the research, when I visited participants’ homes, I recognised the signs of respect such as a spotless house, or saying that “no, I didn’t have to take off my shoes,” giving me the best seat, or buying an expensive “feed” from the local Kentucky Fried store. My positioning almost exclusively as an outsider by the other group members changed as I got to know them, via our meetings and informal time together. These changes were subtle, often signified through ordinary touches such as asking me to pick up a bottle of milk from the shop if I was on my way over. I mostly enjoyed being given a little more of the insider status, because it gave me a feeling of inclusion. However, I also had to be prepared for the fluctuating and contradictory nature of this status conferred on me, as it often changed for no apparent reason and most often carried paradoxical elements of inclusion and exclusion as the following example relates.

On this particular day, we’d had a particularly rich story-telling session and group members were happily singing waiatas (songs) afterwards. In fact if I remember correctly, I had told my story to the group that day, and having done so, was feeling a greater sense of inclusion. In one of the waiatas that followed, the women would all sing to one group member addressing them by name and asking “do you love Jesus?” This would be followed by the group enthusiastically singing that “yes, [person’s name] loved Jesus.” It was with some apprehension that I sat waiting for my turn. However, it never came. The waiata was sung to everybody in the group but me. I felt a mixture of relief and separateness from the group. In retrospect my guess is that, knowing that I did not have the same religious beliefs as them, in a sense they had included me by excluding me. The sense of exclusion on this occasion was painful – there was nothing for me to do, but just to sit with it. These, I believe, are the subtle and shifting nuances of insider/outsider relationships that an action researcher may experience over an extended period of time in intensive engagement with a community. They undoubtedly influence relationships, the course of the research, and the nature of what emerges from the inquiry.
Achieving social change

A question often asked of PAR aimed at social change, and an implicit question that underlay the Housing Advocacy project for participants, was “to what extent could this project achieve social change, particularly at the macro public policy levels?” Writers have often dealt with the issue of redistribution of power at either group or organisational levels. Marion Martin, for example has written about the nature of power between the researcher and community members (Martin, 1996). Hiebert and Swan share their experience of a community controlled PAR project that challenged status quo power relations between the Canadian government, physicians and the HIV community (Hiebert and Swan, 1999).

My experience of PAR as a participatory process aimed at broad social change, is that it requires changing power relations at multiple levels. Within the WAG project this included shifting self-concepts and perspectives, changing power relations with family and community members, and partnering organisations, in addition to achieving changes at the macro level within the policy sector. The multi-levelled nature and complexity of the shifts in power relations that occurred during the project is the subject of a journal article (Williams and Labonte, 2003). Power relations are, however, a central issue within the social action stream of PAR and so warrant some discussion here.

Building on the previous group and skills development work undertaken in the earlier phases of the project, participants’ self-concepts and perspectives continued to change throughout the housing advocacy activities. As one WAG member commented: “I realised that I could be the same as other people and that I don’t have to be treated down all the time.” WAG members also spoke about the significance of seeing they could make changes “to see the strength and power we can have.” As the project progressed, these processes of personal change at times impacted significantly on WAG members’ relationships with their families and other community members. For several WAG members, for example, continued attendance at the group was challenged by some male and senior family members who argued that the women’s place was at home with their children, leading to some (temporary) attrition in group membership. Some of those who
remained had to assert their right to their families to do so, risking strains in family relationships.

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts and disruption in status quo power relations occurred between WAG members and Goodworks representatives. Partnerships with organisations enjoying greater access to economic resources and other forms of structural power are often vital to traditionally marginalised groups’ capacity to influence social change, as they were with WAG’s. In the fourth and final phase of the housing advocacy project, WAG was in the process of achieving a number of significant changes in local state-owned housing conditions. These included widespread media coverage about the housing conditions, increased receptivity on the part of the local Housing New Zealand office to complaints from tenants, some action to improve conditions and meetings with Housing New Zealand representatives, public policy makers and Ministers of Parliament. One group member described these shifts in power relations at the macro level in the following way:

*The group started from the bottom and worked our way up. It took us a long time, look where it got us now – to the top. To me Housing New Zealand feel scared of our group and they know that we can always find more houses to get to the media. … It also seemed like the Labour Party were after us. Because we can make their housing policy go up – we were also getting their name out to the media. And then other groups like community housing. They came to us also looking for help. And if these groups want something off us, they always know they have to return us something.*

Around this time, it became clear that as a result of the PAR project, some WAG members expected greater power sharing by Goodworks within the partnership with WAG. However, Goodworks was unable to accommodate WAG’s claims for more equitable power relations and a conflict ensued that was never resolved. Unfortunately, the loss of this partnership undermined WAG’s ability to continue the advocacy activities. Increases in personal and group power on the part of WAG, a central aim of the PAR project, therefore paradoxically undermined the capacity of the group to
influence ongoing change at the macro-policy levels. This, I believe is a pivotal and ongoing concern for PAR projects of this nature.
Appendix A

The Housing Advocacy Project:
Changes in Empowerment Domains (Lewis)

WAG members: Changes in individual and group capacities

♦ Increased confidence and more agentic self-perceptions
♦ Reconnection and pride with Samoan and Tongan identities
♦ Group building and belonging
♦ Skills development regarding analysis of housing issues and power relations, group facilitation, research and media advocacy skills

Hilltown community: Changes in capacities

♦ Marked increase in complaints from tenants to Housing New Zealand following the housing advocacy

Reports


Media Releases


Meetings and communications

♦ Labour Party Spokesperson for housing
♦ Housing New Zealand
♦ Community Housing
♦ Social Policy Agency

Changes to housing conditions and policy

♦ Action taken by Housing New Zealand to remedy the conditions of state-owned houses in Hilltown – for example, action to fix driveways, erect child proof fences, improve ventilation, install handrails, affix stoves to walls, check water temperature levels, etc.
♦ Contribution to the policy debate around the introduction of income-related rents in the Labour Government’s new housing policy.
References


Bibliography


Selected Further Reading


Hall, B. (2001). I wish this were a poem of practices of participatory research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry in practice (pp. 171-178). London: Sage Publications.


