PAR and mixed methods: What role for quantitative and qualitative methods in PAR?

The choice of participatory action research (PAR) as an approach to “doing social science” does not presage the type of data that will be collected, nor the particular method of analysis that will be used. PAR involves both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis as does traditional social science. In PAR however, the choice of research methods is driven not only by the learning objective of the co-researchers (i.e., goal-driven choice), but also by the socio-cultural particulars of the community involved (i.e., context-driven choice). A community with a strong oral tradition, for example, will probably attach a great deal of importance to knowledge and experience depicted in narrative form. Since PAR aims to make research findings accessible to all, knowledge produced in ways that are most familiar to the community is likely to be the most trusted.

Since PAR is highly contextualized, and qualitative methods pay more attention to contextually-specific knowledge than most statistical methods do, PAR researchers are likely to begin with a qualitative research orientation. Still, quantitative methods can be a valuable complement given the problem-solving objectives that might be most important to particular communities. For example, the energy-consuming behavior of residents in a mountainous rural community could be approached in PAR-like fashion by relying on narratives produced by the inhabitants (i.e., when, where and how they heat themselves, how their parents generated electric power when it was needed, what type of buildings they prefer to live in, what the weather is like, and how have things changed for the current generations). If their motivation is to reduce their gas and electricity bills, a detailed quantitative assessment of the energy they are using and what they pay for it, may be the best way to begin. Ultimately, merging the quantitative and qualitative findings may offer the best chance of helping them address the problem that is most important to them.

Blending qualitative and quantitative methods may be important for another reason. If policy-makers must accept research findings before they are willing to consider changing policies or practices, than reliance solely on qualitative social science research methods may be counterproductive. Some officials may require quantitative (comparative) and not just qualitative (deeply contextual) findings to justify change.