“RESEARCH WITH” INSTEAD OF “RESEARCH ON”:
ACTION RESEARCH WITH “VULNERABLE” PARTICIPANTS
A Guest Editorial

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And that this journal has survived this long is perhaps a testament to the tenacity of grassroots researchers in the face of rather inhospitable conditions (Clausen, 2007, p. 1).

As Dr. Clausen made clear in his editorial on the tenth anniversary of the journal, persistence and a sense of purpose are essential characteristics of not only journal editors, but also those who conduct action research (AR) projects. In this guest editorial, I hope to draw attention to two important concepts for action researchers: a definition of vulnerable populations and an understanding of how AR is a key methodology for ensuring that vulnerable populations are treated with respect and justice. I have organized these concepts around four guiding questions.

Who exactly are vulnerable participants and what makes them so vulnerable?
Throughout history certain groups of people have been abused by those with higher status and power. Due to their education, social status, and influence, researchers have unfortunately sometimes been those abusers (Johnson, & Christensen, 2007). To prevent abuses of power from happening in modern times, universities have established ethics review boards to examine research projects and determine which ethical concerns may arise, if any. In today’s litigious times, universities are especially cautious about research with people who, due to their position within society, are most likely to be abused. Some of these abused groups have included refugees, people with mental illnesses, adults who cannot read or speak English, minorities, and people with disabilities. Understanding which people might be at risk for abuse is an important concern for ethics boards and needs to be examined critically.
In her research which examined the definitions used by ethics review boards by universities in the United States, Kristen Perry discovered that while many university ethics boards had separate review processes for medical and social science research proposals, the boards used similar criteria, often medical criteria, to define “vulnerable populations”. Commonly, inclusion into this group is decided by a predefined checklist which includes “children”, “prisoners”, “speakers of other languages”, and the “educationally or economically disadvantaged” (Perry, 2011). In this same article, research issues flagged by ethics committees are linked with medical ethics such as susceptibility “to coercion or undue influence”, inability “to make informed decisions”, and “to read consent documents”. While she points out that these definitions by their very nature are paternalistic and do not recognize that adaptations for inclusion can be made, she also explains that they only target limited aspects of a research project—informed consent.

Why is this definition so problematic?

These checklists of conditions which supposedly impair one’s ability to advocate for oneself is problematic. Ethics boards are at risk of assuming that participants are incapable of making decisions for themselves, and as a result deny research projects which might advance our understanding of people with conditions (Juritzen, Grimen, & Heggen, 2011). Rather than defining a person by their condition or status, research board ethicists should examine research projects for vulnerable participants in terms of how they can provide the maximum benefit. What the ethics boards mentioned in Perry’s (2011) study fail to address is perhaps as paternalistic as what they do: informed and on-going consent; shared benefits of the research; dissemination and ownership of results, and further advocacy once the project is complete. Yet, for qualitative researchers in the social sciences, some of these issues are the cornerstone of ethical decisions (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007). Ethical researchers make sure not only to ask for consent at the start of the research, but also continue to do so as the project unfolds and the participant becomes more aware of what is being asked of him or her. They make sure that the research project benefits not only the researcher at a theoretical level, but the participant at a personal level. They work to ensure that the results are communicated to the participant in accessible language. They make sure that if advocacy is needed as a result of the research, these same ethical researchers support it.

How might AR as a research methodology maximize benefits for vulnerable participants?

Some who are unfamiliar with the history of AR might be surprised that early AR methodology did not discuss teacher reflection, professional development, or classroom practices per se, but rather examined “intergroup relations” and called for research that studied “social management or social engineering” (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). Lewin, often described as the grandfather of AR, could not have made his thoughts about the role of research in the social sciences any clearer than they were in this statement, “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice”. He envisioned AR as a methodology that focused on social change. In fact, Bargal (2014) describes Lewin’s vision as:
...deeply rooted in the values of co-operation among researchers, practioners, and clients. These values are based on rational, transparent, decision-making procedures and high regard for humanistic values. Lewin perceived democratic society as a pluralistic entity and insisted on granting freedom of expression and respect for the diversity of groups. (p. 501)

In the previous paragraph it becomes clear that AR, with its foundations in humanism, democracy, and social justice, is about conducting “research with” as opposed to “research on” participants. Researchers who conduct projects with these values engage in a dialogic relationship with those that they study. Action researchers, by their democratic orientation, are not only focused on meeting their own research needs, but they also consider participants at every stage of the project including the development of research questions, the data collection, the findings, the dissemination of the project and the ownership of the findings (Pant, 2012).

While there are certainly other forms of research which work towards lessening the imbalance of power between the researcher and the participant, AR generally (Bilash, 2009; Burns, 2010) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) specifically (Liamputtong, 2010; Pant, 2014) orient themselves towards co-learning and giving voice to those who might otherwise remain silent or be silenced. Liamputtong (2010) shares her opinion on PAR:

I argue that participatory action research provides opportunities for many marginalized individuals to be able to engage in research and find solutions which benefit not only themselves, but others in their communities. The process of PAR is empowering. It is a crucial methodology for cross-cultural researchers who attempt to bring social justice to the society or community involved in the research (pp 209-210).

What can be learned about vulnerable participants and AR in this issue?
In this issue, authors share their findings about their student-participants who benefit directly from the projects in which they participated despite labels such as minority, English as a second language (ESL), underperforming, transgendersed, intellectually disabled, in custody, or in protective care. In the first article, “Learning physics teaching through collaborative design of conceptual multiple-choice questions, Dr. Marina Milner-Bolotin describes how preservice teachers learn about the construction of multiple choice questions. She finds that this particular method of instruction provides learners with opportunities to practice doing what they someday hope to teach their future students to do. In the second article, “We are Researchers”: Students with and without intellectual disabilities research the university experience in a participatory action research course”, the research team of Susan Ryan, Susan Yuan, Alex Karambelas, Luke Lampugnale, Bernard Parrot, Cora Sagar, and Taylor Terry investigate the benefits of a team research project conducted by students with and without intellectual disabilities. These students researched issues that were personally relevant to them which included student-selected topics such as health, home-university disconnect, and diversity on campus (specifically
relating to transgendered students). Dr. **Anne Arthur and Erin Hannah** investigated young adults who are both in “treatment, care, custody, or institutional care” and are re-engaging in secondary school in their article titled "Perspectives of older adolescents on intellectual engagement and re-connecting with secondary school". They identify factors that are important in school success for this particular group. Dr. **Michael Dunn** tested an instructional approach for Grade Four students in "Struggling writers’ use of iPad art and text apps for story writing”. His article documents the steps followed in teaching underachieving students how to improve their writing. His participants included English as a second language learners and children of color. Finally **Tai Vo** reviews the book “Language, culture, and identity among minority students in China: The case of the Hui” which also examines the voice of one of the 56 ethnic tribes that exists in China.

Each of the above authors demonstrates how researchers can maximise benefits for their participants and find ways to capitalize on “the ability, mode and/or right of individuals or groups to make their ideas, opinions, emotions, perspectives and needs known to others” (Rector-Aranda, 2014, p. 806). With labels typically designated for vulnerable populations, action researchers in this issue have ensured that participants benefited from research in personally meaningful ways.

**REFERENCES**


**Biographical note:**

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**Trudie Aberdeen**, a PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta, is this issue’s guest editor. Her research interests include literacy instruction with two very different populations of language learners: adult English as a second language learners with no or with limited first language literacy (www.leslla.org) and heritage language learning children in “Saturday Schools” in Alberta (www.ihla.ca and www.sahla.ca). She has used AR with both of these populations to enhance instructional methods.

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