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ABSTRACT

The epistemology of participatory research relates knowledge to action, especially the production of knowledge and political action to redress inequality. This paper identifies characteristics of participatory research and describes three research efforts which exemplify them in varying degrees. The tenets of participatory research suggest guidelines for degrees, the conduct of inquiry for social scientists interested in the relation of research to increased political participation and improved human services.

The relation of knowledge and action, along with other epistemological considerations of various research methodologies, has occupied the attention of social scientists. Much of the training of social scientists is in fact socialization to the canons of a discipline which require their intelligent use and knowledge of their comparative merits and limits. The distinction of fact and value is generally as far as most graduate students go in plumbing the philosophical depths of their discipline. Often the "value free" research these graduate students produce later as practitioners of a discipline is understood as innocent of politics and objective in any implications for action.

The disciplines of social science, in general, preserve a place for dissent from their dominant paradigms and their practice. Thus, one finds discussion of the relation of fact and value, of the value-ladened assumptions of "value free" research, and of the ontology beneath every epistemology. Equally problematic for a few researchers is the relation of knowledge to action.

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Participatory research is a methodology that deals explicitly with the relation of knowledge and action. The exponents of this methodology are critical of the political correlates of the standard methodologies of the social sciences, especially survey research, and espouse a different set of political correlates for research (Fals Borda, 1979; Hall, 1981, 1984; ICAE, 1980; LeBoterf, 1983). The tenets of participatory research are important for all social scientists who understand the production and dissemination of information as an intervention in a social and political process. In addition, these tenets are important for social scientists who value political interventions to reduce inequalities in society and to increase the ability of relatively powerless groups to improve their situation. As an introduction to participatory research, this paper suggests some of the characteristics of this methodology and discusses three hybrid examples of participatory research.

## PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory research assumes knowledge is related to power and power is related to change or to maintenance of the status quo. It borrows heavily from Marx and contemporary social theorists such as Paulo Freire and incorporates class analysis. Its central concerns are research, knowledge production, and empowerment related to the position of oppressed people, poor people, people with political or economic disadvantage.

One of the key assumptions of participatory research is that it will lead to change *by* the people who do research. Advocates thus distinguish participatory research from other research which assumes that change will come, if it comes about at all, by the action of people who read the work of others. The participatory research adherents eschew that hope for the intention of mobilizing people, especially those affected by the problem under study, in the process of doing the research. Research and action thus form a continuum and are part of a single process of political change.

There are several clear and distinguishing characteristics of participatory research:

(a) The problem under study and the decision to study it have origins in the community affected by the problem;
(b) The goal of the research is political or social change derived from the information gathered;
(c) Local people control the process of problem definition, information gathering and decisions about action following from the information; and
(d) Local people and professional researchers are equals in the research process. They are both researchers and learners.

These characteristics distinguish participatory research from survey research and other methodologies in several ways. First, there is more emphasis on researchers as learners. The participatory research process is a learning process for all involved, not a process whereby some people accumulate information about other people. Thus, the subject-object dichotomy is bridged and the reflexive nature of human interaction, whereby I am affected by those I intend to affect, is acknowledged and applied to research professionals as well. Participatory research is a dialogue over time and a mobilization of human resources for information gathering that may lead to action.

Second, the action focus differentiates participatory research from other forms of research. Participatory research is intended to be of direct and immediate benefit to a community and the research process is under local control. People learn in the process of doing. They are not merely applying what they know already. What information do we need? How do we go about getting this information? Who is going to get the information? What does the information mean? Is it enough information? How do we interpret the information? What action seems reasonable in the light of what we have learned? These are questions of process decided in open discussion among everyone involved.

## Qualifying the Model

There are several anamolies, if not contradictions, about participatory research. For example, one of the functions of participatory research is to unmask the myth of science and to validate people's knowledge (Hall, 1975). But in practice this is very difficult to do without some person outside the community, with professional credentials, lending assistance or credence to local knowledge and claims about its validity.

The role of the outside expert is important despite the emphasis on local people in research. This role is not easy to integrate in local research efforts. There is the taint on the professional credentials of a person who lends assistance and credence to research efforts which stretch or violate the canons of a discipline and which relate to an apparent political position. Participatory research requires researchers to do precisely this to the dismay or horror of some colleagues. A professional researcher may deal with this difficulty by fashioning local residents into neophyte researchers to imitate the canons of a discipline and thus compromise the validity of local knowlege. Or a researcher may risk his or her professional credentials by participating in unorthodox research methods which then compromise the authority and ability of that person to lend credence to the information local people produce.

In addition, there is almost an inherent contradiction in writing a methodology of participatory research and emphasizing the origin of this research in the community. In the main, professionals read and write such material and provide

"models" which may seriously compromise the character of participatory research and its origin in the community. In specifying a methodology of participatory research, we also create a new field of expertise with canons and strictures. This only enhances the role of the professional and creates new grounds for dichotomies which participatory research seeks to bridge.

Given the importance of the professional and the researcher from outside the community in participatory research, it is incumbent on us to recognize that role. Papers such as this are read primarily by professional researchers and we need to take cognizance that our role may make participatory research possible even as it compromises it. Professionals and researchers have an important role in the assistance of the production of information that may lead to change. We will be better prepared to fulfill that role if we focus on the characteristics of participatory research that we can preserve despite our participation rather than on its community character which we jeopardize by our support.

It may be useful to speak of participatory research as a hybrid research effort which combines survey research and methodological tenets from participatory observation. Three examples will suggest hybrids of survey research and participatory observation that exemplify the role of an outside researcher assisting another group to undertake change. This, in turn, offers guidelines for the role of professional researchers in participatory research.

## Applying the Model

The Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens (YCCC) is a community organization in Bell County in Eastern Kentucky started in response to the pollution of Yellow Creek from a municipal sewerage plant inadequate to treat the waste material from a tannery in Middlesboro, Kentucky. After a long process of political conflict on the local and state level, the YCCC decided to conduct a household survey of people along the creek to determine illnesses that might be related to the contamination of the creek. Many good features came from this survey. Local residents acting as surveyors received 98% cooperation, which is a much higher rate of response than is ordinarily expected. The survey provided YCCC members new anecdotal information on the pollution problem and the opportunity to share their views and efforts with their neighbors. The survey was on many counts a large success.

However, the survey also demonstrates important limits to the methodology and its place in a political conflict. First, community residents, with outside assistance, constructed a survey that was too long to code and analyze adequately. Subsamples of the total number of people interviewed when controlled for such factors as smoking or age proved too small for adequate analysis. Most responses were not included in the final analysis and responses to questions related to the appearance and smells of the creek proved to be as important in demonstrating

a nuisance as the effort to establish a causal link of exposure and illness. Second, the use of many different volunteers meant incorrect coding and a host of errors that required enormous amounts of time to rectify. The point is that the relation of information to action needs to be kept in mind in devising the survey instrument which must be as simple as possible in light of its purpose. Participatory research is not a scientific study even though sound principles of survey research and sampling can and should be observed.

Undertaking this form of study was a risk to the political goal of YCCC, which was the cessation of dumping untreated sewerage and industrial waste into Yellow Creek. Such a study shifts the grounds for cessation from nuisance and quality of life questions to the health and illness of people. In addition, such a study may open up another fight for a community group which generally has barely enough resources to deal with one conflict at a time. Often the community group is forced to defend their findings before a professional audience, such as epidemiologists (Gibbs, no date). In such a case, the conservative bias of epidemiology as a science becomes the grounds on which the argument turns even though it is precisely this bias which makes some alternative research necessary to establish reasonable grounds, short of death and illness, on which to halt pollution.

In retrospect, this survey was only one part of a political conflict and served many useful purposes. The survey was almost forced upon YCCC by their critics who denied a problem and challenged YCCC to prove a problem. YCCC demonstrated integrity in the conduct of the survey and a good-faith effort to document the problem and this helped win greater public approval. The survey established reasonable, if not scientific grounds, for improving conditions on Yellow Creek. YCCC has gained much as a result of their efforts, of which the survey was part, including a new water utility system and electoral victories in city government. The resolution of the central issue awaits long-delayed court action (Couto, 1986a).

A second example of hybrid participatory research involves survey research undertaken in six rural, low-income communities to establish a baseline from which to measure the effectiveness of a community-based intervention in maternal and infant health and development. University students worked with local women and trained them in interviewing techniques and sampling methods. In addition, they supervised the completion and coding of questionnaires to guarantee uniform responses and to minimize mistakes. The questionnaire was shortened, in light of the Yellow Creek survey experience, to include items of central importance to the community-based interventions, but again proved too long.

The results proved important in several ways. The survey provided the six programs criteria with which to judge if they were serving the most important needs of the community and the families with the greatest need. It provided each of the programs information with which to judge differences in the behavior and

outcomes among their clients compared with a community average or profile. It also provided information to document the hunger, poverty, and inadequate health insurance of women and children in each community.

The consequences of the process are as important as the results of the survey. Local women were employed to conduct the survey. These women were identified according to their ability, including leadership potential, and concern with local issues. This survey was an orientation for them to the issues of maternal and infant health in their communities. Subsequently, when funds became available, many of the women who conducted the survey took employment in the program to extend its services to low-income pregnant women and mothers with infants (Couto, 1985a, 1986b).

A third hybrid example of participatory research is a study of the homeless in Nashville, which became part of the formation of a proposal to establish a health care clinic for homeless people there. Social service agency heads, responsible for the conduct of programs and services on behalf of the homeless, conducted several enumeration studies of the homeless. This involved waking at 4:00 a.m. and visiting shelters, single room occupancy hotels, jails, alleys, abandoned cars, the underpart of bridges and the other sleeping places of homeless people to count them.

Eventually, this enumeration provided information on the numbers and demographics of the city's homeless people to advocacy groups and the city and social service agencies' directors. This, of course, is very important. But, equally important, the process of enumeration organized a set of agency directors around the issue of homelessness, informed them about the homeless, and prepared them to cooperate and to take advantage of opportunities to introduce new services for the homeless. Such an opportunity came with a request from the Pew and Johnson Foundations for proposals to conduct health services for the homeless. Several agency staff members collaborated in the successful proposal and implemented new and integrated services for the homeless. These achievements flowed from the cooperation and information entailed in the enumeration (Couto, 1985b).

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, the three examples are very different. The Yellow Creek comes closest to the model of participatory research; the Nashville homeless study is least similar to that methodology. In the first, people directly affected by the problem designed and implemented the information gathering. In the latter, the people directly affected by homelessness were studied by others who designed and implemented the information gathering. On the other hand, in the first, community people attempted to replicate a scientific study. In the latter, the study was simple and descriptive, with little effort at analysis or correlation.

Because of this, the study of the homeless in Nashville was the least expensive; computer time and staff time required to compile and code large amounts of data increased the cost of the other two research efforts. The three examples also differ according to who initiated the information gathering and why it was important to them.

Mindful of these differences, we may still make some generalizations from these examples. First, elements of survey research and participatory observation can combine in various manners to form hybrids of participatory research. Second, professionals can play a role in participatory research as they did in these cases, but this almost guarantees a hybrid methodology. To prevent the boundaries of participatory research from becoming too fluid and ill defined, these cases suggest questions to ask of research that relate it to the model of participatory research.

Does the research focus on a particular problem rather than on characteristics of the people studied?
Does a problem of the community or a hypothesis of the researcher drive the study?
Is there education, training, and involvement of people besides the outside researcher and staff?
Does the research include dialogue over time about the problem, information gathering, the findings and appropriate action to take?
Does this dialogue include, as equal partners, the people affected by the problem and the professionals and researchers?
Is the research replicable and ordinarily affordable by a group with few resources?

These questions may help us to stay focused on the promise of participatory research, even as its expression varies. That promise entails the link between knowledge and action and concentrates on information gathering that is accountable to the people under study, if not under their control. Finally, that promise entails new roles for researchers and those researched as equal partners, dependent on each other, to see that we act on what we come to know.

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