

Reflections of a Feminist Political Scientist on Attempting Participatory Research in Aotearoa*

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Participatory research is not well-established in Aotearoa (New Zealand), but there are precedents, and current examples of work which incorporate some of the elements of participatory research. Here I record my reflections as a pakeha (non-Maori person) on personal attempts at participatory research. The process has been valuable in both the Aotearoa and international contexts. It has helped me to identify some wider issues in Aotearoa which have implications for social action.

Learning from Developing Countries

At the end of 1983, soon after setting out on leave, I attended a seminar on participatory research in Manila given by Rajesh Tandon, now the co-ordinator of the International Participatory Research Network of the ICAE (International Council for Adult Education). That was the first time I had heard of the term participatory research. The name had suggested to me the possibility of academics working in teams.

Rajesh Tandon's statements on social science methodology corresponded with both my intellectual and gut reactions. After having spent six years doing "rigorous" research on what had seemed an important topic: "A Study of Property Theory in the Eighteenth Century Scottish Historical School", and investigative work on New Zealand national development policy, with its "Think Big" projects and philosophy, I had become disillusioned about the value of both of these types of research in the history of ideas and public policy. What I

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empathized with so readily in participatory research, was the methodological critique from which it has sprung.

At that stage I was not aware that there was an international network of participatory researchers. I planned to go to India to see some of this research in action, but in the meantime, I was off to Nigeria, or so I thought. At the Nigerian Embassy in Nairobi, I found out that I was denied entry. Whether it was because I was from a university, or whether I was trained, or because of New Zealand's sporting contacts with South Africa, I can't say. The extraordinary thing was that coincidentally, I found myself a few weeks later in the office of Kamal Mustafa at the University of Dar Es Salaam, who was the coordinator for participatory research in the African continent. Intrigue was added to interest. We talked and I went away with all of the literature he had available.

At this point in my learning process I understood the essence of participatory research to be a living engagement with a community group. It required the principal researcher to recognize that it should be the group that defined the problem, and that having participated in the research, the group would subsequently own the knowledge.

My next stop was Britain, where I had contact with development people—academics whom I respected, and regarded as challenging in terms of both theory and experience. Still buoyant with my new insights, I was shocked to meet strong resistance to the notion of participatory research. The current notion seemed to be that it was something "Third World and gimmicky". So I turned my attention instead to what I could learn from some very alive and active feminists in England.

My understanding of participatory research developed no further until I reached India, where all of my expectations were surpassed. I was no longer just talking about a methodology, but meeting "academics" and "social workers" who were engaged in participatory research, so I was confronting the evidence of the effectiveness of their work. It was a brief exposure, but it confirmed the viability of the methodology as a tool in the relief of oppression.

Problems of Getting Started

I returned to Aotearoa in August 1984 keen to talk with two close Marxist colleagues. I had come to Marxism through development studies and had not yet integrated my own feminist and ecological

convictions. I hoped that through adopting a creative methodology, a single theoretical perspective would emerge. However, I was not able to convey these prospects to my colleagues. For a second time, my enthusiasm for participatory research met with a dampening response. (I have since come to recognize more clearly the constraints of the university institution, which, through its own power structure, claims the allegiance even of Marxist scholars. There are also practical difficulties in combining the roles of participatory research and university lecturer.)

To begin with, I tried to find out whether anyone else was doing this type of research in New Zealand. A few people were on a regional mailing list and I traced them. None had been able to incorporate it in their work. One had tried in a limited way, but was handicapped by being under contract to a government department. It seemed that there was no participatory research being done anywhere.

Most of my time was taken up with teaching, but I stayed open for any opportunity to get started. Fortunately, in 1985, two of my honours students Jan Andrews and Nicola Armstrong became interested in participatory research after I had introduced works on the subject by Tandon, Mustafa, Bryerson, Hall and Fernandes.

Jan had a temporary job with a small agency, the Women's Employment Trust. This was early days for the new Labour Government and they had set up a task force to call for submission on taxes and benefits. A small amount of money was available. Jan brought together a working group, and in the space of a few weeks we planned and held some workshops involving 200 low-income women. It was a start, but not a basis for continuing work.

I had begun to do some background research about women outworkers (home-based workers). With the economic restructuring that was occurring, more women were being employed to work in their own homes—often under exploitative conditions. Some women in Christchurch were working for 50 cents an hour. (This was at a time when the legal minimum wage for full-time factory machinists was over \$5 an hour.) Jan was a member of the combined trade unions women's sub-committee, and through her, I was invited to the meetings. The group was concerned about the growing problem of outwork, and we began to explore possibilities of working together. Eventually, it proved to be problematic partly because there are outworkers in a number of different industries, and I learned that trade unions are not comfortable working across areas. Secondly,

unions are mainly interested in protecting full-time jobs, whereas outworkers theoretically undermine factory jobs. On the part of the outworkers, there is a degree of suspicion towards union people who may be after them to pay dues. Fundamentally, we found that for women, the basic stumbling block was fear: fear of what a new venture might lead to, fear of conflict on the sub-committee. While a few of the women were responsive to something which seemed to them progressive, a basically different approach was deeply institutionalized within the organization.

If Jan and I were going to launch any participatory research amongst outworkers, we would have to do it ourselves. By now we had a lot of information on the history of outwork in New Zealand, the legislation, and the current problems. We put together a proposal for funding from a government department, ready to work together on a job-sharing basis. For many weeks we waited, only to be turned down, and told that this was a problem for unions to deal with.

New Strategies

At the end of 1985, I returned to India, where I confided to my friends that all I was doing was becoming an expert on the problems of getting started. Those were heady days for SPARC (Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres) in Mumbai, which had just successfully completed its mammoth enumeration of pavement dwellers. In Delhi I spent time at PRIA (Society for Participatory Research In Asia), where amongst other things I noticed an increased emphasis on women. Again the exposure was confirming, but this time I looked more closely at strategies for initiation. SPARC, for example, in doing its enumeration, had used a standard tool in an innovative way. PRIA was busy initiating national workshops on Women and Wastelands. On my return I discussed these things with Jan, but her overall comment was: "Delle, do you think participatory research really is something that goes better in a country like India where the problems are so acute?" I felt that the time had come for me to get off the back foot.

The new year brought the start of my new course at third year level "Women and Development." I put it to the students that development was not something which just happened overseas, and that we might initiate something which could lead to the formation of women's groups in the working class area of Hei Hei. We constructed

a survey, and generated local interest by holding a public meeting. We then organized around the survey itself, fully aware that our priority was to enable women to come together for their own purposes. It was a small-scale venture, with twelve students, eight local women, and sixty-eight other local women who responded to us.

This initiative was enough to demonstrate the effectiveness of the methodology. Participatory research came alive for me, and stopped being a prospect. The information gathered was unique because it shed light on dependent poverty and interrelated pressures on low-income women, with disturbing facts about their health.¹ For some of the local women, the process had a marked effect: they were able to identify their own experiences as part of a pattern common to the women; they identified myths which conceal women's oppression by men (for example, a woman's first duty is to her family); they identified myths which legitimize women's oppression of other women (such as society's attitude to single mothers); they felt power in shedding oppression. They brought their own knowledge to university and talked to the students. For over a year, a local group continued to meet, applying the new insights they had gained to other areas of concern to themselves.

Since then some of the members have gone separate ways. The small amount of organization which we had been able to inject tended to be ad hoc. Even though in the following year, I took out a new group of students, and we followed-up one particular problem which had shown up—the big propagation of women taking mind-changing, psychotropic drugs (anti-depressants and minor tranquilizers), it became clear that organizationally, more leadership was needed than I could supply.

Within the university, a parallel development was sparked off by a group of women students disgruntled about the lack of courses to do with women. (At the time, it never occurred to me that here were elements of a participatory research project.) The students had conducted a survey which showed clearly the need and demand for feminist studies. All of the likely women lecturers in the university were contacted. So, to see what could be done about it, some of us began to meet regularly, although at first reluctantly since we were already overworked. More than 44 per cent of the student population was female, whereas approximately 12 per cent of the staff were women. The students had identified their part of the problem. They wanted to

work with feminist academics to bring about a new development. We formed a collective.

Feminist Methodology

A significant discovery for me came from an article by Maria Mies. For the first time, a feminist was describing the principles of participatory research in the context of a quest for "a new methodological approach consistent with the political aims of the women's movement."² In the article, Mies acknowledged earlier criticisms of the dominant quantitative social science research methodology which had identified its hierarchical nature, its political bias alongside its claim of value neutrality, and the structural separation between the theory and practice of positivism. The problem she saw was that as long as this critique was "confined to the magic circle of academic institutions", and did not reach the working masses, it merely reproduced the separation. Alternatively, the evidence from feminist scholarship and political experience, is that only when there is a struggle against women's exploitation and oppression can the extent and form of the patriarchal system be understood.³ Ironically this last claim was being borne out within Canterbury University with the opposition being shown to the establishment of feminist studies. We did not have to go far to test the theory.

In 1987, at Canterbury, we enrolled our first students for feminist studies, 211 women and men. The struggle was by no means won because we lacked resources and were doing the work voluntarily. We had established that the demand was there, that a future programme would be viable, and also that as a working collective we could function effectively.

A Role for Feminist Studies

It has been said that academically, the focus for feminists has been shifting from a preoccupation with theory to the question of methodology.⁴ I would argue that a key concern is to bring theory and method closer together. Feminist methodological criticism, not only of positivism and naturalism, but also of ethnography and participant observation,⁵ is clearing the way for the political role of feminist research to be recognized.

Feminists interested in bringing about change, cannot rest with the notion that the goal of social science is to discover the nature of

social phenomena. Not only does that goal fall short of our aims, but we have learned that it is only in action for change, that the phenomena come to be fully promising: the empowerment of women in a process that brings theory and practice together, allowing a political development, as it leads to the generation of new theory.

In teaching courses in the Political Science Department on Women and Development, I have sought to combine discussion of the problems with theoretical and metatheoretical analysis, while at the same time providing opportunities for students to engage in research at a grassroots level. They have generally accepted the principle that the only appropriate form of research to do with women, is that which has the empowerment of women as an integral part of the process. And when they themselves have joined in that process, their own learning has been greatly enhanced.

While it has been possible to combine classes and research for students at a third-year level, beyond that, at Masters level, the pressure to produce written work is too great to allow time for practical work. For working on theses, individual research is required and the constraints are such that almost inevitably the student defines a problem which can be investigated and written up in a limited time.

In 1987, as Stage One level of Feminist Studies, I ran two sessions in which I conducted intra-class research, introduced the students to basic concepts of participatory research, giving examples from India and from here, and once again, invited some of the women from Hei Hei to come to the university and take part in small group discussions. I was taken back by student enthusiasm. They wanted to get me on television, wanted to turn history essays into participatory research and were intent on applying a participatory research label to a range of endeavours. I reflected on my own role. Was I anxious to be the guardian of participatory research in its pure form? I was not prepared to expose the local women of Hei Hei to more than they had bargained for by bringing in the television, and I felt strongly that the knowledge they had generated was their own. As for history essays, did this mean reintegrating a method into an academic exercise? Also I was uneasy about participatory research being used as a middle-class tool. The problems were solved by forming a group of those students especially interested in participatory research. We met a few times and talked through the methodology at greater depth.

By this time, the projects with the Hei Hei women, and the contacts I had made, particularly with mature students, had begun to gain

credibility for me with two grassroots women's organizations, Women's Refuge and Rape Crisis. These groups already function in a non-hierarchical way, and they are keen about doing this type of research. They each invited me to work with them, and now two projects are underway. One is a local initiative, similar to the Hei Hei experiment, involving students again, but with good organizational backing. The other is a national evaluation which is urgently needed by Rape Crisis. Previously these groups had not sought academic help, partly because of a lack of trust, but also because they had no clear idea of how to proceed, or whom they might engage. For me, the contact was timely.

I had learned the difficulties of trying to organize women locked into a 70 hours-a-week treadmill of household work, child-care, and paid employment. I had become interested in a massive shift going on in Aotearoa where across the spectrum of age, level of education, and socio-economic status, women are going out on their own. In 1986, for example, there were more women who abandoned relationships with men, and went on the solo parent's benefit than there were marriage licenses issued. Statistically, psychologically, and theoretically, there are thousands of women, who already know the meaning of oppression and have begun to take a hand in their own development. Society individualizes them, keeps them poor, and treats them with derision. Many are helped through their crises by Women's Refuge and Rape Crisis. The hope I foresaw was eventually to build beyond the crisis stage.

The research I am now doing with the organizations was envisaged by them as basically preventive. What is actually happening with our first endeavour is that a participatory research project is just beginning, and a process is underway which looks set to generate organization of women, information, definition of problems, and pointers for strategy as well as refinement of theory and methods. Preconceived ideas about pre-crisis or post-crisis potential seem set to merge with the momentum of whatever it is we have sparked off.

It is fitting that the link with feminist studies is already there. After all, feminist studies, an academic subject, grew out of the women's movement, which in turn grew out of women's consciousness-raising groups, and not from abstract theory. Feminist scholars cannot allow an academic discipline to develop which is detached from women's struggles. A chief role for feminist studies is therefore the facilitation of research which not only avoids a separation by

linking women in a common task, but has the capacity to vitalize the struggle and inform the study.

Community Outlook

The discussion of women's organizations touched on one aspect of community development, but there are other issues and particular features of social change to be considered, which bear on the prospects for research.

Most of the research done in Aotearoa of a standard type is funded either by companies for their own profit or by the government. As social tensions rise due to racial problems and unprecedented levels of unemployment, it seems likely that the government will need to give priority to the question of order. Meanwhile, most people assume that knowledge is obtained for the common good (and that there is a public accountability system if the government fails to deliver the goods), and they continue to look to the government as to a godfather, expecting problems to be solved, when in fact, the government has had a hand in creating those problems.

An assumption of the futility of this assumption was provided by former student Nicola who, after she graduated, took up a position in a government department. She reported on the prospect of a participatory research project: Maori and Pacific island women, hundreds of them working as cleaners in government departments, were about to have their employment put in jeopardy, and their lives disrupted following the onset of corporatization. She drew up a proposal, but the departmental head would not allow the research to be done, because it was too politically sensitive.

"Voluntary" organizations in the community have been confronting hard times. Two years ago, the government withdrew a funding scheme on which most small organisations had relied for paid workers. In place of the old scheme, a new structure was established which was to administer a finite and reduced sum. The effect was that groups were pitted against one another in the competition for diminished resources. This destructive process has still not been documented because nobody has had sufficient time or money to do it. Meanwhile, corporatization⁶ has caused the loss of many jobs. This, coupled with the axing of government-funded work schemes and a systematic fragmentation of unions, has brought hardship and disarray, which in turn has served to dispel effective opposition. Dis-

illusionment has been setting in amongst traditional Labour Party Supporters.

Whereas the process of disillusionment takes time, one group in the society already had 150 years of experience to draw on. History will show that the most systematic work which has been done in this period of the fourth labour government has been done by Maori people.

They would not label their efforts 'participatory research' as such, yet their style of working is close to what has been defined in this way. They automatically have a bottom-up approach because as indigenous people they are on the bottom of the society, socially and economically. The chief aim in Maori development is development of Maori people, pride in their culture, and an all-out bid to save their language from extinction, and to gain the restoration of their land and fishing rights in accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi, on which the colony of New Zealand was founded. Reviewing ten years of struggle, Donna Awatere wrote of herself and three other leading Maori women—Hana Jackson, Eva Rickard and Titewhai Harawira: "We women didn't always agree on the plan, but as to the goal, always agreement: our Land, our Language, kaha Maori and taha Maori."⁷

In Aotearoa, not a week goes by without a hui (meeting) being held in some part of the country. A massive amount of research is going on in various forms, and at different levels, but in a concerted way. Maori people are already linked through connections and they have traditional ways of dealing with conflict, and reaching consensus. New organizations have sprung up to meet specific needs. Networking happens as part of a communal culture. Oral history enriches and informs the present. It would be wrong to paint too rosy a picture, especially since the renewed Maori struggle is only now gaining momentum, and many Maori people have been socialized in over a century of assimilation with white culture. My point is that within the Maori community, research and action are being successfully combined in Maori development.

By contrast, a number of non-Maori groups are floundering. For example, in Christchurch in 1987 a housing network came together comprising one representative from seven different agencies. I was invited to discuss the possibilities of a participatory research project with them, to mark the year of shelter for the homeless, but I discovered that the agencies themselves, church and secular, operate like

small servicing bureaucracies, without any substructure of organization. Within a few months, two key people had changed their jobs and the small group had folded. There is now a new network which has formed in response to a government initiative to form a national housing authority, with the aim of informing government policy!

What is to be Done?

There is, right now, a moment in our history when certain radical forces for change are already at work in the society. Maori people are not the only disaffected group. Sexism has been just as systematically institutionalized as racism, and this explains in part, why it is in the area of feminist activity that developments are also taking shape. Amongst other marginalized people low-paid, and unemployed, there is little sign of new movement, mainly due to lack of political coherence. From the top, the strategies of international capital, aligned with a national Business Roundtable and the Labour Government are having a major impact on the society. There is worse to come, it seems, and the natural resources and social security and peace which we have enjoyed are seriously threatened.

There is plenty of potential work for participatory researchers, but I doubt that this will be done by academics, even if they have the talent and inclination. (We know that grassroots people tend to be anti-intellectual, and that intellectuals in universities generally get their rewards from more patently scholarly work.) Participatory research needs an input of time and energy which academics can rarely give. In theory, they could link with a community organization, but this implies that organizations are themselves ready to work in this way, and even then there is the contradiction that for university staff to make themselves available to community groups, they may need to reduce their commitment to teaching, and resist some of the other demands being made on them within the institutions. By definition, the responsive people have the least spare capacity, and they are few in number. Another factor is that we still have, as a result of the colonial mentality, a preponderance of university teachers who were born overseas and have come here to take up positions. For whatever reason, academics, who are predominantly male, and almost all non-Maori, are not generally in touch with the community.

They serve a conservative institution which as a result of economic and political measures is becoming increasingly elite.

Within the university, but more particularly, beyond the university, the politics of funding is an issue. It is not surprising that for the most part, radical research has had little support in the past. It is not surprising that the professional researchers have not been interested in participatory research methods or that the most oppressed groups are finding those methods fit with their aims. It is significant also, that collaboration between the Maori, Pacific Islander and pakeha is found in the women's refuge organization.

With many volunteer organizations barely able to survive financially, the problem of funding is compounded. One reason Maori groups have been doing so well with respect to research is that they have long made do on minimal outside support, they tend to share resources, and some funding has been made available. Another key factor is that they have identified the problems. This element of the methodology is the cornerstone.

The challenge of participatory research is not only in the work itself. But in the need for some degree of self-reliance on the part of the facilitating researchers. As a political strategy for empowerment it will grow in acceptance as it transforms grassroots organisations, and as its process generates new formations.

In Aotearoa, events are overtaking any research plans we might have. We are entering a period when the problems of trying to merge all of the elements of participatory research, could be overshadowed by crisis. Perhaps then, what has been learned methodologically from participatory research will be of help as we are forced right back to the basis of our survival, with the need to establish networks, and the need to develop anew.

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4. Currie, Dawn and Kazi, Hamida. 'Academic Feminism and the Process of De-radicalization: Re-examining the issues' in *Feminist Review* No. 25, March 1987, p. 81.
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6. Corporatization was a process whereby a range of national services, administered by the government were made into separate entities, called state-owned enterprise. The new structures were headed by prominent businessmen, to be put on a profit-making basis. The second stage in this process is to sell them off.
7. Donna Awatere, 'Wahine Ma Korerotia' in *Broadsheet*, July 1982.

SECTION II

Participatory Research & Social Transformation

Section Outline

Participatory research emerged as a critique to dominant social science research, with the main objective to produce new knowledge or synthesize existing knowledge. Its role however is not restricted to only the phase of inquiry and education, but also transcends—to contribute to social transformation and change. It however needs to be emphasized that social transformation requires a number of interventions: organizing, mobilizing, struggle, knowledge. PR thus does not directly lead to social transformation. It however can make an important contribution to that process.

This section of the book highlights the political dimension of PR, with a focus on tracing its contribution to people-centred development and social change. The section consists of eight papers by educators and practitioners.

L. David Brown introduces the political role of PR, in his paper 'People-centred Development and PR'. He argues that PR is a vehicle for people-centred development. As an approach which includes inquiry, education and action, PR highlights local problems, facilitates collective action and attitudinal change among the poor and assists in building local people's organizations—all leading to people-centred development.

This viewpoint is supported by Rajesh Tandon in his paper 'PR and Participatory Social Action'. He highlights the significance of participatory social action as one "characterized by an equal distribution of power, reliance on local resources, continued control by the people, small and locally evolved technology and qualitative outcomes." Based on the close relationship between top-down social action and top-down social research, he argues that PR needs to

develop certain key characteristics, which mark participatory social action, in order to enable its alliance with the latter.

The links between PR and social action are further strengthened by an early writing of Rajesh Tandon—'Issues and Experiences of Participatory Research in Asia'. Besides providing insights into the characteristics of experience of PR in Asia, the paper also highlights that "PR in its attempts to bring social transformation, has a necessary relationship with social action." A trend, which according to Tandon "has scared many professional researchers from joining PR". The political implications of PR, and its contribution to organization building for the poor is clearly illustrated in this chapter. The paper 'Participatory Research in North America and India' by John Gaventa and Juliet Merrifield explore three approaches to participatory research: (1) The reappropriation of knowledge, (2) Developing the people's knowledge, and (3) Popular participation in the social production of knowledge. They further provide insightful illustrations from North America and India to support the three approaches to participatory research. The paper explodes the myth that the relevance of participatory research as an approach for social change is restricted to the domain of developing countries.

Broadening the purview of social transformation to include 'cultural reconstruction', Rajesh Tandon addresses the contribution of PR to cultural reconstruction in general and in Pozzuoli in particular. His paper 'PR as a Contribution to Cultural Reconstruction' illustrates four critical steps, which include "understanding crises, discovering historical roots, visualizing the future and generating commitment to reconstruction."

Building on the premise that PR makes an important contribution to social transformation, Anthya Madiath's paper on 'Tribals and Land Alienation' highlights the use of the PR approach in the organization of landless tribal labourers in Orrisa to fight against land alienation. The paper thus links the process of 'inquiry' and 'education' to the political dimension of 'collective action' for social change. Eileen Belamide's paper 'Participatory Research Among Farmer-Settlers in Southern Philippines' further highlights the process whereby farmers in the Philippines engage in social analyses of their existing situation to raise political pressures about the existing structure of the village.

The political dimension of PR also extends to assisting poor tribal women of Dhulia district, Maharashtra in their struggle for liberation

of land, equal wages, security and a greater role in decision making in the family and in the community. Vijay Kanhere highlights this struggle in his paper 'Women's Struggle for Empowerment'. PRIA, as an educational support organization has been working on the philosophy of PR since its inception. Rajesh Tandon in 'Knowledge, Participation and Empowerment: PRIA's Experience' provides an overview of how the perspective of PR has influenced PRIA's work on participatory learning, occupational health, women's economic development, local self-governance and strengthening of civil society. The link between PR and empowerment is clearly illustrated.