



Ensuring Quality: Indicative Characteristics of Participatory (Health) Research

The following criteria can be used when reflecting on the quality of participatory research projects. They have been adapted from the ICPHR Position Paper 1 by Prof. Tina Cook.

1) Participatory

The goal of PR is to maximize the participation of those whose life or work is the subject of the research in all stages of the research process, including the formulation of the research question and goal, the development of a research design, the selection of appropriate methods for data collection and analysis, the implementation of the research, the interpretation of the results, and the dissemination of the findings. Such participation is the core, defining principle of PHR, setting this type of research apart from other approaches in the health field. Whatever model is used to describe participation in the research process, the goal of PHR is to provide the opportunity for all participants to be equitably involved to the maximum degree possible throughout the research.

2) Locally Situated

PHR is grounded in the reality of daily life and work in a specific place and time. The issue being researched must be located in the social system which is likely to adopt the changes that result from the research process. This is the strength of PHR and results in the further development of local knowledge. It is this local dimension that often presents the greatest challenge to funders and policy makers as well as to those who assume that their generalized knowledge (“scientific” or “professional” knowledge, in the usual sense) is superior.

3) A Collective Research Process

In PHR the research process is typically conducted by a group representing the various stakeholders taking part in the study. This group can include engaged citizens, members of civil society (NGOs) health and social welfare professionals, health organizations, academic researchers, and policy makers. Any one of these stakeholders can initiate and lead a study. The title “participatory researcher” or “co-researcher” is not reserved for the academics but rather designates all members of the research group. The leadership role consists of facilitating a shared decision-making group process for developing, implementing, analyzing and disseminating the research.

4) PHR Projects are Collectively Owned

Consistent with the above-named principles, the ownership of the research lies in the hands of the group conducting the study. The group needs to decide how best to report on the findings of the research in order to meet the set goals.

5) Aims for Transformation through Human Agency

PHR follows the explicit goal of creating positive social change as a result of the research process for those persons whose life or work is the focus of the research. Typical research goals are:

- improving the health of a specific group of people;
- addressing the social determinants of health by improving living standards;
- addressing the political determinants of health by changing repressive or restrictive policy;
- improving the quality of services by addressing organizational issues.

A quality criterion for PHR is supporting transformation processes which go beyond the span of the research project so as to contribute to lasting change in the interest of better health. Sustainable

change is promoted, for example, by involving a broad coalition of stakeholders in the research, setting up structures for sustained learning and action as part of the research process, and providing skills training for local people to carry on the initiatives launched during the research once the project is completed.

6) Promotes Critical Reflexivity

Critical reflexivity means considering how power and powerlessness affect the daily lives and practice of those whose life or work is the focus of the research. It requires professionals to question their roles and their knowledge based on power differentials between themselves and service users, and based on the expertise gained through life experiences and the social disadvantages faced by people without professional health qualifications.

7) Produces Knowledge which is Local, Collective, Co-created, Conversational and Diverse

Knowledge produced by health research is typically by and for an academic audience. Often highly technical in both methodology and reporting, the knowledge can be difficult to diffuse to policy makers, practitioners, community leaders and others who could use the information to make change. Knowledge produced through PHR is accessible to different audiences, especially for whom the work has direct impact.

8) Strives for a Broad Impact

An explicit intention of PR is to bring about social change. Social learning (learning together and from each other) is a fundamental dimension of the PHR process and the continual cycle of “look, reflect, act” underpins the dynamics of developing a connected knowing. Interactive processes engage people in transformative learning, i.e., changes in the way they see the world and themselves. This generates an intention of being able to act based on their experience during the research and the research findings, thus having a wider impact

9) Produces Local Evidence Based on Broad Understandings of Generalisability

The generation of local evidence can accumulate over time strengthening the ability of local participants to take effective action. Transfer of interventions from one locality to the next is about understanding the contextual conditions in the new setting, how they differ from the setting in which the knowledge was produced, and reflecting on the consequences.

10) Follows Specific Validity Criteria

- Participatory Validity: Extent to which stakeholders take an active part in research process
- Intersubjective Validity: Extent to which the research is viewed as being credible and meaningful by the stakeholders from a variety of perspectives
- Contextual Validity : Extent to which the research relates to the local situation
- Catalytic Validity: Extent to which the research is useful in presenting new possibilities for social action
- Ethical Validity: Extent to which the research outcomes and the changes exerted on people by the research are sound and just
- Empathic Validity: Extent to which the research has increased empathy among the participants

11) Is a Dialectical Process Characterized by Messiness

As knowledge and action strategies generated by PR arise out of a collective research process characterized by dialogue among participants with different perspectives on the subject under study, this does not necessarily result in a consensual view. It may reveal and promote several different views resulting in different ways of addressing the issue at hand. The occurrence of this messiness is a fundamental characteristic of PR and its nonlinear, multi-focused research process and outcomes which cannot be characterized prior to the study. The rigour in PR lies in the extent the research is facilitated as to make possible new, transformative insights which offer these fresh approaches for action