

Reconsidering Participatory Action Research within the Context of Decolonisation in mainstream terms

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I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Maori and Anglo-Saxon participants with whom I am working, and whose courage and wisdom informs my reflections:

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My catalyst is about creating an opportunity for non-Indigenous practitioners to explore their practice assumptions in the context of decolonization.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners are welcome.

The following reflections are a consequence of my work in a project funded by Queensland Health, but do not in any way reflect the State government's position: they are entirely my own.

The reflections are background to the foreground of what we may create together in the Congress.

I. REFLECTIONS

Participatory Action Research (PAR) a participatory expression of "action research" (AR). As practitioners know there are many variants of AR that we learn about, work with, adapt and innovate as action researchers in the fields of practice.

Context (field of application, resources, local history etc) makes a difference, delegated powers make a difference, autobiography and stances make a difference, and our cultural assumptions also make a difference.

Learning about decolonization in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been an aspect of context that is powerfully influencing my approaches with regard to PAR.

The term "decolonization" was new to me, in itself an omission of my white blindside, as Indigenous peoples have been participating in decolonization for as long as colonization has been taking place.

I learned about decolonisation in a literature review we carried out for a State funded PAR strategy, recognizing and integrating health promotion in early childhood services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In this context decolonization is a positive determinant of health achieved through Indigenous communities taking control of their culture and health (Vickery et al, 2007). Decolonisation is understood globally as the process of a colonized people decoupling themselves from the co-dependency created by the coloniser's (ongoing) theft of resources (land) and culture (language, social fabric, spirituality).

There is strong protection about decolonizing practices, as these are the practices of resilience and care for people and country. Making conversation about decolonization an Indigenous right and responsibility, closed to non-indigenous, including the colonizer, is understandable.

However Vickery et al also state that:

“Processes to promote decolonization need to be well thought out and can be hindered by ongoing colonization problems (2007, p33)”.

Decolonisation happens in a context of ongoing colonization, conscious and unconscious. Moreover the colonizer also suffers the internally directed assumptions of colonization (exploitation, theft, alienation, inflated profit, control) leading to my proposition that the colonizer, of whom I am one, needs to address our own forms of decolonization in companionship with those whom we colonise, if the transformative potential of authenticity, legitimacy and recognition (all aspects of sovereignty) are to be enjoyed.

This risks the paradox, identified in Indigenous academic literature, of the colonizer further embedding colonizing power by being politically correct (Riggs, 2004).

Riggs refers to Rutherford who suggests that white morality is always expressed as enactments of white aggression and of maintaining white sovereignty (1998).

So how can we work constructively at this paradoxical edge as PAR practitioners?

I am learning to approach decolonization, through my field of action (PAR), which has the capacity to question ontology, epistemology and radically shift ways of being, doing, knowing and becoming. I want to open this question with peer practitioners, inviting us to propose our PAR approaches, and critique them from a decolonizing context:

- How does our PAR practice as non-Indigenous peoples promote white sovereignty within our own people as well as within cross-cultural contexts?
- How do Indigenous PAR practitioners work across the cultural/racial differences without being forced to participate in ongoing colonization?

PAR has traditions of recognizing the “right to have rights” that Southern participatory traditions (eg: Friere, Fals Borda) invested in its foundations. I thus felt that PAR, whatever variant we co-created would be an appropriate methodology to work with this field.

I was surprised to realize that I had to reconsider some of PAR’s revered integrity in the context of decolonization.

The following rough table is an example of this realization. I refer to Somekh’s distinctions with great respect and am not implying in anyway that they are lacking outside the decolonization context. However, as I am also coming to realize, there are few contexts that are free of this context

	Somekh’s (2006) distinctions: Action Research...	In decolonization context
1	‘integrates research and action in a series of flexible cycles’	cycles yes, but not for pragmatic outcomes so much as to encounter the spiritual(Yunkaporta and McGinty, 2009)
2	‘is conducted by a collaborative partnership of participants and researchers’	yes but how do we determine who are “participants” who are “researchers” in a decolonising context – the roles are blurred as we are all participants in decolonisation and all researching its form through our participation
3	‘involves the development of knowledge and understanding of ... change and development in a natural (as opposed to contrived) social situation’	yes – but how do we protect life as it is in a “natural social situation” from being further exposed to invasive/interventions when our researching practice holds within it white aggression?

4	'starts from a vision of social transformation and aspirations of greater social justice for all'	not sure – I am not sure if “social transformation” is appropriate at all – being so bound to Judeo Christian notions of redemption. Healing perhaps – see Yavu-Kama-Harathunian (1998) for a framing of spirituality that maintains cultural integrity and fluidity
5	'involves a high level of reflexivity and sensitivity to the role of the self'	Not sure again – the role of the self in mainstream terms is highly contestable in Indigenous cultures, the notion of “self determination” is very different when pushing through layers of discrimination and oppression, layers of being the privileged child of colonisation
6	'involves exploratory engagement with a wide range of existing knowledge'	yes – however, to distinguish, understand and co-create different kinds of existing knowledge we need to be philosophically informed – and politically aligned with decolonisation - as power is deeply embedded in knowledge construction practices and needs to be outed for the colonizer to become self aware as such at a cultural level of knowing
7	'engenders powerful learning for participants'	yes – totally – learning needs to be articulated and shared in the presence of each other – and – intra-culturally so that the spaces for decolonisation open within and between cultural boundaries
8	'locates the enquiry in an understanding of broader historical, political and ideological contexts'	yes – but again – whose understanding and how do we work the politics of dominant understandings in a decolonising context?

And is there anything else? Well, yes – I think I can speak with my research colleagues when I say we are finding that crucial to PAR in decolonisation is the notion of “governance” - before and above all – that the source of legitimacy for action is varied when working cross culturally, and perhaps highly illustrative of ongoing colonisation – the governance arena of a PAR strategy is where participation in decolonisation is most vibrant.

Considering participatory action research in this context requires me to make self-critical reflexivity my core of action research practice, and to turn my inquiry gaze towards my own people, those within the “mainstream”. I want to receive with new understanding the racist presumptions of my people, including my own, including the invisibilisation of our own race (Riggs), and find ways in which we can become conscious of invisible assumptions – even when shrouded in good intent and together learn respect.

And more deeply, to encounter the sense of disorientation that we must, if we are to truly meet the matter of whose ground on which we stand and with what integrity we stand upon it.

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