

Hypothesis: The Research Page

Learning with the community *Evolution to transformative action research*

V.R. Ramsden, RN, MSC

Transition to an Integrated Primary Health Services Model Research Team

This is the final article in a series on participatory methods of facilitating research. The first article provided an overview of participatory methods.¹ The second article described the specific methodology known as participatory action research, which is a rigorous methodology—just as demanding as any other but more flexible and consequently easily adjustable to constantly changing clinical environments.² This article describes transformative action research.

Transformative action research encompasses a high level of participation, action research, and transformative learning.³ Transformative learning refers to learning through praxis, a process that weaves together:

- critical analysis of social situations and issues,
- practising group and communication skills,
- improving practical and technical abilities,⁴ and
- spiritual growth and healing.

Facilitators of transformative learning recognize the importance of:

- people's readiness to learn,
- forming a strong team,
- knowing people's context and needs very well,
- improving their ability to reflect and act, and
- increasing the level of awareness and personal growth.⁵

Broadening base of perceptions

Transformative action research challenges the usual notions of research design. It points out that it is no longer sufficient to conduct the research "for" or "on" a community or organization, as perceptions and expectations of researchers and target populations differ. Working "with" individuals, communities, and organizations broadens the base of perceptions and expectations that powerfully influence assumptions to structure the way we interpret research findings. Thus, we as researchers are able to move beyond

seeing only what we expect to see and hence enrich our knowledge and experience.

Transformative action research requires true collaboration where power and empowerment are shared horizontally. Key informant interviews and focus groups would be insufficient, as key informants do not necessarily reflect the community or target population. Creating a transparent environment is very important when maintaining participatory principles where everyone has the opportunity to influence and shape programs in their communities.

Qualifications needed

Researchers who use high levels of participation should have experience as adult educators, a reasonable grasp of both qualitative and quantitative methods, and a broad knowledge base. They must also have the capacity to:

- listen;
- guide and facilitate discussion, ensuring that key questions are reflected upon;
- encourage trust;
- delegate tasks and responsibilities;
- plan actions to help bring together the views of the various people involved in the process; and
- create an environment that facilitates sharing and reflection.⁶

In essence, the research investigators or academics become facilitators when engaging in transformative action research. Researchers act as catalysts, confidantes, or collaborators. Thus, researchers build bridges to facilitate the paradigm shift required to work with communities. As facilitators, they take direction from the community, which is reflected in the process, methods, and results of the research. In addition, researchers maintain the integrity of the process by ensuring data are kept for both the communities and the research team. As a result of active involvement, the community



acquires a sense of ownership, capacities are built, individuals and organizations are empowered, and what is learned is applied within the community.

Transformative action research builds upon the principles of participatory evaluation as outlined by Capeling-Alakija et al⁶ (Table 1^{7,8}).

Conclusion

The strength of transformative action research is that learning and research are done together. Hence, we learn what the community realities are. One of the challenges and subsequent opportunities of this method is that to engage in the process requires trust built on relationships that are sustainable over time.

Change is a process, not an outcome. Yet the process that evolves through use of transformative action research is a very important outcome.

Monitoring change requires a process-oriented method based on the principles of transformative action research. This method can be applied in a variety of settings and jurisdictions. People who reside in the communities, and health care practitioners as well, gain a greater appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of various members of the interdisciplinary team that includes the community. The wisdom of the community, once recognized, respected, and validated, will support and enhance the capacity for transformation. Transformation of people, health care practitioners, and the health care system will enhance our ability to work with people and the communities in which they reside. ♦

Dr Ramsden is Coordinator and Director of the Research Division in the Department of Family Medicine,

Table 1. Process of transformative action research

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Outline a conceptual framework using participatory principles
- Define parameters for the TAR process
- Assess constraints and resources or enabling and inhibiting factors
- Identify members of the team facilitating TAR
- Negotiate the purpose and objectives of the TAR process

GENERATING QUESTIONS TO BE A PART OF THE TAR PROCESS

- Facilitate workshops in the community with team members
- Collectively identify the main focus of the project

DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

- Provide necessary training in data-gathering methods
- Gather data
- Provide weekly feedback on the quality of data gathered
- Analyze data collectively

RETURN DATA* TO THE COMMUNITY FOR CONSIDERATION AND REFLECTION

- Return data to communities for interpretation and decision making via community meetings
- Invite participants to reflect on the data
- Identify insights, prioritize actions to be taken, and subsequently disseminate findings appropriately

REFLECTION AND ACTION

- Recast approach to challenges so that they are considered opportunities for change
- Coordinate resources for resolving conflicts and challenges during the process
- Take action together

TAR—transformative action research.

* Raw data must be organized into readable narrative description with major themes and categories that have been abstracted through analysis. The qualitative aspect of a project will emphasize illumination, understanding, and extrapolation rather than causal determination, prediction, and generalization.^{7,8}



College of Medicine, at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Members of the Transition to an Integrated Primary Health Services Model Research Team were G.N. White, P.R. Butt, E. Korchinski, H. Albert, E. Baptiste, G. Braun, E. Calder, J. Crowe, M.P. Dressler, P. Ferguson, A. Fineday, D. Fineday, D. Fisher, L. Francis, C. Gamble, S. Hunt, M. Jackson, K. Hay, G.J. Laliberte, M. Michaels, D. Morales, C. Popadyneec, S. Wolfe, and the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr Cave is Research Director in the Department of Family Medicine in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

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