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## **Participatory research: an approach for change**

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## **Introduction**

The myth of the objectivity of social science research has been so sufficiently exposed in recent years that a long discussion is unnecessary. Myrdal has pointed out the importance of social scientists stating their biases openly rather than hiding behind a false front of supposedly objective truth (Myrdal, 1970). Blackburn has analyzed in considerable depth the ideological assumptions underlying the whole of the social science method (1972). In adult education, Freire has underlined the ways in which supposedly "neutral" techniques of teaching can be oppressive and dominating regardless of the intentions of the adult educator (1973).

The intent of this article is to put the case, based on four years of the author's

experience in trying to apply standard social science research methods in an African country, for adopting an alternative approach to adult education research which avoids the oppressive ideological pitfalls, provides a more accurate reflection of social reality, assures more complete involvement of the community, is more closely linked to established principles of adult education and is more scientific.

## A CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

The article does not pretend to show a completed product nor step-by-step instructions for researchers to follow. This, and other articles in this issue, are a call for assistance. The case for alternative methods, as will be shown, seems compelling. What is needed is more basic work and communication among those who have relevant experience.

Like most of us, my training in educational research was based on what might be called a classical approach to social science research. Such "orthodox" social science research methodology is based on the attempts of sociologists and psychologists to develop an approach to understanding human behavior as much as possible like the methods natural scientists use to study plant animal, chemical and physical properties. The essentials of most research courses cover such subjects as hypothesis construction sampling strategies; instrument design (almost always some form of questionnaire); data analysis (aggregation of individual data into group statistics); and interpretation. There are many thorough text books, written rather as cookbooks, to guide the novice through this process and into the world of "science".

With this training and some experience, I accepted a job as a researcher in an adult education institution in Africa. For four years I practised and taught adult education research based on the fundamentals as I understood them. During the past year and a half, I continued teaching these approaches only because I was unclear about what the alternatives might be. In uncertainty, I could always fall back on the vast references and sources of survey research methods, but there was little to refer to on any other approach.

What was the cause of my growing dissatisfaction? It began after my

involvement with two early surveys; the first connected with the national elections in November 1970 and the second with local adult education officers. In both cases information was gathered by an extended questionnaire carefully worked out and pre-tested. The information was tabulated and I began the task of interpreting the data. What could I base my interpretation on?

In the case of the election study I had not done the interviewing myself and knew very little about the area concerned beyond what I could read or see in the few days' visit. In the second case I had been in the country for only four months and there was even less to read on the subject of local adult education programmes than on political participation. My interpretation had to be based on my experience, my knowledge, my biases and my expectations. No amount of care in making up the questions, taking the sample or checking the validity of the results afterwards could change this. The fact that the crucial task of interpretation depended on the insights that I managed to pull from tables and talks and books and hunches seriously undermined my confidence in the objectivity and purity of such survey research methods. It seemed to me that I did not have information of sufficient accuracy or depth to allow for anything but mere presentation of tabulations.

As time went on, I tried to improve my research approaches through further refinements of the instruments, more carefully controlled samples or more sophisticated analysis of data. But the more I did this and the more familiar I became with the work of other researchers, the more I realized that what I was interpreting as weakness in my research design was in fact a reflection of a set of fundamental shortcomings in the social science research methods I was using.

### **Partial list of shortcomings**

Some of the most serious shortcomings which made it quite impossible to pretend that what I was doing was in any way scientific included the

following:

*1. The survey research approach oversimplified social reality and was therefore inaccurate.*

Even if one were not concerned about the arbitrariness of instrument construction or the class bias of such specific tools as semantic differential tests and various other tests devised by those who work from a primarily psychological base, these approaches would be generally unsatisfactory. A research process that extracts information from individuals in isolation from one another and aggregates this into a single set of figures does so at the expense of reducing the complexity and richness of human experience. Social responses to problems by groups of people are not necessarily the same as the total of individual responses of people acting alone. It is of course correct to say that the use and interpretation of the figures, "depends on the institutional and social context within which the research is embedded" (Carr-Hill, 1974:30). But even given an institutional framework that encourages popular participation or control of decision making, the representation of population needs by a set of figures such as "22 percent of those interviewed said that their home environment has had the most influence on their career choice", is inadequate, and unsatisfactory if one is seeking to develop programmes to meet the complex needs of people.

A second way in which survey research oversimplifies is the perspective of the forced choice. Information is sought through interviews or questionnaires which provide a framework for the responses. For example, many questions ask people what is "most influential", "least satisfactory" "first choice" or "most responsible" regarding some specific attitude or decision when attitudes, decisions and behavior do not reflect a single cause. The curious fact is that all of us have experience of this false choice. We have often filled in forms or questionnaires and have felt the desire to say, "that really isn't the right question". The forced choice approach reaches a fetish point in some educational research as was seen in one case where a "diagnostic tool" was being employed to help in the analysis of new adult students. Potential students of English were asked to choose the one form of literature in which they were most interested from a list that included novels, short stories, poetry, drama or non-fiction. Pity the person who either didn't know the difference between the forms

(this is likely enough in modern literature), wanted some of all, or was curious about a specific period.

A third reason why one-time surveys oversimplify is their presentation of a static picture of reality, a photograph of a group of people with neither a past **nor** a future. The very fact that the survey is ahistorical is a severe limitation; social change is a continuous process, a dialectic or movement from one pole to another over time. The way people respond on one day under one set of conditions **by** no means guarantees a similar reaction at another time.

## *2. Survey research was often alienating, dominating or oppressive **in** character.*

If one accepts Freire's point that teaching methods have ideological **implications** then the same holds true for research methods. If **one** is **concerned** with increasing people's capacity **to** participate fully and **gain** some degree of control over their lives, then research methods themselves can be part of this process as the article by Swantz in this issue shows. Questionnaires or interviews designed in **an** office of a university or adult education institution are by nature one sided. This process regards people as sources of information, as having bits of isolated knowledge, but they are neither expected nor apparently assumed able to analyze a given social reality. At the extreme, researchers take up peoples' time with often badly formulated questions and make interpretations based on little experience in the **area** or the social class of participants. They purport to use their information as the basis of programmes which are then expected to be useful and relevant. This method simply cannot be called science and certainly should not be called research.

Research approaches of this style often create the illusion among those who are the suppliers of information that research is rigorous, highly technical, scientifically "pure" and that the work can only be done by those who are university trained. The abilities of people to investigate their objective realities are not stimulated and the pool of human creativity is kept within narrow confines. Those most familiar with the problems and whose daily existence is affected by **poor** health, poor nutrition, low levels of production or past failures of educational provision are effectively taken out of the active process of making the changes which **might** lead to improvements. Control is left to those who by definition and levels of training are outside the experiences within which change **is** sought.

*3. Survey research did not provide easy links to possible subsequent action.*

Much research in adult education is action oriented. It may be an attempt to determine a community's educational needs or an attempt to modify existing programmes through an evaluation/research process. In either case it is expected that when changes are made the people in the community or the participants in the adult education programme will participate more actively, more efficiently or will gain increased benefits over what had existed before. Basic principles of planning stress that the likelihood of full and effective participation in any ventures—education, political or social—are improved by involving would-be participants in the decision-making process. In addition to resulting in a poor source of information, research which has alienated, or at best treated respondents as sources of primitive information, has little likelihood of creating the active and supportive environment essential for change.

*4. Survey research methods were not consistent with the principles of adult education.*

The arguments put forward so far would apply to a critique of research in social science generally. Within the field of adult education there are additional criteria to be met in selecting a research approach. To begin with, adult education is rooted in a concept of social justice and equality in a way in which other disciplines are not. Concern for the adult learner is often concern for the proportion of the population that has not had, for various reasons, an appropriate share of either national wealth or social services. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, adult education is directly linked to attempts to increase participation of citizens in national development and to provide a minimum level of basic education to all people. A reading of any or all of the basic adult education texts such as Kidd, Knowles or Miller would produce a set of principles that would most likely include statements such as: a) Programmes should be based on adult needs; b) Adults, unlike children, are more easily able to articulate their learning needs; c) Although there are changes with age in the ways in which adults learn, the phrase, "too old to learn" is a fallacy; d) Adults work out often quite complex learning strategies to achieve desired goals on their own (Kidd, 1974; Knowles, 1971; Miller, 1964). These principles, and many others, imply a faith in adults as whole persons participating actively in the world. It is no secret that the administration of actual programmes usually falls short of these principles; but

such principles do exist and should serve as a basic guide for adult education research.

Instead, we find that the dominant research methods in use and the ones being picked up as adult educators begin to do more and more research are alienating, inaccurate as a means of identifying needs, and see some adults as marginal or incapable of articulating their own needs. Research in adult education is at an early stage of development. Within this specialization we still have time to select research approaches that suit us uniquely and thereby keep us one step ahead of other social sciences now going through the throes of discarding an antiquarian pursuit.

### **Alternative Strategies**

Some work has been done on finding an alternative approach. A general dissatisfaction with orthodox approaches has been expressed in the work of Mead and Blumer (Blumer, 1969). Qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, strategies have made their strongest entry with Glaser and Strauss, in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Filstead's introduction in *Qualitative Methodology* provides a useful discussion substantiating the need for alternatives (1970). In this issue Pilsworth and Ruddock describe an alternative approach based on a phenomenological position. Still other approaches have borrowed from anthropology and stress the value of participant observation (McCall and Simmons, 1969). From Africa comes the work of Swantz (in this issue and elsewhere) and in some sense Malya with his approach to providing follow-up literacy material and investigation of a literacy environment (Swantz, 1974a, 1974b; Malya, 1975). In Latin America, Freire provides useful ideas in chapter three of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and a bit more in a talk given to the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania (1971, 1973). Vio (in this issue) describes some attempts at peasant participation in Chile under the Allende government.

### **Principles of participatory research**

Obviously, the development of participatory methods are at an early stage. It is perhaps not appropriate to develop a set of step-by-step cookbook recipes because to do so would be to some extent a contradiction in terms. What can be put forward as a basis for further work or criticism are some of the principles, derived from the experience so far.



### *1. Research methods have ideological implications.*

This point acts more as a reminder, a reinforcement of points made earlier in this article and by others such as Freire (1971), Blackburn (1972), M.F.D. Young (1975). It means quite simply that there is a "hidden curriculum" in the way a research process is carried out and one needs to be conscious of this fact.

### *2. A research process should be of some immediate and direct benefit to a community and not merely the basis for an academic paper,*

Research cannot be justified solely as the basis for intellectual exercise or academic career building. It is important that the community or population gain not only from the results of the research, but from the process itself. This means, for example, that villagers or city dwellers should--as a result of participating in the research process—be more able to articulate problems themselves and to initiate processes to find solutions. In more concrete terms, the reports of the initiate processes to find solutions in youth research in Tanzania by Swantz (1974b) and the agrarian reform work in Chile (Vio, this issue) stress the importance of the entire research team contributing to the productive work of the area. Such an approach has the added advantage of creating a better working atmosphere and providing a closer involvement with the community for the outside members of a research team.

### *3. A research process should involve the community or population in the entire research project from the formulation of the problem to the discussion of how to seek solutions and the interpretation of the findings.*

Here we come to what is perhaps the fundamental principle of participatory research and its point of most radical departure from both orthodox research approaches and such improvements as grounded theory. The research process should be based on a system of discussion, investigation and analysis in which the researched are as much a part of the process as the researcher. Theories are neither developed beforehand to be tested nor drawn by the researcher from his or her involvement with reality. Reality is described by the process through which a community develops its own theories and solutions about itself.



*4. If the goal of the research is change, then the research team should be composed of representatives of all elements in the situation that have a bearing on the change.*

If, for example, research is being done on types of educational programmes to provide employment, then the research teams would need to include employers as well as educators. If the research is related to rural development then people concerned with agriculture, marketing, land tenure as well as education would need to be involved.

*5. The research process should be seen as part of a total educational experience which serves to establish community needs, and increase awareness and commitment within the community.*

Research of this nature could be seen as a natural part of the educational planning or development planning process. It could be an accepted method of raising interest and increasing motivation rather than as a by-product of a research project which might or might not be picked up, depending on the circumstances surrounding the project.

*6. The research process should be viewed as a dialectic process, a dialogue over time and not as a static picture from one point in time.*

Roy Carr-Hill makes a compelling case for using questionnaires as consciousness raising instruments (1974). His point is that precisely because questionnaires are biased, they can be used positively to create an awareness and to awaken in individuals' powers of analysis which can then be brought to bear on the problem. I would agree with this point, but would want to make certain that in a participatory research process several additional aspects are made clear. The first is that the questionnaire represents only the first stage of the analysis, the basis for several discussions and interactions with the respondents. Secondly, that the interpretation of the questionnaire data is also shared and is not done solely by a single social scientist. Thirdly, one would want any action based on the research process to be arrived at by more than a social scientist and his or her bureaucratic counterparts. The one-time questionnaires, even in the hands of someone who is "pro-people",

remains a static and limited tool. It does represent a way of arousing initial interest in a social problem, especially in industrialized societies where community and group interaction is extremely limited.

*7. The object of the research process, like the object of the educational process, should be the liberation of human creative potential and the mobilization of human resources for the solution of social problems.*

This statement is a value, an underlying assumption for participatory research which will not suit everyone. But then this type of research will not perhaps be acceptable to a number of people in any case. The focus of research, learning and socio-economic development should be the same-man. The more intellectual power and creativity that can be brought to bear on society, the more likely a solution. We do not need more highly trained and sophisticated researchers operating with ever more esoteric techniques, but whole neighbourhoods, communities and nations of researchers”.

An analogy to medicine is appropriate here. Social science research often appears to produce a situation in which a medical doctor tries to diagnose a patient's symptoms from around the corner and out of sight. The social scientist uses his "instruments" to measure the response of the patient as though they were a kind of long stethoscope. The focus of the researcher has been on developing a better and better stethoscope for going around corners and into houses when the real need is for the researcher to walk around the corner, go into the house and begin talking with the people who live there.

## CONCLUSION

Participatory research is not a guarantee of ideological purity. What is? But research concerning itself with aspects of people's lives, particularly field research, needs to involve people in a different relationship than that of actors to be acted upon or of subjects seen as objects. If change is to occur adult educators need to be more deliberate about involving people in research. We must not, however, "confuse preoccupation with the truth that should characterise any serious scientific effort with the so-called neutrality of science which in actual fact does not exist (Freire, 1973). Participatory research, based on the assumption that man is a social animal,

offers a process that is more consistent with adult education principles, more directly linked to action, and more scientific because it produces a more complex and thereby more accurate picture of reality.

The sub-theme articles in this issue on participatory research provide more details on actual approaches and experiences. There is a great deal of work underway in this field. At least two seminars (one in Africa and one in Latin America) and one conference are being planned to deal in some way with these issues. The topic is a vital and important concern for all adult educators.

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