



MedUNAB
ISSN: 0123-7047
ISSN: 2382-4603
medunab@unab.edu.co
Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga
Colombia

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Participatory Action Research: Engaging Communities in Mental Health
MedUNAB, vol. 27, núm. 2, 2024, Agosto-Noviembre, pp. 124-125
Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga
Santander, Colombia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29375/01237047.5314>

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REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS DE LA SALUD

Vol. 27(2): 124-125, August - November 2024
i-ISSN 0123-7047 e-ISSN 2382-4603



Editorial

Participatory Action Research: Engaging Communities in Mental Health

Investigación de acción participativa: Involucrando a las comunidades en la salud mental

Investigação-ação participativa: : Envolvendo as comunidades na saúde mental

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ARTICLE INFORMATION:

Article received: August 15, 2024

Article accepted: November 30, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29375/01237047.5314>

How to reference. Cadena S. Participatory Action Research: Engaging Communities in Mental Health. MedUNAB [Internet]. 2024;27(2):124-125. doi: <https://doi.org/10.29375/01237047.5314>

Palabras clave:

Participación de la Comunidad; Investigación; Salud Mental; Participación Social; Integración a la Comunidad

Keywords:

Community Participation; Research; Mental Health; Social Participation; Community Integration

Palabras-chave:

Participação da Comunidade; Pesquisa; Saúde Mental; Participação Social; Integração Comunitária



As we usher in the new year, it presents a valuable opportunity for introspection and forward-looking aspiration an invitation to envision a future enriched with hope and an improved quality of life. While personal reflections often take center stage, it is our connections with those around us -our communities- that fundamentally shape our identities and experiences. So, what exactly constitutes a community?

At its essence, a community is often defined as a group of people residing in a shared geographic area, such as a neighborhood, who may share common cultural, linguistic, and historical roots. This perspective highlights the similarities that bind individuals together. Yet, communities can also be beautifully diverse, comprising individuals

who coexist with mutual respect and an understanding of both shared traits and differences, enhancing the cultural tapestry that weaves them together and fostering deeper connections among neighbors.

The actions and interactions of these community members significantly impact not only the daily rhythms of life but also the coping mechanisms that shape how neighborhoods function. Engaging in one's community can take on various forms—be it volunteering, participating in local meetings, or simply fostering supportive relationships. When researchers seek to uncover and understand the pressing social issues facing these communities, the most reliable and effective approach is to turn to the voices of the residents themselves.

This deep engagement, from the initial idea to actionable steps and tangible social change, lies at the heart of a research methodology that prioritizes the insights and experiences of those directly affected. Emerging in the mid-20th century, Participatory Action Research (PAR) arose as a powerful counter to the often detached and one-sided nature of conventional research practices. PAR endeavors to dismantle the barriers that traditionally separate researchers from the researched, transforming what were once passive subjects into active agents of inquiry. By emphasizing shared decision-making, collaborative analysis, and united action, this methodology transcends mere data collection; it acts as a catalyst for empowerment, inclusivity, and profound transformation within communities.

However, the application of PAR requires a foundation of mutual respect and trust among participants. For individuals living with the ongoing challenges of mental illness, the process can feel daunting or unwelcoming. How frequently are their perspectives and voices engaged when tackling the multifaceted social issues related to mental health within their neighborhoods? Those who grapple with mental health challenges—alongside their families and other community members—bring invaluable insights and experiences to the table, insights that deserve recognition and integration when identifying concerns through a personal lens of this disenfranchised population.

Investigators stand at a pivotal crossroads, with both the opportunity and responsibility to address the urgent social issues of our time, including substance abuse, mental illness, suicide, and homelessness. This responsibility calls for a genuine commitment to fostering equal participation, which not only identifies complex problems but also broadens the exploration of potential solutions. By re-framing possible actions and engaging community members in a collaborative learning process, we can empower individuals to understand that they possess the agency to create positive change not just in their own lives, but also within the lives of their neighbors. Through this

collective empowerment, communities can flourish, filled with hope and resilience.

I encourage your curiosity to understand the unique challenges and opportunities as you become knowledgeable about participatory action research methods. By integrating this lived experience perspective, we as investigators contribute to the outcomes of our work and directly empower those whom we wish to study.

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