

# Consciousness raising in participatory research: Method and methodology for emancipatory nursing inquiry

Nursing practice and research that are grounded in emancipatory inquiry challenge the inequalities and injustices that affect health in this society. Increasing numbers of nurse scholars have explored the use of emancipatory inquiries (particularly feminist theory and critical theory) as philosophic bases for nursing practice and as theoretical or methodologic perspectives for nursing research. This article presents participatory research as a methodology and consciousness raising as a method for nursing research that addresses the emancipatory goals of feminist and critical theories. An example of consciousness raising in a participatory nursing research project is offered. It is argued that participatory research can produce a revolutionary emancipatory knowledge for the future of nursing and health care. Key words: *consciousness raising, critical theory, emancipatory inquiry, feminist theory, methodology, participatory research*

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AS THE INJUSTICE that arises from the social constructions of race, class, and gender becomes inescapably linked to health problems in U.S. society, increasing numbers of nurse scholars are exploring the use of emancipatory inquiry, particularly feminist and critical theories, as philosophic bases for nursing practice<sup>1-10</sup> and research.<sup>11-21</sup> Over the past decade, feminist and critical theories have become increasingly sophisticated and multidimensional. As in other disciplines, nursing scholars have struggled with the complexity of the issues of research methodology and method posed by these developments. For example, early feminist researchers recommended qualitative, primarily interpretive, methodologies that would lead to a greater understanding of women's lives. Methods were proposed that focused on women, allowed women's voices to be heard, and reduced the hierarchy between researcher and researched. More recently, scholars have recognized the need for additional methods and

methodologies that are suited to the explicitly political goal of feminist and critical theories—that is, emancipation. This article presents participatory research as a methodology and consciousness raising as a method for nursing research that addresses both the complexities and the emancipatory goals of feminist and critical theories.

Harding's<sup>22</sup> definitions of epistemology, methodology, and method in research help clarify the distinctions between emancipatory inquiry, participatory research, and consciousness raising. Harding defined *epistemology* as "a theory of knowledge," *methodology* as "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed," and *method* as a "technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence."<sup>22(pp2,3)</sup> Epistemologies address what can be considered legitimate knowledge in the research process, methodologies prescribe the way in which the research is done, and methods are the tools used to do the research. Within Harding's framework, emancipatory inquiries such as the feminist and critical theories are epistemologies that view knowledge production as a liberatory act. Participatory research is a methodology of how knowledge production is created in the research process. As the method of inquiry in participatory research and the method of practice in feminist process, consciousness raising provides a bridge between Harding's methodology and methods, between how the research is done and the tools used to do it. Consciousness raising in participatory research provides the forum in which decisions about research design and method are made.

This article begins with a brief description of the principles of emancipatory inquiry and their influence on the research methods in nursing. This description is followed by

discussions of participatory research and consciousness raising as methodology and method of emancipatory inquiry. An example of consciousness raising in a recently conducted feminist nursing participatory research project is given.

## EMANCIPATORY INQUIRIES

*Emancipatory inquiries* are ideologies that seek to understand oppression in society and, through this understanding, transform it.<sup>23</sup> Falling under the broader heading of emancipatory inquiry are the German Frankfurt school of critical social theory, feminist theory, Marxist theory, gay and lesbian liberation studies, and the anticolonialist movement of people of color in the United States.<sup>10,23</sup> Grounded in political resistance movements, each of these ideologies perceives society as consisting of groups that possess unequal levels of power and resources. Each of these ideologies has a common theme of emancipation through knowledge production.

Within emancipatory inquiry, knowledge is believed to be socially constituted, historically situated, and valuationally based. Thus, scientific research, as a human endeavor to advance knowledge, is influenced by the sociocultural and historical context in which it takes place and is considered neither value free, objective, nor neutral. Rather than attempting to bracket or control the values, biases, and social situatedness of the researcher, emancipatory inquiry places those issues at the center of the research process.<sup>12</sup>

The goal of emancipatory inquiry is social change. Making a critical distinction between the purpose of emancipatory inquiry and that of traditional science (and logical

positivism), Fay stated that in emancipatory inquiry "the point of knowledge is not to provide the means by which one can use a particular causal process, but to transcend these processes; it is not knowledge of external variables in order to manipulate them, but self knowledge in order to be freed of them."<sup>23(p90)</sup> The goal of emancipatory inquiry can be further distinguished from the positivist fields of inquiry such as experimental science that pursue knowledge to predict or control and from the interpretive fields such as phenomenology that seek to understand.<sup>24</sup> The goal of emancipatory inquiry is neither prediction nor understanding, but emancipation, both within the research process and within society.

Early methodologic arguments for emancipatory (primarily feminist) inquiry in nursing did not address its emancipatory goals. In a pioneering work on feminist methods in nursing research, MacPherson's<sup>15</sup> recommendations were more consistent with an interpretive inquiry. She stressed the importance of focusing on women's experiences, making the research findings available to the subjects studied, and using qualitative methods with more interactive interviewing. In an early report of feminist nursing research, Webb referred to a political goal in the research, proposing that a feminist research methodology in nursing research would "offer opportunities for mutual consciousness-raising and for working together to challenge male medical control . . . over women's lives."<sup>21(p249)</sup> Reporting the ways in which the consciousness of the women participants was raised, Webb also described the ways in which her own consciousness was raised as a result of doing the study.

More recently, feminist and critical scholars have expanded on Webb's recommenda-

tions, specifying critical dialogue or consciousness raising as an essential component of critical and feminist inquiry.<sup>13,16,19,25</sup> Researchers have begun to describe negotiation, reciprocity, empowerment, and dialogue within the research process. Meleis<sup>16</sup> urged nurses to consider consciousness raising as a methodologic tool in feminist research. Stevens<sup>19</sup> pointed out that "reciprocal interaction" is basic to critical research and argued that dialogue between the researcher and the researched must replace the controlled observation of traditional research paradigms. Campbell and Bunting<sup>13</sup> asserted that in both feminist and critical research, knowledge is created (rather than discovered) via dialogues in which the researcher and researched negotiate and decide together on meaning. They suggested that the research methodology should be nonhierarchical and "expose hidden power imbalances."<sup>13(p5)</sup>

While not specifically recommending an emancipatory paradigm, Newman called for a process of inquiry involving "negotiation, reciprocity and empowerment"<sup>26(p38)</sup> as the research methodology most suited to exploring and developing her theory of health as expanding consciousness. Newman credited the work of Lather,<sup>27</sup> a participatory researcher, as the basis of this new research methodology, but she did not identify her research as participatory nor her work as grounded in emancipatory inquiry. However, a recent response to Newman's work highlighted the participatory nature of her proposed research methodology. Batey<sup>28</sup> argued that the problem with Newman's thesis is that she blurred the distinctions between the goals of practice, in which the client should directly benefit, and the goals of research, in which this goal is not the primary

one. Perhaps unknowingly, Batey identified one of the important aspects of participatory research: The distinction between practice and research is not blurred, but overtly rejected. Benefit to those involved in the research process is a primary goal of participatory research and one that distinguishes it from other research methodologies.

Terms such as "reciprocity" and "negotiation between researcher and researched" emphasize the mutuality of experience in participatory research. In a participatory research design, the consciousness raising is mutual, and it involves all engaged in the research process. In her feminist participatory research with Khmer refugee women, Thompson noted, "In the construction of this research context, we also wanted to avoid relationships that would cast us purely in a 'helper-helpee' arrangement."<sup>20(p37)</sup> While Thompson told us little about the consciousness raising that occurred in the nurse researchers, she offered the most thorough description of a nurse researcher engaged in the critical dialogue and negotiation of emancipatory inquiry.

In addition to Thompson, several recent nurse researchers have specified participatory research.<sup>10,29-31</sup> Stevens and Hall<sup>10</sup> recommended participatory research as a methodology consistent with the principles of critical theory but provided only limited information about it. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick<sup>29</sup> described using participatory research to empower women as community health workers in the Dominican Republic, yet she did not ground her research within a specific emancipatory framework. Similarly, Abbott and colleagues<sup>30</sup> and Corcega<sup>31</sup> recommended participatory research without acknowledging its political roots or goals.

Nurses have called for emancipatory perspectives to guide nursing research and for mutual consciousness raising as a part of the research process. Some have identified participatory research or the principles of participatory research as a methodology. A few nurse researchers have begun to describe participatory nursing research projects. The need is clear for further discussion and explanation of participatory research as methodology and consciousness raising as method of emancipatory nursing inquiry.

## PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

As a methodology, participatory research addresses how the research should be conducted, rather than which techniques should be used in gathering the data. Grounded in critical and (more recently) feminist theory, participatory research is an alternative approach that integrates scientific research with education and political action. Developed primarily out of the emancipatory work of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire,<sup>32</sup> participatory research has five qualities that distinguish it from traditional research methodologies<sup>33,34</sup>:

1. Participatory research involves participation by the people being studied in all phases of the research process, including design, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of research results. Participatory research implies a partnership between the researcher and those being researched. The

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terms "subject," "informant," or "respondent" do not apply in this case. This research is not done *on* or *for* others, but *with* others.

2. Participatory research places value in experiential and popular knowledge and other nonscientific ways of knowing. Within this methodology, theory is generated from the experiences, lives, and self-understandings of the human beings engaged in the research. Theorizing helps individuals explain their lives by exposing false ideologies. Black feminist theorist bell hooks expressed this clearly: "I came to theory because I was hurting."<sup>35(p80)</sup> Remembering her early, unsuccessful efforts to question the patriarchal authority of her father to her mother, she describes finding sanctuary by seeking explanations for her parents' behavior in theoretical analysis: "This 'lived experience' of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where I worked at explaining that theory could be a healing place."<sup>35(p80)</sup> The act of theorizing initiates change in individual lives and can lead to social transformation in collective lives.

3. Participatory research focuses on empowerment and power relations. The concept of empowerment is frequently the focus of nursing research.<sup>7</sup> In participatory research, empowerment is not necessarily the focus but is incorporated within the research process. Participants are empowered in part by illuminating the power inequities between the researcher and those being researched. Openly acknowledging the power imbalance in the researcher-researched relationship can be an empowering process for those involved and allows the imbalance to be investigated as a part of the research process.

4. Consciousness raising is the method of participatory research. Participatory research involves a mutually educative encounter between researcher and researched that generates both data and theory. This characteristic is discussed in the next section on consciousness raising as a method of inquiry.

5. A goal of participatory research is political or social action to change unequal power distributions in society. As discussed earlier, the goal of knowledge production in emancipatory inquiry is social change, not just the advancement of knowledge or even the advancement of knowledge for social change. In other words, the goal of participatory research is to affect the lives of the actual participants of the research project in beneficial ways. The social change begins with the participants (including the researcher). However, most participatory researchers recognize that the social and political changes generated by participatory research projects often end with the participants as well. In other words, the changes may be limited to raising the consciousness and changing the behavior of the individual participants of the project.

As a part of the new paradigm research, examples of participatory research are still relatively rare. Beyond those mentioned in nursing, ones that may be of particular interest to emancipatory nurse researchers are Maguire's<sup>24</sup> feminist participatory research project with women who had been residents of a shelter for battered women in New Mexico; Lewis and Ford's<sup>36</sup> work with African-American women in the inner city; and Mies'<sup>37</sup> work in Germany helping battered women write their own life histories as a consciousness-raising and social change project.

As described above, participatory research provides a methodology for feminist and critical theories that allows the emancipatory goals of these theories to be realized in the research process. Consciousness raising provides the method by which this activity takes place, as researcher and researched engage in mutually educative and liberating encounters.

### CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

In a recent volume describing feminist methods in social research, Reinharz<sup>34</sup> did not locate consciousness raising within her discussion of feminist participatory research. She labeled consciousness raising "an original feminist method" but stated that it is not usually defined as a research method, but rather as a method of feminist political action.<sup>34(p220)</sup> However, she noted that the goal of participatory research is to "create individual and social change by altering the role relations of people involved in the project"<sup>34(p181)</sup> and pointed out the importance of recognizing the changes that occur in the researcher as well as those being researched. Differing somewhat with Reinharz, the author suggests that the feminist political method of consciousness raising *is* the method of inquiry of participatory research in which social and individual change occurs. As such, consciousness raising does not replace other methods that are the actual tools of data collection. It precedes those methods, providing the format in which the research takes place.

Consciousness raising has its roots in feminist and critical political movements. Consciousness raising involves the recognition of social, political, economic, and personal constraints on freedom, and it pro-

vides the forum in which to take action to challenge those constraints. As presented by Freire,<sup>32</sup> consciousness raising involves dialogue between those with a theoretical analysis of oppression and those who are oppressed. By engaging in critical and liberating dialogues, individuals uncover the hidden distortions within themselves that help to maintain an oppressive society.

Early feminist consciousness-raising groups did not distinguish between theoreticians and experientialists; everyone had the opportunity for analytic and empirical input.<sup>11,38</sup> Because feminist consciousness raising both affirms the self as knower of one's condition and simultaneously critiques the conditions that have created what one is, everyone becomes a theorist. As bell hooks described it, "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice."<sup>35(p80)</sup> The distinction between knowledge labeled "theory" and knowledge labeled "experience" is a false dichotomy.

In feminist consciousness-raising groups, women experience a shared sense of reality and a shared sense of oppression; they become conscious of their problems as group problems rather than as their own individual problems.<sup>38</sup> Women begin to see the way they have internalized the dominant view of their inferiority and thus may be contributing to their oppressive life situations. Ironically, an increased awareness of complicity in their own oppression can lead to a greater sense of individual empowerment for women. Women recognize that they both shape and are shaped by their reality. This concept of mutual exchange between women and their reality is consistent with nursing's view of the mutual growth and

change that occur in human–environment interactions.

Consciousness raising is simultaneously an individual and a group experience of empowerment. It can contribute to psychologic change for the individual and social transformation for groups and communities. Fonow and Cook emphasized the importance of both personal and political outcomes of consciousness raising: “emotional catharsis, academic insight and intellectual product, and increasing politicization and activism.”<sup>39(p3)</sup>

Transformation via consciousness raising occurs in a process of enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation.<sup>23</sup> Each of these exists in dynamic relation to one another.

### Enlightenment

Enlightenment is the experience of coming to see oneself in a radically new way by engaging in a dialogue that is a process of self-reflection and theorizing.<sup>23,32,40</sup> In participatory research, this dialogue develops out of, but must not be limited to, an a priori theory (such as feminism or critical theory) that seeks to explain why things are the way they are. New theory is created out of this dialogue as individuals come to see the links between their own struggles and those of others and to create their own explanations. In participatory nursing research, one example of enlightenment occurs when individuals become aware of the ways in which societal injustices contribute to their health problems.

### Empowerment

Enlightenment itself is not enough to bring about liberation. To transform the ex-

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isting social order, individuals and groups must become their own mobilizing force. Empowerment is the process by which a group of individuals become galvanized to act on their own behalf.<sup>40</sup> It is also a state of feeling more powerful and having an ability to affect others and to change social institutions.<sup>41–43</sup> Empowerment is an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience, with each contributing to the other. In participatory nursing research, individuals become empowered to explore the links between the inequities in society and their own impaired health situations and to take action when these links are uncovered.

### Emancipation

Emancipation is both the process of becoming liberated and the state of being liberated.<sup>23,32,40</sup> *Emancipation* is the state of being in which people come to know who they are and have the collective power to determine the direction of their existence. The nature of emancipation is dynamic. Because human beings are not separable from their social and historical context, reality is not a static entity, but a process—a transformation. By engaging in acts of enlightenment and empowerment, human beings become liberated—and more fully human.

Kendall<sup>4</sup> called for nursing practice that encourages people to embrace emancipatory actions, moving beyond coping and adaptation. Similarly, within participatory nursing research, emancipation is a part of

the healing process. When working with groups that have been underserved in health care and underrepresented in health research, the very act of doing research can create change "because the paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their powerlessness."<sup>34(p191)</sup>

Although the preceding discussion presents the concepts of enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation as though they exist in distinct and linear relationships, it is not the case. Rather, they are experienced as overlapping circles of reflection and action that take place within a dialogue, producing a new and liberating knowledge. The following example of a consciousness-raising group in a participatory research project will illustrate how it occurs.

### **CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING IN A FEMINIST NURSING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT**

The author recently was involved in a feminist nursing participatory research project in a therapeutic drug treatment community in a midwestern urban area. Although the drug treatment program was traditionally coed, with an increasing number of women seeking and entering treatment, some of the staff had become aware of the differing emotional, psychosocial, and support needs of women. The administrators of the drug treatment program were interested in developing an all-woman component to the program, and I was asked to consult. I, in turn, was interested in understanding the process of all-woman consciousness-raising groups as a treatment approach for women. I suggested the possibility of doing a feminist

participatory research project with women in the program.

A group was formed to discuss the special needs of women in treatment and to plan the women's program. In addition to serving as a planning group, it became the consciousness-raising group for a feminist nursing participatory research project with women in drug treatment. The members of the group engaged in a process of self-education; using previous research of women's drug use and the clinical experiences at the pregnant women's facility, we discussed issues and concerns of women in treatment. Out of this forum, decisions were made about the creation of the program and the conduct of the research.

The group was made up of key staff members and selected residents. Nine women, four residents and five nonresidents, participated in the group. The nonresidents included a master's-prepared social worker employed as a therapist in the program, a social work intern, a registered nurse on staff, the program coordinator, and myself. We met weekly for 8 months.

We came together as a group of women to identify our commonalities and explore how they could be used to help women in treatment. Almost immediately, however, our differences became as visible as anything we had in common. Four of us were white and four were African American. We came from middle-class, working-class, and poverty backgrounds; we ranged from an 8th grade education to advanced degrees; and we were staff and residents in the treatment facility, some with a history of substance abuse and others without. We began to talk about ourselves—our lived experiences and our feelings and attitudes toward ourselves, toward men, and toward each other. To cre-



ate an atmosphere in which women could learn to feel connected to one another, we discovered that we needed to learn it among ourselves.

Examples of enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation occurred in this feminist nursing consciousness-raising group. Enlightenment occurred as we met and talked about the issues and treatment needs of women who abuse drugs and alcohol. Theory and praxis were integrated as we offered explanations for women's behavior based on previous research, on various individuals' lived experience of using drugs, on feminist theory, and on past experience of providing treatment to women and of being in a treatment program. Theory and praxis were also integrated as we examined our own lives, preconceptions, and ways of interacting as women in the group. In the process of talking about how to create a consciousness-raising experience for women in drug treatment, we engaged in consciousness raising ourselves.

As we created our own understandings of the life situations of women and a plan for treatment, we became empowered. We supported each other, disagreed with each other, and pushed and pulled each other to move forward on our own and other women's behalf. We helped each other to act with greater urgency—we spoke up for ourselves, made public presentations, articulated our rights and needs, and clarified priorities.

Enlightenment and empowerment occurred on an individual level in the group as well. A discussion ensued about what it means to be a woman. One woman talked about the responsibility—taking care of the kids, being a mother. Another countered that being irresponsible (as a mother) was sometimes alright and that she did not feel

guilty about it. I talked about feeling torn between my work and my family. An African-American woman who was single and childless wanted a definition that did not include kids. Describing the pressure that black women feel to have babies in order to be "real" women, she said that when she meets someone new, his first question is, "Aren't you married?" followed by, "Do you have kids?" and, finally, "What's wrong with you?"

She looked up *woman* in a 1980 dictionary: A man was described as a generic human being; the definition of a woman included the term "fussy." We decided to write our own definitions.

Influenced by the dictionary, we tried to write what we wished it had said. Eight women developed eight different definitions and then read them to each other with varying amounts of self-consciousness and determination. It was an exciting moment for us all and a transformation for the group.

The women engaged in consciousness raising as a means to better understand women's abuse of drugs and to create a plan to change their situation and that of others. The act of engaging in consciousness raising was a healing experience for all of the women involved. The moment in the planning group when we read aloud the definition of woman in the dictionary was enlightening. Writing and reading aloud our own definitions was an empowering experience.

Emancipation is a dynamic state of being in which self-knowledge (enlightenment) and self-advocacy (empowerment) are connected to knowledge and advocacy for others. Emancipation is accomplished by engaging in enlightening and empowering experiences, and it takes place in concert with enlightenment and empowerment. The

planning and implementation of the women's program were emancipatory experiences for the women involved as we used the strength of our awareness and connectedness as women to create a women-centered space.

An environmental change took place. The women's program came into being, a program that created new opportunities for enlightenment and empowerment for women by allowing them to come to new understandings of themselves. The development of this space also opened concrete possibilities for women. Women were provided with more leadership opportunities within the women's program, in part because there were more positions created for women. This situation was true for residents as well as staff. The women's program and the subsequent funding of a federal grant to support the program meant that many more women were hired as staff.

Women residents within the program had more freedom—they could more easily have their children with them, and they had more opportunities for treatment. The women identified ways in which the changes were allowing them to grow. The staff gained greater expertise in women's issues in treatment and were frequently asked to consult with other programs concerning women's issues in the state and across the nation.

The consciousness-raising group also shaped the methodologic decisions for the second stage of the research project: exploring women's consciousness raising in an all-woman treatment program. The two primary research methods that emerged were to conduct a series of interviews with individual women as they went through the program and to engage in participant observation of a weekly women's issues group over

the same time period. Thus, the outcomes of the consciousness-raising group were evident in the changes created in the program, the changes in our individual lives, and the shaping of the research project that followed the initiation of the program. A discussion of the results of that stage of the research are beyond the scope of this article.

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Consciousness raising in participatory research is the meeting ground of theory and practice; it is both the method of achieving a goal and the goal itself. The research process becomes a consciousness-raising experience in which researched and researchers engage in critical dialogue. This act leads to new understandings of self and new understandings of each other and to the creation of new theories to explain phenomena.

In participatory nursing research, consciousness raising involves reflection and action among individuals concerning health issues. The reflection serves to uncover the social, political, and economic constraints on their health and the ways in which their own distorted beliefs have contributed to these constraints. The action includes the changes that occurred within individuals as they make these discoveries and any collective action the individuals take to change the societal constraints.

Participatory research requires a commitment to the emancipatory goals of feminist and critical theories in the research process. By calling on us to engage in consciousness raising with those being researched, to share all levels of the research project with them, and to address the power imbalances that exist between researcher and researched, participatory research challenges us to apply the emancipatory principles of our femi-

nist and critical theories to our research actions.

We are entering a time of dramatic change in health care. Sweeping reforms are being called for in health care policy and delivery. As early forecasters of the need for change in health care, feminist and critical theorists in nursing have brought attention to the socioeconomic injustices that contribute to health problems. Recognizing the impor-

tance of emancipation in healing, feminist and critical theorists have called for nursing practice and research that challenges the status quo. If we are to move beyond the status quo in emancipatory nursing research, we must employ research methods and methodologies that move beyond the status quo as well. Consciousness raising in participatory research is a method and methodology for the future.

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