The Article Idea Chart

A participatory action research tool to aid involvement in dissemination

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Participatory action research (PAR) is a research approach that has gained prominence in recent years because of its focus on the participation of key stakeholders from all constituent groups within the community or organisation under study and its goal of creating positive change through the research process. PAR is thought to be particularly well suited to research in the mental health field (Nelson et al. 1998). In fact, Ochocka, Janzen and Nelson (2002, p. 386) go so far as to say that the use of PAR in community mental health research is a 'moral imperative'. Individuals with a mental health diagnosis (who often call themselves 'consumer survivors') have traditionally been left voiceless, both in health-care services and society in general (Leff & Warner 2006). PAR allows for the 'voice of the consumer' to be acknowledged in research (Rogers & Palmer-Erbs 1994, p. 10) because they are given the opportunity to be actively involved in the research process. As aptly stated by a consumer survivor researcher within a PAR project, 'psychiatric consumer-survivors are both witnesses to the system and the reason for the system's existence' (Ochocka, Janzen & Nelson 2002, p. 379). The involvement of consumer survivors in PAR projects also helps ensure that the topics are of social importance to the population being studied and that the results are shared in accessible ways (White, Nary & Froehlich 2001).

In PAR projects, all members are included and participate actively throughout the research process, from initial project design to data collection and analysis (Whyte 1991). Multiple perspectives on a topic can increase the quality of data collected, the range of interpretations and conclusions, and recommendations for change. The dissemination of results and recommendations is arguably the most important aspect of PAR projects; Montoya and Kent (2011, p. 1003) explain: 'It is vitally important to communicate results and interpretations with community partners and to present information in a way that is both informative and respectful'. It is through the appropriate dissemination of results that positive societal change is enacted. In community mental health research, including consumer survivors in the dissemination

process helps ensure that scientific findings are communicated in appropriate, efficient and accessible ways (Montoya & Kent 2011). If disseminated effectively, PAR results can reach a variety of audiences, including policy decision-makers, social service agencies, health-care services, consumer survivors and academic researchers, and promote positive action within communities. In this article, we describe the deliberate development and use of an Article Idea Chart, a tool designed to ensure involvement by all stakeholders in the dissemination stage of PAR projects.

Recognising the benefits of PAR methodologies, we have undertaken a number of PAR projects examining issues in the field of community mental health. The project of particular interest in this article is a Community University Research Alliance (CURA) program in London, Ontario, Canada, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The CURA program is examining the issues of poverty and social inclusion/exclusion for consumer survivors of a mental health diagnosis. Stakeholders include consumer survivors, their family members, service providers from mental health and income support agencies, employers, students, policy decision-makers and academic researchers. The work is built on a previous CURA program from the same institution, which focused on housing issues for consumer survivors (in discussion we refer to this as CURA1). The CURA program is a five-year (2011–2016) large-scale endeavour involving three main components: research, training of students, and community capacity development (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council 2013). As principal investigator (Forchuk) and research coordinator (Meier) we are involved in all aspects of program functioning but pay particular attention to community capacity development through the dissemination of results and recommendations.

THE CURA PROJECT: ENSURING PARTICIPATION

In accordance with PAR principles, the CURA program team has acknowledged the importance of equally engaging stakeholders in all aspects of the research process. The active inclusion of stakeholders began during the proposal-writing phase and will continue through the duration of the program by inviting individuals from various stakeholder groups to engage in the program through committee membership. It is vital to involve diverse stakeholders early in the research process so they can direct the research questions asked and methodologies used. In addition, investment by stakeholders throughout the research process increases the likelihood of them feeling connected to the program and wanting to contribute to dissemination activities. Once committees are developed to guide the program, the Article Idea Chart can be introduced and used to encourage active participation by all stakeholders in dissemination activities. A detailed description of the Article Idea Chart is provided in the next section.

We first describe the methods used to engage stakeholders in committees as membership has a direct impact on participation in the Article Idea Chart. In order to effectively manage the various aspects of the CURA program, a total of eight committees and subcommittees were developed. Seven subcommittees manage day-to-day program activities, annual forum arrangements, community projects, media and government relations, policy and ethical issues, curriculum development, and research activities. The eighth, an advisory committee (i.e. steering committee), receives reports from all subcommittees and oversees the overall CURA program. This structure is beneficial because it permits all members of the program to take part in committees that fit their personal and professional interests. In addition, each committee focuses on specific issues and plans, thereby allowing the program to be managed effectively and efficiently. Each committee is also involved in the important task of writing and presenting program findings relevant to their work.

Individuals become involved in CURA committees in a variety of ways. During the proposal-writing phase, academic researchers from disciplines related to the CURA topic were invited to participate. Mental health and income support agencies throughout London and surrounding areas were contacted to request that one or more service providers from each agency participate as a partner in the program. Can-Voice, a consumer survivor peer support agency, was invited to be the lead community agency with multiple members becoming involved in the program, including one individual accepting a 'Community Lead' role to complement the 'Research Lead' role held by Dr Forchuk. Any interested individual (from any stakeholder group) is regularly invited to join a committee of his or her choice; invitations to join the CURA program are delivered in the quarterly program newsletter distributed to local agencies, during research interviews, and at presentations and annual program forums. These deliberate and frequent invitations promote inclusion by a variety of stakeholders and provide the program with enriched knowledge and experiences from new members over time.

The committee structure and deliberate effort to include stakeholders positively affects all aspects of the program. Not only do the diverse voices of stakeholders enrich data collection but they also enhance the ways in which dissemination activities are undertaken. The Article Idea Chart is a tool that gives all stakeholders involved in the program the opportunity to participate in writing and dissemination of their choice, therefore fully embracing the inclusivity PAR projects strive to achieve. It would not be possible to engage stakeholders in the Article Idea Chart if they were not actively involved in the program through committee membership.

THE ARTICLE IDEA CHART

The Article Idea Chart (see example in Table 1) was developed during the CURA1 program on housing and mental health (Forchuk, Csiernik & Jensen 2011). The chart was created as a way to engage all committee members from various backgrounds in the writing process and dissemination of PAR results.

The Article Idea Chart is distributed to all committees during each meeting. Any individual member is given the opportunity to propose topics for publication, including written articles for academic journals or non-academic audiences (e.g. community newsletters). In addition, any individual from any committee is given the opportunity to join and contribute to existing topic groups. Once a group is formed (authorship generally ranges from three to eight people), they begin to meet separately from regular committee meetings in order to develop the article. Progress and updates on current articles are then shared at committee meetings. The development and use of this tool is a very deliberate way to encourage all stakeholders to become involved in the dissemination process. By allowing all members to propose topics of interest to them and to join existing topic groups, the writing process and authorship becomes very open and transparent. As the Article Idea Chart continues to be reviewed at each committee meeting, there are times when similar topics will be combined and, conversely, times when one topic will be split between two separate groups as the data requires and permits. Each topic group is given the support of a research staff member for literature reviews, data analysis and assistance

Table 1: Article Idea Chart for PAR projects (examples Included)

Topic	Author(s)	Data source	Audience	Date claimed	Action/ progress	Submission
Fairness and social justice	S Benbow A Rudnick C Forchuk B Edwards	Year 1 Open-ended questions	Disability and Society Journal	16 July 2012	Submitted	Submitted 7 April 2013
CURA impact	P Hall S Perry C Forchuk	Year 1 Partner interview	Action Research Journal	23 January 2012	Paper complete, editing phase	Submission aim: 1 September 2013
Stigma	R Csiernik C Forchuk B Edwards A Meier	Year 1 Stigma scale	Social Work Research	10 September 2012	Writing phase	Submission aim: 1 September 2013

in writing. The quality of work is enhanced by the participation of various stakeholders with differing academic backgrounds. All members who sign up to participate are expected to play an active role in the writing process, including ensuring the material can be understood by the intended audience. The decision on submission location and target audience is decided solely by the working group who creates the article.

To date, in the current CURA program, the list has reached 36 topics. While this may seem like an unrealistic number, the CURA is a large-scale study seeking to understand a number of

issues using various data collection methods. Some team members have joined multiple groups, while others have joined one or two groups of particular interest to them. Due to scheduling and availability of team members, it is not feasible to have 36 working groups meet simultaneously, so approximately four topics are chosen at a time and given priority. These are chosen at the research committee meeting, based on current availability of data. As one article is completed and submitted, another topic group initiates their meeting. In this way, the CURA program is in a constant state of data analysis and dissemination. As demonstrated in Table 1, the time between 'Date claimed' and 'Submission' can be lengthy; this is partially due to the fact that some committee members claim topics of interest to them early in the research process before all data is collected and also due to the feasibility issues mentioned above. Because team members remain actively engaged in the program for a number of years through committee meetings and events, wait times between claim dates and submission dates have not been reported as a concern.

The Article Idea Chart was successfully used in the CURA1 program. As a result, 39 topic ideas were proposed and over 20 articles were published. Some of the original topics were merged and a few were abandoned if no one joined the group and the proposer did not wish to pursue the topic without others. Of the articles, 18 were originally published in academic journals and were later compiled into one book entitled *Homelessness, housing and mental health* (Forchuk, Csiernik & Jensen 2011). Contributing authors within the book came from a wide variety of backgrounds, bringing varying personal and professional expertise on mental health and housing to the articles. Academic professionals, service providers, consumer survivors and students all worked together as authors of articles within the book. Compiling the articles into one book allowed for a broader range of audiences to access the material as the book was given away and sold at CURA events and forums. In addition to these articles, a program newsletter was created by a group of writers and distributed to all partners and local agencies quarterly. The CURA1 program utilised the Article Idea Chart specifically for written dissemination, but it could be expanded to include oral presentations and conference proceedings for other research groups.

The Article Idea Chart functions as a deliberate way to encourage participation in written dissemination. However, engaging stakeholder groups traditionally unfamiliar with research presents ongoing challenges. In the CURA1 program, consumer survivors and service providers participated in publication development but academic team members often outnumbered members of other stakeholder groups. In addition, academic journals were the most frequent publisher of the research results. Despite this trend toward traditional research audiences, the program nonetheless strove to make the results as inclusive and accessible as possible, including through distribution of the quarterly newsletter, posting of results on the program website,

presentation of results at community forums and publishing of articles on community agency websites, when permitted. These challenges reflect the fact that academic members continue to be the most comfortable with research writing and dissemination. However, the use of the Article Idea Chart serves as an explicit invitation to other members to become involved in aspects of research not traditionally open to them and has been successful in engaging diverse authorship.

While CURA programs are five-year large-scale projects with the potential for several publications and presentations, the Article Idea Chart can be used for smaller studies as well. For example, the Article Idea Chart was utilised during a recent two-year research project entitled 'Poverty and Mental Health: Issues, Challenges and Solutions' funded by the Ontario Mental Health Foundation (2013). While the timeline, scope and membership of this study was smaller than that of CURA programs, the Article Idea Chart was used and produced 12 topics; 4 articles have been submitted for review while analysis and writing for other topics are ongoing. A PAR project need not be large scale in order to use this tool. It is simply a deliberate methodology for ensuring that all team members (regardless of academic background) are given the opportunity to participate in publications or presentations on topics of interest to them.

CONCLUSION

The PAR research process is beneficial as it engages all affected stakeholders on a given topic and removes traditional academic researchers from the role of expert. It is especially well suited for mental health research as a means of engaging consumer survivors in projects concerning the systems in which they participate. While many authors discuss the importance of PAR and explain ways in which to engage community members in the research team, rarely do publications explicitly discuss tools and methodologies used to ensure the full participation of all team members in one of the most important aspects of PAR research: dissemination of results. The Article Idea Chart is a tool that has been utilised successfully in a number of PAR projects to date. It can be revised to suit the needs of other PAR projects and can be expanded to include presentation topics and conference proceedings. The Article Idea Chart removes any confusion from dissemination by making the process transparent and openly available to all team members, regardless of stakeholder group.

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