Long Title: The challenge to change: Participatory research and professional realities

Short Title: Participatory research and professional realities

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Abstract
This introductory paper discusses participatory research methodologies. Included is an overview of traditions of participatory research and how they relate to what many academic and other researchers are already doing, the strengths and weaknesses of participatory research, and what they imply for professional identity. Participatory methods are not meant to replace but to complement more formal research methodologies.

Keywords community-based management, locally-based knowledge, ownership of information, participatory research, participatory management, relaxed rapport
Participatory research (described in the literature as having more than 50 variants) is becoming a methodology of choice in the social sciences. Certain legislation mandates its use, most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act. Yet some social scientists have been slow to accept the methods and, more importantly, the evolving research paradigm that it offers.

Two recent forums -- "Participatory Research and Management: What Works and Why?," presented at the 8th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management in Bellingham in June, 2000 (two papers of which appear in this issue), and "The Challenge to Change: Rural Participatory Theory and Applications, Professional Realities, and the New High Ground," presented at the Association of American Geographers' annual meetings in Boston in March, 1998 -- provided a venue for social scientists to comment on and critique the use of participatory research and management in their own work. In both forums, the voices of diverse social scientists, in sociology, anthropology, natural resources, environmental social science, and geography, exemplified the requisite cross-disciplinary interaction so necessary to develop genuine and effective participatory methodologies.

Participatory research and management methodologies are typically conducted under the evolving paradigm of process, local knowledge, and reversals of learning (see Berardi, 2000). Such work is indeed "good science" -- repeatable in design, reliable (internally and externally) in the quality of the data obtained, convincing with a sound and reasoned argument, and able to discount or reject alternative explanations. The work is designed to add locally-initiated and locally-based knowledge to the existing body of centralized academic information and understanding.
As discussed in Berardi and Donnelly (1999), the information from studies with a participatory approach is often presented in narrative format (Sallenave, 1994). Such a narrative, without reference to measurable quantities, can be sufficiently robust to withstand scholarly scrutiny. Relying on qualifiers, together with triangulation, involves a shift from measuring to comparing (Chambers, 1994b, p. 1263), which, in many ways, makes the data more valid, rigorous, and most importantly, relevant (Chambers, 1997).

A number of traditions can be identified as participatory research yet all share a basic principle, namely, that participatory research and management opposes the classic expert model with its top-down approach.3 People in communities often are interested in research that is relevant to them. An explicit goal of the project may be change of some sort. Other common principles include that:

- the community and the researcher are partners, participating in all phases of a study or a project (as in Vachta and McDonough's paper in this issue) from inception to completion;
- the expertise and interests of the community and researcher complement each other (scientists, of course, have expertise in certain technical topics, but ordinary citizens also have expertise about social relations in their own communities, as evidenced in Zanetell and Knuth's paper);
- the community and researchers negotiate a project that is mutually agreeable;
- the researcher gains some understanding of the life of the community as experienced by residents themselves – in effect, their frame of reference;
- there is concern for the tone in which information is presented and meaning is interpreted; and,
• there is a commitment to certain values -- democracy, equity (the notion that we should generate economic opportunities for all), working with the environment as a habitat for people and other organisms, and, lastly the value of self- and community-determination, with people experiencing the changes that they see as important.  

Under a typology developed by Jules Pretty of the University of Essex, “participation” can be conceptualized as follows:

• manipulative participation (participation is just a pretense);
• participation by consultation (participation is by people being consulted or by answering questions; professionals are under no obligation to accept public comment and act on it);
• functional participation (participation is seen by external agencies as a means to achieve project goals, especially reduced costs; objectives have been predetermined);
• interactive participation (people participate in joint analysis, development of action plans, much group decision-making); and,
• self-mobilization (people participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions; they develop contact with external institutions for resources and technical advice, but retain control of the process and results).

Interactive participation practiced as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) first appeared in the late 1980s as a way for villagers to retain the data that were collected in the community. It evolved from a familiar tradition, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) used in the study by Zanetell and Knuth. PRA was championed by Robert Chambers, an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Chambers wrote a classic text, Rural Development, Putting the Last First, that advocates participatory rural appraisal. His newer book,
Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last, published in 1997, focuses on the researcher changing the way in which she or he looks at problems.

In my own work, I have examined how these methodologies might be effectively used in investigating the adoption and implementation of improved sanitation services in remote areas of Alaska. This participatory approach is especially important with Athabaskan Indians and the Yupik Eskimo who have a strong oral tradition. It represents interactive participation in the sense that the research area and program is being developed cooperatively, with a leading rural health organization that actually defines the pacing of the work.

Zanetell and Knuth’s paper provides an excellent example of the application of Rapid Rural Appraisal to efficiently supply a socio-ecological baseline in a Venezuelan watershed where native fish species are declining. Using four techniques and products typical to RRA -- community maps, historical profiles, organizational Venn diagrams, and river-fishery maps -- the authors show that indeed a high correlation exists between published data on the fishery and RRA results, thus highlighting the importance of RRAs in policy and research initiatives.

Vachta and McDonough's paper provides a good illustration of resource management using participatory methodologies. The paper discusses the Urban Resources Initiative (URI/MSU) of Michigan State University's Department of Forestry and collectively designed community forestry projects. The paper considers the human dimensions of the place as well as biophysical conditions or the behaviors and needs of non-human species. The authors argue that given the range of cultural and personal values surrounding nature, the environment and the use of natural resources, and the potential benefits and problems which can be derived from forestry projects, no single professional can be an expert in knowing exactly what solution is most appropriate for every setting and situation. If the active participation of local residents are incorporated in the
planning stages, however, decisions could be made with foreknowledge of the community. The
authors argue that city foresters in particular could facilitate more participatory management by
developing partnerships with community groups on the development and implementation of
community nurseries; perhaps donating trees and training to community groups in exchange for a
return of a percentage of the trees at maturity for transplant to parks and as street trees.

The two papers illustrate how the isolation of the communities studied -- either economic
(Vachta and McDonough) and/or physical (Zanetell and Knuth) -- increases the suitability of
community-based management projects. Methods proposed here are not meant to replace but to
complement more formal research methodologies. In many cases, they provide what might be
considered the most valid information -- generated by, and describing, the communities
themselves.

One of the problems with the current practice of participatory research and management is
the tendency for institutions or persons to trademark their methodology or approach with
excessive focus on a particular acronym, e.g., PRA or PAR or RRA. This is good in that it shows
innovation and a sense of ownership regarding the production of new, related methodologies. It
can be problematic, however, when participatory research -- essentially a political enterprise --
degenerates into a technical problem: who is really doing it, and when, and what it is rightfully
called.

Perhaps scholars can agree that it does not really matter where one starts or how one starts;
what really matters is where one ends up. For all of these variants, the researcher or manager is
likely to end up at much the same place. The defining variable for participatory research is
perhaps ownership of the information. With true participatory research, the ownership rests with
the collaborating participants, usually the community, and perhaps the research process as well, depending on the terms of engagement.

Another problem with participatory research is the concern with depolitization as it becomes mainstreamed into large agency and state projects. Scholars need to be careful with terms so that “participatory” does not become a meaningless, catch-all term, with agencies using participatory methods in the data collection or analytical phase of research and then slipping back into a hierarchical or autocratic approach during implementation and management. Scholars in fact always need to qualify the terms “participatory” and “participation.”

In terms of dealing with time considerations, participatory research methods are certainly challenging, especially for graduate students. For one, many university programs do not allow a great deal of flexibility for students to substantially deviate from stated research projects and goals, yet such adaptability is one of the common traits of participatory research. Several interesting articles about such concerns recently have been published in *American Sociologist*. Time, however, also is a factor for the participating community, which may be eager to work for change rather than engage in something that could be construed as outsider-mediated planning.

In sum, if we as researchers can find research that advances our knowledge, is intellectually stimulating, and promotes some desirable community change, then there is a good partnership. Part of the commitment to participatory research and management values, also, is being able to walk away from a project, especially if researchers cannot morally, ethically, practically, or physically deliver such assistance.

Questions regarding professional identity and the intellectual ownership of information are often difficult: How is participatory research, a non-extractive methodology, even possible when research itself is an extractive and proprietary process in the academic setting? Further, can
researchers tolerate, as Robert Chambers of the Institute of Development Studies puts it, “baskets of choice” replacing “packages of practice” as part of a research approach in which doubt, critical self awareness, and acknowledgment of error are valued (Chambers, 1997: 188).

In this new high ground, the participatory research experience adds what Chambers calls “empirical affirmations” that researchers’ attitudes and behavior are integral to the research activity itself. It thus calls into question the role of the researcher, and, in so doing, stimulates critical thought on professional identity in the practice of human inquiry.

Overall, participatory research offers a different approach to organizing information collection and analysis. It advances knowledge as well as facilitates community capacity to generate needed information. Yet there are substantive challenges to initiating, participating in, analyzing, and presenting such research, not least of which is the challenge to the researchers themselves – to rethink the concept of knowledge as necessarily reflexive and critical (as opposed to absolute and authoritative). A relaxed rapport is critical to this effort (Chambers, 1997). It suggests a middle ground between the hurried visitor and the seasoned resident participant-observer in conducting research. It supports the idea that critical, useful, meaningful information can be gathered in a short period of time, by listening carefully and remaining flexible and opportunistic.

Relaxed rapport is more important than prolonged residence. With such an approach, it is possible to facilitate meaningful exchange, gain understanding quickly, and, at the same time, enjoy the work – an enjoyment that necessarily comes with learning.
References and Suggested Readings


Some terms for participatory research, learning, and action include: Action Planning, Agroecosystems Analysis (AEA), Citizens' Juries, Community Audits, Community Profiles, Development Education Leadership Teams (DELTA), Farmer Participatory Research, Farming Systems Research, Future Search, Groupe de Recherche et de Planification Participative (MARP), Participatory Appraisal (PA), Participatory Analysis and Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Forest Resource Assessment (PFRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Urban Appraisal (PUA), Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA), Rapid Food Security Assessment (RFSA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), and Regenerated Freirian Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT).

See Berardi, 2000 for the edited transcripts and commentary.


For further discussion, see Gillespie's comments (from which much of the information in this paragraph is derived) in Berardi, 2000.