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## **Making Sense of Participatory Action Research Approaches: Mapping the Territory**

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# **Making Sense of Participatory Action Research Approaches: Mapping the Territory**

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**Abstract:** *This roundtable discusses the historical, political and cultural contexts from which different approaches to Participatory Action Research have emerged. A typology will be provided that differentiates dimensions of various PAR approaches.*

A substantial body of knowledge has been constructed to represent different dimensions to research that falls under the larger umbrella of Participatory Action Research (PAR). As an alternative set of approaches to the research process, PAR approaches question and problematize fundamental values, criteria and tenets underpinning conventional forms of social science research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Selener, 1997; Whyte, 1991). Understanding the rationale behind undertaking PAR approaches is often lost on many adult education graduate students and faculty who have not had significant practical exposure to PAR practice and philosophy. Part of the confusion stems from the myriad approaches that fall under the organizing rubric of PAR. The PAR territory includes: Participatory research (Gaventa, 1988; Hall, 1975; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall & Jackson, 1993), action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), action inquiry and learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1999), cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996); feminist participatory research (Maguire, 1987), transformative research (Deshler & Selener, 1997), practitioner research (Noffke, 1999), and participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1997).

Adult educators, students and practitioners who are not familiar with the PAR terrain often are not aware that there are different strands that make up the PAR tapestry (Selener, 1997). Apart from the difficulty of identifying and distinguishing the key features of PAR approaches, there are very few comprehensive sources of information that provide a map for navigating the conceptual dimensions that set PAR approaches apart from conventional social science research methodologies (See Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). As an alternative approach to conventional social science research, graduate students and adult educators who value more critical and participatory forms of knowledge generation, have very little guidance for understanding and conducting PAR approaches in contexts that warrant its design and application.

This roundtable discussion will center on understanding the diverse historical, political and cultural contexts from which different approaches to PAR have emerged. The roundtable moderator will provide a typology that differentiates dimensions of various PAR approaches that both converge and diverge. Specific elements that are described in the typology and that will be proposed for further discussion include researcher roles, values, concepts, purposes, methods, culture, power, ideologies, use, dialogue, participation, sustainability, partnerships, knowledge construction, action, insider-outsider relationships, and learning. Finally, there will also be a discussion of specific cases, best practices, ongoing tensions and debates in PAR, as well as a dialogue

on different challenges associated with undertaking various PAR approaches inside and outside of institutions of higher education.

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