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## Participatory Action Research

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A revolution in research has been unfolding for quite some time wherein ordinary people – long the subjects of study by privileged scholars – are collaborating with professionals in the creation and analysis of data and complex theory. The purpose of this partnership, commonly called Participatory Action Research, is to generate knowledge enriched by diverse points of view in an educational process ‘empowering’ all those involved to change themselves, their relationships with each other and their world.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of Participatory [Action] Research differs from conventional research in, at least, the following ways:

1. In response to disciplinary agendas, conventional research generates and assembles data in professional texts linguistically and spatially inaccessible to the people whose lives they claim to represent. In contrast, participatory research creates knowledge that is useful to, understood and ‘owned’ by the people from whom it is derived. While this information, in itself, may assist people to further their individual and aggregate agendas, the principle aim of Participatory Action Research is to impart technical, analytical and socio-organisational skills enabling

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Waters-Bayer (1994) seems to be speaking about PAR when she refers to “enriching research.” Susan Wright and Nici Nelson (1995:51) write about “participatory research” and characterise it as a process in which people are agents rather than objects of research. Accordingly, they include methodological innovations under this heading (such as the experiments in Mass-Observation orchestrated by Humphrey Jennings, Tom Harrison and Charles Madge) that were not designed to enrich non-professional participants. At the same time, Wright and Nelson (1995:58) state that the “aims of participatory research are to empower more widely and systematically.” Clearly, the meaning of PAR, enriching research etc. can be ambiguous. In this dissertation, I distinguish between “participatory research” (where people are agents in, rather than the objects or subjects, of research) and “Participatory Action Research” (in which people are involved in research *so that* they can be ‘enriched’ by the experience). Daniel Selener (1997) explains that Participatory Action Research has been developed by analyst-activists working in community development (e.g. Paulo Freire) action research in organisations (e.g. Kurt Lewin), action research in schools (e.g. Burdette Ross Buckingham) and farmer participatory research (e.g. Robert Chambers).

non-professionals to determine and meet their own research needs. Such an approach is envisioned to contribute towards

*the formation of historical and collective subjects who participate fully in the definition and fulfillment of their needs and longings, as equals in the global society* (Selener 1997:19).

2. In conventional research, the professional is ordinarily admonished to be socially inert so that subjects can be observed acting as if they were not being watched. In Participatory Action Research, scientists are active agents of change in the communities with which they are working. In this role, they are facilitators and catalysts, not directors, of transformation.

These several points can be summarised as differences in aims, means and epistemological beliefs about the production of authoritative knowledge (i.e. the “knowledge that counts”). Given that these differences exist in principle, if not always in practice, what do professional researchers have to gain from the principles and practices of Participatory Action Research?

## **1. Participatory Action Research and Results**

The knowledge produced by Participatory Action Research is arguably richer, and almost certainly more reliable when working with ‘oppressed’ social groups, than that built through conventional practices because the research is explicitly committed to and engaged in social change.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, feminist scholars began to explore what Maria Mies (1983) calls “conscious partiality” (see also Schrijvers 1995). That is, they began to reject the validity and legitimacy of ‘value free’ research and professional indifference towards human objects of study. Instead, researchers took the side of certain groups, partly identified with them and in a conscious process sought to create spaces for critical dialogue, mutual reflection and common learning (Schrijvers 1995:22). Gerrit Huizer (1986:236-237) explains one aspect of the benefits which followed from rejecting ‘neutrality’ in the name of scientific ‘objectivity.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Oppression’ is a description of the relationship between individuals or social groups, not a characteristic of either.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Omvedt (1979) distinguishes between ‘objectivity,’ which may be understood as a genuine commitment to the testing of hypotheses, and ‘neutrality’ vs. ‘commitment,’ which are subjective

... it is through concrete practical involvement, 'taking sides', and participating in the emancipatory processes of common people, that one can gain valuable scientific insight, which, in turn, can be useful to those same emancipatory processes. Researchers can supply the people they work with, with information and conceptual tools which help those people to interpret their situation.

*The processes of rapid change in which communities and societies are everywhere involved at present can probably fruitfully be studied and understood by participating in those change processes from within and from below* (emphasis original).

Many researchers, such as Margery Wolf (1996), Jayati Lal (1996), Joke Schrijvers (1995, 1993), Sandra Harding (1987) and Nancy Harstock (1983) have subscribed to the belief that partisan participation in peoples' lives and struggles helps social scientists learn *from experience* the nature and significance of what they are seeing. There is also evidence that a politically committed stance is critical to learning *from people*. Gail Omvedt (1979), for example, found during her investigation of rural women in India that 'neutral' interviewers in her team were given non-provocative, safe responses reflecting established social norms. In contrast, interviewers who expressed a commitment to improving these women's lives were given richer and more reliable information (see also Waters-Bayer 1994:146).

My own experience seems to confirm and underscore these conclusions. Indeed, what I learned from people while working in the Ecuadorian Andes was affected by the fact that I was neither indifferent nor unresponsive to, but instead open to and active in furthering, their concerns and agendas. For example, *campesinos* provided me with sensitive information because they trusted that I would not use or let it be used against them. Perhaps more importantly, individuals and institutions were willing to make time to learn *with* me because my research focused on issues of pragmatic interest to them.

This is not, of course, to say that valid social observations cannot be made without 'taking sides' and participating in people's agendas. Rather, it is to note that personal involvement in people's struggle to survive enhances understanding of the realities

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moral stances. If Omvedt's distinction is valid, then researchers may be socially committed *and* objective analysts.

they face and that informants are more open with researchers who sympathise with them than with neutral observers.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Participatory Action Research and Ethics**

### **A. Extractive Research**

In the *Sierra*, rural children have been told that *gringos* (a.k.a. white-skinned foreigners, or Bogeymen) steal and make sausages of them. Though adults smile at this, many indigenous women and men are deeply mistrustful of outsiders. As Sabine Groux (1997) found during fieldwork for her PhD in Colombia, there is a common myth that researchers extract information from communities in order to write books and make their fortunes. Regardless of how exaggerated this belief may be, neo-colonialist, extractive research is the norm in South America and elsewhere. Accordingly, data is oft mined in rural communities and exported for processing, sale and consumption in the First World (see Lal 1996; Creswell 1992; Mohanty *et al.* 1991; Ong 1988).

Regardless of whether researchers see their work as extractive and exploitative or not, it is certain that many of their subjects/objects do. Researchers may repay or reciprocate for the information they are given by bestowing gifts or becoming political and/or economic advocates (see Bachrach Ehlers 1990). In such cases, their research may no longer be exploitative. It does, however, remain extractive unless the imbalance between what research takes from and gives to informants is redressed. By generating locally useful information and recording it in an accessible form, Participatory Action Research is arguably non-extractive.

### **B. Professional Privilege**

Because participatory research engages professionals and their erstwhile informants as equal partners, and because it aims to stimulate the analytical skills of all participants, it can deconstruct social patterns of dependency and deference.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal engagement in people's causes also tends to result in "knowledge for action," as opposed to "knowledge for understanding" (Scott & Shore 1979. See also Edwards 1993:78; Long & Villarreal 1993:140).

As explained by Diane Wolf (1996:ix), the power relations inherent in the process of gathering data (and implicit in the process of ethnographic representation) more commonly contribute to establishing and fortifying the dependency of the 'researched' on the 'researcher,' as well as the former's public deference to the latter. Wolf urges those researchers who would avoid such outcomes to adopt a "politics of uncomfortable self-conscious questioning [and] a critical questioning of the field and the motives underlying what we do." While this reflexivity is vital, it is not in itself an end. Indeed, ethical concerns about research must not lead to analysis paralysis and the cessation of investigation by professionals. In the words of Jayati Lal (1996:207),

*A reflexive and self-critical methodological stance can become meaningful only when it engages in the politics of reality and intervenes in it in some significant way. Otherwise, we risk the charge of self-absorbed navel gazing.*

Instead, the task is to engage in what Ellen Carol DuBois (1983) calls "passionate scholarship;" that is, critical study in which the researcher is an active facilitator of change (see also Lather 1991).