Participatory Critical Incident Technique: A Participatory Action Research Approach for Counselling Psychology
Technique d'incident critique participative :
une approche de recherche-action participative pour la psychologie du counseling

Fred Chou
University of British Columba and Trinity Western University
Janelle Kwee
Trinity Western University
Marla Buchanan
University of British Columbia
Robert Lees
British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the utilization of the participatory critical incident technique (PaCIT), an approach that incorporates participatory action research (PAR) with the critical incident technique (CIT). This method fits with the aims of counselling psychology to bring social justice and action into the forefront of research activities (Canadian Psychological Association, 2009; Kennedy & Arthur, 2014). PaCIT addresses potential limitations of both methods and is a viable research tool for use with marginalized groups and within cross-cultural contexts. Based on a recently completed project with youth in alternative education, we present a theoretical and practical approach for integrating CIT within a PAR framework.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article donne un aperçu de l'utilisation de la technique d'incident critique participative (PaCIT), une approche qui intègre la recherche-action participative (RAP) à la technique d'incident critique (CIT). Cette méthode s'adapte aux objectifs de la psychologie du counseling visant à mettre la justice et l'action sociale de l'avant dans les activités de recherche (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014; Société canadienne de psychologie, 2009). PaCIT aborde les limites potentielles des deux méthodes et constitue un outil de recherche viable auprès des groupes marginalisés et dans des contextes interculturels. Fondée sur un projet de recherche récemment terminé auprès de jeunes recevant une éducation alternative, une approche théorique et pratique est présentée permettant d'intégrer la technique d'incident critique dans un cadre de recherche-action participative.

At the heart of the definition of counselling psychology, which was formally adopted by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) in 2009, is social action and responsibility: concern for the growth, well-being, and mental health

of individuals, groups, and communities. This view supports the premise that research and practice are mutually informative and strive to adopt culturally appropriate approaches. Embedded in the core values of counselling psychology are awareness of sociocultural factors and of individual and community strengths as central mechanisms of positive change. CPA's definition of counselling psychology supports developing competencies for facilitating change in populations whose well-being is impacted by systemic circumstances. It offers a vision for counsellors and counselling psychologists to be involved in advocacy in order to promote change at various systemic levels, from micro-levels (individual and family) to macro-levels (community and societal).

Social justice is not explicitly stated in CPA's definition of counselling psychology; however, its principles of advocacy and emphasis on social and cultural contexts are embedded in the definition. Although there is no unified definition of social justice, its overall aim is to "minimize oppression and injustice in favour of equality, accessibility, and optimal developmental opportunities for all members of society" (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014, p. 188). Despite social justice being historically part of Canadian counselling psychology and propositions for a social justice orientation to be integrated in training, research, and practice (see Bedi et al., 2011; Palmer & Parish, 2008; Sinacore, 2011), there is a lack of commitment to action for integrating its principles into practice and research (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014). To address these limitations, this article presents a participatory methodology that incorporates the critical incident technique (CIT) into participatory action research (PAR), methods that are both steeped within counselling psychology in Canada (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009; Kidd & Kral, 2005).

PAR is a collaborative research process between researchers and participants that involves the development of mutual and reciprocal goals, research design decisions, data collection, analytical processes for interpretation, and ways of representing and implementing results that raise critical consciousness and promote positive social change for the participating group or community (Reason, as cited in Kidd & Kral, 2005). PAR has been supported as an intervention that encourages individual and collective agency and systemic change (Ho, 2002). According to Kidd and Kral (2005), the principles of PAR align closely with counselling psychology, as the discipline has a history of working with disadvantaged persons and recognizes contextual factors that impact individuals. The approach is valuable because it ensures that perspectives that have traditionally been marginalized or discredited are integrated into the current academic discourse, while ensuring that the research is beneficial to the community that is being studied (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Both Kidd and Kral (2005) and Vera and Speight (2003) call for the utilization of participatory methodologies in counselling psychology research.

Arguments against the utilization of PAR are pragmatic and methodological. As Kidd and Kral (2005) stated, amongst qualitative methods, "PAR as a research approach may well prove to be among the most difficult to establish and integrate" (p. 192). Moreover, PAR is sometimes conducted uncritically—research collaborators

from the population of interest in the study are often limited in their contributions, and it has been criticized for seeming "unscientific" and lacking rigour and reliability (Fleming, 2011; Smith, Monaghan, & Broad, 2002).

In light of these concerns, we provide a critical examination of the use of PAR both as a research approach and as an advocacy-based intervention for vulnerable populations. Specifically, we address potential shortcomings of PAR by integrating the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT), an iteration of the critical incident technique (CIT), as a research method within the PAR framework, promoting a hybridized approach that we call the participatory critical incident technique (PaCIT). PaCIT offers a way to meaningfully engage with vulnerable populations in research and social action. We offer a description of PaCIT with a threefold purpose: (a) to make PAR more accessible in counselling psychology, (b) to provide a model for active practice for social justice in counselling psychology research, and (c) to build on developments of CIT within counselling psychology research methods. Ultimately, we submit the proposition that PaCIT is a viable research tool for use with marginalized groups and in cross-cultural research contexts as it validates other worldviews through partnership and collaboration, and it produces relevant and accessible research results for both the scientific research community and communities-at-large as significant stakeholders.

<div align="center">PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH</div>

PAR is a research process in which researchers and participants work together to establish values and mutual goals to carry out a research project, implementing results in a way that "will raise critical consciousness and promote change in the lives of those involved—changes that are in the direction and control of the participating group or community" (Reason, as cited in Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 187). The foundations of PAR can be ascertained as an emancipatory form of Kurt Lewis's Action Research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). Action Research proposes that theory is developed and tested by practical interventions and actions (Kindon et al., 2007). Though the roots of PAR cannot be drawn from a single source, the core framework of PAR is focused on doing research "with" rather than "for" stakeholders (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Though some authors view PAR as action research or participatory research, others would argue the inclusion of the participatory element in action research signals PAR's explicit political commitment, collaborative process, and participatory worldview (Kindon et al., 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

The philosophical underpinnings of PAR are consistent with postmodern ontology and constructivist epistemology denoting that there are multiple or shared realities framed within sociohistorical contexts (MacDonald, 2012); it can be seen as a critique of the dominant positivist/postpositivist social science research (Wadsworth, 1998). It is steeped in the idea that there is "a democratic commitment to break the monopoly on who holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken by explicitly collaborating with marginalized or 'vulnerable'

others" (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 11). In PAR, the researcher is an outsider who collaborates with groups that have been traditionally marginalized or oppressed, by which this collaboration is focused on understanding the sociohistorical-political factors of oppression and evoking social change within the groups' circumstances (Freire, 1970; Herr & Anderson, 2005). It is explicit about the power differentials between researchers and participants and challenges traditional research paradigms by critically assessing each step involved in the research process by attending to the power dynamics in research relationships (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2005).

The key elements of PAR, according to Brydon-Miller (1997), are the following: (a) it originates from marginalized groups/communities; (b) it needs to address fundamental causes of oppression within a community; (c) its goal is positive social change; (d) it is a process of research, education, and action; and (e) it involves participants in a participatory and transformational process. At the core of PAR is participation, where decision-making power is shared with coresearchers from the community (Kidd & Kral, 2005). PAR involves a self-reflective cycle that includes planning, acting, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007).

Although the primary tenets of PAR are well established, there are no systematic procedures inherent to PAR; rather it is a process that is shaped by the contextualized needs of those involved in the inquiry (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Reason, 1994)—it is an orientation toward inquiry that differs from positivist and empiricist science (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It is a macro method that sets the stage for development of a research project (Kidd & Kral, 2005). With PAR, it is essential that methods are determined by the members of the community/group and shaped by its context in order to reach the goals of the community/group (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Thus, PAR offers an epistemology and axiology for a research design that is collaborative and action based. PAR fits within a critical-ideological paradigm as it (a) adheres to constructivist principles, being that reality is constructed within a social-historical context; and (b) has explicit emancipatory and empowerment themes, as the reality of power dynamics are acknowledged and the role of the researcher-participant interaction is focused on empowering participants toward collective social and democratic change (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005).

Shortcomings of Participatory Action Research

While PAR represents ideals consistent with the priorities of counselling psychology, there is a lack of knowledge regarding PAR within the field (Kidd, 2002). Its employment has been relatively limited (Kidd & Kral, 2005), perhaps because PAR does not have clearly defined methodological guidelines (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007) and it is a demanding and complex method to undertake (Dick, 1993; Kidd & Kral, 2005).

As the role of a PAR researcher is to engage in a participatory attitude, including the sharing of decision-making power, it can be difficult for researchers to work within institutional guidelines and schedules (Dick, 1993; Herr & An-

derson, 2005). Institutional gatekeepers may not understand the PAR process as PAR does not fit within conventional research practices; in turn, researchers are often left with less support in navigating the process (Dick, 1993; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Traditionally, there has been an institutional power difference between the researcher and the researched, and this notion is challenged in PAR (Moore, 2004).

Researchers engaged in the PAR process are navigating sociopolitical environments and are challenged to face their own embedded beliefs while being part of the struggles of the community they are involved with (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Moore, 2004). The lines between professional and community member become blurred as researchers are challenged to reflect upon their position of privilege and may struggle with ethical challenges in maintaining boundaries. The researcher is faced with competing assumptions. According to Moore (2004), to do PAR well, the researcher needs to become part of the community; yet conversely, researchers in academia are often required to value traditional forms of knowledge generation—unbiased empirical data.

As PAR does not fit within conventional research paradigms and assumptions, it can often be misconceived and seen as "less rigorous," "unreliable," "unscientific," "soft," and/or "invalid" (Dick, 1993; Fleming, 2011; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Moore, 2004; Smith et al., 2002). In addition, due to the complexity and ambiguity of PAR, it can at times be conducted uncritically and limit the roles of coresearchers or improperly share decision-making powers (Fleming, 2011; Smith et al., 2002). Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, and Aoun (2010) note that few PAR projects involve coresearcher participants in all of the research phases—including earlier phases of designing the research study and later phases of data analysis and dissemination. The lack of coparticipant engagement is a marker of weaker PAR studies (Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010). Lastly, community-based research practices often emphasize community engagement over rigorous research that adds to the critique of invalid research results (Belkora, Stupar, & O'Donnell, 2011).

Smith et al. (2002) argued that PAR, when conducted properly, both can be methodologically sound and can add significantly to the body of knowledge in the specific area of study. Smith et al.'s (2010) establishment for standards for PAR evaluation and reporting is a step in the right direction. Thus, in order to promote its usage, guidelines that are accessible, rigorous, systematic, and maintain the integrity of the foundations of PAR are necessary. Before describing the amalgamation of PAR with CIT, we will first provide a brief description of CIT research methodology.

CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

The critical incident technique (CIT) is a qualitative research method that examines concrete events (critical incidents) that helped or hindered a specific phenomenon (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009). Originally developed by Flanagan (1954), who worked for the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States

Army Air Forces during World War II for the purpose of selecting and classifying aircrew and improving training, it has evolved to focus on psychological constructs and the lived experiences of participants in many contexts over the last half-century (Butterfield et al., 2005). As CIT draws upon the lived experiences of participants, it is rooted in a phenomenological research tradition that presumes that a participant's assumptions can be inferred from descriptions of a particular phenomenon or event (Brookfield, as cited in Sharoff, 2008). The value of the CIT approach is that it is a practical and efficient methodology that is flexible, can be adapted to the requirements of the research study, and can be administered via a variety of modalities, such as verbally or in paper form (Sharoff, 2008).

CIT was later enhanced by Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009), who added wish-list (WL) components (i.e., factors that were not present in their experience of the studied phenomenon, but which would have been helpful) in addition to both helping and hindering items, and outlined systematic steps and credibility checks to ensure rigour, resulting in the ECIT. CIT and ECIT is a five-step process: (a) ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied, (b) making plans and setting specifications, (c) collecting the data, (d) analyzing the data, and (e) interpreting the data and reporting the results (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009; Flanagan, 1954).

Critical Incident Technique in Counselling Psychology

CIT has been employed in other fields, including education (Brookfield, 1990) and nursing (Norman, Redfern, Tomalin, & Oliver, 1992), along with other fields in psychology such as multicultural counselling (Pedersen, 1994; Sue & Sue, 1990). In counselling psychology, Woolsey (1986) advocated for its use due to its (a) consistency with the skills, values, and experience of counselling; (b) ability to encompass factual happenings; (c) ability to explore turning points; and (d) utility as a foundational/exploratory tool for research and building theories and/ or models (Woolsey, as cited in Butterfield et al., 2005). Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009) further promoted CIT as an approach within the field of counselling psychology. They summarized the evolution of CIT to its current iteration, ECIT, by focusing on four areas including (a) a shift to focus on psychological constructs as opposed to strictly behavioral incidents, (b) from direct observations to retrospective self-reports, (c) differences in how data is analyzed, and (d) the inclusion now of nine credibility checks that build upon its rigour and trustworthiness (Butterfield et al., 2005).

Shortcomings of the Critical Incident Technique

Despite its practicality and appropriateness for research in counselling psychology, there are some notable shortcomings of the CIT as a research method. For example, Flanagan (1954) suggested that the CIT, which was first developed as an exploratory approach, may touch only the surface of the particular phenomenon without facilitating understanding of the latent meanings and constructions of meaning from participants. Sharoff (2008) proposed that a limitation to CIT is

the issue of reflection, as some participants may not be aware of their experiences of a particular phenomenon or they may have difficulty separating one incident from multiple other incidents related to a particular event. Hughes (2007) concurred that "CIT lacks the strong theoretical underpinning of some other qualitative methods such as phenomenology or participatory action research" (p. 11). CIT is generally viewed as atheoretical; however, others (see Butterfield et al., 2005) characterize CIT as being a flexible approach that can be conducted within a positivist/postpositivist or constructivist framework. ECIT, on the other hand, fits within a constructivist framework. The purpose of this manuscript is to propose a PAR design as an epistemological and critical theoretical perspective for conducting CIT research.

PARTICIPATORY CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

To address the challenges and shortcomings of PAR and CIT, this article presents an integration of both and frames it as the participatory critical incident technique or PaCIT. It is a dialectic of the critical participatory principles of PAR balanced by the pragmatic and systematic functionality of CIT. The purpose of the approach is to provide researchers with a tool within counselling psychology to promote the utilization of PAR in the field, while providing a systematic, familiar, feasible, accessible, and rigorous approach to counselling research.

To date, the utilization of CIT within PAR has only been found in two other articles in the literature: Belkora et al.'s (2011) and Yonas et al.'s (2013) studies that highlight the utilization of CIT within community-based PAR. The articles promote CIT's usage as a rigorous approach that facilitates engagements and fits with PAR due to its flexible design and rigour. Although Belkora et al. (2011) provide an overview of CIT, the authors do not discuss the process of and paradigmatic assumptions inherent in integrating these methodologies. Conversely, our focus is to (a) frame PaCIT as a methodology for counselling psychology, (b) build on the evolving literature of CIT through extension of the ECIT to PaCIT, (c) highlight its strengths and limitations, (d) discuss paradigmatic assumptions of mixing methods, and (e) provide steps for its implementation.

The value of adding CIT to PAR is that it provides a structure for critical reflection in the form of understanding critical incidents (Sharoff, 2008). By providing more structure to the model of PAR, it addresses PAR's limitation of being too unstructured or ambiguous. The systemic steps of CIT also provide the rigour for PAR to fit within a traditional empirical perspective. The utilization of CIT as a form of reflective practice is not uncommon, as it has also been employed in Brookfield's (1990, 1998) work in the form of Critical Incident Questionnaires for educator practice. With PAR, it provides a philosophical foundation for CIT and provides further depth in understanding a particular phenomenon as co-researchers may have a latent understanding of the studied phenomenon or event. PAR also encourages critical reflection, which can help foster a deeper reflexivity of the CIT approach.

Paradigmatic Assumptions and Philosophical Integration

A paradigm comprises philosophical assumptions that serve as a basis for understanding the world (Mertens, 2010). The assumptions that define paradigms include (a) *axiology*, values of research; (b) *ontology*, the nature of reality; (c) *epistemology*, how we know what we know; and (d) *methodology*, the process and procedures of research (Ponterotto, 2005). According to Bazeley (2004), it is critical to adhere to the values of the methodology one adopts. Each qualitative method is built on different assumptions; therefore, it is important to consider these assumptions as they guide the choice of method, data interpretations, and analysis (Denzin, 2010; Yanchar & Williams, 2006).

In PaCIT, two qualitative methodologies—PAR and CIT—are being combined (see Butterfield et al., 2005; Creswell et al., 2007). The combination of methods, also known as mixed methods (see Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007), has traditionally focused on mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies; however, it can also include mixing qualitative methods (Barbour, 1998; Morse, 2010). In both cases, careful consideration of paradigmatic assumptions and their implications are necessary.

Johnson et al.'s (2007) review frames mixed methods as being on a continuum of qualitative dominant, symbolized as QUAL + quan or QUAL + qual; quantitatively dominant, QUAN + quan or QUAN + qual; or equal status design. Within counselling psychology, Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, and Creswell (2005) provided three considerations when determining usage for mixed methodologies: (a) determine the theoretical lens, (b) decide how data collection is implemented and prioritized, and (c) decide the point at which data analysis and integration occurs. In the following section, we discuss these three points for PaCIT along with its theoretical rationale for being an independent approach for implementing PAR. With the PaCIT model, PAR is the dominant methodology (QUAL) with CIT subsumed within it (qual). The epistemological assumptions of PaCIT are based on PAR, with CIT as an approach to help foster more depth of understanding and a systematic analysis process.

Paradigmatic adherence. Different paradigms come with different axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions. One way to address these differences is through theoretical coherence where one method is adopted within a theoretical framework (Yanchar & Williams, 2006). Mertens (2007) proposed that mixing methods can be framed either through pragmatic assumptions or with a transformative/critical-ideological paradigm. In the case of PaCIT, ECIT is adopted into a PAR framework that adheres to a critical-ideological paradigm and PAR's theoretical assumptions guide the methodology (Yanchar & Williams, 2006).

With PaCIT, therefore, ECIT needs to be modified to fit within the emancipatory, transformative, and critical framework of the critical-ideological lens. It still maintains core constructivist values—ontologically, multiple realities are legitimized and a close understanding of participant perspectives is critical to its epistemology. From a critical stance, however, PaCIT places axiology at its fore-

front, validates that ontology is mediated by power relations constructed within social-historical contexts, and is deliberate in its epistemology in partnering with vulnerable participants to invoke action. Despite modifications, the inherent values of CIT as a means to critically and systematically ascertain helping and hindering aspects of a phenomenon to solve practical problems remain intact (Flanagan, 1954).

Data collection and design. Morse (2010) presents qualitative mixed method designs as being either sequential or simultaneous QUAL + qual. "Sequential" in Morse's model means the process of doing first one method then doing the next; "simultaneous" refers to both methods being done at the same time. PaCIT parallels the simultaneous QUAL + qual method; PAR is the dominant approach (QUAL), while CIT is supplementary (qual). However, it deviates slightly from Morse's characterization. Morse's view is that mixed methods consist of a complete method (core) plus an incomplete method and is qualitatively driven by the dominant qualitative approach. PaCIT, however, views both CIT and PAR as complete methods, and underlying it is a social justice driven methodology with explicit advocacy principles that are consistent with PAR.

Data analysis and integration. Analysis with PaCIT is a fluid and dynamic process. It is not simply an analysis of PAR and the ECIT data separately, but a process in which one informs and influences the other and vice versa—it is iterative in nature. In Lal, Suto, and Ungar's (2012) article that examines combining grounded theory and narrative inquiry, the researchers explored similarities between the approaches and posited that the methodologies are complementary, based on 10 key methodological features of research design. Likewise, CIT compliments PAR and vice versa in its research design, both historically and epistemologically.

Historically, PAR and CIT share similar foundations. PAR comes from action research, which stems from the work of Kurt Lewin, who was interested in producing research that led to action and raising the esteem of minority groups (Lewin, 1946; McTaggart, 1991). Lewin (1946) argued that the application of social science research must be shaped by the context to which it is applied; it cannot be based solely on general principles. With CIT, Flanagan focused on developing a psychological research method that can be shaped into solutions for "solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (1954, p. 1).

The analysis process of CIT is informed by PAR in that thematic analysis is done by researchers who are part of the contextualized circumstances of the studied phenomenon—expert witnesses. Meanwhile, CIT contributes to PAR by offering a systematic method, making explicit action steps through thematic analysis of helping/hindering incidents, and offering opportunities for coresearchers to engage in critical reflexivity as they apprehend critical incidents that affect their context through data collection and analysis. Both focus on creating action out of research for contextualized circumstances. Foundationally, this allows each analysis to complement the other.

The development of PaCIT as a PAR methodology for counselling psychology is based on a recently completed research project whereby the principal investigator (PI), Fred Chou, collaborated with youth in an alternative education setting to examine ways to improve a rural community's school system for vulnerable youth. Thus, in addition to presenting a theoretical basis for integrating PAR with ECIT, we offer anecdotal perspectives from this project, an illustration of PaCIT, and refer to it in order to highlight specific steps of a PaCIT research model.

Youth-Led Solutions to Improve High School Completion Rates

In this project (see Chou et al., 2015), researchers collaborated with six students from alternative education to inquire about the experiences of vulnerable youth—students in alternative education and youth who have dropped out of secondary schools in rural British Columbia. Within a PAR framework and utilizing the ECIT, youth coresearchers asked their peers: What helped and hindered their retention and success in mainstream and alternative education?

Youth coresearchers were given the opportunity to participate in the research for class credit as part of a project learning class. They were trained in research and analytical skills, research ethics, interpersonal skills, and interviewing. Additionally, they gained experience in public speaking and working as a group over the course of an entire academic year. The youth coresearchers actively participated in the development of the project, recruiting and interviewing participants, and analyzing and disseminating the data. It has been noted that a truly collaborative engagement in PAR at all phases is rare (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), yet the practicality of ECIT combined with the participatory approach of PAR made this possible.

In this study, the youth coresearchers conducted semistructured interviews with 18 participants. The overall findings show that relationships with staff and peers, flexibility, psychosocial and academic supports, and personal circumstances are vital in helping vulnerable students succeed in school. The coresearchers played a vital role in interpreting the meaning of these themes through their own lived experience in both mainstream and alternative education.

Framework for Effective Participation

The foundation for PaCIT is based on effective and authentic participation; it is a PAR approach with specific CIT steps modified to fit within a critical perspective. The PAR framework dictates *how* the project is facilitated, as the "process is, in effect, the method" when it comes to PAR (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 189). These foundational elements frame the PaCIT approach and will be presented first, followed by the modified CIT steps. The foundation of PaCIT includes the following principles: praxis, authentic participation, and an empowering environment.

Praxis. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and the notion of praxis, *conscientization* (critical consciousness or critical reflexivity) and social action,

serve as foundational grounds for PAR (Freire, 1970; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2005). Conscientization refers to "an awareness of how institutional, historical, and systemic forces limit and promote the life opportunities for particular groups" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87). Interacting with these conditions through social action fosters an awareness of factors that may be oppressing one's own self-determination (Freire, 1970). In becoming personally aware, one becomes aware of the social forces that oppress others (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) describe this process as a spiraling process—throughout the project coresearchers are constantly and intentionally engaged in this cycle of praxis.

In this research project, the coresearchers became aware of how they and other students had been marginalized within the school system (critical reflexivity). Reflexivity involved reflections of their own experiences that were linked with current and historical examples of oppression, such as racism, and responses to oppression, such as the feminist movement. These dialogues were open discussions that were rooted in coresearchers sharing their lived experience in a manner that was validated by others. This in turn resulted in advocacy by discussing these issues with school administration and creating plans to address these concerns in their school system (social action). Engaging in this action provided them with a different understanding of their social circumstance. Later reflections were based on analyzing the data using the systematic steps in CIT, which provided a model to engage in this form of reflexivity.

Authentic participation. There are varying models for coresearcher participation (see Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 1996; Hart, 1992). In the development of PaCIT, we utilized Hart's (1992) ladder of participation. Though the model is focused on youth, the concept can apply to PAR regardless of age of participants/coresearchers, as tokenism and nonparticipation are possibilities when partnering with members of any marginalized group. The Appendix is a representation of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, modified to be inclusive for general community groups. In this ladder are varying stages of nonparticipation (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) and participation (consulted and informed; researcher-initiated, shared decisions with locals; local-initiated and directed; and local-initiated, shared decisions with researchers). Each rung connotes a higher degree of participation.

Authentic participation does not imply that more involvement is most appropriate at all stages in the research process, nor does it mean that the research is "better." As Chen, Poland, and Skinner (2007) noted, research is a rigorous process and can be overwhelming for coresearchers who do not have formal training and experience in research methods. It is thus important to be flexible while still maintaining a participatory attitude according to Hart's (1992) model. Full collective action and participation is rare in the PAR literature. Typically there are various levels of involvement at different researcher stages (Smith et al., 2010). Hart's (1992) ladder allows for flexibility, as there are differing levels that still adhere to a participatory posture.

In the current study, the researchers approached the project from an aspirational lens of ensuring full collaboration (level 6 on Hart's, 1992, ladder of participation), while still recognizing the contextual barriers and degree of commitment that coresearchers could provide. Rodríguez and Brown (2009) proposed that, with power, the responsibility of the PI/adult researchers are

> to provide leadership for and maintain the cohesion of our teams to ensure the quality of the research and scaffold learning … personal decisions are made about the work of the research team that we believe will benefit the [coresearchers] and the overall integrity of the research project. (p. 28)

An example of sharing power in this study involved inviting coresearchers to modify the informed consent so that it was consistent with wording that they felt would best communicate their message to their peers. Another example was the decision that ideas from anyone, including the PI, would be discussed within the research group and only with consensus would the idea be implemented. Some of these ideas included deciding on a logo, modifying the wording on a theme or category, and deciding on conferences to disseminate the research results.

Environment for empowerment. The model by Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) for critical youth empowerment provides key areas to consider when implementing PaCIT. Though the article is focused on youth engagement, these principles apply to various types of groups. Jennings et al.'s model includes (a) a welcoming, safe environment; (b) meaningful participation and engagement; (c) equitable power-sharing; (d) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes; (e) participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change; and (f) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment.

Steps for Conducting PaCIT

Though the steps are presented in methodical order, the process is cyclical and flexible. PaCIT draws from the flexibility of the original CIT approach and modifies and adds to the steps of the ECIT in order to fit within PAR principles. These renegotiated steps are (a) determining stakeholders, (b) negotiating general aims of the project, (c) recruitment and training of coresearchers, (d) making collaborative plans and specifications, (e) collecting the data, (f) analyzing the data, (g) interpreting data and reporting, and (h) reassessment and future action steps. See Table 1 for a comparison of the approaches. As the steps of PaCIT build on and modify ECIT, only changes to the original method are highlighted. The readers are encouraged to refer to Butterfield et al.'s (2009) article for a more complete summary of the steps of ECIT.

Determining stakeholders. The stakeholders are not determined by the researcher, but by the community that the researcher is involved in. Typically these are individuals who have a vested interest in their community and specifically with the concerns within the community. Those who raise those concerns may have positions of authority and power in the community, or they may be individuals

Table 1

Comparison between CIT, ECIT, and PaCIT

Methodological feature	Critical Incident Technique (CIT)	Enhanced CIT (ECIT)	Participatory CIT (PaCIT)
Paradigm	Positivist, Constructivist	Constructivist	Critical-Ideological
Authors	Flanagan (1954)	Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009)	Chou et al. (2015)
Foundational principle(s)	Procedures for collecting direct observations to facilitate solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles	Qualitative research method for application in counselling psychology	Participatory action research, which originates from community and partnerships with marginalized groups; aims include praxis, authentic participation, and empowerment
Steps	1. Ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied 2. Making plans and setting specifications 3. Collecting the data 4. Analyzing the data 5. Interpreting the data and reporting the results		**1. Determining stakeholders** **2. Negotiating general aims for the project** **3. Recruitment and training of coresearchers** **4. Making collaborative plans and setting specifications** 5. Collecting the data 6. Analyzing the data 7. Interpreting the data and dissemination **8. Reassessment and future action steps**
Credibility checks	No credibility checks	1. Audiotaping interviews 2. Interview fidelity 3. Independent extraction of CIs 4. Exhaustiveness 5. Participation rates 6. Placing incidents into categories by an independent judge 7. Cross-checking by participants 8. Expert opinions 9. Theoretical agreement	

Note. Taken and adapted from Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009), Flanagan (1954), Freire (1970), and Brydon-Miller (1997). Different steps from ECIT to PaCIT are bolded. Readers are encouraged to review Flanagan (1954) and Butterfield et al.'s (2005, 2009) articles for a comprehensive review of CIT and ECIT steps.

with little significant sociopolitical power but who are affected by the community concern. Given the dynamic process of PAR, there is no established process for determining stakeholders. In our study, stakeholders were determined through a process of engagement with local community members. As a research team, we mapped out stakeholders to understand their roles, needs, and desires for the project; this process is also known as *stakeholder analysis* (see Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Mapping the project provided understanding of potential conflicts as well as potential synergies.

There are varying models for stakeholder involvement. In our study, we used an advisory committee made up of stakeholders to provide input for the research team. The research team involved students from the local alternative education program (coparticipants/coresearchers), graduate level cofacilitators, community- and university-based research supervisors, and the PI. Lastly, research participants were students who had dropped out of mainstream education.

Positionality. Herr and Anderson (2005) framed PAR as insiders (the community) working collaboratively with outsiders. Positionality refers to "one's position in the organizational or social hierarchy, and one's position of power vis-à-vis other stakeholders inside and outside the setting" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 41). Researchers are typically not of the community—they are outsiders. In this step, and throughout the project, the researchers examined their positionality and their assumptions, while recognizing that as outsiders they had potential for oppressing or silencing other community voices. This examination involved a continuous reflexive process whereby researchers assessed their own biases. Engaging in this process as an outsider is inherently paradoxical; as a researcher, one has privilege that enables opportunities to learn and engage in PAR, yet this privilege is part of an institutional power that historically has been an agent of racism and classism (Dickson & Green, 2001). This paradox required researchers to constantly engage in understanding their position through supervision, debriefing, and/or journaling throughout the project.

As PAR affirms the reality of power and privilege and how it shapes knowledge, researchers and research teams must grapple with issues of power that influence these projects (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Recognizing power involves examining the larger system of involved stakeholders and the possible directions in which they may want to influence the project. It also entails recognizing the biases that researchers and coresearchers may have for influencing results. In our study stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, would either support the process of the study or block it. Additionally, the group recognized that the results would also be disseminated to the school board, which created challenges because, on the one hand, it was important to honour participant perspectives, while on the other hand, it was also valuable to present information in a manner that would be readily acceptable to stakeholders. To address these concerns, coresearchers engaged in role-playing situations to understand how the positions of multiple stakeholders may influence a particular result. We discussed the biases that we brought to the study on a consistent basis.

Negotiating general aims for the project. Negotiating general aims for the research project is a process of working together with vested stakeholders to facilitate a shared vision (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Choosing PAR/PaCIT depends first and foremost on the context and whether or not the community is in support of its implementation (Kidd & Kral, 2005). It is focused on a community question and a need for action to address a problem within the community (Creswell et al., 2007). The process of defining the question is collaborative. Typically, questions may originate from community members, and the researcher assists in the collective formation of the question at hand (Creswell et al., 2007). The method within PAR is determined by the community, and PaCIT can be utilized to address certain types of questions—specifically, helping or hindering factors to solve practical problems and developing broad psychological principles (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009; Flanagan, 1954). As ECIT is exploratory by nature, PaCIT can be used to further understand a little-understood event, phenomenon, or construct (Butterfield et al., 2005).

The general aim answers two questions (Butterfield et al., 2009): (a) What is the objective of the activity? (b) What is the community wanting to accomplish in engaging this activity? The goal is to attain reciprocity; therefore, the needs of the stakeholders must be carefully negotiated (Herr & Anderson, 2005). It is important to understand that all stakeholders, along with the researcher, bring their own values and beliefs regarding the benefits to the community and what the central question may be. There are multiple ways to involve stakeholders. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, as discussed earlier, is a model that researchers can adhere to. In Chen et al.'s (2007) study, the researchers utilized Hart's ladder to assess the level of participation of their coresearchers and the community through each stage of the research process. They recognized that, at certain steps in the research process, there were limited levels of engagement. This assessment of each step was built into our research project. For PaCIT, it accommodates levels 4 to 8 according to Hart's (1992) ladder of participation. The flexibility allows PaCIT to be adapted according to the context, coresearchers, and research stage.

The process of determining the research question was based on a problem that the community presented—the lower student completion rates and their desire to explore and understand what factors contributed to this, particularly with regards to students who had disengaged from mainstream education. From that point, the research team determined the research question and received feedback from the respective stakeholders through meetings and negotiations.

Recruitment and training of coresearchers. According to PAR, coresearchers are chosen based on their own choice and self-agency. Hart (1992) noted that authentic participation involves (a) a participant's understanding of the intentions of the project, (b) knowledge about who made the decisions for their involvement and why, (c) having a meaningful role, and (d) volunteering to join the project after the aims and purposes had been made clear to participants.

In this research study, the potential coresearchers were invited to take part in an information session about the research project. They were informed of the research

purpose, what their involvement would entail, and compensation. Interested individuals were later contacted, and a date was set for a research/information meeting.

Practical steps of developing competence. Once coresearchers volunteered, they were trained in research methodologies and engaged in a process of critical reflexivity and social action. According to Smith et al. (2002), areas to be addressed in order to improve PAR involved methodological practicalities (recruitment and retention, skills acquisition and training, sustaining involvement, and cost and time); validity and reliability (professionalism and research competence, consistency, and making choices to fit subject and methods); and ethics (exploitation, use and valuing work, protection, and confidentiality). Training protocols should involve elements that address these areas of concern to ensure that research can be conducted to attain results that are relevant, sound, and ethical. With our study, a training protocol involved a dialogical process that highlighted introductions and team building to develop group cohesion, developing group identity and vision, research basics, research ethics, interview training skills and research competency, practice interviews, practice data analysis, and action planning.

Praxis (critical consciousness and social action). Throughout the project and during training, praxis is intentionally integrated into the process. This can be facilitated through discussions and debriefing about specific learning that happens during the research process. These reflections help inform action. In our study, praxis was fostered by asking explicit questions about the coresearchers' educational experiences and experiences of marginalization. Discussions about marginalization were organically linked to others' examples, such as women's rights and residential schools. This reflexivity led to social action by having coresearchers take part in research throughout their engagement and by discussing the research study with community stakeholders.

Building cohesiveness. Significant time was allocated to build relationships with coparticipants and the community, as relationships are integral to the successful implementation of PAR (Dickson & Green, 2001). In bringing together a research team, it is important to build a sense of group cohesiveness (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Strategies utilized to build group cohesion for the research project involved forming a vision, creating a research team name, and respectfully honouring the coresearchers' experiences. Tuckman's (1965) model of group development—forming-storming-norming-performing-adjourning—was utilized to understand the group process of the research team. Counselling professionals are well positioned to facilitate PAR group processes because of the focus in the field on skills and training in group therapy.

Making collaborative plans and setting specifications. The purpose of this step is to collaboratively create plans, develop interview protocols, and set specifications for the research process as a research team with coresearchers. Building on the ECIT method (see Butterfield et al., 2009), the operationalization of this step involves (a) establishing a timeline (when recruitment starts, interviews, and analysis) for the research team; (b) determining together what to observe or ask; (c) creating an interview protocol that fits within the research context; (d) drawing on the

contextual expertise of the coresearchers; and (e) developing strategies for recruitment. According to Butterfield et al. (2009), the interview guide should be shaped in a manner that can capture critical incidents (CIs) and wish-list (WL) items.

Developing proficiency for utilizing the PaCIT method is done throughout the training process. Having coresearchers involved in developing the interview guide is crucial, as it ensures local knowledge is integrated into the data collection process, which results in better and more relevant questions (Flicker, 2008). Furthermore, having coresearchers help with the recruitment lowers barriers to involvement and results in better recruitment (Flicker, 2008). In our research project, coresearchers developed recruitment material, presented to their peers and classmates, and invited their personal networks—all 18 participants were recruited by coresearchers.

Collecting the data. Interviews were conducted to elicit specific CIs (What helped and what hindered staying in school?) and WL items (What would have helped them stay in school?). In our study, the coresearchers paired together to conduct interviews with the participants. Following ECIT protocol, interviews focused on gathering background and demographic information, building rapport, and eliciting CI and WL items. Involving coresearchers enhanced data collection, resulting in more accommodating environments and a reduction in hierarchical differences between participants and researchers (Flicker, 2008).

Analyzing the data. It is uncommon for PAR projects to involve coresearchers through the analysis step due to its complexity (Smith et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). However, inclusion of coresearchers adds depth and includes coresearcher expertise in shaping the results, thus fitting within PAR ideologies (Flicker, 2008; Smith et al., 2010). Furthermore, CIT as a method, with its outlined steps and flexibility, "accommodates involvement from a large spectrum of the community" (Belkora et al., 2011, p. 443). In our study, coresearchers were involved in the analysis process and the steps were modified to scaffold the process. Analysis entailed (a) determining the frame of reference; (b) formulating categories derived by grouping similar incidents; and (c) determining the level of specificity or generality to be used in reporting the data, which depends on the goals of the study (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009; Flanagan, 1954).

Organizing raw data. After interviews were conducted and transcribed, CIs and WL items were organized using colour-coordinated highlighters—helping CIs, hindering CIs, and WL items each had their own corresponding colour, and transcripts were organized into a binder. As this step did not benefit from coresearcher input, the PI did this part of the analysis. This decision was agreed upon by the team and the coresearchers.

Identifying CIs and WL items. The CIs and WL items were also elicited by the PI due to the tedious nature and time limitations of the work. This decision was also agreed upon by the coresearchers. The coresearchers reviewed the incidents and raw data. The rationale for having the PI facilitate organizing raw data and identifying incidents was based on Chen et al.'s (2007) suggestion to not overwhelm coresearchers. Moreover, engagement in these processes may not necessarily

be meaningful for coresearchers or add value to the overall results. The process of identifying incidents followed Butterfield et al.'s (2009) ECIT protocol.

Creating categories. Categories were formed in collaboration with coresearchers. With PaCIT, coresearchers can be seen as expert witnesses in the studied phenomenon—they are impacted by the same events and therefore offer different and contextually grounded perspectives regarding incidents and what they mean locally. It is an inductive process whereby coresearchers integrate their expert knowledge with their experience of conducting interviews to form categories of the incidents. The formation of categories occurred in a dialogical process, drawing on the experiences of coresearchers while still ensuring that they were representative of participant experience. Categories were formed in a manner that could be "easily applied and maximally useful" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 347). Categories are formed to solve practical problems and facilitate action—for example, by further applying helping, decreasing hindering, and implementing WL categories.

Interpreting the data and dissemination. PaCIT follows a modified version of the nine credibility checks proposed in Butterfield et al.'s (2005, 2009) ECIT methodology. Building on ECIT, an additional advocacy step was added and nine credibility checks were modified to honour the coresearchers' and participants' expertise. Butterfield et al.'s (2005, 2009) nine credibility checks are audiotaping interviews, interview fidelity, independent extraction of CIs, exhaustiveness, participation rates, placing incidents into categories by an independent judge, cross-checking by participants, expert opinions, and theoretical agreement. While most of the credibility checks remained the same, the following highlights our modifications.

Interview fidelity. To ensure interviews were being conducted in a robust manner, the PI sat in on the first few interviews and provided feedback. During meetings, coresearchers also had opportunities to debrief and discuss the interviews. Furthermore, recorded interviews were utilized as learning devices for opportunities for coresearchers to build on their research skills. Both modifications served as a means to foster critical reflexivity while ensuring interview fidelity.

Cross-checking by participants. Cross-checking or second interviews were conducted after initial data analysis was completed. This process determined whether or not the elicited incidents properly represented the experience of the participants. During cross-checking, the process was made transparent and participants were presented with their transcribed interviews and list of critical incidents. Included in this credibility check was a specific action step: querying for recommendations for the school board that included the wish-list analysis.

Expert opinions. Experts within the field were chosen to review final categories (see Chou et al., 2015, for information about the experts). With PaCIT, coresearchers' perspectives were also included in this section, as they were viewed as experts on their contextualized circumstances. Moreover, participant experiences were also considered expert opinions.

Reporting the results. In our study, categories were examined to form themes and specific recommendations. As the goal is to facilitate change in the community, the

purpose of this step was to ensure that specific steps were clarified for implementation of research results. Dissemination in our study involved the coresearchers presenting alongside the PI, to stakeholders in the community, school administrators, the local school board, at academic conferences, and to the Deputy Minister of Education. Lastly, we coauthored a manuscript summarizing the results of the study (see Chou et al., 2015).

Reassessment and future action steps. As PAR involves iterative phases of reflexivity, planning, and social action, the last steps include a reassessment of the project and determining whether or not goals have been met. Future action steps are determined to ensure results are properly disseminated and actions are taken based on the study, and to foster appropriate actions and research questions that stem from the research project. For example, future action steps included collaboratively writing and publishing a peer-reviewed journal article (see Chou et al., 2015) and setting a precedence for future youth-based PAR studies in the local community.

Limitations. There are limitations to the application of PaCIT. Since it is based on CIT, this study is limited by the types of questions it can answer—what helps or hinders a particular experience or activity and questions that are exploratory in nature (Butterfield et al., 2009). Further, given that PaCIT comes from a PAR framework, the community stakeholders needed to be in support of it. PaCIT, as a research approach, must be negotiated with the community as a viable option that can help answer salient questions that are relevant to its scope. Therefore, it can only answer a certain type of question that lends itself well to a CIT inquiry and must be agreed upon and adapted to and by the community.

Another challenge for PaCIT and participatory methodologies in general is the process of managing biases of coresearchers. Biases can be negotiated through engaging in critical reflexivity in PAR. In a case study that examined a youth-based PAR project, Kirshner, Pozzoboni, and Jones (2011) suggested the following strategies to scaffold the process of managing biases: (a) provide coresearchers with multiple opportunities to surface bias, (b) guide coresearchers in explaining their thinking to others, (c) frame and reframe the purpose of the research, and (d) teach data analysis practices.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The purpose of this article has been threefold: (a) to respond to Kidd and Kral's (2005) call to make PAR more accessible in counselling psychology, (b) to provide a model for active practice for social justice in counselling psychology research (Arthur & Collins, 2014), and (c) to build on ongoing developments of ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009) within counselling psychology. PaCIT is an approach that incorporates PAR with CIT, fitting with the aims of counselling psychology (CPA, 2009) to bring social justice and action into the forefront of research activities.

Consistent with this aim, PaCIT fits within a critical-ideological paradigm as it adheres to principles with explicit emancipatory and empowerment themes

(Kidd & Kral, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). As recommended by Smith et al. (2010), PaCIT is structured to facilitate authentic participation, encompasses a transparent process, conveys the experiences of coresearchers, and reveals the limitations and challenges of a given project. PaCIT addresses potential limitations of both PAR and CIT while maintaining paradigmatic coherence and action orientation in the framework of social justice. As a research methodology, PaCIT exemplifies the criteria for rigour proposed by Herr and Anderson (2005), which include (a) *dialogical and process validity* (generation of new knowledge), (b) *outcome validity* (achievement of action-orientated outcomes), (c) *catalytic validity* (education of both researcher and participants), (d) *democratic validity* (results are relevant to the community), and (e) *process validity* (sound and appropriate research methodology).

Capitalizing on the core values of counselling psychology to maintain awareness of sociocultural factors and of individual and community strengths as central mechanisms of positive change, PaCIT is a means to conduct critical research within the field of counselling psychology. We propose that PaCIT, a practical and theoretical integration of PAR and CIT, is a viable research tool for use with marginalized groups, particularly in cross-cultural endeavours. PaCIT validates other worldviews through partnership and collaboration, produces relevant and accessible research results for both the scientific research community and the communities of research inquiry, and supports positive change for individuals whose well-being is impacted by systemic circumstances.

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About the Authors

Fred Chou is a doctoral student in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia.

Janelle Kwee is an assistant professor of counselling psychology at Trinity Western University.

Marla Buchanan is a professor of counselling psychology in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia.

Robert Lees is a practicing psychologist with British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Address correspondence to Fred Chou, University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V6T1Z4. E-mail: fred.chou.fc@gmail.com

Appendix
Hart's Adapted Ladder of Participation

Nonparticipation/ participation	Level of participation	Description
Nonparticipation	Level 1: Manipulation	Locals are involved, but used by researchers to communicate the messages of researchers. Locals are consulted, but no feedback is provided to them.
	Level 2: Decoration	Locals are involved, but are only involved to make it seem like they have an impact on the decisions. Unlike manipulation, researchers do not pretend that a cause is inspired by locals, rather locals are used to support the researchers own cause in an indirect way.
	Level 3: Tokenism	Locals are provided with a voice symbolically. Their voice has no impact on the decisions made by researchers.
Degree of participation	Level 4: Assigned but informed	Locals do not initiate the project, but they understand that they have a sense of ownership.
	Level 5: Consulted and informed	Researchers design and create the project. However, locals are consulted for the decisions that researchers make. These opinions are considered by the researchers.
	Level 6: Researcher-initiated, shared decisions with locals	Researchers start the project and decision making powers are shared with locals. They are involved in the decisions made about the project.
	Level 7: Local-initiated and directed	Locals start the project and all the decisions are made by locals about the project.
	Level 8: Local-initiated, shared decisions with researchers	Locals start the project and take part in full partnership with researchers. Decisions are shared and locals are supported by researchers.

Note. Adapted from Hart's (1992) ladder of participation and modified to generalize to research for varying groups. The higher levels result in higher levels of engagement and participation.