# PRINCIPLES FOR PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH



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## The value of principles

It is easy to become bedazzled with bright light of a pristine set of 'principles'. All too often they can be used to take the high moral ground, and to judge out of context the quality of people's work. A preoccupation with 'principle' has also been criticised as a masculinist failing which distracts attention from authentic caring about the lives of people (Noddings, 1984). In its worst form, obsession with principle, or at least the determined application of one set of principles when others are demonstrably relevant, becomes manifest as the immorality which is embodied in all kinds of fundamentalism -- religious, political or scientific (sometimes known as positivism).

Nevertheless, I want to propose in this paper a theory of participatory action research in the form of a set of principles defining what participatory action research is, and what it is not. I do this for two reasons. First, such principles are an effective way of distilling knowledge accumulated from the experience of participatory action research. In this sense, principles are descriptive as well prescriptive (but only as a thesis about participatory action research to be tested in future practice). Second, the principles should perform an educative function. There is a sense in which participatory action researchers must re-invent the wheel as part of the commitment to owning the practice of research a well as the social practice the research informs and is informed by. But this does not preclude the common sense of trying to learn something from the experiences of others. When trying to decide on concrete action in a particular situation it helps to know how others fared in similar or in some way related circumstances. In this respect, descriptive accounts of concrete cases can be useful to make extrapolations to different cases (Cronbach, 1982; Stake, 1978, House, Mathison & McTaggart, in press). At the same time, general principles can provide useful guidance to assess the appropriateness and validity of examples, and in formulating plans for concrete action.

When contemplating work which claims to be participatory action research it is important to keep in mind three general questions: How is this example participatory action research? What does this example tell us about the criteria we might use to judge claims that an endeavour is participatory action research (to test our theory of what participatory action research is)? And, most important of all what contribution has this example made to the improvement of understanding, practice and social situation of participants and others in the situation described (acknowledging that all good things in our experience are not necessarily participatory action research)? If we decide that something is an example of participatory action research, we are suggesting that it is likely to have improved the lives of those who have participated. If we decide to the contrary, we are questioning whether the activity has done as much as it might have (without necessarily condemning it, for it might have accomplished something). In emphasising the issue of how an example might have been *better* participatory action research, the strategy becomes less judgmental, and more oriented to future action.

To address these questions we need not only to identify good examples of participatory action research, but also to propose some criteria or characteristics which can be used to consider what is, and what is not participatory action research. Of course, judging whether activities are examples of participatory action research would be a pointless exercise if strong arguments for participatory action research did not exist. But these arguments do exist, and in reality culminate a distinguished

intellectual tradition (Tandon, 1988; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988a; McTaggart, in press). But even that is an understatement because the modern conception of participatory action research is a convergence and coalescence of theoretical and practical traditions in many fields -- agriculture, social work, education, health, obstetrics, housing, and community development. This convergence is sometimes attributed to the revitalisation of communitarian politics, and that is relevant, but by no means the sole cause, nor even the most important cause. There is an important substantive reason as well. In all of these fields it has been demonstrated time and again that the *application* of the researches of others (especially positivist research which blithely claims or assumes universal applicability) in new social, cultural and economic contexts is unlikely to work. People must conduct substantive research on the practices which affect their lives themselves.

Because of the diversity of fields in which participatory action research has been developed as a way of improving and informing social, economic and cultural practice, it is perhaps understandable that the idea can mean quite different and sometimes contradictory things to different people. Despite some considerable emergent agreement about what participatory action research is, any literature search using the descriptors 'participatory research', 'action research' or 'participatory action research' will still identify a confusing and meaningless diversity of approaches to research. It is impossible to find out from such a sample just what participatory action research is. This is because the term is often misused, sometimes because of lack of understanding, and sometimes to represent research deliberately as inspired by communitarian values when it is not.

## The basic idea of participatory action research

Some confusion arises because of differing views about distinctions which might be made between participatory action research and concepts such as 'participatory development', and 'political activism'. It is important to recognise that the term 'research' carries with it some important connotations: intensive *study of a situation* and the *production of knowledge* in some form or another, including important ideas like *informed practice*. Nowadays it is not so necessary to argue from first principles the validity of practitioners' knowledge, a considerable literature in the philosophy of social science has already accomplished that. That literature also has some important implications for the appropriate definition and practice of *participation*. And the meaning of participation is another area of confusion to which we will return in due course.

At one level of analysis, the idea of participatory action research is straightforward enough. The inventor of the term 'action research', social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952), described action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of the action. In practice, the process begins with a general idea that some kind of improvement or change is desirable. In deciding just where to begin in making improvements, a group identifies an area where members perceive a cluster of problems of mutual concern and consequence. The group decides to work together on a 'thematic concern' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988a). The cylic nature of the Lewinian approach recognises the need for action plans to be flexible and responsive. It recognises that, given the complexity of real social situations, in practice it is never possible to anticipate everything that needs to be done. Lewin's deliberate overlapping of action and reflection was designed to allow changes in plans for action as the people involved learned from their own experience. Put simply, action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experience, and make this experience accessible to others. Two of the ideas which were crucial in Lewin's work were the ideas of *group decision* and *commitment to improvement*. A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seem likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice (Henry & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988b).

*Action research is a group activity*. But in situations where people with different power, status, influence and facility with language come together to work on a thematic concern, the idea of participation becomes problematic. The most disturbing confusion about the nature of participatory action research arises because of corruption of the meaning of the term 'participation'.

## Thinking about 'participation'

The first step in analysing this confusion is straightforward. It involves making the distinction between 'participation' and 'involvement' which is made clear in standard English dictionaries:

> **participate**, v. i. Have share, take part, (*in* thing, *with* person); have something *of* (*his poems participate of the nature of satire*); so participant ...
>
> **involve**, v. t. **1.** Wrap (thing *in* another); wind spirally. **2.** Entangle (person, thing, *in* difficulties, mystery, etc.); implicate (person *in* charge, crime, etc.); include (*in*), imply, entail. **3.** (in *p. p.*) Concerned (*in*), in question; compicated in thought or form (*volvere volut-* roll).

*Authentic participation* in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualised, practised, and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership -- responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice. *Mere involvement* implies none of this; and creates the risk of cooption and exploitation of people in the realisation of the plans of others.

Rajesh Tandon has identified several 'determinants' of authentic participation in research:

1. People's role in setting the agenda of the inquiry,
2. People's participation in the data collection and the analysis, and
3. People's control over the use of outcomes and the whole process (Tandon, 1988, p. 13).

Elaborated below is a more detailed expression of the idea of participatory action research -- an idea which presses the point that the real test is that people are actually conducting the research for themselves.

## The idea of research on practice by participants

To develop this point it helps to analyse the idea of participatory action research a little further. We use the term participatory action research to differentiate it from kinds of research which typically involve researchers from the academy doing research *on* people -- making the people objects of research. Research *on* people can be either empirical-analytic or interpretive, and as Habermas (1972, 1974) has argued, because neither of these approaches to research has an explicit politics, both empirical-analytic and interpretive research express an interest which is not emancipatory. The knowledge produced from such research can be used in coercive kinds of ways, but somewhat contradictorily can create the *illusion* of participation. People can be required to work out ways of implementing policy developed on the basis of knowledge produced by research *on* them. This is *not* participatory action research but the cooption of people into the research, development and dissemination approach invented by a coalition of policy-makers and social scientists with a primary interest in maintaining control.

Participatory action research engages people from the academy and the work-place in an entirely different relationship. For simplicity, I will use the terms 'academic' and 'worker' to label the two groups of people typically engaged in participatory action research, though it is obvious that both terms are too narrow for the diversity of agencies and people who collaborate in participatory action research projects. I make the distinction because it helps to show the common project of participatory action researchers, as well as the distinctive tasks they may play in their own institutional and cultural contexts.

Academics and workers in participatory action research are joined by a thematic concern -- a commitment to inform and improve a particular practice. This practice is not a narrowly conceived technical activity, but in MacIntyre's terms, is

> any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative activity

> through which goods internal to that activity are realised, in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the goods and ends involved, are systematically extended. ... Tic tac toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Brick-laying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, so are painting and music. In the ancient and medieval worlds the creation and sustaining of human communities -- of households, cities, nations -- is taken to be a practice of in the sense in which I have defined it. Thus the range of practices is wide: arts, sciences, games, politics, in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life all fall under the concept. (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175)

MacIntyre distinguished practices from institutions:

> Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are bearers. For no practices can survive any length of time unsustained by institutions ... institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the co-operative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 181)

This broad view of practice and the location of practices in historically formed institutions[1] enables us to identify the common and distinct contributions participatory action researchers must make from their different institutional and cultural contexts. Academics and workers may join forces to improve the theory and practice of education, social welfare, agriculture, health, usually in the workers' own work context.

The common project of participatory action research has several aspects. Each participant, academic and worker, must undertake:

- to improve his or her own work;
- to collaborate with others engaged in the project (academics and workers) to help them improve their work; and
- to collaborate with others in their own separate (academic and worker) institutional and cultural contexts to create the possiblity of more broadly informing the common project, as well as to create the material and political conditions necessary to sustain the common project and its work.

That is, participatory action research is concerned simultaneously with changing *individuals*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the *culture* of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong. The culture of a group can be defined in terms of the characteristic substance and forms of the language and discourses, activities and practices, and social relationships and organisation which constitute the interactions of the group (see Foucault, 1973; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988a[2]).

- The individual is a bearer of language, but 'comes to' language, as it were, finding it pre-formed as an aspect of the culture of a group or society; language 'contains' expressive and communicative potential, and the way we use language can only be

changed by also changing social 'agreements' about how language is used -- patterns of language use which are a first aspect of the culture of the group.

- The individual is an actor, but his or her acts are framed and understood in a social context of interaction; changing social action usually requires also changing the ways others interact with us -- patterns of interaction which are a second aspect of the culture of the group.

- The individual defines him or herself partly through his or her relationships with others, but the nature and significance of these social relationships is to be understood against the fabric of social relationships which characterise wider groups, institutions and societies; changing social relationships usually requires that others also change their perspectives on the ways we relate to them and how our relationships with them fit into the broader fabric of relationships which structure society -- patterns of relationship which are a third aspect of the culture of a group.

In participatory action research, the culture of three kinds of 'group' is subject to influence: the culture of the group of academics and its extension into the academic workplace; the culture of the collaborative participatory action research group itself; and the culture of the workers' workplace and its extension into the community. Unfortunately there is still a reasonable expectation that academics will be imperialistic in their relationships with workers, because of the ways in which academics typically come to participation, because of their command of particular specialised discourses, and perhaps because of the deference of workers.

To counter this, considerable energy must be directed at ensuring reciprocity and symmetry of relations in the project group, and at maintaining community control of the project (and its staff). The group must engage an *ideology critique* to ensure its work is not misdirected and its understandings not distorted by deference to illegitimate authority. When status and power differentials exist among participants, these must be *suspended* to allow collective work to begin, but *combatted* in the course of that work. To claim to be *participatory* action research, any activity must attend to these criteria ahead of all others. And it is in this context that the substantive knowledge of the academy can be most useful to help people see what they have intuitively understood -- that their own subjectivity is likely to be gendered (Eisenstein, 1984), colonialised and nationalised (Chatterjee, 1986), Westernised (Lanhupuy, 1987) and supplanted by the mass enculturation of the capitalist impulse (Aronowitz, 1977; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985). That is, the work of ideology critique can be expected to involve 'decolonising the mind' in a number of dimensions (Ngugi, 1981).[3]

Participatory action research recognises that people are social beings, and that they are members of several different groups -- active participants in the living, local and concrete process of constructing and reconstructing the language, activities and relationships which constitute and reconstitute the culture of the groups of which they are members. To change the culture of their groups (let alone of whole institutions or society more broadly), people must change themselves, with others, through changing the substance, forms and patterns of language, activities and social relationships which characterise groups and interactions among their members. In participatory action research, they do this collectively and collaboratively, and deliberately set aside time to reflect on these matters as a basis for conscious individual and group decision.

Social improvement through participatory action research entails explicit analysis and exploratory change both on the side of the individual and on the side of the culture of the groups (and, more broadly, the society) in which people constitute their forms of life. Changing a whole society and culture is, on the face of it, beyond the reach of individuals; in participatory action research, groups work together to change *their* language, *their* modes of action, and *their* social relationships and thus, in their own ways, prefigure, foreshadow and provoke changes in the broader fabric of interactions which characterise our society and culture. In other words, participatory action research has both an individual and a collective aspect: individual action researchers change themselves, and they support others in their own efforts to change. Through critique of these efforts to change, in the slogan made famous by the environmental movement, participatory action researchers 'think globally, act locally'.

As Rajesh Tandon (1988) has cogently argued, *knowledge production* in participatory action research places an emphasis on workers developing their own understandings. Arguing for the reform of prisons, Michel Foucault argued in the same way:

> If prisons and punitive mechanisms are to be transformed, it won't be because a plan of reform has found its way into the heads of the social workers; it will be when those who have to do with that penal reality, all those people have come into collision with each other and with themselves, run into dead-ends, problems and impossibilities, been through conflicts and confrontations; when critique has been played out in the real, not when reformers have realised their ideals.
>
> Critique does not have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this is then what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who refuse and resist what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. (Foucault, 1981, p. 13)

Of course, the work of the action research group will result in many shared understandings, and the work of academics in the group will reflexively inform their relationships with the institutions from which they come. That is, knowledge production is of three general kinds: knowledge developed by workers; knowledge shared by the group; and knowledge developed by academics. These forms of knowledge are intimately related, but it is the first category of knowledge, the knowledge of the workers which is the primary focus. And this focus is achieved by focusing energies on improvements *from the workers' perspective*. This perspective may be informed by a critique developed from the broad perspective of social theory, but the practical decisions about what counts as a sustainable move towards improvement must always belong to the workers.

## Against the preemptiveness of policy and technique

The general form of the question a participatory action research group has at the beginning of an action research cycle is:

> *We intend to do X (individual and group action) with a view of improving Y (individual and group practice).*

The question implies some shared understanding of what is happening already; it assumes that improvement can be monitored in some way; and most important of all, it envisages an evolution of understanding in concert with the improvement of practice as collective action is implemented and refined in practice. For each individual concerned there is a commitment to an improvement of his or her own work -- and the situation in which it is consitituted. Usually several alternative action aspects can be identified in response to a single general area of perplexity. The collective plays an important role in deciding where the group *and* individuals may exert their efforts most effectively. In turn, the collective reflects on observations made about action taken so far, and uses this reflective activity to inform decisions about future action steps -- of the group, and of individuals. In this way the public and the personal spheres of thought and action are kept in step.

For all participants, it is usual to find that the practical issue, concern, or problem which takes shape as a shared thematic concern will change as it is described more closely and as the action strategy exerts it effect. It is important to recognise that the initial general plan and the successive action steps will be modified in the light of experience. Each critically informed action step will conserve the strengths of previous steps and reach out further towards improvement and understanding. For this reason it is nonsense to think of participatory action research as a means of policy *implementation*. Participatory action research regards any policy (or directive) as a theory -- each constituent theorem to be tested against the experience of practice and amended accordingly. That is, participatory action research critically *tests* policy (or rather the theory implicit in it) -- it is not an instrument of implementation.

In the same vein, techniques are not used pre-emptively. The means used to monitor each action

step (individual or collective) and its effects are selected to match the problem. This kind of enquiry never latches on to a monitoring technique and then tries to find an issue to fit the niceties of the technique. Solving the problem of how and what to record is part of the process of learning in participatory action research groups.

The final point to be emphasised here is the need for all participants in the process to discuss regularly the changes in their work: to engage in discourse in order to articulate plans and reflect on the effects of their actions. Participatory action research is *dialogical.* In articulating the idea and practice of 'action research', social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952) recognised that <u>all</u> action research had to be participatory -- he encouraged collaborating groups of people to work on problems of mutual concern and consequence, for example in race relations and community housing in post-war North America. For all participatory action researchers, regular and systematic communication with other action researchers and others affected (other workers, other community members) is essential for a number of reasons:

- It makes it clear from the outset that the action research process involves explicit investigation of the relationships between individual action and the culture of the groups engaged-- investigation which analyses and systematically explores individual and group patterns of language use, activities and social relationships.
- It encourages the collaborative development of the rationale for the practice under investigation, and for others related to it.
- It helps allow the enquiry to be seen as a collaborative 'project' rather than as a personal and introspective process.
- It helps the group to see its common project as well as the separate (and congruent) efforts of participants working in their separate contexts.
- It helps to clarify unforeseen consequences and ramifications of the work.
- It makes defining the issues easier because explaining the project to others demands clarifying each individual's own thinking.
- It helps to get moral support and to see the limits of support (others may not be so captivated by the project as are members of the collaborating group).
- It allows others to help, and to become involved in a constructive participatory way.
- It aids reflection by providing a variety of critical perspectives on the effects of action and the constraints experienced.

## Five things participatory action research is <u>NOT</u>

1 Participatory action research is <u>NOT</u> the usual thing social practitioners (academics and workers) ordinarily do when they think about their work. Participatory action research is more systematic and collaborative in collecting evidence on which to base rigorous group reflection, and in planning change.

2 Participatory action research is <u>NOT</u> simply problem-solving. Participatory action research involves *problem-posing*, not just problem-solving. It does not start from a view of 'problems' as pathologies. It sees values and plans problematised by work in the real world, and by the *study* of the culture and nature of work by people themselves. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes made.

3 Participatory action research is <u>NOT</u> research done on other people. Participatory action research is research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others. Participatory action research is research which

treats people as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively in making their own histories and conditions of life, as able to be more effective in making their histories and conditions of life by knowing what they are doing, and as collaboratively potent in the construction of their collective history and conditions of life. It does not treat people as objects for research, but encourages people to work together as knowing subjects and agents of change and improvement.

4 Participatory action research is NOT a 'method' or 'technique' for policy implementation. It does not accept truths created *outside* the community, or truths created by researchers working *inside* the community who treat the community as an object for research. Participatory action researchers may accept propositions from outside as worthy of *testing*, or they may elect to study their own situation from first principles as it were, to develop their own understandings of what is happening -- as a guide to action.

5 Participatory action research is NOT 'the scientific method' applied to social (educational, agricultural ...) work . There is not just one view of 'the scientific method'; there are many. Participatory action research is not just about hypotheses-testing or about using data to come to conclusions. It adopts a view of social science which is distinct from a view based on the natural sciences (in which the objects of research may legitimately be treated as 'things'); participatory action research also concerns the 'subject' (the researcher) himself or herself. Its view is distinct from the methods of the historical sciences because action research is concerned with changing situations, not just interpreting them. Participatory action research is a systematically evolving, a living process changing both the researcher and the situations in which he or she acts; neither the natural sciences nor the historical sciences have this double aim (the living dialectic of researcher and researched, see Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

## What participatory action research is[4]

1 Participatory action research is an approach to *improving social practice* by *changing* it and learning from the consequences of changes.

2 Participatory action research is contingent on *authentic participation*: it is research through which people work towards the improvement of *their own practices* (and only secondarily the improvement of other people's practices). Through dialogue among participants, regular checks are made to ensure that the agenda of the least powerful become an important focus of the groups' work.

3 Participatory action research develops through *the self-reflective spiral*: a spiral of cycles of *planning, acting*, (implementing plans), *observing* (systematically), *reflecting* ... and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting. One good way to begin a participatory action research project is to collect some initial data in an area of general interest (a reconnaissance), then to reflect, and then to make a plan for changed action; another way to begin is to make an exploratory change, collect data of what happens, reflect, and then build more refined plans for action. In both cases, issues and understandings, on the one hand, and the practices themselves, on the other, develop and evolve through the participatory action research process -- but only when the Lewinian self-reflective spiral is thoughtfully and systematically followed in processes of group critique.

4 Participatory action research is *collaborative*: it involves those responsible for action in improving it, widening the collaborating group from those most directly involved to as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned.

5 Participatory action research establishes *self-critical communities* of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process: the planning, the action, the observation and the reflection; it aims to build communities of people committed to *enlightening* themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation, and *emancipating* themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values.

6 Participatory action research is a *systematic learning process* in which people act deliberately, though remaining open to surprises and responsive to opportunities. It is a process of using 'critical intelligence' to inform action, and developing it so that social action becomes *praxis* (critically informed, committed action) through which people may consistently live their social values.

7 Participatory action research involves people in *theorising* about their practices -- being *inquisitive* about circumstances, action and consequences and coming to *understand* the relationships between circumstance, actions and consequences in their own lives. The theories participatory action researchers develop may be expressed initially in the form of *rationales* for practices. They may develop these rationales by treating them as if they were no more than rationalisations, even though they may be our best current theories of how and why our social (and educational ...) work is as it is. They subject these initial rationales to critical scrutiny through the participatory action research process.

8 Participatory action research requires that people put their practices, ideas and assumptions about institutions to the *test* by gathering *compelling evidence* which could convince them that their previous practices, ideas and assumptions were wrong or wrong-headed.

9 Participatory action research is open-minded about what counts as evidence (or data) -- it involves not only *keeping records* which describe what is happening as accurately as possible (given the particular questions being investigated and the real-life circumstances of collecting the data) but also *collecting and analysing our own judgements, reactions and impressions* about what is going on.

10 Participatory action research involves participants in a process of *objectification of their own experience*, for example, by keeping a *personal journal* in which participants record their progress and their reflections about two parallel sets of learnings: their learnings about the practices they are studying (how the practices -- individual and collective -- are developing) and their learnings about the process (the practice) of studying them (how the action research project is going).

11 Participatory action research is a *political process* because it involves us in making changes that will affect others -- for this reason, it sometimes creates resistance to change, both in the participants themselves and in others.

12 Participatory action research involves people in making *critical analyses* of the situations (projects, programs, systems) in which they work: these situations are *structured* institutionally. The pattern of resistance a participatory action researcher meets in changing his or her own practices is a pattern of conflicts between the new practices and the accepted practices of the institution (accepted practices of communication, decision making and educational work). By making a critical analysis of the institution, the participatory action researcher can understand how resistances are rooted in conflicts between competing kinds of practice, competing views of social (and educational ...) positions and values, and competing views of social organisation and decision-making. This critical understanding will help the participatory action researcher to act politically towards overcoming resistances (for example, by involving others collaboratively in the research process, inviting others to explore their practices, or by working in the wider institutional context towards more rational understandings, more just processes of decision making, and more fulfilling forms of social work for all involved).

13 Participatory action research *starts small*, by working through changes which even a single person can try, and works towards extensive changes - even critiques of ideas or institutions which in turn might lead to more general reforms of projects, programs or system-wide policies and practices. Participants should be able to present evidence of how they started to work on *articulating the thematic concern* which would hold their group together, and of how they *established authentically shared agreement* in the group that the thematic concern was a basis for collaborative action.

14 Participatory action research starts with *small cycles* of planning, acting, observing and reflecting which can help to define issues, ideas and assumptions more clearly so that those

involved can define more *powerful questions* for themselves as their work progresses.

15 Participatory action research starts with *small groups* of collaborators at the start, but widens the community of participating action researchers so that it gradually includes more and more of those involved and affected by the practices in question.

16 Participatory action research allows and requires participants to build *records* of their improvements: (a) records of their changing *activities and practices*, (b) records of the changes in the *language and discourse* in which they describe, explain and justify their practices, (c) records of the changes in the *social relationships and forms of organisation* which characterise and constrain their practices, and (d) records of the development of their expertise in the conduct of *action research*. Participants must be able to demonstrate evidence of a group climate where people expect and evidence to support each other's claims. They must show respect for the value of rigorously gathered and analysed evidence -- and be able to *show and defend* evidence to convince others.

17 Participatory action research allows and requires participants to give a *reasoned justification* of their social (and educational ...) work to others because they can show how the evidence they have gathered and the critical reflection they have done have helped them to create a *developed, tested and critically-examined rationale* for what they are doing. Having developed such a rationale, they may legitimately ask others to justify their own practices in terms of their own theories and the evidence of their own critical self-reflection.

## Participatory action research as the praxis of critical social science

As part of the development of a theoretically better grounded conceptualisation of participatory action research Carr and Kemmis (1986) have argued that it was the *only* form of enquiry which met what they termed 'the five minimum requirements' of a critical social science. Though they were arguing the position for the theory and practice of *education*, the features specified above can be seen to be in accord with these requirements which can be paraphrased in the following terms:

> First, the criticisms of positivism means that any adequate approach to social enquiry must *reject positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth*, in particular the assumption that knowledge has a purely instrumental value in solving social problems and the consequent tendency to see all social issues as technical in character.
>
> Second, the interpretivist argument that social enquiry must grasp the meanings that social practices have for those who perform them, educational enquiry must *accept the need to employ the interpretive categories of workers in social (educational, agricultural, health ..) programs* using existing self-understanding as a base for articulating and developing improvements in social understanding, social practice, and the milieu of relationships and structures in which social practices are constituted.
>
> Third, because it is true that consciousness not only defines reality, but that reality may systematically distort consciousness so that the understandings of people may be shaped by illusory beliefs which sustain irrational, contradictory and unexamined forms of life, social enquiry must *provide ways of distinguishing inadequate, internally inconsistent and ideologically distorted interpretations from those which are not, and suggest ways in undeveloped understanding can be engaged in the three registers of language, social relationships and practice, and overcome together*. The interpretive approach does not recognise how these distortions occur, nor seek to provide guidance about how they might be confronted.
>
> Fourth, the interpretive approach does not recognise that many aims, purposes and strategies pursued by people are not the result of informed conscious choice as much as they are by constraints and impulses in a social structure over which they little control. Therefore, social enquiry must *concern itself with identifying and exposing those aspects of the existing social order which frustrate the pursuit of rational goals, and work to provide, articulate and critique grounded theoretical accounts which promise ways in which such obstacles can be overcome.*

> Fifth, social enquiry must *commit itself to the view that the educational status of its work will be determined by the ways in which it relates to practice, in particular to the ways in which it empowers participants to continue the struggle for social enquiry and improvement.*

That is, from the perspective of critical social science, social enquiry cannot simply *explain* the sources of problems people (academics and workers) face. Its purpose is to engage the full spectrum of social practitioners in enquiry to *inform and guide* practice, to suggest action to take to overcome problems and difficulties, and to suggest new possibilities. Such collaborative enquiry must be orientated to transforming the way both workers and academics see themselves, their situations and their understandings so that factors frustrating their social goals and purposes can be recognised, engaged and eliminated. Complementarily it follows that such enquiry must be oriented to transforming the situations which place obstacles in the way of achieving social goals, perpetuate ideological distortions, and impede rational and critical work in social situations. It is just that scenario that the principles outlined above anticipate realising.

## Some examples of principles in practice

The principles can be used as a guide to deciding whether accounts of research are genuine examples of participatory action research, and more important, as a guide to planning how participatory research practice might be improved. The principles are not absolute criteria but a product of the work of a group of participatory action researchers -- a theory of participatory action research. Any study claiming to be participatory action research might present evidence that these general principles have been observed or why the principles themselves must be changed to take account of new evidence. That is, it is essential that the principles are not applied imperialistically, because that would conflict with the fundamental idea of action research which indicates that principles such as these are problematised by practice. To conclude this paper, I present in summary form principles which have been identified in two related cross-cultural participatory action research projects in Northern Australia. The first example is written from a Western perspective and describes some principles underpinning an Aboriginal teacher education program conducted by Deakin University (McTaggart, 1987; McTaggart & Henry, 1988; McTaggart, 1989, March; 1989, July). The second example is written from the perspective of Yirrkala Aboriginal community and is extracted from a study of the development of education and schooling. One of the authors was a participant in the teacher education program mentioned.

### Pedagogical principles for Aboriginal teacher education

The teacher education program took as its task the education of Aboriginal teachers to reverse the historical trend described by Wesley Lanhupuy, Yirrkala community member and Member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for Arnhem in this way:

> Schools have been part of the process of the colonisation of Australia and its original inhabitants. Schools were introduced and imposed on Aborigines following the fierce struggles for the land between Aborigines and the new white settlers. This occurred in a predictable pattern as each state and territory of Australia was progressively colonised over the past two hundred years. This colonisation process has taken place within living memory in the Northern Territory and unfortunately continues in many of our schools today. These have been difficult times, in which schools have been used quite openly to capture the minds of Aboriginal children and to turn them towards the dominant balanda [white] culture. So schools have been most significant in the attempt by non-Aboriginal Australians to assimilate Aborigines into the balanda society...
>
> The strong balanda cultural orientation of the [school] and the dominating position of balanda teachers and administrators inevitably work to influence the minds of children in ways that undervalue the Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal people now understand that if schools are to serve the political

> social and economic purposes of their own people, the school, as an institution, needs to be accommodated within Aboriginal society itself. Only when the cultural orientation of the school becomes Yölngu [Aboriginal], will schools become integral to the movement of Aborigines toward self-determination. The decolonisation of schools in Aboriginal communities is the challenge for Aborigines now. (Lanhupuy, 1987)

Cognisant of the need to reflect the accreditation and teacher registration commitments of the degree program in which the Aboriginal teachers were enrolled, the principles for the participatory action research project conducted within the confines of the program were as follows:

1. Courses should reflect a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination. Students' work should involve them in consultation and collaboration with senior members of their communities to help prepare and educate all for leadership roles in education in the community.

2. Courses must foster the exploration, understanding and practice of both ways education. Aboriginal students must play the key role (in consultation with their communities) in proposing ways of increasing Aboriginal cultural content of the school program, ethos, and message systems.

3. Courses should be research-based. They should relate to staff research work, and engage students in research to encourage them to adopt a research stance to their own teaching, and to educational practice more generally. Consequently students should be engaged in problem solving tasks which press them to adopt a critical attitude to the issues of their courses.

4. Courses should be practice-based. Students should use courses as explicit mechanisms for exploring and extending their potential as teachers. The intensity of inter-relationship between different courses will vary.

5. Courses should provide a series of tasks or experiences from which students can construct their own[5] model or view of teaching and education. Therefore the program should develop increasing autonomy and responsibility in the student as a learner-teacher and teacher-learner; while earlier courses done by students may have been more tightly structured, later courses should allow greater opportunities for self-initiated and self-directed enquiries by students.

6. Courses should emphasize the fundamental interrelationship of both ways educational theory and practice; they should encourage students to reflect critically on theories by reference to actual teaching practices (their own and others'), and to reflect on actual practices by reference to available theories (their own and others'). Critically informed case studies and action research in curriculum, teaching and education studies are ways that investigations of the relationship between theory and practice can be structured.

7. The value of critical reflection will also be emphasized in relation to the pedagogy of each course. The arrangement of pedagogy of each course should be explicit and self-disclosing so that students can reflect critically on how the activities of the course have related students, teachers, knowledge and the learning context. Research tasks, the nature of teaching and the character of assessment should be open to negotiation and evaluation by students and staff. (Extracted from McTaggart, 1987)

To capture in a few words the overarching principle by which the participatory action research into Aboriginal pedagogy was guided, I can do no better than to borrow from Paulo Freire:

> I must try ... to have the people dialogically involved as ... researchers with me. If I am interested in knowing the people's ways of thinking and levels of perception, then the people have to think about their thinking and

> not be only the objects of my thinking. This method of investigation which involves study -- and criticism of the study -- by people is at the same time a learning process. Through this process of investigation, examination, criticism and reinvestigation, the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved. (Freire, 1982, p. 30)

Always together, Yaka gäna: Participatory research at Yirrkala as part of the development of Yolngu education

Yirrkala Aboriginal teachers Raymattja Marika and Dayngawa Ngurruwutthun, working with Batchelor College lecturer Leon White summarise participatory action research as operating in a context which:

- Makes explicit that our learning/researching community at Yirrkala requires an environment in which collective responsibility constitutes the main theme of our work ...so that we contribute to the development of our community itself.
- Locate our research in a cooperative working community that has got ownership and control of the work ... to bring us to a position where we can step back from our practice and reflect on the things that we do.
- Is based on an understanding of the fundamentally important role that negotiation plays in the research process. Our work always requires negotiation between the respective groups ... so that our Ngalapal [elder thinking people] are sure we are not doing things for ourselves as individuals ... The process of negotiation we use as learners earns us rewards by giving us
    - Recognition as learners in our community ... to develop further skills and knowledge from Ngalapal ... in order to maintain our culture and pass it on to the other learners that will follow us.
    - Gives us respect as teachers because we are humble as learners ... and that we value learning about our Yölngu reality.
- Is built on explicit understandings of reciprocity as expressed by 'bala lili'... Bala lili means giving and then getting something back.
- Establishes common objectives -- our starting point is always to negotiate the right place to start ... The process of establishing our common objectives gets us to share ideas, critically analyse each other's suggestions from a Yölngu point of view, and agree to the plan. This helps us and the Ngalapal reflect on the things that we do before we make new plans, and establish new directions to go.
- Assists confidence building as part of this process ... In our planning meetings we work to develop each other's active participation. In our formal education way Yölngu are expected (even tested) by being required by Ngalapal to perform in public. Because of this we have developed guidelines for the behaviour of observers of Yuṯa Yölngu at ceremonies and times when people are being 'tested', particularly when someone makes a mistake ... Confidence building through participation also helps us to understand and appreciate our Yölngu cause. (Extracted from Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White, 1989)

## Concluding comment

In his closing remarks at the Participatory Research Conference held in Calgary, Canada in July this year, Orlando Fals Borda defused concerns that some studies reported were not authentic participatory research by suggesting that people would learn from their mistakes. That is true, but it is only true if people are prompted and supported to reflect critically on their work. We could even

say that participatory action research only exists because some enlightened practitioners of social enquiry have developed the science of learning from their own mistakes, and from the mistakes of others. Mao Tse Tung once asserted, 'The important thing is to be good at learning', while noting that it was unrealistic to expect even his best generals to have victories all the time.

Unfortunately we all learn too slowly, partly because we have become imbued with a Western consciousness which devalues and distrusts collective and critical self-reflection as a source of legitimate understanding. We all need all the help, substantive and social, we can get. I hope therefore, that there is some virtue in proposing principles such as those I have articulated here. I hope that such a declaration helps us not only to learn from our own mistakes and successes, but also to avoid the mistakes and emulate the successes of others -- and to do so more quickly and more painlessly. That hope embodies the aspiration that people will also help us, by pointing out how these particular principles seem to be wrongheaded (or confirmed) on the basis of their own particular experience of participatory action research.

## Note

1. There is a sense in which institutions as we know them are social practices too. One of their obvious failings stems from the fact that they are practices created by people other than those who have to work in them -- hence the constraint on the substantive efforts of workers in the institution. Because they are made by others, institutions are disabling as well as enabling (in particular predetermined directions, which is often tantamount to saying the same thing).

2. I owe much of the conceptual furniture of this work to my collaboration over several years with Stephen Kemmis and Colin Henry and other members of the Deakin University Action Group.

3. In the Nicaraguan context, Lankshear (1986) makes a similar point about participatory action research in the literacy process known as *Alfabetizacion*:

> Both prior to the overthrow of Somoza in 1979 and subsequently, this deliberate fusion of literacy teaching with an explicit ideological position has had a dual aspect. In some cases, e.g., with illiterates who had actively joined the revolutionary forces, the literacy process combined teaching the skills of reading and writing with helping 'pupils' to analyse and understand more clearly something they had already intuitively grasped: namely, that oppression, poverty, disease and ignorance were not aspects of a 'natural' or 'given' reality, but, rather, consequences of how Nicaraguan society operated under Somoza, and that a new social order could be built once the old had been overthrown. (Lankshear, 1986)

4. It should be recognised here that these principles are derived from a Western (and patriarchal) cultural tradition. Two points need to be made: in working in this way with Australian Aboriginal people the principles have been offered as a thesis about an approach community and educational development with a view to the ideas being reinterpreted for Aboriginala people's purposes. In fact, this has happened (see for example, Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White, 1989, July; McTaggart, 1989, July; Bunbury, Henry, Hastings and McTaggart, in press). Nevertheless, Aboriginal people have found some of the imperatives quite useful. For example, despite the importance of the oral tradition in Australian Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal action researchers have consistently found it useful to maintain written records of their data collection and participatory action research work generally.

5. This notion may seem overly individualistic expressed in this way. It should be seen as an individual commitment to realise a <u>publicly defensible</u> theory of education along with a commitment to work with others in its realisation. That is, the idea is collectively examined individual work in a collaborative context rather than intuitive idiosyncracy.

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PS 3