

12
26

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: AN EXPLORATORY STATEMENT

Rajesh Tandon

Participatory Research (PR) approach is beginning to emerge as an approach of inquiry and social change. The emergence of Participatory Research approach is rooted in some basic frustrations experienced in the pursuit of classical research. Before outlining the PR approach, it might be useful to verbalize some of those frustrations:

- (a) Classical research approach in social settings has implicitly borrowed the method of inquiry used in natural sciences. This has led to a distorted emphasis on "objectivity" and researcher-subject differentiation. Classical research approach in social settings has placed primacy on developing research designs (both in the laboratory and in the field) that attempt to maintain the separation between the researcher and individuals in the social system under study. Such an emphasis will seem mis-directed if we examine the three distinctive characteristics of inquiry in social settings:
- (i) Social research means a study of individuals, groups and organizations in a social setting;
 - (ii) The researcher shares his/her essential humanity with the individuals in the social setting under study;
 - (iii) The very act of inquiry tends to have some impact on the social system under study.

One can clearly notice the differences that emanate from these distinctive characteristics between social research and inquiry in natural sciences. To that extent, it is doubtful if social research can utilize a method of inquiry implicitly based on the assumptions of natural science inquiry.

(b) Another major influence of natural sciences on social inquiry is in terms of the acceptable purpose of research. Research in natural science has been solely aimed at increased understanding of and knowledge about natural phenomena. The utilization of this new knowledge has been the task of the technologists. Social science researchers have assigned similar role to themselves. Social change based on the enhanced understanding of social systems and phenomena is not seen as an integral part of their role. In the absence of social technologists, the utilization of new knowledge has been neglected.

One may ask why social technologists have not "arrived" so far? Part of the reason may lie in the distinctive nature of social science inquiry. If we assume that it is impossible to control all the spurious interferences in social research (and this is an increasingly documented assumption), then it might be difficult to talk about "reproducibility" and consequent generalization. We only develop a partial understanding of a social phenomenon/setting, and this seriously limits our ability to generalize. Therefore, a major arguments against the utilization of knowledge generated by social research in its lack of applicability in particular settings. To that extent, those interested in social change in a particular setting tend to initiate their own research process in that setting.

Classical social research has, therefore, neglected the issue of change in social systems. It has not only been indifferent to this issue, but also actively punished those who attempted to combine the two purposes of understanding and change by labeling their efforts "unscientific".

- (c) Another argument against researchers' involvement in social change is premised on the misconception that research is value-free. Since all change, especially social change, is based on a normative vision of the "desired", and since researchers' task is to be objective and value-free in pursuit of his/her inquiry, how can one expect him/her to combine the process of inquiry with the process of change?

The underlying fallacy in this argument is the naive assumption that inquiry is value-free. What to say of social research, even inquiry in natural sciences is not value-free. The researcher not only believes that the natural phenomena are orderly and can be therefore, researched, but also carries a framework in order to collect observations. These frameworks are as much normative as those held by social researchers.

Moreover, the myths of value-free inquiry and non-normative role of the researcher have led to the dehumanizing and catastrophic utilization of knowledge. The overwhelming obsession of researchers with "objectivity" and "neutrality" has resulted in the development of nuclear missiles, biological poisons and psychological brainwashing.

- (d) Finally, there is an ethical issue that has been largely neglected in classical social research. The practice of classical social research has resulted in complete and exclusive control of the process and outcome of research by the professional researcher. The researcher develops knowledge based on data collected from individuals groups and organizations in a social setting. Those individuals, groups and organizations do not have any control over the knowledge generated from the data obtained from them. They are the "subjects" of research.

And the researcher is neither accountable to them nor responsible for the use of knowledge thus generated. A researcher can do that in natural sciences without any ethical consideration because the subject-matter is natural phenomenon. Can we follow the same argument for inquiry in social phenomena?

In the light of above frustrations with classical research approach, it is valuable to analyze the issue of control a little more in-depth. In various types of research approaches, what is chosen and who chooses? If we broadly classify the research types into the three categories shown in figure-1, then it is easy to understand how participatory research approach differs in some very fundamental ways. Academic research is what most professional researchers are engaged in and what most research institutes reward and encourage. Policy/evaluation research has become increasingly popular over the last two decades. An administrator, policy-maker or government agency, commissions a research study in order to satisfy some of the administrative needs. This client is, by and large, outside the problem/area that s/he wants researched by a professional researcher. Participatory Research has been set against these two types on the three key steps in a research act; choice of the problem, choice of the methodology, and choice of the outcome. Figure-1 highlights, somewhat dramatically, this issue of control in research. Academic research has emphasised unilateral control by the professional researcher on all steps of a research act. PR is an approach where this control is jointly shared by the researcher and the actors in the problem situation.

Before going into the details of some of the implications of these fundamental emphasis in Participatory Research, it might be worthwhile to enumerate what a PR approach might entail concretely. Figure-2 is an attempt to chart the steps of an "ideal" Participatory Research approach. One major element of Participatory Research that is missing in this

Figure-1: Distinctions between three types of Research Processes

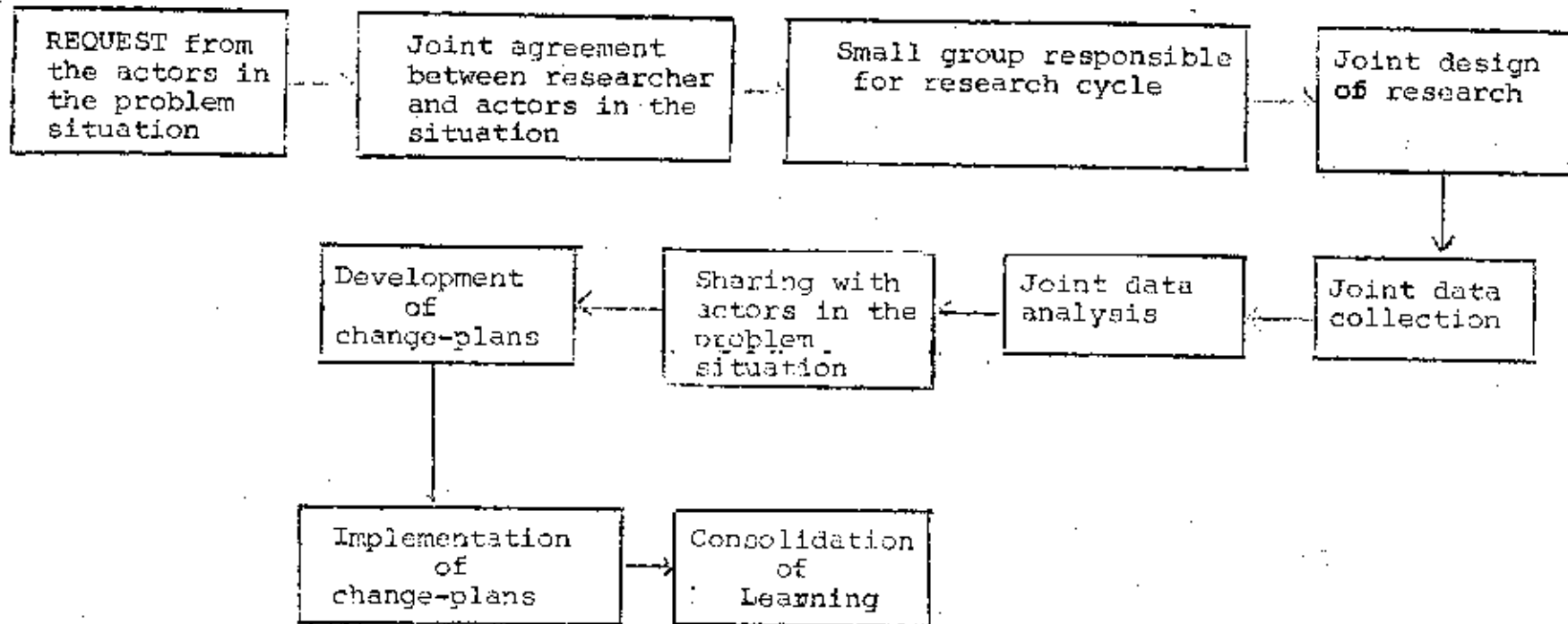
STEPS IN RESEARCH	TYPE OF RESEARCH	ACADEMIC RESEARCH	POLICY/EVALUATION RESEARCH (COMMISSIONED)	PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH
1. CHOICE OF PROBLEM	What?	Choice based on the interest and discipline of the professional researcher.	Choice based on clients administrative needs.	Choice based on immediate problem situation.
	Who?	Professional researcher	Client (who is outside the problem area).	Jointly by the actors in the problem situation and professional researcher.
2. CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY	What?	Experimental research designs, use of reliable instruments, statistical analysis	Quasi-experimental field research designs, use of reliable instruments, statistical analysis.	Consensual validity based research designs, use of empathic instruments, multiple analysis methods.
	Who?	Professional researcher	Professional researcher	Jointly by the actors and the professional researcher.
3. CHOICE OF OUTCOME	What?	-Publications (presentations in "learned" seminars).	-Report (to the Client) -Publication (if the researcher negotiates)	-Changes in the situation -Increased knowledge base -Increased capacity among actors to inquire into and change their situations.
	Who?	Professional researcher	Client (primarily)	Jointly by the actors and the professional researcher.

"ideal" model is the ideological/normative stance. To the extent that Participatory Research approach is an attempt to break away from unidirectional control of the professional researcher, it is to be consistent in its definition of "actors in the problem situation". Therefore, Participatory Research approach is solely in response to and for the fulfillment of the needs of the less powerful, weaker segments of a social setting

Some comments related to figure-2 are needed here:

- (i) The initial request in an "ideal" Participatory Research process may come from the powerless actors in the situation. But in reality, this may not be so. The request may come from someone powerful within the situation, or outside it. Yet, the researcher can transform it into a Participatory Research approach by following some later steps, provided his/her ideological stance is explicit.
- (ii) Various steps outlined in figure-2 appear to be one-shot, fixed steps. In reality, a Participatory Research process has to be cyclical and iterative. For example, joint agreement may need to be worked and reworked many times, over the entire cycle.
- (iii) As presented here, various steps in Participatory Research process assumed the involvement of an outside researcher. In reality, groups of actors in a particular setting may go through the entire process without any assistance from the outsider. In fact, effective Participatory Research process must have the increased capacity of the actors in the situation inquire into and change their situation as a valued outcome. To that extent, an outside researcher will become redundant soon.

Figure-2: Steps in an "ideal" Participatory Research Approach



- (iv) As presented in figure-2, the Participatory Research process may appear identical to Action Research (AR) approach. However, there are two significant ways in which Participatory Research is different from Action Research. First, the ideological stance and emphasis on making the researcher's value-premises explicit are generally not mentioned in Action Research approach. Second, Action Research can be, and is being, undertaken without the participation and control of the actors in the situation. In essence, then, Action Research becomes another method in the exclusive control of the professional researcher.

The above discussion raises many important issues. At this stage, one can only begin to articulate and understand those issues. Final answers to them may emerge later. Some key issues are being articulated and confronted here; it is hoped that they will generate some dialogue.

- (a) How to develop authentic, valid knowledge? Participatory Research approach tends to lay emphasis on authenticity as opposed to validity. The concept of validity as defined by classical research paradigm is inappropriate because of several reasons. Firstly, knowledge about a social setting is not equivalent to information obtained from it, the meaning attached to that information is more important. Any representation of social reality is contingent upon such meanings that actors attach to their reality. Secondly, the impact of historical contingency on knowledge derived from social settings is too critical to apply universal constructs of validity. Existing criteria of validity are concerned with the generalizability of the outcomes of research.

Participatory Research approach is potentially an attempt to generalize a process of research, instead of its outcome.

To that extent, the criteria of validity need to focus on the external generalizability and internal consistency of the research process itself. What can be some beginning elements of such a concept of validity? One can enumerate a few such elements:

- i) Relevance: historical, temporal and spatial.
- ii) Researcher calibration: sensitivity of the researcher.
Emphasis on the calibration and reliability of the researcher as opposed to an instrument or a method.
- iii) Convergence: issues, methods and outcomes.
Emphasis on consensus of issues, multiplicity of methods and congruence between processes and outcomes.
- iv) Inclusion: context, actors and researcher.
Emphasis on looking at the research as a social process and managing the confluence between the aspects of the setting, actors in the setting and the researcher.

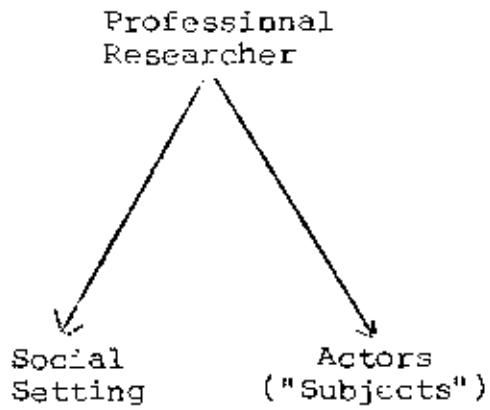
How can we build an alternative concept of validity based on the stance that the Participatory Research approach emphasises generalizability of the research process itself?

- (b) If the generalizability of research process is emphasised in Participatory Research approach, What is the outcome of the research itself? The outcomes in Participatory Research process are at several levels:.

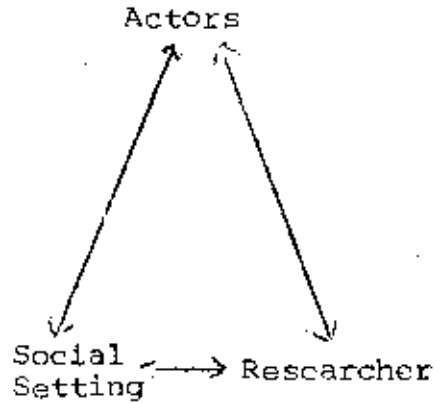
- i) Immediate social change/action is one such outcome. The actors in the situation engage in an effort to transform their situation.
- ii) Increased knowledge about the particular social setting is another outcome. This knowledge is available with the researcher as well as the actors of the social setting.
- iii) Increased capacity among the actors in the situation to enquire into and change their situation is another important outcome. The ability and confidence of the actors in the situation to carry out further research and change is a potentially significant contribution of Participatory Research. This is the educational aspect of Participatory Research, where the actors in the situation learn how to learn; ~~de~~tero-learning occurs in Participatory Research process.

- (c) If there are the potential outcomes of a Participatory Research process, what happens to the enhancement of knowledge? As mentioned above, the increased knowledge about the social setting is available both with the researcher and the actors in the situation. Is it not enhancement of knowledge? Or enhancement of knowledge is exclusively the task of professional researcher? Classical research, as mentioned earlier, emphasises professional control over the generation, utilization and elaboration of knowledge (figure 3). Participatory Research approach maintains that the actors in the situation are not merely passive "subjects" of research, but are actively influencing the processes of knowledge-generation and elaboration.

Figure-3: Control over knowledge-generation and elaboration process



CLASSICAL RESEARCH



PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

becomes a political one. What are the implications of research assuming a political meaning: for the researcher? for the actors in the situation?

Is this issue of politicization of research process unique to Participatory Research? Research in social settings has always been political: either to maintain, explain and justify the status-quo or to question, examine and transform it. May be, we have not been aware of the political aspects of our research effort since we never believed that our inquiry was normative or we never made explicit our ideological stance.

These are some of the challenges of Participatory Research approach. By their very nature, these are macro challenges. We can attempt to deal with them at the macro level; or, we can analyze and resolve them by our micro actions in the context of a specific, concrete Participatory Research effort.