

## Power and Knowledge

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Participatory research has long held within it implicit notions of the relationships between power and knowledge. Advocates of participatory action research have focused their critique of conventional research strategies on structural relationships of power and the ways through which they are maintained by monopolies of knowledge, arguing that participatory knowledge strategies can challenge deep-rooted power inequities. Other action research traditions have focused more on issues of power and knowledge within organizations, while others still have highlighted the power relations between individuals, especially those involving professionals and those with whom they work.

Earlier understandings of power in participatory research tended to dichotomize the notion: 'they' (structures, organizations, experts) had power; 'we' (the oppressed, grassroots, marginalized) did not. Participatory research was a means of closing the gap, of remedying the power inequities through processes of knowledge production, which strengthened voice, organization and action.

In more recent years, the uses and understandings of participatory research have broadened considerably. Rather than being seen as an instrument only of the powerless, the language and methods of participatory research are being adopted by large and powerful institutions. The new legitimacy and acceptance of participatory research raises critical questions. What aspects of participatory practice are institutions like national governments and the World Bank taking up? Does this new incorporation represent co-optation, or does it represent new spaces for larger and more effective action? How are power relations mediated across agencies and actors as participatory practice moves to larger scale? What are the interrelationships of the uses of participatory research for social, institutional and individual change?

### Power as Knowledge

Power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. A starting point for situating our analysis of power

and knowledge in participatory research is to map out some of the different ways in which power is conceptualized and their implications for research. In doing so, we draw on Gaventa's (1980) earlier work on quiescence and rebellion among mining communities in rural Appalachia. We take as our starting point the three dimensions of power elaborated by Lukes (1974) and built upon in Gaventa's analysis.<sup>1</sup> Adding a fourth dimension, the relational view of power emerging from the work of Foucault (1977, 1979) and his followers, we explore questions of power, knowledge and participation.

Lukes (1974) begins his argument by challenging the traditional view in which power is understood as a relationship of 'A over B': that is, power is the ability of A (the relatively powerful person or agency) to get B (the relatively powerless person or agency) to do what B might not otherwise do (Dahl, 1969). In this approach, power is understood as a product of conflicts between actors to determine who wins and who loses on key, clearly recognized issues, in a relatively open system in which there are established decision-making arenas. If certain voices are absent in the debate, their non-participation is interpreted as their own apathy or inefficacy, not as a process of exclusion from the political process.

Within this first dimension of power, knowledge or research may be conceived as resources to be mobilized to influence public debates. Practically, with this view, approaches to policy influence, knowledge and action relate largely to countering expertise with other expertise. The assumption is that 'better' (objective, rational, highly credible) knowledge will have greater influence. Expertise often takes the form of policy analysis or advocacy, both of which involve speaking 'for' others, based not on lived experience of a given problem, but on a study of it that claims to be 'objective'. Little attention is paid in this view to those whose voices or whose knowledge were not represented in the decision-making process, nor on how forms of power affected the ways in which certain problems come to be framed.

This pluralist vision of an open society, in which power is exercised through informed debate among

competing interests, continues to affect many of our understandings of how power affects policy. However, this view has been widely challenged. Political scientists such as Bachrach and Baratz (1970) put forward a second understanding of power. They argued that the hidden face of power was not about who won and who lost on key issues, but was also about keeping issues and actors from getting to the table in the first place. Drawing upon the work of Schattschneider, they argued that political organizations 'develop a mobilization of bias . . . in favor of the exploitation of certain kinds of conflict and the suppression of others . . . Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out' (Schattschneider, 1960: 71). The study of politics, Bachrach and Baratz argued, must focus 'both on who gets what, when and how and who gets left out and how' (1970: 105).

In this view knowledge, and the processes of its production, contribute very strongly to the mobilization of bias. Scientific rules are used to declare the knowledge of some groups more valid than others, for example 'experts' over 'lay people', etc. Asymmetries and inequalities in research funding mean that certain issues and certain groups receive more attention than others; clearly established 'methods' or rules of the game can be used to allow some voices to enter the process and to discredit the legitimacy of others.

From the second dimensional view, empowerment through knowledge means not only challenging expertise with expertise, but it means expanding who participates in the knowledge production process in the first place. It involves a concern with mobilization, or action, to overcome the prevailing mobilization of bias (see Gaventa, 1993). When the process is opened to include new voices, and new perspectives, the assumption is that policy deliberations will be more democratic, and less skewed by the resources and knowledge of the more powerful.

While the second dimension of power contributed to our understanding of the ways in which power operates to prevent grievances from entering the political arenas, it maintained the idea that the exercise of power must involve conflict between the powerful and the powerless over clearly recognized grievances. This approach was then challenged by others such as Steven Lukes who suggested that perhaps 'the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place' (1974: 24). The powerful may do so not only by influencing who acts upon recognized grievances, but also through influencing consciousness and awareness of such grievances in the first place.

In this approach, the control of knowledge as a way of influencing consciousness is critical to the exercise of power. Knowledge mechanisms such as socialization, education, media, secrecy, information control, and the shaping of political beliefs and

ideologies, all become important to the understanding of power and how it operates. In this approach, power begins to resemble Gramscian notions of 'hegemony' (Entwistle, 1979) or Freirean ideas (1981) of the ways in which knowledge is internalized to develop a 'culture of silence' of the oppressed.

Countering power involves using and producing knowledge in a way that affects popular awareness and consciousness of the issues which affect their lives, a purpose that has often been put forward by advocates of participatory research. Here the discussions of research and knowledge become those involving strategies of awareness building, liberating education, promotion of a critical consciousness, overcoming internalized oppressions, and developing indigenous or popular knowledge. There are countless examples of how the transformation of consciousness has contributed to social mobilization, be they in the civil rights, women's, environmental or other movements. And, there are a number of intellectual traditions which may contribute to our understanding in this area. Increasingly, for instance, new social movement theory recognizes the importance of consciousness by raising such issues as the development of collective identity, and of the constructions of meaning and of culture in galvanizing citizen action (Morris, 1984; Mueller, 1992).

Each of these approaches to power carry with them implicit or more explicit conceptions of knowledge, and how it relates to power, as well as to strategies of empowerment. In the first view, knowledge is a resource, used and mobilized to inform decision-making on key public issues – issues of who produces knowledge, or its impact on the awareness and capacity of the powerless are less important. In the second view, the powerful use control over the production of knowledge as a way of setting the public agenda, and for including or excluding certain voices and participants in action upon it. In response, mobilization of the relatively powerless to act upon their grievances and to participate in public affairs becomes the strategy – one in which action research is an important tool. In the third dimension, the emphasis is more upon the ways in which production of knowledge shapes consciousness of the agenda in the first place, and participation in knowledge production becomes a method for building greater awareness and more authentic self-consciousness of one's issues and capacities for action.

#### *Beyond the three dimensional view*

While over the years this three dimensional framework has provided a useful way of understanding power and knowledge in research, it has also been critiqued from a number of differing perspectives. For some, the approach is limited in its understanding of power as a 'power over' relationship – whereas in fact power can be seen as a more positive attribute

as well, as in the power to act. And, in some cases power is seen as an attribute growing from within oneself, not something which is limited by others. This 'power within' is shaped by one's identity and self-conception of agency, as well as by outside forces held by 'the Other' (Kabeer, 1994; Nelson and Wright, 1995; Rowlands, 1995).

All three dimensions of power focus on the repressive side of power, and conceptualize power as a resource that individuals gain, hold and wield. Building on work by Foucault, others have come to see power more as productive and relational. In this view, power becomes 'a multiplicity of force relations' (Foucault, 1979: 92) that constitute social relationships; it exists only through action and is immanent in all spheres, rather than being exerted by one individual or group over another. For Foucault, power works through discourses, institutions and practices that are productive of power effects, framing the boundaries of possibility that govern action. Knowledge is power: 'power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (1977: 27).

Foucault's analysis of the micro-practices of power shows how the effects of knowledge/power create particular kinds of subjects, who are subjugated through 'regimes of truth' that provide a means of policing the boundaries around the categories that knowledge defines. By placing the power effects of knowledge at the heart of his analysis, Foucault opens up a perspective on power that has often been misinterpreted as unduly negative. Rather, by showing how knowledge/power produces and sustains inequalities, Foucault affirms 'the right . . . to rediscover what one is and all that one can be' (1979: 145).

Recent work by Hayward draws on Foucault to argue for 'de-facing power' by reconceptualizing it as 'a network of social boundaries that constrain and enable action for all actors' (1998: 2).<sup>2</sup> She argues that freedom is the capacity to act on these boundaries 'to participate effectively in shaping the boundaries that define for them the field of what is possible' (1998: 12). This has a number of important implications for thinking about power and knowledge in participatory research. First, it shifts the analysis of power only from resources that 'A' holds or uses, to include other broader ways in which spheres of action and possibility are delimited. If power is shaped by discourse, then questions of how discourses are formed, and how they shape the fields of action, become critical for changing and affecting power relations.

Secondly, this approach recognizes that no human relationship is exempt from a power component. In so far as power affects the field of what is possible, then power affects both the relatively powerful and

the relatively powerless. From this perspective, power involves 'any relationship involving two or more actors positioned such that one can act within or upon power's mechanisms to shape the field of action of the other' (Hayward, 1998: 15). Power can exist in the micro-politics of the relationship of the researcher to the researched, as well as in broader social and political relationships; power affects actors at every level of organizational and institutional relationships, not just those who are excluded or at the bottom of such relationships.

Finally, this broader approach to power includes the more positive aspects through which power enables action, as well as how it delimits it. Power in this sense may not be a zero-sum relationship, in which for B to acquire power may mean the necessity of A giving up some of it. Rather, if power is the capacity to act upon boundaries that affect one's life, to broaden those boundaries does not always mean to de-limit those of others. In this sense power may have a synergistic element, such that action by some enables more action by others. Challenging the boundaries of the possible may in some cases mean that those with relatively less power, working collaboratively with others, have more, while in other cases it may direct conflict between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless.

### Knowledge as Power

If, in this expanded view, freedom 'is the capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible' (Hayward, 1998: 21), then we can also more clearly situate knowledge as one resource in the power field. Knowledge, as much as any resource, determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom. Through access to knowledge, and participation in its production, use and dissemination, actors can affect the boundaries and indeed the conceptualization of the possible. In some situations, the asymmetrical control of knowledge productions of others can severely limit the possibilities which can be either imagined or acted upon; in other situations, agency in the process of knowledge production, or co-production with others, can broaden these boundaries enormously.

Throughout the literature on participatory action research, we find various theories and approaches which to some degree or another are premised upon the claim that democratic participation in knowledge production can expand the boundaries of human action. However, writers do not fall neatly into certain mutually exclusive categories, and there are great variations even within the schools. Increasingly, as was seen in the 'Convergence' conference in Cartagena in 1997, the schools and approaches are changing and overlapping with one another (Fals Borda, 1998).

Below we illustrate and explore some commonalities and differences that draw especially (but not exclusively) from the approaches which have influenced our thinking the most. These are those associated with the Freirean tradition of participatory action research, and those associated with more recent work around participatory rural appraisal, an approach which has spread very quickly in the 1990s with an enormous impact on development thinking and practice.<sup>3</sup>

### *The nature and locations of power*

For those early writers on participatory action research (PAR), power is understood as relation of domination in which the control of knowledge and its production was as important as material and other social relations. As Rahman put it:

The dominant view of social transformation has been preoccupied with the need for changing the oppressive structures of relations in material production – certainly a necessary task. But, and this is the distinctive viewpoint of PR (Participatory Action-Research), domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over means of material production, but also over the means of knowledge production, including control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge. Irrespective of which of these two polarizations set off a process of domination, one reinforces the other in augmenting and perpetuating this process. (1991: 4)

The knowledge that affects people's lives is seen as being in the hands of a 'monopoly' of expert knowledge producers, who exercise *power over* others through their expertise. The role of participatory action research is to empower people through the construction of their own knowledge, in a process of action and reflection, or 'conscientization', to use Freire's term. Such action against power over relations implies conflict in which the power of the dominant classes is challenged, as the relatively powerless begin to develop their new awareness of their reality, and to act for themselves (Selener, 1997: 23).

While in this earlier view of PAR, power is located in broad social and political relations, later work by Chambers, more often associated with PRA, puts more emphasis on domination in personal and interpersonal terms. Starting with a focus on 'hierarchies of power and weakness, of dominance and subordination' (1997: 58), Chambers outlines two categories: 'uppers', who occupy positions of dominance, and 'lowers', who reside in positions of subordination or weakness. In his account of 'uppers' and 'lowers', power is less fixed in persons than in the positions they inhabit *vis-à-vis* others: people can occupy more than one position as 'upper', and may occupy both 'upper' and 'lower' positions

depending on context. This relational portrayal of power relations mirrors Foucault's view of power as residing not in individuals, but in the positions that they occupy and the ways in which discourses make these positions available to them.

Chambers's description of the ways in which what he describes as 'normal professionalism' creates and reproduces power relations can equally be read through a Foucauldian lens. By circumscribing the boundaries of what is knowable, Chambers argues, professionals replicate hierarchies of knowledge and power that place them in the position of agents who know better, and to whom decisions over action, and action itself, should fall. His description of the ways in which professionals impose their 'realities' on 'lowers', with power effects that obliterate or devalue the knowledge and experience of 'lowers', resonates with Foucault's (1977) account of the ways in which 'regimes of truth' are sustained through discourses, institutions and practices.

Departing from a 'power over' perspective, PRA is characterized as a means through which a zero-sum conceptualization of power can be transcended: 'lowers' speak, analyse and act, in concert with each other and with newly sympathetic and enabling professionals who have become aware of the power effects of their positions as 'uppers'. Through analysis and action, 'lowers' are able to lay claim to their own distinctive versions and visions, acquiring the 'power to' and 'power within' that restores their agency as active subjects. By listening and learning, 'uppers' shed the mantle of dominance:

From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift from convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning. They seek out the poorer and weaker, bring them together, and enable them to conduct their own appraisal and analysis, and take their own action. The dominant uppers 'hand over the stick', sit down, listen, and themselves learn. (Chambers, 1995: 34)

While offering an optimistic view of the possibilities of individual change, this view has also been critiqued for failing to analyse broader sources of oppression (e.g., Crawley, 1998). At the same time, those involved with PAR have also been critiqued for offering a broad analysis of social power relations, without clear starting points for change at the micro and personal level. (Many of those involved in organizational action research might also emphasize an intermediate level, which examines power in the organization and group, as a mediating level between individual power and broader social relationships.)

Part of the difference in views here is found in the level of analysis. Rather than thinking about these approaches as necessarily competing, it is perhaps more useful to think of them of as complementary, each with a differing starting point in addressing mutually re-enforcing levels of power. In his com-

parative work on PAR, 'co-operative inquiry' and 'action inquiry', Reason also points to the necessary interlinkages of each of these levels and approaches. 'One might say that PAR serves the community, cooperative inquiry the group, and action inquiry the individual practitioner. But this is clearly a gross oversimplification, because each of the triad are dependent upon the others' (Reason, 1994: 336). If freedom, as defined earlier, is the capacity to address the boundaries of possibility which are drawn in multiple ways and relationships, then surely the multiple levels of change are each important.

#### *Power and the nature of knowledge*

While differing approaches to action research may have differing understandings of the location of power, they all share an epistemological critique about the ways in which power is embedded and reinforced in the dominant (i.e. positivist) knowledge production system. The critique here is several-fold. First, there is the argument that the positivist method itself distorts reality, by distancing those who study reality (the expert) from those who experience it through their own lived, subjectivity (Gaventa, 1993). Second is the argument that traditional methods of research – especially surveys and questionnaires – may reinforce passivity of powerless groups, through making them the objects of another's inquiry, rather than subjects of their own. Moreover, empirical, quantitative forms of knowing may reduce the complexity of human experience in a way that denies its very meaning, or which reinforces the status quo by focusing on what is, rather than on historical processes of change. Third is the critique that in so far as 'legitimate' knowledge relies largely within the hands of privileged experts, dominant knowledge obscures or under-privileges other forms of knowing, and the voices of other knowers.

Against this epistemological critique, participatory action research attempts to put forth a different form of knowledge. On the one hand, such research argues that those who are directly affected by the research problem at hand must participate in the research process, thus democratizing or recovering the power of experts. Secondly, participatory action research recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed and embedded, and therefore research approaches that 'allow for social, group or collective analysis of life experiences of power and knowledge are most appropriate' (Hall, 1992: 22).

Thirdly, participatory action research recognizes differing forms of knowing (see Park, Lincoln and the Introduction in this volume), and that feeling and action are as important as cognition and rationality in the knowledge creation process. While participatory research often starts with the importance of indigenous or popular knowledge (Selener, 1997: 25), such knowledge is deepened through a dia-

lectical process of people acting, with others, upon reality in order both to change and to understand it.

Resonating with the feminist critique of objectivity (see Harding, 1986; Maguire, Chapter 5; Treleaven, Chapter 24), writing on participatory research emphasizes the importance of listening to and for different versions and voices. 'Truths' become products of a process in which people come together to share experiences through a dynamic process of action, reflection and collective investigation. At the same time, they remain firmly rooted in participants' own conceptual worlds and in the interactions between them.

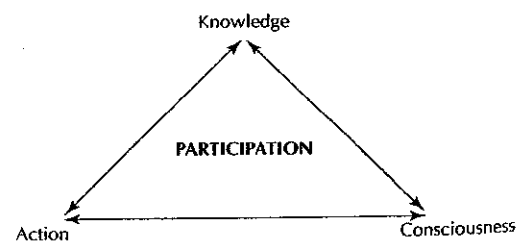
#### **Knowledge, Social Change and Empowerment**

While there is thus a certain amount of commonality in the various approaches in terms of their critique of positivist knowledge, and the liberating possibilities of a different approach to knowledge production, there are important differences across views as to what about participatory research actually contributes to the process of change. That is, what is it in participatory research that is empowering?

In our earlier analysis of three approaches to power, we saw that each carried with it a distinctive approach to knowledge, and how it affects power relations. Participatory research makes claims to challenge power relations in each of its dimensions through addressing the need for:

- knowledge – as a resource which affects decisions;
- action – which looks at who is involved in the production of such knowledge; and
- consciousness – which looks at how the production of knowledge changes the awareness or worldview of those involved.

However, in much of the literature, and indeed in the practical politics of participatory research, processes of empowerment, or of overcoming unequal power relations, tend to emphasize one or the other of the above approaches. To do so, as we shall discuss below, is limiting, for it fails to understand how each dimension of change is in fact related to the other, as Figure 6.1 illustrates.



**Figure 6.1** Dimensions of participatory research

*Participatory research as an alternative form of knowledge*

Undeniably one of the most important contributions of participatory action research to empowerment and social change is in fact in the knowledge dimension. Through a more open and democratic process new categories of knowledge, based on local realities, are framed and given voice. As Nelson and Wright suggest, based on an analysis of PRA approaches, the change process here involves 'an ability to recognize the expertise of local farmers as against that of professional experts; to find more empowering ways of communicating with local experts; and to develop decision-making procedures which respond to ideas from below, rather than imposing policies and projects from above' (1995: 57).

Similarly, Chambers (1997) argues for the importance of participatory processes as a way of bringing into view poor people's realities as a basis for action and decision-making in development, rather than those of the 'uppers' or development experts. A number of case studies of participatory research have clearly demonstrated how involving new participants in the research process brings forth new insights, priorities and definitions of problems and issues to be addressed in the change process (see, for example, case studies in Park et al., 1993 and others in this volume).

The importance of using participatory methods to surface more democratic and inclusive forms of knowledge, as a basis of decision-making, cannot be denied. At the same time, by itself, this approach to using participatory research for altering the boundaries of knowledge is fraught with challenges for several reasons. First, there is the danger that knowledge which is at first blush perceived to be more 'participatory', because it came from 'the community' or the 'people' rather than the professional researcher, may in fact serve to disguise or minimize other axes of difference (see critiques by Maguire, 1987, 1996 on PAR; Guijt and Shah, 1998 on PRA). In the general focus on the 'community', an emphasis on consensus becomes pervasive. Yet consensus can all too easily masquerade as common vision and purpose, blotting out difference and with it the possibility of more pluralist and equitable solutions (Mouffe, 1992). By reifying local knowledge and treating it as singular (Cornwall, Guijt and Welbourn, 1993), the possibility is rarely acknowledged that what is expressed as 'their knowledge' may simply replicate dominant discourses, rather than challenge them. Little attention is generally given to the positionality of those who participate, and what this might mean in terms of the versions they present. Great care must be taken not to replace one set of dominant voices with another – all in the name of participation.

Moreover, even where differing people and groups are involved, there is the question of the extent to

which the voices are authentic. As we know from the work by Freire (1970), Scott (1986, 1990) and others on consciousness, relatively powerless groups may simply speak in a way that 'echoes' the voices of the powerful, either as a conscious way of appearing to comply with the more powerful parties' wishes, or as a result of the internalization of dominant views and values. In either case, participatory research implies the necessity for further investigation of reality, in order to change it, not simply to reflect the reality of the moment. Treating situated representations as if they were empirical facts maintains the dislocation of knowledge from the agents and contexts of its production in a way that is, in fact, still characteristic of positivism.

The dangers of using participatory processes in ways that gloss over differences among those who participate, or to mirror dominant knowledge in the name of challenging it, are not without consequence. To the extent that participatory processes can be seen to have taken place, and that the relatively powerless have had the opportunity to voice their grievances and priorities in what is portrayed as an otherwise open system, then the danger will be that existing power relations may simply be reinforced, without leading to substantive change in policies or structures which perpetuate the problems being addressed. In this sense, participation without a change in power relations may simply reinforce the status quo, simply adding to the mobilization of bias the claim to a more 'democratic' face. The illusion of inclusion means not only that what emerges is treated as if it represents what 'the people' really want, but also that it gains a moral authority that becomes hard to challenge or question.

*Participatory research as popular action*

For this reason, to fulfil its liberating potential, participatory research must also address the second aspect of power, through encouraging mobilization and action over time in a way that reinforces the alternative forms and categories of knowledge which might not have been produced.

Though the action component of the participatory action research process is developed in all schools, it has particular prominence in the work of Lewin, and those organizational action researchers who have followed in his tradition. Action research focuses first on problem-solving, and more secondarily on the knowledge generated from the process. The emphasis of the process is not knowledge for knowledge sake, but knowledge which will lead to improvement, usually, for the action researcher, taken to mean in terms of organizational improvement or for the solution of practical problems.

At the same time, while knowledge is not for its own sake, neither is action; rather, the process is an iterative one. Through action, knowledge is created,

and analyses of that knowledge may lead to new forms of action. By involving people in gathering information, knowledge production itself may become a form of mobilization; new solutions or actions are identified, tested and then tried again. Thus, in action research, knowledge must be embedded in cycles of action-reflection – action over time (Rahman, 1991). It is through such a process that the nature of action can be deepened, moving from practical problem-solving to more fundamental social transformation (Hall, 1981: 12). The ultimate goal of research in this perspective is not simply to communicate new voices or categories, but

the radical transformation of social reality and improvement in the lives of the people involved . . . Solutions are viewed as processes through which subjects become social actors, participation, by means of grassroots mobilizations, in actions intended to transform society. (Selener, 1997: 19–21).

#### *Participatory research as awareness building*

Just as expressing voice through consultation may risk the expression of voice-as-echo, so too action itself may represent blind action, rather than action which is informed by self-conscious awareness and analysis of one's own reality. For this reason, the third key element of participatory action research sees research as a process of reflection, learning and development of critical consciousness. Just as PRA has put a great deal of attention on the 'knowledge' bit of the equation, and action research on the action component, PAR, which grew from pedagogical work of Freire and other adult educators, placed perhaps the greatest emphasis on the value of the social learning that can occur by oppressed groups through the investigation process.

Here again, however, it is important to recognize that reflection itself is embedded in praxis, not separate from it. Through action upon reality, and analyses of that learning, awareness of the nature of problems, and the sources of oppression, may also change. For this reason, participatory research which becomes only 'consultation' with excluded groups at one point in time is limited, for it prevents the possibility that investigation and action over time may lead to a change in the knowledge of people themselves, and therefore a change in understanding of one's own interests and priorities. Not only must production of alternative knowledge be complemented by action upon it, but the participants in the knowledge process must equally find spaces for self-critical investigation and analysis of their own reality, in order to gain more authentic knowledge as a basis for action or representation to others. Such critical self-learning is important not only for the weak and powerless, but also for the more powerful actors who

may themselves be trapped in received versions of their own situation. For this reason, we need to understand both the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 1970) and the 'pedagogy of the oppressor', and the relation between the two.

The important point is to recognize that the approaches are synergistic pieces of the same puzzle. From this perspective, what is empowering about participatory research is the extent to which it is able to link the three, to create more democratic forms of knowledge, through action and mobilization of relatively powerless groups on their own affairs, in a way that also involves their own critical reflection and learning.

#### **The New Context: from Margins to Mainstream and from Micro to Macro**

In much of the literature on action research in the past, the assumption has been that this process of participatory action research was used primarily at the micro level, and often with or on behalf of relatively marginalized groups. Participatory action research was often associated with social movements, various forms of participatory rural appraisal with local planning and development projects, and forms of action research with organizational change. As we have seen, the links between knowledge, power and empowerment are complex and difficult, even at these levels.

During the 1990s, however, participatory research has faced a new challenge. Rather than being used only at the micro level, it has been scaled up and incorporated in projects or programmes working at regional, national or even global levels. Rather than being used by social movements or marginalized groups, its rhetoric and practice have been adopted by large and powerful institutions, including governments, development agencies, universities and multinationals.<sup>4</sup>

There are many examples. One is the 'Consultations with the Poor' project, commissioned by the World Bank in 1999, in preparation for the World Development Report on Poverty 2000/2001. This study used participatory research methods (mainly based on earlier experiences of participatory poverty assessments), to gain views from poor people about their priorities and concerns. Over 20,000 people were involved in the consultation process, in 23 countries. This represented the first time the World Bank had sought a report based on hearing from 'popular' voices, rather than on analysis by its in-house experts.<sup>5</sup> Now, the World Bank and the IMF are even beginning to use participation as a new 'conditionality'. In order to receive debt relief under the new Highly Indebted Poor Countries programme, representing a key success of the global Jubilee 2000 Campaign, national governments will have to demonstrate not only that the funds will go towards

poverty alleviation, but also that the poverty plan is 'participatory' in its approach.

In a number of countries, similar processes have been used for some time at the national level. In Uganda, for instance, a national Participatory Poverty Assessment Process involving government officials, NGOs and local communities is using participatory research approaches to gain information about the expressed priorities and needs of poor people, as well as for local action planning at the district level. The process represents the latest generation of Participatory Poverty Assessments (Holland, with Blackburn, 1998; Robb, 1999), which have now been used in a number of countries by governments and international agencies to ascertain the needs and priorities of poor people. A number of national governments have also begun to institutionalize participatory processes in various sectoral programmes. In Indonesia, for instance, building upon the success of farmer-to-farmer schools for integrated pest management approaches, the government has now made these approaches mandatory across the country. Similarly, in India, participatory methods of assessment have been required in the national watershed programme, requiring huge challenges of training to go effectively to scale (Blackburn, with Holland, 1998).

There are changes at the local level as well. In a number of countries such as India, the Philippines and Bolivia new local government legislation institutionalizes processes of participatory action planning, and of participatory monitoring through local vigilance committees. In other countries, such as the USA and the UK, processes for direct consultation, such as citizens' juries, are seen as new forms of direct democracy, supplementing past forms of representative democracy (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999).

These and other examples raise new challenges for participatory action research and questions of power. How do we understand the dynamics of power when participatory methods are employed by the powerful? What happens when participatory research becomes incorporated as 'policy'? Whose voices are raised and whose are heard? And how are these voices mediated as issues of representation become more complex with the use of participatory methods in larger-scale planning and consultation exercises?

Here there are at least two possible positions, each of which has its proponents. On the one hand, there are those who argue that such adoption of participatory processes from above represents co-optation of its core concept and principles. And, the evidence is abundant that even if this is not the intent, the problems associated with rapidly taking participatory approaches to scale are abundant. Flexible approaches give way to blueprints; participation has been rushed and superficial; methods and techniques have been overly stressed, rather than the purposes for which they are used, or the behaviours and

attitudes which must also be present; hopes are raised, and follow-up has often been weak. The rapidly developing misuse and abuse of participatory approaches has raised serious questions of quality, and of the ethics of what constitutes good practice (see Chambers, 1998a: 12).

On the other hand, there is the argument that under such conditions new policies and programmes for participatory approaches create opportunities for change, and at a much more far-reaching and significant level than could be reached through local, micro action alone. Even if there are cases of misuse, the hope is that large-scale programmes create 'spaces' which can legitimate local action, through which relatively powerless groups can find new voice and gain capacity and leverage resources for more effective change. As Chambers writes, for instance,

These conditions present huge opportunities. Bad practice is an opportunity to improve. Scale is an opportunity to have widespread impact. Potentials are not just for local level participation, but for changes at three levels: policy, institutional and personal. (1998b: 113)

The fact is that we know relatively little about what happens when participatory approaches are adopted on a large scale, or about the degree to which they are used to co-opt resistance and reinforce existing power relations, or the degree to which they provide new spaces and opportunities that strengthen change from below. At the Institute of Development Studies, several exploratory studies are beginning to pursue this question. While the answers are not yet fully conclusive, we can begin to suggest certain enabling factors which will help to maximize the change potential for participatory processes. Early lessons include:

- *The importance of organizational and institutional change:* Scaling-up of participatory approaches must mean more than simply adding a new set of tools and methods to existing institutions, which themselves may be hierarchical, inflexible and non-participatory. As those working with action research in organizations have perhaps realized for some time, effective promotion and use of participatory methods at the 'grassroots' by large organizations means changing the organizations themselves – addressing issues of organizational culture, procedure, incentives and learning. While in the past much attention has been paid to strengthening the capacity of local organizations and grassroots actors to conduct participatory research, the mainstreaming of the participation debate recognizes a 'second generation' agenda – that is how to build the capacity for institutional change at all levels (Tandon and Cordeiro, 1998). Such organizational change is most effective when there are high-level 'participation champions' who will support the process, who encourage middle



managers to take risks and behave differently, who can interpret the new way of working for others.

- *The importance of personal attitudes and behaviour change:* Closely related to the importance of organizational change is the importance of personal attitude and behaviour change. While this may appear self-evident to those who have long used participatory methods for personal reflection and change, when participatory methods are adopted on a large scale, there is still a tendency to drift towards their use in a rote, checklist manner, even if they are used in arrogant or culturally insensitive ways. Approaches to training and dissemination must be found which also focus on changing personal values, ethics and commitments by those who are using the tools, again at all levels.
- *Taking time to go slow:* There is tendency when participatory approaches are adopted on a large scale to rush them into place quickly. Targets are adopted. Mass training must be done. Funds must be dispersed. The risk of course is that the bureaucratic needs will drive the process rather than allowing a slower more deliberate participatory process to take its course. Those programmes which have gone to scale most effectively, in fact, have done so horizontally – rather than vertically. That is, they have included processes of peer-to-peer sharing, of building demonstration projects which then spread to other areas, and of including time for learning, testing and continuous improvement in the process.
- *Links to social movements and local capacity:* Even if openings for change are created from above, such spaces must be filled by simultaneous movements and actions from below which can occupy the new spaces with different voices. Otherwise, there is always the danger that these openings for participation will simply mirror the status quo, and serve to strengthen and reinforce more dominant voices at every level. Filling such spaces 'from below' requires local capacity – organizations which are already empowered and aware, and who have the ability to use the new legitimacy that participatory policies can offer to challenge the status quo, to negotiate and to sustain their involvement over time. Where there are social movements in place which have helped to 'conscientize' and mobilize local voices, this is more likely to occur. Where there is no prior organizational and mobilization experience of those 'at the bottom', it is unlikely that these new public spaces will be filled, though the new opportunities may help to stimulate and catalyse new local demands.
- *Creating vertical alliances and networks:* If a prior level of social capital is important for encouraging local groups to mobilize and to occupy political spaces created above, so too is there a need for new forms of trust and collaboration across levels of

power. By definition, large-scale change must happen at multiple levels – changing global actors will not be done by the villagers, nor will village-level change be created by a staff person in a global organization. But change at both levels is important, for large-scale and meaningful change to occur. Such change processes can best be aligned, to create new synergies with one another, to the extent that actors at differing levels learn to engage critically across power differences. For this to happen, mediating organizations, processes and networks that vertically cut across hierarchies are critical – but so too are processes of meaningful representation and voice from one level to the other. While large-scale consultation processes begin to make this possible, transparency of how differing voices are being mediated, and by whom, must be present.

- *The importance of monitoring for quality and accountability:* Finally, it is clear that to do participatory research on a large scale also means constantly monitoring and holding to account the nature and degree of participation which is occurring. This argues for the need to evolve new concepts of validity in participatory research, ones which measure the quality of participation, as well as the quality of knowledge. This implies a new understanding of participatory research ethics – that goes beyond traditional ethical concerns regarding such things as confidentiality and protection of research subjects, to ask questions about who participates in and benefits from research processes, how information is used and by whom, and how the process transforms or supports power relations. How to evolve such quality standards, and how to use them to hold differing actors and institutions to account, represents one of the most important challenges facing participatory research today.

Such approaches to large-scale change begin to recognize, with Hayward and others, that power relations occur at every level and sphere, affecting the powerful as well as the powerless. Rather than seeing participatory research as only a tool for mobilizing the powerless against the powerful, this approach takes a more nuanced view, to explore how participatory methods can facilitate change at multiple levels, among multiple actors. Such an approach is not to wish away conflict – for conflict of interests and views will also be present within and between levels – but it is to suggest that to change the boundaries of the possible, especially in a highly globalized world in which actors and issues are so interrelated, means to bring about change in multiple spaces and arenas, and to link those processes of change through new and accountable forms of interconnection. This approach also argues that the potential for large-scale change through participatory research is determined as much by the quality of the

relationships of one set of actors to another, and the extent to which they each address power relations, as by the capacity or strength of any one set of actors in the process.

Ultimately, developing and using new forms of participatory knowledge on a large scale is a question of promoting and creating new forms of participatory democracy, in which ordinary citizens use their knowledge and experience to construct a more just and equitable society. In a time in which inequality between the rich and the poor is greater than ever before, in which globalization threatens even the limited democracy of nation states, the challenges of going to broader scale with participatory research are enormous, but so also are the risks of failing to do so.

### Notes

Our thanks to Kate Hamilton and Mel Speight for research assistance on this chapter.

1 This section draws heavily on Gaventa (1999).

2 Among the most interesting recent empirical studies of power we have seen, the study is based upon her dissertation on power in the schools in New Haven (Hayward, 1999). It is forthcoming as a book by Yale University Press.

3 PRA evolved through innovation and application in the South in the late 1980s and early 1990s, influenced by Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), applied anthropology, participatory action research, feminist research and agroecosystems analysis (Chambers, 1992; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Core methodological principles include iterative, group-based, learning and analysis, the use of visualization methods to broaden the inclusiveness of the process and enable people to represent their knowledge using their own categories and concepts, and an explicit concern with the quality of interaction, including a stress on personal values, attitudes and behaviour.

4 For reviews of some of these experiences of scaling up, see Blackburn, Chambers and Gaventa (1999), Gaventa (1998) and Chambers (1998b).

5 Further information on this project can be found on the World Bank web page at <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty/conspoor/index.htm>

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