

Social Transformation and Participatory Research*

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Roots

The term 'participatory research' has now been in existence for about 15 years. It began with the practice of adult educators in the countries of the South Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These adult educators were confronting the contradictions between their philosophy of adult education and their practice of research methodology. Their philosophy of adult education placed learners in the centre and focused on learners' control over their learning process. The major element of this philosophy is based on the premise that adults are capable. They are capable of learning, of changing, of acting, and of transforming the world. It is this essential faith in people as an integral part of the philosophy of adult education that was being contradicted through the adult educators' training as professional researchers. When these adult educators began to examine the problems related to the reality in which they were situating their practice of adult education, when they began to evaluate the impact of their adult education efforts, and when they began to study the learning process of adults, they realized their research methodology was alien to the adult learners and unilaterally controlled by these adult educators as researchers treating their learners as objects of manipulation in the research process.

The social science research methodology became an elitist and dominant methodology after the Second World War. The growing importance of development and debate on various models of the dominant method, in the newly independent countries of the South witnessed a growing use of this research methodology in identifying

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and determining the agenda of development by the ruling cities of these new nation-states. Professionally trained researchers were being produced by the emerging 'factories' of knowledge production to carry out research on problems of poverty, development and growth. The research methodology they learned, imbibed and practiced, had borrowed heavily from the natural sciences and was based on myths of neutrality, objectivity and scientificism. Under the guise of these tenets of natural science research methodology, the social science research methodology became heavily dependent on behaviourism and empiricism as the basic defining paradigm of research. Professionally trained adult educators were no exception to this historical trend.

Recovery

It is this critique of the classical research methodology which led to the coining of the phrase 'participatory research' as an alternative research methodology. The further pursuit of those involved in the practice of participatory research and its theoretical elaborations led to several discoveries worldwide. First, we discovered that the theoretical underpinnings of participatory research are much deeper than classical research methodology. We discovered that participatory research is a methodology of alternative systems of knowledge production that has been in existence since the very beginning of the human race. It is a knowledge production system of ordinary people, those who are deprived, oppressed and underprivileged. Historically, this system has been unrecognized, neglected and delegitimized. We discovered that elite control over knowledge and the production of knowledge was the dominant system in much of human history. This dominant system tended to serve the interests of the elites in perpetuating the status quo.

It was this recognition which began a widespread search in different regions and continents to examine the historical contexts of the origins of participatory research. We discovered its links with the struggles of people over long periods of history in our cultures, countries and continents. We saw that control over knowledge and over the system of production of knowledge has been traditionally used as one of the ways to control poor and oppressed people. Control over knowledge production systems, dissemination and use of knowledge, and access to knowledge historically have been used in different

societies to continue the systems of domination of the few against the many, to preserve the status quo and to undermine the forces of social transformation. In the contemporary context, the control over all aspects of knowledge has become a major source of control over ordinary people, their lives and their minds.

However, throughout history, popular systems of knowledge and an alternative system of knowledge production have existed parallel to the dominant system. This has been the system of producing knowledge for the purposes of the daily survival of poor and deprived people. In the contemporary context, participatory research is the methodology of this alternative, popular system of knowledge production.

Participatory research emphasizes the use of knowledge as one of the major bases for power and control in our societies. It has enormous potential as a major contributor in transforming the struggles of poor and deprived people.

Alternative Systems of Knowledge

When we examined the purposes of knowledge production, also involved in its production, the ways of producing knowledge and the resources needed, we saw major differences between the dominant systems of knowledge production and participatory research. The dominant system of knowledge describes its purpose (answer to the question 'For what?') as the pursuit of truth. This appears as an objective truth; though in practice it is a subjective representation and interpretation of reality. In contrast, alternative systems of knowledge production are involved in answering questions of daily survival and providing insights into the daily struggle for life and living of ordinary people in struggle. The methodology of dominant systems of knowledge production is the classical social science research methodology (based on empiricist and behaviourist traditions) which emphasizes the concepts of neutrality, objectivity, distance from the subjects and methods of data collection which exercise unilateral control over the process of inquiry.

In contrast, participatory research methodology as a representation of an alternative system of knowledge production explodes the myth of neutrality and objectivity and emphasizes the principles of subjectivity, involvement, insertion and consensual validation in order to develop its methods of data collection and analysis.

The dominant system currently and historically recommends the use of trained and exclusive personnel as the sole pursuers of knowledge production. In contemporary terms, these are the trained professionals and researchers, like their historical counterparts of the Brahminical origin. In contrast, participatory research attempts to present people as researchers themselves in pursuit of answers to the questions of their daily struggle and survival. It recognizes the need for an occasional special input of expertise and contribution of certain skills, but it rejects the myth of professionally trained experts as the only legitimate pursuers of knowledge.

The resources for the production of knowledge also differ. In the dominant system resources came from the elites themselves, be they kings, rulers or ruling classes. In their contemporary manifestation, these resources come from the state and its agencies, and from national and multinational corporations, foundations and other such elite institutions. In contrast, the resources for alternative systems of knowledge production, have been generated by the people themselves. In some cases in recent times, however, some participatory research efforts have received support from the institutions of apparent elite control, though much of the grassroots practice of participatory research continues to be supported by the people themselves.

It is this fundamental difference in the two systems of knowledge production which becomes the context for further elaboration of the theory and practice of participatory research.

Knowledge Enterprise

In uncovering the origins of participatory research, it becomes important to analyze the knowledge enterprises in contemporary societies. The twentieth century has seen the emergence of the dominant system's production, use and dissemination of knowledge as a major modern enterprise. In some so-called developed countries of the world like the United States, the knowledge industry is contributing to close to half the gross national product. In some of the so-called developing countries of the South, this is increasingly becoming a major enterprise. The knowledge industry now has specialists, experts, projects, grants, research assistants, statisticians—a whole range of people specially trained for a narrow part of the knowledge industry.

With the growth of literacy in the early part of the twentieth century in the countries of the North, knowledge systems use the

printed word as a dominant form of representing knowledge. Hence, over the decades, it has been equated with knowledge. With the increasing specialization of the knowledge industry, special disciplines, journals, guilds of editors and experts, emerged subtly yet powerfully regulating the knowledge industry. Financed by the state, corporations and other elite interests in society, the knowledge industry determined what society called 'legitimate knowledge' and 'subjective opinion'.

With the rise of specialization on the one hand, and the cult of expertise on the other, two important social processes were set in motion in different societies at different points in time during the last few decades. The first major process was the dismissal of popular knowledge and the alternative system of knowledge production. With the growth of specialization and increasing centralization of the knowledge industry, only a particular mode of knowledge production recommended and pursued by the dominant systems of knowledge production was accepted as the legitimate mode of knowledge production.

The second and related process which occurred over this period was the undermining of the capacities of ordinary people to engage in serious inquiry about problems and issues of daily concern to them. On the one hand, the increasing organization of the knowledge industry began to produce its own agents—the professionally trained researchers, who alone were seen as legitimate producers of knowledge; and on the other, it created a widespread notion that ordinary people lacked the capacities and the tools for production of knowledge and that it took extraordinary training in elite academic institutions to be able to acquire the competencies needed to produce the knowledge.

The second half of the twentieth century has seen the powerful use of the media of mass communication to change and influence the opinions, attitudes and values of people in a given society. The growing investment in communication technology in recent decades has further strengthened these trends. The cutting-edge research and development efforts of new communication and information technology in the North, and growing fascination with and deployment of it in the South, has led to enormous power in the hands of ruling elites due to the essentially centralizing and controlling nature of this technology. One of its major uses has been to control the minds of people, not merely the minds of the middle classes but also the minds of

the poor and the oppressed. In fact, this control has been so successfully exercised in some societies that poor and oppressed people have been made to believe in the inevitability of socio-economic inequalities in their societies. Their expectation is to continue in that lowest socio-economic strata of society. Even ordinary people began to believe that they lacked the capacities, the intellect and the competence to produce their knowledge for solving their own problems their daily struggles and survival.

The rise of the knowledge industry in the twentieth century has narrowed and limited epistemological options. Historically, knowing was a comprehensive integrated human process. Earlier epistemological positions described the broad modes of knowing: thinking, feeling and acting. It was believed that humans knew about social phenomena by the use of their rational self through the processes of thinking and analyzing. It was also believed that inquiry and the process of knowing were pursued through feeling the emotional self of human beings. In fact, the phenomenological writings seemed to support feeling as an important mode of knowing. Acting was also a legitimate and important mode of knowing about a given situation. Early writing on action research seemed to support this epistemological position.

The rise of the knowledge industry, however, with increasing specialization and the cult of expertise, led to the dismissal of feeling and acting as legitimate modes of knowing. The narrow definition of epistemology became a rational pursuit and not an emotional and action pursuit. In fact, the academics—professional producers of knowledge, were given the label of 'thinkers'.

Thus the narrowing definition of epistemology and the dismissal of feeling and acting as important and legitimate modes of knowing a given reality, found support in the increasing forces of division of labour between the mental and the manual. The new class of intellectuals thought of themselves as thinkers, while the rest of the ordinary people were left out. The gulf between theory and practice widened. All human pursuit, in particular, development actions, became applications of theoretical principles, derived through abstract manipulation of symbols and constructs by these professionally trained, certified and male agents of the dominant system of knowledge production. The production of knowledge and understanding from the daily practice of the people was dismissed, just as feeling and acting were as epistemological modes.

The close linkage established between thinking and writing in this century led also to the undermining of traditional and popular forms of knowledge dissemination. The oral tradition and the use of art and culture in its various forms and manifestations as the major ways of sharing and understanding knowledge produced through the alternate system were cast aside. The dominant system instead emphasized the written and printed words, both for the certification of those who wanted to be legitimate knowledge producers and for the rest of the society. Thus papers, books, journals, seminars and conferences became the only legitimate modes of dissemination of knowledge. In fact, they became so dominant in certain societies that they often became confused with knowledge per se.

Contemporary Contribution of Participatory Research

It is in this historical context within the framework of the political economy of knowledge and knowledge production that we have to examine and explore the contributions of participatory research.

1. Valuing People's Knowledge

In the face of continuing delegitimizing of people's knowledge and alternative systems of knowledge production, a major contribution of participatory research is to strengthen the forces of relegitimizing people's knowledge. Counter forces must be established to demonstrate that popular knowledge and alternative systems of knowledge production continue to be practiced by the poor in support of their daily struggle and survival. One of its major contributions, for example, is the rediscovery of traditional health practices as important ways of sustaining health in a community. Other areas include traditional agricultural practices, systems of irrigation and water management, protection of forests and other natural resources. However, it has to be recognized that these alternative forces continue to face the growing onslaught unleashed from the dominant system of knowledge production.

2. Refining Capacities

The second major contribution of participatory research has been the recapturing and refining of ordinary people's capacities in conducting their own research. This entails enhancing their self-confidence in their capacities in order for them to analyze their situation and to develop solutions; in doing so the analytical and critical facilities of

ordinary people which have been undermined and undervalued can be reinstated.

3. Appropriating Knowledge

A third major contribution of participatory research is the assistance it provides to primary people to appropriate the knowledge processed by the primary system. In contemporary societies the dominant system produces knowledge about various socio-economic phenomena and processes, in particular about the conditions of the poor. Participatory research has assisted the poor and their organizations in acquiring, incorporating, appropriating and reinterpreting the knowledge produced by the dominant system for their own use.

4. People's Perspective

The fourth contribution of participatory research has been the development of knowledge that is relevant to ordinary people in struggle. Participatory research has uncovered pertinent questions like alienation from the land and other natural resources, the continued struggle to resist the forces of domination—questions which are not the focus of inquiry in the dominant system of knowledge production. These are questions that derived from the perspective of the ordinary people themselves.

5. Liberating the Minds

And finally, participatory research has contributed to the forces of liberating the minds of the poor and the oppressed by helping them reflect on their situation, regain their capacities to analyze and critically examine their reality, and to reject the continued domination and hegemony of the elite and the ruling classes. By encouraging critical reflection, questioning and the continuous pursuit of inquiry, participatory research liberates the minds of the poor and the oppressed, and challenges dominant forces.

Continuities and Ambiguities

The early writings on participatory research began to emerge in the late '70s. Many of these writings including case studies, critiques, and theoretical reflections, were an attempt to document the early formulations and theorizing on participatory research to the world at large, albeit in the form of the printed word. These initial writings served the twin purposes of inviting other like-minded practitioners

of participatory research to join them in the nascent movement on the one hand, and to pose tentative challenges to the promoters of the dominant system of knowledge production on the other.

The early documents thus became the focus of great attention, both by the protagonists and the antagonists. The conceptual, practical, epistemological and methodological critiques of participatory research pointed out several ambiguities in theory and inconsistencies in practice. A decade later, with the development of practice and the refining of theory, participatory researchers can respond to these ambiguities and inconsistencies.

Four categories of ambiguities were highlighted in the writings on participatory research about a decade ago. These ambiguities related to the objectives of participatory research, the role of the researchers and the participants, the methods of research, and the results of research.

The primary objective of participatory research is the production of knowledge and encouraging the poor and oppressed, and those who work with them, to generate their own knowledge, control their knowledge and control the means of production of knowledge. Awareness as an educational process is a product of this process of participatory research. In pursuing knowledge, the ordinary people experience an educational process and as a result become aware of forces that control them and delegitimize their experiences and competencies. But awareness as an educational experience is not the primary objective. Social change has never been a direct outcome of participatory research and therefore it cannot be construed as one of its objectives. Social transformation requires several types of intervention: organizing, mobilizing, struggle, knowledge (control over knowledge, control over means of production of knowledge, appropriating knowledge produced by the dominant system). Participatory research can make a small but important contribution to the social change process but it cannot lead directly to social transformation.

The second ambiguity is related to the question of the roles of researchers and participants. This ambiguity arises out of those of us who have been products of the elite system of knowledge production, who have rejected that system, and who are trying to find relevance for ourselves in the context of the alternative system. We are called researchers. For ordinary people in participatory research, the distinction between the researcher and the participant is irrelevant—they are both. For us, it becomes difficult to behave as participants in the

ongoing social realities of the poor and the oppressed because we are not part of it. We must therefore try to focus on the processes of participatory research and the alternative system of knowledge production. Participatory research is a collective process of inquiry, as opposed to the individualistic nature of classical research methodology. As a collective process, therefore, it rejects the separation of roles and the emphasis on the researcher as an individual. In fact, there is a danger in this type of separation of roles because it reinforces the division of labour between the mental and the manual—the researchers and the participant. Do researchers like us who have been trained in the dominant system but who have rejected it in favour of the alternative system have a role to play in our system of choice?

Formally trained researchers like us can contribute our skills and expertise by bringing additional information and constructs produced from the dominant system to the service of the alternative system and the processes of appropriating such constructs. Those of us who have a philosophical faith in the underlying principles of participatory research, have a definite role in the contemporary context and must play that deliberately and actively.

This is a manifestation of one of the inconsistencies in the actual practice of participatory research. Many of the contemporary experiences and illustrations of participatory research seem to involve professionally trained researchers. But then this is the very nature of dialectics—the contradictions being the basis for further movement and change. In fact, the use of the label 'participatory research' came from those of us who were trained in the classical methodology, as many of us began to question the empiricist, behaviourist and controlling tenets of the dominant paradigm, we began to sow the seeds of an alternative view of knowledge and its production. It is this dialectic which promoted several of us to recognize the alternative paradigm of knowledge and system of production of knowledge and to promote participatory research as its methodology.

The next ambiguity involves methods. Historically, references have been made to methods which are appropriate to participatory research and others which are inappropriate. Methods of data collection which are qualitative in character have been seen as more appropriate to participatory research, while survey and other quantitative methods of data collection are seen as irrelevant. If concrete information has to be collected from a large number of people in a given

situation for strengthening people's action, surveys and questionnaires are appropriate.

Participatory research is the methodology of the alternative system of knowledge production. It is a set of tools, techniques and methods. Embodying the values and philosophy of alternative and popular systems of knowledge production, it is based on the belief that ordinary people are capable of understanding and transforming their reality. Its articles of faith include a commitment to collective participation, and empowerment of the ordinary people in having and knowing their world; in envisioning a new society; and in playing their collective roles in that process of transformation. It is this faith in the participation of ordinary people that also acts as the philosophical basis for participatory research methodology. The determinants of this participation in participatory research are three-fold:

1. People's role in setting the agenda of inquiry,
2. People's participation in data collection and analysis, and
3. People's control over the use of outcome and the whole process.

Practice shows that different combinations of the three determinants have been employed.

Additional methods of data collection which do not rely on the written word have been used in several examples of participatory research. These methods derive from the oral traditions of communications and dissemination of knowledge like songs, dramas and music which express ideas in a way that is an integral part of the life of ordinary people in our societies.

The fourth ambiguity, results of the participatory research, relate to the objectives. The primary outcome of participatory research efforts is new knowledge or a fresh synthesis of old knowledge. Learning by the people and becoming organized are byproducts of the collective pursuit of knowledge. The primary result is knowledge. Who uses the results? Do people control the use of results?

The question of the relevance of participatory research presents a new challenge. It has been argued that participatory research is relevant only in developing countries. This argument seems to negate the existence of developing work situations in the developed countries. If we continue the exploration of participatory research and contemporary representation of the alternate system of knowledge production by the poor and the oppressed, then wherever such people exist (and they do exist in the North as they do in the South today), such systems of knowledge production exist. As a result, participa-

tory research as a means of strengthening alternative systems of knowledge production can be practiced anywhere, irrespective of the North and the South divide and irrespective of the socio-political and geographical context of a given country. If we also look at the contributions of participatory research as referred to earlier, this confusion disappears. These contributions can be made in any society.

Links to Social Movements

What have been the links between participatory research and contemporary social movements? Historically, alternative systems have been related to and based on the ordinary people's need to survive, which has meant maintaining close links with the struggle of people. In its contemporary manifestation, participatory research must discover, as well as build such links to the people's struggles and social movements.

The links of participatory research with contemporary social movements have varied in different parts of the world depending on the strength and location of those movements. It also seems that voluntary organizations, grassroots practitioners, development workers and other catalysts of social change have been providing the major momentum to the practice and conceptualization of participatory research around the world. Four social movements in particular have links with the participatory research movement.

The movement to preserve natural resources provides one such link. In different parts of the world, movements have emerged in response to lack of access to, and control over natural resources like land, water and forests, by the poor and ordinary people. The centralized, elite-controlled, development strategy is leading to dispossession of the poor and displacement from their traditional access to and ownership of natural resources. Degradation of natural resources has been another major consequence of the current development strategy being followed worldwide. These issues have been rallying points of the natural resources movement. Participatory research has contributed by helping ordinary people to generate new knowledge, and to appropriate knowledge produced by the dominant system.

Participatory research has developed links with the workers' movement, particularly workers in the unorganized and the informal sectors of the economy. The struggles of rural labourers, informal sector workers and women workers on issues of wages, rights, workplace

health and safety, and living conditions in slums and housing colonies, have been the areas where participatory research practice has played an active role. It has also served to highlight their own experiences as workers to provide them with a legitimate basis for the representation of their rights in society. In some contexts, workers' takeover of economic enterprises in order to collectively manage and control them has been the focus of participatory research efforts. Workers' cooperatives in different parts of the world have also provided links with participatory research in several countries. Workers' inquiry as an ongoing theme of the struggles of the working class as an integral component of that struggle seems to be the basis for the links to this social movement.

Participatory research and the women's movement have well-grounded links. The special experiences of women as women, the recognition of unique modes of inquiry have been the basis for establishing these links with participatory research. The points of interaction between the two have included the struggle to overthrow women's double oppression, to be treated as persons in their own right and the formation of women's organizations; the efforts to expose domestic violence; and the struggle to gain equal and just status for women in society.

The human rights and peace movements have been arenas for links with participatory research. In many societies with military dictatorships, the daily violation of human rights has been the basis for organizing social movements. The links to participatory research, however, are fairly weak at the moment.

The links of participatory research with contemporary social movements are theoretically inevitable yet practically very difficult. Our earlier elaboration of the concepts and the origins in the meaning of participatory research makes the establishment of close links with contemporary social movements inevitable because of the nature of the struggles. Yet it is very difficult to establish these links when professionally trained researchers are involved in trying to support the alternative systems of knowledge production. Nevertheless, participatory research must be used to strengthen the alternative systems of knowledge production. The links between the two are historically necessary. The future practice of participatory research needs to focus on these links in order to realize its historical potential as a contribution to contemporary efforts at social transformation.