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Challenges for participatory action research and indigenous knowledge in Africa

Summary

Participatory action research represents the convergence of two intellectual and practical traditions, that of action research and participatory research. Although participatory action research is by no means uncontentious, it has become a familiar term to social research practitioners. However, in recent years critiques of Western epistemologies by sociologists of knowledge, feminists, post-colonialists and postmodern scholars present challenges for participatory action research in Africa. This article critically examines epistemologies that support and underpin participatory action research. It particularly interrogates the dominance of Western epistemologies in supporting models of participatory action research used in Africa and elsewhere, and explores spaces for indigenous epistemologies and Western epistemologies to be performed together within participatory action research processes.

Uitdagings vir deelnemende aksienavorsing en inheemse kennis in Afrika

Deelnemende aksienavorsing verteenwoordig die konvergensie van twee intellektuele en praktiese tradisies, aksienavorsing en deelnemende navorsing. Alhoewel deelnemende aksienavorsing nie onbetwisbaar is nie, is dit 'n bekende konsep in die sosiale wetenskappe. Hedendaagse kritiek teen Westerse epistemologië deur sosioloë van kennis, feministe, postkolonialiste en postmoderne kundiges bied uitdagings vir deelnemende aksienavorsing in Afrika. Hierdie artikel verken die epistemologië wat deelnemende aksienavorsing ondersteun krities. Dit lewer veral kritiek op die oorheersing van Westerse epistemologië in die ondersteuning van deelnemende aksienavorsingsmodelle wat in Afrika en ander plekke gebruik word. Die artikel ondersoek ook ruimtes vir inheemse epistemologië en Westerse epistemologië om saam, binne deelnemende aksienavorsingsprosesse, beoefen te word.

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This article presents normative arguments for ways in which indigenous epistemologies and Western epistemologies might be able to work together within participatory action research processes.[1] It addresses three challenges for participatory action research processes in Africa:

- how participatory action research processes could be liberated from being dominated by Western ways of knowing
- how indigenous ways of knowing might be adopted in participatory action research processes
- what might serve as a conceptual framework for western epistemologies and indigenous knowledges to be performed together within participatory action research processes.

At the outset the author wishes to point out that he is aware of the problematic use of the term "Western". By referring to Western epistemology one may be accused of "othering", or defining "other" epistemologies negatively as non-Western. However, since there appears not to be an alternative term for referring to the Eurocentrism entrenched in Western epistemologies, it shall be used in this article. The use of the term Western epistemology must be understood "as always in 'scare' quotation marks, that is, as a social construct of Eurocentrism" (Harding 1993: 20). Perhaps the use of the term indigenous may also be problematic. The term indigenous is used because it appears that there might not be a more suitable alternative.

Participatory action research represents a convergence of two traditions, action research and participatory research. This implies that participatory research and action research have distinctive origins. According to Bhana (1999: 228) participatory research (PR) has its origins in the fields of education and community development whereas action research (AR) arose out of a need to change the way industrial companies and other organisations were managed. Their distinctive origins might account for minor differences between the

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two approaches to research. However, Bhana (1999: 228) asserts that the differences between the two approaches have become inconsequential, and that current usage favours the term participatory action research (PAR) for any kind of research which incorporates action and/or participation. In this article participatory action research is therefore used as an inclusive term for both approaches.

But, what distinguishes participatory action research from other forms of inquiry? Schwandt (1997: 112) identifies three characteristics that appear to distinguish participatory action research from other forms of social inquiry: its participatory character, its democratic impulse, and its aim to produce knowledge that is both useful and action-oriented. The participatory character refers to relations of cooperation, mutuality and reciprocity between the researcher(s) and other participants. Participants are involved directly and as equitably as possible in all dimensions of the research process (for example, identifying issues to be addressed; production and analysis of data; development and dissemination of research reports). Concerning the second characteristic, participatory action research should be viewed not as a recipe for democratic change but rather a process that embodies democratic principles. Concerning the third feature, research participants are encouraged to construct and use their own knowledge, which becomes an empowering process. The three distinctive characteristics of participatory action research place it in tension with more traditional approaches to research. In fact, participatory action research developed largely as a reaction to more traditional (positivism and interpretivism) approaches to social research and might best be located within a critical paradigm.

Critical researchers argue against the limited notions of positivist and interpretive approaches. This does not necessarily mean that they reject absolutely research conducted within these frameworks. However, in terms of assumptions, critical approaches argue that positivist and interpretive approaches are epistemologically flawed and politically conservative. Critical research challenges the objectivist epistemology (knowledge is impersonal and objective) and realist ontology (reality exists independently of our knowledge of it) of positivist science. Although critical research shares with interpretive research the view that knowledge (of reality) is socially constructed, it criti-

cises the latter approach for its emphasis on primarily understanding social reality in lieu of contributing to transforming it. It is important to note that critical approaches to research accept as "truth" that our social world is characterised by injustice, exploitation as well as political and economic domination. As Lather (1991: 11) so cogently puts it, critical research is about "what it means to do research in an unjust world". For the critical researcher the world is unjust by design, that is, it is the result of human will and intention. Also, that the social world is oppressive for many groups, particularly along the lines of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, disability and so on. Furthermore, that our social world is characterised by inequitable distribution of resources worldwide. Unlike positivist research which accepts the *status quo* or interpretive research which seeks to understand how individuals or communities experience and construct social reality, central to critical research is the ideal of changing our world to one that is more just and equitable. The research process itself thus becomes a process of change. In essence, what distinguishes critical research from more conventional ones is that it is openly ideological (it is not value neutral), socially critical, overtly political, and emancipatory in orientation (aims to liberate the participants involved in the research).

In the light of what has been discussed a pertinent issue is raised that is neglected in the various sites and discourses of participatory action research. What is referred to here is a concern about epistemological justice in that disparate epistemologies have not been equally adopted in or compared equitably within participatory action research processes. This is an important concern because Western epistemologies continue to dominate "other" ways of knowing. It is my view that debates on this issue is and will continue to become increasingly important for several reasons. Firstly, the dominance of Western ways of knowing are being challenged by among others sociologists of knowledge, feminists, post-colonialists and indigenous activists. Secondly, in the context of processes of globalisation and internationalisation currently prevalent, there is danger that indigenous knowledges could become assimilated into an imperialist archive. The concept of an imperialist archive is elaborated on in the next section of the article. Globalisation means the processes of cultural

unification, which are occurring across the planet, particularly in terms of culture and media. It also refers to unification, which is occurring, leading to larger and larger political groupings, centred on economic activity. According to Gough (2000: 335) internationalisation involves the promotion of global peace, social justice and well being through intergovernmental co-operation and transnational social movements, agencies, and communities. Thirdly, the recent optimism for an African renaissance may bring debates on indigenous knowledges into sharper focus.

1. The Western cultural archive

Smith (1999: 44) points out that Western knowledges, philosophies and definitions of human nature form what Foucault (1972:) has referred to as a cultural archive. According to her it could also be referred to as a "storehouse" of histories, artifacts, ideas, texts and/or images, which are classified, preserved, arranged and represented back to the West. Foucault has also suggested that the archive reveals "rules of practice" which the West itself may not necessarily be able to describe because it operates within the taken for granted rules (Smith 1999: 44). Hall argues that although shifts and transformations may occur within Western thinking this happens without changing the archive itself, nor the modes of classification and systems of representation contained within it, being destroyed (Smith 1999: 44). Linda Smith (1999: 44) argues that systems of classification and representation enable different traditions or fragments of traditions to be retrieved and are formulated in different contexts as discourses, and then played out in systems of power and domination, with material consequences for colonised peoples. She points out that the archive not only contains cultural artifacts, but also is itself an artifact, that is, a construct of Western culture.

With respect to social research we have seen several transformations taking place as a result of critiques of positivist research. Since the mid-1980s in particular we have seen an explosion of ideas and practices in a quest to understand social reality. Ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics and interpretive, feminist, critical and narrative inquiry are some of the terms that have been used as frames of reference for examining social reality. Lather has referred to this new

ground research as post-positivism. Post-positivist inquiry represents contemporary intellectual work within a time characterised for its disturbance of the formerly secure foundations of knowledge and understanding (Lather 1991). In addition, in the 1990s there has been proliferation of "post-" frameworks such as post-modernism, post-critical, post-paradigmatic and so on (Goodman 1992: 118). These labels used to describe non-positivist approaches to research (including participatory research) do not, however, provide space for indigenous research approaches. As Smith (1999: 167) notes

> what is significantly absent are the organic and indigenous approaches to research, which have led to the development of the world indigenous movement and to major constitutional claims on Western states by indigenous peoples.

She points out that the possibility that approaches can be generated from very different value systems and worldviews are denied even within the emancipatory paradigm of post-positivism. The point here is that even though transformations have occurred within the sites and discourses of Western research, it might have occurred without the modes of classification and systems of representation changing. Participatory action research emerged as the consequence of challenges to the dominance of positivist science. However, in itself it remains a Western model of research and essentially uses Western methods to produce data and to validate knowledge. It arose as a consequence of reflexivity within Western thought.

With respect to indigenous peoples, their knowledges have been absorbed into the dominant (Western) cultural archive and represented in Western terms back to the West as well as to indigenous peoples themselves. As a consequence, indigenous ways of knowing have been colonised and defined negatively as non-Western and inferior. Colonisation did not only involve colonisation of land owned by indigenous peoples, but also colonisation of the minds of indigenous peoples. It is important for us to remember that Western knowledge is in itself an indigenous knowledge, which has become dominant as a result of colonialism and imperialism. It is only because of European imperialism that western knowledge has the "appearance of universal truth and rationality, and often assumed to be a form of knowledge that lacks the cultural fingerprints" (Gough 1998: 508)

that appear to be much more conspicuous in other knowledge systems. It is in this context that we need to understand critiques of Western knowledge from among others sociologists of knowledge, feminists, post-colonialists and indigenous activists. Critiques leveled against the dominance of Western knowledge have thus been raised by both Western scholars and from the perspective of the colonised. Since research concerns the production of knowledge this issue is particularly relevant here. It is at this juncture that the discussion now turns to indigenous knowledges and research.

2. Indigenous knowledge and research

According to Smith (1999: 7) "indigenous peoples" is a relatively recent term that was constructed in the 1970s out of the struggles mainly of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood. She points out that it is a term that internationalises the experiences, concerns and struggles of some of the world's colonised peoples. Recently, indigenous knowledge has gained prominence as a consequence of varied critiques of the dominance of Western ways of knowing. An increased global concern about indigenous knowledge systems is evidenced by events such as the proclamation of 1993 as the year of "indigenous peoples and repressive regimes".

A post-colonial era and the optimism about an "African renaissance" might bring debates on indigenous knowledge systems into sharper focus. In South Africa the National Research Foundation (NRF) has identified Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a priority area for research. Also, in Africa indigenous ways of knowing still reside among the majority of people. However, Serote (1999: 351) points out that although this is so it appears to be only the fallback when nothing else holds. Instead he recommends ways in which indigenous knowledge systems can play a role in the re-awakening and re-emergence of the continent (for details see Serote 1999: 351-5).

But what is meant by indigenous knowledge? Chavunduka (O'Donoghue & Janse van Rensburg 1998: 2) describes indigenous knowledge in an African context as referring to

> African history, African cultural heritage and African customs as developed in direct response to the physical and social realities in this part of the world.

O'Donoghue & Janse van Rensburg (1998: 159) point out that although the above perspective is useful, it treats indigenous knowledge as "fairly narrow ethno-historical processes, often in oppositional postures". In a recently published article Goduka (1999) explores indigenous epistemologies and also writes of them in oppositional terms to Western ways of knowing. My view is that such oppositional postures are understandable if viewed in the light of the dominance of Western epistemologies. Goduka (1999: 28) articulates an indigenous standpoint as the following:

- There is no objective basis for science; objectivity in research is neither possible nor desirable.
- Newtonian-Cartesian epistemologies grounded in Eurocentric tradition are simply one way of constructing knowledge.
- Magic, art, spirituality, science, fantasy 'dreaming', *iintsomi* — mythology, legends and superstition are alternative models of knowledge construction and transmission with equal claims and respectability.
- All reality/knowledge is constructed, deconstructed and one kind of reality/knowledge is as good as another.
- There is no standpoint or perspective that is superior to another; the literal and oral traditions simply complement each other. In addition, oral tradition serves as a legitimate method to articulate feelings and thoughts that have been repressed by the denial and rejection of subjectivities and other truths.

Challenging Western research has become part of the indigenous movement across the world. Because of negative experiences with Western researchers, who often treat indigenous peoples as specimens not human beings, many indigenous peoples have decided not to do research. However, Smith (1999: 107) asserts that recently there has been a dramatic change and increasingly indigenous peoples are showing an interest in research, particularly certain kinds of research. This might be so because of greater prominence given to indigenous knowledge systems as a result of critiques leveled against the hegemony of Western epistemologies by indigenous activist themselves and reflexive Western scholars. Part of indigenous research is to tell an alternative story, to tell the history of Western research

through the eyes of the colonised. Smith (1999: 2) argues that these counter-stories are powerful forms of resistance, which are repeated and shared across diverse indigenous communities. Indigenous research is a field that privileges indigenous concerns, practices and indigenous participation as researchers and researched. There are several projects currently being pursued by indigenous communities forming part of a complex research programme. The diverse array of projects is too numerous to mention. However, Smith, for example, identifies 25 different indigenous projects such as *story telling, indigenising, gendering* and so on (Smith 1999: 142-62 for a comprehensive account). These projects are not entirely indigenous since some arise out of social sciences methodologies and others directly out of indigenous practices. This form of inquiry might be referred to as bicultural research or partnership research whereby Western ways of knowing and indigenous ways of knowing work together.

It is important to note that the critique of Western ways of knowing is not with Western science *per se*, but rather with its dominance over other ways of knowing. Nor, is the interest here to uncritically eulogise indigenous ways of knowing. In this respect there should be an awareness of the danger of binary oppositional thinking. Binaries are however, useful for the purpose of analysis. The interest here is rather with how Western ways of knowing can be decentred so that it might be more equitably compared with other ways of knowing. The concern is also with how Western epistemologies and indigenous knowledges might work together. It is with this in mind, that the discussion now turns to David Turnbull's ideas of performativity and spatiality.

3. Exploring new spaces in participatory action research

I draw on the work of Turnbull (1997) to explore how Western knowledge traditions and African indigenous knowledge traditions might be performed together. Turnbull (1997: 552) argues that there are two major positions that one can discern concerning the status of knowledge. The first is the imperialist position. This position holds that knowledge is uniquely distinguished by virtue of its rationality

and method, that is, is universal, objective and valid within the limits of its own fallibility.

The second is a localist position. This position holds that all knowledges are situated within particular sets of values. Turnbull (1997: 552) points out that these situated knowledge position can, in turn, be divided into two key positions. First there are those who argue for the unique virtue of their particular value system such as proponents of Islamicisation of science or the "wisdom of the elders." Those who recognise the differences between knowledge systems but are also concerned with ways in which these systems can co-exist hold the second position. It is the latter view of localism that Turnbull argues for and that is pursued further in this article. Turnbull argues that few of the localist positions provide for a radical rethinking of how knowledge is produced in all cultures. He points out that generally approaches have focused on the knowledge itself which he refers to as a representationalist perspective, rather than on the processes involved in producing knowledge, that is, that scientific knowledge is a social activity. For Turnbull (1997: 553) knowledge is both performative and representational.

Turnbull (1997: 551) argues that all knowledge traditions are also spatial in that they link people, sites and skills. He suggests that from such a spatialised perspective, universality, objectivity, rationality and so on cease to be unique characteristics of scientific knowledge. Turnbull (1997: 553) writes:

> [R]ather these traits are effects of collective work of the knowledge producers in a given space. To move knowledge from the local site and moment of its production and application to other places and times, knowledge producers deploy a variety of social strategies and technical devices for creating the equivalences and connections between heterogeneous and isolated knowledges. The standardisation and homogenisation required for knowledge to be accumulated and rendered truthlike is achieved through social methods of organising the production, transmission and utilisation of knowledge. An essential component is the social organisation of trust.

Following Shapin (1994), Turnbull (1997: 553) points out that the basis of knowledge is not empirical verification, as the orthodox view would have it, but trust. He uses diverse examples such as the building of Gothic cathedrals in medieval Europe, the Polynesian co-

lonisation of the Pacific, the development of modern cartography as well as rice farming in Indonesia to demonstrate "how particular knowledge spaces can be constructed from differing social, moral and technical components in a variety of cultural and historical contexts". The important contribution Turnbull makes is that all knowledge systems have localness in common and that the difference between different knowledge traditions is based on different kinds of work involved in creating assemblages from a collection of practices, instrumentation, theories and people:

> Some traditions move it and assemble it through art, ceremony and ritual; [Western] science does it through forming disciplinary societies, building instruments, standardisation techniques and writing articles. In both cases, it is a process of knowledge assembly through making connections and negotiating equivalences between the heterogeneous components while simultaneously establishing a social order of trust and authority resulting in a knowledge space (Turnbull 1997: 553).

By viewing knowledge systems comparatively in terms of spatiality and performativity, it becomes possible for disparate knowledge traditions to coexist rather than for one to displace another. According to Turnbull (1997: 560) this would require the creation of a third space, "an interstitial space in which local knowledge traditions can be reframed, decentred by enabling all knowledge traditions to work together." In an African context such a space would mean that representiveness of knowledge, be it the "eurocentricity of western science" or the "wisdom of the elders" should be de-emphasised and the performativity of knowledge accentuated. This would enable both Western epistemologies and African indigenous knowledges to coexist. Such a perspective is essential for Africa's renewal so that African indigenous knowledges are not assimilated into an imperialist archive. This is important in a context of ever-changing and complex globalisation processes. Recognition of the performative aspect of knowledge production might ensure a future for local knowledges and the creation of multiple knowledge spaces instead of one homogenous global space.

However, it might be important for us to realise that we cannot relive pre-colonial times and it is therefore necessary to explore new ways in which educational knowledge could be produced in post-

colonial Africa. The creation of new knowledge spaces in which both Western epistemologies and African indigenous knowledges can co-exist should be central to the production of educational knowledge in Africa. As Africans we can draw inspiration from examples elsewhere, where such new knowledge spaces have been created. For example, Aborigines in Australia's Northern Territory have for many years through their own performative modes mapped their country by identifying every tree and every significant feature of their territory. Today some Aborigines are doing the same using the latest in satellites, remote sensing and Geograhical Information Systems (GIS). By representing their local knowledge on digital maps they are able to make their ways of knowing visible in Western terms — "a new knowledge space which will have transformative effects for all Australians" (Turnbull 1997: 560).

Turnbull's framework opens up possibilities for not only extending participation but also provides space for comparing and accommodating seemingly disparate knowledge traditions within participatory action research processes. Taking up the challenge of exploring such possibilities might enable the development of endogenous models of participatory action research in lieu of merely importing exogenous models. In South Africa San (bushmen) trackers are being equipped with digital devices to record animal sightings, a local example of traditional African ways of knowing, working together with sophisticated Western technologies.

4. Concluding comments

Participatory action research processes continue to be dominated by Western epistemologies and methods. A challenge for reseachers in Africa is to explore new spaces for disparate knowledge systems to work together in participatory action research processes. In this article it has been argued that Turnbull's ideas of performativity and spatiality might be key in creating new spaces for knowledge production within participatory research processes. This would require heeding the clarion call for decentring Western knowledge so that it might be more equitably compared with indigenous epistemologies, and also for research to be decolonised. This would enable African knowledges to counter the "the homogenising effects of economic

and cultural globalisation and internationalisation" (Gough 2000: 1). For those of us who refer to ourselves as indigenous or who are committed to working, through participatory research processes with indigenous people, this challenge should be taken up. It is not an easy challenge and might involve personal risk, intellectual daring and perhaps, even struggle. As Goduka's (1999: 27-8) neatly captures:

> [A]lthough I am an indigenous Xhosa scholar, versed in our traditions, in many ways I am a beginner in tuning into and drawing on indigenous educational philosophies because I have been schooled in eurocentric epistemologies. Thus living within, beside and in the face of European tradition makes opportunities for a fully indigenous, cultural, personal, social and spiritual life a daily struggle against the framework of eurocentric dominance.

Those of us who regard ourselves as Western researchers should take up the responsibility of exploring ways in which we might work together with indigenous peoples in local knowledge spaces. In Africa we are faced with the tension between universal claims of global science on the one hand and on the other the equally compelling claims to recover the African past. The latter is an important challenge as Scott (1997: 18) reminds us, "denied memories are dangerous memories".

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