

Action Research: Context and Challenges....

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What are talking about?

How much does it matter what we call it?

Labels out there include:

- Participatory action research
- Community-based research
- Community-based participatory research
- Community-based participatory action research
- Public sociology
- Engaged anthropology
- Public anthropology
- Collaborative ethnography
- Decolonizing methodology
- Public history
- Collaborative research

Source: Ron Glass, Director, Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California

Usage of terms varies widely just within one research field:

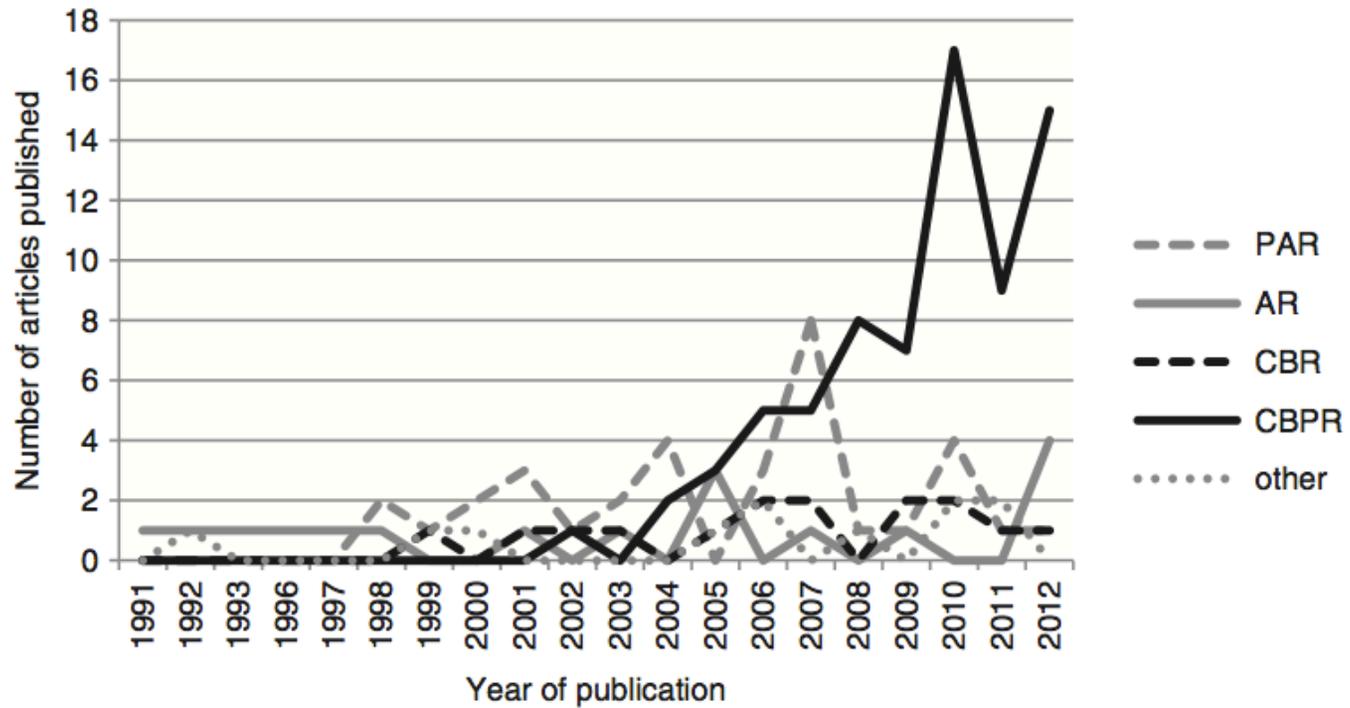


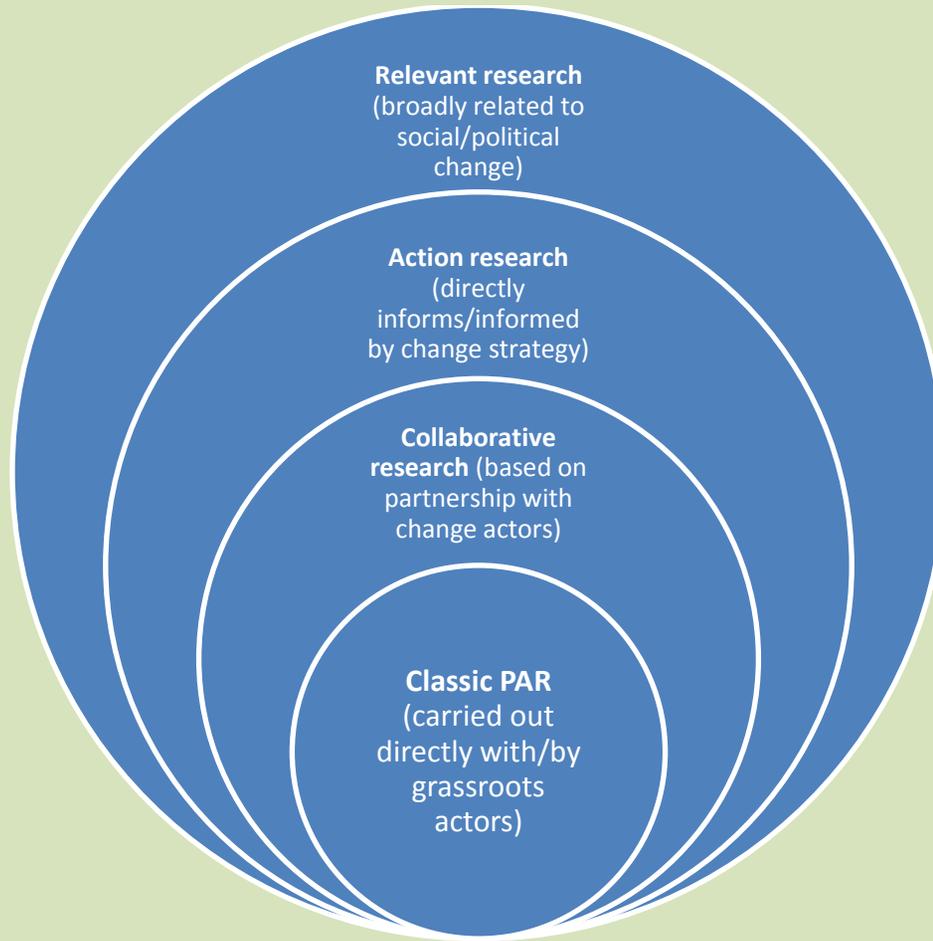
Figure 2. Use of terms between 1991 and 2012.

From: Ulrike Brizay, et al "Community-academic partnerships in HIV-related research: a systematic literature review of theory and practice," *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 2015, 18

Three points for today:

- PAR is one of three broad kinds of orientations to action research
- Let's recognize the tensions between action research and scholarly agendas
- Reality checks: Easier said than done

PAR is located in the broader context of collaborative research relevant to social change:



Action research: Method or orientation?

- An action research *orientation* can draw on various research *methods*.
- Some methods can be PAR, others are collaborative – or ‘just’ relevant to change strategies...

	Classic PAR	Collaborative research	Action research
Pop ed, community-based			
Testimony/oral history			
Survey research			
Participant observation			
Ethnography			
Social documentation			
Participatory mapping			
Investigative reporting			
Media/content analysis			
Data mining/visualization			
Legal research			
Power structure research			
Follow the money			
Econometrics (enviro justice)			
RCTs			

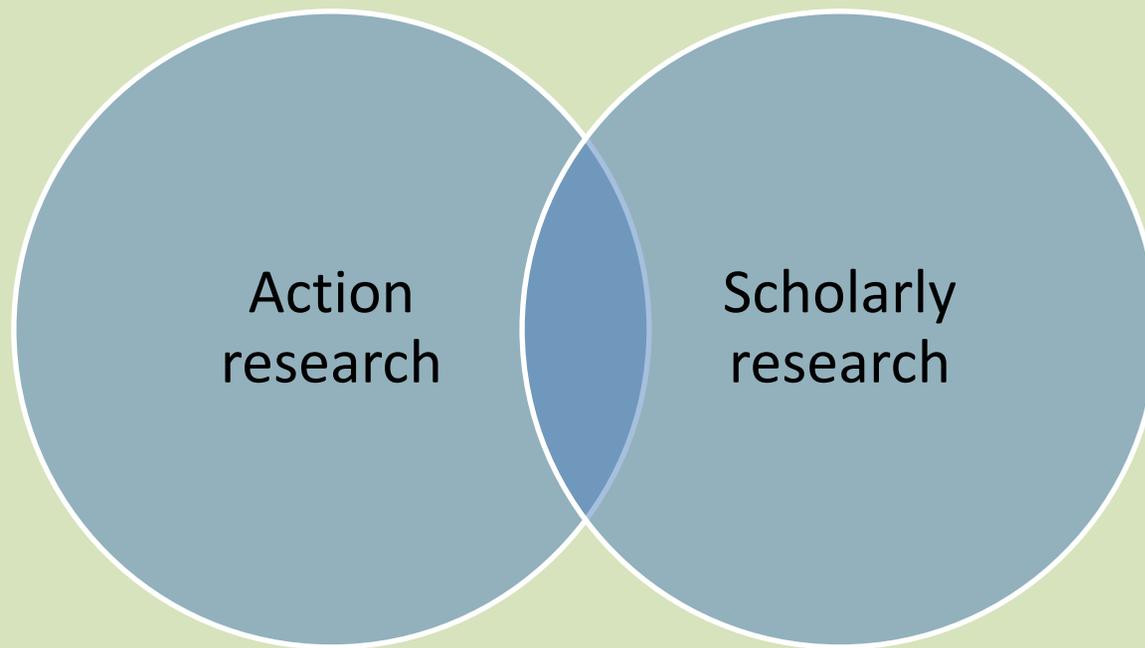
If many *methods* can be applied with an action research *orientation*...

... what “counts”?

- Action research *agendas* are directly oriented to informing public action to address injustice
- Is this an inclusive approach... or conceptual stretching?
- Strategic view of relationship between knowledge production and action is key
- How does research (and learning) go from contributing to *awareness*... to *actionability*?

Recognize difference.... as always, a crucial step towards finding common ground....

.... Here differences center on agendas, framing, priorities, timeframe and process/product



Finding that overlap is easier said than done...

Realistic expectations are crucial – and often rare

Reality checks for faculty and doctoral students on a scholarly path:

- Much relevant knowledge production is *not* scholarly
- Trying to meet both goals can fail to meet either
- Rhythms and priorities will vary – as in any partnership
- Starting projects is easier than finishing them
- Multiple products that target different audiences are key to dissemination
- Visible action-research processes and products can be inspiring....
- ... But they are only the ‘survivors’ –
- *Unsuccessful* projects and partnerships are much less visible....

For masters’ students:

- What action research skills are most relevant for your ideal professional path?
- What action research relationships are most relevant?

For both: How do you learn to put yourself in your partners’ shoes?

For more, see “Lessons from Action-Research Partnerships,” Development in Practice, 16(1), 2006

For professors, two ways around these dilemmas include:

1. Incorporate action research into *teaching*

- A focus on action research for *learning* can avoid overload of specifically *scholarly* agendas
- But... what if teaching an action research course turns out to be more labor-intensive than a conventional course?
- Then your labor is uncompensated and the work spills over into other priority areas

2. Raise research funds to buffer conflicting goals by:

- Buying out courses to open up the necessary research time
- Compensating practitioner partners to recognize *their* competing priorities
- Recruiting professional communications support for outreach/dissemination of findings
- Supporting an advocacy strategy to increase the relevance of findings
- Food for thought: the only way to do action research well *without* adequate dedicated funding is to let either scholarly research or work/life balance suffer – or *both*

Concluding cautionary note:

Without enough time and money - for scholars - action research can a risky proposition, so look before you leap...