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PAR and the Friendly Outsider

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves collaborative efforts among researchers and local stakeholders with the goal of promoting social change and building community capabilities. In traditional social science research, the goal is to draw broadly applicable and objective generalizations from specific circumstances. However, PAR is a human-centered process that acknowledges the importance of context and subjectivity. PAR seeks to overturn traditional approaches to social science research that leave out stakeholders. Instead, researchers and stakeholders create space to inquire and learn together, creating a synergy of local knowledge and ‘expert’ knowledge and exploring the possibility of change.

A starting point for planners and others seeking to engage in PAR is to develop their own capacity for productive collaboration. PAR researchers can become better collaborators by striving to adopt the stance of a “friendly outsider” and cultivating qualities of self-confidence, integrity, humor, respect, curiosity, and open-mindedness. These qualities may be somewhat foreign to traditional social scientists but they are long-acknowledged qualities of excellent movement builders and leaders.

PAR researchers must also acknowledge their outsider status. Researchers cannot presume to know the experience of the communities with which they work. They can work to improve trust and maintain open lines of communication by engaging in individual and collective reflection. Such reflection processes can help to ensure that the intentions of the researchers and community members remain aligned.

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1 Greenwood and Levin