

# Participatory action research for improving evidence-based service delivery and policy

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Dr Phil Crane,

Social Work and Human Services, Faculty of Health, QUT

# Guiding principles in the Australian Government White Paper on homelessness *The Road Home*

- 1 National commitment, strong leadership & **cooperation from all levels of government & non-government and business sectors**
- 2 **Preventing** homelessness is important (*“Turning off the tap”*)
- 3 **Social inclusion** drives our efforts
- 4 **Clients need to be placed at the centre** of service delivery and design
- 5 The safety and wellbeing of all clients is essential
- 6 The rights and responsibilities of individuals and families needs to be protected
- 7 **Joined up service delivery needs joined up policy** (*webs of services and policies*)
- 8 Transition points are a priority (*timely intervention*)
- 9 Evidence based policy helps shape priorities for action ... **Action research is important as it helps improve policy and ensures that best practice and experience can be shared**
- 10 Targets are set to reduce homelessness and hold ourselves accountable

(Australian Govt 2008: my emphasis)

# Challenges for homelessness early intervention and prevention services

- State government taking on responsibility for service delivery
- Responding to demand with limited resources
- Homelessness caused by a range of interacting factors
- Responding to complexity: to 'whole people' who have inter-related difficulties/ needs in a policy and service environment that is compartmentalised (ACOSS 2008, Beadle 2009)
- Working across policy areas, services and systems, formal and informal
- Dealing with various levels of barrier to the improvement of people's situations
- What balance between direct service delivery and building more capacity in the community?
- Knowing what service approach/ model to use
- Providing an 'evidence base' for practice in a specific context

# Terminology

- Petr (2009) distinguishes between
  - ▣ **Practice based research-** where practitioners study their own practice and clients
  - ▣ **Empirically based practice-** where service delivery implements “externally generated and validated interventions and methods” (Petr 2009:4)
  - ▣ **Evidence based practice (EBP)-** a broader approach which considers appropriateness of an application to a situation, ethical issues such as informed consent, client values/ expectations. Can be used as a noun (validated best practices) or as a verb (a process)
  - ▣ **Multi-dimensional evidence based practice-** integrating empirical knowledge with consumer and professional viewpoints. Various sources of knowledge are not mutually exclusive.

# Common criticisms of EBP

- Evidence is too narrowly defined. What should be counted as evidence?
- The role and value of practitioners and their expertise are unclear. How should they be positioned in the inquiry process?
- Resources and/or contextual factors are ignored. How and when should service users and/or other contextual factors enter decision-making processes about service delivery and policy?
- Not enough attention is paid to the clients preferences and expertise

# A context relevant notion of evidence required

- Satterfield et al (2009) examined evidence-based clinical practice across disciplines of medicine, nursing, psychology, social work and public health
- Found models of EBP are more holistic in some disciplines Eg social worker decision making often utilizes a broader suite of contextual (political, economic, intra-organisational, and practitioner-level) factors
- The responsibility for integration of evidence in EBP is still located with the practitioner on the basis of it requiring “complex skills” (Petr 2009: 378)
- Conclusion: A broad rather than narrow definition of evidence-based practice is needed particularly when applied to the social world.

# Practice elements rather than models of service


- Governments & professionals often want ‘answers’ to problems. These answers constitute packaged answers (models of service) to particular problems that can be then applied across a range of contexts through ‘policy’
- This fits best with the notion of empirical based practice
- An examination of social practice research indicates that it is more general characteristics of practice that predicate effectiveness rather than use of a specific technology or therapy
- American Psychological Association commissioned task force found *that most psychological treatments work best using nonspecific therapeutic elements, such as empathy, catharsis, or the patient’s relationship with the therapist* (Wampold 2001 cited in Satterfield 2009:375)
- An analysis across 25 service case studies approaches found it was certain general characteristics of intervention (practices) that explained good early intervention rather than a specific model of service (Crane and Brannock 1998). These included ‘immediacy of response’, availability of soft entry points to more specialised support, and an ‘action- reflection’ character within the intervention agency

# The contexts of implementation matter

- Theory of front line bureaucracy (Lipsky)
- Existing models of service constrain the delivery of new policies and ideas
- In order to be able to deliver a policy idea the model of service and contexts of implementation need to be conducive to it (Crane 2003)
- In the delivery of the vision of a more 'joined up' and client centered homelessness response it will be imperative that the models of service used on the ground have these joined up and client centered practice orientations embedded in them
- The approach we take to evidence (the what and how) will determine whether services can deliver on the vision
- PAR provides a mechanism and a process for this

# The case of Reconnect

- Program logic based on relatively robust research and analysis of the problem (youth homelessness) and what needed for its resolution from 1980-1996 (eg HREOC 1998, MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1995, Crane and Brannock 1996). Substantial input from homeless people and service providers via research and advocacy
- Understood youth homelessness as having temporal, felt, material and relational dimensions caused by a complex interplay of structural, institutional and situational factors. Rather than focusing on developing interventions to address particular factors early intervention was developed to focus on intervention at the time disconnection from supports was occurring (timeliness) (see work of Chamberlain & MacKenzie)
- A pilot program developed (YHPP 1996-1998) which had a detailed program logic, distinguished early intervention as part of a continuum of effort, elicited good practice principles (RPR 1998) and a 'tool box' approach to intervention elements from existing evidence, including a requirement to undertake action research as a technique for developing contextually responsive services (PMYHT 1998). Program wide support and resourcing of action research and good practice occurred.

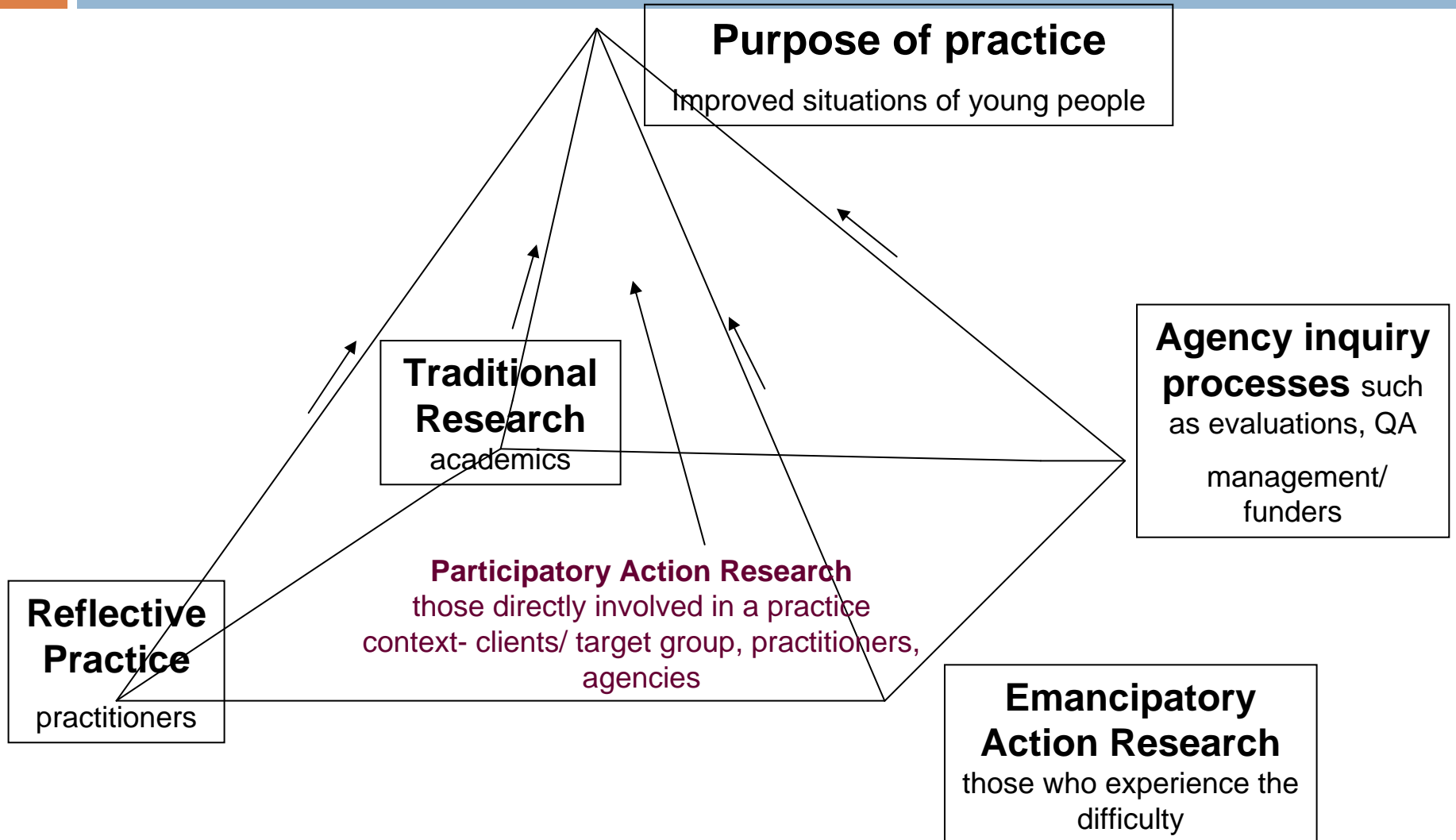
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- Within this funded services can develop their own approach to intervention
  - This pilot was heavily evaluated (multiple approaches)
  - Reconnect program resulted- now 107 services
  - The program continued to proactively seek multiple sources and types of evidence from program wide evaluation, service data collection, commissioned studies, action research synthesis reports, and action research reports by each service

# The service development approach

- Reconnect utilises a **‘meta framework’ for intervention** ie it specifies a program logic based on robust evidence, good practice principles drawn from grounded inquiry, and a mandated requirement to undertake action research as a permanent feature of the service. It does not require the delivery of concrete specified models of service but prioritizes client outcomes (eg stability of living situation). This can be termed a ‘soft hands’ approach to management.
- Reconnect services are encouraged to **simultaneously deliver direct early intervention services and engage in collaborative community capacity building**. The key focus is on achieving outcomes via the implementation of well-founded practice principles
- By doing this Reconnect provides a service environment more **amenable to the type of joined up & client centered service delivery** that is now being sought in homelessness policy and legislation.

# Complimentary approaches to inquiry

# Who is central to the inquiry process? (who decides what the research question is and what was found out)



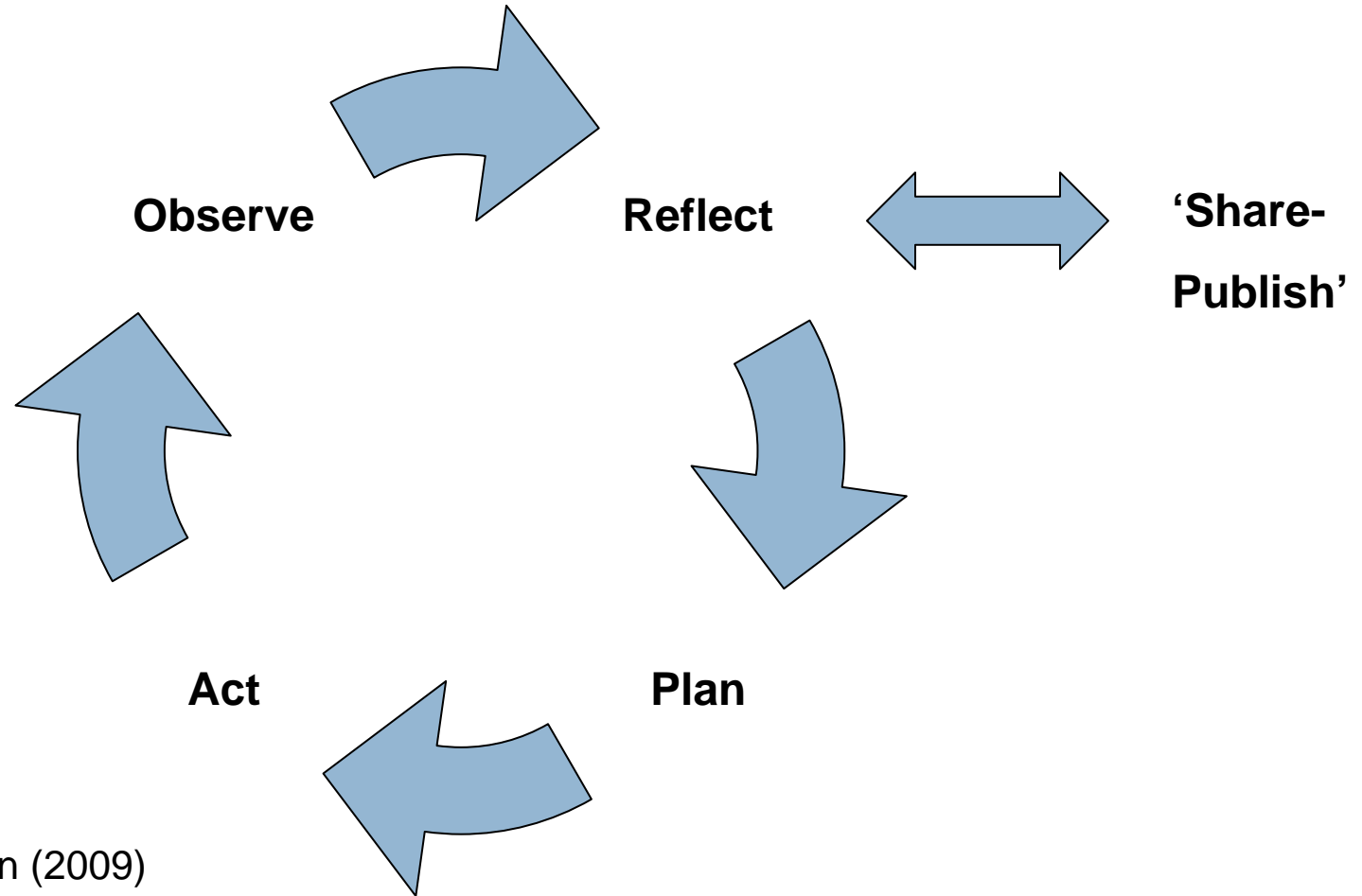
# Types of action research

- **Emancipatory action research** (Friere) where those affected control the process. Is liberationist in orientation
- **Technical action research** utilises the cyclic model but the question posing and determination of meaning lies with 'others' such as management, service providers, academics and/or external consultants.
- **Participatory action research** where practitioners together with other 'stakeholders' including clients ask questions and control the inquiry process. Suits the institutional and layered context of government programs and funded service delivery

# What is participatory action research?

- *“It is a way of working together to make things better”.*
  - From the ... *pearls of wisdom* report
- **A systematic process for**  
generating understanding + achieving change
- About **asking questions with** and exploring for answers ‘What would it take ... ?’  
‘What could we do to ... ?’
- **Building the participation** of those who have direct involvement in the response process
- **Prioritises outcomes** not services or particular models of service
- Not supplementary to practice or simply a source of recommendations but **a tool for development, improvement and change.**
- About developing **trustworthy** conclusions/ insights into what works in a particular context and **sharing these.** Goes beyond action learning.

# The basic cycle of PAR used in Reconnect



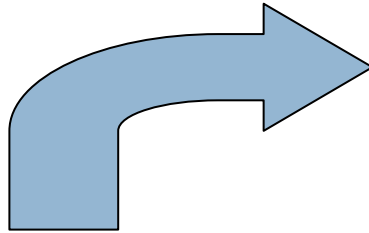
Crane and ORegan (2009)

Imagine a rolling ball- multiple cycles over time

# An extended PAR cycle

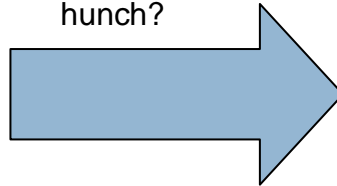
## Observe

What is happening in our practice context?



## Reflect

How do we interpret this?  
A question?  
hunch?

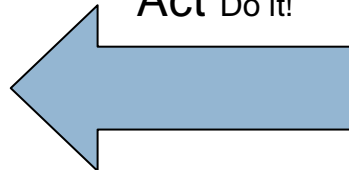


## Plan

What will we try together?

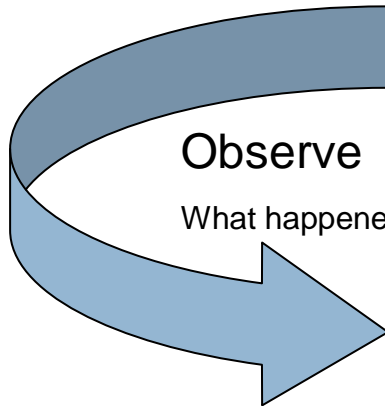


Act Do it!



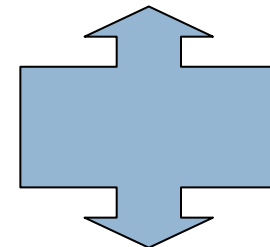
## Observe

What happened?



## Plan again

How can we improve it?



**Reflect** How do we interpret this? Analyse, share & check



**Conclude** Share publicly?

# Revisiting how we define evidence

*A definition drawn from evidence based practice literature:*

- *Evidence is defined as research findings derived from the systematic collection of data through observations and experimentation and the formulation of questions and testing of hypotheses (Satterfield et al 2009:383)*

Understood through the lens of PAR this can be re-expressed as:

- Evidence is defined as findings derived from the systematic collection of data through observations and experimentation, a process involving the formulation of questions and evaluation of possible answers
- PAR undertaken well has this character

# PAR as a mechanism for expanding the evidence base

- Using a centrist frame evidence is gathered for *governments, program managers, and professionals* ie people other than those affected by the issue. The tendency is to see evaluation and data provision as a requirement, an obligation arising out of the funding contract or as allowing organisations to undertake continuous improvement.
- PAR compliments this by gathering evidence *for those involved in the inquiry process*. This evidence can be shared with others voluntarily.
- Tensions can and do exist when government or organisational managers demand that PAR provides evidence that meets their decision making needs
- So can PAR contribute to policy even if the control of it is located at the point of service delivery? Yes by:
  - Building a culture of inquiry- helps balance against risk averse dynamics
  - Building program logic
  - Developing cases that others may deem as relevant to their context
  - Creating relationships that allow new strategies to develop and in turn inform policy
  - Providing a pool of evidence for external evaluators and program managers
  - Contributing by invitation to questions that have relevance across a program or field
- PAR is a complimentary rather than competing source of evidence

# How did Reconnect do this?

- Mandated AR in service agreements and program logic then gave lots of encouragement, messages that it was OK to make 'mistakes' but learn from this, gave permission to dedicate staff time to AR, fostered sharing
- Developed an action research system
- Responded to shifts in policy as opportunities for AR to undertake new implementation challenges eg newly arrived refugees, latest Questions of National Significance re joined up service delivery

# Developed an action research system

- Brought program managers, service providers, and a PAR academic together into an ongoing committee (Reconnect Action Research Committee) to advise on and manage the use of AR in the program
- Training events and good practice forums to allow staff to share and gain confidence
- Services reports on AR analyzed with 4 types of reports being generated:
  - Process Report (on how AR undertaken- strengths/ areas to improve across program)
  - Questions of National Significance report
  - Best 10 (exemplars)
  - Individual feedback to services on how they undertook their AR
- These reports used to inform ongoing training and resourcing in AR, including new editions of manuals and other communications

# What we found in Reconnect

- Multiple sources of evidence that the program was effective (PMYHT 1998, ARTD 1998, RPR 2003, National Youth Commission 2008)
- Program level evaluations and commissioned studies have concluded PAR contributes to:
  - Better outcomes for young people and others
  - Improved relationships with other 'players'
  - Better responsiveness to the local context and changes in it
  - Culturally inclusive (watch the jargon!)
  - Improved service delivery processes/ models of service
  - Development of a new service or project
  - Enhanced broader community capacity for early intervention
  - A more responsive, improvement oriented culture within services and across organisations
  - Producing evidence and evaluations that contribute to credibility and sustainability (eg ARTD 1998, RPR 2003, FaHCSIA Action Research Reports various authors 2001-2009)
  - Other studies have indicated the community capacity building outcomes of the Reconnect approach (Evans & Shaver 2001, Ryan 2003)

# Resistance to PAR as evidence

- Even in an environment which endorses the use of action research there is recurring resistance to funding AR infrastructure. Manifested as
  - ▣ Requests to prove PAR produces outcomes as a condition of support. This is normally in the form of requests for 'hard' evidence that AR leads to improved outcomes
  - ▣ a view that PAR to be worthwhile should deliver effective 'models of service' that can be deployed across a diversity of contexts and/or the identification of factors that cause the 'problem' phenomena (such as youth homelessness). In other words generalisability across contexts is highly valued and forms of evidence which purport to offer this are highly valued. This misunderstands what PAR provides evidence about ie context responsive practice
  - ▣ market oriented assumptions that all monies are better given to services rather than to provide program wide infrastructure eg services should entirely determine their own training responses rather than participate in some program wide training and dialogue

# PAR assists resolve a continuing tension between central management and local responsiveness

- A robust meta-framework for intervention combined with PAR provides a process for bridging this duality
- ***PAR can meet needs for program governance and evidence based policy by:***
  - Providing a process accountability mechanism that can be embedded in contracts- we will not tell you what to do but we will demand you show us you are identifying interventions that are responsive and outcomes oriented in your context
  - Maintaining the capacity for the program logic to be altered over time as new evidence emerges or political emphasis changes. (Broad program level questions can provide a boundary for funded service inquiry)
  - Having particular utility in longer term efforts to address complex social phenomena in a way that generates community support and engagement and context responsive strategies

# PAR

- ***Can meet need for local or community specific management and evidence based practice:***
  - ▣ Allowing the freedom to select action oriented questions for inquiry that are understood as locally relevant, and which facilitate the development of local relationships necessary for the success of strategies which require multiple stakeholder support
  - ▣ Providing a mechanism for collaborative inquiry that builds shared strategic knowledge through building communication, shared local visions, and shared data over time
  - ▣ Providing a mechanism to focus on particular client-centered outcomes across contexts where existing service systems differ enormously
  - ▣ Respecting cultural differences in a real and meaningful way

*PAR provides opportunities for researchers and participants to co-construct knowledge, unsettling the power dynamics between outside expert and local community insiders (Silverstein and Auerbach 2009: 275)*

# Developing trustworthy evidence from PAR requires ...

- **Involving people** who are most affected by and closest to, the situation being investigated
- Using **multiple** sources and methods of 'finding out'
- Making sure you '**observe**' (what happened?)
- **Fine tuning**/ changing direction along the way
- **Being systematic (and creative) about recording** the process and 'evidence' so that what is learnt from each part of the cycle can be summarised
- Using an **open process** that builds trust (even if others have agendas)
- **Being ethical**
- **Sharing** what has been found out internally with participants and externally
- **Seeking disagreement** as well as agreement
- **Using multiple cycles** to fine tune and 'confirm' insights and good practices
- **Developing 'rich' answers** to questions which reflect the 'evidence'
- **Preserving what has been learnt**, 'the story' and making this available (AR reports, DVD, report etc)



**Questions?**

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# Thankyou

Phil Crane can be contacted at  
Social Work and Human Services  
Faculty of Health  
Queensland University of Technology (Kelvin Grove campus)

Email: [p.crane@qut.edu.au](mailto:p.crane@qut.edu.au)

Tel: 07 3138 4663