Challenging the Boundaries of the Possible: Participation, Knowledge and Power

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1 Introduction
Participatory research has long held within it implicit notions of the relationships between power and knowledge. Advocates of participatory action research have focused their critique of conventional research strategies on structural relationships of power and the ways through which they are maintained by monopolies of knowledge, arguing that participatory knowledge strategies can challenge deep-rooted power inequities. Other action research traditions have focused more on issues of power and knowledge within organisations, while others still have highlighted the power relations between individuals, especially those involving professionals and those with whom they work.

In her work on *Defacing Power,* Hayward (1998: 21) suggests that we can conceive of freedom as the 'capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible'. If that is the case, then knowledge, power and freedom are inextricably intertwined. Perhaps as much as any other resource, knowledge as power determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom. Through access to knowledge and participation in its production, use and dissemination, actors can affect the boundaries and indeed the conceptualisation of the possible. In some situations, the asymmetrical control of knowledge productions of 'others' can severely limit the possibilities, which can be either imagined or acted upon; in other situations, agency in the process of knowledge production, or co-production with others, can broaden these boundaries enormously.

Throughout the literature on participatory action research, we find various theories and approaches which to some degree or another are premised upon the claim that democratic participation in knowledge production can enable otherwise marginalised people to exercise greater voice and agency, and work to transform social and power relations in the process. However, there are great variations within the 'schools' and traditions of participatory research as to how transformational social change occurs.

Below we illustrate and explore some commonalities and differences in these approaches, drawing especially (but not exclusively) from the approaches which have influenced our thinking the most. These are those associated with the Freirean tradition of 'participatory action research', and those associated with the work around PRA (participatory rural appraisal or participatory reflection and action) and PLA (participatory learning and action), an approach which spread very quickly in the 1990s with an enormous impact on development thinking and practice.

2 The nature and locations of power
For those early writers on participatory action research (PAR), power is understood as a relationship of domination in which the control of knowledge and its production was as important as material and other social relations. As Rahman put it many years ago:

> The dominant view of social transformation has been preoccupied with the need for changing the oppressive structures of relations in material production – certainly a necessary task. But, and this is the distinctive viewpoint of PAR (Participatory Action Research), domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over means of material production, but also over the means of

knowledge production, including control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge. Irrespective of which of these two polarizations set off a process of domination, one reinforces the other in augmenting and perpetuating this process. (Rahman 1991: 4)

The knowledge that affects people's lives is seen as being in the hands of a 'monopoly' of expert knowledge producers, who exercise *power over* others through their expertise (Hall 2002; Tandon 2002). The role of PAR is to enable people to empower themselves through the construction of their own knowledge, in a process of action and reflection, or 'conscientisation', to use Freire's term. Such action against 'power over' relations implies conflict in which the power of the dominant classes is challenged, as the relatively powerless begin to develop their new awareness of their reality, and to act for themselves (Selener 1997: 23).

While in this earlier view of PAR power is located in broad social and political relations, later work by Chambers, more often associated with PRA, puts more emphasis on domination in personal and interpersonal terms (see for instance his article in this *IDS Bulletin*). Starting with a focus on 'hierarchies of power and weakness, of dominance and subordination' (1997: 58), Chambers outlines two categories: 'uppers', who occupy positions of dominance, and 'lowers', who reside in positions of subordination or weakness. In his account of 'uppers' and 'lowers', power is less fixed in persons than in the positions they inhabit *vis-à-vis* others: people can occupy more than one position as 'upper', and may occupy both 'upper' and 'lower' positions depending on context. This relational portrayal of power relations mirrors Foucault's view of power as residing not in individuals, but in the positions that they occupy and the ways in which discourses make these positions available to them.

Chambers describes the ways in which the taken for granted practices associated with the professions – what he calls 'normal professionalism' (Chambers 1997) – creates and reproduces power relations. By circumscribing the boundaries of what is knowable and treating other forms of knowledge as if they were mere ignorance, Chambers argues, professionals produce and reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and power that place them in the position of agents who know better, and to whom

decisions over action, and action itself, should fall. His description of the ways in which professionals impose their 'realities' on 'lowers', with power effects that obliterate or devalue the knowledge and experience of 'lowers', resonates with Foucault's (1977) account of the ways in which 'regimes of truth' are sustained through discourses, institutions and practices.

Departing from a 'power over' perspective, PRA is characterised as a means through which a zero-sum conceptualisation of power can be transcended: 'lowers' speak, analyse and act, in concert with each other and with newly sympathetic and enabling professionals who have become aware of the power effects of their positions as 'uppers'. Through analysis and action, 'lowers' are able to lay claim to their own distinctive versions and visions, acquiring the 'power to' and 'power within' that restores their agency as active subjects. By listening and learning, 'uppers' shed the mantle of dominance:

> From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift to convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning. They seek out the poorer and weaker, bring them together, and enable them to conduct their own appraisal and analysis, and take their own action. The dominant uppers 'hand over the stick', sit down, listen, and themselves learn. (Chambers 1995: 34)

In his article in this *IDS Bulletin*, Chambers further develops the idea of the 'pedagogy for the powerful', which will enable powerful people 'to reflect and change' through such approaches as workshops and retreats, facilitations training, direct experiential learning, peer influence and promotion of well-being.

While offering an optimistic view of the possibilities of individual change, this view has also been critiqued for failing to analyse broader sources of oppression (e.g. Crawley 1998) and also for being subject to misuse and abuse in a way that re-enforces the *status quo* (Cooke and Kothari 2001). At the same time, those involved with PAR have also been critiqued for offering a broad analysis of social power relations, without clear starting points for change at the micro and personal level. (Many of those involved in organisational action research might also emphasise

an intermediate level, which examines power in the organisation and group, as a mediating level between individual power and broader social relationships.)

Part of the difference in views here is found in the level of analysis. Rather than thinking about these approaches as necessarily competing, it is perhaps more useful to think of them of as complementary, each with a differing starting point in addressing mutually re-enforcing levels of power. In his comparative work on PAR, 'cooperative inquiry' and 'action inquiry', Reason also points to the necessary inter-linkages of each of these levels and approaches. 'One might say that PAR serves the community, cooperative inquiry the group, and action inquiry the individual practitioner. But this is clearly a gross oversimplification, because 'each of the triad is fully dependent on the others' (Reason 1994: 336). If freedom, as defined earlier, is the capacity to address the boundaries of possibility which are drawn in multiple ways and relationships, then surely the multiple levels of change are each important.

3 Power and the nature of knowledge

While differing approaches to action research may have differing understandings of the location of power, they all share an epistemological critique about the ways in which power is embedded and reinforced in the dominant (i.e. positivist) knowledge production system. The critique here is several-fold. First, there is the argument that the positivist method itself distorts reality, by distancing those who study reality (the expert) from those who experience it through their own lived subjectivity. Second is the argument that traditional methods of research – especially surveys and questionnaires – may reinforce passivity of powerless groups, through making them the objects of another's inquiry, rather than subjects of their own. Moreover, empirical, quantitative forms of knowing may reduce the complexity of human experience in a way that denies its very meaning, or which reinforces the *status quo* by focusing on what is, rather than on historical processes of change. Third is the critique that in so far as 'legitimate' knowledge relies largely within the hands of privileged experts, dominant knowledge obscures or underprivileges other forms of knowing, and the voices of other knowers.

Against this epistemological critique, participatory action research attempts to put forth a different form of knowledge. On the one hand, such research argues that those who are directly affected by the research problem at hand must participate in the research process, thus democratising or recovering the power of experts. Second, participatory action research recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and embedded, and therefore research approaches 'which allow for social, group or collective analysis of life experiences of power and knowledge are most appropriate' (Hall 1992: 22).

Third, participatory action research recognises differing ways of knowing, multiple potential sources and forms of knowledge, as Pettit elaborates in his article in this *IDS Bulletin*. For many practitioners engaged in social change, feeling and action are as important as cognition and rationality in the knowledge creation process. While participatory research often starts with the importance of indigenous or popular knowledge (Selener 1997: 25), such knowledge is deepened through a dialectical process of people acting, with others, upon reality in order both to change and understand it.

Resonating with the feminist critique of objectivity (see for instance, Harding 1986), writing on participatory research emphasises the importance of listening to and for different versions and voices. 'Truths' become products of a process in which people come together to share experiences through a dynamic process of action, reflection and collective investigation. At the same time, they remain firmly rooted in participants' own conceptual worlds and in the interactions between them.
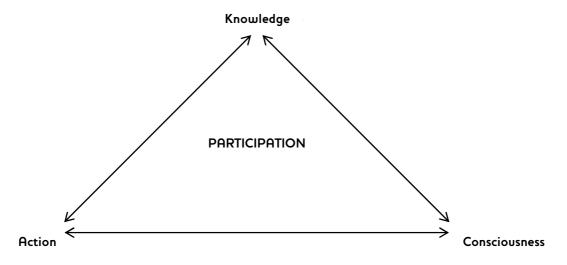
4 Knowledge, social change and empowerment

While there is thus a certain amount of commonality in the various approaches in terms of their critique of positivist knowledge, and the liberating possibilities of a different approach to knowledge production, there are important differences across views as to what about participatory research actually contributes to the process of change. That is, what is it in participatory research that is potentially transformatory of power relations?

In Gaventa's earlier article in this *IDS Bulletin*, three forms of power were outlined (visible, hidden and invisible) and how they interact with different spaces and places of participation. Each of these three forms, or faces, or power carries with it an implicit or explicit understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. Participatory research makes

Figure 1 **Dimensions of participatory research**

Knowledge

PARTICIPATION

Action   **Consciousness**

claims to challenging power relations in each of its dimensions through addressing the need for:

- knowledge – as a resource which affects observable decision making (visible power)
- action – which looks at who is involved in the production of such knowledge in order to challenge and shape the political agenda (hidden power)
- consciousness – which looks at how the production of knowledge changes the awareness or worldview of those involved, thus shaping the psychological and conceptual boundaries of what is possible (invisible power).

However, much of the literature, and indeed the practical politics of participatory research and struggles to reconfigure power relations and enhance agency, tend to emphasise one or the other of the above approaches. To do so, as we shall discuss below, is limiting, for it fails to understand how each dimension of change is in fact related to the other as Figure 1 illustrates.

5 Participatory research as an alternative form of knowledge
Undeniably one of the most important contributions of participatory action research to empowerment and social change is in fact in the knowledge dimension. Through a more open and democratic process, new categories of knowledge, based on

local realities, are framed and given voice. As Nelson and Wright suggest, based on an analysis of PRA approaches, the change process here involves:

an ability to recognise the expertise of local farmers as against that of professional experts; to find more empowering ways of communicating with local experts; and to develop decision-making procedures which respond to ideas from below, rather than imposing policies and projects from above. (Nelson and Wright 1995: 57)

Similarly, Chambers (1997) argues for the importance of participatory processes as a way of bringing into view poor people's realities as a basis for action and decision making in development, rather than those of the 'uppers' or development experts. A number of case studies of participatory research have clearly demonstrated how involving new participants in the research process brings forth new insights, priorities and definitions of problems and issues to be addressed in the change process. Based on this view, for instance, the development field has seen a rapid expansion and acceptance of participatory methods to gather the 'voices of the poor' in the policy process, be it related to 'poverty', the environment or livelihoods (see for example Brock and McGee 2002; Chambers, this *IDS Bulletin*).

The importance of using participatory methods to surface more democratic and inclusive forms of

knowledge, as a basis of decision making, cannot be denied. At the same time, by itself, this approach to using participatory research to reconfigure the boundaries of knowledge raises a number of challenges.

First, there is the danger that knowledge which is at first blush perceived to be more 'participatory', because it came from 'the community' or the 'people' rather than the professional researcher, may in fact serve to disguise or minimise other axes of difference (see critiques by Maguire 1987, 1996 on PAR; Guijt and Shah 1998 on PRA; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2003; Cornwall and Pratt 2003; Brock and McGee 2002). In the general focus on the 'community', an emphasis on consensus becomes pervasive. Yet consensus can all too easily masquerade as common vision and purpose, blotting out difference and with it the possibility of more pluralist and equitable solutions (Mouffe 1992). By reifying local knowledge and treating it as singular (Cornwall *et al.* 1993), the possibility that what is expressed as 'their knowledge' may simply replicate dominant discourses, rather than challenge them, is rarely acknowledged. Little attention is generally given to the positionality of those who participate, and what this might mean in terms of the versions they present. Great care must be taken not to replace one set of dominant voices with another – all in the name of participation.

Moreover, even where differing people and groups are involved, there is the question of the extent to which the voices are authentic. As we know from the work by Freire (1970), Scott (1986, 1990) and others on consciousness, relatively powerless groups may simply speak in a way that 'echoes' the voices of the powerful, either as a conscious way of appearing to comply with the more powerful parties wishes, or as a result of the internalisation of dominant views and values. In either case, participatory research implies the necessity for further investigation of reality, in order to change it, not simply to reflect the reality of the moment. Treating situated representations as if they were empirical facts maintains the dislocation of knowledge from the agents and contexts of its production in a way that is, in fact, still characteristic of positivism.

The dangers of using participatory processes in ways that gloss over differences among those who participate, or to mirror dominant knowledge in the name of challenging it, are not without consequence. To the extent that participatory processes can be seen to have taken place, and that the relatively powerless have had the opportunity to voice their grievances and priorities in what is portrayed as an otherwise open system, then the danger will be that existing power relations may simply be reinforced, without leading to substantive change in policies or structures which perpetuate the problems being addressed. In this sense, participation without a change in power relations may simply add a more 'democratic' face to the *status quo*. The illusion of inclusion means not only that, what emerges is treated as if it represents what 'the people' really want, but also that it gains a moral authority that becomes hard to challenge or question.

6 Participatory research as popular action

For this reason, to fulfil its liberating potential, participatory research must also address the second aspect of power, through encouraging mobilisation and action over time in a way that reinforces the alternative forms and categories of knowledge which might have been produced.

Though the action component of the participatory action research process is developed in all schools, it has particular prominence from the work of Lewin (1948), and those organisational action researchers who have followed in his tradition. Action research focuses first on problem solving, and second on the knowledge generated from the process. The emphasis of the process is not knowledge for knowledge's sake, but knowledge which will lead to improvement, usually for the action researcher taken in terms of organisational improvement, or for the solution for practical problems.

At the same time, while knowledge is not for its own sake, neither is action; rather the process is an iterative one. Through action, knowledge is created, and analyses of that knowledge may lead to new forms of action. By involving people in gathering and information, knowledge production itself may become a form of mobilisation; new solutions or actions are identified, tested, and then tried again. Thus, in action research, knowledge must be embedded in cycles of action–reflection–action over time (Rahman 1991). It is through such a process that the nature of action can be deepened, moving from practical problem solving to more fundamental social

transformation (Hall 1981: 12). The ultimate goal of research in this perspective is not simply to communicate new voices or categories, but

> the radical transformation of social reality and improvement in the lives of the people involved … Solutions are viewed as processes through which subjects become social actors, participation, by means of grassroots mobilisations, in actions intended to transform society (Selener 1997: 19–21)

7 Participatory research as awareness building

Just as expressing voice through consultation may risk the expression of voice-as-echo, so too action itself may represent blind action, rather than action which is informed by self-conscious awareness and analysis of one's own reality. For this reason, the third key element of participatory action research sees research as a process of reflection, learning and development of critical consciousness. Just as PRA has put a great deal of attention on the 'knowledge' bit of the equation, and action research on the action component, PAR, which grew from the pedagogical work of Freire and other adult educators, placed perhaps the greatest emphasis on the value of the social learning that can occur by oppressed groups through the investigation process.

Here again, however, it is important to recognise that reflection itself is embedded in praxis, not separate from it. Through action upon reality, and analyses of that learning, awareness of the nature of problems, and the sources of oppression, may also change. For this reason, participatory research which becomes only 'consultation' with excluded groups at one point in time is limited, for it prevents the possibility that investigation and action over time may lead to a change in the knowledge of people themselves, and therefore a change in understanding of one's own interests and priorities. Not only must production of alternative knowledge be complemented by action upon it, but the participants in the knowledge process must equally find spaces for self-critical investigation and analysis of their own reality, in order to gain more authentic knowledge as a basis for action or representation to others. Such critical self-learning is important not only for the weak and powerless, but also for the more powerful actors who may themselves be trapped in received versions of their own situation. For this reason, we need to understand both the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire 1970) as well as the 'pedagogy of the powerful' (Chambers, this *IDS Bulletin*), and the relationship between the two.

The important point is to recognise that these various approaches to participatory knowledge, learning and action are synergistic pieces of the same puzzle. From this perspective, what is empowering about participatory research is the extent to which it is able to link the three approaches: to create more democratic forms of knowledge, through action and mobilisation of groups of people on their own affairs, in a way that also involves their own critical reflection and learning. It is perhaps when these are effectively combined, that participatory research may contribute to the possibility of challenging and expanding the boundaries of the possible.

Notes

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