

Participatory action research with older rural men: Can it help them to help themselves?

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Men's groups provide vital support for socially isolated older men, particularly in rural areas. To further this, these groups need to evaluate their work and identify directions for the future. Given the 'grass roots' nature of men's groups, participatory action research (PAR) may provide a useful framework. PAR conceptualizes research as a fundamentally political act where 'everyday' people use their knowledge and skills to create social change through an iterative process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This research evaluated the efficacy of a PAR framework for helping an older rural men's group define and achieve their goals. The Older Men's Network Inc (TOMNET), based in South-West Queensland, uses outreach, social activities and volunteering to counter social isolation among rural men aged 50+. Guided by PAR principles, three meetings were held with TOMNET members and community stakeholders over a seven-month period. Goals were identified in Meeting 1; action plans were developed in Meeting 2 and implemented in the following months; and progress was reported and reflected upon in Meeting 3. Descriptive analyses of action plans and progress reports, and thematic analyses of reflections, were conducted to evaluate this approach. The men identified clear goals, but struggled to develop detailed action plans. Limited progress was made on implementing the action plans, but the men formed strong relationships with community stakeholders and were committed to continuing the PAR cycle beyond Meeting 3. Barriers to progress included feelings of inadequacy ("*we're only a crowd of ordinary blokes*") and a desire for more leadership ("*did we need to be more proactive?*"). PAR may be a useful framework for helping older rural men to help themselves. The lived experiences of older rural men, however, may be such that they require longer timeframes for action and more direction in the first iteration of a PAR project.