

A review: The participatory research project

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1978

UNESCO Knowledge Democracy / Participatory Research Hub
Publications

Original citation:

MacNeill, T. (1978). A review: the participatory research project. *Learning*, 2(1), 3-5.

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A review:

THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT

by Dr. Teresa MacNeil

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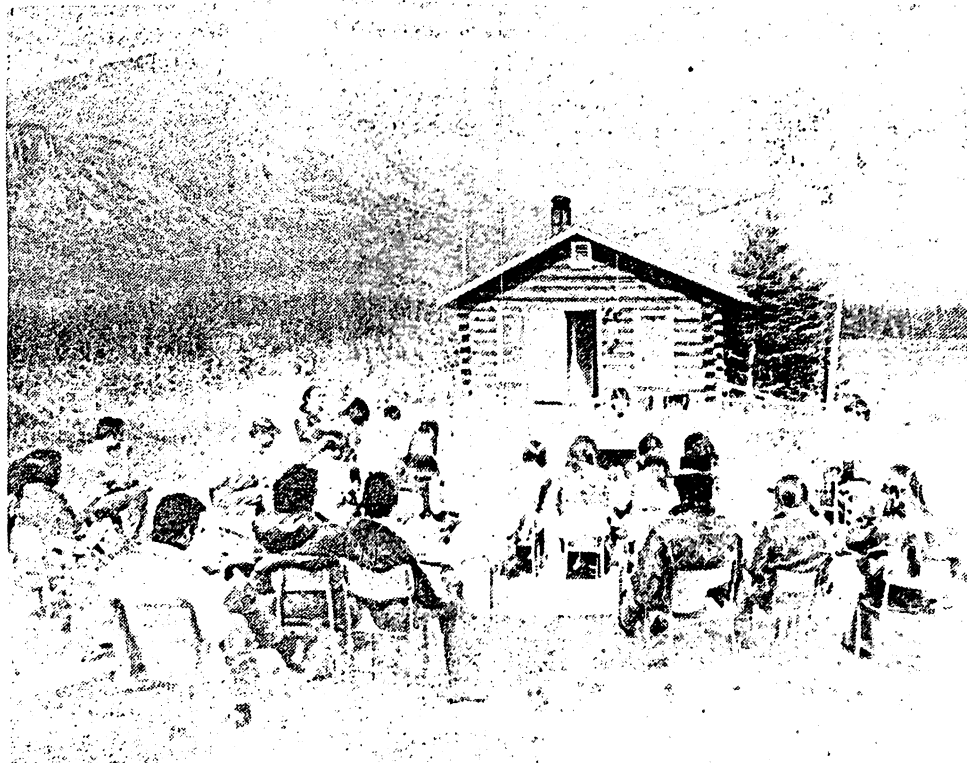
Participatory Research is a project of the International Council for Adult Education and has as its goal "the study and dissemination of information about research processes which focus on popular groups in the exploration and transformation of their own reality."¹ The current manifestation of its work is in the form of four Working Papers.² I'm inclined to say three working papers since the fourth is an annotated bibliography and as such, does not challenge the reader to modify its contents as do the ideas in a working paper. The modification of the contents of each of these papers is what their producers have explicitly invited through their direction to "please duplicate and distribute these papers at will. We would be interested to know if you do." That sort of open invitation is truly in keeping with adult education tradition if not with the spirit of our current copyright legislation.

Being involved daily in a program where the focus is on having the learner plan, implement and evaluate his/her curriculum, I am at once favorably disposed to a project entitled Participatory Research. After all, a title like that promises to give me some more resources for considering what, if anything, the adult educator's emphasis on the autonomy of the learner has to do with research. It promises to shed some light on the definition of research used by adult educators when they involve the learners in the process of defining and deriving generalizations about their reality. And it promises to draw some boundaries around the term "participatory" by specifying the circumstances under which participation on the part of the researched can be appropriately called research. These papers do not deliver very specific responses to these interesting concerns. But I trust their producers would quickly retort that my expectations are my problem since the papers are "working papers." As such, they do indeed stimulate thought, argument and ideas for change.

Exploring the concept

These three papers treat the subject of participatory research in quite different ways. Hall's approach is straightforward and general. He describes weaknesses of what he calls the "most commonly used (Social Science) research methods." He feels that research in adult education is still young enough to find approaches which are more attentive to people as the subject of the research effort.

Following a very brief review of alternate research strategies he introduces the concept of participatory research as the "combination of community participation in decision-making with methods of social investigation." The task, as he views it, is to find appropriate



Justice Thomas Berger is shown presiding over a community hearing at Nahanni Butte, NWT. It is reprinted with permission of Peter Martin Associates Limited, publishers of "The Past and Future Land," by Martin O'Malley.

approaches which will involve "those who are traditionally the researched in formulation, collection of data, and interpretation of information."

He goes on to describe a collection of six guiding principles which state what the research process ought to achieve. Somewhat paraphrased, they are: immediate and direct benefit to a community; involvement of community in the entire research project; liberation of human creative potential; and ideological goals.

Hall describes the development of a low-cost grain storage system by and for a group of Tanzanian farmers as an example of participatory research. Their response to a food spoilage problem was to produce a type of silo which was uniquely appropriate for their level of knowledge about grain and for their economic circumstances. In his conclusion, Hall contends that we (adult educators) have lost sight of the objectives of our work in the process of finding ways to add to the "body of knowledge," and that participatory research, in spite of its drawbacks, is a way to keep what we value and the way we proceed, more closely linked.

The research strategy

Bonnie Cain spends relatively little time defending the importance of the concept of participatory research. She assumes that it is both necessary and in demand. She is more concerned that we have no clear strategy for conducting this approach to research. Her purpose is to "discuss what philosophical understandings and resulting behaviors will produce an environment conducive to participation or conducive to accepting the definitions of reality of the people involved in the research process."

"... please duplicate and distribute these papers at will"

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Her focus, then is on the researcher and his/her methods. She sees that the essential act of the researcher in participatory research is to give over to others his/her power to be the only one who "could define reality, truth or knowledge." Her emphasis on the way the researcher behaves is reflected in the fact that she defines participatory research as "a process towards gathering new knowledge with the people capable of defining that knowledge."

Cain's paper is enriched by references to the work of others. She provides a brief historical background of social science research and of research connected with development projects of the "third world." In her view, the failure of some cultural anthropologists, for example, to commit their research to application" has left many of the lessons of anthropology underutilized by developers."

She refers to Budd Hall's guiding principles and, despite her conviction about the importance of participatory research, she is not entirely happy with those principles.³ The difficulty she finds is that they go beyond the meaning of participation and research to include pedagogy and mobilization. She doesn't agree that such outcomes as "change" and "liberation of human potential" necessarily result from participation or research "... without appropriate action in an environment supportive

of that action; humans liberate themselves in a time and space appropriate to themselves." And so she sees promises of change and liberation as adding too much complexity to the already difficult situation of trying to combine the participation of those being researched with the activity of research. She wants us instead to clarify what we are calling research (i.e., "what we/they are looking for") so we can more readily determine how we are going to do it.

Cain discusses the performance implications for the researcher once he or she has accepted the subjects' active participation in the research process. Anyone who is looking for a concrete description of those performance implications will see that they are not easily translated into behavioral terms. She uses terms such as increasing humility, valuing intuition, sympathetic understanding, hearing what the participants articulate, and becoming equally vulnerable. As direction for the way the researcher should work, what does it mean to have "belief in and movement toward reciprocity?" Yet this latter ability, according to Cain, is probably the most important of the several characteristics the researcher must develop.

While there is room to criticize such lack of specificity about what the researcher must do to practise these characteristics, there is much to be said in praise of the fact that Ms. Cain at least considers the "how" of participatory research.

She presents a set of three characteristics distilled from her analysis of what is required for a participatory research method as a result of her search for something functional. They, in paraphrased form, are: sufficient time to deal with the complexity of the problem; joint reflection by researchers and members of the "culture"; permanent sequence of analysis, statement, action, reflection, analysis, etc.

These functional considerations are not as directive as I would like to find in a paper addressing the "how" of participatory research, but, I just remembered, she said at the outset that we can't hope to have a recipe book. She sees research "solutions" as being "too situation-specific." Instead, she thinks it is more productive to keep exploring "the philosophical stances and resulting behaviors which produce an environment conducive to participation." But without concrete references to those behaviors, I'm unable to understand what that means.

The example

Neither Hall's emphasis on the concept nor Cain's concern about the method receive much attention in Jackson's paper. He is primarily concerned about the outcomes of

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“ . . . if the object is learning, why should we confuse the issue by talking about research?”

MacNeil

participation, not as research outcomes but as change in the participants. In this paper Jackson's purpose is "to identify some of the elements of learning which emerged out of the recent Dene participation in the federally appointed Berger Inquiry into the MacKenzie Valley natural gas pipeline." There is, however, reference to what Cain would call philosophical stance and resulting behavior. It is Judge Berger who assumes responsibility for that stance and its resulting process.

Jackson's description provides some evidence that, if we view Berger as researcher, he exhibits many of the characteristics mentioned by Cain as necessary for participatory research. Certainly in his treatment of the Dene Nation there are signs of the Judge's sympathetic understanding, of his humility and of effort to hear what people articulated. Jackson presents the following quotation from O'Malley⁴ to illustrate Berger's simple and informal style:

I am here so that you can tell me what you think and so that you can say what you want to say. I want you, the people who make the north your home, I want you to tell me what you would say to the government of Canada if you could tell them what is on your mind.

Hall's guiding principles for participatory research are also mentioned by Jackson.⁵ He refers to the land use and occupancy research reported by Nahanni et al (1976) and maintains that it "corresponds directly to the concept of participatory research." Because the focus is on the Dene learning outcomes, this paper does not provide much to assist the task of extracting directions for research behavior. For example, Jackson reports that fieldworkers were recruited and trained by the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories. Their task was to interview individual trappers and hunters as well as family groups in order to determine land use patterns. He lists several of the survey questions but he does not say to what extent these questions were modified by the inquiry process. He does not say how the training sessions were handled in order to enhance the prospect of obtaining a rich, valid and reliable data supply. He does not tell us how, once they were trained, the fieldworkers' data gathering plan was restructured by interaction in the Dene communities.

Jackson does tell us about the product of the Inquiry process by describing the "three generative themes in Dene learning." He provides examples to support his contention that the following three themes were developed through the Inquiry:

- learning or relearning about the relation between Dene and their land
- learning what political rights are entitled to Dene
- learning how to present statements, positions, and research to a federal inquiry, with the goal of increasing public support.

Nor are the learning outcomes limited to the Dene. Jackson says that the oil companies and governments likewise learned a great deal but some study is required to determine what they learned. He concludes that "Development is the result of a struggle between contradictions" and he is apparently satisfied that the Inquiry provided a public opportunity to openly examine many of Canada's political and economic contradictions.

Defining research

Up to this point I have simply accepted the authors' claims in support of participatory research. Instead of being critical, I watched for some clear behavioral directives they might offer about the way one conducts this kind of research. I am disappointed with their high level of generality in that regard. In fact, Cain is the only one who expressed concern about the way the researcher must work and I have already referred to the inadequacy of her concern.

But what about the question of whether the participatory research approach qualifies to be called "research"? Jackson does not address the question. Hall mentioned it to the extent that he is anxious for those adult educators who are doing research to do it in a way that links what they value (probably the development of the learner) with the way they work.

Cain is the only one who moves directly to the question of defining what is meant by research. But she veers from it promptly upon urging the practitioner engaged in development to rethink what is meant by research and, even go further, to rethink what is meant by science. She goes down another route to provide considerable support for her claim that involvement of the insider — the researched — is likely to enhance the quality of the research. But she doesn't tell us how she defines research.

This absence of a general perspective on research forms a serious gap in the foundation of the Participatory Research Project. It leaves one without a basis for

judging whether those who promote participatory research regard it as the only way to do research or as one of many valid approaches to research. The authors' references to the outcomes of the research process (i.e., variations on Hall's guiding principles) omit mention of a fundamental purpose of research.

Perhaps they presume universal agreement on the reason for conducting research. Do they, for example, support my view that the purpose of research is to accurately define reality to the extent of being able to determine a cause and effect relationship between variables within that reality? Until the project clarifies its definition of research I will have to be content to view what the authors say in relation to my own definition. This will allow me to freely assert that the authors would join me in saying that participatory research is only one among many appropriate approaches to the discovery and refinement of knowledge. The extent to which it is appropriate would depend on the research question and its social context.

The very fact that it addresses practitioners, that Hall refers to the adult education researcher, and that Jackson discusses the Berger Inquiry suggests that these proponents of participatory research do not regard this as the exclusive approach to describing and predicting social phenomena. What they are saying, I believe, is when the object of research is to describe a living, changing social reality it is insufficient to do so through outsiders who gather quantitative, static descriptions. Further, since the social situation is continually changing the research procedure should be designed in a way to permit adoption of results with minimal disruption of the system. Thus, a broad contributing source of information enhances the acceptability of new conclusions.

Strengths and weaknesses

What, then, are some of the circumstances under which the participatory research approach is or is not appropriate? Except to mention distinct advantages, the working papers do not deal directly with the necessary conditions for the approach. But they provide some clues.

Jackson, for example, implies that participatory research embodies certain assumptions about human nature; that a community of people is able to define its own reality and that they can be helped to develop systems for continually and accurately acting on that reality. His Dene example supports these assumptions.

Cain quotes from a "third world" case to point out that a community of people is not only able to define and subsequently act on their own

reality but are actually able to enhance the quality of research through the participatory process.⁵ "Much more of this research must be done by local researchers and through local institutions than has been the case to date. This is suggested for three reasons: (1) much of this research involves sensitive issues that may be difficult for the "outsider", including unfamiliar national researchers, to grasp; (2) as research attempts to assess values and motivation, considerably more insight into the local behavior and local perceptions will be necessary for the interpretation of results; and (3) much, if not most, of the necessary information will not be accessible to the short-term researcher "off-shore" scholar . . . much of the most important research can only be done by extensive field work (including follow-up and tracer studies) and close contact with local communities, families and leaders."

There is room to be cautious when assessing the appropriate circumstances for participatory research. Surely the addition of "researchers" to the process cannot preclude the need to apply rigorous procedural standards. In fact, the "real-world" consequences of this type of research call for such high standards of quality control as to cause most of us to drop the participatory idea.

Participatory Research also contains certain assumptions about the social system in which the research results are being applied. It assumes that people are free to examine their social reality, that there are learning and technical resources which will equip individuals to study their reality, and that there are mechanisms which will enable them to act on that reality. This is indeed a critical set of assumptions; ones which are not readily fulfilled. Even the Dene success reported by Jackson falls short on some of these structural requirements. Although the Dene people were able to describe their situation quite accurately, they did so in response to a substantial threat to their social and economic security. Rather than say they were free to study their situation it might be more appropriate to say they were forced to do so. They apparently had all the necessary learning and technical resources.

Yet, in spite of such support, one must question whether the social system provided them with a mechanism to enable the Dene Nation to act on its reality. As Jackson states "regardless of native and public interest (and) group intervention, the pipeline may be

perception problems about the researcher's role. We were confirmed in our impression that Canadian universities do not regard non-credit education as being worthy of serious attention. They merely assume that when labour asks for resources to create learning opportunities for its members and leadership, the request is for credit courses. A few institutions have moved past this level — notably the University of Winnipeg, Dalhousie University's Institute on Public Affairs and Simon Fraser University.

Community colleges, in those jurisdictions where they exist, are more readily compatible with the



the issues raised at the Halifax meeting from a Maritime perspective:

Other participants in the series of consultations in addition to Mary Catherine Wallace, were: Tony Manera, president of Vancouver Community College; Nels Thibault, president of the Manitoba Federation of Labour and Jim Dowell, director of education for CUPE. In all, the leadership in labour education was well represented.

We are working on the summary report and hope to publish its findings following additional deliberation and assessment in the autumn.

Participatory research continued

built." This could well be the most serious limitation of participatory research.

Is it really possible to implement the results of the process in a context which includes greater numbers and intensity of interests than were represented in the process? The researcher has to face the very serious ethical question of whether one should create expectations which cannot be met without depending upon unpredictable, outside forces. Perhaps the findings can only effectively apply to the immediate culture from which the data were derived.

Participatory purposes

Clearly, the researcher's purpose must dominate any decision to select the participatory research strategy.

This approach, at best, is one of many ways to obtain reliable data. If the desired outcome is change in a complex social/economic/political scene, it is a rather dubious way to approach research. It can provide accurate data on only a limited aspect of that scene. Virtually by definition, data derived in this manner must favor the argument of those who are promoting or resisting the change; depending on the position of the participatory group. Further, if all parties in the change context do not have equal involvement in the process, there is danger of overexposing the case of some participants.

For example, the Dene people apparently presented every aspect of their case to the point where the oil interest could change its argument to counteract the public support for the Dene. Such exposure of their position without concurrent

exposure of the oil and government positions left them vulnerable to the reactions of these other strengths.

If the object of participatory research is learning, then the quality of the data will be limited to descriptions of reality which enable participants to become more skillful in the process of gathering, processing and displaying the data. But if the object is learning, why should we confuse the issue by talking about research?

1. As described on back cover of each Working Paper. Copies obtained from: 29 Prince Arthur, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5R 1B2
2. Working Paper No. 1, *Creating Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly: Research Methods, Participation and Development* by Budd L. Hall.
- Working Paper No. 2, *Dene Learning for Self Determination and the MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*; (1974-1977) by Ted Jackson.

Working Paper No. 3, *Participatory Research: Research with Historic Consciousness*, by Bonnie J. Cain.

Working Paper No. 4, *Select and Annotated Bibliography on Participatory Research*, prepared for Social Sciences Division, UNESCO.

3. Cain lists seven principles. Hall listed six. The additional one in this case is that the research team should be composed of representatives of all elements in the change situation, provided the goal of the research is change.
4. O'Malley, M. *The Past and Future Land* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates), 1976, p. 14.
5. He lists only five with the missing one being that the object of the research process should be the liberation of human creative potential. He doesn't say why he excluded it, but I'm sure Cain would approve!
6. Francis J. Method, "National Research and Development Capabilities in Education," *Education and Development Reconsidered* (Praeger Publishers, (1974), p. 138.