



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

Making sense of critical participatory action research. Reflections on *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*

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Submitted for publication: 2nd November 2016

Accepted for publication: 5th November 2016

Published: 16th November 2016

<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.62.013>

Keywords: Habermas, participatory action research, communicative spaces

Introduction

After immersing myself in *The Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*, I believe I have a better understanding of participatory action research and its relationship to the work of Habermas. I feel it has enabled me to align my values and beliefs with Habermas and action research's philosophical underpinnings within the critical theory paradigm. For me this book has clarified how communicative spaces, the theory of communicative action and public spheres are related to participatory methodologies.

At the start of the book, Kemmis and co-authors (2013, pp 2-3) define the purpose of critical participatory action research as 'to change social practices, including research itself, to make them more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable and more just and inclusive'. 'Rational' in this context conveys a sense of being more reasonable, comprehensible, coherent and sensible. Carr and Kemmis (1986) critique the positivist and interpretivist paradigms and argue that for critical participatory action research to bring about social change, it needs to reject the premise of objectivity whereby the researcher is viewed as a 'distant observer'. They further advocate that self-reflection is essential, for the individual and the collective, to ensure the critical aspect and validity of the research. Overall, they say participatory forms of research methodology create the conditions for practitioners to be activity involved and have a voice in all aspects of the research process (Kemmis et al., 2013).

A meaningful learning for me has been the realisation that critical participatory action research is not a series of iterative cycles that lead on from each other but rather a self-reflecting spiral that is continuous. This realisation may, on the surface, seem obvious. However, it is a longstanding assumption for me that has now been unpacked and I have gained a new perspective on how to participate in this form of research. The significance of this is that within my values and beliefs, I feel registered nurses should be active in decision making and able to influence their environment. Having a spiral that is ongoing – which includes the process of planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on the process, and then replanning and so on – allows for overlapping and a more fluid movement of participants in and out of the process. Having an ongoing spiral enables the process of critical participatory action research to be determined by the participants, rather than the research process (Kemmis et al., 2013).

Figure 1: Creative representation of self-reflective spiral



I have been able to make sense of the relationship between Habermas' (1987) *Theory of Communicative Action*, the role of participation in the public sphere in how this relates to communicative action and communicative spaces. A public sphere is created when a group of people with a common interest come together to explore a problem or an issue. I value that in our interactions with others; as researchers we need to respect others' expertise and value the contribution they make. Within critical participatory action research, participants or co-researchers come together and talk about their workplace and their values, and come to a mutual consensus or shared understanding. Therefore they are active in the process and their expertise is both recognised and valued. Most importantly the issue of power is explored and recognition is given that we are not all equal. Research groups need to value and explore difference in open and honest ways, and agree on ways of working that mitigate or minimise the power distribution to create a safe communicative space. Such a space allows them to remove themselves from organisational constraints and dare to dream (Kemmis et al., 2013).

The process of participating in communicative action occurs with a communicative space. This is a place where participants are free to be open and honest, and respect each other's ideas and perspectives. From a critical participatory action research perspective, this requires a space where conversations are conducted respectfully, there is a sincere attempt among participants to reach unforced consensus and difference is appreciated. Safety is created within communicative spaces where participants engender a sense of cohesion with shared decision making. This cohesion itself ensures there is validity and legitimacy in the attainment of unforced consensus. Validity and legitimacy are essential in critical participatory action research and can only be achieved through communicative action where participants are free to decide what is comprehensible to them, what they believe is the truth, what they believe to be sincerely stated and what seems to be morally right and appropriate at a given point in time (Kemmis et al., 2013, p 36).

In conclusion, critical participatory action research involves the research team and the participants being committed to an ongoing discourse that aims to consider practice differently in an open and

honest way, enabling the rethinking of clinical practice. Communicative action aims for change in practice that is more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive.

References

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement, support and guidance provided to me by my supervision team, Professor Jan Dewing, Dr Anne Williams and Dr Sharon Bourgeois.

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