The Methodology of the Participatory Research Approach[*]

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This paper aims at critically examining the participatory research approach (PRA). The paper is divided into five main sections; the first two sections explain the context in which the PRA developed. The third section looks at what the PRA is purported to be and its different political expressions. The fourth section argues for the primacy of methodology in both understanding and evaluating the PRA, while the fifth section concludes by posing issues regarding the future of the PRA in its inevitable institutionalization, both professionally in the social sciences and politically with respect to development efforts in the Third World. This paper is intended as a basis for discussion about the PRA. It represents a compendium which is by no means exhaustive on the topic or claiming to be the 'final word'. We ask for constructive and if necessary destructive criticism of our ideas.

1. The Social Context in Which the PRA Developed

The PRA arose in the context of thorough-going questioning within the field of social research. Such issues as the relationship between the means and ends of social research, the relationship between researcher (whether individual or institution) and the researched, neutrality and objectivity, were re-problematized in the light of a critical reflection on methodological and epistemological questions.

Importantly, this questioning of the precepts of social research was an expression and development of the popular struggles in the advanced capitalist countries. These struggles were posited against

the establishment, the 'post industrial' society, and the streamlined bureaucracy of the computer age. The dominant ideological response of humanism assumed an individualized, rather than social form. The articulated goals were the realization of self, the quest for the free human essence, and the subversion of the corporate machine through the reinsertion of the human being. This tendency was translated into social research methodologies and techniques where the researcher was encouraged, not to contain, but to employ his/her subjective human attributes in order to extend his/her understanding of the people under study. The action component of social research rested on the belief that a recognition of the elements and facets of domination in social life on the part of individual subjects would release them from their conditioned acquiescence. This process on a social scale would bring about liberation. The researcher's role was therefore to actively promote an inter-subjective context conducive to this actualization of people's inner selves; in other words, to unlock the door to the inherent human thrust for an undefined freedom.

In Third World countries, the glaring contradiction between, on the one hand, the super-sophisticated, politically sterilized, technicist social research practice and the persistent poverty and entrenched underdevelopment on the other, threw the issues of social research into even starker political relief. Questions about the objectives of social research, the researcher–researched relationship, were necessarily posed in the light of basic development goals increased food production, mass literacy etc. Furthermore, these goals were set against the background of escalating anti-imperialist struggles and strengthening capitalist penetration. The answers were equally couched in humanist ideology, but a humanism with a distinctly social focus, that looked to the *people*, the *nation*, the *oppressed* as its subject. Social research in this context, it was recognized, had to be directed towards development, and some went on to say, towards liberation where development and liberation as concepts with unspecified content were generally seen as synonymous. The social researcher became a self-conscious actor and participant in the process of development and liberation. The PRA took roots in this broad context.

2. The Professional Context in Which the PRA Developed

The PRA developed within the frame of a qualitative approach to social research. The qualitative approach represented a reaction to the

quantitative approach which was charged with reducing human beings to scores on socio-economic indices to facilitate computer tabulation. The qualitative approach was advanced in an attempt to study human beings multi-dimensionally. The qualitative data gathering techniques tended not to be structured on interviews of large numbers of people. Large sample size and statistical significance were sacrificed. But the question remains, to what extent did the qualitative approach overcome the legacy of the quantitative approach? This can be examined with respect to participant observation, the qualitative social research technique that was in fact the forerunner of the PRA. Participant observation was described by Freilich (1970) as:

'An important data-gathering technique in active research, since it:
1. maintains and/or increases the anthropologist's rapport;
2. provides checks on data collected in other ways;
3. provides novel data not otherwise collectable; and
4. helps to isolate and to type key informants.' (Freilich 1970:567)

Described as such, clearly participant observation was merely a more effective means of data collection still bound up with the positivist methodology which held objectivity as the primary requisite of social research. *Objectivity* thus referred to an attitude of scrupulous non-partisanship on the part of the social researcher on the one hand, and the subjecting of qualitatively collected data to rigorous verificational processes on the other. The latter implied the separation of the data-gathering process (the context of discovery) from, not only the policy-making process (the context of social action), but also from the context of validation. In other words, once data had been qualitatively gathered, it could be subjected to verificational techniques and serve as the basis of policy-making without further recourse to the concrete situation in which the research had taken place and to which it referred.

What then, it must be asked, is the specificity of the PRA? What distinguished the PRA from other techniques of the qualitative approach, particularly participant observation?

3. The Participatory Research Approach

The PRA succeeds to a far greater degree to break with the legacy of so-called objective social science. The participatory research approach is not purported to be a methodology but rather has been conceived

by its advocates as an approach going beyond the boundaries of a
mere data gathering technique. It must be pointed out immediately
that the distinguishing features of the PRA can be designated only at
a high level of generality. This, as will be shown, is due to the fact
that a wide range of research practices and an equally wide range of
political ideologies are embraced by the broad category, the PRA.
However, it can be argued that the following broad features are in-
tegral to the PRA in all its expressions.

Firstly, subjective commitment on the part of the researcher to the
people under study is essential. This implies a rejection of the pos-
sibility of value-neutrality and of the conception of the social re-
searcher as a tool or technician. The researcher must have a sensitiv-
ity and democratic identification with the people, the oppressed.

Secondly, there is close involvement of the researcher with the
researched community. The researcher is perceived as a committed,
participatory social actor, who must seek to combine his critical in-
sight and knowledge with the understanding and resources of the
local people to trigger new awareness of contradictions facing them.
The concept of dialogue between the researcher and the community
is emphasized as a reaction to the manipulativeness of positivist social
research, the over-simplification of social reality through the use of
conventional research methodologies such as the survey approach
and the alienating, dominating and oppressive character of such
methodologies.

Thirdly, the approach is problem-centred. Research is perceived
not as mere data-gathering, the result of which can be acted upon by
others, the policy-makers. Rather the objective of social research is
to understand the conditions underlying a problem in order to resolve
the problem by transforming those conditions (be they perceived as
social, political or social-psychological).

Fourthly, the Participatory Research Approach is conceived as an
educational process for both the researchers as well as for the people
with whom the research is conducted. The close and active interac-
tion between the researchers and the people through dialogue and
discussion, is ultimately aimed at action towards the solution of so-
cial contradictions.

Fifthly, the Participatory Research Approach stipulates respect for
the people's own capability and potential to produce knowledge and
analyze it. Knowledge creation as being the monopoly of the profes-

sional researchers alone, as commonly practiced by conventional researchers, is challenged by the PRA

In short, the PRA has been described as a three-pronged activity: an approach to social investigation with the full and active participation of the community in the entire research process; a means of taking action for development; and an educational process of mobilization for development, all of which are closely interwoven with each other.

There are actually several different versions of the PRA, differing in the degree to which they imply or advocate the researcher's political activism amongst the local people. A few examples will be cited below.

Freire (1972 and 1974) was the first to popularize the PRA on an international scale. His version of the PRA which he refers to as conscientization is conceived as a strategy in the liberation of oppressed peoples. He refers to those employed in the strategy as revolutionaries rather than researchers. The revolutionaries in union with the local people engage in cultural action in opposition to a dominating power and/or culture revolution under a revolutionary regime. The revolutionaries' political activism is conceived as democratic in form but guiding:

> The fundamental role of those committed to cultural action for conscientization is not properly speaking to fabricate the liberating ideas, but to invite the people to grasp with their minds the truth of their reality (Freire 1974: 76).

de Oliveira and de Oliveira (1975) present another version of the PRA known as militant observation. The technique of dialogue central to Freire's conscientization is supplemented with more traditional data collection in the vein of participant observation. Reference is to the researcher not the revolutionary, however the context of the research process is depicted as revolutionary. The researcher's role is to actively politicize in a more pedagogic fashion:

> The process of political education ... is at the heart of the process of militant observation (de Oliveira and de Oliveira 1975: 4)

Stavenhagen (1971) wrote about activist observation which he describes as:

> The true synthesis between research on, and participation in the social change process, not as is so often the case from the vantage

point of the administrator, the outside manipulator or the transitory participating visitor (a common breed of applied anthropologist); but rather at the level of the political organizer, the social agitator (in the noblest expression of the much maligned term), or the fish in the water (to use a relevant Chinese metaphor). Thus action and research would be joined both in the interests of furthering knowledge and of contributing to change (Stavenhagen 1971: 339).

Stavenhagen argues for social change reformist or revolutionary depending on the context. He affirms his approach is compatible even with research under the auspices of organizations firmly a part of the international capitalist system:

Of course, international aid programs are a far cry from social revolution, and if taken in isolation their efforts will be minute; but then the role of applied social scientist, as I see it, is to act to the best of his ability in terms of his personal ethical commitments, within the institutional framework that he has chosen as his field of action (Stavenhagen 1971: 341).

Other versions of the PRA delimit the process of politicization. Rockhill's (n.d.) notion of qualitative research is effused with complacency for the status quo. In this case political activism is irrelevant and hence ignored. Qualitative research conceived in entirely humanistic terms is aimed at 'promoting individual and social capabilities' (Rockhill, n.d.).

Swantz (1977) defines the boundaries of the researcher's activism as:

Today the task is to bring these people (poor, middle-class peasants and government servants and politicians) into communication with one another within the present political structures and to use first their given rights to demand more say and become more aware of their situation. The people can be made conscious of the existing exploitative practices of self-interested chairmen, petty traders or government leaders. But this can be done within the framework of Tanzanian socialist practice and it does not at this point of historical development require a class war, in which energy would be spent in dividing instead of building up unity within the existing political structure in rural areas (Swantz 1977: 16).

Kassam's (1979) anthropocentric approach synthesizes humanism with national development goals. The researcher's political activism becomes defined by national objectives. This is exemplified in his study of literacy evaluation:

> By using an anthropocentric approach, this little study is primarily designed to capture at least at part of that excitement of the Tanzanian literacy campaign by illuminating its impact on the most personal and qualitative aspects of people's development, a campaign which constitutes one of the most profoundly significant development endeavours in Tanzania (Kassam 1979: 1).

These examples strikingly illustrate the enormous range of political activism that can be accommodated by participatory research's basic approach. The reason why this political spectrum is possible is because the approach is subjective, and idealist. It is explicitly subjective being dependant upon the individual researcher's political views, sensitivity, knowledge and insight. The PRA rarely stipulates what the researcher's frame of reference is or should be beyond recognizing that the people he/she is studying are oppressed or have unrealized capabilities and potential. But within this stipulation implicitly resides the philosophy of idealism, which posits the humanness of the researcher as the basis for his/her identity with the oppressed, while the oppressed are viewed as having answers to their self-emancipation by virtue of being oppressed. In other words, oppression is morally romanticized. Furthermore, no criteria are offered for evaluation of what constitutes oppression.

Generally, advocates of the PRA acknowledge that the researcher will enter the field with pre-conceived ideas and expectations based on past experience, reading or even ignorance. As field work progresses his/her original ideas will be reinforced, altered or entirely rejected as a result of interaction with the people being studied. Never theorized and rarely even questioned are the class interests that the researcher objectively serves, and the false consciousness or ignorance of the oppressed who are blinded by ruling class ideologies or their own petty property interests, as in the case of the peasantry.

The PRA encourages entirely open-ended inter-subjectivity. What of course results is that the individual researcher's philosophical and theoretical biases with their attendant political implications become the basis for the incidental development of an ad-hoc methodology. The ad-hoc methodology develops as the product of the unconscious

assimilation of eclectic and often contradictory ideas and value judge-
ments, generally pregnant with dominant class interests which in turn
are operationalized in an arbitrary and haphazard fashion.

4. Methodology

It is important to note that there are an array of methodologies that
can be consciously adopted which in turn result in a variety of analy-
ses and hence arrive at differing conclusions and problem solutions.
Methodologies are identifiable with particular historical class out-
looks. This section includes a brief examination of some of the more
common eclectic premises of the ad-hoc methodology associated with
the PRA. These premises will be traced to particular philosophical
traditions.

A. Definitions

For clarification it is necessary to begin with some definitions of
terms used with reference to research.

Research is activity aimed at gathering and analyzing information for
the production of new knowledge.

A *technique* is defined as a means of appropriating information, whereas
an *approach* is defined as a mode of appropriating information.

A *methodology* is a much more comprehensive term. The means and
mode of acquiring knowledge as well as the foundations of the re-
searcher's perceptual and theoretical understanding are embodied in
the term. The axis of any methodology is its conception of reality and
causal effect which provides the foundation for the production and
justification of new knowledge. The way a researcher relates to the
people he is studying and the manner in which he gathers informa-
tion and what he does with the information all follow from his par-
ticular conception of reality and causal effect. In other words, a
methodology is the unity of a philosophy with a method of abstrac-
tion and method of investigation.

A *theoretical framework* is both a product and an essential adjunct to
the methodology. The theoretical framework is composed of explicit
concepts used as a basis for gathering, ordering and analysis of in-
formation.

A *problematic* is the particular focus of analysis within the confines of the theoretical framework. The problematic arises from the area of study and the nature of contradictions found therein.

B. Eclectic Premises of the PRA's Ad-hoc Methodology

Through specification of a researcher's methodology and theoretical framework, the researcher transcends his subjectivity. The research-er's work can then be easily identified with particular class outlooks, philosophical traditions and political tendencies.

The PRA can be primarily traced to the philosohical information of pragmatism. However, PRA's tendency towards eclectical absorp-tion makes it vulnerable also to other often conflicting philosophies currently dominating the social sciences, especially idealism and empiricism.

The philosophy of pragmatism first formulated by Dewey is sum-marized by Oquist (1977: 10–17). The following brief description extracts the most salient points of Oquist's exposition.

Pragmatism posits knowledge as eventual rather than antecedent. Knowledge arises from human action. The production of knowledge is viewed as beginning with practical problems. The resolution of problems is guided by values. Values are defined as purposes guiding behaviour. Values are conceptualized as criteria for the judgement of external relations, which avoids the usual moral connotations involved when they are denoted as inner personal conditions. In the words of Dewey (1929: 247), a value statement is 'a judgement as to the importance and need of bringing a fact into existence; or if it is already there, of sustaining it in existence.'

Values are arrived at through affirmative judgement on conditions and results of experienced objects. Values are not regarded as certain-ties but rather as hypotheses of prospective questions. Ideas guide actions. Actions are undertaken to maximize desired values. As Oquist (1977: 14–15) explains:

> The only goal of knowledge is the solution of problematic situa-tions. Knowledge is not an end in itself. It is always a means to the end of 'control over values'. Ideas are simply acts to be per-formed. They are means rather than ends, they are also proximate relative means.

The different versions of the PRA discussed in Section III are firmly rooted in the philosophy of pragmatism as indicated by their

disregard for theoretical construction either before launching field work or while the study is in progress.

In addition, the PRA takes the pragmatic position that the relationship between theory and practice is produced by experimental practice. Practice is primary. Knowledge begins and ends with practice. As Oquist (1977: 15) explains:

> Practice is where the problems that originate in research arise and where one must return for a final accounting of the validity of the knowledge one produces to solve the problematic situation.

The PRA is however logically inconsistent with pragmatism in some respects. Notably suspect is the PRA's adherence to a value judgement while all other ideas are considered operational and testable in relation to practice. The initiating and motivating premises throughout the participatory research process are the value judgements that the people being studied are oppressed or have unrealized potential. These value judgements cannot be discarded without jeopardizing the PRA.

As mentioned before, these value judgements and their moral imperative signify the idealist component of the PRA. Idealism is defined as a philosophical outlook which ignores material causation. Idealists embed social forces in the realm of ideas and trace history as a chronology of men and ideas instead of an unfolding picture of the development of forces of production and production relations. Participatory research clearly evidences idealism in its naive positing of participants (i.e. the researcher and the people being studied) and their interaction as capable of problem solutions at the level of ideas while ignoring or de-emphasizing wider context of the economy and objective social forces which could impinge or facilitate remedial social action.

All the versions of the PRA so far discussed exemplify elements of idealism. It is important to note that originally the PRA as it was first conceived by Freire had conflicting elements of idealist and materialist philosophy. The authors following Freire, possibly with the exception of the de Oliveiras, are inclined to increasingly stronger idealism. However, even in the case of Freire notions of materialist causation seem to be incidental to a far more basic acceptance of idealist causation. Even though Freire writes about a dialectic between the superstructure (ideology) and the infrastructure defined as that 'created in the relations by which the work of man transforms

the world' (Freire 1974: 58), these notions are not an integral part of 'conscientization'. Conscientization remains an individualistic and spiritual experience despite the background of revolutionary activism in which it is situated. The following passage from Freire (1974) is effused with humanistic idealism:

> Che Guevara is'an example of the unceasing witness revolutionary leadership gives to dialogue with the people. The more we study his work the more we perceive his conviction that anyone who wants to become a true revolutionary must be in communion with the people. Guevara did not hesitate to recognize the capacity to love as an indispensible condition for authentic revolutionaries. While he constantly noted the failure of the peasants to participate in the guerrilla movement, his references to them in the Bolivian Diary did not express disaffection. He never lost hope of ultimately being able to count on their participation.
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> In citing Guevara and his witness as a guerilla, we do not mean to say that revolutionaries elsewhere are obliged to repeat the same witness. What is essential is that they strive to achieve communion with the people accessible only to those with a Utopian vision, in the sense referred to in this essay is one of the fundamental characteristics of cultural action for freedom. Authentic communion implies communication between men, mediated by the world. Only praxis in the context of communion makes conscientization a viable project. Conscientization is a joint project in that it takes place in a man among other men, men united by their action and by their reflection upon that action and upon the world. Thus men together achieve the state of perceptive clarity which Godman calls the maximum of potential consciousness beyond real consciousness (Freire 1974: 74–75).

Idealism which ignores the objective class interests of the researcher as well as the oppressed themselves can simply posit liberation as an attitude of mind. The *oppressed* and the researcher somehow transcend their classes and mutually partake in a spiritual *communion* whose basis is a common humanity. While the experience may provide romantic passages for the researcher's future book, it leaves the *oppressed* in much the same state of affairs.

The PRA's absorption of empiricist elements is possible only at the expense of its pragmatic foundation. Empiricists regard acts as

value-free and based upon neutral observation of reality. In opposition, pragmatists bring the facts into existence on the basis of value judgements. But pragmatism nevertheless bears similarity to empiricism in the sense that both philosophies take facts as unproblematic. Empiricists claim to derive facts directly from reality. Pragmatists, on the other hand, derive facts from problematic situations, i.e. only the situations are considered problematic not the facts. Both philosophical traditions mystify the nature of facts.

Facts are actually never given even when they may be viewed as conditional on a specified situation, as in pragmatism. Facts are always problematic. In other words, facts are always theoretical interpretations of empirical conditions.

As facts are being observed by the researcher and especially after they are recorded, they are already implicitly or explicitly a part of the theoretical constructs of the researcher. The categories in which information is either unconsciously perceived or consciously collected orders reality. For example, a researcher gathering information on peasants' annual monetary incomes for a particular area would ultimately be able to present a picture of social stratification based on his *facts*. Another researcher gathering information in the same geographical area collects data on ownership of means of production: land, ploughs, stock, etc. On the basis of his *facts* an entirely different picture of much greater social differentiation emerges. His *facts* reveal that there are landed property owners with wealth tied up in fixed capital (a phenomenon which would not have become evident using the annual monetary income category of the first researcher) versus landless rural proletariat who are forced to sell their labour power for a wage.

Neither researcher has distorted his respective facts. But the facts are different for the same reality, based on differing theoretical frames of reference. Why the frames of reference and hence the facts differ has to be understood in relation to the developing class struggle and the role the researcher objectively plays in the class struggle.

The PRA, as was explained before, aims at social change but there is no surety the net result will be revolutionary, reformist or even reactionary change. The PRA's stipulation that the researcher be sincerely interested and sympathetic to the people he/she is studying is nothing more than romantic idealism which provides little guarantee one way or the other. What is far more significant is that the inherent eclecticism of the PRA gives rise to an ad-hoc methodology

which flexibly allows various political versions of the PRA to emerge. The PRA researcher's stated intention to facilitate progressive social change for the oppressed is realizable only to the extent that the political implications of his specific ad-hoc version of the PRA co-incide with the objective interests of the oppressed. If and when progressive social change occurs it is never accountable to the PRA, but rather is attributable to fortuitous subjective factors on the part of the individual researcher or the 'oppressed' being studied.

5. The Institutionalization of the PRA

There is one final consideration to be made in this paper related to the theme of the politics of research. It is necessary to take note that each and every social researcher who adopts the PRA and practices it, whether discriminately or indiscriminately with regard to method-ology, contributes to the institutionalization of the PRA both in a professional sense vis-à-vis the social sciences and more importantly in a political sense vis-à-vis development efforts in the Third World.

What does institutionalization imply in the world of social science and social development at large today? It is perhaps too early to say. The PRA has not congealed into any one political tendency and perhaps given its eclectic nature it never will, but rather will take on different political complexions in response to different national, regional and local contexts.

Nicholaus (1972: 52) stated that there is only one general *socio-logical law*, namely 'that the oppressors research the oppressed'. Clearly the PRA rejects this, and embraces the belief that social commitment can invalidate the *sociological law*. However, there is a need to be alert to two issues regarding the use of PRA in social research. These issues are related to the fact that even within the context of PRA tenets, the PRA could very easily degenerate into *social espionage* in the Third World, despite the best intentions and commitment towards those being studied on the part of the PRA researcher.

Firstly, this is possible because the PRA social researcher rarely escapes being in a position of paid employment or financial sponsor-ship by one or another agencies with vested interests in Third World development. Under these circumstances the PRA researcher is rarely given complete discretion to carry on research in the manner he/she sees fit, regarding content, tempo etc. Thus the inter-subjectivity of the PRA portrayed as a dual relationship between the researcher and

the oppressed is actually three-fold. There is almost always a third party, the sponsorship agency, who may remain a shadow, but nevertheless makes its presence felt. This third party may intervene in various ways, e.g. by demanding practical results of a certain sort at a certain time or project documentation at awkward moments etc. Thus the results generated by the PRA project can ultimately become a programmed product of the sponsoring agency. The question that all researchers committed to the tenets of the PRA would have to ask themselves is: 'what are the interests of the sponsoring agency?' The sponsoring agency may be benevolent, patronizing, domineering or dangerously counter-reform and reactionary. Almost all PRA projects are thus bounded by the expectations and intentions of a sponsoring agency.

Secondly, any output of a PRA project whether it be the form of material reform or even just project documentation once released outside the boundaries of the inter-subjective relationship of the participants (i.e. the researcher and those studied) will have social repercussions that are beyond their control. If the commitment upon which the PRA is premised is to have any meaning, then the researcher in conjunction with those studied would have to anticipate the possible effects on the PRA project. In the more materialist conceptions of the PRA, depending on their political interpretations of social forces, participants would have to consider the possible impact on progressive struggles in the wider community. Of course, as stated above, the amount of control the participants have within their power even regarding the release of the material and/or ideological products they generate is limited. However, to the extent that control is possible, for the sake of conformity to the principle of social commitment, control would have to be exercised in a responsible manner.

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Editor's Note

From Clarity to Anarchy: Participatory Research Approach*

(A critique of 'The Methodology of the Participatory Research Approach' by Deborah Bryceson et al.)

This paper presents conceptual arguments to delineate the methodology of the participatory research approach (PRA). After presenting an excellent analysis of the social and professional contexts of the origin of PRA, the authors describe various points of view which are broadly subsumed under PRA. The degree of the researcher's political activism is seen as the main dimension on which these various points of view differ.

There is a major fallacy in the argument presented by the authors that the wide range of political activism supported under PRA leads

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to naive idealism on the one hand and methodological ad-hocism on the other. First, let us be clear that PRA is not an invention of the seventies, by a group of dedicated social science researchers. What is new is the label 'participatory research', not the approach. People engaged in mobilizing and organizing the rural poor in India, and other Third World countries, for example, through their very concrete actions, demonstrating all the aspects of PRA we have conceptualized recently. Many of them, those engaged in PRA today, do not know the label, and some of them even shy away from it.

Second, PRA can be looked at from two contrasting starting points. It can be approached from the point of view of the activist struggling in the field. For an activist, PRA, by very definition, entails political activism in the field. The other way of looking at PRA is our own familiar professional researcher's point of view. For us researchers, direct political activism may appear to hurt the process of knowledge generation. Moreover, we have our own constraints of institutional membership. We may not be free to commit ourselves to direct political action. Is it possible to reconcile these two points of view? And if yes, the PRA will necessarily have the range of political activism in its fold, as described by the authors. If not, then PRA will become the future discipline of academic professional researchers and join hands with action-research and participant-observation in the classrooms. This is an important issue which has implications beyond the methodology of PRA.

To the extent that we define the origins of PRA in the social and developmental context of the Third World countries, we cannot argue for the separation of PRA from the increasing demands of participatory social action. Consequently, we cannot ignore the activists' points of view. And, that implies that the major challenge for PRA is to accommodate and integrate these two points of view. Till that happens (and if it is possible and desirable), PRA may have to continue reflecting the wide range of political activism and choices of methodology.

The second aspect of this paper which has methodological implications, relates to the issue of subjectivity. The authors highlight the argument that PRA reflects open-ended inter-subjectivity and eclectic approach. They feel that this eclectic orientation is embedded in the philosophy of pragmatism. According to the authors, such an orientation leads to methodological ad-hocism. In order to understand the subjective and eclectic aspects of PRA, we have to examine the basic

difference between the classical research approach (CRA) and PRA. One of the hallmarks of the classical research approach is its clarity and precision in methodology. Moreover, this methodology of CRA is based on the control of external, spurious influences and the subjectivity of the researcher. This implies that CRA encourages the thinking aspect of the researcher; and, it attempts to reduce the feelings of and actions by the researcher which are believed to contaminate the research.

This rigid delimitation of thinking as the only mode of inquiry is the foundation of CRA. Its proponents have advocated this methodology and its teachers have presented philosophical justifications for thinking as the only valid and legitimate mode of knowing and inquiry. However, human beings are somewhat different from machines. They feel and act, as well as think. As feeling, thinking and acting individuals, they not only learn but also contribute to others learning. To the extent that CRA is limited to the thinking mode of inquiry, it truncates the essential humanity of the researcher and makes unrealistic demands on him/her as a researcher. PRA, on the other hand, accepts feeling and acting as equally important modes of knowing as thinking. The entire existentialist philosophy supports feeling as a valid mode of knowing; and the theoretical underpinnings of action-research provide the basis for acting as a legitimate mode of knowing.

If we recognize that PRA is a holistic approach to inquiry and knowledge-generation, with feeling, thinking and acting as independent and correlated modes of inquiry, we begin to understand the apparent eclecticism and ad-hocism of the PRA. To the extent that PRA opens up many more modes of inquiry as opposed to the narrow, limited, unimodal approach of classical research, it is inevitable that the methodological options thrown open by PRA will appear to be unruly, anarchic and ad-hoc to those of us who are schooled in the neat, well-defined and pre-set methodology of CRA. Moreover, the eclectic orientation of PRA is a reflection of not only the wide range of modes of inquiry as described above, but also the variety of contexts, researchers and issues presently being encompassed by PRA. Different researchers with different previous experiences are engaged in PRA in different settings. This variety is so overwhelming to us who are used to CRA, that we almost label it ad-hoc and open-ended.

The third aspect of this paper, which has attracted me is the notion of idealism in PRA. The authors argue that PRA implies value

judgements and moral imperative which reflects the idealist component of PRA. Moreover, they maintain that such idealism tends to overlook material causation. The paper further describes how this idealism leads to naive positing of participants, whereby objective socio-economic conditions as causes for problems and their solutions are ignored. I tend to agree with the authors partly. It is conceivable that the PRA can degenerate into a subjective, local and superficial analysis of the social reality. It is possible that the researcher places entire emphasis on the subjective experiences of the participants in developing an understanding of reality. In my own field experience, I have found that the small, poor farmer is unaware of the systemic causes of his poverty and impoverishment. If I agree with him blindly, the only plausible explanation for his poverty is his own stupidity, ignorance and incompetence. However, this will be my naivete as well as a distortion of PRA. One salient methodological element of PRA is the joint analysis performed by the people as well as the researcher. The researcher develops his/her own analysis of reality (and that includes objective systemic conditions) just as the people have their own subjective analysis of reality. These two are then brought into active interaction whereby a joint analysis of reality develops. Without this joint analysis, the methodology of PRA is incomplete. And having engaged in this process of joint analysis, the researcher can avoid the pitfalls presented in this paper. Moreover, it is this element of joint analysis in PRA that brings out the key learning for the participants.

In sum, therefore, it is useful to underscore the anarchic appearance of PRA. It appears anarchic because it is a major departure from our present modes of conceptualization of the research process. It seems anarchic because it is pregnant with unmanageable variety. And it just may be anarchic because it is ambiguous, unclear and incomprehensible.