

**PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES:
Grounding the 'Alternative Paradigm'**

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ABSTRACT

Based on the work of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, a number of non-governmental organizations in Latin America have adopted participatory methodologies as an alternative to previously used models for 'Development'. An important underlying principle of these methodologies is the issue of social transformation.

Drawing from recently completed fieldwork in Northern Chile, this paper presents a view of these practices on the ground, and brings the relationship between theory and practice into focus.

RÉSUMÉ

En se référant aux travaux de Paulo Freire et de Orlando Fals Borda, plusieurs organisations non-gouvernementales en Amérique Latine ont adopté des méthodologies participatoires en tant qu'alternative aux modèles du 'Développement'. Un principe important de ces méthodes concerne la transformation sociale.

Cet article utilise un projet de recherche complété récemment au Nord du Chili afin de présenter l'application de ces pratiques, et afin d'illuminer la relation entre théorie et pratique.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on my fieldwork in Chile from June 1989 to July 1990, and therefore presents a view of participatory methods in a Latin American setting. As you might remember, there was a sixteen year dictatorship in Chile and my own research was done at the time of the democratic opening that occurred when general elections were held in December, 1989, half-way through my stay there. It seemed to me that if these methods were being used to empower people, this was an ideal moment to assess the results of actions carried out throughout the eighties. There is a lot of information relevant to this political context that might be necessary to fully understand what was occurring, but hopefully you will be able to ask questions during our discussion that will help clarify what I am saying here.

IN THEORY

Participatory research (PR) or participatory-action research (PAR), as it is also known, is an area of inquiry and social action that has grown over the past fifteen years, primarily from a critical evaluation of research methods in the field of adult education. This methodology has been utilized in working with grassroots organizations in Asia and Africa and Latin America. With PR/PAR, the concepts of "concientization" and "thematic investigation" initially developed for the purposes of literacy by Paulo Freire (1983) have become basic, developmental concepts. Since PR/PAR seeks to empower the underprivileged to exert greater self-determination, a critical self-awareness process is encouraged to enable learning about the political and economic forces that affect the position of grassroots groups in society, and this involves the history behind this particular structuring of social relations.

One of the main goals of participatory research, as proposed by Orlando Fals Borda (1979), is the de-colonization of science by the creation of an "alternative paradigm". In his view, positivistic science has supported and served dominant political and economic systems. And, in order to correct for this bias, social science must be a 'committed science' for the people. The practice of participatory research is based on methodological principles, which include a commitment on the part of the 'intellectuals' to avoid dogmatisms while restituting 'popular knowledge' as the basis for consciousness. The active decolonization of knowledge is to be achieved through the integration of action-reflection techniques (Borda 1980).

The philosophical background for PR, according to this author, can be found in Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of popular philosophy; put simply, the view that "all people are knowledgeable", which finds resonance in the anthropologists' concern for people's own perspectives; and also in Foucault's (1972) concept of "living history", the "unceasing effort of a consciousness trying to grasp itself in its deepest conditions", the view that history is always in the making and that we are all involved in this process.

I prefer to talk globally about participatory methods or methodologies (PMs) since popular education (PE) and participatory research (PR) or participatory-action research (PAR) share common threads. PMs, then, are aimed towards empowering people through dialectical/dialogical processes, to bring about the necessary social transformation that will enable them to improve their lives. PAR, for example, has been defined as "an integrated activity that combines social investigation, educational work and action" (Hall 1982). PMs are supposed to promote horizontal,

rather than vertical (hierarchical) modes of communication. In these communicative aspects, PR and PE come together. Both are based on dialogue and both have the goal of producing what Freire (1983) calls a "cultural synthesis", the generation of qualitatively new knowledge within the encounter of two systems of knowledge.

Evaluations take place as part of the practice of participatory methodologies. But while these evaluations may be appropriate insofar as practice goes, before and after the process, I feel the complex connections between language, knowledge, culture and social identity need to be more closely researched to elicit whether there are patterns of changing meanings on both sides of the social equation (i.e. on the part of intellectuals and grassroots). For the purposes of integrating knowledge, and in order to avoid imposing external criteria, the organization of practical knowledge and its meaningful categories need to be understood in comparison with those of academic knowledge. The cultural models that orient the discursive negotiation of everyday life (Holland and Quinn 1987) likely involve a different logic that needs to be drawn out (cf. Enriquez 1979).

Before going to the field, I had read in the literature that there were communicative gaps (Delpiano 1984) and also heard a popular education monitor express a concern about the appropriation of discursive opportunities by the 'intellectuals' (personal communication). In my view, this problem called to question the process as a whole, and led me to ask the following: How much integration (cultural synthesis) could be taking place in light of the recognized communication problem? How was everyday life being altered by participation in this process? How could this change be assessed? What were its observable features?

IN PRACTICE

My research entailed an assessment of participatory methods as used by intellectuals barred from academe when the Pinochet dictatorship came to power in 1973 and who as a result had organized in what are known in the literature as "academic NGOs" (non-governmental organizations). My field location was the city of Iquique in Northern Chile and the highland (Andean) region of Cariquima, composed by eight villages. The kinds of programmes implemented with the Aymara people of Northern Chile were of a broad range. Some were oriented towards providing infrastructure for development while others were meant to promote cultural revival. For instance, there were: a wool marketing project, technical transfer projects, literacy projects, health projects, and others. In all of these projects there was an element of research on the part of the intellectuals. I chose to

focus in a particular geographic region of the highlands, due to the logistics of transportation throughout this isolated region, but more importantly, due to the need to gain access and establish trust within the villages -- both of which imply TIME.

Two organizations had worked in this region since the early eighties. One of them subsequently split into two, with the secession of its entire rural team, who were the ones actually working in the highlands. But this group went on to form its own NGO and was thus able to continue its work.

The programmes best accepted by the communities were those geared toward productive activities. For the 'receiving' population already accustomed to government assistance programmes, it seemed that this was the role the NGOs had to play, that they were actually alternative assistance agents. The least accepted programmes were those designed to foster cultural revival, because the villagers could not grasp their intent. To them, 'culture' is everyday life and therefore these programmes seemed senseless, even though the materials produced were thought of as attractive. The most appealing projects were those leading towards an augmented income for the household: marketing of wool, improved cash crops ... and anything having to do with their herds ... because "the herd is our richness".

In fact, the reactions that I found in the highlands with respect to these NGOs were at best sceptical, and at worst oppositional, due to a perception that these organizations were using the communities to obtain foreign funding on their behalf.

WHAT WAS WRONG?

Communication and a lack of integration of knowledge was at the bottom of the failure of the projects. The economically oriented projects were always given a priority on the part of the communities because they at least offered a hope for higher productivity and perhaps higher income that is something quite concrete and tangible. This explained, for example, the success of two supply co-ops which were seen as saving devices, in terms of transportation costs and availability of supplies from the external market.

But the vision of the process and its outcome as held by the external agents (and planners) was quite different to that of the members of the communities. And, these differences were never identified, nor made explicit, as indeed they should have, if the process was to lead to a different (less asymmetrical) kind of relationship. Apparently, everyone performed their expected roles and nobody complained. On the surface,

things were going just fine. It seems as if it is only in retrospect that one can gain this insight when interviewing those who were part of the projects.

A great deal of misunderstanding stemmed from what was *precisely* the intent of participatory methods. There was a total lack of the kind of reflexivity that PMs require. Indeed, 'the recipients' could not understand this new approach, but worst still, 'the deliverers' did not fully understand it either! In their idea of what 'participatory methods' were, they only involved themselves in the process marginally. They knew that these methods were an 'up and coming' trend for those of the 'correct' political persuasion. But because in this case this meant those opposing the dictatorship, and clearly all of them were, some of the finer and more important aspects of these practices were not fully appreciated. There was the feeling that they were indeed democratizing research practices, but in my analysis, there was a confusion of what participation actually meant, and, for the most part, there was little critical consciousness (in the Freirian sense, cf. 1973) in the conception of the projects. But the degrees to which this occurred varied in each organization. And the crucial element in this diversity related to their level of reflexivity and their internal dynamics.

One of the NGOs working in this region made great strides through their practices, and after the political opening at the end of 1989, began programmes involving the transfer of basic skills that might actually lead to empowerment. Their internal organization and their clarity of purpose (to stand as advocates for the Aymara), enabled the kind of reflexivity within the group that was conducive to an improved approach over time and after learning from their own mistakes. But this was a slow and longterm process, that resulted from an involvement of about eight years with highland groups.

Since we are considering these practices as potential field methodologies in applied anthropology, I think we need to ask ourselves: What can we learn from this 'ground experience'?

I mention the following points, as a start:

1) PMs are a group activity, and they demand the creation of a context where the dialogue/exchange can occur. Here, the definition of the participating 'community' becomes an issue.

2) If PMs are used, the intent is not simply to research a particular setting or patterns of behaviour ... it is, as the theory states: a *committed* approach that is to change the vertical relationship between researcher and researched. We need to be quite clear about this and what this entails.

3) As anthropologists, we are usually prepared to sacrifice our daily comforts when 'in the field'. But are we equally willing to sacrifice some

of our categories of analysis, accept those we are given by our counterparts and even develop new ones that are more relevant to the specific situation?

4) The communication process as we begin to develop these categories, or even as we try to uncover or discover them can be greatly delayed, due to language and cultural differences. Are we suitably *trained* to deal with these circumstances, can we afford the time, does our funding permit us to go that route?

5) We are also giving up our control of the research process and must find ways to share this control ... does our training *prepare* us to negotiate this?

6) What happens after we leave the field? How is the newly generated knowledge going to be of use to the group involved? Might there be some unintended consequences derived from the participatory experience?

I do not want to leave you with the impression that I do not believe in the tenets of PR, because I actually do. What I wish to stress is that this is not an easy route to follow, that this is not just another type of method that we can use or not use. This is the start of a new kind of interaction. Thus, it requires a great deal of planning, depth and length of involvement. And in the end, much will depend on the context of your own research.

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