

Participatory Action Research for Strengthening Health Systems: A Freirian Critique from a Community Based Study Conducted in the Northern Areas of Pakistan

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Abstract : Action research (AR) is one of the types of health systems research (HSR), and participatory action research (PAR) is known for being effective in health systems strengthening (HSS). The current literature on PAR for HSS cites numerous examples and case studies that led to improve health services; build child health information system; increase knowledge and awareness of people about health problems, and identify pathways for institutional and policy change by engaging people in research. But examples of marginalized communities being agents of change in health governance are not common in health systems research (HSR). This approach to PAR is at the heart of Paolo Freire's Social Transformation Theory and Critical Consciousness building, which was used to design a community-based PAR study in the Northern/mountainous areas of Pakistan. The purpose of the study was to understand the place and role of marginalized communities in strengthening existing health governance structure (health facility and village health committees and health boards) by taking marginalized communities as partners. Community meetings were carried out to identify who is living at the social, political, cultural and economic margins in 40 different villages. Participatory reflection and analysis (PRA) tools were used during the meeting to facilitate identification. Focus group discussions were conducted with marginalized groups using PRA tools and family ethnographies with marginalized families identified through group discussions. Findings of the study revealed that for the marginalized health systems constitute more than just delivery of health services, but it also embraces social determinants that surround systems and its governance. The paper argues that from Freirian perspective people's participation should not only be limited to knowledge generation. People must be seen active users of the knowledge that they generate for achieving better health outcomes that they want to achieve in the time to come. PAR provides a pathway to the marginalized in playing a role in health governance. The study dissemination planned shall engage the marginalized in a dialogue with service providers so that together a role for the marginalized can be outlined.

Keywords : participatory action research, health systems, marginalized, health services

Conference Title : ICHSP 2017 : International Conference on Health Systems and Policies

Conference Location : Montreal, Canada

Conference Dates : May 11-12, 2017