

# Participatory Action Research and the Australian Chinese Community

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## Introduction

In this paper we explore culturally appropriate ways of conducting participatory action research in the Australian Chinese community. We address some cultural issues encountered by researchers, and offer suggestions to assist researchers to be effective in meeting the needs of the Australian Chinese community. We conducted a review of the literature on Chinese cultural traditions and the Australian Chinese community; interviewed community workers in Sydney about the research methods they used, and difficulties encountered working with the Australian Chinese community. We re-define participatory action research in Chinese language, and re-translate this back into English. We highlight some cultural issues about conducting research with the Australian Chinese Community.

## Literature Review

There are many approaches to Participatory Action Research (PAR), and no single definition can be adequate. Most commentators agree with Bob Dick that action research is action plus research (Dick, 2001, 2002). Outcomes of a single project include improved practices and increased knowledge. The Handbook of Action Research makes a larger claim: 'Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview' (Reason

& Bradbury, 2001). Hart and Bond (Hart & Bond, 1994) distinguished different types of action research: experimental; organizational; professional; and empowering action research. These form a rough continuum, from relatively high levels of control by the researcher, and application of positivist standards of scientific validity in experimental action research, to high levels of participation, change orientation and social relevance in empowering action research. Action research is dynamic and flexible, involving repeated cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, in an approach that integrates informed action with reflection and knowledge building (Smith, Pynch, & Lizardi, 1993).

In community action research (Hughes, 2003), researchers and participants plan both action and research jointly. When using PAR to solve community problems, the expert knowledge that community members have of their own circumstances and life experience is acknowledged, and placed beside the action researcher's expertise in methods and processes. Decision-making is distributed and shared (though not always equally). The researcher has an important role as a catalyst to help participants define the problem, plan what to do, then intervene in ways that best suit the participants and their situation. Williams (Williams, 1999) commented that PAR is a more real and true way to gather people's experiences and knowledge than traditional top-down positivist research, in which planning, decision making and implementation are predetermined.

If researchers use methods that are not appropriate to local, cultural, economic and political conditions, they will not gather information that is as complete, rich or accurate as possible. Participatory action researchers have used an array of data collection methods. Participant observation and various forms of research interviewing are very often employed. Other methods include group discussion, public forums, surveys, production of audio-visual materials (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998), oral histories, observation of action groups (Hughes, Goolagong, Khavarpour, & Russell, 1994) and educational workshops. Good working relationships are necessary for open and clear communication between participants and researchers. Photovoice was used as a participatory method for needs assessment, to improve the health of rural Chinese women in Yunnan. Chinese women took photographs of their everyday activities and living conditions. Later, the researchers interviewed the women, collecting their personal stories. Themes and issues were identified in group discussion. Researchers and participants presented information in a public forum. It was then used in community health plans and by policy makers (Wang, 1999). In this Chinese setting, it was important for researchers to understand the power relationships and structure of privilege before they approached the appropriate authorities and entered the community.

PAR long been recognized as way of working with minority and disadvantaged communities (Lewin, 1946). Advocates claim it is educational and empowering (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1972), conveys a sense of respect to community members, and most importantly, it facilitates community changes desired by community members. PAR has been successfully used in Australia with Aboriginal (Dickson, 2000; Hughes et al., 1994; Marika, 1992) Arabic (Tobin, 2000) and other disadvantaged communities.

## **Method**

This action learning project began with a review of selected literature reporting research conducted with the Australian Chinese community. Following this, one of us (C. Mok) consulted with a group of five Australian Chinese community workers in Sydney. Discussion included their views of research with Australian Chinese community members, their knowledge and attitudes of the fit between social research and aspects of Chinese culture, and their knowledge and attitudes about action research. At the end of the discussion session, members of the group were encouraged to produce a representation of PAR using a form such as graphics, traditional Chinese sayings or nursery rhymes. These were placed on a staff room notice board in a Chinese community centre, with a page inviting further comments. We also worked collaboratively with Australian Chinese community workers, and

an international group of action research students to express PAR in Chinese language using Chinese traditional sayings and cultural symbols.

## **Findings:**

### **The Australian Chinese Community**

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002), people born in China are the fourth largest category of overseas born permanent immigrants who settled in Australia between 2001 and 2002. In New South Wales, the Chinese language is spoken at home more than any language other than English. The Chinese community is the most diverse immigrant group in Australia Martin (1998). Because of this diversity, human services provided to the community need to take account of factors including the time of emigration, degree of assimilation, religious beliefs and education. In a study of recent Australian immigrants of Chinese, Spanish and Middle Eastern background, Burnett (1998) found that prediction of settlement outcomes is difficult, because of complex processes at individual, family, institutional and societal levels. In addition to language, employment and general orientation problems, immigrants reported problems related to health, ageing and self-identity. Immigrants must recompose their cultural identity, as traditional Chinese values are often in conflict with dominant Australian or Western values.

### **Cultural Issues**

Shlapentokh (2002) described three broad philosophical traditions that have great influence on Chinese culture. Taoism learns from, and seeks accommodation with nature, enjoining people to follow the natural law. Buddhism has similar reverence for all living creatures, teaching people to seek enlightenment and practice compassion. Confucianism places emphasis on social relationships, teaching respect for authority in families and the state, and contentment through acceptance of one's social situation. These are three of many strands found in the diversity of Chinese cultural traditions.

### **Individualism and collectivism**

Cultures manage the tension between individual and collective needs in different ways. Many Western observers and researchers have described Chinese culture as collective, in contrast to the individualism of the West (Martin, 1998). In Chinese culture, people give precedence to the interests of groups, especially families, over the individual needs of members. Chinese people traditionally consider the needs of their whole family over their individual preferences. Harmony is valued, confrontation avoided, and communication is often indirect or implicit. In research interviews, many Chinese people are not inclined to express individual needs unless encouraged to in ways that are congruent with their cultural expectations and patterns of communication.

'Filial piety' is a concept that builds and maintains unity and order in Chinese families (Wright, 1964). Family structure is traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal. The oldest male of the family is the central authority, to whom others are required to show respect. All family members have a strong obligation to preserve the family name. Saving 'face' is very important, as the effect of loss of face on the family is more important than consequences for

the individual. Disputes involving family members are managed within the family, and it is not acceptable to accept help from outsiders.

## **Egalitarianism and hierarchy**

While the Confucian ethic remains powerful, recent history has also shaped Chinese society and attitudes inside and outside Mainland China. The Long March is deeply embedded in the psychology of the Chinese Communist Party and influenced the political agenda of post-war leaders Mao Zedong (1949-1976) and Deng Xiaoping (1977-1997). The decade-long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw established hierarchies overturned, with industrial development and collectivization of agriculture on a vast scale. Mao, Deng and their governments were repressive, regimes, imposing death penalties for political deviance. The exercise of power by officials was reminiscent of the imperial hierarchies, and obligations of kinship and friendship rather than contractual arrangements. The State mobilized everyone to conform and work for the benefit of whole society (Shlapentokh, 2002). The start of the Twenty-first Century has seen an increase in market economics, and a loosening of state economic control. However, China remains under tight political control. The political ideals imposed upon the Chinese people are different from the Western egalitarian society where human rights and liberty are highly regarded.

## **Research with the Australian Chinese Community**

A review of the limited research on the health of Australian Chinese people indicated that members of the Australian Chinese community are less likely than other Australians to use mainstream health services. This is often due to language barriers and lack of accessible information. In addition, patients of Chinese background are more passive in seeking professional help, and more reliant on family members for health care than other Australians (Daly et al., 2002).

A study of gambling among restaurant workers in Sydney's Chinatown found that they often avoided talking about gambling with a Chinese interviewer topic to avoid stigmatization and loss of 'face'. The researcher spent considerable time to establish culturally appropriate ways to communicate and make use of existing community resources. Anonymous surveys enabled participants to give information without disclosing their identity. The researcher facilitated discussion with restaurant owners and workers to plan program activities suited to the workers' needs and available time (Mok, 2001).

The Australian Chinese Community Association organized a public conference with Australian Chinese women and community workers to identify issues and problems encountered by Australian Chinese women, and develop action plans for service development. They formed two action groups, which ranked their needs in priority order planned program activities. Resulting programs are evaluated annually, and data is collected for continuous improvement (Australian Chinese Community Association, 1996). Though not formal research, this strategy is similar to participatory action research in which community members' participation is maximized through cycles of planning, acting, observing and evaluating.

## **Participatory action research in Chinese cultural context**

Many Chinese immigrants are not willing to reveal their needs to a researcher. The ideologies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism encourage individuals to practice acceptance and remain passive. They focus more on the collective concerns than individual needs. Chinese

immigrants are more likely to raise their voices on issues concerning their family and fellow Chinese community. In addition, many Chinese people fear authority. They imagine research as laboratory scientific activity, and fear that investigation may become interrogation if researchers are not satisfied with their answers. Many are afraid that individual involvement in research may bring trouble with the authorities, which might bring shame into their family name or other detrimental consequences.

Not all members of the Chinese culture think alike. Attitudes and knowledge change with exposure to education and mainstream Australian culture. Some Chinese Australian families have lived in Australia for several generations, and there is increasing number of health professionals and others with knowledge of social science in the Australian Chinese community. Some community members feel and act liberated. While community attitudes change with education and acculturation, those who actively participate in the Australian Chinese community identify with Chinese traditions with an Australian lifestyle.

Though there is not a strong tradition of participatory action research in Chinese communities, the principles of participatory action are well known. The Chinese phrase 'Qun Ce Qun Li, Gong Chuang Mei Hao Sheng Huo' is translated as 'Together we plan, Together we act for a better community lifestyle.' This Chinese saying captures the principle of involving everyone in the community in planning and action. The illustration shows a group of people performing a traditional Chinese long dragon dance. To the Chinese, the Dragon symbolises power, goodness, fertility, vigilance and dignity. The pearl that the dragon is chasing represents wisdom and knowledge. The music and dance encourage the community to work harder in order to succeed. We can take the swirling of the long dragon's body as a symbol of the cyclic process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. A team effort is required to perform the dragon dance. The pearl represents the aim or essential core of action research, the new knowledge that participants pursue. Everyone makes an effort to achieve it.

Figure 1: Together we plan, together we act for a better community lifestyle.



(illustration and calligraphy by Candy Mok and Chi Ling Fong.

## Cultural Issues and PAR in the Australian Chinese Community

Community service providers must be flexible in accommodating the dynamic changes in the Australian Chinese Community. The Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural

Affairs recognise the importance of community input, and they require community statistics and information with applications for funding, to document and demonstrate community needs (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). PAR is an appropriate approach for community organisations to reach the Australian Chinese community, and there are many opportunities for researchers and community workers to use PAR methods, provided they are presented in a way that is congruent with Chinese Australian culture. A Chinese model of PAR can mobilise and empower the Australian Chinese community. The Chinese model gives an impression that the mainstream community respects cultural differences and open to communication and inputs in Chinese terms. Researchers and members of the community can learn together and find the best ways to facilitate communication channels and build strengths to advocate their needs & concerns.

When working in the Australian Chinese community, it is important to convey messages using Chinese language. The use of language should demonstrate sensitivity to level of education, degree of acculturation and linguistic background of the audience. It is important that the aims of action research, and the relevant research questions and action objectives are communicated clearly, especially to key stakeholders in the Australian Chinese community. Researchers must protect confidentiality, and give serious attention to community concerns about the proper use of information.

Gaining support and approval from local leaders and professionals is essential. Researcher should be aware of local sensitivities, and employ data collecting methods that avoid stigmatization and incrimination. Research should encourage family involvement, and avoid putting individuals in situations that could lead to loss of face.

Researchers have to work out the structure of power and privilege within the community, so that researchers can approach the appropriate parties and gain consensus among them. It is important to approach community members who command trust and respect, in the community, and who will not exploit a community project for their own purposes.

Participatory action research is an appropriate framework for social research in the Australian Chinese Community, but as always, the research framework must be translated into cultural terms and symbols that are well understood within the local community, and the research method must adapt to the needs and cultural styles of the people.

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