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# **Participatory Action Research: A Useful Tool for Exploring Work-Life Balance Issues**

**Aileen M. Fortune**

Associate Extension Professor  
University of Maine Cooperative Extension, York County Office  
Springvale, Maine  
[aileen.fortune@maine.edu](mailto:aileen.fortune@maine.edu)

**Jennifer Brown**

Ecological Education and Transformative Leadership Consultant  
Morrill, Maine  
[jennbrown2@gmail.com](mailto:jennbrown2@gmail.com)

**Deb Burwell**

Leadership Development Facilitator  
Paddling the Rapids  
Belfast, Maine  
[deb@paddlingtherapids.com](mailto:deb@paddlingtherapids.com)

**Eileen Conlon**

Organization Development Consultant  
Conlon Consulting Group  
Wells, Maine  
[conlon@maine.rr.com](mailto:conlon@maine.rr.com)

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**Abstract:** Many of our Extension clients struggle with issues of work-life balance, self-care, and sustainable leadership. Extension staff do as well. This article describes the richness of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) tool as an educational and community development intervention and a qualitative research methodology. The project on self-care and women's sustainable leadership described here also engaged researchers as participants in the study. Using PAR to create solutions to issues of self-care and work-life balance has great potential in Extension with benefits to clients and staff as well.

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## **Introduction**

Many women and men are increasingly feeling the challenges of trying to find balance in their lives

(Galinsky, Bond, Kim, Backon, Brownfield, & Sakai, 2005; Tang & Wadsworth, 2010). Responding to issues of work-life balance and self-care has been part of our Extension human development work with clients for decades and continues to be equally important concerns for many Extension staff as well (Havercamp, Christiansen, & Mitchell, 2003; Kutilek, Conklin & Gunderson, 2002; Hughes & Fetsch, 2008; Strong & Harder, 2009; Ensle, 2005; Peters, Zvonkovic, & Bowman, 2008, Kroth & Peutz, 2011).

Since 2004, The Eleanor Days annual retreat has supported women exploring issues of self-care to sustain themselves for the challenges of leadership for the long haul. Women participate in a group process of sharing stories, learning, and inspiring each other. They reflect, rejuvenate, and make plans to integrate their experience and new self-care skills into their lives.

As educators, we have grappled with finding ways to articulate what we've learned, make collective meaning of these experiences, and communicate the long-term impacts of this program. We wanted to find a way to capture the knowledge we create together about self-care, connection, and sustainability to share it with others beyond the retreat.

## Why Participatory Action Research?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves researchers and participants in the collaborative design and implementation of the project with the goal of increasing understanding and improving participants' lives in some way. It promotes individual and collective empowerment and/or social change (McIntyre, 2008).

PAR became a powerful tool for us to go beyond the work of individual learning of the retreat format to an educational program that was not only a self-care strategy but also research and the foundation for new program development.

The PAR methodology has been used in Extension both for program development with clients and to support Extension staff (Krasny & Doyle, 2002; Phelps, Hermann, Parker, & Denney, 2010; Havercamp, Christiansen, & Mitchell, 2003).

## Our PAR Project

Our research topic was "exploring self-care and connection in women's sustainable leadership." We invited interested women to participate in an open-ended collaborative self-study.

The topic was of both personal and professional interest to us as participant researchers. PAR allows researchers to engage as active participants in the process, which was a natural continuation of the retreat model where facilitators are also members of the group process. Three of the four participant researchers were not Extension staff members.

Between October 2009 and May 2010, 30 women engaged in the project in two Maine locations. Participants ranged in age from 34 – 73 and were at various stages of their lives and careers. Each group was facilitated by two participant researchers. Meetings were designed collaboratively.

Each group developed its own research questions to guide inquiry. These included: What is self-care? How do I make self-care an integral part of my life? What are the messages that keep me from taking care of myself?

Participants determined the research modalities used in each session and between PAR meetings. These included: journaling, interviews, poetry, artistic expression, imagery, body work, discussion, and

experimentation with new self-care practices. Each time we met, we included a writing activity during the session, which later became a substantial portion of our data. Data analysis of writings, meeting notes, and discussions began during the summer of 2010. We continue to notice themes, refine findings, and create meaning from this experience as the work is shared with others.

## **Preliminary Research Findings Summary**

- We found that the role that "limiting cultural messages" plays is significant in women's self-care decisions *everyday*.
- We discovered that true self-care needs to be individually defined and begins with slowing down and listening to ourselves.
- We learned that self-care is full of complexities and changes over time.
- We found that the role of connection and community is significant in individual self-care.

## **The PAR Group Process, a Helpful Self-Care Strategy**

We found PAR to be an empowering educational intervention as well as an exciting research methodology. One PAR participant said that in most circles in her life talking about self-care is "taboo." The group research gave credibility to the individual work of self-care. It gave participants the permission to keep self-care attention on the front burner and take their needs seriously.

## **Actions**

Actions were developed that not only changed the lives of participants but have also benefited others.

- Participants experimented with and developed personal self-care strategies.
- They led discussions and activities in social, work, and community settings with clients and colleagues.
- They modeled self-care in their own work roles and invited others to determine self-care strategies as part of their work plan.
- They developed educational resources, art, and guided imagery to share.

The action phase of the research continues as we share and integrate findings back into the Eleanor Days retreat, develop new programs, and explore further research possibilities.

## **Researcher as Participant, Participant as Researcher**

Facilitating a PAR group while also being a member did indeed present some challenges and required our careful attention to boundaries and roles. We were wholeheartedly immersed in the project and learned much in both researcher and participant roles. We needed to be patient with the ambiguities inherent in PAR and were reminded of the power in truly trusting the process. The benefits and excitement of the project far outweighed the challenges.

## Conclusion

Our PAR project was an intensive 6-month process. With the co-created research, educational design, and collaborative data analysis, we are able to articulate some of what we have been learning for years, but couldn't quite capture with workshop evaluation tools. The whole of what we discovered was beyond what we had expected when we began.

PAR empowered not only participants to create changes in their lives. It has benefited other women and men as the research is shared. Findings are now the basis of new program development in Maine.

Participatory Action Research has great potential as a tool to explore issues of self-care and work-life balance in Extension with benefits to clients and staff as well.

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