

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: ETHIC OR LOGIC

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'Classical research in the social sciences has essentially set itself the target of defining and describing reality by explaining observable phenomena. In the process it has operated from the standpoint of an "observer" on the assumption that a given reality can best be defined and described by staying outside of it. This has implied two further assumptions, first that an entry into the situation (or reality) by the researcher will distort (or disturb) it and two that this disturbance itself should not form part of the study. Quite clearly one can see that these are principles drawn from physics. The Heisenberg principle is quite clearly one of the pillars on which research methodology in the physical sciences rests. Crudely stated the Heisenberg principle says that no system measurement is 100 per cent accurate since the very act of measurement is a disturbance of the system. In this principle lies the seed for the pursuit of "objectivity".

However, I am tempted to see this chain in the reverse order that is -- to my mind the cry for objectivity, the patent for which invention belongs solely to linearised western thought - is really a solution to cover a host of problems that post-renaissance western culture created for itself in order to solve the (at that time) continuous riddle (or need?) to see the world as chaos. "The nineteenth and the first half of twentieth century conceived of the world as chaos --- (it) appeared to represent ultimate reality"¹. The social

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scientist in all fairness therefore, in order to hold back his own chaos while defining, describing and discovering "social order" had to take on an "observer" stance. The reaction to the image of the world as chaos was to take the elementalist view in the mode of analysis and search for a deterministic ultimate truth or ultimate order. The elementalist mode of analysis postulates that in order to understand a system the only way is to understand the behaviour of the elements of the system. The sciences were also therefore more deterministic rather than probabilistic in their statements.

Looking at the world as chaos led further to the model of man where subsistence and survival were hypothesised as the prime driving forces. In order further, to gain some control over the chaos it was necessary to generate a construct of social order demanding compliance. The model of man therefore followed four principles.²

Environmentalism Principle:

This said that man is totally moulded by his environment and that his attitudes and frames are totally shaped by outside influences. Thus the human mind is nothing but a computer that gets programmed ---- the most prominent example of this assumption is psychoanalysis which says that personality is essentially formed by early childhood experiences. In this assumption, in fact, lies the greatest paradox of western democracies where everyone is born equal but where also there exists an almost pathological concern with "abnormalities"..... particles in Brownian motion outside the 30 limits. Protestations such as those raised by Ronald Laing² are increasing in momentum. If an "abnormal" is identified the society puts in tremendous effort in bringing him back to the fold.

The second principle is the stimulus-response scheme. All behaviour of man (and for that matter animals too) are seen as responses to external stimuli only. This has led to the school of "social engineering" and so forth plus the whole

belief in reward and punishment as the sole vehicle of motion of any kind.

The third principle evident in the classical social sciences approach (illustrated by Freud) is that of the principle of homeostatic equilibrium. That all behaviour is towards reduction of some tension or the other giving rise to schools of thought such as needs theories.

The fourth principle is that behaviour is governed by economy of mental or other energy. The exemplar outcome of this line of thinking is reduce education to the minimum needed otherwise you warp personality raise demands and so on.

The basic paradigm from all this is sum total is really a robotic image of man and a randomised existence which requires the establishment of a social order and stability. The philosophical ramifications aside this also determines the paradigms in use in social inquiry, some of the highlights of which are, a front of value neutrality, normative analysis, the postulate of a social order being a distinct reality (as opposed to a negotiated one) and so on.³ Needless to say, this approach has inexorably led the development of manipulative psychology to make man fit more and more closely to the model of a robot and converted the social sciences to a "handmaiden of pecuniary and political interests."⁴

A Paradigm Shift

We have been examining a dichotomisation which seems to be increasingly proven false. The dichotomy that has been drawn is the essence of one of the basic differences in eastern and western epistemology. The western thinkers took the stance of saying that there exists a definite reality distinct from its participants which generates stimuli while eastern thought followed the line that what one perceives as the world is the creation of the perception alone. While one line of thought produced the megamachine and robotic images of man the other produced the concept of maya. An attempt at generating the third alternative is what creates a new paradigm. This paradigm rests on the foundation that the nature of the world is organisation and the nature of man is active and self-diverting. This does not fall

into the classical either-or of seeing the world as chaotic or ultimately ordered and allows the inclusion of the evidence of man taking on active as well as passive, responding-only roles. In short, it is more inclusive in nature, not resting on dogmas for compartmentalisation.

This generates a whole new world of sociological inquiry methods. Participatory research is the logical outcome of this new paradigm. In fact, the paradigm we are now talking about is not all that new and glimpses of it are available in the literature. The most compact statement of this is found in Driggers (referred to earlier).

While western literature in part continuation of its tradition has focussed only on the approach paradigm the eastern literature has largely focussed on the "researcher." While it is usually left to the reader of the western literature to deduce and infer from the statements of the approach paradigm as to what kind of frames of reference, values and attitudes of the individual "researcher" would be consistent with it, the eastern literature's focus has been at the other end of the continuum. Samkhya literature has done this most vividly where-in we find statements regarding the nature of phenomena, causality and relationships. Its flavour of focussing on individual development has then led to its close linkage with theories of individual growth and concern for the enlightenment of the "researcher." In following its own concern western literature has moved towards technique development to the extent of coo-book recipes for practical application of the "participatory" paradigm.⁵ Looked at objectively in fact the participatory paradigm leads to a dissolution of the "researcher-researched" differentiation altogether. As such, it becomes incumbent upon the "researcher" to examine, state and define continuously his own value frame, action goals and modes of analyses. This is not merely the statement of a

value but allogically consistent outcome of the participatory paradigm. In accepting the assumptions that the nature of the world is organisation the researcher is automatically a representative and an agent of a microcosm of the organisation. In accepting that man is self-directing and active the researcher is no longer in a position to linearise the "researched" into a particle, for just as he the researcher is his own representative so is the respondent. In terms of research outcomes as such the focus on causality and the need to prove with finality disappears except when the research is for political purposes. This is again only a logical outcome of the principle that there exists no one unique reality, and that the perception of reality is also rooted in the perceiver himself.

In summary then we see that the researcher-researched differentiation is invalid if the increasing data base about the nature of the world and the nature of man are taken into account. We can also postulate that the task of theory building shifts in focus from a search for the validity of singular hypotheses to the identification of isomorphies, patterns and part-whole relationships. And that the nature of the theories so built will be probabilistic and contextual when stating concrete interactions and about the nature of phenomena when describing the "wholes."

Towards Some Methodological Rules for Participatory Research:

The prime epistemology of the present paradigm is that no data is inconsequential. It is based on the clear primacy that data is given over the theoretic framework of the student-actor. The hierarchisation of the data is the result of a consensus about goals and boundaries reached jointly by the student-actor and the community. The emergent methodological rule then is a warning light that should flash in the student-actor's mind when he finds that every new action arena is

reinforcing and repeating rather than adding to or modifying his theoretic framework. There are two fallouts from this broadly defined rule. The first is that since the mind is being used to study the action and interaction of minds there is a significant possibility of psychological collusion, and self-reflexivity. The hypothesised Archimedean point of the structuralist classical school of research called this "subjectivity" but really covered what they saw as a problem instead of solving it⁶ by generating the concept of objectivity. In order to take this self-reflexivity into account and in order to identify multiplicity of processes in the research situation all data requires examination and integration with patterns being observed and formulated. The second fallout of this rule is that relationships between identified patterns are open to continuous modification with incoming data.

The second rule is emergent from the focus on process identification rather than event explanation. The shift away from event explanation to process identification and understanding leads to the possibility of multiple meanings of and linkages between actions and even structures. The student-actor thus needs to continually re-evaluate the meanings that are manifest with those that are latent, and work with the next broad rule that to every event there are theoretically at least infinite meanings.

The above rule seems to appear more mind-boggling than it really is. The process of selection is done through the identification of redundancies or patterns,⁷ into which the available data seems to juxtapose itself in the eye of the student-actor. For instance, while identifying potential action directions for the study of higher education systems by an examination of the existing literature Banerjee and Malhotra⁸ identified that all the literature they had isolated for study were in a normative mode, looked at Universities

and colleges as closed systems (in system theoretic terms) and used the cybernetics feedback model for proposing changes. An alternative mode of examining the literature could have been to examine the substantive issues and their reality orientations and to highlight the differences between the books. This simplistic example has been used to indicate the process of pattern identification. This is the third rule, identify patterns rather than check substantive issues against some concept of external reality.

The fourth rule is, for want of a better expression, self-awareness. In his monumental work on language and perception Whorf⁹ points out the difference between knowing a language and knowing about it, "Scientific linguistics have long understood that the ability to speak a language fluently does not necessarily confer a linguistic knowledge of its background phenomena and its systematic process and structure, any more than the ability to play a good game of billiards confers or requires any knowledge of the laws of mechanics that operate upon the billiards table (p.213)."

The rule therefore implies two levels of self-awareness, one "that which I am and that which I am attempting" and two "the background phenomena I am living with during my action involvement as a student-actor."

The final rule for the student-actor is the rule of creativity. Creativity as defined by Koestler is the "perceiving of a situation or idea in two self consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" He distinguishes between the two frames of reference or planes as "between the routine skills of thinking on a single 'plane' as it were, and the creative act, which always operates on more than one plane. The former may be called single minded, the latter a double minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed." 10

The student-actor thus is charged while adopting the participatory paradigm with the responsibility of continually keeping his creative potential in an activated state in perceiving the same phenomena through multiple frames simultaneously.

In summary these set of rules, provide the direction of shifting from the classical mode of differentiation-control to integration-direct, and attempt to integrate the approach paradigm with the personal stance of the student-actor.