

Extraction, empowerment, and relationships in the practice of participatory research

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Abstract

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 empowering communities and preventing the negative effects of extractive research. A key question for managing that tension is who decides on the focus and conduct of the research. Reciprocity, mutual learning, and action are three elements of the relationship between co-researchers that bear as much on the question of who decides as the degree of participation. Rather than participation, the focus in participatory research should be on the quality of the relationship between the co-researchers.

Extractive or empowering research: What is the difference?

Part of the rationale for adopting a participatory approach to research is that doing so corrects standard research practices that extract knowledge from communities to the benefit of people elsewhere and 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; researchers often 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, can be 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. Although the amount, type, and quality of community members' participation in the research process is important (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), emphasizing participation may not be enough. It may be just as, or perhaps more, important to focus on the relationship between the professional researchers and community members. Mediating the tension between their different expectations, between extraction and empowerment, turns on the question of who decides. Who decides the roles of the different collaborators in the research? Who decides how the research will proceed, what questions will be asked, how data will be analyzed, and how the results will be used? The relationship between the professional researcher and community members is critical to how such decisions are made.

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. Depending on the community involved, this claim may reinforce the uneven relationships of power that constitute all types of 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 academics 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 being just as extractive as conventional research is often accused of being.

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.

This suggests that, empowerment depends on the unfolding of numerous elements in the practice of participatory research. Reciprocity, mutual learning, and action are three elements (and there may be others) of the relationship between professional researchers and community members that bear as much on the question of who decides as the degree or level of participation. The interplay of these elements 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.

The field of research relations

This dynamic is illustrated graphically in figure 1. Participation, reciprocity, mutual learning, and action occur in varying amounts between projects as well as within the stages of a single project. The axes in figure 1 thus represent continua with more of an element occurring toward one end and less of an element occurring toward the other end of each axis. Research may have high levels of participation and low levels of reciprocity, mutual learning, and action. Alternatively it could have low levels of participation, medium levels of action, and high levels of reciprocity and mutual learning. Numerous combinations of high, intermediate and low levels of these and other elements are possible and do occur in actual practice.

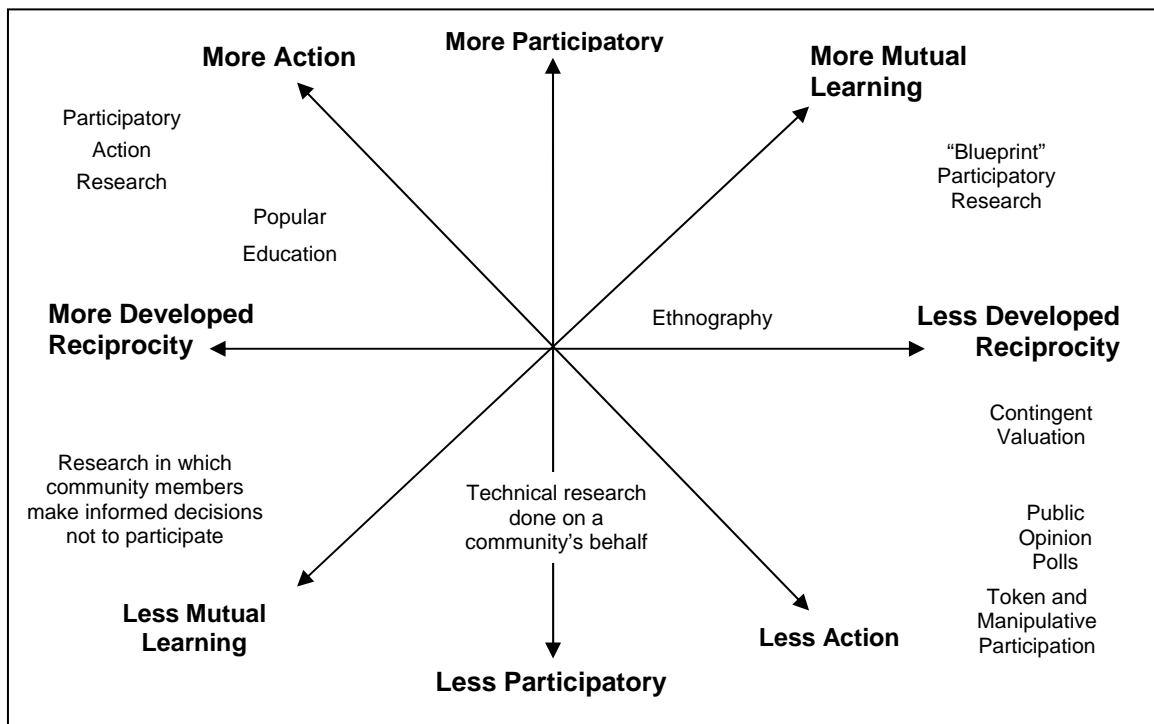


Figure 1: The field of research relations

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). 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 of participation, and different motives for and goals in adopting a participatory approach. When presented alone as they usually are, without explicitly representing the role of reciprocity, mutual learning, action, or other elements, 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.

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. Clearly participation alone does not lead unequivocally to empowerment of community members or to more robust research findings.

The question of who decides is relevant here. Projects that are most successful in empowering community members in some way seem to be those in which professional researchers and community members work together as equals to decide on levels of community participation, the degree and type of action that is appropriate, setting goals, and other matters pertinent to conducting the research. In such projects, relationships of reciprocity and trust are more highly developed even if the co-researchers decide that community members should have limited participation in some or all phases of the research.

One could argue that existing typologies of participation capture this dynamic because reciprocity, trust, action, and mutual learning are implicit in their descriptions of higher levels of participation. I would argue, however, that it is necessary to separate participation and these other elements analytically because of the tendency to conflate participation and empowerment, because of the frequency with which participation is done “by the book” without genuine efforts to empower community members, and because empowerment may be achieved by research that is not participatory.

The axis of reciprocity in figure 1 represents the qualities of social relationships in research that bear on empowering community members to be equal partners in making decisions about the research and action. As with participation, the axis is a continuum. At one extreme it 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) reasons 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 community members 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).

Research with high levels of participation and well developed relationships of reciprocity fall in the upper left area of the diagram in figure 1. Higher levels of action and mutual learning would place the research somewhere on the upper side of the three-dimensional sphere created by the four axes. The ideals of popular education and participatory action research (that is, PAR in its Southern or emancipatory tradition) involve mutual learning between teachers and students in the former, and scientists and lay research collaborators in the latter. In both cases 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, reciprocity, mutual learning, action and other elements. 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 sphere 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 to 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 participate in field research activities described in participatory research manuals, but the research agenda is scientist driven and community members are not involved as equal partners in making decisions pertinent to conducting the research. In such cases, participation is at moderate to high levels, but reciprocity is less developed and mutual learning and action may be at low levels. 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 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.

Varying levels of participation, reciprocity, mutual learning, action and other elements may occur within any field or subfield of inquiry, even those that profess allegiance to emancipatory principles. Consider 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 reciprocity, mutual learning, or action.

To be sure, researchers in 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 behaviorist 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 a mixed record in involving community members in research. Many political ecologists now adopt a participatory approach to research. Nevertheless, many graduate students in anthropology, geography, and other social sciences assume that because they propose to do participant observation, their research is participatory. This assumption is evident in many applications for fellowships that the Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program receives each year. The fellowship program, which I direct, supports participatory research in community-based natural resource management in the United States.. The frequency with which this assumption surfaces, suggests that participatory approaches are not yet fully integrated into graduate education.

Cultural critique may emphasize participatory approaches even less. Hale argues that anthropologists in this tradition have generally not questioned the need to change their methodological approaches, and have not sought to change the “everyday material relations of the research process” (Hale, 2006, p. 103).

Be that as it may, research taking a conventional approach, whether it is in political ecology, cultural critique, or some other tradition, 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.

Entanglements of empowerment and extraction

The relationship between participation, reciprocity, and empowerment is thus messy, ambiguous, and convoluted. Elements of empowerment and extraction may occur simultaneously in every type of research no matter how engaged community members are in making decisions about the research. 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.

Even when the research is highly participatory and levels of reciprocity, mutual learning, and action are high, 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” (pp. 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 of or uninterested in theorizing.

Yet, extractive research 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. Schafft 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.

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 directly related to the question of who decides; it is as much, and perhaps more, a function of the relationship between the researcher(s) and community members as it is of participation. Participation without reciprocity, mutual learning, and other elements of healthy partnerships is an empty promise leading ultimately to extractive research, frustration, and continued marginalization on the part of community members. Engaging as equal partners in the research, 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

What, then, of keeping empowerment and extraction in some kind of creative tension? Managing this tension is directly related to the question of who is involved in the decisions and analyses that establish the credibility of the research. Professional researchers and community members have a common 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 theory building.

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 no knowledge, be it scientific, local, or indigenous, is infallible. It must also embody the principle of democratic inclusion

(Krimerman, 2001). An open, inclusive process of analysis that addresses the tensions between the different interests of scientists and community members is crucial. The absence of such a process 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. At the same time, 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).

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.

Assuring that community members are involved as equal partners in negotiating these choices is dependent on the relationship between researchers and community members. Participation alone is not sufficient to nurture such partnerships. Rather we need to focus on developing the elements of strong relationships (reciprocity and other elements) and to use participation strategically to proactively seek better accounts of the world that are of practical value to marginalized peoples.

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