

A Case for Participatory Research in Business Management

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Abstract

The human aspect is getting due attention in the management research that adds more fascination to management research. The pursuit of understanding the human factor clearly highlights the importance of participatory methods of qualitative research. This pursuit remains unfulfilled unless the subjects and objects of the management research themselves becomes party to research. Here lies the importance of participatory management research that is an organic part and parcel of qualitative research. The present paper attempts to provide an overview of the tools for participatory management research.

Keywords : Participatory Research, Qualitative & Quantitative Methods, Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Introduction

The debate about pros and cons of Quantitative and qualitative methodologies of research has a long history. But there is also growing appreciation of benefits of integrating the quantitative and qualitative research. The management research thought is gradually shifting from

debating mutual exclusivity of these two streams to synergizing the endowments of them. There are examples that highlight the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods.¹ The quantitative research provides a broad breadth. But this will not necessarily provide insight so important for management decision making. On the other hand, the qualitative approach can provide depth that could enable a manager understand the dynamics. This bears special significance with rapidly changing contours of consumer preferences, organizational dynamics, and increasing complexity of the business environment.

There is greater appreciation of the fact that for the effective management research, one needs to synergies quantitative and qualitative methodologies that would result in better measurement and analysis. This is further supplemented by the policy recommendations can lead to better action.² Moreover, qualitative methods have proved their utility in the areas such as investigation of impact on incomes and markets which are generally seen as quantitative. There is a greater awareness now that failure to analyses qualitative dimensions of livelihoods leads to misrepresentation and inaccuracy in analysis³. The traditional outlook has found utility of qualitative methods more in the context of micro level analysis. However more recently it has been utilized for macro-level policy and advocacy too.

The qualitative methods have also proved their utility vis-à-vis emerging aspects of management such management of microfinance. The qualitative tools find their application for a wide range of activities that are crucial for a successful microfinance institution, such as⁴

- Developing new products and modifying old ones,
- Understanding clients and their perceptions of the Micro Finance Institution and its services/products,
- Developing/refining marketing programmes,
- Analysis of clients' risks/vulnerability opportunities and how people use (formal and informal sector) financial services,
- Understanding the "financial landscape" or environment within which the Micro-Finance Institution is operating.

- Analyzing problems such as drop-outs and growing trends of loan default,
- Impact assessment and evaluation,
- Analysis of relative depth of outreach,
- Detecting fraud/rent-seeking, and
- Running strategic planning/staff meetings.

There are examples of utilizing qualitative methods for research vis-avis enterprise promotion⁵. There are examples of utilizing qualitative methods for research into aspects of micro financing too⁶.

Moreover, the human aspect is getting due attention in the management research that adds more fascination to management researchers more difficult. The pursuit of understanding the human factor clearly highlights the importance of participatory methods of qualitative research. This pursuit remains unfulfilled unless the subjects and objects of the management research themselves becomes party to research. Here lies the importance of participatory management research that is an organic part and parcel of qualitative research. The present paper attempts to provide an overview of the tools for participatory management research.

Participatory Research in India

[Participatory research in the discipline of management is gaining acceptance across the world.] Participatory research is practiced in India since eighties, but it is practiced mainly in the field or development, and more specifically in the field of rural development. Thus we have a situation whereby the participatory research has got strong rooting in India, but has remained on the periphery of the conventional management research as applied to the fields other than developmental management. This could also give a prima facie impression that the participatory research is predominantly convenient for management aspects vis-a-vis poverty alleviation.

But as has been underlined by the trends in consumer analysis, and the impacts of globalization (that are still under debate), the wide masses of India that were hitherto ignored by the mainstream management thought are gaining Centre stage as they are showing increasing inclination to buy

consumer goods. The authors' observation of the increasing consumption of range of products, by the masses.

Without going into the value analysis of these consumer preferences, it needs to be noted that the hitherto ignored masses of India are gaining attention of the management practitioners, not only from development professionals, but others too. This attention gets translated into enterprises such as those of local brands of aerated drinks one could locate even in Mandvi taluka of Surat district in Gujarat that is surrounded by villages that are predominantly inhabited by tribal's.

There are vital illustrations of utilizing the participatory tools for management research in India that are elucidated subsequently in this paper.

Meaning of Participatory Research:

Participatory research includes the stakeholders or subjects of the research in part or all of the process. It attempts to bridge the gap between theory and action. (Cohn and Shapiro, 2003). Participatory research focuses on a; process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by the local people rather than on them⁷. Participatory Research is not a single approach, but rather cuts across a broad collection of approaches intended to enable participants to develop their own understanding of and control of the process and phenomena being investigated. So when we talk about Participatory Research, we refer to certain fundamental tenets that characterize Participatory research (based on Ashby et al 2000; Ashby, 2003; Vernooy and McDougall, 2003)⁸

1. The research reflects a clear and coherent common agenda (or set of priorities) among stakeholders and contributes to partnership building.
2. The research builds a capacity for innovation by including stakeholders in joint enquiry and co-development of new resource management regimes.
3. The research addresses and integrates the complexities and dynamics of change in human and natural resource systems and processes, including local understanding of these.
4. The research applies the 'triangulation principle'. It combines multiple

sources of information and methods, and links together various knowledge words through participatory learning and joint enquiry.

5. Monitoring and evaluation of participation and the research proactive.
6. Power and risk sharing are conscious research strategies.
7. The research process is based on iterative learning, feedback loops and two-way sharing of information.
8. Relationships among partners are founded on mutual respect, accountability and joint decision-making.

The participatory approaches have been advocated for Business Development Services for Small and Medium Enterprises. A participatory approach to the planning of Business Development Services for Small and Medium Enterprises. A participatory approach to the planning of Business Development Services (BDS) interventions imparts the following advantages⁹.

1. Better understanding of SME needs.
2. Greater ownership of the interventions by the BDS personnel, clients and participating organizations.
3. Increased possibility of Longer-term sustainability

In practices, emphasis on participatory approach has questioned the value of some conventional approaches, such as large surveys, in favor of more rapid methods that are more integrated with action.

The Participatory Research and Conventional Research

We have purposely used the term 'Conventional' Research here to refer to commonly understood connotation of research. The comparative analysis is also not intended to downplay applicability of one research over the others. The authors see synergy and niche suitability of each of these research methods that could be utilized in synch with each other. So time and again. It is highlighted that it is not the question of participatory of others (i.e. mutual exclusivity), but is about how we optimally blend participatory and conventional methods.

There is very close organic relationship between the conventional and

participatory methods, and they do not exist as neatly definable and independent concepts. These terms refer to collections of approaches and experiences bundled together out of convenience and necessity, as a way of making sense of experience. The fundamental dimension of difference between conventional and participatory research, as per some, is the issue of 'who controls and makes decisions' about this process and this is the basis of several well-known frameworks or typologies mentioned below¹⁰.

Typology of Participation

The following is a typology that could be suggested from Biggs, 1989; Probst et al, 2000: **Contractual Participation:** One social actor or stakeholder group has sole decision-making power over most of the decisions taken in an innovation process, and can be considered the 'owner' of this process. Others participate in activities defined by that stakeholder group, i.e. they are (formally or informally) 'contracted to provide services and support.

Consultative Participation: Most of the key decisions are kept with one stakeholder group, but emphasis is put on consultation and gathering information from others, especially for identification of constraints and opportunities, priority setting and/or evaluation.

Collaborative Participation: Different actors collaborate and are put on a more equal footing, emphasizing linkage through an exchange of knowledge, different contributions footing, and emphasizing linkage through an exchange of knowledge, different contributions and a sharing of decision-making power during the innovation process.

Collegiate Participation: Different actors work together as colleagues or partners. 'Ownership', responsibility and risk are equally distributed among the partners, and decisions are made by agreement or consensus among all actors.

There have been both successes and failures while dealing with both the conventional and participatory methods. Though these the researches have understood importance of innovating in research methodologies and even developing newer participatory methodology. One illustrations a participatory research methodology of 'Dimensions of Maturity' developed by one of the authors of this paper¹¹.

Promising Trends in Participatory Research

This has been very rightly put forth as 'Rather than advocating one "brand" of research over another, researchers are increasingly focusing on innovating and experimenting to match the methods and the situation. They are also working to bring the insights of everyday practice in the field back to the design of new technologies and future research practices, protocols, structures and strategies'¹². There are very promising trends vis-à-vis participatory researches that include:

1. A focus on the ethics and power relations involved in participatory research approaches
2. A much wider (though still insufficient) effort to bring gender considerations into participatory research methodologies and to analyze gender differentiated outcomes of participatory NRM
3. A call for more accountability, standards of practice, codes of conduct and constructive critique among practitioners of participatory research
4. An exploration of research on the process of participation under uneven relations of power, including conflict resolution
5. A shift from participation of hybrid methods, mixing quantitative and qualitative analysis, and social and biological approaches
6. A creative proliferation of hybrid methods, mixing quantitative and qualitative analysis, and social and biological approaches
7. The experimental combination of geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, maps, models and participation.
8. A serious effort to scale up from farm to landscape level participatory research and an exploration of regional and national applications
9. A willingness to place research questions and results in social and historical context
10. Attempts to link specific practices and information to broader meaning, including interpretations of history and visions of the future, through scenarios and other integrative tools for negotiation and planning.

The Participatory Research Methods : a snap shot

The participatory research methods can be broadly classified as 13.

1. General Methods
2. Field Based Techniques
3. Workshop Based Techniques
4. Self-Assessment

General Methods:

1. Key-Person Interviews
2. Open-Ended Interviews
3. Focus Groups
4. Case Studies

Field -Based Techniques :

1. Participatory Rural Appraisal
2. Participant Observation

The Workshop Based Techniques :

1. ZOPP (Objective Oriented Project Planning)/ Team-Up (Objective Tree)
2. Social and Gender Analysis

Self-Assessment Tools :

1. Community Vulnerability Index
2. Community Development Capacity Index
3. Partnership Matrix

It needs to be specified that a salient feature of the participatory methodologies is that it is a growing family of various research techniques. So, the above list is illustrative. Moreover, there is no mutual exclusivity of these techniques, and the researcher can choose a blend of techniques, not only from within the participatory researches but with other techniques too.

An Illustration of the Use of Participatory Research Methods:

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is important participatory research methodology widely practiced in the context of rural areas not only in India but in most of the developing countries. PRA is defined as 'A qualitative method of research for involving communities (especially rural ones in developing countries) in their own futures'¹⁴.

PRA has been described as ' a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions to plan and to act'¹⁵. The term PRA first appeared in the late 1980_s in India and a number of African countries. So far, PRA has been widely applied in all fields of development, from resource management, agriculture-forestry-fisheries, socio-economic and poverty reduction programmes PRA is carried out using a range of well-proven tools

and techniques as well as a growing tool kit of news and developing approaches¹⁶.

Apart from the exploratory community meetings, the common PRA tools are¹⁷.

- Semi structured interviewing
- Preference ranking
- Seasonal and historical diagramming.
- Focus group discussions
- Mapping and modeling

A detailed account on use of PRA in research is available from a study conducted by the Natural Resources Institute and funded by the DFID,U.K¹⁸ The objectives of the PRA in Madhya Pradesh were of identify farm and non-farm income sources of rural households, barriers to the uptake of non-farm employment, and opportunities, which can be translated into policy recommendations. While narrating the methodology, Somer al mention that open-ended discussions with individuals and community members were conducted under the assumption that it would ensure better articulation and reflection of the community's view on rural non-farm economy. There has been considerable flexibility while deploying different participatory methods that include social mapping, ranking of Income Generation Activities (IGAs), focus groups discussion and in-depth interviews. The Income Generating Activities (IGAs) are multifaceted and are affected by wide variety of tangible and intangible factors. Methods employed for this were influenced by these complexities and hence the researchers had to collect data wider than those of IGAs per se. Consequently, the data incorporates a broad set of conditions, assets and analysis related to the way people structure their income generating activities as well as the reasons why others cannot access certain IGAs. The perceptual data were extracted by using different above mentioned PRA methods. It is very evident from the above that utilizing of participatory methods can be crucial for research vis-à-vis enterprise promotion.

Epilogue

Traditionally there had been fixed can notations about utility of quantitative research methods and qualitative participatory research methods. Qualitative research methods had been forte of the disciplines of history and

anthropology in particular, and sociology and political science to some degree, while economics has almost exclusive preference to quantitative methods. But recent innovations have highlighted the complementarity of both these forms of research, i.e. quantitative and qualitative (Chung 1998: Chung et al 1997: about and Guijt 1997). Practitioners have found means of complementing their preferred method, sometimes by borrowing from other disciplines¹⁹.

Moreover, innovations are at the core of many organizational activities and are focus of much management research. Participatory innovation development is a key strength of the partners. The participatory research has special significance in the context of participatory innovation development²⁰. These aspects carry crucial significance for management research that many times handles a range of factors simultaneously, right from economic to political sociological. There are interesting integrations done of different methodologies with participatory methodology of research such as combining participatory Research with Phenomenology²¹. Moreover, the increasing complexity of the issues handled by management research that have the human factors and client preferences at the Centre stage calls for greater adoption of participatory methods of research in India.

Endnotes

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