

What Are the Academic Merits of Participatory Action Research?

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What is Participatory Action Research (PAR)?

The term “action research” is attributed to Kurt Lewin, who used it to describe a research methodology that focused on problem solving as opposed to investigation. The participation element captures an equal emphasis on the direct, [collaborative involvement](#) of the people seeking to solve the problem.

The Community of Interest

Rather than following the traditional external imposition of an investigative goal by an objective researcher, the PAR methodology requires that the research problem arise from those directly impacted by the planned solution to that problem—the community of interest. The research proposal is typically situational, and the resources needed to solve the research problem are assumed to reside within that community.

The PAR Cycle

Since the declared objective of PAR is to solve a problem, proposed solutions must be tested and the outcomes observed before any further modifications are made to subsequent iterations. This cycle is typically documented in four stages:

Plan—Act—Monitor—Reflect.

The first iteration of the cycle will most likely begin with detailed reconnaissance of the current situation (observation) in order to generate the proposed solution during the first [planning stage](#).

Academic Merits

While the commitment to collaborative involvement in the pursuit of practical resolution of problems is honorable, the practical realities of PAR give cause for concern:

- **High Degree of Urgency**The need to solve a problem demands the emphasis on action that PAR provides. The multiple iterations of the PAR cycle may be interpreted as rushed research, with the result that the findings may be dismissed as being poorly conceived or flawed.
- **Working with Novice Researchers**The community of interest may be closer to the problem and potential solutions than an objective researcher, but without rigorous methodological practices, the generated data may be brought into question.
- **Potential for Bias**Since the “researchers” are also implementing changes in alignment with a solution that they themselves proposed, the objectivity of their actions is questionable.
- **Questionable Context**Since the initial observations and proposed solutions are generated within the specific environment of the research problem, the immediacy precludes a [thorough literature review](#). As a result, the assumption that the solution lies within the realm of the community of interest becomes questionable. What if the problem requires the input of an external observer who has done extensive research on the topic?
- **Limited Extrapolation**Since the research problem and the team of research partners tend to be specific to a unique community-based issue, the potential to extrapolate from or generalize the data produced from the study can be limited.
- **Limited Contribution**This degree of situational specificity will also limit the likelihood that the study can be reproduced with any degree of rigor. At best, researchers may be able to identify similarities of outcome, but the initial research study may be limited to case study status rather than a broader contribution to the body of knowledge on the topic.

PAR may meet a methodological need for situation-specific research projects, where the community of practitioners wants to be directly involved in the resolution of a local problem, but without assurances of academic rigor, the results of such a study would find a limited audience.

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