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Poverty Research:
Methodologies, Mindsets
and Multidimensionality

Robert Chambers
December 2007

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Summary

After defining key words and listing biases and limitations, this paper seeks to explore linkages between methodologies, mindsets, concepts and perceptions in research on poverty. Risking caricature, three streams, syndromes or paradigms are described: first, reductionist - standardised, non-contextual and quantitative, associated with questionnaire surveys, income-poverty, poverty lines and economic analysis; second, particularistic – idiosyncratic, qualitative and contextual, associated with participant observation, ideas about poverty in cultures and communities and anthropological analysis; and third, participatory – pluralist, interactive and multidimensional, associated with facilitation of poor people's own analysis, and pioneered by a growing number of innovators.

Three approaches to the multidimensionality of poverty have been multidisciplinary teams, composite indicators, and mixed methods. Complementing these, participatory methodologies go further into new ground. In the past decade and a half they have exploded with creative diversity, not least with participatory poverty assessments, methodological innovations for research, face-to-face experiential learning, and local people's own research.

The contrasting mindsets of economics, anthropology and participatory pluralism are reflected in and reinforced by their different forms of representation. The multidimensional nature and linkages of poverty and illbeing can be represented by nets and webs.

Participatory methodologies repeatedly surprise, and reveal and illuminate relatively neglected dimensions of poverty and illbeing like seasonality, the places of the poor, the importance of the body, and how these and others interlock. With participatory pluralism, methods can be invented and evolved to fit specific topics. Lessons learnt include the need for enough time for trials and piloting; the critical importance of selection, training and mentoring of facilitators; and how behaviour, attitudes, ethics and quality are linked.

Participatory pluralism is part of a quiet methodological revolution that has passed largely unnoticed in disciplinary mainstreams. It is blocked by embedded professional

mindsets and habits, and by personal, bureaucratic and institutional resistance and inertia, not least in universities. The questions are whether the future of methodology in poverty research lies now much more with this eclectic, creative and participatory pluralism, and whether this can offer a win-win, a best of all worlds, for all, professionals and people living in poverty alike.

Keywords: poverty, research, participatory methodologies, multidimensionality, mindset, pluralism.

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Contents

Acknowledgements

'In some cases, the methods used to identify poverty drive the debate to such an extent that they change the way the subject is understood.'

(Spicker, *The Idea of Poverty* 2007: 7)

'… the poor themselves – and not economists or anthropologists – speak best when it comes to helping others understand poverty.'

(ActionAid Asia n.d.)

'A plague o' both your houses.'

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)[1]

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.'

(Wordsworth, The Prelude)

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1   The idea for this quotation came from John Harriss (1989).

Abstract

Meanings of key words are defined, and some of the writer's biases noted. The underlying question of the paper is to what extent, with research on poverty, there are linkages between methodologies, mindsets, concepts and perceptions. Three streams, syndromes or paradigms are described. The first is standardised, non-contextual and quantitative and is about income poverty, poverty lines, statistical analysis, and questionnaire surveys. The methods and mindsets of many economists are associated with and sustain this approach and its reductionism. The second is idiosyncratic, qualitative and contextual, and is about poverty in cultures and communities as conceived and expressed through the intimate interaction of researchers and local people. The methods and mindsets of many social anthropologists are associated with and sustain this approach and its particularism. The third is participatory and interactive, and is about poverty as expressed and analysed by local people, often in groups facilitated by outsiders. The mindsets and methods of many in civil society, and increasingly of others independent of discipline, are associated with and sustain the pluralism of this approach and its multidimensionality.

These three streams, syndromes or paradigms can supplement and complement each other, and do not have to be mutually exclusive. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Attempts to gain from combinations include combining disciplinary specialists in teams; constructing composite indices; and mixing the quantitative and qualitative methods of the first two streams. The power and potential of participatory approaches and methodologies (PMs) go further, but have been under recognised and undervalued. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, PMs have exploded with creative diversity. Relating to poverty some are:

● Participatory Poverty Assessments;
● Methodological innovations for research
● Face-to-face experiential learning; and
● Local people's own research.

The contrasting methods and mindsets of economics, social anthropology and participatory pluralism are expressed and reinforced by their differing analytical representations. Webs and other diagrams often used with participatory pluralism can show multiple dimensions and relationships, adding to what words, graphs, correlations and tables can, enabling the presentation and analysis of the multiple dimensions and commonalities of poverty.

Practical lessons concern: innovating methods to fit specific topics and local conditions; allowing plenty of time for trials and piloting; the key importance of facilitators, their selection, training and mentoring; and interlinked behaviour, attitudes, ethics and quality.

A way forward now is for development professionals to be more courageous, inventive and reflexive in the approaches they use in research to understand the illbeing of poverty and the wellbeing to which poor people aspire. The quiet revolution to which this points implies radical change in embedded professional methods, mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. As of 2007, the seeds of such a

revolution have been sown but are scattered and vulnerable. The recognition, let alone creation and adoption, of participatory methodologies and eclectic pluralism are blocked by massive professional, academic, bureaucratic and institutional inertia. Innovation and adoption seem to vary inversely with power. The challenge is to transform tertiary education, research institutes, and other sites of professional power and knowledge, liberating us all from learning disabilities and opening up endless adventures in experiencing and learning. The conclusion in the spirit of this paper, is not certainties but questions: for professionals who want to make a difference does the approach of eclectic and creative pluralism offer enhanced understanding, realism, relevance, effectiveness and fulfilment? And for many of those who suffer the multiple deprivations of poverty, can it help towards a better life? Answers will come from practice.

1 Preliminaries

1.1 Context, purpose and content

For professionals concerned to undertake research on poverty this is a brilliant time to be alive. The explosion of methodological innovation of recent years opens up almost unlimited scope for further creativity and invention. For the pioneers of discovery, the walls of the old disciplinary silos that once penned us in have fallen and there is new freedom to explore, invent and hybridise methods and methodologies and to learn experientially. At the same time, a majority of professionals and of powerful institutions remain pent in their professional prisons. Or, mixing metaphors, like dinosaurs they lumber on while new nimble creatures scuttle at their feet, proto-mammals promising another future. To what extent they can and should co-exist and co-evolve with the dinosaurs, and to what extent supersede them, time will show.

This paper seeks to understand what has happened and is happening with approaches, methodologies and methods for poverty research. The rate and diversity of innovation makes this impossible for me to do well. I shall start with a short historical overview, and then adopt a selective empirical approach. My hope is that a historical perspective will make it easier to see where we have come from, where we are, and where we might now go. I shall outline and analyse some of the methods and methodologies that have emerged in the past two decades to see what they have in common, and what conditions their creation has required. This will lead to reflection about constraints and conditions for creativity.

1.2 Meanings

I am not saying that this is what these words should mean, only that these are my intended meanings in this paper.

Approach: a general way of going about things. An approach is larger than a method or a methodology. Approaches can, for example, be variously reductionist, particularist, or participatory, non-contextual or contextual, or mixed method. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can have dimensions that are methodological, behavioural and to do with relationships.

Development professional: refers to all working on development especially in or in connection with non-OECD countries. This includes academics, NGO aid agency staff, consultants, government personnel, managers and people in the private sector, politicians and researchers, whatever their discipline, profession or training.

Emic: expressing the views, concepts, categories and values of insiders.

Etic: expressing the views, concepts, categories and values of outsiders.

Illbeing: the experience of bad quality of life.

Income-poverty: poverty conceived and measured as income. For ease and accuracy of measurement, reported consumption is often taken as a proxy for income. Consumption-poverty would then be a more accurate term, but to avoid repeated

qualifications in the text, income-poverty is used as a proxy for consumption-poverty.

Lowers: people who in a context are subordinate or inferior to uppers. A person can be a lower in one context and an upper in another.

Material poverty: poverty conceived as deprivation of income, wealth and physical assets such as clothes and shelter.

Method: a detailed way of proceeding or doing something.

Methodology: a system of methods and principles.

Mindset: the ideas, attitudes, beliefs and predispositions with which a person approaches, frames and interprets situations and experiences. Mindsets are enmeshed with individual personality, and conditioned and sustained by upbringing, education, culture, social relations, professional and bureaucratic norms and incentives, and life experiences.

Multidimensional poverty: poverty conceived as having many dimensions, for example, but not only, material poverty, vulnerability, physical weakness, bad social relations, and powerlessness.

Normal professionalism: the concepts, methods, values, and mindsets commonly manifest in a discipline or profession (such as economics, engineering, social anthropology or social work).

Paradigm: a mutually supporting pattern of concepts, values, methods, behaviours, relationships and mindsets. A top-down paradigm of planning and things can be contrasted with a bottom-up paradigm of participation and people.

Particularist: focusing on the particular and on contextual specificity and complexity, as in much anthropological study.

Reductionist: reducing the diverse and complex to the standard and simple for purposes of analysis, or studying part of systems separately from the wholes, as in much economic practice.

Reflexivity: self-critical epistemological awareness, the quality of reflecting on one's own mindset and predispositions and how these frame, mould and distort what is perceived and expressed.

Uppers: people who in a context are dominant or superior to lowers. A person can be an upper in one context and a lower in another.

Wellbeing: the experience of good quality of life.

1.3 Caveats: mindset, predispositions, limitations and scope

In seeking some degree of self-critical epistemological awareness – being critically reflective about one's own ways of being, mindset, categories, ways of framing reality, perceptions, prejudices and predispositions – let me warn the reader about some of my relevant biases. I take pleasure, and have sustained a livelihood, by looking for gaps between professional concerns and for aspects of realities that

seem to have been overlooked or understudied. I am liable to exaggerate the importance of such gaps and aspects, and am vulnerable to glee when I think I have found a professional omission or misperception. I respect statistical rigour and see numbers and statistics are important, but often more flawed than their users recognise. I tend to privilege the knowledge, values and abilities of poor and excluded people over those of established and powerful groups. I have been repeatedly astonished at the insights and capabilities of 'lowers' that are revealed when 'uppers' adopt participatory behaviours, attitudes, approaches and methods. I surely have other biases of which I am less aware, but these at least will show themselves in this paper.

The paper is also limited and biased in scope. It is about learning about, and to a lesser extent with, poor and marginalised people, about their lives, illbeing, priorities and the proximate conditions they experience. There is a plethora of information: a google for the three words *poverty research methodology* on 23 April 2007 yielded a harvest of over 8 million items. In what follow I focus selectively on the proximate realities of the conditions, experience and lives of people living in poverty.

This has serious limitations. The paper is not about learning about the structures and processes that make poor and marginalised people poor and marginalised, and keep them so. Nor does it review new concepts, like chronic poverty (e.g. Green and Hulme 2005) which have contributed significantly to professional understanding. This will shock some readers. But the focus on people living in poverty and the conditions they experience is, I believe, justified, by the main focus: the astonishing and transformative methodological developments of recent years that are relevant and have been brought to bear, and the insights that have resulted. The danger is that this will distract from structures and causes. To borrow imagery, focus on methodology could be like concentrating attention on the microdetail of meandering in a swamp when only someone hovering higher can see ways out of it.[2] Methodologies and poverty research can be an easy option diversion from the broader structural causes of poverty and can point to inadequate, even palliative, solutions. It can provoke welfare reflexes at the cost of structural change. It can point the finger continually at poor people instead of at the rich and powerful. But to achieve large-scale good change, the rich and powerful appear a higher priority for study and transformation. And I would argue that the *World Development Report 2010* should be not about poverty but about wealth, not about the poor and powerless and their transformation but about the rich and powerful and theirs. So one future path for participatory methodologies is precisely to contribute to this reversal of focus.

A further limitation is the disciplinary approaches reviewed. For researching the proximate conditions and experiences of poverty, many disciplines have a bearing. I have chosen to focus on economics and anthropology because their contrasts illuminate significant differences. This approach is vulnerable to descending into caricature, exaggerating binary oppositions, and overlooking research in the traditions of other disciplines like demography, geography, political science and sociology which to varying degrees bridge, combine and synthesise, and contribute so much.

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2   John Harriss gave me this imagery, based on an exchange between Teddy Brett and Mike Edwards in an LSE seminar.

A final limitation to which I must draw attention is the superficial treatment of mindsets and reflexivity. I have dared to put mindset into the title in order to flag it for the future. As development professionals, most of us are open to criticism for our failure to reflect back on ourselves, and our lack of critical awareness of the conditioning which predisposes us to frame realities in certain ways. Reflexivity at the personal level is a key component of the eclectic participatory pluralism with which the paper concludes.

Most attention is given to participatory approaches and methods, since these are relatively recent, are continuously evolving and being invented, extend into new areas, present new findings and reveal neglected and often surprising realities. Reviews of more traditional research methods, their strengths and limitations, are not in short supply,[3] and it seems more constructive to describe and assess some of the methodological frontiers than to dwell on and in the better known and duller disciplinary heartlands or backwaters. The ingenious refinements and innovations within these older areas are many, and fall within the ambit of, in Thomas Kuhn's (1962) term, normal science, that is science within an established paradigm; and will be well covered in mainstream disciplinary journals, especially in the fields of economics, medicine and anthropology. The focus is here is therefore more on the parallel movement of the past three decades which has evolved to become paradigmatically distinct, now associated with participatory approaches, methodologies and methods, and the mindsets, behaviours, relationships and concepts associated with them.

2 Concepts of poverty and methods: three streams[4]

Seen historically, three streams of research approach that contrast with each other can be chosen to stand out:

- Economic reductionism: quantitative, and non-contextual;
- Anthropological particularism: qualitative and contextual;
- Participatory pluralism.

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3   For reviews of traditional research methods, the best place to look may be in the reading lists of university courses, discipline by discipline, especially sources where one disciplinary approach is being critiqued by another. There are strong critiques by anthropologists of the approaches of economists, for example Harriss (1989) and Jodha (1989), and most trenchantly Polly Hill in her polemic *Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological Case for a Prosecution* (1986).

4   I have been surprised, alarmed even, to find elaborations and evidence for some of the points in this section and in the paper as a whole in a paper written in 1988 (Chambers 1992). The major changes that I stand out for me since then have been elaborations and explorations of multidimensionality, especially vulnerability, and the explosion of participatory methodologies and their application.

The first two are more conventional, standardised and embedded. The third is more innovative. Each has elicited and sustained its own paradigmatically distinct concept of poverty.

Any attempt to summarise the historical relationship between concepts of poverty and methods for studying poverty will oversimplify. Realities are mixed, muddled, messy and at the same time nuanced. That said, it still seems reasonably valid and useful to distinguish these three streams, noting that each has its distinctive concepts and methods: income and consumption-poverty associated with questionnaires; idiosyncratic, emic concepts of poverty associated with participant observation; and multidimensional poverty associated with participatory approaches. The contrast is strongest between the first and third. The more recent participatory approaches with their exhilarating explosion of methods and methodologies elicit more complex and diverse realities of poverty as multidimensional systems with commonalities.

2.1 Economic reductionism: quantitative and non-contextual

2.1.1 Income poverty: origins and spread

Those sources I have consulted on the origins of the economic, quantitative and non-contextual stream (Rein in Townsend 1970; Holman 1978; Beck 1994; and Spicker 2007) all refer to the pioneering research of Booth and Rowntree in England in the late nineteenth century. In investigating poverty in London, much of Booth's work was qualitative, but he also tried to measure it and invented the term *poverty line* (Spicker 2007: 42). Rowntree's later study in York was more quantitative, with a questionnaire household survey of 11,560 families. He used the idea of household budgets and set the pattern of the measurement of poverty primarily in terms of income[5] to the relative neglect of other aspects.

The spread of this approach was extraordinary. There have been many developments, refinements and qualifications. There can be few countries in the world that do not now have a poverty line, measured either in reported income or in reported consumption. It is pertinent then to ask why the questionnaire survey and of the concept of income-poverty became so universal around the world to the extent of being methodologically hegemonic, especially during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Seven reasons can be postulated:

1. The British imperial and colonial influence and influence on governments and educational systems in the Empire and Colonies, and other countries.
2. The power and attraction of statistics, and their influence on policy and opinion (which both Booth and Rowntree experienced).
3. The growing authority of statisticians, statistical procedures, and concepts of scientific rigour in the professional analysis of numbers.

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5   These bald summaries omit the qualifications and subtleties of the work of Booth and Rowntree. For a summary and some criticisms see Holman (1978: 2–13).

4. The training of students in statistical, sampling and questionnaire survey methods, and the ease with which such training could be routinised, giving an easy task to teachers and providing skills to students for later employment.
5. The rise and power of economists and of economics as a profession, particularly after the second world war.
6. The ability of questionnaire surveys to generate poverty lines to provide comparisons between countries, between geographical and administrative regions, and between categories of people and of occupations, and, when in time series, to indicate changes over time.
7. The usefulness poverty line statistics for practical and policy purposes: they fulfil the needs of the state to simplify and count poverty in order to make it legible, enabling it to grasp a large and complex reality (Scott 1998).[6]

The value of statistics should not be in dispute, enabling as they do overviews and comparisons. And when they cover a range of dimensions like infant mortality, longevity, education, access to health services, and so on, they are valuable to decision makers.

2.1.2 Methodology and mindsets

Methodology, professionalism, bureaucratic inertia and mindsets fit together. Questionnaire surveys as methodology provide the numbers needed for professional analysis. Bureaucratic inertia embeds and perpetuates them as practice. And mindsets seeking standard and reductionist simplicity are sustained and reinforced. Thus V.M. Dandekar, for years the doyen of Indian economists:

> Whichever criterion we might use to define the poor, if poor and not-poor are to be mutually exclusive classes, we must use *one single* definition of poverty.
>
> (Dandekar 1981: 9) [my emphasis]

Poverty statistics derived from questionnaires have major defects. They often focus on one dimension[7] – income or consumption poverty, and the resulting numbers are their most prominent output. Critical analysis and prescription tends to focus on sampling and sampling errors to the relative neglect of more significant non-sampling errors. Whatever their shortcomings, such surveys, like the National Sample Survey in India, have their value for making comparisons, even if these may be based on dubious data. However bad they are, numbers can be laundered, printed out and analysed. It was an economics professor from a North American university visiting Nepal who gave Gerry Gill the title for his (1993) paper *OK, The Data's Lousy, But It's All We've Got.*

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6   In *Seeing Like a State,* James Scott (1998) does not mention poverty lines. Knowing the extent and location of poverty was not a priority in the cases he presents, but his arguments and analysis apply as well to poverty, once it became important for the state to know about it, as they do to other domains.
7   Much else may be covered, for example in the Living Studies Measurement Study. But notoriously many data are not used, and the point is that PL data tend to have primacy and be most propagated and discussed.

Questionnaires as method and income or consumption poverty as concepts probably fitted better the realities of poor people in urban London and York a century ago, many with cash incomes from one source of employment, than those of many poor people in developing countries today with multiple sources of subsistence and livelihood. Income poverty as a concept, and poverty line measures as a tool, come at a cost. They can dominate thinking and policy. They can be brutally reductionist. They are limited to flows, not stocks. There is so much they do not capture – assets, wealth, shelter, clothing, vulnerability, disability, access to education and services, transport and communications, or the environmental and other effects of where poor people live – which Booth saw as so significant. Nor do they touch other dimensions of illbeing like violence, insecurity, discrimination, bad gender and other social relations, or powerlessness.

2.1.3 Resilience, primacy and persistence

Income-poverty, is, though, resilient and maintains its primacy. Since drafting this paper, I have seen Andrew Sumner's 2007 paper *Meaning Versus Measurement: Why do 'Economic' Indicators of Poverty Still Predominate?* Many reasons can be postulated:

- Most other dimensions do not have comparable statistics;
- Time series data for income-poverty often go back many years;
- Poverty lines based on income-poverty are already established;
- National survey systems are stable and have formidable inertia. They also produce statistics which provide full employment for powerful economists;
- Income-poverty is repeatedly entrenched whenever a new measure is sought – even with the *Human Development Index* (Sumner 2007: 10), and most powerfully in current practice in the first MDG, to halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than a dollar a day.[8]
- The dominance of conventional[9] economists in the World Bank and in Ministries of Finance and Planning.

In dealing with the discordance between the single measure and multidimensionality, a sleight of hand or mind can be mustered. Other dimensions are acknowledged and then ignored. This is not a new phenomenon. Gunnar Myrdal, himself an economist, noted:

> In presenting their concepts, models and theories, economists are regularly prepared to make the most generous reservations and qualifications – indeed to emphasize that in the last instance development is a 'human problem' … Having thus made their bow to what they have become accustomed to call the 'non-economic' factors, they thereafter commonly proceed as if those factors did not exist.

> (Myrdal 1970: 28–9)

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8   The first MDG also aims to halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

9   I use the term 'conventional' economists because there are those who have led the break away from the reductionism of income-poverty, most notably and honourably including Gunnar Myrdal, Dudley Seers and Amartya Sen.

Thus Montek Ahluwalia wrote for India (1986: 72): 'A comprehensive assessment of the living conditions of the poor, and changes over time, must encompass not only consumption levels, but also health, longevity, security in both health and consumption levels, and, of course, access to public goods such as drinking water and education'. But he then pointed out that

> … time series data on all of these dimensions are not available. Data from a series of consumption surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation … are available, and these data have been used in most of the studies of rural poverty in India.
>
> (*ibid.* 59)

This led him into forms of syntax in which 'poverty' meant having low reported per capita consumption. When this slide of meaning takes place, poverty is then not what people living in poverty experience. Nor does it reflect the expression of their priorities. Poverty is economic, to do with reported income or consumption. The prescriptions then tend to be economic, buttressing and justifying policies of economic growth. Those who plough this furrow dig themselves into a reductionist rut. Wider and more complex realities disappear out of sight and out of mind. As the naughty verse has it:

> Economists have come to feel
> What can't be counted can't be real
> The truth is always an amount
> Count numbers, only numbers count
> Poverty becomes what has been measured.

2.2 Anthropological particularism: qualitative and contextual

For a long time, economics on the one hand, and most other social sciences, especially social anthropology on the other, followed largely independent trajectories. For social anthropologists defining and measuring poverty were not priorities. Their main concern was with observing and interpreting social relations and behaviour, and their main approach participant observation.[10] When they used the word *poverty* it was with an idiosyncratic, locally and culturally specific meaning, influenced by the interaction of context and their own conceptual framework. For Margaret Haswell, working with an agricultural society in West Africa 'Fundamentally, the nature of poverty can be defined as that point at which there occurs an imbalance between man and land of such an order that men can no longer rely upon the natural fertility of the land for their survival' (Haswell 1975: 71). Richard Waller (1999) in his essay on *Pastoral Poverty in Historical Perspective* started with pastoralists' own discourse on poverty and description of who is poor. Other authors, like Polly Hill (1977) writing on rural Kano, Nigeria, did not find it necessary to define poverty but rather implicitly combined local meanings with common ideas of deprivation: she wrote that 'I have

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10   While participant observation has been their overarching approach, social anthropologists have employed a wide range of methods. See for example Pelto and Pelto (1978).

found it most painful and depressing to examine, albeit "clinically", the miserable circumstances in which so many Dorayi people find themselves: to my mind, it is no wonder that the study of individual poverty has been so neglected in rural Africa' (*ibid.*: xi). In the literature I have reviewed, the concept of poverty was not a major focus of attention for anthropologists, even when the word appeared in the titles of their books; and to the extent that it was considered was understood as a varying and often indeterminate blend of emic and etic non-numerical concepts.

2.3 Participatory pluralism: from contextual to commonalities

The oppositions between approaches that were macro, economic, quantitative, and based on large-scale questionnaires, and those that were micro, anthropological, qualitative and based on participant observation, were presented sharply and analysed eruditely in Pranab Bardhan's book (1989) *Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists.* And in that book John Harriss, an anthropologist, headed his chapter with 'A plague o' both your houses'. The defects and limitations of both approaches were well known, well documented, and seen as serious. But the other ways of finding out that had been pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s were little recognised among academic elites and not named in the index of that book. These other ways were a third stream born of frustration with traditional questionnaires and with anthropology. Among practitioners in civil society, agricultural research, and some other fields, they had already established strong bridgeheads. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), drawing especially on semi-structured interviewing (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1987) and agro-ecosystem analysis (Conway 1985), came of age with an international conference in 1985 (Khon Kaen University 1987), with practice and theory linked to a repertoire of methods for finding out more quickly and accurately, and so for practical purposes more cost-effectively.

In the very late 1980s and early 1990s, mainly in India, RRA evolved into Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In PRA local people, usually in small groups, expressed and analysed their realities through maps, matrices and other diagrams using visuals and tangibles often on the ground. The behaviour, attitudes and mindset of facilitators were crucial. The outcomes were many, with much abuse of the approach and methods as they spread, but also with brilliant innovations.[11]

The approach was participatory: local people, especially those who were excluded and marginalised, like women, people of low caste, *dalits* or tribals, were encouraged and enabled to express their realities and priorities jointly; interaction between them generated cumulative group-visual synergy[12] and cross-checking; and the

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11 Some of these innovations are described in a comparison IDS Working Paper 286 (Chambers 2007).

12 Group-visual synergy is a repeated experience with PRA methods. The interaction of local people with their visual representations, especially on the ground, with cumulative cross-checking, the addition and correction of detail, and commitment to completeness, often take off into self-sustaining activity. Little eye contact, less scope for domination, and opportunities to contribute manually rather in words combine in a 'democracy of the ground'. As with all constructions of knowledge, there are questions of dominance, motivation and bias but these are unusually transparent through observation of interactions, process and visuals. These points are further elaborated in Chambers (1997: 207).

emergent expression of realities was bridging in the sense that it did not need to polarise qualitative and quantitative. The approach was also pluralist and inclusive, with a philosophy of 'sharing without boundaries' (Absalom *et al.* 1995).

The realities that manifested and were made visible with participatory approaches transcended reductionism and particularity. When facilitated well primacy was accorded to the expression of their emic realities by lowers minimising the imposition of the etic frames of meaning of uppers. The word poverty itself was challenged, and its hegemony as a concept and category when translated from dominant into subordinate languages. The concerns of poor and marginalised people that came to light were less 'poverty', and more reducing illbeing and the bad life they sought to escape and enhancing wellbeing and the experience of the good life to which they aspired. When these priorities were expressed, reductionism was replaced by multidimensionality and particularism by commonalities.[13]

3 The challenge of multi-dimensionality

The multidimensionality of poverty was recognised by Booth and Rowntree. The post Second World War mantra was to fight not just poverty but the three evils of 'poverty, ignorance and disease'. For some, the multidimensionality of poverty was so self-evident that it did not need discussion. Charles Elliott, an economist and writing in a tradition of political economy, said in the opening sentences of his book *Patterns of Poverty in the Third World.*

> The basic configuration of world poverty is well known. Although the detailed statistics are unreliable, the services of a statistician are not required to establish that the majority of mankind is ill-fed, ill-housed, under-educated, and prey to preventable disease.

> (1975: 1)

This was then an adequate basis for his analysis of the nature and causes of inequality and social stratification.

At the same time, in powerful institutions – the World Bank, the IMF, and Ministries of Finance – primacy has tended to be accorded to income and consumption poverty. This is illustrated by the opening words of the 'Overview' of the 1990 *World Development Report* on poverty.

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13   For elaboration of this assertion concerning multidimensionality and commonalities based on the analysis of empirical data generated in a participatory mode, see Narayan *et al.* (2000), chapter 2 'Wellbeing and Illbeing: The Good and the Bad Life' (pp. 21–43) and for my auto-critique as one of the analysts, see Chambers (2002a).

During the past three decades the developing world has made enormous economic progress. *This can be seen most clearly in the rising trend for incomes and consumption:* between 1965 and 1985 consumption per capita in the developing world went up by almost 70 per cent. Broader measures of well-being *confirm* this picture – life expectancy, child mortality and educational attainment have all improved markedly. *[my emphasis]*

The picture is defined by incomes and consumption. Broader measures confirm. The WDR 1990 does have one of its nine chapters on delivering services to the poor and another on transfers and safety nets; but the rest and the underlying and encompassing frame are economic, with poverty defined in income and consumption terms. With the Copenhagen Social Summit in 1995 this was decisively broadened and the term multidimensionality came into the mainstream, to become later a major theme of the WDR 2000/01 *Attacking Poverty,* which was informed by the Voices of the Poor research (see below). That WDR opened with the words:

Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being. But what precisely is deprivation? The voices of poor people bear eloquent testimony to its meaning … To be poor is to be hungry, to lack shelter and clothing, to be sick and not cared for, to be illiterate and not schooled. But for poor people, living in poverty is more than this. Poor people are particularly vulnerable to adverse events outside their control. They are often treated badly by the institutions of state and society and excluded from voice and power in those institutions.

(WDR 2000: 15)

The major sections of the report are on opportunity, empowerment and security.[14] More recently, the multidimensionality of poverty was the theme of the launch conference of the UNDP International Poverty Centre in Brasilia in 2005 (Kakwani and Silber, in press), reflected and explored also in its new series *Poverty in Focus* (Ehrenpreis 2006).

4 Normal methodological responses: multidisciplinarity, merging and mixing

Three methodological responses to challenges of multidimensionality have been multidisciplinarity; the merging of dimensions in composite indices; and what are now known as mixed methods, usually referring to combinations of qualitative and quantitative.

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14   The original sequence was empowerment, security and opportunity, but this was changed after Ravi Kanbur, the leader of the report, resigned following pressures from the State Department to make changes. Opportunity was then put first.

4.1 Multidisciplinarity

The thinking and practice here has been that different disciplines tend to focus on and are qualified to study different dimensions: adding disciplinary specialists to a team will then illuminate more aspects which, put together, will give a more rounded and complete understanding.

Combining disciplines in teams was a practice in the 1970s as part of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Farming Systems Research (FSR) but not prominent, to my knowledge, in research on poverty at that time. The defining volume on RRA (Khon Kaen 1987) repeatedly refers to teams, as in its summary 'A small team of researchers representing different disciplines is normally used in RRA to obtain the range of expertise needed to better understand rural situations' (*ibid.:* 11); and there were protocols for how team members should behave, for example, in semi-structured interviewing (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1987: 134). With FSR representatives of disciplines could be envisaged as looking in on a farming system from outside, each seeing its own special domain — an agronomist crops, a soils scientist soils, an economist labour and markets, a plant pathologist plant diseases, a forester trees, and so on missing or neglecting the internal linkages between domains in short overlooking much of the farming system. To get disciplinary specialists to go beyond their territories and work together on common ground, seeing the linkages, was a recurrent problem. More recently this has been partially solved by the sustainable livelihood (SL) framework. This was used by multidisciplinary field teams in the IFPRI-led research project on the poverty impacts of agricultural research carried out by International Agricultural Research Centres (Adato and Meinzen-Dick 2007). Two of the strengths of the framework are: first, it includes aspects that might otherwise be missed, like shocks, trends and seasonality; and second, it provides neutral common ground that is not the territory of any discipline and so on which specialists can more easily come together — for example the various capitals — human, natural, financial, physical, social and sometimes political. However, common ground can also leave a lot out. For all its strengths, the SL framework is weak on dynamism, history and power and according to an authoritative overview makes 'no explicit mention of poverty' (Ashley and Carney 1999: 36 cited in Adato and Meinzen-Dick 2007: 40).

Multidisciplinary teams studying poverty may never have been common. From their very nature they have to extract data and then interact with one another, and so distance themselves from poor people. A classic photograph in Robert Rhoades' *The Art of the Informal Agricultural Survey* (1982) shows a knot of researchers talking to one another while the farmer stands ignored to one side. Interdisciplinary approaches have been more common and have received more attention: interdisciplinary here refers to integrating the theoretical and methodological frameworks of different disciplines, a characteristic of many winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics (Harriss 2002: 488). The old reflection is apposite here and applicable to poverty studies as to many other social science fields, that much of the best collaboration is not multidisciplinary through teams but interdisciplinary in the same brain.

4.2 Merging: composite indices

Another response to multidimensionality has been to construct composite numerical indices. These are necessarily limited to dimensions for which there are statistics.

Sumner (2007: 10) has listed some of these composites: the Physical Quality of Life Index, the Combined Quality of Life Indices, the Human Suffering Index, the UNRISD Level of Living Index, the General Index of Development and Socioeconomic Index, the Food Security Index of IFAD, the Integrated Poverty Index, the Basic Needs Index, Women's Status Index and Relative Welfare Indicator, WHO Quality of Life Indicators, the Combined Consumption Level Index, the Real Index of Consumption, the Index of Economic Well-being, and the Human Freedom Index. The best known and most influential are those developed and popularised through the UNDP's Human Development Reports. These have potential variously to correct the macroeconomic and income-poverty biases of World Bank's analyses. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite of per capita GDP and indices for life expectancy and education, but according to Sumner still gives primacy to GDP per capita. This composite index has been used widely, with not only national but also subnational applications, for example in Indian states with their own HDIs. And yet another, again originating in the *Human Development Report,* is the Human Poverty Index.

For all their value for comparing regions, countries, and areas within countries, a weakness of these indices is what they cannot or cannot easily and realistically include, for example: vulnerability – hard to measure meaningfully; social relations, especially those of gender; seasonal deprivation; subordination and exploitation; and powerlessness.

4.3 Mixing methods

A third response has been to mix methods. Mixed methods refers to combinations of qualitative (qual) and quantitative (quant), of contextual and non-contextual. Four good sources are: Booth *et al.* (1998) *Participation and Combined Methods in African Poverty Assessment: Renewing the Agenda* which reviews the weaknesses of 'single-stranded methods' and the evolving agenda; Kleih and Wilson (2001) *Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Survey Work,* a rich source on practical methodological issues; and Kanbur (2003) *Q-Squared: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Poverty Appraisal* which publishes 21 analytical contributions to a workshop held at Cornell; and White (2002) who gives detailed illustrations of synergies between quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Three types of qual/quant combinations have been described (Marsland *et al.* 2000: 7): *merging* – swapping tools and participatory attitudes; *sequencing,* with qual informing quant, or quant raising questions for qual to investigate; and *mixed suite,* with concurrent use of tools from the different traditions. Practised thus separately and/or in sequence some of the more common combinations and complementarities are:

- Qual to identify hypotheses or questions for quant to test or explore
- Qual to identify and explore what quant will miss, or that quant cannot broach
- Qual to crosscheck and correct quant, and calibrate degrees of error
- Qual to probe causalities, including illuminating correlations from quant
- Quant (where there are time series) to identify trends in whatever dimensions are measured
- Quant to provide cross-section comparisons between different individuals, households, groups and communities, and across regions, countries and continents

- Quant to provide estimates of prevalences and distributions within population areas
- Quant to triangulate with qual.

To a degree, multidisciplinary teams, composite indices and mixed methods can be seen as extensions of the normal paradigm for research. Multidisciplinary teams seek to cover more by adding disciplines. Composite indices seek to express complex diversity as a single number. To be sure, the *Human Development Reports* include tables which show the elements that have been combined to produce the HDI. But the main thrust, the most conspicuous output, is the single figure, the score which allows countries to be ranked. And for their part, mixed methods have many modes but often seek to combine the quantitative, usually derived from questionnaire surveys, with the qualitative of participant observation.

Recently, it has become common as good practice to combine qual and quant with a participatory element (see for example Adato *et al.* 2007; Adato and Meinzen-Dick 2007; Howe and McKay 2007; Parker and Kozel 2007; Place *et al.* 2007). And it is to participatory methodologies that we now turn.

5 Methodologies: participatory, pluralist, creative and diverse

The astonishing explosion of methodological creativity of the past dozen years or so has included mixed methods. Often they have elements which are participatory which have passed largely unrecognised by mainstream institutional and academic research. Much of this relates to poverty. The strongest combinations in poverty research have been where qual and quant have been combined with participatory. This was a major finding from *Participation and Combined Methods in African Poverty Assessment: Renewing the Agenda* (Booth *et al.* 1998).

The examples that follow present but a fraction of the field. I have chosen them with three purposes: to give an idea of what has been and can be done; to encourage others to break out of the old moulds and adopt, adapt and invent for themselves methods such as these; and to provide background material to draw on for comparative analysis to understand better the nature of the creativity and diversity which they represent.

Participatory approaches to research on poverty can be separated into four clusters, though in practice these overlap: participatory poverty assessments (PPAs); methodological innovations for research; face-to-face experiential learning; and local people's research.

5.1 Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs)

A participatory poverty assessment has been described (Norton *et al.* 2001) as an instrument for including poor people's views in the analysis of poverty and the

formulation of strategies to reduce it through public policy.[15] The first PPA in Africa was in Ghana in 1993 (Dogbe 1998) followed by Zambia (World Bank 1994; Milimo *et al.* 1998). Both these used PRA methods. The third, in South Africa in 1995 (Attwood and May 1998; May *et al.* 1998) was unusual in inviting contributions from NGOs and researchers who then used different methods, from PRA (Teixeira and Chambers 1995) to individual life histories and others. These first three African PPAs were qualitative, very open-ended and did not seek to generate numbers. Later PPAs, in Tanzania and Kenya, were designed with a degree of standardisation and produced some statistics.[16] UPPAP (the Uganda Participatory Policy Process) drew on lessons from earlier PPAs, went through two rounds, and attracted a lot of international interest in the North[17] as well as the South (Bird and Kakande 2001; Robb 2002: 154–62). In the UNDP Participatory Poverty Assessment in Bangladesh (UNDP 1996) statistics were generated from focus groups indicating the ranked priorities of poor urban and rural women and men. A PPA approach was used in South London in the UK, with striking findings about deprivation (Cornwall 1997). By 2007 hundreds of PPAs have been carried out, in all continents[18] and at subnational as well as national levels.

The insights and policy impact of PPAs have been considerable. They have repeatedly drawn attention to aspects of deprivation to which poor people gave higher priority than those of the dominant professional perceptions and policies. For example, the South African PPA identified and named time poverty (now more often referred to as poverty of time) as a deprivation especially of women.[19] Reviews (World Bank 1996; Booth *et al.* 1998) of African PPAs found that they brought out strongly and repeatedly the importance of:

● Physical isolation as a key factor in access to services and markets;
● A sense of isolation, from services, markets, government institutions and information;
● Seasonality of access and vulnerability;
● Differential vulnerability among different categories of people;
● The importance of water supplies;
● Security of life and livelihood as a primary concern;
● Access to curative health care as a consistently high priority;
● Local visions of poverty relating to community norms (e.g. dignity and self-respect);
● Hunger and dietary inadequacy as a distinct dimension of deprivation;
● The decline of traditional – and insufficiency of alternative – safety nets.

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15 For overviews, analyses and reviews of PPAs see Hanmer *et al.* (1997); Holland with Blackburn (1998) for reviews of individual PPAs; Norton *et al.* (2001); and Robb (2002).

16 The Tanzania and Kenya PPAs were led by Deepa Narayan of the World Bank. For an idea of the process in Tanzania, and illustrations of the statistics produced, see the video *The Poverty Experts,* probably still available from the World Bank Information Department.

17 The City of Manchester, for example, sent a team to study the process, and there were calls for Uganda to provide technical assistance to the North to advise on how to conduct such a successful PPA.

18 Except (I am open to correction) Antarctica.

19 A woman asked how she would spend an extra two hours if they were given to her immediately replied growing vegetables. Others burdened with shopping, collecting firewood and water from far away, field work, gardening and other tasks wanted to spend more time with their children (May *et al.* 1998: 108).

A PPA-style project, at first known as Consultations with the Poor, and later as Voices of the Poor, was conducted in 1999 in 23 countries in preparation for and to influence and to contribute to the *World Development Report 2000/2001* (Narayan *et al.* 2000). Over 20,000 men and women were involved in focus group discussions and analysis. It used a methodology (Shah 1999a) that was framed around four issues – wellbeing and illbeing, problems and priorities, the role of institutions, and gender relations. It was designed to cover those topics but to be very open-ended. The findings presented daunting problems of analysis and difficult decisions about trade-offs and the construction of knowledge by the analysts.[20] There were issues over selection of evidence, quotations taken out of context, and the processes through which categories emerged, challenging the reflexivity of the analysts and qualifying the representativeness of some of the data presented. That said, striking commonalities could be found between the very diverse groups and contexts concerning wellbeing and illbeing, social relations, places of the poor, relations with state and other institutions, the importance of health and the body, and insecurity.

The methodology, devised specially for Voices of the Poor, has never, to my knowledge, been used again, nor has this model for comparative poverty research been tried again. It could be, and in my view has much to commend it, especially if used on a smaller scale.

5.2 Participatory innovations in research methodology

Over the past 20 years, and largely unnoticed in the mainstreams of disciplines, there have been innumerable participatory innovations in research methodology, many of them ingenious, and they continue to multiply and diversify. A few examples can illustrate.

Wealth ranking was first popularised through the work of Barbara Grandin (1988). It was adopted and adapted in early PRA (see e.g. *RRA Notes* 18, June 1993). Typically, local analysts sorted household cards into piles. In a participatory mode it often became wellbeing grouping, as local analysts used criteria broader than and different from wealth. In the 1990s it spread widely among NGOs like ActionAid, and then Plan International. More recently it has become a common feature of good poverty research. At the Toronto Conference of May 2004 on 'Q-Squared in Practice: Experiences Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches', 8 of the 14 papers selected from some 60 submissions, reported on research which had used wealth or wellbeing ranking or grouping.

Inter-community commensurability was thought for a time to pose insuperable obstacles. Where comparisons were made, as in the Kenya PPA, they were questioned on the grounds that communities could not be expected to have the same cut-off points between wealth or wellbeing groups. This was until a breakthrough in South Africa where a novel participatory wealth ranking process

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20   For critiques of the Voices process see Jackson (2002: 503), Rademacher and Patel (2002), and Chambers (2002a).

has been evolved and applied to almost 10,000 households to assess the number of poor households and their level of poverty (Simanowitz and Nkuna 1998; Simanowitz *et al.* 2000; Hargreaves *et al.* 2007). Qualitative and quantitative data have been combined to increase comparability across contexts, with local perceptions of poverty formally used to generate a wealth index of asset indicators. The information from many rankings was used to determine indicators that were consistent between rankings. These were then used to classify households into socioeconomic welfare rankings and to assign poverty lines. The outcome was 'a rich appraisal of the prevalence and depth of poverty' and of its indicators with policy relevance (Hargreaves *et al.* 2007: 224).

An example of *ad hoc* inventiveness is provided by a study of the Targeted Inputs Programme in Malawi. This programme was intended for the poorer people. The question was to what extent it reached them or went to others. Participatory processes identified categories of food security and groups in communities allocated households to categories. A separate process identified who had received the targeted inputs. The findings put numbers on the extent to which poorer people had been left out, and others had been included (Levy 2003). It showed, and put credible percentages on, substantial misallocations.

The ingenious 'stages of progress' method was evolved and invented by Anirudh Krishna in Rajasthan, and has now (2007) been applied in five contexts – in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in India, and in Kenya, Uganda and Peru (Krishna 2004, 2005, 2006) . A participatory process defines stages of progress that poor households typically follow on their pathways out of poverty. This is in terms of the sequence of what they would spend any additional money on. Food always came first. Participatory classification of households according to the stages they are at, and where they were 25 years earlier, combined with household histories, gives insights into why some progress and others fall back. Perhaps the most striking finding has been that in all but one context, poor health and health-related expenses had been the most common reason associated with falling into poverty (Krishna 2006: 16; also Krishna 2007).

Local people can also use GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and GPS (Geographic Positioning Systems): there has been an astonishing evolution and spread of Participatory GIS in recent years, with many applications including empowering people to defend their lands and forests against corporations and loggers.[21]

Much inventiveness has also been devoted to ways in which local people can generate numbers. These entail variously counting, calculating, measuring, estimating (often associated with comparing and relative proportions), and valuing. Many of the wide range of methods are associated with PRA like social mapping, matrix scoring and pile sorting. The resulting 'alternative statistics (Archer and Newman 2003: NO16) can be empowering, especially in dealing with officialdom.

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21 For Participatory GIS visit www.iapad.org and www.ppgis.net . Issue 54 (April 2006) of *Participatory Learning and Action* (IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1 0DD www.iied.org) *Mapping for Change: Practice, Technologies and Communication* contains 15 short articles on PGIS, including practical and ethical issues. *Participatory Learning and Action* is free to subscribers from non-OECD countries. Visit orders@earthprint.co.uk

In the context of poverty, illbeing and wellbeing, there have been many other examples of numbers generated through participatory processes – a study of service utilisation in over 130 villages in Nepal (ActionAid Nepal 1992), a study of responses to drought in 20 districts in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi (Eldridge 1998) or the Guatemala study of violence which led to a table derived from 176 focus group listings showing frequency of mention of 22 strategies for coping with violence (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 140). The iconic example is the Malawi census. The official census gave a rural population of 8.5 million. When this was disputed, statisticians well versed in participatory approaches and methods took a representative sample of 54 rural villages, and combined participatory social mapping and a short questionnaire with brief household visits. When extrapolated, the estimated rural population was 11.52 million, some 36 per cent higher (Barahona and Levy 2003 and 2007).

A major breakthrough has come from Uganda with the addition of a qualitative module using the Rope Technique, to a sub sample of the Uganda National Household Survey (Kagugube *et al.* 2007). Groups of community members place household cards on ropes to indicate positions along seven dimensions: having assets for production, food security, sending children to school, access to medical services, having enough money, having many dependents with few resources, and powerlessness. The positions indicate scores from 1 to 10 and can be taken as commensurable between communities, and also compared with findings of the questionnaire survey. One can envisage a future in which such modules become standard practice, with possibilities of monitoring over time changes in dimensions like perceived powerlessness.

The potential of participatory statistics has been largely unrecognised. It has not yet become a subject in prestigious journals.[22] It appears to be blanked out by disciplinary blinkers, institutional inertia, and power structures, and the reflexes and habits they sustain. This failure of recognition and adoption has been especially marked in research and evaluation conducted by or sponsored by the World Bank. The Bank is dominated by macroeconomists and research and evaluation have to be framed to fit their mindsets and feed their traditional criteria or rigour and modes of analysis. But what has happened, and what we now know to be possible, leads to asking, again and again, whether in research a questionnaire is the best way of trying to find out about a topic. At a minimum, there is a case now for always asking 'is a questionnaire the best way of learning?' and beyond this 'who will learn, how much and how well?'. We now know that with sensitive and light facilitation local people have far greater capabilities to generate numbers than most professionals have supposed, that their numbers are usually more accurate, and that participatory numbers can be tools for empowerment and social justice.[23]

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22 The only exception I know of is Barahona and Levy (2007) in World Development. This and its sequel Kagugube *et al.* (2007) present major and potentially transformative innovations which should be compulsory for reading and reflection by all who are engaged with national statistics and their analysis.

23 For more evidence for these assertions see Chambers (2003). A substantial update of that article to complement this Working Paper is in draft to be submitted to this IDS Working Paper series in 2007.

5.3 Face-to-face experiential learning

The third approach to learning about poverty has been experiential and face-to-face. This has taken three main forms: immersions; total participatory research; and life histories. And combinations have been made of all three.

5.3.1 Immersions[24]

Immersions (Eyben 2004; Irvine *et al.* 2004, 2006; PLA forthcoming) are when a person who is not poor spends time living hosted by a family in a poor community, usually for at least two or three days and nights, and often for longer. In their more organised forms, there is a period of preparation beforehand, and another for reflection afterwards. Immersions have a prehistory, but have only begun to spread significantly in the past decade. Pioneers have included Karl Osner who initiated the Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP) in the mid-1980s. Over 50 EDPs for senior politicians, administrators, church people and others, mainly from Germany, have taken place in numerous countries. The World Bank under James Wolfensohn initiated a programme of immersions for senior staff, hundreds of whom have taken part. Increasing numbers of organisations are using immersions for the selection and/or orientation of new staff: the Trade Union SEWA (The Self-Employed Women's Association) and the NGO PRADAN, both in India, among others. ActionAid International is practising and organising immersions in at least eight countries. And the NGO PRAXIS in India is setting up a website for sharing insights and experiences. Perhaps most significantly, Sida has adopted immersions for its staff as a policy. Immersions seem to be gradually taking off to become a movement.

Immersions would not conventionally be classified as a research method or approach. This is in part because of the traditional idea that research should be focused, objective, detached and dispassionate, with preset objectives or hypotheses. In contrast, immersions are open-ended, experiential, face-to-face, interactive, and human.

The learning may be translated to an intellectual and policy level. The classic and best known immersion is that of Ravi Kanbur in India in 1999. His account was read widely round the world, and fed into and influenced the *World Development Report* which he was leading. In 2004, the Cornell economist Gary Fields (one of the authors of the 1990 WDR) had an immersion with SEWA. He had feared that according to the standard labour economics model, the minimum wage might harm the very people, in this case self-employed women, it was meant to help. But through exposure to their context he revised his view, learning that it could

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24 For an overview, see Eyben (2004). For reviews of approaches and practical and ethical issues, and for other sources, see Irvine *et al.* (2004 and 2006). For information on immersions organised for development professionals by ActionAid International, see AAI (2006) or contact immersions@actionaid.org. For sources on immersions contact Raffaella.catani@gmail.com. A website on immersions is (September 2007) being set up by PRAXIS www.praxisindia.org

and did benefit them as an aspirational target (Fields 2004). Beyond such specifics, the most significant changes come through personal learning from living and being with poor people. As Taaka Awori, the Country Director of ActionAid Ghana, put it after her immersion in a community in Northern Ghana:

> The immersion has helped me grow as a development practitioner but more importantly as a person. It was a very different way of learning for me because I learnt experientially. In that sense, all of me was learning, not just my mind as is usually the case. The immersion allowed me to stop analysing people living in poverty as objects of development but rather to just be with them and allow the learning to emerge.

The human and emotional aspect is important. In conventional science, emotion is believed to distract and distort. In experiential learning it is integral, for it is the whole person, not just the mind, that is learning. The amateur video made by ActionAid International staff in April this year in Western Kenya, recording their experience of living for three days with people affected by HIVAIDS, uses banner headlines like EMOTION and ANGER (AAI 2007). The experience made a deep personal and professional impact, and provoked heart-searching, challenging priorities and practices. There were insights relevant to policy and practice; but perhaps more important was the explosive frustration felt and the passion, energy and commitment that followed.

5.3.2 Total participatory research

Views of the Poor is the title of a report subtitled *The Perspective of Rural and Urban Poor in Tanzania as Recounted Through Their Stories and Pictures* (SDC 2003) (Jupp 2003).[25] This was intense and total participatory research, an immersion experience for staff of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and of their partners. The aim was to gain a better understanding of those who were very poor, and to strengthen SDC's poverty focus. After training in participatory research methods, the staff spent a full day each with a very poor family, living and working with them, leaving their hands free by taking no notes. The researchers were shocked. After the experience, some needed counselling. The learning and personal impact were strong and a year later found to have lasted. In some of their words:

> I could not believe that the family only had one broken hoe to cultivate with. It was like trying to dig with a teaspoon. I will never forget that.

> The image of the baby crying all day with hunger will always be with me.

> I've worked in rural villages for more than 20 years, but I have never had an experience like this.

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25 The *Views of the Poor* report (SDC 2003) was produced by Swiss Development Cooperation, Bern. The guidance notes Views of the Poor: Some Thoughts on How to Involve your own staff to Conduct Quick, Low Cost but Insightful Research into Poor People's Perspectives (Jupp 2003) is available from the author Dee Jupp: dee.jupp@btinternet.com

Even village leaders could not tell you what we experienced for ourselves.

We heard untold stories. It was an eye-opener as families shared their problems that would never be aired in group meetings. They treated us like confidantes.

5.3.3 Listening, and life stories of people living in poverty

Oral histories have a long pedigree. More recent is the practice of empathetic interaction and listening as a source of insight, personal learning and inspiration. Harsh Mander's (2001) *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives* is about real-life stories of forgotten women and men, girls and boys, in contemporary India. These are invisible people who in many ways, have been pushed to the extreme edges of society in the name of development and change. Their narratives show not only how they survive and cope; they bring out their endeavour to overcome, with rare and humbling courage, resilience, optimism, humanism and hope.

Those who tell their stories are street children, sex workers, women, *dalit* and tribal survivors of atrocities, riot victims, especially women, homeless and destitute people, scavengers of night soil, and those living with leprosy and HIV. In the same spirit and genre, ActionAid researchers in Asia listened to and recorded 250 life stories in Vietnam, Pakistan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. The volume *Listening to People Living in Poverty* (Parasuraman *et al.* 2003)[26] presents 29 of these, and analyses what they show and what can be drawn from them. As the authors accurately say 'This book presents quintessentially the worm's eye view of the experiences of poverty and its impact, against the bird's eye view that dominates the present discourses on poverty.'

Kumaran, one of the researchers, concludes his powerful paper *Listening as a Radical Act* (2003: 14) by saying that

Life story collection is much more than a research method. It is an attitude of mind, a disposition of heart … by privileging this method of collecting data, we have given legitimacy and significance to different ways of being a researcher and a person. Soon the alternative ways of doing research may come to complement other conventional ways, and hopefully create a radically new development researcher …

A question for all of us who are engaged with research, writing, analysis and policy concerning poverty, is whether combinations of these three approaches – immersions, total participatory research, and listening to stories as a radical act – should be integral to our personal and professional learning. This is a far cry from Poverty Lines. But we can ask whether we need to offset the depersonalising and distancing of conventional research by privileging these other approaches. Arguably, they have their own rigour, they add a new depth, they involve us more as people. The authors of *Listening to People Living in Poverty* provoke and challenge us with their reflection that (p 26):

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26 Companion volumes for Nepal were *Listening to People Living in Poverty in Nepal* (2 volumes) (New Era and ActionAid Nepal 2004).

In a world overwhelmed by bits of floating information, introducing emotions into the reflective process frees meaning-making in creative ways.

5.4 People's research: whose research and for whom?

The major objective of poverty research may be for outsiders to gain knowledge and understanding. This is classic normal extractive professional practice. The aim of such research may be to change things for the better. But it may make no direct difference to those who are 'respondents'. Much of the most promising and pathbreaking research of recent years, as outlined above, has been, in contrast, with the active participation of poor people themselves. Often this has been, at least at first, with external facilitation and support. The ancestry of people's own research includes John Gaventa's (1980) seminal study *Power and Powerlessness: Rebellion and Quiescence in an Appalachian Valley* which describes how poor communities were enabled to do their own research on toxic waste dumped on their land. In agriculture and natural resource management, there have been many examples such as Farmer Field Schools, Integrated Pest Management (Dilts 2001) and CIALs (Comites de Investigacion Agricola Local) in Latin America in which farmers conduct their own research. Though not directly related to poverty and illbeing, these have shown the great capacity that committed local people have for conducting their own investigations and analysing and acting on their own data. Similarly, the Reflect movement, now in over 60 countries, encourages local groups of poor people to review their situation and to research and analyse it, often using PRA methods (Archer and Newman 2003; Archer and Goreth 2004; Archer 2007). The Views of the Poor research included PRA methods with which poor people did their own analysis, for example though mapping, listing, ranking and scoring, timelines and trend analysis, flow diagrams, and children's drawings. People were given disposable cameras to take photographs of what was significant in their lives, and these were later displayed as an exhibition in Bern (pers comm Dee Jupp). Participatory video (PV) has also spread very widely in the past few years (Satheesh 1999; Lunch and Lunch 2006). One of its seedbeds was videos made by poor women in rural India. Though they could not read or write, they became skilled professionals and went on to teach PV to others in India and other countries.

The question to ask, then, and repeatedly, is whose research is it? Conducted by whom? For whom? And if the answer is 'our' research, for 'us' to benefit 'them', it can always be asked – are there ways 'they' could conduct the research or more of it, learn from and own the outcomes, and be empowered to act on them? In the 2000s we know enough about participatory approaches and methods to recognise that the answer can often be that there are such ways, many more than were known in earlier decades. Sarah Levy (2007) presents a persuasive case for locally-owned information systems in the twentyfirst century, with local resource centres to empower local communities and groups, informing them, and enabling them to take local action and to claim rights.[27] The questions 'Whose knowledge counts?

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27 Levy cites a personal communication from Bimal Phnuyal that one such resource centre in Nepal which displayed locally generated information was renamed 'The Rights Claim Centre'.

Whose research counts? and Whose reality counts?' are about power and agency. And a further question is 'Whose research *on what?*'. Instrumentally as well as ethically, they point towards transformations of power relations in research. That is a challenge indeed.

Beyond this are the questions: 'Whose research *on what?*'. Local, poor and powerless people's research on the structures, processes and relationships that keep them poor is not new. It has Freirian ancestry and is an important focus of many Reflect groups. It can concern local and wider power structures. Proximately, it can concern gender relations as in the Internal Learning System in Tamil Nadu where women keep visual diaries monitoring their domestic and community relationships (Nagasundari 2007; Noponen 2007). It can concern wages, prices and access to services. Farmers in many countries are active in the analysis of the returns they receive for their produce. Participatory value chain analysis can take this up through the market system, identifying who gets how much for what at different points in the chain. Poor people's own research on what makes and keeps them poor remains a major frontier and challenge for professional facilitation and innovation.

6 Representations of poverty

One thrust of the argument to this point is that the way we professionals conceive poverty is influenced and reinforced, even determined, by the methods we use to generate and analyse data. But there is more. It is also constrained and framed by the forms in which we represent realities. This aspect of professionalism, although obvious to the point of embarrassment, may have been rather overlooked. On the one hand, we have the particularistic, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable realities of poor people's lives and experiences. On the other, we have the means of representation used largely unselfconsciously by professionals. In their dominant, hegemonic form, these means have strengths so evident and well known that we need not dwell on them. That they also have inherent limitations deserves critical attention.

6.1 The poverty of tables, equations, graphs and sentences

The forms we choose for representation limit and mould what we show and at the same time affect accessibility. Thus, for example, most of us use *tables* to box and bundle realities as numbers – totals, ratios, correlations and so on, encouraging us to generate these, and not least because the representations can be relatively economical, clear and accessible. For many economists, *equations* are a skilful short-hand means of expression and analysis, and can show hypothesised relationships and be used to test and analyse, but for many uninitiated non-economists, algebra is a marginalising mystification. *Graphs* are powerful, persuasive and accessible means of expression of trends and relationships but are usually limited by being on a flat two-dimensional surface. For their part, those like social anthropologists who mostly confine themselves to words for their representations have to order and

express their thoughts, in most languages, in the linear logic of *sentences*, in English generally subject-verb-object. These totals, ratios and linear sentences, to an extent equations, correlations and graphs, make it hard to express and show commonalities of multiple dimensions with multi-directional links.

6.2 Multidimensionality and commonalities: the power of diagrams

These can, though, be expressed and analysed through diagrams and visual representations. These have been oddly little used, except by poor people themselves when facilitated in a PRA mode. Social and other maps, causal-linkage diagramming, problem trees, and Venn diagrams are among the more common of those in the PRA repertoire. PRA visuals and tangibles have shown remarkable versatility, and are being continuously invented and rediscovered.[28]

Despite their obvious advantages, the same could not be said so much until recently about the use of visuals by professionals. However, computer graphics and animations have now opened up a burgeoning range of possibilities. A remarkable example is an illustrated lecture by Hans Rosling (2007) 'New Insights on Poverty and Life Around the World' in which animation and colour show how countries have progressed over time in terms of two variables, for example child survival and per capita GDP.[29]

Another if less dramatic set of exceptions has been web or net diagrams used to represent a multidimensionality of deprivations and their linkages. These make it easier to separate out and see more clearly dimensions that are sometimes confounded, like vulnerability and material poverty. Webs of deprivation can have any number of nodes to represent dimensions, for example five in figure 6.1, ten in figure 6.2 and twelve in figure 6.4. Webs were very useful, even critical, in the analysis of the voluminous Voices of the Poor material (Narayan *et al.* 2000). In that study we faced difficult practical issues of how to analyse a large amount of data, much of it initially qualitative, but also to varying degrees amenable to aggregation and quantification. We were continually impressed by how dimensions of deprivation which emerged and were elicited from the participatory data were common to many contexts, and how they were interlinked. We increasingly saw and expressed these commonalities and links as nets or webs in which poor people were trapped, and some of the emergent categories or dimensions coalesced into chapters. Two diagrams were published (Figures 6.1 and 6.2)[30] And two others were not (Figures 6.3 and 6.4).

Figure 6.1, Development as Good Change: From Illbeing to Wellbeing, named five composite dimensions of illbeing and wellbeing, and their interlinkages.

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28   For a good collection of PRA methods see International HIV/AIDS Alliance *Tools Together Now!* (2006).

29   I am grateful to Carl Jackson for this source. Hans Rosling's lecture can be seen at http://infosthetics.com/archives/2007/07/new_ted_hans_rosling_talk_data_visualization.html The software used is in the public domain.

30   For a self-critical review of the process see Chambers (2002a) which includes a more extended analysis of the origins and process of developing these diagrams on pages 147–8.

Development could be seen as shifting from illbeing to wellbeing with equity, with interventions to enhance wellbeing possible at any of the five points. The double-headed arrows in these four diagrams do not assert a causal linkage in every case. Rather they put a question on the agenda, asking whether, and if so when and how, there is causality in either direction.[31]

## Figure 6.1 Development as good change from illbeing to wellbeing
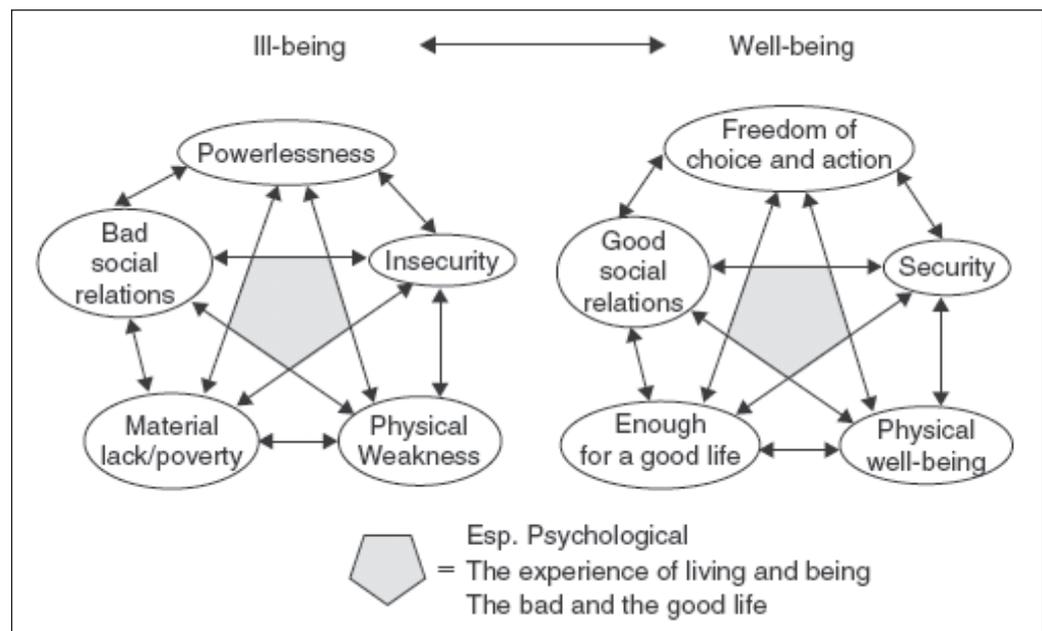
Figure 6.2 Dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing

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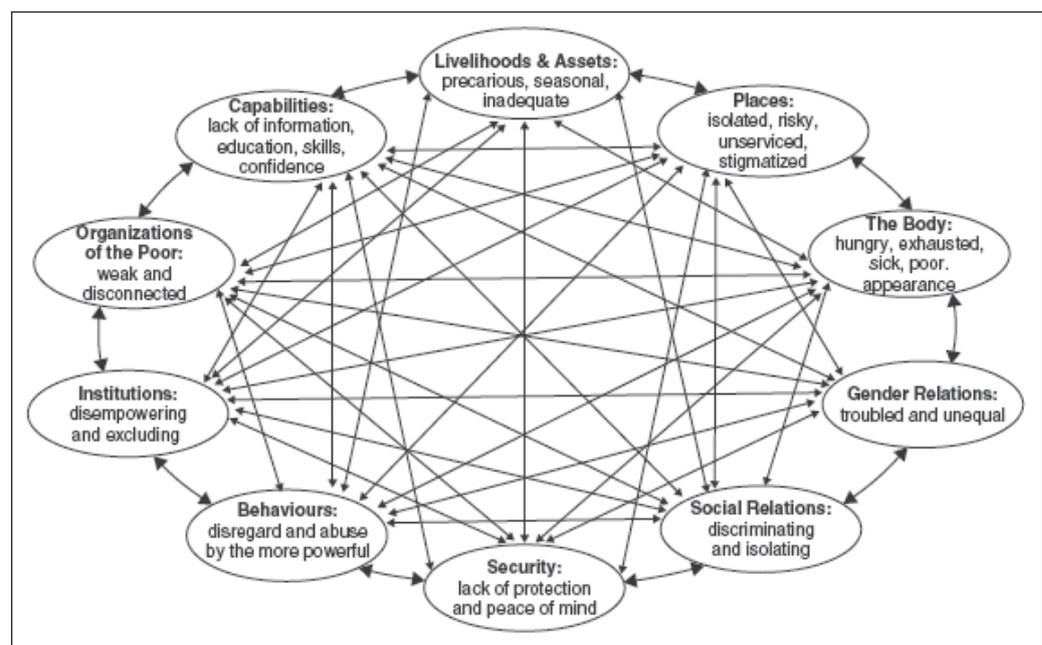
31 In an earlier version of five linked circles, (Chambers 1983: 111–14) I listed examples of the 20 causalities of the double-headed arrows of the 10 links that are found with a web of 5. It is an exacting, even tiring, but illuminating exercise to take one of these diagrams and do this.

Figure 6.2 (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 249) expanded the circles to ten. As the diagram indicates, each of these in turn can take various forms. They combine in powerlessness symbolised by the net.

By specifying these characteristics of disadvantage, Figure 6.2 again raises an agenda for intervention with any one of them, and questions of how they interlink and reinforce each other. In any story of the life of a poor person, linkages can be traced.

The versatility and power of these ways of presenting multiple dimensions and causal links can also be illustrated with two further diagrams.

Figure 6.3, also inspired by the Voices experience (and in part shown in Narayan *et al.* 2000: 97) shows two body syndromes. These express several ways in which a weak, hungry, exhausted body can be part of self-reinforcing syndrome, including reducing the power to bargain, and how less money can mean delayed and lower quality medical treatment. These were both aspects of disadvantage which the Voices evidence presented. Figure 6.4 goes further in complexity.

Figure 6.3 Body syndromes
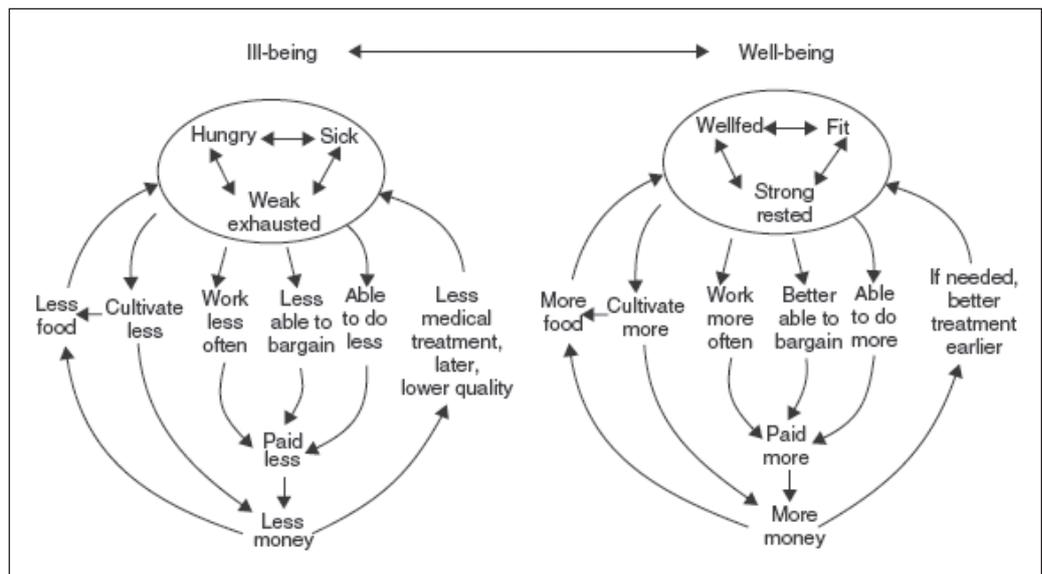
All 12 of these dimensions

- material lack
- vulnerability and insecurities
- social relations
- physical weakness – the body, exhaustion
- location – places of the poor
- poverty of time
- seasonal dimensions
- capabilities
- ascribed and legal inferiority
- lack of information
- lack of access to services
- lack of political clout

Figure 6.4 The web of poverty's disadvantages
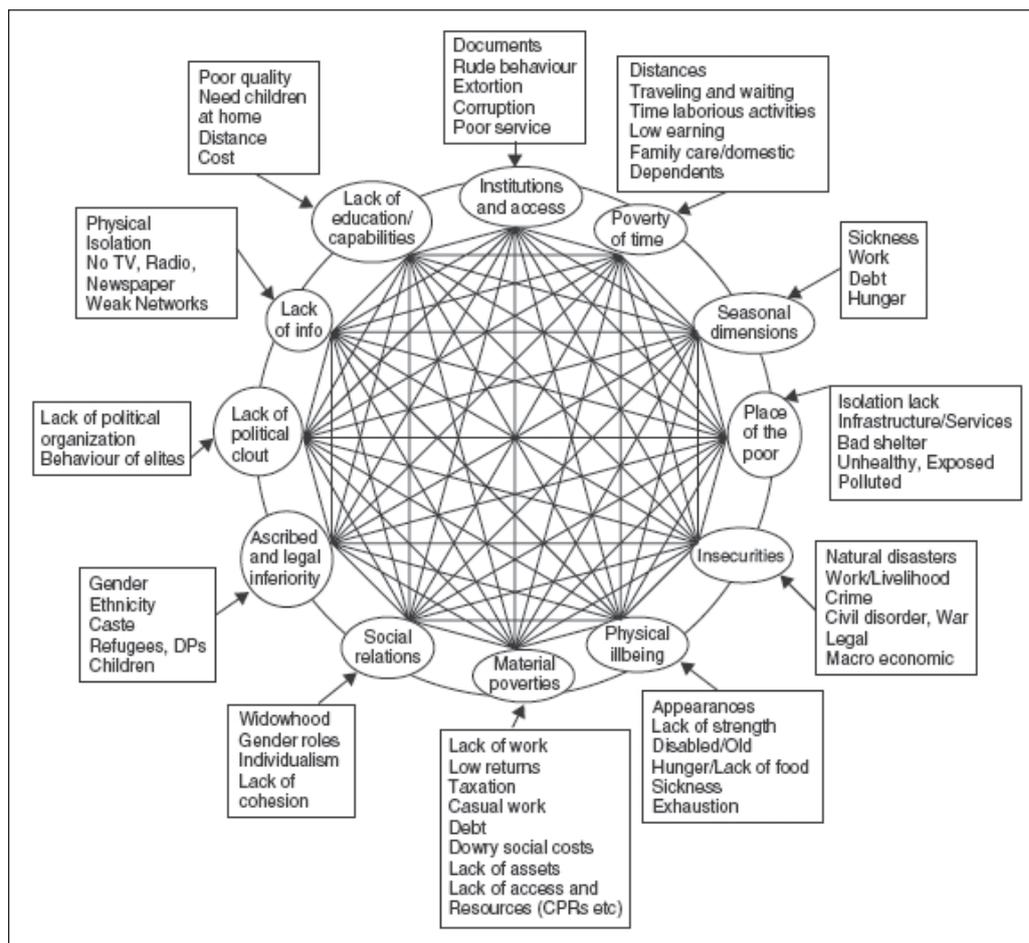
together with disregard and abuse by the more powerful, have been articulated and diagrammed by poor people, using variations and combinations of mapping, listing, Venn diagrams, pie diagrams, pile sorting, matrix scoring, pairwise ranking, timelines and seasonal diagrams, wealth and wellbeing ranking and sorting. The web has proved versatile, having been filled out for particular aspects: for sexuality by Susan Jolly[32] (2006) and for transgender and HIV/AIDS by Giuseppe Campuzano (2006).

These webs, especially the last, have the advantage of making it easy to raise analytical and practical questions. This applies to causal linkages which can be seen and interrogated. Without a web diagram these are harder examine. For example, Marco Zupi (2007: 32) uses the language of interrelationships and mutual reinforcement, and even the words network and web in postulating 5 D-hubs of deprivation – Destitution, Distress, Disadvantage, Disability and Dependency but in his diagram does not draw the connections between them. With any web diagram,

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32   The web of disadvantages has been expanded and filled out from the same categories for sexuality by Susan Jolly (s.jolly@ids.ac.uk), and for transgender and for HIV/AIDS by Giuseppe Campuzano.

we can ask which aspects and which linkages are found and function for any person, group or set of conditions, which can be weakened or reversed, and which are most binding. If we simplify by conflating or cutting out dimensions, we risk failing to identify crucial disadvantages or connections. As Figure 6.4 indicates, each of the 12 dimensions can manifest in various forms. We can also ask whether Figures 6.2 and 6.4 overstress the negative, in ways in which Figures 6.1 and 6.3 do not because the latter indicate the potential for transitions (though, of course, these can go either way).

A question remains: whose analysis and categories are to be privileged? These are largely 'ours', those of professionals who are not ourselves poor, expressed in 'our' language. The words, concepts, categories and priorities of poor people, especially illustrated by the way they were elicited and expressed in the Voices of the Poor, were rich and varied with commonalities. There are trade-offs to be puzzled over: between 'their' realities and ours; between local participatory diversity and commensurability for purposes of aggregation; and between many categories representing poor people's realities and fewer categories more manageable for outsider professionals and for measurement.

7 Dimensions professionals tend to overlook

Participatory approaches repeatedly point to dimensions of illbeing and wellbeing that professionals are predisposed, almost programmed, to overlook or neglect. Four are habitually and repeatedly unnoticed or undervalued in professional literature, practice and policy.

7.1 Tropical seasonality

The interacting seasonal disadvantages include: [33]

- hard work in cultivation
- sickness (malaria, Dengue fever, diarrhoeas, skin sores and diseases, snake bite, Guinea Worm Disease …)
- lack of food especially in the hungry season
- poor quality and rapidly contaminated food
- physical weakness and exhaustion from combinations of the above

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[33] For more on the multiple adverse interactions of tropical seasonality for poor people see Robert Chambers, Richard Longhurst and Arnold Pacey (eds) 1981 *Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty,* Frances Pinter, London (out of print). For an update see Chapter 4, Chambers (1993), which also has a short bibliography. This remains a lamentably neglected subject despite its profound policy implications for pro-poor policy and practice. Many MA Development courses do not include seasonality as a required subject in their syllabus, including some at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex where it is a weekend option.

- shortage of money, loans in kind with high implicit interest rates
- isolation, with difficult or no access to markets and medical treatment
- late pregnancy and childbirth
- shelter and housing collapsing, leaking, flooded
- being wet and cold
- the high opportunity cost of not being able to work
- neglect and exposure of children.

Season-proofed as they are against all of these, professionals living in urban centres under-perceive the multiple interactions of disadvantage for poor people living in rural areas during tropical rains, especially those areas which are 'remote'. During the rains, travel is often restricted to tarmac roads. Those off the tarmac and especially those 'cut off' during the rains, are not visited, met or heard.

7.2 Places of the poor

A whole chapter in *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 71–88) came to be concerned with the places where poor people live and work. This was not foreseen in the planning of the study, but emerged as the findings were collected and sorted.[34] The places where poor people live suffer combinations of isolation, lack of infrastructure, lack of services, crime, pollution, and vulnerability to disasters like drought, floods and landslips. Stigma of urban place can mean that place of residence must be concealed or dissembled when applying for a job. Inordinate amounts of time may be required for obtaining basics like water. The *Chronic Poverty Report 2004–05* devotes a whole chapter (CPRC 2005: 26–35) to 'Where do Chronically Poor People Live?' and does a service by describing and analysing spatial poverty traps, their ecological characteristics, poor infrastructure, weak institutions and political isolation. Disadvantages of place, whether rural or urban, as a dimension of deprivation, have for long been recognised, especially by social critics and social geographers.[35] The question is whether the multiple interactions of dimensions of disadvantage which have spatial dimensions have been adequately appreciated.

7.3 Poverty of time and energy

Some of the poorest wish they had work. A very poor woman in a Bangladesh village complained:

> These days I have no work. If we had land, I would always be busy – husking rice, grinding lentils, cooking three times a day. You've seen how hard Jolil's wife works, haven't you? I have nothing to do, so I watch the children and worry. What kind of life is that?

> (Hartmann and Boyce 1983: 166–7)

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34 For the hidden circularity of this emergence see Chambers (2002a: 146–7).
35 Historically, for the UK, see for example Friedrich Engels *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845) and Charles Dickens *Hard Times* (1854).

There can be poverty of too much time, and poverty of too little. The evidence from the Voices of the Poor study suggested that unwelcome surplus time was becoming more common for men with unemployment while poverty of both time and energy becoming more common for women. This latter poverty of time and energy was recognised in the South African PPA (May with others 1998: 108–9). It has become more acute for many women as they have become breadwinners in addition to their domestic and reproductive roles (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 111–4). When asked what her dream was, a poor rural woman in Zambia said that it was to be able to go to town, spend time with her friends, and come back again.[36]

7.4 The body

The importance of the body, and of health and strength, to poor people shouts out from participatory study after study. The emergent categories from the Voices of the Poor study (Narayan *et al.* 2000) led to a whole chapter entitled 'The Body'. From their analysis of over 250 life-stories of poor people, Parasuraman and his co-authors derive a whole chapter of *Listening to People Living in Poverty* to 'The Labouring Body' (2003: 274–97). This, they point out, is often the only resource a person living in poverty is able to use.

> The continuous exertion of their bodies in labour that is underpaid and undervalued leaves them exhausted. Their work is hazardous, seasonal and leaves them vulnerable to outside harm. They are forced to use and sell their bodies as an instrument. They rarely have time to recuperate or rest, and are reduced to what their bodies can do. These processes inscribe on their bodies and leave them to diseases, degenerating illnesses and death.

> (*Ibid.* 293)[37]

The central importance of the body to most poor people has been under-recognised. The slogan at the head of a poster of the trade union SEWA (the Self-Employed Women's Association) in India reads: OUR BODIES ARE OUR WEALTH. The body is more important to people living in poverty than it is to professionals. For many, it is their most important asset. But it is at the same time vulnerable, uninsured and indivisible. It has often been weakened by life experiences. It is exceptionally exposed and vulnerable – to hard and dangerous work and accidents, to contamination and pollution, to violence, to sickness, to lack of nutrition, overwork and exhaustion. With an accident or illness it can flip suddenly from being main asset to liability, needing payment for treatment and having to be fed and cared for. It is a recurrent finding that many people fall into bad conditions of deep poverty because of what has happened to their bodies. Yet in general, the priority to poor people of quick, effective and affordable treatment to halt their impoverishment has not been

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36 The source is a video of a PRA training in Zambia in 1993, entitled *The PRA Report,* made by World Vision, Australia.

37 The authors refer at the end of this paragraph to Scarry (1985), but these conclusions flow too from their own analysis.

appreciated by professionals. In addition to human and ethical aspects, it may cost much less, and be more feasible, to provide good curative services so that poor people avoid becoming poorer than it is, once they are poorer, to enable them to claw their way back up again.

7.5 Negative synergies

These four neglected dimensions, like others, interact with negative synergies. A poor woman in The Gambia, referring to what could happen during the agricultural season of the rains, said: 'Sometimes we are overcome by weeds through sickness or accidents' (Haswell 1975). With seasonal vulnerability of the body, in places which are isolated or cut off, and with seasonal poverty of time and energy when time and energy have high opportunity costs, the disadvantages are compounded, but in ways which are not readily visible to urban-based, elite-housed, season-proofed, security-guarded professionals. The power and privileges of others make it worse for poor people. It is a cruel twist that they are kept waiting in clinics while better dressed middle class people see health staff straight away.[38] Counted as human wellbeing foregone by waiting, the time of the poor people is often worth much more than that of those who are better off. But this is neither recognised nor acted on. Following any logic of optimising wellbeing, it is the middle classes who should have to wait.

8 Paradigmatic and practical implications

8.1 Paradigmatic

Paradigmatic differences can be exaggerated, and any table is vulnerable to exaggeration and even caricature. That said, Table 8.1 seeks to summarise the paradigmatic differences explored in this paper. Pluralism can embrace the economic and social anthropological paradigms. But much evidence indicates that many of the insights which in the past derived from the classic approaches of questionnaire surveys and participant observation can be better derived from participatory approaches which combine people's own analysis with commensurability. 'Expecting surprise' under mindset may itself surprise those who have not facilitated participatory methods. But those who have will know how frequently the realities expressed are unexpected, when we are informed not through 'our' frames but by 'their' reality.

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38   This was a repeated complaint in focus groups in the Voices of the Poor study (Narayan *et al.* 2000: chapter 5).

Table 8.1 Paradigmatic characteristics

Approach	Economic reductionism	Anthropological particularism	Participatory pluralism
Most common method	Questionnaire survey	Participant observation	Group visual analysis
Role of outsider	Data collector	Participant observer	Convenor facilitator
Local people are	Respondents	Social actors	Analysts
Mode	Extractive	Interactive	Self-organising
Strengths	Non-contextual Breadth	Contextual depth	Design for purpose
Mindsets, expecting	Comparable numbers	Social and cultural insights	Surprises
Outputs, presentations	Correlations, tables etc	Rich descriptions	Maps diagrams

Note: this table is itself reductionist. For the sake of presentation the characteristics have been simplified and exaggerated, leaving much out.

The contrast is strong between methods and concepts that are reductionist and standardised and those that are participatory and pluralist. They point to different priorities for action. Income poverty points attention to raising incomes, and so to growth and now pro-poor growth (e.g. Ehrenpreis 2007). Top-down etic and economic thinking has paradigmatic and practical implications for what should be done. Top-down approaches can work to a degree as with the green revolution and some of the measures advocated by Jeffrey Sachs such as immunisation and mosquito nets. These can be effective where a standard and robust input fits a uniform receiving environment – the HYV input package on flat irrigated fields, vaccinations into the homeostatically controlled and standardised inside of the human body, and less certainly nets as barriers between people and mosquitoes. But these approaches do not work, or do not work well, with local conditions that are complex, diverse, dynamic, uncontrollable and unpredictable (Chambers 1997: 70–4, 103, 162–3, 187). These demand bottom-up approaches which encompass, express and fit local conditions.

Participatory and pluralist approaches point then to a much wider repertoire of interventions which usually matter more to poor people than income, with attention to local diversity of conditions and needs. Paradigmatically, decentralised and diverse self-organising systems[39] make sense here, and the invention and application of participatory methods context by context, and purpose by purpose.

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39 The principles of the theories of chaos (Gleick 1988), complexity (Waldrop 1994), and emergence (Johnson 2001), summarised as deep simplicity (Gribbin 2004), are relevant here, and the practical and theoretical understandings of SOSOTEC – self-organising systems on the edge of chaos. See Chambers (2007: 24) for a short elaboration.

8.2 Practical lessons and reflections

Much experience has now been gained in how to evolve and apply participatory approaches and methods. Here are some emergent practical lessons and reflections.

8.2.1 Local fit

Sarah Levy (2007) argues that for the locally-owned information systems she advocates, we need to develop methodologies to reform out-of-date over-centralised information collection systems. If we want to empower poor people to take part in reducing poverty and promoting development, we must end the monopoly of information by central governments. The development of participatory methods capable of producing local as well as national statistics means that the potential now exists, even in remote and marginalised communities, for people to produce their own information. The results have the potential to be more reliable than those produced by outsiders.

8.2.2 Long gestation, innovation, piloting and continuing evolution

Participatory methodologies for local fit and specific purposes can rarely be plucked straight off a shelf. Typically, they have to be evolved, often with combinations of creativity, trial, error and improvisation. The Voices of the Poor methodology (Shah 1999a) came out of a brainstorming workshop, a piloting of a draft methodology in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bolivia and India, and a further workshop which reviewed the experience and agreed the basics of the methodology. Anirudh Krishna's *The Stages of Progress Method* (2006) reveals the difficulties that can be faced. He went into the field in rural Rajasthan seeking to understand why some but not other households had been able to escape from poverty and why others fell into it. Panel data would have required a gap of seven or eight years. He sought an alternative:

> It took six months of field research, including four months experiencing nothing but failure, before a potentially workable methodology started taking shape. These initial formulations, implemented in the first Rajasthan study (Krishna 2003, 2004), were successively improved upon in additional studies, undertaken with research partners and community groups in other parts of India and later in Kenya, Uganda, Peru and North Carolina, USA.

> (Krishna 2006: 3)

For the Rope Technique in Uganda, the team 'Spent much time and effort developing and testing a methodology that would produce *measurable results* as well as *in-depth qualitative answers*' (Kagugube *et al.* 2007 5. Emphasis in the original).

Other participatory methodologies through which local people analyse their own realities and which have spread widely have also typically had long gestation periods, with much experimentation. Reflect was grown out of a combination of Freirian consciencisation and the PRA approach and methods. It was piloted for weeks and months first in Uganda, then in Bangladesh and then in El Salvador, with many

changes, and now continues to evolve and take different forms in over 350 organisations in over 60 countries (Archer 2007). Stepping Stones (Welbourn 2007) is another case. Accounts of the Internal Learning System (Nagasundari 2007; Narendranath 2007, Noponen 2007) and of the Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) (Mayoux 2007) also illustrate the way in which successful participatory methodologies continuously evolve and are adapted to local and institutional conditions and priorities.

8.2.3 Training and mentoring of facilitators

> Asked who are the most important persons in the development, spread and evolution of high quality participatory methodologies, without hesitating I will respond 'The Facilitator'.

> (Nandago 2007)

Repeatedly, accounts of these methodologies emphasise the importance of training and mentoring facilitators. For the wealth ranking in South Africa (Simanowitz *et al.* 2000), for Reflect, for Stepping Stones, and for ILS the importance of the training and mentoring of facilitators is stressed. For the Voices of the Poor, the selection and training of facilitators was crucial to the success of the methodology. For the Stages of Progress method, Krishna (2006: 3–4) has written:

> Because so much depends upon the quality of interviewing – and upon combining carefully results derived separately from individual interviews and community groups – training is a very important aspect of this methodology. Training for a period of ten days was built in at the start of this exercise in each study site. Following three days of classroom discussions and simulation, the study teams would go out to conduct practical exercises with the methodology, first in one set of communities and following feedback and discussions, in a second set of communities. I remained with the study teams for additional periods of up to two weeks, working with them and watching them as they worked, and developing, in discussion with them, further refinements to these methods.

The disappointing performance of some large programmes labelled participatory, like the Watershed Programmes in India, can in part be attributed to poor selection, inappropriate training and lack of mentoring of facilitators. Not everyone can be a good facilitator. Participatory poverty research demands sensitivity to poor people. Selection of facilitators, the depth and intensity of their training, and the closeness and quality of the mentoring and support they receive, are conditions for good performance with all participatory methodologies, and especially those involving people living in poverty.

8.2.4 Behaviour, attitudes, ethics and quality

In participatory research, ethics, behaviour, attitudes and quality are indissolubly linked. There is a profoundly personal dimension to quality. Arguably, this is true of all research that involves personal interaction, including extractive questionnaire

surveys. With participatory research, however, the quality of relationship is more central. Where the outside researcher is more a facilitator, where it is joint insider-outsider research, even more where the research and analysis are by insiders, the behaviour and attitudes of the outsider are key to quality. From a purely practical point of view, unless there is respect, empathy and trust, quality will suffer. But this is approaching from the wrong end. With participatory approaches, ethics have to come first. There have been endless abuses, especially of PRA, using the methods exploitatively, taking people's time, and raising their expectations. This is both wrong and ultimately self-defeating. A fundamental of respect is awareness of the other and behaving in ways which do not exploit but enhance, which do not just extract but empower. As Sarah White and Jethro Pettit say in their paper 'Participatory Methods and the Measurement of Well-being' (2004: 94).

Ultimately, it is not so much the techniques used as how the research is conducted and the relationships established between researchers and research participants that determine the quality of research. Questions of ethics and behaviour have a direct bearing on how valid the findings are.

The authors explore the significance of the shift from wealth ranking to wellbeing ranking, and the much wider, deeper and nuanced realities that can be expressed around equivalents of the word wellbeing. For these, and for the 'thinking, meaning and feeling' of people at the individual level to be opened up and understood, the relationship between researcher/facilitator and participant/researcher can be crucial, especially early in the process, before the research and learning have become more 'theirs'. How well all this can be done depends heavily on the sort of person the facilitator is.

9 The best of all worlds?

The potentials opened up by participatory methodologies appear almost unlimited.

9.1 Discovery and learning

Precisely because of these preceding features, these approaches frequently lead to surprises, to significant and useful findings, to new insights into sensitive dimensions, and collective action.

Surprises are predictable. PPAs have repeatedly revealed poor people's realities to differ from what professionals have supposed. In the voices of the poor (Narayan *et al.* 2000), the second most commonly identified cause of rural poverty as perceived and presented by rural focus groups in five African countries in their causal linkage

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40 I have perhaps ten times bet money in workshops that no one will guess what rural people in sub-Saharan Africa identified most commonly as a cause of poverty, after health. No one has yet guessed theft, so I have yet to lose any money, though this footnote may be an own goal if anyone ever reads it.

diagrams was, after sickness, theft.[40] Participatory studies of urban violence in Jamaica, Guatemala and Colombia elicited a far wider range of types of violence, as people perceived them, than outsiders might have supposed and the importance, positive or negative, of different related institutions. The Guatemala study showed the frequency of mention of 22 different strategies for coping with violence. And contrary to common professional belief, violence categorised as economic was found to be much more widespread than that which was political (Moser and Holland 1997; Moser and McIlwaine 2000, 2001 and 2004).

An example of fundamentally important findings has been the high priority to poor people of a strong and healthy body and of good access to curative treatment, higher than most professionals have supposed. This has been a repeated finding – of PPAs, of the Voices of the Poor, and of Listening to the Poor (Parasuraman *et al.* 2003) leading to its chapter on 'The Labouring Body'. Applications of the Stages of Progress methodology have reinforced and confirmed this, showing across countries and conditions that sickness and costs of treatment are almost always[41] identified as the most significant cause of becoming poorer (Krishna refs *passim* esp.2006: 22).

An example of new and sensitive dimensions opened up is sexual and reproductive health, and violence against women. Participatory approaches and methods have enabled women and girls, and those who have been abused, to express and analyse their realities. Topics like pre-pubertal sexual activities, the number of partners young men have, the characteristics valued by young women in different types of partners, have all been uncovered (Shah 1999b; Cornwall and Welbourn 2002), with participants enabled to analyse and share their own realities. Pioneering work by Meera Shah and her colleagues (Shah *et al.* 1999a and b) in Zambia facilitating 17 PRA methods like matrix scoring, anonymous slips, pairwise ranking, and Venn diagramming enabled teenagers to share and analyse many aspects of their sexual behaviour and preferences: girls, for example, listed 16 types of partners and scored them in a matrix against five characteristics. And boys indicated the numbers of partners they had had.

Finally, an example of collective action is the movement of Community-Led Total Sanitation (Kar and Pasteur 2005; Sanan and Moulik 2007). Habits of shitting (the crude word is always used) and their consequences have been brought into the open through facilitating participatory appraisal and analysis. Except where there are programmes of hardware subsidy for latrines, this frequently provokes action to achieve what is known as ODF (open defecation free) status. CLTS was evolved by Kamal Kar working with NGOs in Bangladesh, and was subsequently spread to India, Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan and other countries. It has recently been introduced into Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and some other African countries. The strong hypothesis confirmed informally is that total sanitation, with no open defecation, will lead to a sharp improvement in health outcomes.

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41   Only in one of the six studies was poor health and health-related expenses not the most frequent reason for falling into poverty. That was in Rajasthan with 60 per cent of households. However the most common reason – high interest private debt, with 72 per cent, may often have been related, especially to cost of treatment.

9.2 Credibility and impact

The credibility of what is learnt through participatory approaches and methods is increasingly recognised. It almost goes without saying that data and insights from participatory local processes usually have a richness and authenticity of detail that gives them a special authority. There is also a credibility of observed process. With good facilitation, and even without it, triangulation between participants with group visual methods can be seen to be taking place, and successive approximation, cumulative crosschecking and additions observed, with transparently obvious attempts by participants to 'get it right'. This group visual synergy has its own impressive rigour (Chambers 1997: 159–60, 207). Again and again, the realities of local people, expressed, visually and/or in numbers, have carried conviction, and empowered them to present to and influence those in power.

Those who take part in personal experiential learning, as with immersions, total research, and life histories, can gain in confidence and credibility in their professional lives. This can apply in arguing cases in meetings, in writing memoranda., and in influencing policy and practice. Some have spoken of how this leads to being able 'to speak with the authority of passion' (AAI 2007). Advocacy that draws on lived experience can get closer to speaking from within the realities of those who are poor and marginalised, in contrast with the more common othering of talking and thinking about 'those people'.

9.3 A quiet revolution? An endless adventure?

Many of the thrilling innovations and discoveries of the past two decades were at first ignored, denied or denigrated in academia. Perhaps they threatened the security of professional conservatism and power. Students who wished to use PRA approaches and methods for thesis research faced scepticism and opposition from their supervisors. Some established academics were among the last to learn. Trapped in teaching, their fieldwork past, and tempted to repeat courses year on year, many may not have been in a position, or inclined, to learn new methods hands-on. But in more and more universities, and more and more disciplines, this has been changing. Those still in denial or unaffected in their methods and methodologies are mainly older faculty and the higher status professions and departments, perhaps most of all economics. For many the knee-jerk questionnaire reflex still overrides alternatives.

Globally, much of the creativity and innovation has come from relatively powerless civil society of the South, and most of the numbing imperviousness has been manifest among the most powerful in the North, most lamentably in the citadels of sustainable error in Washington DC. Innovation and adoption seem to vary inversely with power, high status and insulation from grounded reality, as with econometrics. Methodologically, the World Bank's research seems trapped in a conservatism.[42] That impedes innovation and learning. Mentally and methodologically,

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42 In earlier drafts I described this conservatism as sclerotic. Uneasy at being so rude to power, I went to the dictionary (Collins New English 2005) which has this: 'Sclerotic 1 *path* a hardening or thickening of organs, tissues or vessels from chronic inflammation, abnormal growth of fibrous tissue or degeneration of the myelin sheath of nerve fibres (esp the inner walls of arteries), deposition of fatty plaques'. Was I right to remove the word or should I have left it in?

many who are imprisoned in their paradigm of normal science deserve sympathetic understanding, and beyond that, liberation therapy. This is nothing new. Thirty five years ago, that great polymath economist, Gunnar Myrdal, put his finger on it when he wrote:

> That economists work within a methodologically conservative tradition is usually not so apparent to the economists themselves, especially as the tradition affords them opportunity to display acumen and learning, and, within limits, to be inventive, original and controversial.

> (Myrdal 1970: 267)

The challenge, to them and others, is to be inventive, original and controversial outside the safe and stable walls of their paradigm.

9.4 A future of participatory pluralism?

Methodologically, this points us towards a future of eclectic and creative pluralism in which participatory approaches and methods are far more widely practiced, repeatedly improvising, combining and inventing to fit specific needs and situations. To have quoted Wordsworth's much repeated

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive

at the head of this paper may have seemed inappropriate hyperbole, though citing its source as *The Prelude* could seem fitting at the start. However, Wordsworth used the same phrase in *French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts;* and that would go better in this conclusion were it not for the bloody consequences of the French Revolution. The revolutionary enthusiasm here is different, tempered but not dimmed by doubt and critical reflection. I hope I have shown enough about the range and originality of recent approaches and innovations to justify it. In disciplined academic writing, one does not often find words like astonishing or exciting, still less thrilling (which I have used above). By expressing emotion instead of clinical detachment, they risk undermining conventional credibility. But in using words like these I have two purposes: expressing the empirical reality of what I experience; and flagging to others the remarkable nature of the innovations of recent pioneers.

We can now see that fundamentalisms with walls are fatally flawed ('I do PRA', 'I do Appreciative Inquiry', 'Questionnaires are the only way' …). They should be a thing of the past, looked back on with wonder as well as sorrow. We can see now that one big way for poor people to be better served is for development professionals to be more courageous, versatile, creative and especially reflexive. Self-critical reflexivity, struggling to become aware of one's mindset, predispositions, embedded words and categories and frames of meaning, has not been a prominent in tertiary education or professional training, which, quite the opposite, have dealt in and imparted set frames and certainties Yet critical reflexivity would appear basic to good work in development, and to be most needed by those, and those disciplines and professions, that least doubt and question themselves.

All of this applies in the approaches we use in research to understand poverty and illbeing, and the wellbeing to which poor people aspire. The quiet revolution to

which it points implies radical change in many professional methods, mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. As of 2007, the seeds of such a revolution are there but scattered – germinating, but often threatened and vulnerable and failing to spread. The challenge is to transform tertiary education, research institutes, aid agencies and other sites of professional power and knowledge, liberating us all from learning disabilities, making us more aware of what has opened up, and leading to what promise to be endless adventures in experiencing and learning. This requires that those with more power make space for and encourage those who can pioneer and innovate. It means making pioneering and innovating, as some have already, a way of living and working.

In a critical spirit, the conclusion can be questions:

● for development professionals who want to make a difference does participatory methodological pluralism of the sorts touched on in this paper offer enhanced understanding, realism, relevance, effectiveness and fulfilment?
● for those who suffer the multiple deprivations of poverty can it in consequence, and through their own actions, help towards a better life?
● and if so, for many purposes and contexts, does methodological pluralism, eclectic, creative and participatory, offer a win-win, a best of all worlds, for all actors?

Answers will come from practice.

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