

Participatory Research And Community Organizing

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Introduction

The distinct features of post-industrialism, such as the trends toward rising numbers of white-collar workers, decreasing numbers of blue-collar workers, a greater emphasis on information goods rather than industrial manufacturing, the mobilization of science in production and management, and a consumer-oriented economy of affluence, have been studied and discussed since the mid-1950s. Price (1963) surveyed the growth of "big science" in the 1950s and demonstrated the exponential growth rate in the production of scientific knowledge. Dwight Eisenhower, at the end of his administration, warned the nation against the alliance of science with industry and the military (Eisenhower, 1971). Machlup (1962) first introduced the notion of a knowledge society by analyzing the growth of the knowledge producing industries in the U.S. economy, such as education, research and development, media and communications, and information machinery. Similarly, Bell (1974) observed that information and knowledge had become key resources in the post-industrial society, in much the same way that labor and capital are central resources of industrial societies.

Still, these economic and social developments have not led to the "carefree utopia" of cybernetic postindustrialism that fascinated early space age America in the 1960s (Luke, 1991: 2). Instead, new technical and economic forces are creating a more culturally impoverished and ecologically destructive world system, and a concomitant degeneration of political democracy and ordinary everyday community (Agger, 1985; Bell, 1976; Beninger, 1986; Gartner & Riessman, 1974; Grahame, 1985). Habermas (1979) in his discussion of technology and science suggests that the monopoly of capital is now reinforced by the monopoly of information and "high-tech" solutions that has penetrated into not only the realm of economy but every sphere of public and private life. In our televisual democracy, for example, public life emerges from public opinion polls, whose mathematical indices are substituted in practice for "the public" itself. The masses become a demographic construct, a statistical entity whose only traces appear in the social survey or opinion polls. Daily television news programs create false stylized narratives about contemporary political "reality" with actors, sets and scripts to report "what is true" about American politics. In this process, apathetic public participates in a simulation rather than a real representative democracy (Luke, 1991).

Changing economic and political relations, based on the ownership and control of information technologies and communication, raise important questions for community organizing in an increasingly privatized, postindustrial world of a knowledge society: Who produces knowledge and for whose interests? What are the implications of a changing economic and social order for the relatively powerless? Who are the have-nots in the knowledge society, and how do they organize against the new elements of oppression the knowledge society brings? Today's challenges call for rethinking of knowledge production in community organizing. Instead of conceptualizing research as detached discovery and empirical verification of generalizable patterns in community practice, social researchers need to view research as a site of resistance and struggle. Hence, a major focus of this paper is to explore research methodologies by which social researchers and community practitioners can mobilize information and knowledge resources, as one part of their broader strategies for community empowerment. I begin by briefly summarizing the political economy of the new postindustrial society and the role of knowledge elite. This analysis is linked to the emergence of participatory research movements. I argue that the participatory approach to community research offers an epistemology and methodology that addresses people, power and praxis in the post-industrial, information-based society. To illustrate this, I describe how a participatory research project is carried out in community practice, articulating key moments and roles of the researcher and participants. I conclude with the reconfiguration of validity in social work research.

Knowledge Elite as Power Broker

From a grassroots perspective, the significance of a knowledge society stems from the social relations it implies. The power of the knowledge society is derived not simply from technological advances, but also from the growth of new elites who embody and institutionalize them. With the rise of modern sciences, knowledge has become a commodity. There is a market mechanism for this commodity (Hall, 1979). Within that economic structure, the production of knowledge has become a specialized profession and only those trained in that profession can legitimately produce it. Knowledge becomes the product to be owned, and the expert, the specialist of knowledge, becomes the power broker (Bell, 1974). In modern society, knowledge has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of "experts" and the elite class they represent.

The ideology of the knowledge society has at its roots a modern-day faith in science as the model of truth (Imre, 1984). The claim to truth gives rise to hierarchies of knowledge which reinforce and legitimate the economic and social hierarchies. The truth-claim and the procedures for gaining access to that truth have historically privileged the pronouncements of trained experts over the discourses of "ordinary" people (Foucault, 1980). Today this ideology manifests itself in the deference of the people to the expert, and ultimately the subordination of their own experiences and personal meanings to expertise. As a result, decisions affecting ordinary people are shown to be based on "expert" knowledge, denying the rationality of individual citizens and their life experiences. Understanding human nature and the problems of living becomes the purview of scientists, rendering people dependent on experts to explain and oversee their life experiences (Berman, 1981). Hence, the specialists dominate any debate concerning issues of public interest because ordinary people are unable to enter the scientized debate, as they lack the technical terminology and specialized language of argumentation (Habermas, 1979).

Unequal relations of knowledge are therefore a critical factor that perpetuates class or elite domination. Inequalities abound - in access to information, in the production and definition of legitimate knowledge, in the domination of expertise over common knowledge in decision making. Underlying all of these elements of the power of expertise is the expert's lack of any accountability to the ordinary people affected by his or her knowledge. The ideology of the knowledge society is a potent one, with profound consequences for participatory democracy: A knowledge system that "subordinates knowledge of ordinary people also subordinates common people" (Gaventa, 1993:31).

Situating Participatory Research Movements

Originally designed to resist the intellectual colonialism of western social research into the third world development process, participatory research developed a methodology for involving disenfranchised people as researchers in pursuit of answers to the questions of their daily struggle and survival (Brown, 1978; Fals-Borda, 1979; Freire, 1970, 1974; Hall, 1981; Tandon, 1981). It is not new for people to raise questions about their conditions or to actively search for better ways of doing things for their own well-being and that of their community. But what participatory research is proposing is to look at these actions as research that can be carried out as organized cognitive and transformative activity (Park, 1993). This vision implies a new framework of political will to promote research as collective action in the struggle over power and resources, and as the generation of change-oriented social theory in the post-industrial, information-based society. Knowledge becomes a crucial element in enabling people to have a say in how they would like to see their world put together and run (Gaventa, 1988). Participatory research is a means of putting research capabilities in the hands of deprived and disenfranchised people so that they can identify themselves as knowing actors; defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, and transforming their lives for themselves (Callaway, 1981; Fernandes & Tandon, 1981; Gaventa, 1993; Horton, 1990; Humphries & Truman, 1994; Maguire, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983). It is a means of preventing an elite group from exclusively determining the interests of others, in effect of transferring power to those groups engaged in the production of popular knowledge (Fisher, 1994; Kling, 1995; Kieffer, 1984).

This theme has been part of the civil rights movement, women's movement, anti-war activism, and environmental movements in the United States that shifted the center from which knowledge was generated. A core feature of these liberation movements is the development and articulation of a collective reality that challenges the dominant "expert"

knowledge that did not reflect people's own experiences and realities. Community organizations, housing and health care coalitions, self-help groups and advocates for environmental justice are among those demanding participation in the development of social knowledge, policy and practice (Epstein, 1995; Gottlieb, 1994; Gartner & Riessman, 1974; Jackson & McKay, 1982; Levine, 1982; Merrifield, 1989; Nelkin & Brown, 1984; Sohng, 1992; Yeich & Levine, 1992). The exploitative results of international development projects triggered popular resistance to First World technology and demands for participation in development research (Brown & Tandon, 1978; Darcy de Oliveira & Darcy de Oliveira, 1975; Ellis, 1983; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1979). The research and action of these groups challenged the monolithic authority of the traditional scientific paradigms and top-down social policy.

Connecting to Social Work Tradition

The concerns and claims of participatory research also bear a striking resemblance to the historical values and mandates that shaped social work in the United States. In the early days of social work, research on the lives of poor immigrants was closely linked to community organization and social reform, and was usually stimulated by the settlers' one-to-one contact with their neighbors (Addams, 1910/1961). Studies of the plight of orphan children on the streets of New York, of tenement dwellers, and of infants dying in foundling homes contained integrally woven components of assisting and advocating for clients, and for developing new services (Abbott, 1936; Breckinridge, 1931; Lathrop, 1905; Lee, 1937). The Hull House approach joined researchers, practitioners, community organizers and residents in dialogue, engaging them together in personal and political action as well as informing social theory. Narrative in style and rich with examples, these published studies brought to public attention the strengths and needs of people in disadvantaged circumstances, and frequently influenced social policy at the national level (Katznelson, 1986; Kling, 1995; Tarrow, 1994; Tyson, 1995).

Many decades later, the prevailing structure of professionalization, specialization and bureaucratization has separated practice, research, policy reform and social change, resulting a widening gap between knowledge development and the realities of practice. Increasingly, practice principles and methods are developed by "experts", often under controlled conditions, then imported into daily practice and tested against clients and the policy context. Such "division of labor" has created institutionally segregated professional roles (i.e., researchers separated from practitioner's domain) with different aims, methods, styles and interests, thereby limiting social work's efforts to attack social problems comprehensively. Recovering the unity among research, practice and policy as one collaborative process, underscored by earlier authors, can provide contemporary social work a different base for expertise, a knowledge that comes from people and community.

Defining Participatory Research

Finn (1994), reviewing current literature in the field of participatory research, outlines three key elements that distinguish participatory research from traditional approaches to social science: people, power and praxis. It is people-centered (Brown, 1985) in the sense that the process of critical inquiry is informed by and responds to the experiences and needs of oppressed people. Participatory research is about power. Power is crucial to the construction of reality, language, meanings and rituals of truth (Foucault, 1973). Participatory research promotes empowerment through the development of common

knowledge and critical awareness which are suppressed by the dominant knowledge system. Participatory research is also about praxis (Lather, 1986; Maguire, 1987). It recognizes the inseparability of theory and practice and critical awareness of the personal-political dialectic. Participatory research is grounded in an explicit political stance and clearly articulated value base - social justice and the transformation of those contemporary sociocultural structures and processes that support degeneration of participatory democracy, injustice and inequality.

Participatory research challenges practices that separate the researcher from the researched and promotes the forging of a partnership between researchers and the people under study (Freire, 1970, 1974). Both researcher and participant are actors in the investigative process, influencing the flow, interpreting the content, and sharing options for action. Ideally, this collaborative process is empowering because it (1) brings isolated people together around common problems and needs; (2) validates their experiences as the foundation for understanding and critical reflection; (3) presents the knowledge and experiences of the researchers as additional information upon which to critically reflect, (4), contextualizes what have previously felt like "personal," individual problems or weakness, and (5) links such personal experiences to political realities. The result of this kind of activity is living knowledge that may get translated into action. Participatory research reflects goal-oriented, experiential learning, and transformative pedagogy (Dewey, 1938; Mead, 1934; Freire, 1974; Shor, 1992).

Conceptualizing the Research Process

Participatory research views knowledge production as a dynamic process of "engagement, education, communication, action and reflection" (Finn, 1994: 27). Knowledge exists in our everyday lives. We live our knowledge and constantly transform it through what we do. Knowing is part of our life; it informs our actions. Critical learning comes from the scrutiny of everyday life. This knowledge does not derive from analysis of data about other human beings but from sharing a life-world together - speaking with one another and exchanging actions against the background of common experience, tradition, history, and culture (Park, 1993). It is this engagement and its impact on ways of looking and developing knowledge which is crucial, rather than the articulation of a set of techniques that can be mimicked.

Conceptualizing knowledge development as an emergent process, the discussion on a theoretical and methodological perspective centers around the conditions and actions that help move research processes in the direction of participation and partnership.

Setting the Research Process in Motion

Participatory research is most closely aligned to the natural processes of social movements. As groups begin to organize there is almost always a natural need to understand more about the situations which people are facing together. Typically, participatory research begins with issues emerged from the day-to-day problems of living. This view builds on the epistemological ground that life experience structures one's understanding of life. This sense of the problem may not always be presented as a consensually derived target of struggle. For this reason, the role of the researcher is to work with the community to help turn its felt but unarticulated problem into an identifiable topic of collective investigation.

Researchers need to take responsibility for developing an informed and critical view of the daily realities surrounding research issues before starting the research project. They need to be knowledgeable about the specific substantive content areas of a research topic, about the cultures and life experiences of those whose lives would be the focus of the research. Researchers need to be aware of how members of a group perceive and speak about their lives. This means they must learn everything that can be found out about the community and its members both historically and sociologically through available records, interviews, observation, and participation in the life of the community (Hall, Gillette, & Tandon, 1982). In the ideal situation, the researcher already lives in the community and partakes in its affairs (Brown, 1985). Typically, however, the researcher is not an established member of the community. For this reason, he or she must be a committed participant and accepted by the community.

During this phase the researcher explains the purpose of the project and begins to identify and solicit help from key individuals who would play an active role in the execution of the project. In this process, the researcher acts as a discussion organizer and facilitator and as a technical resource person (Park, 1993). Together with a collaborating organization, such as a community development agency, social service agency, or community health clinic, the researcher contacts members of the community, activates their interest in the problem to be dealt with by action-driven research, and helps to organize community meetings where the relevant research issues will be discussed. This initial organizing phase of the project can take considerable time and effort. This situation demands interpersonal and political skills of the researcher as an organizer.

This pre-data gathering phase of participatory research has its analog in traditional field research, in which the researcher establishes rapport with the community for cooperation in the research process. However, the contrast is that participatory research puts community members in the role of active researchers, not merely passive providers of information.

Once community members begin to get together to discuss their collective problem, the researcher participates in these meetings to help formulate the problem in a manner conducive to investigation, making use of the community knowledge that he or she developed earlier. From this point on, the researcher acts more as a resource person than an organizer, this latter function being better carried out by community people with organizational skills and resources. The aim of the participatory research is to provide the catalyst for bringing forth leadership potential in the community in this manner. Here, the researcher shares his or her expertise with the people, recognizing that the communities directly involved have the critical voice in determining the direction and goals of change.

Dialogue and Critical Reflection

A key methodological feature that distinguishes participatory research from other social research is dialogue. Through dialogue, people come together and participate in all crucial aspects of investigation, educational and collective action. It is through talking to one another and doing things together that people get connected, and this connectedness leads to shared meaning. The dialogic approach differs from conventional "interviewing" in several respects. Interviewing presupposes the primacy of the researcher's frame of reference. It offers a one-way flow of information that leaves the researched in the same position after having shared knowledge, ignoring the self-reflective process that the imparting of information involves. The dialogic approach and self reflection require the inevitable

engagement of the researcher in the critical process, in the discussion of meanings and perspectives.

Dialog helps people to look at the "whys" of their lives, inviting them to critically examine the sources and implications of their own knowledge. The role of the researcher in this process is not only to learn from the participants, but also to facilitate learning. Education here is to be understood not in the sense of the didactic transmission of knowledge, characteristic of much of expert teaching, but rather in the sense of learning by posing questions and stimulating a normative dialogue: What are the conditions of participants' lives? What are the determining features of the social structure that contribute to creating those life patterns? What choices do the members of the group make, and why do they believe those are good things to do? What are the possibilities for their experience and action? The researcher's sharing of his or her perceptions, questions in response to the dialogue, and different theories and data invite the participants to critically reflect upon their own experiences and personal theories from a broader context. Learning involves examining the self from a new, critical standpoint. This may involve naming areas of ignorance or gaps in knowledge, that render people unable to link personal experience with political reality (hooks, 1989). This is the meaning of conscientization, which Freire has helped popularize. Critical consciousness is raised not by analyzing the problematic situation alone, but by engaging in action in order to transform the situation. Dialogue acts as a means for fostering critical consciousness about social reality, an understanding based on knowledge of how people and issues are historically and politically situated.

Researcher's Reflexivity:

A dialogic approach requires both the researcher and the participants to help create and maintain authentic and mutual relationships. This involves ongoing relationship and raises ethical issues around power, status and authority, as well as critical reflection over their roles, intentions, actions and content. The forging of a partnership is not easy to establish with people who have been victims of a dominating structure; traditional attitudes and negative self images reinforce subordination to outside researchers. And for the researcher it may be difficult to relinquish the role of expert, imposing one's ideas consciously or unconsciously. To counter these tendencies, researchers must engage in explicit reflexivity, that is, they need to examine privately and publicly the sources of social power in their lives and how these sources appear in their research. This position is particularly consonant with social workers' commitment to professional self-awareness. In their research activities, they need to expand that professional self-awareness to include an analysis of their impact on the research as socio-political-historical beings. Their class, culture, ethnicity, gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors must be placed in the frame of analysis and in the research report (Harding, 1991). Ultimately such an emphasis involves a cross-checking mechanism on the hubris of intellectuals and power relations that underlie the formation of knowledge itself.

People's Participation:

Envisioning new, egalitarian partnership requires both the researcher and the community members to break with old, hierarchical patterns of interaction between researcher and researched. "Old" patterns may be most successfully broken and "new" roles created when all collaborators make a clear commitment to continually scrutinize their interactions. At appropriate times, community members must be willing to "call" researchers on their

unexamined assumptions of authority, leadership, expertise. In turn, researchers must be willing to be confronted on such assumptions and to take a back seat to community experts. Researcher/community partnerships are more likely to succeed if all participants in the collaborative endeavor are expected to share responsibility for acknowledging and discussing patterns of interpersonal conduct. In this way, the collaborative researchers strive for an equivalent voice rather than a dominant voice in the research process (Gould, 1995; hooks, 1989).

Research Design and Methods

Participatory research, in theory, draws upon all available social science research methods. However, because participatory research is premised on the principle that the people with a problem carry out the investigation themselves, it excludes techniques that require a separation of researcher and researched, such as when experimental "subjects" are kept ignorant of the purpose of the study. Methods that are beyond the technical and material resources of the people involved in the research are also excluded. Field observation, archival and library research, and historical investigation using documents and personal history, narratives and story telling, as well as questionnaires and interviews, have been used in participatory research.

Once the research question is formulated, the researcher presents to the group methodological options that can be considered within the available personnel and material resources of the community, and explains their logic, efficacy, and limitations. This aspect of participatory research serves to demystify research methodology and put it in the hands of the people so that they can use it as a tool of empowerment. This is a long-range goal of participatory research toward which the researcher moves the process by sharing his or her knowledge and skills with the groups.

Communication is a key methodological concern in participatory research. It draws upon creative combinations of written, oral and visual communication in the design, implementation and documentation of research. Grassroots community workers, village women, and consciousness raising groups have used photo novella (people's photographic documentation of their everyday lives) to record and to reflect their needs, promote dialogue, encourage action, and inform policy (Brown & Tandon, 1978, Carr-Hal, 1984; Wang & Burris, 1994). Researchers use theater and visual imagery to facilitate collective learning, expression, and action (Antrobus, 1989). Other forms of popular communication are utilized such as collectively written songs, cartoons, community meetings, community self-portraits and videotape recordings (Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990; Conchelos, 1985; Randall & Southgate, 1981; Sarri & Sarri, 1992).

Critical knowledge development calls for a creative blend of traditional methods of inquiry and new approaches. Use of alternative communication methods in participatory research has both pushed researchers to re-examine conventional methods and opened up the possibility of using methods that previously would not have been considered legitimate.

Utilization of Results

The path from knowledge generation to knowledge utilization is direct in participatory research, since the same actors are involved in both activities. Often in participatory research, what is investigated is not a theory to be applied but rather the ways of

implementing a practical idea, such as leadership development in the labor and civil rights movements (Horton, 1990), starting a community cooperative (Conti, Counter, & Paul, 1991), policy initiatives for inner city youths (Checkoway & Finn, 1992) or a homeless persons union (Yeich & Levine, 1992). In such instances, action takes place concurrently with research activities. The resulting knowledge often leads to the formation of collaborative ventures. Most important, the assembled findings of the investigation serve as topics of collective reflection achieved through dialogue. Sarri and Sarri's (cited in Finn, 1994) comparative study of a participatory research project in a Bolivian community and one in Detroit, Michigan illustrates the potential for international collaboration and learning. The Bolivian project used citizen surveys, community forums and group interviews to understand and develop action plans around community health care needs. Knowledge from the Bolivian experience informed plans for a youth shelter in Detroit by engaging staff, residents and family members.

Reconceptualizing Validity

The question often raised about participatory research has to do with objectivity and validity: How can the results of participatory research be objective, since the purpose of the research is motivated by the political goals of helping the poor and the powerless? Doesn't the involvement of research "subjects" in the research process seriously compromise the results? Implied in these questions is the presumption that knowledge that is not objective is not valid and therefore not worth having. This presumption, however, stems from the epistemological prejudice of positivism, which narrowly equates valid knowledge with what natural sciences produce. According to the criteria of these sciences, especially as interpreted in social research, the procedures followed in participatory research are at odds with the canons of good methodological practice. How are we then to claim that participatory research leads to valid knowledge?

First, we have to examine the concept of objectivity. This idealistic view of science is a difficult one to maintain in the light of historical (Kuhn, 1962) and philosophical (Hugh, 1990) arguments brought against it in recent years. Scholars and activists in many fields and many parts of the world have been quite critical and convincing in their analyses of the "myth" of objectivity in all scientific knowledge (Collins, 1989; Foucault, 1973; Gergen, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Harding, 1991; Rosaldo, 1989). They contend that too many models of social science research replay and reinforce the theme of disenfranchisement. As Namenwirth (1986; 29) put it:

The scientific mind and the scientific method are thought to ensure the neutrality and objectivity of scientific research, and of the scientist's pronouncements ... Yet, science has not been neutral... Slavery, colonialism, laissez faire capitalism, communism, patriarchy, sexism, and racism have all been supported, at one time or another, by the work of scientists, a pattern that continues unabated into the present...

Another venue of criticism against participatory research is that the collaborative and interactive relationship between the researcher and the researched seriously compromises the objectivity of the data, thus its validity is suspect. This charge, however, derives from a misguided emulation of natural science methodology which has maintained the separation of the researcher and the object in controlled experiment. Such negative appraisals of collaborative research models exemplify an adherence to a monolithic view of scientific inquiry that is first becoming obsolete in the social sciences and social work (e.g., see Coulton, 1995; Gambrill, 1994; Klein & Bloom, 1994; Geertz, 1983; Polyani, 1958; Taylor,

1987; Videka-Sherman & Reid, 1990). Emerging intervention research models call for community collaboration and improvement of community conditions as central features of the intervention design and development process (for example, see Fawcett et al., 1994).

From a methodological point of view, the detached, noninteractive posture of researcher-researched is untenable, as research is a human process, inevitably reflecting the values of human constructors. These values enter into inquiry at choice points such as the problem selection, the instruments and the analytic methods used, and the interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations made (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). One needs only to construct a survey to understand how such surveys contain patterns of selection, omission, and dispositions toward the social world.

For participatory research there can be no such thing as objective or disinterested research and researcher. On the contrary, the major thrust of participatory research is to reunite that which has been divided by traditional research: knowledge and practical/moral concerns. The task of research is to illuminate the meaning of historical processes - objective historical conditions - and bring this knowledge to the practical task of emancipation. The study of society and community organizing, from this perspective, must be joined in a commitment to produce the social conditions necessary for emancipation and empowerment. Research is thereby directed at *both* the understanding *and* the practical transformation of these conditions. If the regulative ideal of natural sciences is objectivity, for participatory research it is "the integration of knowledge and purposeful action" (Smith, 1990: 181).

From this perspective, democratic collaboration with disenfranchised groups is central for *valid* social work research for a number of reasons. First, as Nancy Hartsock (1987) suggests, those who experience disenfranchisement have the most potential for analyzing and understanding what that experience is, and how that experience must be transformed. Experiential expertise is therefore critical to social transformation. Second, the social work values of self-determination and empowerment affirm the importance of self-definition that places the client's knowledge of self at the center of social work practice. Third, self-determining goal of social work practice is not a self contained process, but rather is in relation to one another who can develop linkages and explore reciprocities, collectively explore the real commitments that define their lives as human beings, and create a vision of self actualization in its social environment (Herrick & Sohng, 1995).

Participatory research's fundamental claim to being a valid process lies in its emphasis on experiential and personal encounters. This dimension of validity concerns itself with the skills and sensitivities of the researcher, in how one uses oneself as a knower, as an inquirer (Reason & Rowan, 1981). The quality of awareness and trustworthiness of insight of the researcher, the adequacy of reflexivity, the soundness of inference drawn from interpersonal communications are critical dimensions of validity (Heron, 1988). Argyris (1968) underscored the importance of *interpersonal validity*, suggesting that interpersonal openness and trust were key to achieving high interobserver reliability, though these concerns have received little attention in traditional research.

Another way of looking at validity is to move away from the idea that there is one truth, that there is some simple continuum between "error" and "truth." The conventional notion of validity rests on a belief in the existence of one truth. On this view, facts are what they are, and the truth of belief's is strictly testable by reference to them. All meaningful disagreements are resolvable, at least in principle, by reference to the facts. If people are informed, they will agree. Truth and reality exist outside of the knower.

In contrast, participatory research regards that truth is not referenced simply or directly to an external, independently existing reality but is a way to consider the dynamic and changing, historically and socially constructed patterns that influence our daily lives. These patterns are objective, however, in the very sense that they have been historically and socially formed through human struggles. Subjective, on the other hand, directs attention to what is inside people, the interests and purposes that allow them to make sense of their day-to-day lives. This means that any notion of validity must concern itself both with the knower and what is to be known, moving from towards an *intersubjectively* valid knowledge. An important criterion for the truth propositions is about meaning, about the understanding and interpretation of phenomena, the things we see. We must remember that our explanation of a thing is not the thing itself. As we have learned from hermeneutics, the only criterion for the "rightness" of an interpretation is "intersubjective," that is, that it is right for a group of people who share a similar world. But it is also important to realize that when considering the validity of an interpretation we are not solely concerned about "being right," as Torbert (1981) points out. Being right has to be *contextually valid*. "Are we right given our way of framing the research issues?" "Is our way of framing the research questions fruitful and meaningful? That is, a key validity criteria has to consider not only "is it right?" but also "is it useful" and "is it illuminating?"

A dialectic view of truth must include the notion that there are always emerging possibilities which are not yet visible. This requires a bold shift in evaluating the validity of knowledge, from "Does this research correspond with the observable facts?" to "To what extent does this research present new possibilities for social action?" and "Does it stimulate normative dialogue about how we can and should organize ourselves?" This is termed as *catalytic validity* (Heron, 1979).

The primary strength of participatory research is not about description but about trying out. If we engage in intentional interaction, if we make self-directed changes in the way we conduct our lives, how can we be sure that the changes we make bring about the outcomes we observe? This theme is elaborated by Messick (1989, 1995) who introduced the term *Consequential validity*. It refers to the extent to which outcomes and changes exerted on people by research are sound and just. Here, a validity criteria is public accountability, particularly to those most affected by the resulting knowledge (House, 1990, Kirkhart, 1994).

This acknowledgment leads us to think of research as creating, rather than discovering, knowledge that gives us different ways of relating to natural and social environments. As Habermas (1972) argued, there are different human interests in social science, and these contain different dispositions toward the world and how we challenge it. The question of validity, then, must be dealt with in terms of different kinds of knowledge underlying human conduct in society. One form of knowledge such as critical knowledge cannot be judged in terms of the validity standards emulated from natural sciences, which deal only with the physical world. Critical knowledge validates itself in creating a vehicle of transformation and in overcoming obstacles to emancipation - both internally and with respect to the external world.

Conclusion

Participatory research is a way of seeing and a form of knowing that employs historical knowledge, reflexive reasoning, and dialectic awareness to give people some tools to realize new potentials for the emancipation and enlightenment of ordinary individuals today. By refining people's thinking abilities and moral sensibilities, participatory research hopes to

equip individuals with a new consciousness of what must be done and how to do it. This consciousness might help them determine what their best interests should be and lessen the victimization that people impose on themselves from within or that is forced upon them from outside.

Participatory research does not claim critical knowledge as a privileged form of "true science". Instead, it accepts its potential fallibility, as well as awareness of its own precarious and contingent relation to social change and the inherent difficulties of self-reflective mode of theorizing. Because self-reflection is itself historically situated and cannot make any claim to a transcendent quality. Second, although reflection may reveal an interest in emancipation, it does not necessarily or automatically provide a linkage between this interest and actual emancipatory action. That is, even if one has developed consciousness-raising and unraveled ideological distortions, emancipation still requires active engagement (political), choice and commitment. All human beings are entangled and enmeshed in a recalcitrant reality made of enduring cultural traditions, the demands of everyday existence, and often unyielding personal identities that no critical theorists can ever wholly unravel. Any critical theory that ignores these realities run the risk of becoming itself ideological. Its dialectic outlook must also alert resistance efforts to the unexpected and unintended results of any human action as individuals and groups oppose the prevailing systems of power, position and privilege.

In the 1990s we talk of alliances, coalitions, and working together more than we ever have. At the same time we also speak of building our alliances for change on authentic voices of people through which people make choices, shape action, and create social movements. We have much to gain by critically engaging with the theory and practice of participatory research as we face the many challenges ahead.

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