

From Clarity to Anarchy: Participatory Research Approach

(A critique of "The Methodology of the Participatory Research Approach")

Rajesh Tandon
Asian Coordinator
Participatory Research Project
Public Enterprises Centre for
Continuing Education
Jeevan Tara Building
5, Parliament Street
New Delhi - 110 001

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This paper presents conceptual arguments to delineate the methodology of participatory research approach. After presenting an excellent analysis of the social and professional contexts of the origin of PRA, the authors describe various points of view which are broadly subsumed under PRA. The degree of researcher's political activism is seen as the main dimension on which these various points of view differ.

There is a major fallacy in the argument presented by the authors that the wide range of political activism supported under PRA leads to naive idealism on the one hand and methodological ad-hocism on the other. First, let us be clear that PRA is not an invention of the seventies, by a group of dedicated social science researchers. What is new is the label ("participatory research"), not the approach. People engaged in mobilizing and organising the rural poor in India, and other third world countries, for example, through their very concrete actions, demonstrated all the aspects of PRA we have conceptualized recently. Many of them, those engaged in PRA today, do not know the label, and some of them even shy away from it.

Second, PRA can be looked at from two contrasting starting points. It can be approached from the point of view of the activist struggling in the field. For an activist, PRA, by very definition, entails political activism in the field. The other way of looking at PRA is our own familiar professional researcher's point of view. For us researchers,

direct political activism may appear to hurt the process of knowledge-generation. Moreover, we have our own constraints of institutional membership. We may not be "free" to commit ourselves to direct political action. Is it possible to reconcile these two points of view? And if yes, then PRA will necessarily have the range of political activism in its fold, as described by the authors. If not, then PRA will become the future discipline of academic professional researchers and join the hands of action-research and participant-observation in the classrooms. This is an important issue which has implications beyond the methodology of PRA.

To the extent that we define the origins of PRA in the social and developmental context of the Third World countries, we cannot argue for the separation of PRA from the increasing demands of participatory social action. Consequently, we cannot ignore the activists' points of view. And, that implies that the major challenge for PRA is to accommodate and integrate these two points of view. Till that happens (and if it is possible and desirable), PRA may have to continue reflecting the wide range of political activism and choices of methodology.

The second aspect of this paper which has methodological implications, relates to the issue of subjectivity. The authors highlight the argument that PRA reflects "open-ended intersubjectivity" and "eclectic" approach. They feel that this eclectic orientation is embedded in the philosophy of pragmatism. According to the authors, such an orientation leads to methodological ad-hocism. In order to understand the subjective and eclectic aspects of PRA, we have to examine the basic

difference between classical research approach (CRA) and PRA. One of the hallmarks of classical research approach is its clarity and precision in methodology. Moreover, this methodology of CRA is based on the control of external, "spurious" influences and the subjectivity of the researcher. This implies that CRA encourages the thinking aspect of the researcher; and, it attempts to reduce the feelings of and actions by the researcher which are believed to "contaminate" the research.

This rigid delimitation of thinking as the only mode of inquiry is the foundation of CRA. Its proponents have advocated this methodology and its teachers have presented philosophical justifications for thinking as the only valid and legitimate mode of knowing and inquiry. However, human beings are somewhat different from machines. They feel and act, as well as think. As feeling, thinking and acting individuals, they not only learn but also contribute to others learning. To the extent that CRA is limited to thinking mode of inquiry, it truncates the essential humanity of the researcher and makes unrealistic demands on him/her as a researcher. PRA, on the other hand, accepts feeling and acting as equally important modes of knowing as thinking. The entire existentialist philosophy supports feeling as a valid mode of knowing; and the theoretical underpinnings of action-research provide the basis for acting as a legitimate mode of knowing.

If we recognize that PRA is a holistic approach to inquiry and knowledge-generation, with feeling, thinking and acting as independent and correlated modes of inquiry, we begin to understand the apparent edecticism and ad-hocism of the PRA.

To the extent that PRA opens up many more modes of inquiry as opposed to the narrow, limited, uni-modal approach of classical research, it is inevitable that the methodological options thrown open by PRA will appear to be "unruly", "anarchic" and ad-hoc to those of us who are schooled in the neat, well-defined and pre-set methodology of CRA.

Moreover, the eclectic orientation of PRA is a reflection of not only the wide range of modes^s of inquiry as described above, but also the variety of contexts, researchers and issues presently being encompassed by PRA. Different researchers with different previous experiences are engaged in PRA in different settings. This variety is so overwhelming to us used to ~~to~~ CRA that we almost label it ad-hoc and open-ended.

The third aspect of this paper which has attracted me is the notion of idealism in PRA. The authors argue that PRA implies "value judgements and moral imperative" which reflects the idealist component of PRA. Moreover, they maintain that such idealism tends to overlook material causation. The paper further describes how this idealism leads to "naive positing of participants", whereby objective socio-economic conditions as causes for problems and their solutions are ignored. I tend to agree with the authors partly. It is conceivable that the PRA can "degenerate" into a subjective, local and superficial analysis of the social reality. It is possible that the researcher places entire emphasis^s on the subjective experiences of the participants in developing an understanding of reality. In my own field experience,

I have found that small, poor farmer is unaware of the systemic causes of his poverty and impoverishment. If I agree with him blindly, the only plausible explanation for his poverty is his own stupidity, ignorance and incompetence. However, this will be my naivete as well as a distortion of PRA. One salient methodological element of PRA is the joint analysis performed by the people as well as the researcher. The researcher develops his/her own analysis of reality (and that includes objective systemic conditions) just as the people have their own subjective analysis of reality. These two are then brought into active interaction whereby a joint analysis of reality develops. Without this joint analysis, the methodology of PRA is incomplete. And having engaged in this process of joint analysis, the researcher can avoid the pitfalls presented in this paper. Moreover, it is this element of joint analysis in PRA that brings out the key learning for the participants.

In sum, therefore, it is useful to underscore the anarchic appearance of PRA. It appears anarchic because it is a major departure from our present modes of conceptualization of research process. It seems anarchic because it is pregnant with unmanageable variety. And it just may be anarchic because it is ambiguous, unclear and incomprehensible !