



Social Enterprises
Knowledgeable Economies
and Sustainable Communities

Participatory Action Research Challenges, Complications, and Opportunities

Patricia W. Elliott

**A research report prepared for the Northern Ontario, Manitoba,
and Saskatchewan Regional Node of the Social Economy Suite**

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Entreprises sociales
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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
CHALLENGES, COMPLICATIONS,
AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) — one of the more well-known forms of action research — has a known capacity to build levels of trust and engagement that reveal local knowledge that might otherwise be hidden. This paper presents some of the basic history and principles of PAR, including common challenges and complications. Further, the paper provides a reminder that action research is not a trowel for digging up information. Rather, it is a political stance derived from conditions of inequality and oppression. The author argues that this stance extends to our own highly privileged yet constrained social position as academics. In an environment where scholars are expected to produce knowledge products for their own tight-knit community through peer-reviewed journals, taking on participatory action research presents a fundamental challenge to the way things are. PAR calls on us to re-examine the templates of research and to re-engage in the world as social beings. Ultimately, action research is about rebalancing power. It should come as no surprise, then, that it may upset the status quo not only within marginalized communities, but also within power centres, including our universities. The potential reward is a more humane and just world for all.

INTRODUCTION: WHY ACTION RESEARCH?

MANY JUSTIFICATIONS CAN AND HAVE BEEN MADE for employing action research as the most appropriate tool to gain reliable community data. Clearly, participatory action research — one of the more well-known forms of action research — has a known capacity to build levels of trust and engagement that reveal local knowledge that might otherwise be hidden. Orlando Fals-Borda — one of the founding theoreticians of action research — observed that when residents of El Ragadio, Nicaragua, received training in basic research practices, long-held suspicion and the practice of giving false answers were replaced by trust and a breaking of the silence (Fals-Borda 1987, 333). Obviously this aspect of action research has appeal to researchers and policy makers alike: “Involving local people as participants in research and planning has shown to both enhance effectiveness and save time and money in the long term,” Cornwall and Jewkes note (1995, 1667). Citing such observations, many a research proposal declares that locally generated knowledge is valuable to scholarship and likely could not be cultivated by any other means. Having established this, the proposal may conclude: “Therefore I have chosen to employ participatory action research methodology to answer the research question.” Yet Fals-Borda and Cornwall and Jewkes would very likely respond that such a statement denies the true nature of action research.

As researchers, we must continually remind ourselves that action research is not a trowel for digging up information. Rather, it is a political stance derived from conditions of inequality and oppression. Foundational thinkers such as Fals-Borda conceived their work as being intrinsically linked to the social transformation objectives of Third World liberationists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Paulo Freire, Julius Nyerere, and Camilo Torres (Fals-Borda 2001, 29). This stance is nested within a broader worldview that we are social beings in

dialogue with one another, seeking health, happiness, and freedom together. Such a goal remains out of reach as long as “significant segments of society all over the globe are institutionally excluded from participating in the creation of their own world of thinking, feeling and acting subjects” (Park 1993, 1). From this perspective, action research is seldom described by its proponents as a set methodology that comes with a prescribed set of methods to gain specific results on specific topics in specific situations. Indeed, feminist action researcher Jennifer Bikham Mendez argues that action research is so inherently situational and reflexive that “a “how to” manual would be inappropriate” (Mendez 2006, 10). Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty add:

This approach to research cannot simply be designed in advance by an outside researcher as though scrupulous attention to methodological detail will provide the opportunity to “get it right this time.” It is but a step toward more fully engaging people as creative agents, coauthors in the research process. (2007, 304)

Understanding that action research is “not a list of procedures and protocols to be followed” (Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty 2007, 304), its practitioners are more likely to describe their approach as a “way of being” that places researchers in the service of community members, and that seeks to address the imbalances that hinder our world from becoming a more equal and happy place for all, combining knowledge and action for social progress (Fals-Borda 1987, 332). In so doing, participants in action research must recognize that we ourselves are part of the power imbalance, whether we consider ourselves academics or activists, or both. Mendez notes that “the extreme disparities that structure our relationships mean that ... equality is often difficult to approach in practice” (Mendez 2006, 18). Debates, challenges, struggles, and alliances become essential to a continually unfolding process of knowledge production. If nothing else, this perspective contains within it enough challenges, contradictions, and complications to ensure our community collaborations are never boring. There are plenty of opportunities for unexpected turns and intentions gone awry. The reward is research that has a life beyond our own narrow contributions, as community actors gradually gain traction within the process and take ownership over the next stage of action. Thus, while some projects may flame out spectacularly, we may take comfort that few projects face the alternative: a slow, whimpering decline on dusty shelves.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ROOTS

SIMPLY PUT, action research is *situated, reflexive, and change-oriented*.

These concepts rest at the far end of a long timeline of theoretical and practical exploration. Greenwood traces the base concept of action research to Aristotle's division of knowledge into *episteme* (theory), *tèknè* (action-oriented knowledge) and *phrónêsis*. The latter term, *phrónêsis* — defined as “the design of problem-solving actions through collaborative knowledge construction with the legitimate stakeholders in the problem” — provides an early philosophical base for action-oriented community collaborations (Greenwood 2008, 326–27). Why, then, did action research emerge only comparatively recently, carrying the patina of radical departure from western research traditions? Greenwood observes that while theory and technique were readily accepted by modern western science, the third and more subtle concept of *phrónêsis* was seldom applied. Eikeland (2001) relates this to the supplanting of pragmatic application within the religious and scientific discourse of later ages:

The original Greek impulse toward systematic knowledge accumulation, is more in accordance with this pragmatism, and ultimately with some form of action research, than it ever was with the theology of the middles ages or the abstract, calculative reasoning dominant in the modern period until now.
(145–46)

However, Hammersley (2004) posits that a thread of Greek problem-solving was nonetheless carried through the ages via Kant, Newton, Comte, and Marx, who all rowed against the notion that human affairs were of subordinate importance to “pure” scientific thought (168). Fals-Borda, meanwhile, points to Galileo and Bacon as keepers of the flame of *phrónêsis*, with their penchant for “practice and community need to justify the existence of science and explain the functions of everyday life” (Fals-Borda 2001, 29).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Marxism, existentialism, and pragmatism began to challenge the divide between intellectual work and real life problem solving (Hammersley 2004, 168). As social sciences and popular movements began to evolve side-by-

side, pressing social issues in need of collaborative hands-on responses were brought into focus. In particular, the re-emergence of pragmatism/instrumentalism provided an impetus for later research reform. This intellectual development is most often credited to the U.S. scholar and education reformer John Dewey, and George H. Mead, one of the founders of social psychology (Boog 2003, 429). John Collier, U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, was an early pragmatist pioneer. Collier initiated community education projects in Indian Country in the 1930s, based in the belief that a wealth of Indigenous culture and knowledge was under threat from residential schools (Kunitz 1971, 218–20). Yet the two spheres — research and action — remained for the most part separated by the dictates of modern “objective” science, which remained philosophically positioned in Descartes’ mind-body dualism, with its “gods-eye” claim of an omniscient knowledge that could only be sullied by particularist, pedestrian human experience (Grosfuguel 2009, 4–5).

It was not until 1946 that German-American researcher Kurt Lewin coined the term “action research” to describe a process in which theory is tested by its relevance to practical social action for change (Hammersley 2004, 166; Kindon et al. 2007, 9–10). Lewin also introduced the concept of research, action, and reflection occurring in a continuous cycle. During the same period, Tax and Whyte added an invitation for “local people” to independently identify their research needs (Kindon et al. 2007, 10). Action research represents more than mere pragmatism, however. The emerging paradigm held “emancipatory intentions from the very beginning,” gradually expanding its theoretical base to include socialist and feminist concepts of empowerment and participatory democracy (Boog 2003, 426–28). This novel approach meshed well with an emergent Latin American critique of socio-scientific colonialism. In particular, action research found an ally in Freirian praxis, which sought to close the social distance between teacher and student, researcher and subject (Freire 1972, 59, 97–99). Boosted by radical pedagogy, the new research agenda migrated to the fields of anthropology, sociology, and social psychology, where scholars informed by Marxism, anti-colonialism, and critical theory had begun to question their relationship to the populations they studied. The vanguardism and historical materialism of traditional Marxism was re-examined in light of new liberationist paradigms that had begun to emerge from developing countries in the early 1970s as a counter-discourse to western imperialism (Fals-Borda 2001, 29; Rahman 1991, 13). In response, scholars began to seek a re-ordering of their relations with traditional “research subjects,” inviting new, more equality-based modes of knowledge production that were considered fully capable of challenging and transforming the relationships brought about by material production. Such work was not a flat-out denial of founda-

tional Marxist thought, but rather an expansion of its horizons toward a more humanist, liberationist, and empowered view of humanity, one that recognized that “people cannot be liberated by a consciousness other than their own” (Rahman 1991, 14).

Orlando Fals-Borda identifies 1970 as a “crucial year” for action research; armed with a new edition of Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (1970), Fals-Borda and several of his colleagues “broke the shackles and left the academies” to establish alternative grassroots research institutions and practices, including the Rosca Foundation for Research and Social Action (Fals-Borda 2001, 27–28). The emerging action research model proved itself adaptive to different locales and problems, quickly migrating to Africa and Asia as an alternative to top-down development planning and modernization projects that devalued local knowledge and experience. Park suggests that action research found its first and strongest foothold in the Global South because it was here that the idea of collectivity had not yet been erased by urban industrialization (Park 1993, 18). Marja-Liisa Swantz, who carried out her work in Tanzania, is identified as the first researcher to add the term “participant research” (1974, 119) to the lexicon of action research, giving rise to the phrase “participatory action research” and its popular acronym, “PAR.” While some may contend that all action research is by nature participatory, Kindon et al. argue that the explicit use of the term “participatory” provided a necessary emphasis on research that is embedded in and directed by marginalized communities (Kindon et al. 2007, 11). Rahman summarizes the core philosophy:

The basic ideology of PAR is that a self-conscious people, those who are currently poor and oppressed, will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process others may play a catalytic and supportive role but will not dominate. (1991, 13)

While class struggle figures highly in this analysis, Rahman argues that PAR marked a divergence from the historical materialism of Marxist theory and left movements, in that it was founded in the belief that control over the means of material production was not enough to bring about liberation. At a World Symposium on Action-Research and Scientific Analysis, held in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1977, action researchers began to more explicitly describe PAR not as a methodology but as a commitment to liberating praxis (Rahman and Fals-Borda 1991, 25). This discussion was later expanded to include the concept of people’s knowledge production, “including control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge” (Rahman 1991, 14).

It should be noted that Fals-Borda himself questioned the term “action” in participatory action research, feeling it was redundant. At the same time, feminist theorists questioned the term “participatory,” providing an invaluable contribution to the theorizing of complex power relationships. From the beginning, action and feminist research found common cause in the task of problematizing “systematic relations of power in the social construction of knowledge” (Maguire 2001, 60). The aspect feminist researchers brought to the table was an understanding that power relations are multi-dimensional, meaning there can be no singular view of oppression, which is experienced differently by different people, according to their specific conditions and status. As well, feminist research offered methodologies designed to accommodate the complex landscapes of researcher-subject power dynamics:

Many feminist methodologies emphasize non-hierarchical interactions, understanding and mutual learning, where close attention is paid to how the research questions and methods of data collection may be embedded in unequal power relations between the researcher and the research participants. (Sultana 2007, 375–76)

Thus feminist thought challenged action researchers to look beyond the external oppressor-oppressed paradigm, to critically assess internal power dynamics, and to pay as much attention to the research process as to its outcomes (Mendez 2008, 155–56). Further, feminism provided the theoretical framework to “insist on reflexivity, emphasize the role of subjectivity in research, and draw attention to the ways that power is reinscribed in the research process” (Richards 2007, 16). In particular, the feminist lens compelled researchers to re-examine their own social positions of relative privilege and power, stripping away any artifice of being seamlessly “one with the people.”

This recognition was doubtless essential to action research’s integration with Indigenous communities and movements, where insider/outsider perspectives remain a key topic of debate. From an Indigenous perspective, social research was historically riddled with errors and unable to deliver promised benefits to the community (Burhansstipanov et al. 2005, 71). In the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

The word itself, “research,” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is know-

ing and distrustful.... The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. (Smith 1999, 1)

Not surprisingly, Indigenous communities that felt “researched to death” welcomed non-Indigenous PAR facilitators into their midst as a way to achieve greater community control of research and its outcomes. As Smith notes, action research provides approaches that “assume that people know and can reflect on their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities that can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects” (1999, 127). Increasingly, however, external interlocutors need not apply. When researcher José Antonio Lucero proposed a collaborative research project to a Quechua community in Peru, community leaders declined, saying they were already working with a Quechua anthropologist. Lucero (2006) took this as “a positive sign of the changing times”:

When indigenous organizations are able to work with indigenous social scientists and turn down invitations from those of us who come from the “North” perhaps we are able to be *compañeros* in more meaningful ways that depend less on the good intentions of visiting social scientists but more on the growing capacities of indigenous and popular actors. (22)

Indeed, Hagey (1997) notes that today's Indigenous community leaders are asserting themselves and seeking out their own research consultants who are accountable to them:

First Nations ... are developing their own theory base and research programs. This challenges the romantic ideal of “partnering with communities” to do research and advocacy. (6)

Thus, some sixty years after the initial conceptualization, action research remains a dynamic realm. Hagey's observations fit well with what Rahman and others originally proposed as the natural end point of PAR — the transference of control over knowledge to the people, from inception to production to action. Looking at the difficulty of establishing equal relationships between researchers and subjects, Rahman (1991) looked forward to the day when communities defined and planned their own research tasks, contracting researchers as needed: “Such experience may finally clinch the matter for both sides, and a true

subject-subject relationship may be possible thereafter if mutual interest in a research partnership is subsequently agreed” (17).

FACILITATING PAR PROJECTS: WHERE THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD

GREENWOOD (2008) PROPOSES that the intellectual basis of action research is not merely the application of theory: “Rather, it is a democratizing form of context-specific knowledge creation, theorization, analysis, and action design in which the goals are democratically set, learning capacity is shared, and success is collaboratively valued” (329). He adds:

From this, it should be clear that action research is neither a theory nor a particular set of methods. It is a way of orchestrating combined research and social change activities to pursue collectively desired outcomes. (Greenwood 2008, 330)

With this in mind, the approach encompasses “a broad and messy array of disciplinary approaches, schools of thought and methodological practices” that has a common thread of re-aligning power relationships in knowledge production (Mendez 2008, 139). What, then, is the researcher to make of a research approach that eschews the mantle of methodology and offers no set methods? The answer lies in flexibility of approach while adhering to foundational principles of equality and social change. No end of handbooks and guides offer excellent advice on how to embark on this process, authored by both scholars and community activists. From these sources, a number of common themes and recommended practices are evident. What follows is a basic but by no means exhaustive summary of key principles and approaches:

- **Problem Identification** — PAR begins as a response to a problem identified by the community. It is one thing to say community members are involved in every step of the process. It is another thing to say community members decided on the first step, with the researchers following (Hagey 1997, 2).
- **Engagement** — Trust building. Being part of the community. Simply enlisting

community members to do surveys, or obtaining letters of support from community leaders is not engagement (Burhansstipanov et al. 2005, 72).

- **Dialogic Research Planning** — The research question and the approaches are discussed and debated in an open manner, and local participants are trained in the relevant methods to carry out the approach they settle on (Greenwood 2008, 331). This can present a particular challenge for action researchers, because human need doesn't come neatly packaged in a discipline or methodology.
- **Participation as Process** — Levels of participation are variable and processural. Participation cannot be mandated, but is an “emergent process largely controlled by local conditions,” although it can be enhanced and strengthened along the way as the community comes together to tackle pressing problems (Greenwood et al. 1993, 176).
- **Solidarity** Action researchers do not sit on the fence. How can they? To gain the access and the level of trust required to truly partake in community action, one must clearly be on the side of the people (Vargas 2008, 172).
- **Generation of People's Knowledge** — PAR often engages in recovering a community's common knowledge, contained in traditional skills, stories, memories and testimonials. It also produces new people's knowledge, by identifying problems and energizing people around the task of devising collective solutions (Park 1993, 19).
- **Relationship Reflexivity** — Reflexivity requires us to ask from the outset: what is the nature of the relationship between researchers and community actors? Reflexivity also requires us to recognize inner community dynamics: who is being represented, who is being left out? As involvement shifts throughout the process, these questions should remain active and open (Sultana 2007, 376–83).
- **Empowerment** — PAR includes the goal of engendering confidence and skills to carry local knowledge forward into action. The research cycle leads to action, which may in turn lead to further research, ideally research that finds itself more fully in the hands of the community with each step in the journey (Tang 2008, 241).
- **Ownership** — The data belongs to the community, and ultimately should be understandable, helpful and used by the community, rather than mysterious, harmful and used by outsiders. It should not unduly expose community members to police ac-

tion, surveillance or unwanted interventions. For reference, these principles are crystallized in the concept of Ownership, Control, Access and Participation (OCAP), developed by the Steering Committee of the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey to ensure participating communities have access to and physical control over data (Schnarch 2004, 80).

- **Accountability** — Who precisely does the researcher work for? Do we answer to our research institutes, academic supervisors and external funders? Or do we answer to the community? Hagey suggests that “the facilitator respects the autonomy of the people, avoiding speaking on their behalf, and he or she reports to the community when asked to play a mediator or interpreter role, always accountable to the people” (1997, 5).
- **Action for Change** — Simply writing up the problems of an oppressed community is not enough: “In fact, university libraries are filled with accounts of how aggrieved communities, nations, and workers struggled and resisted, but in no way did these stories contribute to a shift in power relations” (Pulido 2008, 352). At the core of PAR is the idea of fundamentally challenging and changing not only oppressive conditions, but also the structures of oppression.

Although these principles may seem straightforward, the challenges are many and the stakes are high. In the words of Park (1993):

We urgently need to recover peoples’ wisdom and turn it into a potent force for emancipating the rest of humanity...Saving the world from technological and spiritual destruction depends on transforming it into a human sphere of life where community and critical consciousness thrive. (19)

CHALLENGES AND COMPLICATIONS

LIPSITZ (2008) POINTS OUT that anything worth doing can be done badly. “Combining scholarship and activism offers no automatic guarantee of either better scholarship or better activism,” he warns (91). Indeed, researchers who work closely with communities face an unusual array of complications, in both our collaborative

undertakings and our personal/professional lives. We may fail to form good relationships, we may be inadequate to the task, and we may find ourselves enabling oppressive practices within communities. To anticipate and cope with such challenges, it helps to be aware of the experiences of other researchers. To this end, I have compiled a few illustrative examples from the published reflections of action researchers.

Matching Research Skills with Community Need

Lilja and Dixon (2008) note that “participatory research is an approach that can be applied to a wide range of methodologies — surveys, experiments, impact assessments, monitoring and evaluation” (468). This presents a formidable challenge to researchers, who are unlikely to be adept at all possible methodologies and methods. Further, we have our own research prejudices to overcome; our schooling and experience may lead us to favour some approaches over others. For example, researchers who are grounded in activist, feminist, anti-establishment discourse have a tendency to condemn positivist quantitative data. This stance fares well in heartfelt essays and articles, but it may fall short in the world of community action. As Pulido (2008) discovered in her work with the environmental justice movement, qualitative skills were not in high demand. While the activists appreciated her ability to gather stories and relay them to a wider audience, “as well as attend rallies and lick stamps,” what they really needed was a scientist who could map the pollution that was affecting their community and apply demographic analysis to discover the effects. While this may not be the bread and butter of a qualitative researcher, it was nonetheless what the community deemed useful. Rather than re-tooling her training, Pulido used her academic connections to get them the scholar they needed (Pulido 2008, 356). In retrospect, it was the right call. Fox (2004) highlights the importance of positivist quantitative data to the movement’s success:

Quantitative analysis was the key battleground for revealing the racial and class imbalance in exposure to toxic hazards. Alternative numbers empowered alternative ideas, turning them into mainstream common sense while retaining their power. Here the investment in harnessing mainstream methodologies paid off. (5)

Anthropologist Shannon Speed encountered a similar experience when enlisted to help a

community of Tzeltales people establish an Indigenous land claim in Chiapas. One of the first lessons she learned was that, in the context of a land claim that sought to establish the presence of a distinct and continuous traditional culture, her schooling in post-modernist theories of cultural fluidity needed to take a back seat. “From their perspective, emphasizing change alone detracted from the weight of their claim and made little sense,” she writes (Speed 2008, 228). The community did not deny that their culture changes with time, but their identity was far more of an ongoing process, “not something that the inhabitants change like a hat when it suits their purpose or something that is endlessly fluid and unbound” (Speed 2008, 229).

We may conclude that when research planning is truly participatory, we cannot predict or guide the choices, a situation that continually challenges our skill sets and perspectives. Lilja and Dixon (2008) recommend that, whatever means comes to the fore, we should remain focussed on the ends, which they describe as “science, co-learning and action” (468). As these two examples suggest, choosing and deploying the most appropriate methods and perspectives is a challenge to be met with a flexible mind and a willingness to serve not just as a researcher, but also as a conduit to the best possible people and resources needed to tackle the problem.

Power Dynamics

Boog (2003) observes that the relationship between action researchers and participants “represents an experimental microcosm of the problematic social situation of the researched subjects, which was initial reason for setting up an action research project” (434). It’s no secret that the university-based researcher is an unusually privileged and empowered participant in an action research project. To begin with, we are used to presenting ideas in a forceful, confident manner. It’s part of our training — and not a part that prepares us well for community collaboration. Second, project financing is often funnelled through our personal and institutional research funds, putting us in the position of cheque-writer, budgetary egg-sitter, and final report author. This provides influence — whether intended or not — over the shaping of the project and how it is conveyed to others. Burhanssitipanov et al. (2005) offer a simple solution: hand over the chequebook. They suggest that “to make the transition from “paternalism” to “partnership,” research institutions and their employees must be willing to give up some control, power, and money” (72). Unfortunately, individual

researchers may have no influence over this situation, as the institutions they work for have their own internal processes of accountability and control. A strong argument might be made for counting a grant to a community association as a legitimate research expense; however, it is not an argument one can reliably win in the absence of wider academic and institutional reforms. Indeed, there are few easy answers to the over-reaching architectures of class, race, gender, and privilege that seek to hold us where we are in relation to the research process.

As an example, Sultana (2008) describes the complex, situational relationships she encountered while working with rural communities on water issues in Bangladesh. Her shared Bengali roots provided “insider” status in some situations, while being an educated urbanite at times placed her on the “outside.” On the one hand, her relationship with male community leaders was freighted with the sexual inequalities of Bengali society; on the other hand, this experience provided her with solidarity, acceptance, and shared understanding among women. At the same time, some things held her apart from the women: her shoes, her haircut, her university education. If she tried to self-deny her difference, a well-aimed comment from a village woman would quickly remind her of her position. Sultana notes that among feminist geographers, such vexing concerns related to difference and unequal relationships have led to “a general withdrawal from fieldwork in the Global South” (2007, 375). She argues, however, that this stance is not the answer, as it merely leads to less research of use to the poor, and represents a denial that “the very conduct of fieldwork is always contextual, relational, embodied and politicized” (2007, 383). For herself, she learned to laugh when her sneakers were called out as “men’s shoes,” and to accept encounters with local people as experiences that were as rewarding as they were complex. “Consensual research is possible when different identities are understood and accepted, not assuming that there is equality across all researcher and research participants involved,” she concludes (2007, 382).

As an outsider arriving in an Indigenous community, Speed (2008) likewise was aware of the power imbalance that often leads researchers to define the goals and methods of discovery, without involving the community in the process. While she could not change her position as an educated Anglo, neither did she feel it should paralyse her ability to work effectively on behalf of the community. In the pragmatic spirit of action research, she writes that the dilemma comes down to a matter of “doing what one can do”:

An activist engagement with research subjects, at a minimum, demonstrates a

shared desire to see their rights respected, a promise to involve them in decisions about the research, and a commitment to contribute something to their struggle through one's research and analysis. (223)

Such an approach may not immediately change the over-arching power structures, yet it serves to at least improve the research relationship by introducing mutual respect and mutual endeavour — a process likely to produce deeper societal change in the long run. However, Boog (2003) argues that it is not enough to simply recognize power imbalances as part of a continual struggle; researchers need to do what they can to minimize the immediate effects by remaining focussed on the core objectives of “empowerment, emancipation and democratization” (434). This can be done through familiarization with action research techniques and careful planning of a research process that engages participants in decision-making as early in the process as possible (Boog 2003, 435).

Internal Dynamics

Despite our best technique, however, collaborative spaces are unlikely to be contradiction-free (Mendez 2008, 137). Power dynamics are not only present in researcher-community relations; communities themselves are typically rife with inequalities and internal power struggles that existed long before researchers arrived on the scene. This can cause conflicts for researchers, as described by Jonathan Fox:

Any researcher who gets up close and personal with the real world is going to come across dirty laundry, and social movements are no exception. Sometimes the problems are unrelated to the research, and one might decide to look the other way. At other times, one finds oneself immersed in a web of commitments surrounding the research that makes it more difficult to pretend that nothing is wrong. What to do? (Fox 2004, 8).

Fox goes on to state that the safest rule of thumb is to “first do no harm” (2004, 8). Yet what if there are issues of corruption and power abuse? Where does the researcher stand? “These are difficult situations that force us to think about who the partnership is actually with,” he notes (2004, 8). Nonetheless, he questions the role of researcher as interventionist, noting that the community itself may be ill prepared for a revolution. In contrast, Mendez argues that it is impossible for the scholar to be a detached, neutral observer in times of com-

munity conflict: “Simply stated, sooner or later one has to choose sides or risk taking on the role of the disinterested expert who cannot stoop to the level of taking a stand on issues” (Mendez 2008, 153). This leads to yet another complication, namely the level of involvement/immersion that action research demands in community life, and how this is perceived by others as valid scientific method.

Acceptance as Science

Describing his work with Community Against Police Action (CAPA) in South Central Los Angeles, João H. Costa Vargas (2008) provides an excellent picture of the challenges of community-based research. Because the CAPA office was under FBI surveillance and had a history of infiltration by undercover police and agents provocateurs, it was essential from the outset for Vargas to establish himself not just as an anthropology student doing fieldwork, but also as a fellow activist committed to ending police oppression in poor communities. He recalls:

I would not have become a CAPA collaborator if their members had not found my political commitment compatible with their program of social emancipation. Objectivity, if understood as detachment, was simply impossible, for a mere observer would not be welcome into the building on Western Avenue more than a few times. (Vargas 2008, 172)

Far from a fly-on-the-wall anthropologist, Vargas immersed himself in the work of the CAPA office, answering phones and doing other routine tasks throughout the day, and recording his observations and reflections in the evening. He argues that this level of involvement and commitment to the cause was essential to the research process:

Unless your allegiance was beyond doubt, you would never gain the trust of CAPA activists or be able to circulate unencumbered in the building. So forget about being a graduate student in anthropology trying to do participant observation. You were an activist first and, circumstances permitting, an observer second. (Vargas 2008, 175)

This scenario makes eminent sense to anyone who has engaged in community research with a view to affecting social change. But where does it leave us in relation to the dominant

paradigms that rule our lives? Whether in the university, the media, or policy circles, there is a tendency to dismiss the work of scholars like Vargas as non-science. As Hagey (1997) notes, “PAR challenges the idea of seeing researchers as being neutral and unbiased, without vested interests, etc., because it purposely champions the community engaging in its own research” (3). As well, PAR relies on relationship-building and solidarity rather than the professional distance of traditional academic work. For example, Lucero (2006) states that the most important fieldwork advice he received was “be a *compañero*” (21). Social scientific work, he continues, must first be social, because it is “an intervention in people’s lives and worlds that needs to be justified first and foremost to those people who make it possible,” as opposed to extractive scientific inquiry (2006, 21). Park (1993) adds: “PAR represents interactive, holistic knowledge. As such, there is no “proper” distance between the researcher and the researched, who are engaged in a collaborative process” (16).

Presenting action research as science may involve developing and defining novel research methods. For example, Vargas described his work at CAPA as *observant participation*, rather than *participant observation* (Vargas 2008, 175). Another novel approach, arising from Canada, is the concept of place-based learning communities being pursued by Indigenous communities in northern Manitoba and researchers at the University of Manitoba’s Natural Research Institute. Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty (2007) define the model as “dialogic networks formed to generate cross-cultural understanding on local problems or events” (2007, 295). This approach is based in the argument that there is more to research than the documentation of knowledge; engagement in dialogue about respective understandings of phenomena is a research process in itself, capable of creating new ways to frame questions and approaches, and based on mutually agreed-on goals (Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty 2007, 294–95).

Re-inventing and refining methods is just one small step in a larger epistemological journey, however. Observing that every research paradigm has its own system of verification, Rahman (1991) calls on action researchers to develop clear statements on matters of objectivity, verifiability and validity that distinctly relate to action research as the guiding philosophical and scientific framework, as opposed to accepting research assumptions designed for other research paradigms. Along this line, Park (1993) suggests that the question of validity is settled in the application of PAR. If the collaboration leads a community to overcome obstacles, or to broaden empathy and connectedness — typical research objectives — then its validity as research is clear.

Rather than turning one's back on science, then, it is more important to clearly articulate the science of PAR. Such an articulation serves to legitimize people's knowledge systems, allowing grassroots actors to develop their own systems of verification and methods of inquiry (Rahman 1991, 15). This answers Fals-Borda's call for revolutionary science that "becomes a real possibility, not only a felt necessity" (Fals-Borda 1987, 330).

Natural science methods for the most part deal fairly effectively with observation of the physical world; PAR for the most part deals quite effectively with action in the social world. There is no reason one should trump the other, or operate in seclusion. Well-rounded PAR projects make use of natural science methods, just as the natural sciences may use PAR to harness local knowledge in agriculture, climate change tracking, medical botany, and myriad other examples. The growing acceptance of PAR approaches across disciplines is an obvious sign of greater scientific acceptance. Ironically, however, this acceptance raises a new challenge — the spectre of cooptation and exploitation.

Cooptation

As early as 1991, Rahman and Fals-Borda raised the alarm that the "symptoms of PAR cooptation are evident" (Rahman and Fals-Borda 1991, 28). At the time, several universities had begun offering PAR instruction under the general heading of applied science, and PAR had been harnessed to a number of mainstream development projects as community verification systems: "Of course, not everything these institutions call participatory is authentic according to our ontological definitions, and much confusion has been sown in this regard," Rahman and Fals-Borda observed, identifying the problem as "faulty assimilation" of the approach (1991, 28). Similarly, in 1997 Hagey remarked on the growing presence of private research firms that purport to employ PAR, yet work within oppressive power structures rather than against them:

In such cases, the principal investigator can passively be an agent for powers interested in managing the community. A close reading of their reports sometimes reveals an infantilization of community leaders or belittling of the community's problem-solving abilities and political institutions. (Hagey 1997, 4–5)

As any citizen who has been drawn into an ostensibly "participatory" public consultation

can attest, it has become standard practice for facilitators to serve up a limited set of options for consideration within a highly-managed process that stifles debate and diverts community-offered alternative solutions as being “off the agenda.” The process of infantilization spoken to by Hagey is often clear in final reports. For example, a privately contracted consultant’s report on community consultations for the Regina Public School Board stated facilitators used a participatory process of “guided conversation” to gather feedback on a school closure plan (Linen 2008, 5). Although parents arrived at the meetings armed with research on the global impacts of inner city school abandonment, and had worked across schools to develop a critique of the plan and offer alternative solutions, the contractor’s report characterized school closures as “personal and emotional” issues, adding that “the closure situation created strong emotions in the affected schools” which “set a tone that resisted change,” primarily related to the “closure of one’s own school” (H.J. Linnen Associates 2008, 21, 24). Pointing to a carefully worded anonymous web survey as a better “census” of public opinion, and interpreting the survey results as mainly positive, the board-hired consultant recommended that the trustees continue with their closure plan while recognizing the challenge of “taking leadership decisions in these difficult environments” (H.J. Linnen Associates 2008, 24). Thereafter, the board publicly defended its decisions as taking place only after lengthy community consultation. This example illustrates a growing problem of research processes that peel away action research-style methods from the end goal of community control and emancipation. In the words of Hagey (1997): “Beware of research that uses the facilitator and the community members as puppets” (5).

However, it is not only bureaucracies that take part in the cooptation of action research. Mendez notes that today’s transnational social movements place heavy emphasis on the strategic deployment of information, while the rise of NGOs creates greater demand for research and relevant data. In response, action researchers are increasingly called on to “translate” community narratives into the language of policy makers, lending scientific credibility to the arguments made by communities (Mendez 2008, 144–45). While this may be a helpful development, Vargas provides a contrary caution: “It can be argued that translating scattered information into a linear narrative, besides unnecessarily changing the nature of the anarchic and improvisational methods of community organizing, also makes such methods more easily domesticated and appropriated by individuals and institutions who may not have the same political liberatory goals” (Vargas 2008, 178).

Kindon, et al. (2007) note that criticism of participatory approaches has intensified in

concert with its commodification within top-down policy spheres . For researchers, the implication of these critiques is clear. If we take part in research that employs so-called participatory methods to gather information and improve public relations, while failing to theorize and address inequality as the *primary* research goal, we are in danger of being as exploited as the community participants we work with. Emancipation must expand to the research process itself, a difficult prospect in an environment of chequebook consultants. We must continually remind ourselves that we work first and foremost for oppressed and marginalized communities, and not for those who would profess to help them.

Follow-Through

A common criticism of community-based research is that once the project is finished and the funding has dried up, communities are left little better off than when they started. This occurs after community members have contributed a great deal of time and effort to the research, participating in meetings, providing translation services, analysing results, and developing community action plans which may or may not gain funding support once the researchers leave the scene. In her work with immigrant communities in the U.S., Shirley Suet-Ling Tang observes:

Once the research is finished, their contribution is often forgotten and the communities are left standing outside the world of networks, resources and skills development that might help them design and carry out their own research projects. (Tang 2008, 242–43)

Indeed, reflecting on his experience with CAPA, Vargas (2008) notes that researchers often have more to gain at the end of the day than do community members. Researchers get published and advance their careers without ever having to share the dangers of life at the grassroots. Vargas admits that his return contribution was marginal at best:

What did I bring to the collaboration? What benefits accrued from my presence? Other than my time and willingness to perform banal office work and sometimes engage in projects that could have been conceptualized and carried out by almost anyone...there was not much in my set of skills that was of vital importance. The personal, intellectual and political lessons I learned

were far greater and more vital than anything that I could have ever offered to the activists of Los Angeles. (Vargas 2008, 178)

Summarizing her experience working with Khmer-American communities, Tang agrees community actors bring more than their fair share of experience and knowledge to the collaboration. Recognizing the potential of this knowledge to support social justice and community development, she advocates building research capacity among communities of struggle as a critical task (Tang 2008, 241). Typically, this might involve mentoring community members in grant writing, proposal development, community organizing, lobbying tactics, co-operative development and other skills needed to turn knowledge into action. It may also involve enhancing the social capital of communities by forging new networks with universities, political action groups, support agencies and other potentially helpful institutions. An example from my own experience is the Street Workers Advocacy Project, an action research project initiated in response to a “kick prostitutes out of the neighbourhood” campaign in the mid-1990s in Regina, Saskatchewan. Through the project we were able to reach out to a previously unorganized and isolated community, helping them gather their stories and assert themselves as co-members of society. The project included negotiating the first funding arrangements that would allow an Aboriginal-run community group to carry the action cycle forward. Today the “research project” still exists as a storefront service and advocacy organization for the street community. However, capacity and funding remain a great challenge. With this in mind, it is important to be mindful of the line between empowerment and abandonment. Perhaps our initial action research team could have done more in terms of long-term commitment as project facilitators. Could we stand accused of “raising and dumping” a difficult, almost impossible, task on community shoulders? At the same time, one wonders whether or not the “handover” of ownership would have been complete as long as the original facilitators remained active participants on the scene. Would the group have been able to live up to its mission statement: “The Street Workers Advocacy Project belongs to the people we serve”? (Street Workers Advocacy Project n.d.) These are difficult questions to grapple with, for which I have no clear answers. Richards notes that feminist-inspired community research carries with it the freight of emotional ties, including issues of abandonment and other complexities of human relations, more so than in traditional positivist inquiry (2006, 16). How to negotiate a successful path toward autonomy is an example of one such issue raised by the research process and worthy of further reflection and research.

The Lot of the Activist Scholar

Although PAR is gaining wider acceptance as a research approach, actively engaging in PAR remains a risky business for researchers. Our professional progress is tied to the uncertain path of community action, where we have little control — and are indeed committed to exercising little control — over the end results. Added to this is the fact that the research product could be a YouTube video, a workshop, or a protest march, rather than a published paper. It goes without saying that this is a difficult prospect for scholars who do not occupy secure positions in the academy, where lip service is paid to action research but fundamental structures and professional expectations remain unchanged. Elizabeth Oglesby (2006) offers the viewpoint of an untenured Assistant Professor:

I have not engaged in what I would call more substantive research collaboration, i.e., generating research questions in tandem with research subjects or with social organizations in Guatemala. I will go on record admitting that the reason is fear, fear that the process would take too long, or that the very delicate relationships that one has to forge to sustain such a project might fall apart before a publication could be produced. Indeed, although it seems counterintuitive to me, by publishing in Spanish and diverse venues, I wonder if I have gone quite far out on a limb already. (2006, 20)

Jessica Gordon Nembhard expresses similar concerns: “It is very difficult to be tenure track and know that even though my scholarship and commitment depend on my social justice activities and teaching, the tenure decision will be based on everything but that — and may suffer as a result” (2008, 290). We should not conclude, however, that these challenges are confined to junior members of the academy, and that therefore gaining tenure will eventually solve the problem. Even senior, widely published academics such as Greenwood share a sense of marginalization: “Activist research in academic institutions is rare. A powerful set of forces, both external and internal to universities, are arrayed against it” (Greenwood 2008, 319).

The basic complaints are well known and oft repeated. Academics are expected to act as university labourers, spending their time in committee meetings and administration tasks

rather than working in the wider community (Lipsitz 2008). Increasingly, including on my own campus, there are policies to ensure professors work in their offices on a nine-to-five basis. Here they are expected to produce knowledge products for their own tight-knit and highly privileged community, by publishing in approved peer-reviewed journals (Mendez 2008, 152). If they leave campus, it should be to present papers at international academic conferences, not to help out at local community centres. Inspired teaching and service to humanity are not given tangible credit (Nembhard 2008, 290). Racism plays a role in marginalizing our work, as noted by Smith (1999):

The form that racism takes inside a university is related to the ways in which academic knowledge is structured as well as to the organizational structures which govern the university. The insulation of disciplines, the culture of the institution that supports the disciplines, and the systems of management and governance all work in ways which protect the privileges already in place.
(133)

Admittedly, our professional struggles are puny compared to the struggles of marginalized and oppressed communities. Yet it would not serve to disregard our problems with a shrug and soldier on. These problems affect our functionality in the community, and stymie the process of legitimizing community knowledge and action as science.

Action research theorists have offered a range of possible responses. One option is to operate simultaneously and effectively in two spheres. This is the advice given by Canadian scholar and public health advocate Dennis Raphael (2008), in his “Ten Tips for Being a Public Scholar.” Raphael’s tip sheet includes choosing disciplines that allow the incorporation of politics into academic inquiry, as well as to “publish and publish even more” and “get tenured” — tasks he contends are “actually relatively easy for most academics to do” (Raphael 2008, 411–12). This coincides somewhat with sociologist Francesca M. Cancian’s advice: “Sociologists who do activist research and want a successful academic career ... have to bridge two conflicting social worlds” (Cancian 1993, 92). It must be noted, however, that she is far more critical of the publishing imperative than is Raphael. In either case, though, Cancian and Raphael deliver a prospect that is instantly familiar to working women: do it all, and do it better than anyone else. From experience, we may well suspect this is a process designed for our defeat as human beings.

One possible answer is to retreat to a standard division of labour. This appears to be the

approach settled on by Mitchell (2008), who relates the experience of being challenged by a group of students for being “all talk and no walk.” Rather than feeling guilty for his lack of direct engagement in community protest, Mitchell, who calls himself a “deskbound radical,” argues there is a clear and justifiable division of labour between academics who do “intellectual work” and activists who press for change on the picket line (1, 453–54). For many action researchers, however, this approach is likely to be unsatisfying, in the same way that returning to traditional gender divisions of labour might be. James and Gordon (2008) argue in favour of choosing community over academy, if a choice must be made. “Despite its political limitations, the fractured self of the radical subject desires what the academy cannot provide: relevancy and accountability to collectives resisting domination,” they write (371). Therefore, an activist scholar would be better off seeking validation and belonging outside the academy, rather than risking becoming a “sideshow attraction” on the inside (James and Gordon 2008, 371). Indeed, as previously discussed, this was the path taken by Fals-Borda and his contemporaries in the early days of PAR theorizing, providing a clear historical precedent. Thus we arrive at an important debate: can PAR function within the traditional academy, and should it? What, if anything, is to be gained by taking on the additional burden of academic reform?

CONCLUSION: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS ACADEMIC REFORM

OVERLOADED BY COMPETING EXPECTATIONS, activist scholars are pulled in too many directions, with too much to do. Community-based activists face similar problems. They are often too harried in their daily lives to consider historical and theoretical questions, and may become impatient with academics who do so. Consequently, Lipsitz (2008) observes, they borrow from existing ideologies rather than creating or reforming ideologies. Further, the need for solidarity in a crisis makes them insular and isolated to criticism, and resistant to new strategies.

Even a casual observer might conclude the problems of scholars and activists are made for one another. As scholars, we can provide needed social and financial connections to make the lives of community members less harried. We can offer guidance in reflexive prac-

tice by raising important questions along the way, including questions insiders are reluctant to voice for fear of upsetting group dynamics. Our presence can open up established power cliques to new strategies and ideas from the grassroots. Through our grasp of action research theory, we can encourage communities to recognize the value of their own grassroots knowledge, rather than relying on external ideologies and practices that may not conform to local needs and aspirations.

In turn, community action has a contribution to make to scholarship. It challenges the templates we use, forcing us to acquire new knowledge about the world from new sources. Ultimately, community action advances human knowledge, because it is in itself a unique form of knowledge in action. But it is knowledge that is not easy to grasp, being fluid and interactive. Rolling up our sleeves and joining in community activities provides insights and experiences that are difficult, if not impossible, to discover by traditional means. It is also a lot of fun. The goal of understanding and acting on the ensuing influx of new, dynamic, community-generated knowledge cannot help but benefit the academy as much as it benefits the grassroots.

Yet within our institutions we are confronted by significant barriers to the generation and dissemination of co-generated, action-oriented knowledge. Herein may rest one of community activism's greatest contributions to scholarly work. Action research demands us to innovate, rather than to accept the status quo. For example, our traditional knowledge products — journal articles — are largely inaccessible and of questionable relevance to the daily struggles of community collaborators. Even if community activists could afford the subscription fees, the arcane debates and competitive digs that are the hallmark of academic writing are of little use to them. Meanwhile, communities produce a wealth of excellent publications and other media products that are widely disseminated and discussed in a shared language that needs no translation. There is no reason we should not be contributing to these publications as a matter of course in our academic work. In addition, researchers such as Smith (1999) advocate the creation of Indigenous research units, although she warns that such efforts only arise from long struggle to gain recognition and funding within universities. Although difficult, such internal struggles are not in vain. For example, a sign of the impact action research has had on research protocols is evident in the Tri-Council Policy's most recent draft section on "Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples." A review of recommended "good practices" clearly draws from the well of participatory action research, providing guidelines for community engagement in a spirit of mutual benefit, collaborative research

agreements, strengthening local research capacity, and options for community review of research (Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics 2009, 105–10).

A practical reform option available to Canadian researchers is to request support for community-based sabbaticals in project funding applications to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The University of Saskatchewan's Community-University Institute for Social Research is one such organization that has on occasion offered sabbatical opportunities to CBO (community-based organization) employees to take time off from their work to study community problems, with the support of SSHRC funding (University of Saskatchewan n.d.).

PAR also calls on us to develop new strategies in the classroom, so that our students are actively engaged in the community rather than sequestered in study halls. This may involve developing novel curriculum approaches. For example, we could create community internships, and invite community activists to participate in curriculum development and delivery. What do they feel students need to know and read? What dialogues are important to engender? We could also explore new methods of peer review, on the understanding that anonymous, distant academics may not be the most reliable peers to evaluate community work. It is standard procedure to include evaluation processes in PAR projects; why should we not elevate this already well-established and well-formulated practice to the level of peer review? Who better to determine the validity of a project than members of an affected community? Indeed, Mendez (2008) argues that the simple yet profound act of holding research accountable to the community spirals outward into a re-ordering of relationships on a larger scale:

In this way, scholar activists who are undertaking collaborative projects could contribute to a shift in the direction of North-to-South accountability, making the “global power” of the scholar activist accountable to the “local power” of the community or organization. (152)

Thus, from individual struggles we begin to move mountains. This means having the courage to defend our own necks after we stick them out, so that it will be easier for others who follow. “Unless we challenge our obsession with publishing in obscure, albeit highly regarded academic journals, graduate students and early-career academics will have little choice but to do the same,” warns Pickerill (2008, 485). He adds that this involves “not just writing more clearly and in more accessible locations, but spending more time with my community, friends and family...creating space for passion in all our life endeavours” (Pickerill 2008,

486). I would argue that this is the most important part of PAR: it turns us back into social beings. In this manner, the utopian impulse of PAR extends far beyond our community projects. As Stringer argues, participatory research is ultimately an exercise of power (Stringer 1996, 159). It should come as no surprise, then, that it may upset the status quo not only within marginalized communities, but also within power centres, including our universities. The potential reward is a more humane and just world for all.

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