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Cultivating Ecological Understandings in Participatory Action Research: Insights from Dharma Yoga Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

As a PhD researcher, I worked with Participatory Action Research (PAR). To this reference, this paper reflects upon my personal experiences and intellectual development in maintaining inner calm and balance when faced with the outcomes and reactions of practitioner research that follow. I achieved this by utilizing the metaphor of Dharma Yoga, derived from the Vedic tradition. In this reflective inquiry, my focus lies in the field of education, where the application of Dharma Yoga metaphor emphasizes ecological principles like authenticity, relationality, and ethical responsibility. Through this emphasis, I hypothesized that ecological PAR encourages individual growth and societal advancement through inner transformation and outer manifestation of those involved in PAR. My reflection, first, observed the prevalence of the procedural aspects of the PAR model prevalent in the Northern Hemisphere, which centers on organizational learning. Thereafter, my reflective observations shifted to the values of fairness, self-governance, and empowerment embodied in the Southern Hemisphere's PAR paradigm. Mindful of the limitations in both forms of PAR, I began integrating the metaphor of Vedic Dharma Yoga, which eventually created an additional dimension of ecological epistemology. This framework involved reflective introspection, practical implementation, and collaborative involvement as means, through which practitioner researchers in the field of PAR can engage in selfless practical activities and maintaining inner calm and balance throughout the process. Also, it acknowledged the valuable attributes of both Northern and Southern PAR paradigms while enriching them with the intricate ethical connections between practitioner-researchers and their practical applications.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how practitioner-researchers in the field of Participatory Action Research (PAR) can engage in practical activities while maintaining inner calm and balance when faced with the outcomes and reactions that follow. As a doctoral candidate engaged in advanced research, I followed the 'critical place-inquiry' approach introduced by Tuck and McKenzie (2015). This approach required aligning the research's fundamental purpose ('what') with the chosen research method ('how'). Mindful of this alignment, I adopted the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology within the framework of critical place inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This PAR journey encountered various points of progress and challenges, all centered around determining the ethically right actions within the specific context and establishing relevant knowledge foundations.

The culmination of this journey led to linking the principles of PAR with the concept of Dharma Yoga from the Vedic tradition. In Vedic philosophy, as explained by scholars like Morgan (2012) and Yogananda (2002), Dharma represents pursuing authentic behavior, and Yoga emphasizes the interconnectedness inherent in human actions. Viewing PAR through the lens of Dharma Yoga, and with the guidance of research supervisor, I developed an ecological framework for understanding and implementing PAR as part of the overall doctoral study.

This ecological framework, deeply rooted in the ideas of interconnectedness presented by Lang (2018), is based on a holistic view of a connected living system. This perspective emphasizes authenticity, relational connections, and ethical responsibility. As the article unfolds, the discussion delves into the ontological aspects of ecological interconnectedness. This sheds light on the complex interaction between the practitioner-researcher and the various aspects of research practice, particularly the ways the practitioner-researchers can engage in actions maintaining inner calm and balance.

Study Methods

This research employs a method called reflective inquiry. This method is based on the idea that researchers should do more than just follow technical procedures; they should deeply understand the context they are studying (Mortari, 2015). Reflectivity, which includes reflexivity, has become common in qualitative research, especially since the 'interpretive turn'. It is used to justify and confirm research methods. Within the postmodern paradigm, the analysis of my own experiences in this research suggests that the way I think influences the entire research process. Therefore, there is no different section for 'research finding' and 'discussion'. Instead, the reflective meaning-making begins from the sub-heading 'the journey' below. The reflection and theoretical discussion move in a spiral fashion, informing one another. To ensure the credibility

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and validity of the heuristic process, following the suggestion of Mortari (2015), I have also considered the ethical responsibility of being transparent about how I think during the research.

The first part of the paper uses the pronoun ‘I’ to explain and describe my personal experiences and paths as a Ph.D. researcher engaged in PAR. The following section, referred to as the ‘arrivals’, employs the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ to highlight the joint analytical work between myself (the Ph.D. researcher) and my research supervisor. This collaborative effort focuses on creating a framework that considers the complex ethical aspects of the interaction between practitioner-researchers and the actions they take in an ecologically informed manner.

This approach is based on a hermeneutic framework centered around ‘being there’ and ‘being here’, concepts introduced by Heidegger (2002) and further developed by Ramberg and Kristin (2009). The narrative unfolds in a sequential manner. I begin by sharing experiential accounts from my engagement in PAR, emphasizing the ‘being there’ experiences. This is followed by reflections that encompass the combined ‘being here’ perspectives of both authors (myself and my thesis supervisor).

The paper’s structure advances through an ecologically infused dialogue, similar to Gadamer’s (1982) idea of a dialectical ‘play’. This interplay between the text and the contextual lifeworld follows a circular hermeneutical methodology. This methodology employs both a holistic-to-specific and specific-to-holistic approach to understanding ecological relationships. This complex interweaving explores the locally manifested lifeworlds and the globally influential operational framework that supports PAR.

On a broader level, the paper aims not to establish definitive ontological truths, but rather to foster a participatory journey that enhances the ability to perceive the multifaceted relationship between researchers and their practiced methods.

The Journey

In July 2017, I was chosen for the NORHED Ph.D. research fellowship by Kathmandu University School of Education in Nepal. The main aim of my research was to deeply study strategies that support a local and adaptable approach to teaching and learning in schools. I focused on understanding the important effects of teaching practices that are tailored to the specific context within the field of education. To achieve this, I explored the meanings of ‘place’ and ‘emplaced pedagogies’, particularly in the context of Nepal’s cultural and societal environment, which is influenced by Hindu-Buddhist heritage and diverse ethnic backgrounds (see Wagle *et al.*, 2019).

Recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge and customary practices in the specific educational setting, my research was closely connected to aligning the fundamental aspects of what and how the research was conducted. This led me to choose the PAR methodology, which inherently values understanding the current

situation and involves continuous self-reflection. Since PAR is focused on acknowledging the unique human experiences and ways of thinking in a given environment, it became clear that the established tools and guidelines for PAR that were based on one specific context wouldn’t work as effectively in a different setting.

Gradually, it became evident that the intricate differences within each context made it challenging to create a predetermined plan for this research approach. Considering this context, I delved deeply into exploring the indigenous worldviews and the respected cultural traditions that are an integral part of diverse Nepali communities. This effort wasn’t just an academic pursuit but a necessary step in connecting and grounding my research in the nuanced viewpoints and underlying knowledge of the communities being studied.

My doctoral PAR fieldwork that started in July 2017 lasted for two years. This involvement led to two significant encounters with different approaches to PAR, each originating from distinct geographical regions with their own social and cultural contexts.

Firstly, I learned about the organizational learning model of PAR, which comes from the Global North. This perspective emphasizes principles and strategies for learning within institutions, based on the works of Argyris and Schon (1996) and Torres and Preskill (2001). It focuses on how learning influences the practices within institutions.

Simultaneously, I became acquainted with the social justice and empowerment model of PAR, emerging from the Global South. This approach is influenced by thinkers like Freire (1970), Foucault (1979), and Habermas (1971), and is based on concepts from constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory. It prioritizes empowerment and is attuned to the societal and political factors that shape individual and collective realities.

Both of these paradigms provided me with a foundational understanding of PAR, particularly regarding organizational development, autonomy, and ownership dynamics. However, my hands-on experience in the field made me confront various complexities and ethical dilemmas related to the interaction between the researcher and their actions. This relationship raised questions about the motivations behind the researcher’s actions and the resulting outcomes.

I realized that the prevailing paradigms of PAR from both the Global North and South did not fully address the intricacies of the researcher’s role and their actions within the community. As a Ph.D. candidate, I became more aware of this gap in the existing PAR literature, prompting me to investigate and engage with this unexplored aspect.

In my continued involvement with PAR, I began to understand that the range of methodologies within PAR goes beyond the limitations imposed by prevailing paradigms from both the Northern and Southern hemispheres (see Wagle *et al.*, 2023). As pointed out by Kindon *et al.* (2010), participatory approaches in action

research are characterized by their adaptability and flexibility. This characteristic has been present since their inception in the field of social science and research. These approaches haven't been confined to a strict methodological framework. Instead, they've shown a tendency to incorporate various disciplinary perspectives and indigenous knowledge from around the world. This has led to an ongoing and dynamic development of ideas and practices within PAR.

For example, participatory paradigms, which have a socio-political orientation, share similarities with the reflective and constructivist ideas proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994). This perspective provides a space for individuals to actively participate in shaping the approach within a shared context. Consequently, different fields such as Anthropology, Health, and Education have contributed to the diversification of methodologies within PAR. This is evident in emerging paradigms like critical place inquiry by Tuck and McKenzie (2015), indigenous interpretative frameworks by Kovach (2009), and decolonial methodologies promoted by Tuck (2009).

Additionally, the inclusion of spirituality in organizational learning and social justice discussions introduced the concept of Participatory Spirituality, as developed by John Heron (2006). In this alternative framework of PAR, the participatory researcher positions themselves to foster a receptive and co-creative connection with other elements of existence, particularly the immediate experiential context in which they are situated.

Interacting with individuals based on their unique geographical backgrounds, a gradual unfolding occurred, highlighting the significant impact of location-specific worldviews and philosophical beliefs on the shaping of cultural identities and societal practices (Casey, 2009). A clear pattern emerged where the cultural and social behaviors of the participants in my research, who were also co-researchers, were closely linked with their Hindu upbringing and Vedic philosophical views. This brought about an increased awareness in me about the fundamental principles inherent in the Vedic worldview. As the research process progressed, this awareness regarding the actions and endeavors of participatory action researchers became clearer.

From an early stage, my interest in the intricate fusion of art and science found in Vedic Yoga practices began to grow. This interest had captured my attention since my high school years. The integration of physical, mental, and emotional aspects to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena was particularly appealing (see Wagle *et al.*, 2023). My deep familiarity with Yoga principles, which stem from the Sanskrit term Yuj meaning to unite, started to generate transformative insights in the field of action research activities.

I came to realize that this orientation towards Yoga within the Hindu context inherently embodies participatory concepts. It places strong emphasis on the interconnection between the body and mind, viewing existence and nature as intertwined dependencies. Drawing upon the ideas put

forth by Heron (2006) regarding participatory spirituality and the concepts explained by Whitehead (2013) for the development of a living theory situated within distinct cultures of inquiry, I set out on a journey to bridge this gap. Drawing inspiration from Bhabha's (1994) framework, this pursuit led me to conceptualize a 'third space' paradigm within the realm of participatory action research. Within this 'third space', my goal was to go beyond the confines of the existing participatory action research models. This involved cultivating an 'emergent space' where I could explore my own cultural traditions rooted in the Southeastern context. Within this emerging domain, my aim was to formulate a participatory action research model that aligns with the context, introducing a fresh discourse that delves into the interconnected psychological, social, ecological, and spiritual aspects between the participatory action researcher and their diverse activities throughout the research journey.

As I thought deeply about my experiences with PAR in various settings around the world, both in developed and developing regions, I became increasingly interested in the valuable perspectives of Vedic Dharma Yoga. These perspectives seem to offer not only useful approaches for researchers and collaborators, but also for everyone in guiding their actions and reflective processes.

In Vedic philosophy, Yoga is generally understood as a state of compassion and contentment (Rao, 2005; Vivekananda, 1896). It is also seen as a motivation to engage in meaningful activities with careful awareness and a broad understanding, driven not by personal benefit, but by the betterment of larger human communities (Yogananda, 2002). When combined with the concept of Dharma, the Yogic pursuit gains an added layer of genuineness and ethical soundness.

During this period of exploration, I came to realize the valuable insights that Vedic perspectives on Dharma Yoga can provide within the context of Participatory Action Research. Particularly noteworthy is their ability to explain the complex relationship between PAR researchers and collaborators, as well as the actions they take. This offers a framework that captures the sincerity and ethical alignment at the core of their efforts.

My Hesitation and Despondency

During my doctoral fieldwork using PAR, I initially adopted an approach that wasn't directly based on the teachings of Vedic Yoga. However, there might have been subtle influences from Yoga philosophies on my PAR work and self-reflective processes. While Yoga ideas could have unintentionally shaped my actions and introspection within the PAR framework, I wasn't consciously aware of this link at first.

Instead, I mainly followed the critical PAR paradigm as outlined by Kemmis *et al.* (2015). This approach focuses on systematically identifying and solving problems. It highlights the importance of involving local perspectives, needs, and expertise by collaborating closely with community members. But as I started interacting with

the educational institution and the community, I began to encounter the complex discourse within the realm of PAR. Various challenges emerged. These included questions about the shared realities between me and the participants, how we collectively understood the phenomenon at hand, and the ethical justification for our actions. These challenges led me to compare my experiences with established PAR models, like the one proposed by Kemmis *et al.* (2015). While these models prioritize collaboration, autonomy, and empowerment, they don't fully consider ecological and spiritual aspects.

Over time, I started connecting my evolving experiences with the wisdom traditions from both my own background and the backgrounds of the participants. As I encountered more intricate ecological and psychological challenges related to the reasoning and validity of my work, I began to feel uncertain and disheartened. There were moments when my PAR initiatives didn't align with existing models, leaving me feeling disoriented. This led to doubts arising within me, even making me question whether I should continue the PAR process.

Memories of my initial experiences in the academic institution and its surrounding community remain vivid. The teaching staff, who were also my collaborators in the PAR project, seemed inclined to avoid our presence as university-affiliated researchers in what they considered their school domain. On one occasion, a teacher made a sarcastic comment about our involvement, suggesting that we were only there to secure project funding. This sentiment was echoed by a community member the day before. Such recurring statements, like "they're only focused on their doctoral theses," consistently reminded me, as discussed by Kemmis *et al.* (2015), that I was seen as an outsider,

The emotional complexities tied to these incidents led to a lasting unease throughout the day. It's worth noting that building trust with the school community and the broader local environment to work together toward common goals (Kemmis, 2009) became more of an emotional concern than a matter of following procedures. The more I became involved in their activities, the more I noticed the range of reactions people had in their daily interactions. This closeness made me vulnerable to feelings of helplessness and anger.

This brought up fundamental questions in my mind: What motivates me to continue with this endeavor? Is it reasonable for me to endure the difficulties that come with it, especially when the participants in my research seem indifferent to the need for change? What do I gain from all of this? Is it possible that my efforts could be ignored and marginalized by important stakeholders, including the school community, local authorities, my research supervisor, and committee? If my research doesn't achieve its intended goals, what are the consequences? Additionally, considering my initial belief that inaction might be more likely than 'inappropriate' actions (Yogananda, 2002), I wrestled with a crucial question: What if I decided not to take any action at all?

During this phase, I turned to the existing Participatory Action Research literature to find ways to ease my psychological concerns. Unfortunately, both the prevailing approaches from Northern and Southern perspectives lacked effective solutions to alleviate the growing complexities and distress that typically accompany PAR projects.

The feelings of uncertainty and distress I encountered were similar to those experienced by the character Arjuna, a warrior figure from the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata. Specifically, in Chapters XXIII to XL of the Mahabharata, known as the Gita, Arjuna faces a dilemma. The preparations for the Dharmayudha, a battle fought for righteousness, were ready. However, just before the battle was about to begin, a crisis arose that deeply troubled Arjuna. He was confronted with the perplexing question of why he should participate in the fight. Despite being a prominent warrior, Arjuna hesitated and argued eloquently for refraining from action.

In this context of a recurring moral dilemma, Arjuna seeks guidance from Krishna, his mentor and the embodiment of Vedic Yoga teachings. Krishna explains that Arjuna's distress is a result of his attachment to self-centered actions. Krishna suggests a path of action that doesn't involve complete renunciation, but rather a life where actions are performed without selfish motives. This philosophy, called Dharma Yoga, involves selfless actions aligned with authenticity, relationships, and ethical responsibility.

As I pondered my own concerns and dilemmas related to the PAR process, memories of Arjuna's expressions of despair, which I had encountered in my formative years, strongly resonated with me. Particularly, the line "My limbs quail; my mouth goes dry; my body shakes; my hair stands on end; my mind is reeling" (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter I) from the Bhagavad Gita echoed within me. Arjuna's feelings of hopelessness paralleled a series of recurring questions about PAR: What motivates my actions? What might happen if I refrain from action? How can I determine the ethical aspects of my actions? What if my efforts aren't acknowledged or valued?

Around two months after commencing our PAR team's involvement in a participatory needs assessment at a school, I shared an observation with my supervisor. I mentioned, "Sir, it seems moving our project to another school might be a good idea for our PAR initiative. Our presence at the current school doesn't seem to be taken seriously." In response, my supervisor smiled thoughtfully and advised, "Processes take time; just keep finding better ways to communicate our shared principles to all the participants in the research." He added another challenge – finding ways to communicate shared values with the research participants.

My hesitation, indicated by the term Visada (disoriented dilemma) in taking action was full of uncertainty. In this vicious circle of distress and dilemma, I was likely to limit the research to the conventional structural and methodological boundaries of mainstream PAR. This

feeling is often shared by those seeking knowledge (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 1980). People, when faced with uncertain situations, deal with inner and outer conflicts, feeling disheartened while enduring discomfort. As a result, getting disturbed by the conflicting forces in the world, as discussed by Vivekananda (1896), they lose focus on their genuine responsibilities and become entangled in immediate personal gains (and recognition). This sentiment might explain times when I considered easier ways to expedite my Ph.D. pursuits, like using tactics such as ‘I ask, you answer’ or taking an authoritative trainer role. This would bypass the core principles of PAR, which involve participation, ownership, sustainability, collaboration, and introspection. Such thoughts often arise from the human tendency to seek uncomplicated solutions when faced with life’s challenges. This inclination might lead individuals to consider a path of renunciation, as explained by Yogananda (2002). It’s possible that, dealing with my role as a Ph.D. candidate amidst challenges tied to the common paradigms of PAR methods, I might have been tempted to opt for quick fixes or a renunciative approaches.

A significant portion of our lives goes by without addressing the fundamental questions about human existence. According to Yogananda (2002), these inquiries, such as why we exist and the meaning behind our experiences, usually only come up during moments of extreme crises. During these times, we start asking questions like ‘why are we here?’ and ‘what does it all mean?’ It’s possible that in such crises, people start seeing the world as unfamiliar and unsettling. Agreeing with Rao (2005), it becomes important to navigate these feelings in order to function effectively, pushing individuals to overcome them. This could mark the beginning of progress, a first step toward looking inward and examining oneself.

As mentioned earlier, my disappointment with the limitations of dominant PAR models, especially in dealing with complex psychological aspects in researcher-action relationships, led me to find comfort in the teachings of Vedic Dharma Yoga. This philosophical framework has similarities with the threefold path in Buddhism. It suggests that when faced with a dilemma, one should turn to higher wisdom (Buddham Saranam Gachhami), find comfort in authenticity and ethical behavior (Dharmam Sharanam Gachhami), and seek support from the broader community (Sangam Sharanam Gachhami). Radhakrishnan (1980) argues that attaining higher knowledge and wisdom is only possible through inquiry. Therefore, as a PAR researcher dealing with the complexities and limitations of PAR, I leaned towards the path of inquiry rather than giving up.

Insights from Hindu Vedic viewpoints on Yoga, especially the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, guided me during this journey. This dialogue consistently emphasized the importance of being present in the moment, following moral conduct, and forming connections with the surroundings and others. This acted as a persistent reminder, encouraging

me to come back to the present moment, engage in morally upright actions, and establish meaningful bonds with my environment and the people around me.

Adopting the Vedic Metaphor of Dharma Yoga

During the second phase of the PAR project, which took place from September to December 2018, a group consisting of university researchers and chosen subject educators participated in an educational outing with sixth and seventh-grade students. This outing had a focus on visiting a local community, providing various opportunities for hands-on teaching and learning experiences within that context. During the excursion, a stop was made at the ‘Radha-Krishna Temple’, a religious building dedicated to Hindu deities Krishna and Radha. Led by a knowledgeable local guide, the discussion involved sharing mythological and folk stories associated with the temple’s significance. The name Yagya Bhumi, meaning a consecrated area for ritual observances, was linked to this location.

The students were taught with the understanding that their educational endeavors were akin to a collective *Yagya*—a sacred ritual performed for the welfare of the community. The act of attending school and gaining knowledge was thus compared to the values of *Yagya*. This moment led me to reflect on my role as a practitioner of Participatory Action Research. I realized that, in a similar vein to the invoked *Yagya*, my role resembled a form of dedicated commitment. Amidst this reflective atmosphere, a self-directed question arose: “How can the practice of Participatory Action Research be enhanced as I take on the role of a ‘Yogi-researcher’ dedicated to the essence of *Yagya*?”

Focusing on the socio-cultural aspects of Nepali communities, my research consistently delved into the Vedic principles of Yoga, which hold the timeless wisdom of the Nepali civilization. The term ‘Yoga’ originates from the Sanskrit root *Yuj*, meaning to unite. In this context, it represents the harmonious integration of human efforts with personal, collective, and ecological understanding. In simpler terms, it serves as a “method for carrying out activities thoughtfully” (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007), prompting an investigation into the idea of skillful action. According to the perspective of Yoga, an action is considered wise when it is performed in a way that frees the doer from its consequences.

Often, the term Yoga is used alongside Dharma. In Hindu philosophical tradition, Dharma embodies the essential nature of all living and non-living entities. It encompasses maintaining and harmonizing cosmic laws and order. Moreover, Dharma involves the path of moral integrity and a commitment to upholding order. Those who live in accordance with Dharma are believed to exist in a state of balance. Radhakrishna (1980) argues, “Our outward conduct (*svadharma*) and inner disposition (*svabhava*) must align; only then can actions arise spontaneously, free from burdens” (p.73). As a researcher inspired by Yoga principles, and in harmony with the ideals of Dharma

Yoga, the concept of Dharma Yoga became a potent remedial approach. As previously suggested, combining it with established PAR models from both Global North and South could potentially liberate PAR practitioners—including researchers and participants—from the intricate challenges and issues inherent to the field of PAR,

Journeying through the Episteme of Dharma Yoga

The framework of Dharma Yoga, which involves exploring the relationship between being and knowing to achieve a comprehensive ecological understanding (Williams, 2013), guided the application of a three-part approach in PAR. This approach, consisting of thoughtful reflection, physical enactment, and collaborative partnership, functioned as three connected paths towards achieving a state of higher and selfless action. This combination of different ways of knowing directed my ongoing involvement in PAR. The three routes within PAR's framework, which were developed and put into practice during my doctoral research, could be related, either directly or metaphorically, to the four aspects of Vedic Dharma Yoga: Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Dhyana Yoga. These correspond respectively to paths of knowledge, action, devotion, and concentration.

The principle of Karma Yoga emphasizes the value of an engaged life. It highlights the idea that human behavior has two main elements: a sense of responsibility and duty towards others, and a lack of attachment to results. Moreover, creating a sense of balance and calm within work environments is also suggested as a way to achieve elevated action. Overall, these different paths of knowledge—Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, and Dhyana—embrace concepts of unity, integration, and holistic involvement (Byrnes, 2012). In the context mentioned earlier, now I briefly explain how the three paths of knowledge—reflective thinking, active participation, and collaborative partnership—provided valuable guidance for me as I continued to apply the PAR approach throughout my doctoral studies.

Mindful Reflection

During my PAR fieldwork, I aimed to follow an approach similar to the principles of Dharma Yoga, although not entirely the same. I made a conscious effort to stay open to personal truths to a certain extent. A key aspect of this effort was practicing introspection. I looked at myself from a first-person perspective, calling it intentional retrospection. As discussed by Byrnes (2012), the focus was on developing self-awareness with qualities like empathy, ethical behavior, and mindfulness. This practice of looking inward aligns with transformative learning and living theory, where introspection is crucial for the learning journey (Whitehead, 2017). I saw it as a foundational element for expanding my understanding. Through this careful exploration of my internal feelings, thoughts, and tendencies, I gained a better understanding of my core values and assumptions. It also led me to

adjust my personal opinions based on new insights. Over time, this process of cultivating self-awareness through reflective introspection likely improved my ability to take responsibility for how I behave and react in specific situations.

Embodied Action

During the initial stages of my fieldwork, my primary focus centered on the potential negative consequences that could arise if our predetermined goals were not achieved within the specified timeframe. This consistent emphasis on achieving specific outcomes played a significant role in contributing to the increasing stress and disappointment I encountered. Over time, a noticeable shift occurred in my approach. I transitioned from prioritizing final results to placing greater importance on the immediate procedural aspects. This shift arguably led to a more engaged and immersive involvement, akin to a state of 'play'.

This change in perspective subsequently allowed me to become more aware of my psychological makeup and how I functioned within its confines. In the process of self-exploration, I encountered a diverse range of individuals, each characterized by unique capacities and traits. Among this heterogeneous group, a variety of personality traits emerged, including wisdom, introversion, extroversion, and proactiveness. Adapting my interactions with them to align with their inherent psychological tendencies (referred to as *gunas* or *swabhava*) emerged as a strategic approach to harness their distinct abilities.

This transformative adjustment in my approach eventually led to a shift in my perception of the nature and purpose of actions, ultimately instilling me with a sense of 'action confidence' (Pomeroy & Oliver, 2021). Clearly, each endeavor I undertook and every step I took became preparatory stages in my journey toward acquiring wisdom. It became evident that within the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), every physical effort directed at overcoming challenges held the potential to be considered an act of virtue or merit.

Participatory Companionship

In my role as a practitioner-researcher in PAR, I employed empathetic understanding as a way to foster collaborative introspection (Gunnlaugson, 2011). This took shape through what I term 'participatory companionship,' where I engaged with others face-to-face to address shared concerns (see Wagle 2022). This approach helped build communities of inquiry and learning organizations through interpersonal dialogues. The use of participatory companionship provided a platform for research participants to appreciate various perspectives within the group, leading to transformative changes in joint efforts (Chandler & Torbert, 2003, p. 135).

From my personal experience, suspending judgments about others became a way to form connections and become more aware of my ties with others. This impartiality, as described by Yogananda (2002), is established through *Vinaya*—a state of humility resulting

from discipline. These qualities allowed for a careful examination of participant relationships (Pain *et al.*, 2010), fostering collective learning and compassion-driven unity even amid differences. The paradigm of participatory companionship not only encouraged diverse viewpoints but also supported mutual teaching, aligning with Freire's (1970) concept of 'conscientization'.

Emerging with a 'Rightness' of a Kind

On July 6th, 2019, following the submission of the initial draft of this paper to the research committee of Kathmandu University School of Education, the committee's chair asked a question. He inquired, "Shree, now that you've reached this point, what constitutes the reality you share?" This led to a process of thoughtful contemplation based on ethical principles from yogic philosophy (Hyde, 2013). As a result, I arrived at a new understanding about the nature of reality.

I expressed this new perspective as follows: "Expressions of advanced thinking and behavior that embody selflessness without personal ego, all for the purpose of mutual progress, summarize how I perceive shared reality." This shift in understanding, which can be likened to the symbolic concept of *Dharma Yoga*, highlighted a novel way of thinking within Participatory Action Research. In this approach, every thought and action gain ethical significance when it contributes to the greater collective good.

This ethical awareness, to some extent, helped me maintain a deep state of focused attention during my work in PAR (Heron, 2006), leading to a genuine transfer of knowledge from one entity to another. Additionally, this ethical foundation enabled me to interact with the external world while striving to make positive changes for the benefit of society at large. Reflecting on my two-year journey in Participatory Action Research, especially in my role as a PAR researcher (see Wagle *et al.*, 2023), I now feel content and joyful. It's plausible that my methods of valuing the human experience, thereby connecting our efforts with enduring traditions of shared importance, acted as a driving force for these transformative perspectives.

The Arrivals

Starting from this point, I (incorporating critical reflections from my research supervisor) present an ecological analysis of the experiences discussed above. Our analysis employs the *Dharma Yoga* metaphor within the framework of Participatory Action Research. As evident from the narratives above, the *Dharma Yoga* metaphor introduces psychological and spiritual aspects that bring new perspectives to understanding practitioner research.

We particularly focus on the complex interaction between the PAR researcher and their activities. This involves investigating the reasons behind their actions, the ethical meanings embedded in those actions, how actions unfold in the dynamic world, and the cultivation of a peaceful mental state amidst these pursuits. Additionally, a key

question arises: How can we develop confidence in the genuineness of our actions?

Within the ecological framework of *Dharma Yoga*, it becomes clear that an action becomes wise when it is carried out without being attached to its outcomes. This detachment, which signifies actions done without self-centered motives, is essential for preventing an action from binding the doer to its results. Consequently, the practitioner is freed from the consequences of the action. This state emerges when actions are undertaken without selfish intentions. Such viewpoints and approaches empower practitioner-researchers to have faith in the authenticity of their actions.

Furthermore, this perspective prompts them to be mindful of the ethical implications of their actions, especially when these actions contribute to broader goals of sustainability and well-being that go beyond individual or human-centered interests.

The concept of this third space ecological PAR brings together complex interactions between different ideas, merging the distinct threads of Northern and Southern hemisphere PAR while breaking down rigid categories. This space serves as a bridge for combining the strengths of North-oriented organizational learning model of PAR and South-oriented autonomy and empowerment model, while not trying to replace either.

By explaining our use of ecological PAR through the *Dharma Yoga* metaphor, we're not aiming to replace the established North-focused or South-focused PAR approaches, nor are we attempting to resolve debates about their superiority or philosophical foundations. Our proposal centers on providing a path for practitioner-researchers to engage in research that is both dynamic and innovative. This involves taking action and reflecting, not based on external authority, but driven by a deep commitment to unrestricted exploration. This method values maintaining an individual's ethical integrity above all else. At the same time, our proposition recognizes the strengths of both Southern and Northern models, promoting the advancement of Participatory Action Research in today's academic landscape.

While each model offers distinct advantages in understanding societal phenomena, the ecological research approach at the core of this paradigm suggests a shift from the idea of 'modern action research,' which is about universal applicability, to the concept of 'postmodern participatory action research,' which emphasizes localized relevance. Ultimately, it points towards the idea of 'ecological action research,' which is founded on the significance of the planet beyond human-centered perspectives.

Ecological Turns and 'New' Ethical Visions

As explained in the introduction, our ecological framework in the context of Participatory Action Research took shape through a process of self-reflection. We contemplated how, as practitioner-researchers in the field of PAR, we could engage in practical activities while

maintaining inner calm and balance. This balance would help us remain emotionally steady despite the potential outcomes associated with our actions.

Our ecological PAR perspective emerged from the idea that a practitioner-researcher's role is more than just that of an expert with unerring confidence. Instead, it envisions the practitioner-researcher as an integral part of the larger fabric of existence, showing both humility and the courage to accept vulnerability. A similar theme is discussed in the early part of the *Gita*, where the challenge of maintaining inner peace while being active in the world is addressed (Radhakrishnan, 1980). To this reference, this paper, thus, presents a 'new' ecological paradigm that cultivates a sense of 'action confidence' by drawing from the 'traditional' principles of *Dharma Yoga*.

The concept of Dharma Yoga aligns closely with modern efforts focused on interconnectedness, as described by Heron (2006), which is integral to the ecological perspective. However, it introduces a unique aspect by highlighting the importance of authenticity and ethical responsibility in human behavior within the ecological framework. This shift, as explained by Bainbridge and Del Negro (2020), represents a move from individual self-importance to a morally aware and genuine eco-consciousness.

Starting from the idea of "how can one achieve what one inherently represents" (Whicher, 1998, p. 8), and considering core values, the pursuit of inherent qualities offers a method for understanding the fundamental nature (*Dharma*) present in both living and non-living entities. This approach views the world through the perspective of interdependent relationships that exist throughout all aspects of existence. These interdependent relationships, crucial to the ecological perspective, are expressed through concrete actions, selflessly shared emotions, and a deep sense of belonging (Buechner *et al.*, 2020).

As a result, similar to the viewpoint of Dharma Yoga, the ecological standpoint requires active participation in determining how actions are conducted (give and take), all within a shared ethical context (see Wagle 2022). In the realm of Participatory Action Research PAR, this ecological outlook, guided by the principle of universal interconnectedness (Yuj, representing connection), informs our efforts to lead an ethically involved life that contributes to societal well-being, marked by a calm assurance in our actions. This, as discussed by Luitel and Taylor (2019), fosters a feeling of duty or responsibility, characterized as ethical obligations towards promoting sustainable futures.

CONCLUSION

As explained in this paper, the Participatory Action Research paradigm in the Northern hemisphere focuses on organizational learning through collaborative efforts and reflective practices. In contrast, the Southern hemisphere's approach to PAR highlights empowering individuals within the framework of social and political forces that shape their community experiences. However, both of these main paradigms overlook the complex

emotional and psychological aspects connected to the ethical choices made by researchers. Extended from these dominant models, the ecological perspective of PAR, represented by the metaphor of Vedic Dharma Yoga, focuses the role of researcher-researched relationship, emphasizing the ways how practitioner-researchers in the field of Participatory Action Research can engage in practical activities while maintaining inner calm and balance when faced with the outcomes and reactions that follow. This approach signifies a psycho-spiritual framework that aims to bring about personal transformation and societal progress.

This exploration of Participatory Action Research through the lens of the Dharma Yoga principle has led to the development of collaborative and ethical connections that intersect PAR and its researchers. By incorporating ideas from the Vedic tradition about Dharma Yoga into the realm of PAR, my journey during this Ph.D. endeavor, thus, gave rise to a new academic perspective - a third space paradigm known as ecological PAR. This process of reflection expands the ways practitioner researchers understand things, opening up opportunities to combine traditional wisdom and ecological philosophies in their research methods.

Moreover, this reflective process delves into aspects of PAR that haven't received as much attention, specifically the complex interplay between researchers and their actions. It's important to acknowledge that the ecological viewpoint presented here might challenge those who are deeply rooted in conventional 'modern' paradigms that guide PAR practices. Nevertheless, this perspective holds significant implications for practitioner-researchers worldwide, particularly those engaged in PAR initiatives that focus on ecological matters like specific geographic areas and human environments. Additionally, this perspective is relevant for practitioner-researchers who are navigating the nuanced territory of defining the relationships between researchers and their actions.

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