

Participation, Reciprocity, and Empowerment in the Practice of Participatory Research

Carl Wilmsen
University of California, Berkeley
College of Natural Resources

Managing the tension in participatory research between the different expectations professional researchers and community members have for research goals, processes, and outcomes, is central to achieving empowerment goals and preventing the negative effects of extractive research. Recent critiques of participatory research suggest that emphasizing participation is insufficient. Empowerment depends on the practice of participatory research as it unfolds along an axis of reciprocity and an axis of participation. The interplay of these axes creates a field of research relations in which research, depending on the circumstances, may be more or less extractive and/or may contribute more or less to empowerment.

Part of the rationale for adopting a participatory approach to research is that it is a corrective to standard research practices that extract knowledge from communities to the benefit of people elsewhere, and that leave communities unchanged or worse off than they were before. Indeed, participatory research is intended to empower ordinary citizens who collaborate in the research to use the research findings in ways that they see fit for improving their own situation. Yet, recent critiques of participatory research have suggested that participation itself may not correct the errors, right the wrongs, or level the power imbalances inherent in scientific research. On the one hand, participation may be abused; often researchers apply the term “participatory research” to studies that are entirely designed and led by scientists (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) and/or exclude community members from collaborating in many phases of the research including the application of the research results (Simpson, 2000). On the other hand, involving community members in a truly participatory research process does not automatically bring about more egalitarian social relations. Furthermore, due to confidentiality issues, inadequate free time, or other reasons, it may be best for community members *not* to participate in some or all phases of a research project (Hayward, Simpson, & Wood, 2004).

The empowerment goal thus turns on the many choices made in the course of conducting participatory research. To what extent and how should community members participate? What roles should members of different groups in the community play? What is the responsibility of the professional researchers to the community, and how do they balance that with their responsibility to their professional community? Such questions as these are central to the question of empowering community members. Because every situation is different, these and other questions must be negotiated anew among the research collaborators in every participatory research project.

That negotiation, however, is problematic. There is a fundamental tension in it resulting from the different expectations professional researchers and community members have for research goals, processes, and outcomes. Furthermore, negotiation may or may not lead to

empowerment regardless of the degree of participation. If that is the case, what determines whether research is extractive or empowering?

The answer to this question may very well lie in how the fundamental tension between differing expectations in PR is addressed. Although the amount, type, and quality of community members' participation in the research process is important (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Park, 1993), recent critiques of participation and participatory research suggest that emphasizing participation may not be enough. It may be that developing relationships of reciprocity between community members and professional researchers is as important as participation.

Tension in research

The tension in participatory research between the desire of researchers to contribute to theory and the desire of community members to solve their practical problems may contribute to research being extractive even when it is participatory. Participatory researchers try to produce knowledge that is "owned" by the community, but at the same time make claims on that knowledge through the process of theorizing. To build theory, researchers seek to explore alternative explanations for the situation under study beyond those that address the immediate interests and goals of community members. Community members may thus lose interest in theorizing. Moreover, such theorizing may even be counterproductive to their efforts in the long run.

Researchers claim the status of being the producers of theory. This brings the knowledge produced through participatory research into the purview of the university – which claims to be the preeminent institution for the production and dissemination of knowledge – and thereby reinforces the uneven relationships of power that constitute research with communities. Petras and Porpora (1993) have summarized this situation neatly: "Our traditional identity as academic sociologists represents a call to the development of disciplinary theory, methods and substance. Thus our research is primarily oriented toward the academy, where our findings are evaluated as a contribution to the intellectual community of which we are a part" (p. 120). They suggest that in asking academics to surrender the research agenda to communities, emancipatory forms of participatory research ask them to redefine who they are. They argue that "these forms of participatory research, therefore, create a tension between theory and practice that, for such research to be feasible, needs to be resolved" (p. 121).

It is in the routine academic practices of theorizing and publication within participatory research that the danger of conducting extractive research arises. Without adequate attention to the expectations, interests, and concerns of the non-scientists involved in the research, participatory research could end up committing the same transgressions of which conventional research is often accused: the research extracts knowledge from the community to the benefit of the researcher(s) and/or other entities external to the community, and the community is left unchanged or worse off than it was before.

How can we balance the expectations, interests, and concerns of community members with those of professional researchers? Can we hold extraction and empowerment in some kind of creative tension? As in all realms of life, doing so requires negotiation among the parties

involved. Successful negotiation, in turn, requires relationship building, trust, and mutual respect. In short, relationships of reciprocity are central to mediating the tensions inherent in participatory research.

This suggests that, empowerment depends on the practice of participatory research as it unfolds along two axes: an axis of reciprocity and an axis of participation. The interplay of reciprocity and participation creates a field of research relations in which research, depending on the circumstances, may be more or less extractive and/or may contribute more or less to empowerment.

Axes of reciprocity and participation

This dynamic is illustrated graphically in figure 1. At one extreme, the axis of reciprocity includes a one-way flow of benefits and information from the community to the researcher. At the other extreme there is a mutual exchange of information, assistance, and benefits. Oakley's notion of reciprocity in interviewing falls in between these two extremes. Arguing that interviewers cannot hope to elicit in-depth answers to their questions without investing their own identity in the relationship with the interviewee, Oakley (1981) argues that mutual learning between the interviewer and interviewee occurs when the interview is a reciprocal exchange of information.

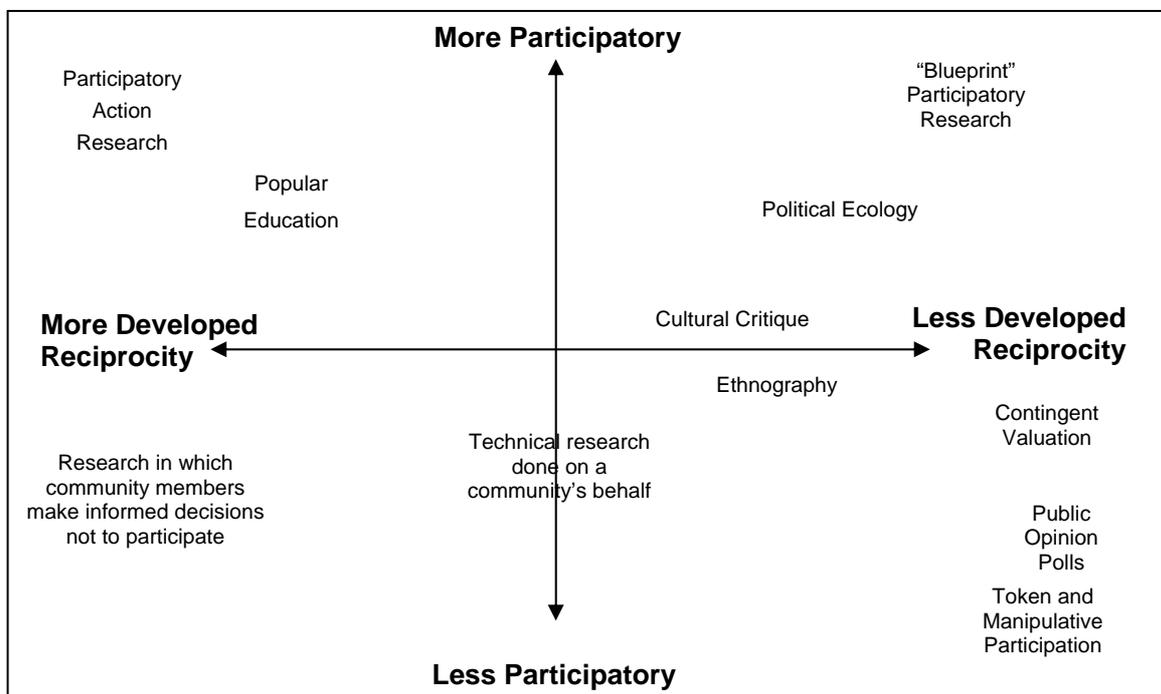
Reciprocity can be extended to include other types of exchange. Moving toward the "more developed reciprocity" end of the axis, the researcher can "give back" to the community in a number of ways. Giving back may entail documenting meetings, writing about issues and making special presentations to inform the broader public about problems and issues, teaching technical skills, or otherwise contributing to the community's efforts to achieve sought after social change. Petras and Porpora (1993, p. 112) refer to this kind of reciprocal exchange as a "parallel process" in which the researcher and community members "pursue their parallel objectives independently while engaging in a mutually beneficial exchange."

Moving even further toward more developed relationships of reciprocity entails a mutual exchange of knowledge, tools, techniques, and labor between community members and researchers. The professional researcher brings theoretical knowledge and specialized skills and puts them at the service of the community. Community members bring their own specialized knowledge and skills to apply to the development of new knowledge and the advancement of theory. As Eduardo Almeida and Maria Eugenia Sanchez have argued, the task is for the poor and the professional researchers to co-create the conditions that allow the former to speak and theorize on their own (cited in Petras & Porpora, 1993).

The axis of participation represented in figure 1 conforms to previously published typologies of participation which are usually presented as a continuum between community control on one extreme and manipulation of public involvement by authorities on the other (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Levels in between these extremes include situations in which people participate by being consulted or answering questions, by contributing material resources (labor in exchange for food, cash, or other material rewards; or land for experimentation), by serving on advisory committees, and by collecting data and sharing in joint analysis.

Presenting typologies of participation in this way is helpful because it demonstrates that there are different forms of participation, abuses that may occur, and different motives for and goals in adopting a participatory approach. When presented alone as they usually are, without representing the role of reciprocity, these typologies have two major disadvantages. First, they imply that higher levels of participation will lead readily to empowerment, and that low levels of participation will inevitably lead to extraction or abuse. They do not account for research in which empowerment may be achieved even with low levels of participation, or in which it may not be achieved despite high levels of participation. Second, they do not account for the common use of conventional field research techniques in participatory research, nor for the contributions such techniques can make in the pursuit of empowerment.

Figure 1: The field of research relations



Recent critiques of participation have shown that higher levels of participation do not necessarily correspond with empowerment or even the accomplishment of other goals, such as incorporating local knowledge, in participatory research. On the other hand, participation can contribute to accomplishing these goals and there are many examples of it doing so. Participation alone will clearly not lead unequivocally to empowerment of community members or to more robust research findings.

If that is the case, what is the difference between participatory research projects that contribute to empowerment, and those that fall short of the goal in one or more ways? Projects that are most successful in empowering community members in some way seem to be those with the most highly developed relationships of reciprocity. One could argue that existing typologies of participation capture this relationship because reciprocity is implicit in their descriptions of higher levels of participation, and because achieving this level of participation is predicated on well-developed relationships of reciprocity. I would argue,

however, that it is necessary to separate participation and reciprocity analytically because of the tendency to conflate participation and empowerment, because of the tendency to use “blueprint” approaches to participation, and because empowerment may be achieved by research that is not participatory.

Research with high levels of participation and well developed relationships of reciprocity fall in the upper left area of the diagram in figure 1. The ideals of popular education and participatory action research¹ involve mutual learning between teachers and students in the former, and scientists and lay research collaborators in the latter, in which all knowledge systems are respected and the participants in the process reach some collective understanding of the situation under study. Through this process, students or community members “own” the research, and acquire knowledge and skills that enable them to take action and/or apply research results to change their social situation (living, work, recreation) in ways that they wish. While this ideal is sometimes reached in actual practice, the great variety of research actually being conducted includes varying combinations of participation and reciprocity. Popular education may, for example, involve academics or activists leading communities in the direction of social change that they, not the community members, feel is needed.

Manipulation and token participation lie on the opposite side of the field in the lower right hand corner of figure 1. In manipulative participation, community members are put on advisory boards, invited to meetings, or involved in research experiments for the express purpose of educating them and eliciting their cooperation in testing hypotheses about activities or policies to which the researcher is already committed. For example, cooperative extension service researchers may involve farmers in research on particular fertilizers, pesticides, or cultivation practices to “educate” and encourage the farmers to begin using them regularly. Similarly, research on certification of sustainable forest management practices may be used more to persuade landowners to seek certification than to investigate its benefits and limitations.

Tokenism occurs when researchers seek input from community members, but maintain strict control over research design, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of the results. Manipulation and tokenism constitute abuses of participatory research. The benefits of participation may be promised community members, but the research ends up extracting knowledge from the community and empowerment does not occur (Simpson, 2000).

While some research projects may be easily identifiable as abusive, and others may be easily identifiable as empowering, most research, including conventional research, lies somewhere in between these two extremes. “Blueprint” participatory research is that in which community members go through the motions of participating in various stages of the research, but the research agenda is scientist driven or otherwise does not incorporate community interests and goals. In such cases, participation is at moderate to high levels, but reciprocity is less developed. Research in which community members make informed decisions not to participate entails more developed relations of reciprocity and low levels of participation. Reciprocity is more developed in such cases because the professional researcher and community members have put time and effort into developing a relationship in which the latter can make informed decisions about their involvement in the research.

Yet, because local circumstances are always unique, locating any project within the field of research relations depends on local context, history, and the ideology of the people involved (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). The positions of the types of research on the diagram in figure 1 are therefore only rough approximations. Depending on the circumstances, a given project within any one of these types could move along the axes in any direction. In the case of technical work done on a community's behalf, the community members who contract with a researcher to study a problem of interest to them may be involved to greater or lesser degrees in the design of the research. They may, for example, contribute to decisions about which data collection techniques would be appropriate as well as help develop lines of questioning. This would move the project closer to the more participatory end of the axis of participation. In addition, the relationship between the researcher and community members could entail more developed relationships of reciprocity. This is the case for political ecology, cultural critique in anthropology, and ethnography. Depending on the circumstances and the researcher(s) involved, any given project within these theoretical and methodological traditions could be more or less participatory, and could have greater or lesser developed relationships of reciprocity. Typically, however, research done in these traditions has been conducted more according to the protocols of conventional social science, and ethnography in particular has been criticized for not empowering community members (Biolsi & Zimmerman, 1997; Trinh, 1989)

To be sure, researchers within these traditions, particularly political ecology and cultural critique, have been sympathetic to community issues and needs. Political ecology, for example, seeks to integrate theories of political economy into behavioralist and cultural ecological approaches to the study of human land management systems in an effort to contribute to amelioration of poverty and land degradation in developing countries. Discussed during the last decade in terms of "liberation ecologies," political ecology has attempted to engage poststructuralist theory and the practical struggles of peasant, indigenous, and other communities around the world to reclaim their rights to self determination (Peet & Watts, 1996). Cultural critique in anthropology is similarly predicated on conducting research with emancipatory goals. It involves research that questions power relations, brings them into sharp relief, explores the operation of power, and deconstructs dominant discourses and representations of marginalized people with the purpose of exposing processes of oppression to help end that oppression (Hale, 2006). Yet, these research traditions have typically entailed the use of conventional research methods, and have not explicitly addressed the question of the impact their research has on communities (whether empowering or not). Participation in them typically involves community members providing information through key informant interviews, oral histories, or other qualitative data gathering techniques. In some cases community members may provide advice on some aspects of the research, but the researcher retains ultimate authority over the conduct, lines of questioning, and goals of the inquiry.

Be that as it may, political ecology, cultural critique, and other research taking a conventional approach may have benefits that accrue to community members, and may empower them in certain ways. Krimerman (2001), for example, has pointed out that conventional research has improved treatment for mental patients, has identified practices in industrial production that are exploitative and/or alienating, and has enabled learning disabled persons to read and write. Consider also research on the history of land titles.

Conventional research on this topic may help communities with their land claims, as has occurred with Hispano communities in the state of New Mexico in the United States. In this case, the research was initiated by researchers, and has not been participatory, but is of interest to community members and has contributed to the efforts of Hispano activists to seek redress for the historic loss of communal lands (Ebright, 1994; Gugliotta, 1998; Neary, 2001). Many land grant researchers have some established relationship with community members, and are aware of their concerns, however. Thus, while participation in the actual research may be low, relationships of reciprocity are sufficiently developed to enable researchers to conduct research with benefits that accrue to community members.

Entanglements of empowerment and extraction

Yet, is such research not also extractive? Does not the researcher use the research results in advancing his or her own career? Even when the research is highly participatory and relationships of reciprocity are highly developed, through the very act of writing the researcher claims the authority to explain. Ideally, theory is co-developed among professional researchers and community members. Yet, even in this process, professional researchers may find it necessary to spend time developing theory alone. As Bradbury and Reason (2003) observe, developing “theory may require iterative cycles of spectatorial distancing of researcher from co-inquirers to theorize and then discuss that theory with those whose experience is its basis” (pages 213-214). There are also situations in which community members are not interested in, or incapable of, theorizing. In her study of the impact of health reform on displaced nurses, for example, Gustafson (2000) found that the laid-off nurses who collaborated in her study were either incapable or uninterested in theorizing.

The relationship between participation, reciprocity, and empowerment is messy, ambiguous, and convoluted. Elements of empowerment and extraction may occur simultaneously in every type of research no matter where it falls in the field of research relations. Researchers, no matter how committed to participatory processes, always want to use research for their own purposes – at a minimum for publications that contribute to current theoretical debates in the academy. Indeed, this is the only way to advance one’s career in the current academic system.

On the other hand, extractive research, falling in the area of the field of research relations with less participation and less developed reciprocity, could empower community members or provide benefits to them in some ways. Some people, for example, agree to be interviewed because they recognize that such research is one way of recording and preserving their traditional knowledge. Even old ethnographies are now providing benefits to Native American communities who, in bitter-sweet irony, are turning to them to relearn and revitalize their traditional cultures.

The implication this has for the goals of participatory research is that empowerment and extraction, as two processes through which relationships of power are negotiated, reproduced, and reinforced, are entangled. In a process parallel to the entanglement of domination and resistance (Sharp, Routledge, Philo, & Paddison, 2000), the different expectations of researchers and community members lead to empowerment and extraction occurring simultaneously in participatory research. Although the self-conscious

examination of power relationships in participatory research is intended to render relationships of power more even, the differing goals of researchers and community members, as supported and abetted by the institutional and socio-economic contexts in which the two groups act, may lead to both empowerment and extraction. These may occur simultaneously, or, as in the case of Native Americans now benefiting from old ethnographies, they may occur at different times, in some cases separated by many years.

Key differences lie in the type and duration of the effects of empowerment and extraction. Empowerment may have temporary benefits for community members. It may, for example lead to greater democratic participation in a development project without democratic principles transferring to other local institutions or lasting beyond the life of the particular project. Schaft and Greenwood (2003), for example, describe how a community in New York fell back on pre-existing local relationships of power after their participatory action research project, which identified important community issues and stimulated some initial action, was completed. On the other hand, empowerment may have lasting effects. Such is the case if research leads to a policy being changed, or to local people being given permanent seats with real power on managing boards as was the case with the Cache Creek Conservancy charged with managing the watershed of Cache Creek in California.

Extraction also may have lasting effects. The case of Native Americans and ethnography again illustrates the point. The extraction of indigenous knowledge debilitated Native Americans in representing themselves to broader publics. This effect is still being felt even as Native Americans utilize old ethnographies in reclaiming their right to self-representation.

The difference between temporary and lasting effects, and either extraction or empowerment being the dominant effect of research lies in the degree to which community members have control over the research results as well as in the degree to which the research involves the development of skills and confidence that enable community members to continue improving their situation into the future. Developing control, skills, and confidence is as much, and perhaps more, a function of developing relationships of reciprocity as it is of participation. Participation without reciprocity is an empty promise leading ultimately to extractive research and frustration and continued marginalization on the part of community members. Reciprocity, on the other hand, entails a relationship of open communication, trust, mutual respect, and exchange between researchers and community members. In such situations, the research may benefit community members even without their active participation in the process.

Credibility, theory, and empowerment

This brings us full circle to the question of keeping empowerment and extraction in some kind of creative tension. This tension is inherent in participatory research because of the need to establish credibility, and because of the desire to make comparisons across cases and space. Professional researchers and community members both have an interest in credibility. Communities need good, robust information to support their claims, and/or to inform their efforts to achieve sustainability or increased well being. If they do not have good information, their claims will be discredited and their efforts will fail. Professional researchers have a stake in credibility because of their interest in producing knowledge that

has broader applicability than to just the specific situation under study – in other words to contribute to the building of theory.

Establishing credibility and building theory depends on conducting rigorous research. Since the knowledge of scientists and community members both are situated in particular contexts and subject to particular constraints (Haraway, 1991), assessing the information and interpretations they each bring to the research situation is crucial to establishing credibility. The process must embody the principle that scientific, local, and indigenous knowledge are not infallible, but must also embody the principle of democratic inclusion (Krimerman, 2001). An open, inclusive process of analysis means that community members should be prepared for the possibility that the most credible explanation of the situation under study may be an explanation that they do not like (Firehock, 2003). The process is infused with power. Mismanaging the tensions between the different interests of scientists and community members risks, to paraphrase Wylie (2005, p. 65), systematically favoring explanations that reinforce existing social and political inequities as a result of ambiguities in the evidence as well as in alternative interpretations.

Theory building and practical problem solving need not be mutually exclusive. Louise Fortmann (personal communication) describes theory as a flashlight: it is, or should be, a tool for illuminating underlying practices, processes, and interconnections that constitute the root causes of problems. That is to say, it should describe the world well enough to be an adequate explanation in and of itself, *and* so that it can form the basis of addressing the everyday problems that people face. Summing up the relationship between theory and practice, Bradbury and Reason (2003, p. 213) note, “Without theory, practice is impoverished.” In contrast to conventional research, in which theorizing is predicated on deliberately holding theory separate from practical problems (Wylie, 2005), participatory research is based on the principle that theory and practical problem solving are interdependent.

Conclusion

To nurture this interdependence, and to prevent the interests of professional researchers from leading to extraction, open communication is required. Early on in the research process the situated interests of all the parties involved need to be identified. Differing expectations, goals, and understandings of each party’s role in the research need to be clearly articulated, and differences need to be negotiated. As choices are made about the conduct of the inquiry, it is necessary to consider how the situated interests of everyone involved in the research might affect who is making the choices and the implications the choices have for the community as well as for the credibility of the research results.

Reciprocity is central to negotiating these choices in a way that the interests of the professional researchers and the community members are at least partially satisfied, so that each realizes some benefits from the research. In the drive to change the extractive tendencies in research such that the distribution of the costs and benefits of research are more egalitarian, what we are really searching for is liberation research. Participation alone will not get us there. Rather we need well developed relationships of reciprocity and strategic use of participation to proactively seek better accounts of the world that are of practical value to marginalized peoples.

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Author contact information:

Carl Wilmsen
College of Natural Resources
101 Giannini Hall
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-3100
U.S.A.
Telephone: 510-642-3431
Fax: 510-642-4612
Email: cwilmsen@nature.berkeley.edu

¹ Here I am using the term “Participatory Action Research” in the sense of the Southern or emancipatory tradition of participatory research.