

# Ethical Dilemmas and Cultural Considerations in using Action Research and Participatory Action Research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a range of important ethical issues that have emerged from the presenter's experiences of using Action Research (AR) or Participatory Action Research (PAR) in a variety of contexts both nationally and internationally. Issues and dilemmas are articulated from the perspective of the student researcher, researcher and research supervisor. Discussion highlights the need for what others have termed 'flexibility' in AR and PAR. However, it is argued that "flexibility", while integral to AR and PAR may result in ethical dilemmas, which have their basis in the subjective and taken-for-granted aspects of culture within and across different cultural contexts and settings.

Differences in what are considered 'acceptable practices' to human research ethics committees in an Australian context will be identified and contrasted with those in an international context. Discussion focuses on the key principles underpinning human research ethics including power, informed consent, anonymity, avoidance of participant harm and the possible benefits for participants of engaging in AR and PAR studies. Critical questions are raised for consideration and discussion with conference delegates with a view to exploring ways in which others might seek resolution of ethical dilemmas when using AR and PAR in different situations and cultural contexts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

My initial attraction to Action Research (AR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) stemmed from the similarity between these methodologies and the nursing process (Löfman, Pelkonen, & Pietilä: 2004), and a sense that the action research approaches were useful to solving practical problems. Nevertheless, over time I have increasingly recognised these attractions disguise the complexity of these methodologies. The complexities related to the use of AR and PAR do not detract from their increasing appeal (Löfman, Pelkonen, & Pietilä 2004; Nolen & Vander Putten 2007; Williamson & Prosser 2002) particularly amongst research higher degree students (Zuber-Skerrit & Fletcher 2007). Of specific concern are the complex ethical issues that can arise during AR and PAR.

Morton (1999: 221) argues "...it is hard, if not impossible, to design ethics into Action Research completely". He also notes that although ethical decisions in AR are often "...nonroutine and made under pressure, there is a need to develop conceptual models for dealing with ethical dilemmas in Action Research, which can easily be internalized by the Action Researcher in the field" (Morton 1999: 221). More recently, Nolen and Vander Putten (2007: 401) argue when discussing AR that "...ethical issues unique to this form of insider research have not received consideration proportional to the growing interest in the methodology". They highlight the need for education to address the complex ethical issues and dilemmas that arise during AR and PAR (Nolen & Vander Putten 2007: 402). Of significance to this paper is that the need for flexibility in AR and PAR (Kelly and Simpson: 2001), an essential feature for accommodating changing situations in the field, increases the likelihood of ethical issues and dilemmas

and that these will be unpredictable and non-routine in nature. This makes these ethical dilemmas difficult to universally address in education on this topic. In this paper, I argue that this is particularly so when cultural issues and taken-for-granteds come into play and add to the complexity of deciding what constitutes an ethical dilemma and how it should be interpreted. My intention is to illustrate these ideas using examples of studies in which I have been involved in the role of research student, researcher or research higher degree supervisor.

## II. BACKGROUND

The intention of this paper is to both discuss my experiences of ethical dilemmas arising from AR or PAR and to seek others' experiences and perspectives on this issue. I acknowledge that there are no simple, or single answers to these dilemmas, or, as Koch and Kralik (2006:108) warn "...rigid rules that will capture the subtlety of ethical situations that arise during research...". Nevertheless I am hopeful that articulation and discussion of these dilemmas, related cultural issues, and questions that they raise will contribute to collective wisdom about how they can be addressed.

Rowan (2001: 114) states "...action research is more than just qualitative research...", rather it is about human beings, and this more engaged approach "means that we may have to take much more seriously the question of research ethics". The increasing volume of literature focusing on this issue indicates growing attention to it. The Australian Government's National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) identifies key ethical values guiding research are research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect. AR and PAR researchers have expressed these values in ways specifically relevant to AR and PAR research. Koch and Kralik (2006: 108) when discussing PAR groups elaborate on *relational ethics*, stating these emerge from "... an understanding that we are inter-dependent upon each other" and reflect a respect for and awareness of each others' vulnerabilities and a willingness to pay attention to and listen to others' experience and contribution.

Fontana and Frey (1994: 372) refer to *situational ethics* in the interview context and the ethical dilemma concerning "the degree of involvement on the part of the researcher with the group under study". Referring to *situational ethics* Punch (1994: 84) observes that researchers often must resolve ethical dilemmas "...situationally and even spontaneously, without the luxury of being able to turn first to consult a more experienced colleague". Rowan (2001: 115) discussing *interpersonal* and *social ethics*, states

In research where the researcher and the other participants come much closer, and are more deeply involved with one another, the personal and social implications become far more complex. Ethical statements by people concerned with such areas of research start to talk about interpersonal ethics – the care with which one treats another equal person – and social ethics, the concern with the result of one's research and the unintended consequences which may ensue.

Succinctly identifying the slippery slope of ethical dilemmas more generally, Wadsworth (1997: 105) argues although "the core issue of ethics is the provision of a set of rules about the conduct of research which is considered 'morally correct'" the process of determining the definition and scope of these rules is a political process. She examines three common ethical concerns; "that the researcher should not harm the subjects, that subjects should give informed consent, and that confidentiality should be offered" (Wadsworth 1997: 105). Wadsworth (1997) concludes that most frequently it is ethics committees who decide what constitutes consent and harm.

These discussions raise issues of power in the conduct of AR and PAR and decision making processes integral to research. Street (1995: 44) observes "power relations can be discovered within intricate webs of human social relationships where power is produced". This is reflected in the Australian Government's (2007: 11) more recent statement "the relationship between researchers and research participants is the ground on which human research is conducted". Both these statements emphasise that consideration of the role of power in ethical dilemmas arising from AR and PAR is essential. Williamson and Prosser

(2002: 558) further confirm this when arguing that AR, although potentially useful for facilitating change, nevertheless

...can be politically and ethically problematic for researchers and participants, as the necessarily close and collaborative relationship they experience introduces a greater element of 'exposure' in AR than in other research approaches, and this can have particular consequences for those working within their organizations.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) make several statements that summarise much of this literature review. They suggest "...qualitative researchers, because they deal with individual persons face-to-face on a daily basis, are attuned to making decisions regarding ethical concerns, because this is part of life in the field" (Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 41). Stating that qualitative researchers must remain alert to ethical dilemmas throughout the research process and "...allow for possibilities of recurring ethical dilemmas and problems" these authors caution "the value of the best research is not likely to outweigh injury to a person exposed" (Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 41). They further warn, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private space of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 41).

### III. EXPERIENCES AS A STUDENT RESEARCHER.

As a novice researcher I set upon the path of my PhD studies. At the time employed as a senior nurse manager relocating several units to a new hospital, being fascinated with leadership and management of people and holding a Master degree in administration, I elected to conduct my PhD research as an 'insider' and to focus on the relocation of nursing staff in one of the relocating units. My being an 'insider' was blurred slightly because I was also new to the location of the study and to that extent an 'outsider'.

Meeting with staff in their existing unit I learned their hopes and fears, their traditions (often visible in symbols including photographs of now healthy patients on the unit wall, participation in pie drives, and annual picnics) and the cultural aspects of this tightly knit group. Firmly believing in a facilitative, inclusive leadership style, I chose to link my studies to the relocation change experienced by this unit's nursing staff and to use AR to facilitate a process of working with rather than on these staff. This I hoped would provide a way of bringing about this relocation change that enabled these staff to bring with them to the new unit, traditions that were meaningful to them as a means of minimising the shock and anxiety of major change. From a methodological perspective, rather than a 'step-by-step' process of AR, I found I needed to adopt what I termed the Notion of Action Research which could accommodate multiple events occurring at one time, but is still principally concerned with a cyclical process of reflection, planning, action, evaluation and further reflection and so on about numerous issues within a limited time frame. I sought to involve and consult staff during formal and informal discussions, providing time for them to reflect and collaborate in processes and play an active role in the change process overall. Working alongside these nurses and, to a lesser extent the unit's multidisciplinary team, in turn enabled me to learn the unit's history and staff members' meanings, interests and goals, and understand its politics and power structures.

A small and diverse group of nursing staff participated in my study and engaged in several one-to-one interviews. I maintained a diary and kept field notes throughout the relocation process. This situation and the study gave rise to multiple ethical issues. These included being an 'insider' in a position of power and trust, raising possible issues of coercion. Further, participants may have been encouraged to participate in my research because of a perception that this might be advantageous to their career or future in the new unit. Potentially I could have confused my roles and, perhaps disliking something that they said or did, might consciously or unconsciously have used this against them in my senior nursing manager role and thus done them harm. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality was made complex in this situation where I was doing research in my own organization. A major issue for me in terms of maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants however was that I did not foresee the difficulty this would present in terms of publishing from this research. This awareness still prevents me from publishing from it,

except for a couple of paragraphs in a more general paper. Nevertheless, one positive from this experience is that I now warn research candidates of this disadvantage of researching in small, fairly static communities, studying topics where potential participants are few or in contexts where one is an ‘insider’.

#### IV. EXPERIENCES AS A RESEARCHER

Following an appointment as Associate Professor to a co-sponsored position in a University and Health Service, my first step into academe, I had the opportunity to work with nursing staff in a psychogeriatric context. This was a new adventure, my background being in paediatric nursing. The Area Director of Nursing had suggested I work with staff in this unit because they had been drawn from a number of health facilities in the area whose units were closing or changing, and she wanted to build their nursing practice expertise and their cohesion as a team. This was a somewhat daunting task! Nevertheless, having read about Nursing Development Units (NDUs) in the United Kingdom, I considered this might be an ideal model to try to introduce in this situation. I realised however, that this was only one way to proceed and its application depended on the level of enthusiasm from the senior nursing manager of the nursing home where the unit was situated, the nursing unit manager (NUM) of the unit and the staff within it. While I mentioned and discussed this model as a possibility to each of these stakeholders, I left the decision about whether or not to use this model to develop their nursing practice to them. Except for one or two nurses who I perceived to be battle weary, I think from years of contribution in a nursing field requiring considerable energy, courage and knowledge, and what I detected was some slight hesitancy on the part of the nursing home’s senior nurse manager there was an overwhelmingly positive response. Gratifyingly, ultimately all the nurses chose to participate in this endeavour. We agreed that I would work along side them one day each week for at least six months and they would receive a computer in the unit to assist with data collection and access to library data bases and so on.

This was a very positive experience partly because I needed to observe and learn about this new (to me) specialty of nursing practice, and gain the knowledge and skill to enable me to care for this very complex group of elderly people. It became apparent however, that although nursing staff of all levels and designations were generally extremely experienced and knowledgeable most did not value themselves or their practice. For example, when I asked one nurse how she so expertly managed a particularly unpredictable resident she responded, “well - I am just an aged care nurse”. Over time this sort of response changed as staff became more articulate about and valuing of their expertise.

After brainstorming with staff over many shifts to identify what nursing practice issues to address, we arrived at the need to examine the management of agitation in the unit’s residents, as the first step in our NDU endeavour, and we used AR led by the unit’s NUM, a novice researcher, to do this. This study’s methods included the use of observation of residents, the design of an agitation scale, and the use of a critical incident technique used prior to the introduction of an intervention and again to evaluate it. For some residents consent to observe them could be sought from their carers, usually family members, but for others this had to be supplied by their carer within the Guardianship Board of NSW.

Gaining ethics approval from the human research ethics committees (required from both the health service and the university) proved highly complex and required much advice from professional officers attached to these committees. As is common in AR a stumbling block was the point at which ethics clearance should be sought for an AR study. This dilemma partly arose because I thought we should seek ethics clearance early because many of the processes leading up to the study, including identifying, reading and discussing literature and identifying the research question, design and method would require staff and I to frequently interact. However, the lack of a research question in the first application for ethics clearance proved problematic to both committees. Ultimately a compromise was reached whereby the first application which sought approval for me to reflect and brain storm with the staff with the aim of identifying the rationale for a study, a research question and a design, the initial phases of an AR approach, was approved on the proviso that when individual research studies and their questions were identified each would require further applications. The staff and I adhered to this and having this information has proved

advantageous to me when applying for ethics clearance for more recent AR and PAR studies relating to nursing practice.

A further ethical dilemma stemmed from the carers' possible expectations when consenting for their loved one's participation in the research, which may have influenced this. Carers who were family members were keen to do anything that might help their loved one and, having had the project and its rationale explained to them during several afternoon discussions, eagerly signed the consent form.

A dilemma around power was also present in this research. In a sense my potential power from having greater knowledge about research was balanced by my lack of clinical knowledge in this specialty of nursing. Rather, issues relating to power involved the senior nurse manager of the nursing home whom I sensed was concerned about the impact on her role of my close interaction with staff and acceptance by them. Following my first meeting with this senior manager I was not asked to meet with her again, and only did so at my initiation when I was leaving the unit. Reflecting on this I think this manager's concern was that I became much more of an 'insider' than she may have been considered by staff. Although the NUM of the unit discussed with this manager each of the many small but important changes that the staff and I proposed over the period I worked with them, I nevertheless perceive that these changes and the increased confidence in staff to critically question aspects of the organization, as well as their practice, may have caused her discomfort.

#### V. EXPERIENCES AS A RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE SUPERVISOR

In this context I will take a different tack and discuss ethical dilemmas more generally so as to preserve the anonymity of students. Part of this discussion highlights how taken-for-granted practices in one culture may prevent the raising of an issue considered an ethical dilemma in another. This is followed by two examples of differences in cultural perspectives about what Australian and international human research ethics committees believe to be 'acceptable practice'.

Although a principle supervisor is to some extent at arms length from the conduct of the research, he or she is nevertheless identified as the study's chief investigator and therefore primarily responsible for its ethical conduct and that of the student researcher. Several dilemmas arise from this situation. First, unless the student has considerable research experience prior to studying for a research higher degree, the principle supervisor becomes primarily responsible for the ethical conduct of a novice researcher. This is not necessarily a problem as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 131) point out in their comment that:

Students are responsible and trustworthy people who, if allowed to use their sense of responsibility in a meaningful way, do become independent learners, capable of generating and following through a quest for knowledge and understanding that will prove intrinsically rewarding.

The particular difficulty when the student is using AR or PAR however, is that, as Kelly and Simpson (2001: 656) point out, these methodologies must "...be flexible enough to incorporate changes" and therefore may require the student as novice researcher to be alert to ethical issues associated with these changes, and willing to seek advice from the supervisor when this arises. Difficulties compounding this situation may occur when a student is conducting his or her research in a country and culture different to the one where the supervisor is located and the student enrolled, because this may make immediate contact more difficult. One answer to this may be the identification of a field supervisor to support the student. However, this may give rise to yet another difficulty if the student and the field supervisor share the culture of the country where the study is being undertaken. In this situation it is possible that neither student nor field supervisor perceive an issue to be ethically challenging because of its taken-for-granted nature in the culture they share. This may mean that the issue is not raised with the student's supervisor who, had it been raised, might have perceived it to be an ethical dilemma requiring careful review.

Differences may also exist between what Australian and international human research ethics committees consider ‘acceptable practice’. An example of this arose when a student’s application for a study to be conducted in an Eastern context was sent to an ethics committee in a Western context where she was enrolled. This Western committee gave approval for priests from a particular religion common in the context of the proposed study, to assist with recruitment of the student’s participants who were an extremely vulnerable group. For various reasons this student was also required to seek ethical clearance from a human research ethics committee situated within the study’s Eastern context. When she submitted her ethics application to this second committee however, it concluded that although these priests were greatly revered by the community, they were not bound by the rules of confidentiality that exist for health professionals, and therefore they should not be requested to recruit participants for this student’s study.

One further example illustrating differences between Australian and international human research ethics committees’ perceptions of ‘acceptable practice’ involved the means by which participants could signify their consent for participation. In this instance when seeking advice about whether or not a thumb print would be acceptable to an Australian based human research ethics committee to signify illiterate participants’ consent, this advice was that this was not acceptable and instead, in this situation, consent should be recorded via audio-tape. When this student applied to the second human research ethics committee situated in the Eastern culture where the study was located, the response from this committee was that it routinely required that participants be offered the option to supply a thumb print to signify their consent. To this end the consent form endorsed by this second committee provided a specific site where the thumbprint should be placed.

Moving on from this more general discussion, a further experience, which highlights a possible ethical dilemma, was only raised for me some time after a student had completed her study and obtained her degree. I, as her principle supervisor, was reflecting on this study and its processes. This student was conducting her AR study in her home context of Asia although she was enrolled in an Australian university. Some of her data were to be collected at a focus group in the village, which was the site of her study. I was fortunate to be able to visit this village to gain some experience of the village culture where the study took place. I was also there to support the student during the focus group because she was using a structured process for data collection and analysis that had been developed and implemented many times in a Western culture but apparently not in an Eastern one. Considering this the student and I both thought it likely that using this structured process in a different cultural to that in which it had been developed and used previously may result in it requiring adjustment ‘on the run’.

In the few days leading up to the focus group the student and I wandered around the village where the student was well known to many villagers in her role as a supervisor supporting students from a local university on a community health placement. These villagers approached us or called out from their homes to greet us as we passed, many graciously offering refreshment despite their evident poverty. The student always introduced me and although I could neither speak nor understand the language I perceived she probably told those greeting us why I was there.

The student’s husband, a medical doctor, drove the student and me to the village. This came about because the focus group had to be held at night so as to allow time for participants to return from working in the fields or the city some distance away, and the village was considered not safe for the student and me at night. The focus group was convened in the village hall. Word had clearly travelled that the student’s husband would be coming to the village because there was a long line of villagers just outside the grounds of the hall waiting to consult him when we arrived. This meant at least some of the student’s participants probably walked past those waiting in order to enter the village hall.

Reflecting on this situation it seemed to me possible that my being in the village and participants’ path of access to the study’s focus group raised ethical issues around the need to ensure their anonymity. On the other hand the intent of the study was to identify and find strategies to address a situation in the village that villagers participating in the study identified to be causing them concern and a disruption to village life.

The study's AR methods and processes were designed to enable the student researcher and the study's participants to work together to resolve this situation in a sustainable manner that would continue beyond the time of her study. Further, the location of the focus group, the opportunities it provided for villagers who were not study participants as well as those who were, and the way villagers interacted with the student and I as we walked around the village were entirely consistent with everyday village life. All this made me question when and in what circumstances are ethical considerations relating to AR or PAR no longer applicable because of a change in the balance between these research methodologies and sustained community development?

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion this discussion has been set within a framework of ethical values identified in the Australian Government's (2007) National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research. It has demonstrated, as Kelly and Simpson (2001) suggest, the necessity for flexibility in AR and PAR to accommodate changes in situations and processes, but that this flexibility may result in a range of unpredictable, non-routine ethical dilemmas. It has been argued that this is particularly so when cultural nuances relating to what constitutes an ethical dilemma and how it should be interpreted exist. Nevertheless, Löfman, Pelkonen, and Pietilä (2004) suggest flexibility extends to the resolution of these ethical dilemmas and that, in this process it is important to consider the project being undertaken and its participants. They add "This means drawing out the full potential of the numerous alternative decisions on ethical issues and the research process, in order to increase and to extend further the use of PAR (and AR) in the future" (Löfman, Pelkonen & Pietilä 2004: 339). Although not decreasing the likelihood that unpredictable ethical dilemmas will arise when using AR and PAR, this suggestion signals one positive outcome of this occurring.

## VII. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ARISING FROM THE PRESENTATION:

1. When and in what circumstances are ethical considerations relating to AR or PAR no longer applicable because of a change in balance between these methodologies and sustained community development?
2. Are PAR or AR studies 'appropriate' for students undertaking research higher degrees?
3. How can AR or PAR be facilitated when researching in hierarchical structures and/or environments?

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