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The Role of Narrative in PAR

PAR is focused on shifting the way we think about and conduct research in communities that have been historically marginalized and disempowered. In addition to producing research and tangible community change, PAR focuses on building capacity and empowering communities through their participation in the research process. Why use narrative in PAR? Narrative can be useful in PAR as an approach to documenting what is happening in a community. It can provide a way for community members to share their lived experiences and to help one another understand how they create meaning in their lives. In this sense, narrative functions as a tool for knowledge-creation and exchange.

Narrative also allows community members to make connections between their personal experiences and larger social forces. These connections can function to illustrate how structural changes impact people’s lives, and may help community groups determine where to focus their energies to create changes in public policy. By providing examples of how people’s lives are shaped by structural forces, the urgency for change may be brought to the forefront.

Story-telling allows individuals to reflect on their past experiences. This can be cathartic; emotions are often difficult to verbalize and may be best conveyed through the illustrative process of narrative. This may be particularly important when inequality and social justice, which may provoke strong emotional responses, are the focus of the PAR effort. Furthermore, one of PAR’s goals is to empower communities. In part, empowerment is about creating your own storyline. Narrative provides important tools for helping people reframe their current circumstances and imagine new possibilities.

Lastly, relationship-building is an important aspect of PAR. Researchers and community members must forge a working partnership. Knowing about one another helps build trust and understanding. Narratives can be used as a device to learn about each other and build trusting emotional relationships.