

25 Relating action to activism

Theoretical and methodological reflections

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Introduction

As preceding chapters have highlighted, many examples exist of the varying ways in which Participatory Action Researchers work closely with groups to identify needs, plan action research projects, consult and then strive collectively to ‘action’ their findings. The three of us are all involved to varying degrees in such participatory activities, we would define ourselves not as just as action researchers, but also as ‘academic-activists’. Whilst much of our time is spent teaching students, marking essays, and undertaking ever-increasing administrative duties within our increasingly corporatised UK universities, we all consciously strive to bring ourselves into contact with social movement groups struggling for radical social change, and to participate with them in participatory actions and ‘research’. More than this, however, we often share the same struggles as resisting others and hence are deeply embedded in social struggles ourselves.

In this chapter we want to reflect upon the similarities and differences between ‘our way’ of doing things, and how (and why) we think it can offer some important additions to what has come to commonly be regarded as Participatory Action Research (PAR). Some academics have taken the need for what might be termed emancipatory or solidarity research seriously, particularly within our own discipline of geography (for example, Blomley 1994; Maxey 1999). It is through this disciplinary lens that we want to reflect on how we relate action to activism, and what this might mean for the undertaking of PAR more generally within the social and environmental sciences. In a sense, then, our chapter refers to and expands upon the previous discussion about liberatory PAR (see Cameron, Chapter 24 in this volume) and reasserts the importance of solidarity and activism.

Some beginnings: relevance and radicalism in geography

Discussions about the relevance of the social sciences to ‘real-world concerns’ have been integral to their development since the second half of the nineteenth century, and the writings of Marx and the anarchist geographer Kropotkin. Such concerns re-emerged in the late 1960s when some academics adopted radical theories and politics rooted in anarchism, Marxism and other critical movements, to

facilitate direct involvement by social scientists in the solving of social problems (see for example Berry 1972; Harvey 1972; 1974; Peet 1969; White 1972).

Since the mid- to late 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in questions of political relevance within many disciplines, alongside a range of other themes focused around exploring the significance of what 'researchers' do. Within geography, there have been powerful critiques of research methodology and the voices or ideas silenced by it, emphasising politically committed research (Nast 1994); increased recognition and negotiation of the differential power relations within the research process (Farrow *et al.* 1995) and multiple activist-academic positionalities (Merrifield 1995); a growing focus on for whom research is produced and whose needs it meets (Nast 1994; Farrow *et al.* 1995); interest in understanding the inter-subjectivity between activist-academics and the researched (McDowell 1992; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Laurie *et al.* 1999; Moss 2002; Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Chatterton 2006; Cobarrubias 2007); and increasing significance across the social sciences in 'public' and/or 'participatory' variants of sociologies, geographies, anthropologies (for example Burawoy 2004; 2006; the forthcoming special issue of *Antipode* 'Being and Becoming a public scholar'; the People's Geographies project at Syracuse University (www.peoplesgeographies.org), and the Participatory Geographies Working Group (PyGyWG) of the Royal Geographical Society, UK (www.pygywg.org)).

All of these elements cannot help but make us reflect on doing 'research' in a 'different' way, from its inception, through to dissemination and most crucially (and beyond 'mere' participatory research), its collective action-ing (see Fuller and Kitchin 2004). So as academics we continue to be actively campaigning, making connections, showing solidarity, confronting inequality, supporting local struggles, and seeking progressive social change. But what is the difference between what we do (and are) and those activities undertaken (and embodied) by many Participatory (Action) Researchers? And what, if anything, does this mean for the future significance and practice of PAR? Below are some reflections to continue pushing these debates forward.

Putting activism back into PAR

For us, activism, academic or otherwise, and PAR are not the same thing, and in this section we want to suggest a few reasons why this might be so and what the implications of such thinking might be for the future of PAR. In so doing we are not necessarily saying that one 'approach' is better than the other, or that the two approaches are unrelated – clearly, activists can be non-participatory while participatory researchers can be very non-active. Both can learn from each other. A key point for us, however, concerns our observation that sometimes, too many times, participatory researchers are more interested in the 'R' than the 'A' in PAR – and probably have a limited repertoire for the 'A' (cf Fals-Borda 2006a).

For us there is a need to reflect on the extent to which those involved in PAR should look beyond 'tools', 'techniques' and 'outputs' and also live up to the challenge of delivering transformative social change (see also Kindon *et al.* Chapter 2

in this volume). Again, this is not to say that PAR is not a diverse tradition where action seeks to address problems faced by marginalised groups and/or disempowered communities. (The chapters in Part II of this volume give a sense of this breadth.) But for us as activists, we wish to raise and revisit questions around the en-action and performance of 'research'. Specifically, we outline below some reflections from our experiences as activists which could be used to explore how PAR can be more than a way of informing policy or improving service delivery, and instead can be used as a vehicle for liberation, radical social transformation and the promotion of solidarity with those defending public services or resisting neoliberal cuts and privatisation.

A commitment to social transformation

The first point we wish to make is one of priorities: why are we doing 'research', and for whom? Have we thought about what 'research' or engagement is actually needed? What or whom is under threat? The overriding motivations of activist 'research' are to develop practice aimed at social transformation rather than to use a set of tools aimed at the 'production of knowledge' and the 'solving' of 'local' problems. Or in the words of Italian Marxist, Conti (2005), 'the goal of research is not the interpretation of the world, but the organisation of transformation' (2005: 2–6).¹

So for us (like many of the authors in this volume), 'research', participatory or otherwise, is not just about acquisition, cataloguing, ordering and the publishing of information on groups to help them. It is about jointly producing knowledge with others to produce critical interpretations and readings of the world, which are accessible, understandable to all those involved, and actionable. The differences are clear: significant social transformation does not come through using participatory techniques or appraisal methods to elicit the views of a community facing the construction of a proposed dam by the World Bank, for example. Social transformation requires working with that community to understand how World Bank policy works, so as to resist and possibly reverse the dam's construction.

The possibilities of change often seem daunting, but tools such as scenarios, calendars and campaign planning can help develop energy and enthusiasm (see Trapese 2007). Of course this raises many issues concerning researcher/facilitator neutrality and impartiality, but maybe these issues are not insurmountable for those troubled by them. At the local, session-based scale, good and impartial facilitation remains possible whilst the overall aims of the work remain highly political, strategic and aiming for transformation (see for example, Wadsworth 2000).

Beyond participation – developing solidarity

The second point is: how are we doing our research? The connections and solidarities we have with others involved in resistance are a key part of activist research. Activist research, in our understanding, implies a common identification of problems and desires amongst groups or individuals committed to social change. People may bring different skills and positions to the discussion: some may work

in universities, some may not. But the common thread is that there is a desire to work *together* to confront and reverse a set of issues, which have a common effect on all the people concerned. Priorities include jointly identifying exact needs and requirements and how to meet these, using research encounters to promote solidarity and direct forms of democracy not based on hierarchy or domination, and a recognition that objectives may be met through direct action and militancy if needed.

This process may work at different levels of intensity depending on the levels of connection and shared ground. We may already be committed and embedded members of groups and use our research time to support them (see McFarlane and Hansen, Chapter 11 in this volume). We may be approached by groups, which we instinctively support, for help and support. With them we develop a radical critique, which may be used to empower and inform (Pratt *et al.*, Chapter 12 in this volume). Alternatively, we may be approached by groups whose views do not concur with our own political worldviews for specific help to develop ideas and tactics for action. At the end of the day, the key to good activism is finding ways:

- to share relevant and accessible knowledges with groups in ways that don't increase dependency or hierarchy;
- to offer both radical critiques and inspiring alternatives which are translatable and seem doable; and
- to appropriately intervene and criticise, or accept and support.

Putting solidarity into practice also means co-producing contextually relevant knowledges which are useful to groups in their struggles. As several chapters in this volume have demonstrated, these can take the form of plays, artwork, photographs, pamphlets, 'zines', guides or websites, which may be more readily used and understood by the general public.

Solidarity is based on mutual respect and understanding, not agreement for agreement's sake. If real solidarity and mutuality is worked at, respectful critique and disagreement are vital and should develop in a supportive and progressive way that generates solutions beneficial for the group. Disagreements that do arise in terms of both content and tactics can be dealt with using a variety of techniques such as de-escalation, conflict resolution and consensus decision making (see Trapese 2007). It is crucial to evaluate whether disagreements are minor or based on personality differences (and quickly resolvable), or are major and perhaps more structural (and may require reprioritising or group subdivisions). Here, then, we are positing what might be called Solidarity Action Research (SAR) – which is explicit about its aims, its goals, and its desire for strong mutual collaboration.

Challenging power relations

As part of the desire for mutual collaboration, it is important to recognise that presupposing the rigidity of social roles and categories can blind us to the possibilities of common ground, and the potential for transformative dialogue. It is more useful to do away with labels such as 'activist' (which can set certain people up as

experts in social change), to allow others to feel they can contribute to social change. Some of the most transformative encounters come through what Giroux (1992) has called 'border pedagogy'. This practice eschews fixed notions of 'us' and 'them' or 'good' and 'bad' tactics. Rather it recognises the many ruptures between groups and embraces and questions differences and newness, however shocking.

As many chapters in this volume demonstrate, challenging power relations means working with groups to uncover structures of power to support people to take control of their own lives. The pedagogical project of Freire (1979; 2004) has been to insist on the dialectical relationship between the 'oppressor' and the 'oppressed'. Through this relationship and the process of *conscientização* we can unpack relationships and causalities, which structure injustice. We recognise our presence in the world, and that history is unfinished business into which we can intervene. Through this process, we can acknowledge that there is not merely external oppression of the 'other', but that we too are subject to oppression and in turn subject others to it. This double movement then compels us to recognise our own role in perpetuating inequality and injustices as well as to tackle larger examples of systematic oppression (Cloke 2002; Kapoor 2005). How this affects our work is crucial and is no easy task, but paying attention to the emotional dimensions of our relationships provides a possible way forward.

Building emotional connection

What Pulido (2003) calls the 'inner life of politics' plays a prominent role in the solidaristic shaping of PAR we are arguing for here (see also Pain *et al.*, Chapter 4 in this volume). Transformative encounters based on solidarity often come from our deep emotional responses to the world. These emotions rarely come from academic books or the classroom, but from direct experiences, intuition or a sense of injustice. Newman (2006) talks of the need to inspire defiance and resistance through stories of rebellion and revolt, and then use constructively the frustrations and anger which stem from these. We need to dispel lingering notions that encounters need to be emotionally objective, or that there will be an emotional imbalance between the rational researcher and the emotional subject. Clearly, at some point we need a clear and level head so we can both convey our own emotions and also respect and respond to those of others without losing our cool (see also Cahill, Chapter 21 in this volume). Our emotions can prompt us to ask ourselves about the extent to which we are promoting explicit, cooperative ways of interacting, which are rooted in a deep desire for mutual aid and group support. Also we can ask whether these ways serve to develop a sense of care and responsibility for others, even those we might not even know.

Prefigurative action

The phrase 'be the change you want to see' sums up a prefigurative politics which is common currency amongst activists in the global justice 'movements of movements'. Such a politics rejects blueprints for change in favour of a relational and

ethical approach, which accepts that everyone can participate in building change every day. This reformulation reworks the nature of change. It reflects Solnit's (2004: 4) acknowledgement that while most analyses of cause and effect see history as marching forwards, it is more like a crab moving sideways. This sideways movement or what she calls the 'angel of Alternative History', 'tells us that our acts count, that we are making history all the time' (2004: 75). Our encounters are therefore not just about action in the research process, but how the research process can contribute to wider activism such as protests, demonstrations, events and campaigns to effect change.

Desiring wholesale change often leads to frustrations. We face rhetorical challenges between different ways of organising human life. Brown (2002) suggests that instead of saying, 'You should live in this way!', we need to discuss alternatives by asking, 'Do these alternatives attract you, incite you, make what you've got appear absurd?' She goes on to say: 'You have to incite an interest that has been pounded out of us, an interest in shaping our own lives and the larger orders we live in, you have to incite interest in ... freedom' (Brown 2002: 220). This is why a tense encounter or an angry conversation contains hope and has transformative power. There will also be compromises and failures, but these provide resources for thinking through how to enact change in a very complicated, often overwhelming, world.

Rather than offering a future blueprint based on what people 'ought' to be doing, then, the trick is to 'discover tendencies in the present which provide alternative paths out of the current crisis' (Cleaver 1993: 1–16). Some of these will disappear, others will survive, but the challenge remains to find them, encourage people to articulate, expand and connect them: to link and network various micro-politics of resistance.

The ideology of change, therefore, is about movement in which the journey is more important than a hoped-for utopia. Beginning this journey means denouncing how we are living and announcing how we could live (Freire 2004: 105). It means identifying the particular values which will become common currency. This is a tricky process. There are no simple answers, nor should there be. Along the way we will come across ideas and values that might be uncomfortable and unmanageable, but that is the rawness and energy of being involved in social change.

Making spaces for action

Finally, social transformation, unpacking power relations, building solidarity and emotional connections are fine principles, and of course they may all be found in varying extents in P(A)R. However, there have been real limits to their practice due to the lack of spaces within which commonality and connection between disparate groups can be built, and through which change can be en-actioned and distanced (Kesby 2007a). Finding and extending places for encounter and solidarity in environments unmediated by consumer relations or profit is one of the most significant challenges of our neoliberal times. Oldenberg (1999) talks of the need for 'great good places', which bring people together to dwell and discuss, and similarly Routledge (1996) has introduced the idea of a 'third space for critical engagement', which seeks space beyond the dualism of activists and their others. Chatterton has

also suggested that temporary autonomous spaces and social centres have an important role to play here (Chatterton 2002; Chatterton and Hodkinson 2006).

Such spaces provide opportunities for transformative dialogue, mutual learning, as well as conflict. Their openness also makes them sites of potential manipulation, fear and insecurity, but civil society stems from all of these tendencies and should be embraced. It reminds us what it means to be free while also connected. It rejects what stops us from expressing, what restrains us, governs us, disciplines us, and makes us blind to each other and the natural world on which we depend. It is essential that participatory spaces are created for building understanding, encounter and action which are inclusive, which nurture creative interaction with others independent of electoral politics, and which can lead to critical reflection and interventions. How does our work contribute here? Like our colleagues (Kesby 2007a; Kindon and Elwood, forthcoming a), we need to ask ourselves, 'How can we create spaces and conversations that extend past or beyond our research encounters?', and just as crucially, 'How can we open up universities and academic research so they become embedded in the practice of this critical civil society?'

Conclusions

In this chapter we have been a little brusque, a little passionate, a little confrontational. We hope it made you feel uncomfortable. We have done this as, like most of you, we are passionate about our work and our encounters and we want to use them as tools for transformation. As we suggested at the outset, for us there are too many examples of PAR where it is the 'R' that is all-important – projects and collaborations that go nowhere, have no substantial transformative basis (at any scale), and which do local communities and communities of interest great disservice, if not damage. Some of the ideas we are suggesting will simply not fit into the necessities and parameters of project funding we receive. Clearly, we have to get the balance right between continuing to do research in the social and environmental sciences, whilst also constantly challenging the underlying premises of what we do, why we do it, who it really helps, and whether it is actually needed. Much of this may be out of our control. We have suggested that a commitment to social transformation, challenging power relations, showing solidarity, recognising and using emotions, being the change you want to see, and building spaces for critical dialogue, is crucial to our activist, rather than just action-based, methodology. Confronted as we all are by increasing global social, economic and environmental injustice, this seems to us to be an urgent methodological as well as political imperative.

Notes

- 1 This kind of work has a history with the tradition of militant research or workers-inquiry in 1970s Italy where researchers worked closely with workers in the factories to understand the structural origins of the problems and jointly develop solutions. More recently in Argentina the group *Colectivo Situaciones* has worked closely with the autonomous social movements in Argentina since the 2001 crisis to jointly document, promote and support the autonomous movements (see *Colectivo Situaciones* 2003; Holdren and Touza 2005).

Part IV

Conclusion

