



Methods for Change

Participatory Activist Research

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Participatory Activist Research



Participatory Activist Research requires the researcher to participate in the thing that they are trying to understand. This approach can be useful for exploring the workings of communities, groups and organisations, and contributing to their goals in the process. It is premised on the researcher spending time in a place, observing and experiencing what happens in the daily lives of individuals involved in that setting. The type, duration and level of participation may vary depending on the needs of the group and the wishes of participants. In some contexts, the approach may be based primarily around observing what is taking place in an organisation and reporting back. In others, the researcher may play a more active role in shaping what happens in the scene in which they are working. It builds upon Participatory Action Research and other ways to describe this more activist oriented participatory approach are 'scholar activism' or 'doings in place'.



How does Participatory Activist Research create or contribute to change?

Participatory Activist Research is a method that supports organisations and communities to meet their own objectives, which may include social or environmental transformation of some kind. As such, the types of change that this approach facilitates tend to be led by the individuals and groups involved. While change is often assumed to occur when a research project is complete and recommendations are published, in participatory research change can begin from the moment the researcher starts asking questions. The initial dialogue between researcher and participants provides an opportunity for reflection that may not ordinarily take place. By offering an outside perspective on day-to-day activity, Participatory Activist Research can provide fresh insight for participants into practices and ways of working that they may otherwise take for granted. By documenting activities and achievements and presenting them back, Participatory Activist Research can often validate and encourage organisations in their work.

What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

Participatory Activist Research is influenced by feminist and postcolonial frameworks, which ask us to read the world for difference, and to notice the mundane and the everyday. Ethically, Participatory Activist Research is committed to going beyond extracting knowledge from communities, by instead actively contributing to the goals of the individuals and groups involved in the research. Like other participatory and ethnographic approaches, it looks beyond surface explanations and verbal accounts. It is based on the idea that the researcher needs to be involved in the detail of what participants do,



Tao teaching Jenny carpentry as he builds his house at Lammas Eco-village

as well as what they say, to really understand what is happening within that community. It builds upon earlier notions of Participatory Action Research in its explicit call for researchers to not only participate but to actively work with communities to help them achieve their goals.



Why might I want to use Participatory Activist Research?

- Participatory Activist Research can be used when working with organisations of various sizes, including activist groups that have a strong intent and clear idea of what they are trying to achieve. It can be used to help organisations, groups or communities check that their work is meeting its aims effectively, and to point to problems, opportunities or questions they may otherwise overlook.
- It works with participants as equal partners in the research, to identify the questions or issues they wish to explore. As a result, participants may feel more invested in the research and be able to recognise a tangible benefit from their involvement.
- By working to support the aims of participants, it is useful for researching communities and groups that are busy, focused on campaigning, or with limited resources or time to devote freely to a research project. Designing research around the needs of participants and offering to volunteer in the day-to-day work of the organisation can support the researcher to gain access, and can make the process of research more meaningful and useful for those involved.
- This is an approach that requires patience and often intensive, long term participation, but it can yield surprising results. Spending time observing and listening carefully can expose complex issues, around, for example, race, gender or income that participants may be less inclined to talk about in an interview. Taking part in mundane, everyday activities can help identify the barriers that may be stopping a group reaching its goals.
- As well as exploring particular questions or issues, Participatory Activist Research can benefit participants by describing and documenting their activities, achievements and journeys, and presenting these observations back to them. It can play an important role in validating the efforts of groups or organisations, encouraging and raising awareness about their work.



Hoppie cutting old wine bottles into glass bricks for use in the construction of a wall in her eco-house



Step by step guide to using Participatory Activist Research:

1. Learn about the organisation and

context: Start by doing some background research to understand the organisation involved in the research. This may include reading online materials or reports, or perhaps some light touch observation in the space where this group comes together. This is important for developing a base of knowledge before discussions begin and for establishing rapport with participants.

2. Connect with key individuals:

Arrange a meeting with key individuals to talk about the issues or questions they may be interested in exploring through the research. Ask the group what they would like to achieve, what is preventing them reaching this goal, what are they struggling with, or what would they like to know more about?

The aim of initial conversations is to reach an agreement about what the research will explore. This dialogue is not completely participant led - the researcher will bring their own questions and ideas, but should approach these discussions with an open mind and aim to build the research around the needs of the participants.

3. Make a research plan:

Write down an outline of the research, including its focus, duration, methods involved (e.g. recorded interviews, taking photographs, writing field notes), and outputs that will be produced (e.g. a summary, a report, articles). Give the group time to reflect on this document when the researcher is not present, to ensure everyone agrees on what has been proposed. Provide participants with options for how they will be identified or anonymised, both individually and collectively, and expect consent to be an

ongoing process that may be revisited and renegotiated over the course of the research.

4. Articulate the value of the research:

Participants may be busy, with limited time or resources. Work with participants to understand what the researcher can do to support their aims and day to day activities. This may mean volunteering for an agreed period of time.

If you are staying with a community, be clear on whether you will be paying for accommodation or food, and if there are any rules you are expected to follow while on site.

5. Spend time with participants:

This could include volunteering on specific tasks (e.g. gardening, building), joining in with meetings and communal activities (e.g. cooking, eating together, washing up), and carrying out some core methods such as semi-structured interviews, filming, or writing observational notes. It can be useful to present yourself as an enthusiastic novice, rather than an expert, to encourage participants to explain what they are doing or working on.

6. Be present and stay on track:

Pay attention to what happens in the moments between these more structured activities. Something as mundane as sharing a cup of tea can give both researcher and participant a chance to relax and reflect, often yielding rich insight. Make time for breaks, and remember to write up field notes at the end of each day while they are still fresh.

7. Share findings diversely and creatively.

Plan to produce a range of different outputs, with differing timescales, considering what would be most interesting and useful for participants.



An example of using Participatory Activist Research in social science research

Affordable eco-homes: low-income environmental solutions

Researcher: Prof. Jenny Pickerill, The University of Sheffield

This research project aimed to understand the approaches and practices that make affordable eco-building possible, in order to identify how we can create more opportunities for people to self-build their own eco-homes. It focused on working with successful small-scale, community-led, self-built eco-developments targeted at low-income residents in England, Spain, Thailand, USA and Argentina. The researcher worked with organisations who advocated for more self-build or eco-homes.

It involved the researcher staying with the community, paying for accommodation, joining with communal activities such as eating, washing up and cleaning. Other methods included interviews (with builders, architects and residents), writing observations, and taking photographs. In the process of writing up the research, new themes emerged. These were then taken back to the community and discussed in communal conversations. The researcher produced a short, descriptive report about the place which was shared with participants, and then published in a blog. Academic articles and a book based on the research were drafted between 6 and 12

months later, and shared with the community for feedback. When complete each case study was sent a hard copy of the book 'Eco-homes'.

The Participatory Activist Research approach was particularly useful in this context as residents initially struggled to articulate what was different about how they built their homes or how they lived because it was normal for them. It often took doing things with them, and for the researcher to ask why something was done a certain way, for interviewees to then explain and reflect on a process that to them appeared obvious and mundane.

This work has been impactful in how it has shared the possibilities of self-build low-cost housing practices, has been used to support planning applications, and has resulted in productive conversations with planners and architects. Participants have also noted how the research helped them feel validated and enabled further conversations in their communities about some of the issues raised.



Where else could Participatory Activist Research be used?

Participatory Activist Research has great potential to be used in settings where it is helpful to build up a systematic picture of how ordinary everyday action is making a difference to the world. Charities, third sector organisations, community groups, global activist organisations and start-up companies all engage in a variety of practices that build a sense of purpose, trust and action. Some groups have a specific vision of how to move forward; other groups may have less of a clearly defined purpose. Whatever the structure of your organisation it can sometimes be helpful to stop and reflect on how things are actually working, in practice, and whether this aligns with overall goals and the change a group wants to make in the world.

While monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks may help to assess what is working; Participatory Activist Research is useful for organisations who are interested in demonstrating how the 'mundane' activities build up to create organisational culture and wider societal and environmental impact. It is sometimes helpful to bring in an external person (researcher) to do this, and there are often students, academics and other researchers who might be interested in participating in your organisation to create change – reach out to your local university! Alternatively, this can be done within the group, by setting up a framework for the research, creating space for conversation and analysis, and noting the small details.

Top tips

1. Start slowly. Take your time to get to know the place and the people.
2. Write everything down, including things that seem irrelevant at the time. The smallest observation can turn out to be the most interesting.
3. Listen very carefully if people tell you there is an area they do not want to discuss. The aim is not to understand every detail of a person's life, but to explore a topic, issue or question.
4. Make sure you do your bit and participate fully. This may mean doing the washing up or the cleaning. Make sure you are contributing and pulling your weight!
5. Always provide feedback. If you just disappear, participants can be left feeling confused and disappointed, and it can damage any potential future research in that space or community (for yourself and other researchers).



Further reading

The following bibliography is a good starting point for resources on activist research methods:

- Activist Research Methods

These academic journal articles are also useful further reading on Participatory Activist research and related approaches:

- Doings with the land and sea: Decolonising geographies, Indigeneity, and enacting place-agency
- Feminist geographies and participatory action research: co-producing narratives with people and place

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