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# Kinsey Dialogue Series # 1: The Origins and Challenges of Participatory Action Research

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

DAVID KINSEY DIALOGUE SERIES

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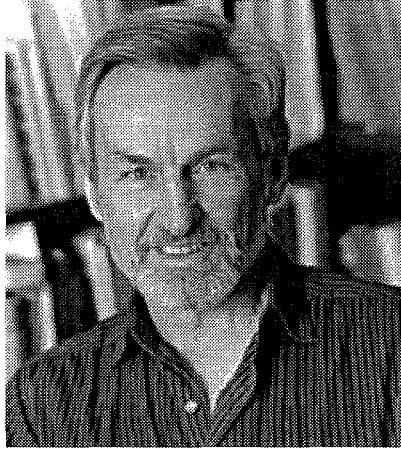
**THE ORIGINS AND CHALLENGES  
OF  
PARTICIPATORY ACTION  
RESEARCH**

**May 14, 1999**

**Center for International Education  
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University of Massachusetts  
at Amherst**



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**Professor David Chapin Kinsey**  
**1930—1998**

*"Education, like nature, is an organic process. Here nurture is more critical than control, redundancies can be functional, and there is room for interactive transformation and surprise. In our garden you do not see the whole at first glance, if ever. Rather you 'make the path by walking,' being attentive and discovering the unexpected around the next bend."*

*David C. Kinsey*

The David Kinsey Dialogue Series was established in memory of our beloved colleague, David Chapin Kinsey. David touched countless lives in the course of his 40 years as a dedicated, brilliant and outstanding educator, helping people everywhere to inquire, explore and discover the world and themselves. Since 1975, David Kinsey served as a faculty member of the School of Education in the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It is our hope that the Kinsey Dialogue Series will uphold his legacy, keeping alive his passionate vision for a better world.

# CONTENTS

	Preface	Page iv
I.	Introduction	Page 1
II.	On Science, Knowledge and Reason	Page 4
III.	On Theory and Practice	Page 9
IV.	On Subject and Object	Page 13
V.	P(A)R as a Philosophy of Life	Page 16
VI.	Some Emergent Challenges	Page 18
	Bibliography	Page 29

## **Preface**

I present the first lecture in the Kinsey Dialogue Series in honor of our respected colleague Dr. David Kinsey, whose interest went beyond university routine and scientific orthodoxy. David Kinsey was one of those original, creative minds shaped by deep interests in community development, nonformal education and adult literacy to change the conditions of poverty and oppression which he encountered in the local realities of people in countries like Nepal, Guatemala, Egypt, Tanzania and Senegal.

Dr. Kinsey's main focus was on alternative research methods, including participatory action research (PAR or PR). PAR is more accepted and acknowledged now than it was in the 1970's, when it began as a rather subversive discipline. Its growth in theory and practice is the subject of this first David Kinsey Dialogue, which focuses on how problems were seen and experienced from the standpoint of Southern peoples.

We arrive at this moment of public recognition of Professor Kinsey with gratitude for his important contributions to our field. David Kinsey opened doors and fostered a



The Origins and Challenges of  
Participatory Action Research

positive atmosphere for PAR and was an active participant in the process we are about to recollect. Hence I offer my respectful homage to him and to his memory as a pioneering spirit who strove for a better academy and a better world.

## I. Introduction

Participatory research as we now know it, with its emphasis on practice in conditions of exploitation and poverty, originated in Third World countries such as India, Brazil, Mexico, Tanzania and Colombia. Participatory research emerged around 1970, when social scientists who shared a particular concern about life conditions among the rural poor, became dissatisfied with our training. Our conceptions of Cartesian rationality, progress, and "normal" science had been challenged, and we sought alternative and emancipatory modes of research and action. This included looking for conceptual elements to guide our fieldwork that would take us beyond our tentative first steps with social psychology, Marxism, phenomenology and classical theories of participation, including action.

But implicit action alone was not enough. We felt that it was important to continue to respect the immanent validity of critical methodology, which, as Gadamer taught us,



implies one logic of scientific investigation (1960). We wanted to perform our tasks with the same seriousness of purpose and cultivated discipline to which traditional university research had aspired. For example, besides establishing a rigorous and pertinent science, we wanted to pay attention to grassroots people's knowledge. We were ready to discard our learned jargon and to communicate instead through everyday language. Moreover, we tried innovative frames of reference like sharing work with collectives and local groups to lay enlightened foundations for their empowerment.

Curiously enough, and in hindsight, we can say that we anticipated postmodernism. At that time, European thinkers were just warming up to this subject. We went beyond them with our attempts to articulate alternative discourses to systematic observations and experiences in the field. This remains a crucial difference among us.

From our concerns arose three broad challenges which

were related to the scientific and emancipatory construction we were attempting. The first one touched on the relationship between science, knowledge and reason; the second, on the dialectics of theory and practice; and the third on the subject/object tension. I will now briefly describe each challenge and our attempts to face them.

## **II. On Science, Knowledge and Reason**

To address the aforementioned challenges, we began to question the fetish-like idea of science as truth, which had been transmitted to us as a cumulative complex of confirmed rules and absolute laws. We began to appreciate that science is in fact socially constructed and therefore subject to reinterpretation, revision and enrichment. Although this may sound obvious, we postulated that its main criterion should be to obtain useful knowledge for what we judged to be worthy causes. Hence the painful confirmation of our own shortcomings in such a task, and the hopeful discovery of other types of scientific knowledge from unrecognized but worthy sources such as indigenous peoples and common folk.

If we could find a way to create a convergence of popular elements and academic science, we could gain a more complete and applicable knowledge, especially by and for the underprivileged classes which were in need of

scientific support. We caused a kind of harmonization by appealing to those pioneers who had deviated somewhat from logical empiricism, positivism, and/or functionalism. From Kurt Lewin and Sol Tax, we took new ideas and the triangular concept of "action research" (AR); and from Daniel P. Moynihan's report on poverty for the Johnson Administration in the United States (1969; cf. Birnbaum 1971); we learned that action research could be relevant for African American communities. In addition, we drew from American educator Myles Horton's work with coal miners in Appalachia, work which built the foundation for the Highlander Research and Education Center, a future bastion of PR (Lewis 1997; Horton and Freire 1990).

At the time, social sciences were already being criticized for their shortcomings — by C.Wright Mills, who insisted on the use of imagination; by Alvin Gouldner, through his idea about reflexive sociology as a work ethic; and by

Barrington Moore, in a rare analysis of injustice and democracy. Economics in particular came out badly for its baseless bent on scientific exactness, for which it was rightly penalized by Gunnar Myrdaland the human economists.

To discuss the evasive problem of purpose in science and knowledge, we began with the concepts of rationality which had been transmitted since the 17th century. These included Newton's operational rationality and Descartes' instrumental reason as a means of understanding and controlling nature. These contained an implicit self-objectivity trend that would later be identified with scientism.

On the other hand, there were Bacon and Galileo's acknowledgments of practice and community needs to justify the existence of science and to explain the rationality of the everyday. These two procedures are equally subject to cause-and-effect processes, and they can in fact be brought together: popular knowledge has always been a source of

formal learning. Academic accumulation, plus people's wisdom, became an important rule for our movement.

Moreover, we confirmed our hunch that this process had an ethical strain. Instrumental rationality, which so often bypasses common life, can lead to the kind of world destruction we witnessed in the twentieth century. Regular scientists may discover ways to travel to the moon, but their priorities and personal values may not permit them to solve the knotty problems of the poor woman who has to walk each day to bring water to her home. The former is of primary interest for technical development; the latter is one of the most persistent human offenses. We therefore declared that, in order to defend their interests, common people deserved to know about their own life conditions more than people from other social classes, who have monopolized knowledge, resources, techniques and power. In fact, we needed to pay as much attention to knowledge production as we usually paid to

material production, thereby tilting the scales toward justice for the underprivileged.

In this way, science appears in need of a conscience, while good reason strives for enrichment through sentiment and feeling. Head and heart must work together. These challenges cannot be resolved except by taking a personal moral stand and by adopting a balance between the ideal and the possible. These challenges also require a holistic epistemology, and arguments which attempt to construct a more satisfactory scientific paradigm, as mentioned below.

### **III. On Theory and Practice**

As we understood more clearly that popular knowledge could be congruent with the heritage of academic science, we experienced the practical need to challenge our inherited yet prophylactic definitions of "commitment." We felt that colleagues who claimed to work with "neutrality" or "objectivity" were willingly or unwillingly supporting the status quo. They were impairing full understanding of the social transformations in which we were immersed or which we wanted to stimulate.

This preoccupation implied two painful, difficult and somewhat dangerous stages: 1) we needed to discover the reactionary traits and ideas implanted in our own minds and behaviors by the educative process; and 2) through praxis, we had to search for a more satisfactory value structure which would support our work without forgetting scientific rules. Our praxis-inspired commitment found bases in the



historical presence and action of Third World leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated non-violent resistance in India, and Julius Nyerere, who championed *ujamaa* policies for communities in need of justice and progress in Tanzania. Other sources of inspiration came from Colombian sociologist, Camilo Torres' example of the "moral subversive," and from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's dialogical model of "conscientization."

One specific problem derived from the tendency toward self-objectivity in the sciences, to which I have already alluded. Scientism and technology, if left to themselves, could produce a mass of redundant information. This had occurred in the United States, where positivists, functionalists and empiricists went berserk accumulating data to explain social integration. In contrast, we attempted to theorize and to obtain knowledge enriched through direct involvement, intervention, or insertion into processes of social action. This was a

solution which eased the cyclical separation between the theory and practice. It also seemed possible to rescue the utopian active sociological traditions of Saint-Simon, Owen and Comte. It also allowed us to learn from 19th century sociopolitical movements such as literacy, cooperativism, Chartism, feminism and organized labor.

At this point in our intellectual development, praxis-committed educators became strategic. Following the leads of Freire and Stenhouse, we combined research and teaching and transcended pedagogical routines for the achievement of justice and cultural awareness. The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), under the leadership of Budd Hall, then organized a PR network. This PR network established "nodes" in New Delhi, Dar-es-Salaam, Amsterdam and Santiago, and published the influential journal, Convergence. Almost simultaneously, at Deakin University in Australia, a group of professors, led by Stephen Kemmis, started to work

with Yothu-Yindi Aborigines. Seminal ideas, such as the PR “spiral,” “reflection-action-rhythm” and “emancipatory research” resulted from their practice (Carr and Kemmis 1986). Finally, it was Bacon who again resolved for us the theoretical tensions created by the primacy of the practical. In his 1607 booklet, “Thoughts and Conclusions,” we read:

In natural philosophy, practical results are not only a way to improve conditions but also a guarantee for truth. Science must be recognized by its works (like faith in religion). Truth is revealed and established more through the testimony of actions than through logic or even observation.

Thus we proceeded to adopt two rules: that practice is determinant in the praxis-theory binomial; and that knowledge should be for the improvement of practice, as *conscientizing* educators emphasize.

#### IV. On Subject and Object

We were careful not to extend the positivist distinction between subject and object into the social domain in the way that the natural sciences usually do. We were also careful to avoid the commodification of human phenomena, as research usually does. It seemed counterproductive for our work to regard the researcher and the researched as two discrete, discordant or antagonistic poles. Rather, we considered them both to be real "thinking, feeling persons" ("*sentipensantes*"), whose views on the research experience could jointly be taken into account.

A resolution of this tension involved looking for what Agnes Heller (1989) called "symmetric reciprocity"— mutual respect and appreciation among participants, and between humans and nature — to arrive at a subject/subject horizontal or symmetric relationship. Moreover, the resolution of this tension helped to define authentic "participation," in contrast

to the dominant, liberal and manipulative versions such as those promoted the dominant one offered those promoted by political scientists like Samuel Huntington. It also created a way to combine different kinds of knowledge. If applied in earnest, this participatory philosophy could produce personal behavioral changes, deep social transformations and political movements.

All of this had practical consequences for research tasks. For example, interviews or questionnaires would have to be conceived and crafted differently, with full participation of the interviewees (or "clients") from the outset. Collective research became possible, and offered the advantage of obtaining more interesting, reliable, and cross-referenced results. In addition, the communication barrier between the "intellectual crowd" and grassroots leaders and common folks could be overcome.

Upon recognizing the symmetrical relationship of

social research, we invented the “systematic restitution” or “devolution” technique for purposes of communication. One idea was to convert the sense and information we were gathering from collective meetings and group action into Antonio Gramsci’s “good sense.” We followed his advice — to overcome the authoritarian tendencies of religion and common sense — in order to arrive at free transformations for cohesive social action with the people. We changed our ways of reporting. We made them understandable to the people who had produced the data. We developed a communication differential according to literacy level. This also helped to retrieve and ‘correct’ official history, to reinterpret it along class lines, according to diverse interests. We promoted the “Logos-Mythos technique” of Latin-American novelists, combining “hardcore” data with imaginative, literary and artistic “cortex” interpretations within cultural frames. This also affected our writing style.

## V. P(A)R as a Philosophy of Life

During the PR construction years, we directly observed, within the processes, some of the results of our work. The processes were slow, but no matter what we achieved in terms of improving local situations or in fostering people's self-reliance and empowerment, the experience was always wonderful, fulfilling and formative for both the basegroup leaders and the outside researchers. We saw that the scientific spirit can be evoked in the most modest and primitive circumstances, and that important and pertinent work for our peoples need not be expensive or complicated. As a result, we had little use for scholarly arrogance and instead learned to develop an empathetic attitude toward "Others" which we called *viviencia*, meaning life-experience (Husserl's Erfahrung). With the careful, human touch of *viviencia*, with its need for symmetry in social relations, it was

easy for us to listen to discourses coming from diverse intellectual origins conceived using a different cultural syntax.

The first World Symposium of Action in 1977 in Cartagena, Colombia (Simposio 1979), was the crowning effort of this early search for a new type of scientific plus activist/emancipatory work. The exchange at the symposium was fruitful and encouraging. It was there that participatory research was defined as a *viviencia* necessary for the achievement of progress and democracy and as a complex of attitudes and values to give meaning to our praxis in the field. Since then, PR has been viewed not only as a research methodology, but also as a philosophy of life that converts its practitioners into "thinking-feeling persons." From this beginning, our movement gradually took on worldwide dimensions.



## **VI. Some Emergent Challenges**

There have been eight world congresses for PR, or PAR. Twenty years after the first World Symposium of Action, the 1997 World Congress, was held once again in Cartagena. This Congress gathered delegates from 61 countries presenting 162 papers. Many important colleagues were present, including politicians and academic professors. PR is now included in university curricula, like those at the University of Massachusetts, initiated by Professor Kinsey. This is an ongoing trend on all continents.

The 1997 World Congress helped us to articulate an "action agenda" for the decades ahead. The advantage in Cartagena was the fruitful dialogue among the different "schools" of participatory research and action, and the presence at the Congress of a good number of sympathizers (Fals Borda 1998).

Several critical issues remain for today's committed PR crowd. These were articulated at the World Congress, and include, from my perspective, the following:

1. *Multidisciplinary and Institutional Transformation.* Through practice and by paying attention to innovators like Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra, Ilya Prigogine and others, we have learned about the merits of multidisciplinary work. We have shown that multidisciplinary work is important for schools and universities, as well as for enterprises and companies. Is it an impossible dream to visualize participatory researchers, educators, philosophers and others working shoulder to shoulder with quantum physicists and biologists — and to continue our work with systems theorists? If we feel more at home with them than with our classical colleagues, and if we and our Audience enjoy combining our scientific work with literary and artistic expression; can we stimulate these holistic processes?

Can we make deeper connections with diverse academic and technical communities and among the internal components of institutions. At the very least, a more satisfying division of academic labor may accrue to the benefit of all, including the action research family itself.

2. *Rigor and Validity Criteria.* We know that we can achieve rigor in our work by combining quantitative measures, when needed, with relevant, well-made qualitative and/or ethnographic descriptions. We also know that validity is not an internal discursive exercise. Pertinent validity criteria can be derived from common sense, inductive/deductive examination of results in practice, *viviencia* or empathic involvement in processes, and the considered judgment of local reference groups. Moreover, evaluation can be done in the course of fieldwork without having to wait for predetermined periods to end. How then, can we surmount the persistent

amateurism in so much of our work, except by working harder and more carefully? While this question has been widely discussed, it has yet to be translated effectively into action (cf. McTaggart 1998).

3. *Generalizable Projects.* For investigating contemporary symptoms of social pathology like anomie, violence, conflict, and drug addictions, we believe there are no better methods than those provided by P(A)R. For example, P(A)R deems as essential deep and respectful local observation. Considering people's need for pertinent knowledge to combat these social ills, how can we provide significant case studies (including macro studies) whose theoretical-practical interpretations could be generalized, without falling into the trap of traditional "pilot projects" (usually destined to fail)?

4. *Deconstruction of Global Uniformities.* We have perceived that global trends toward uniformity, harmful to

people's culture and to the environment, can be subverted, at specific regional and zonal levels, through local cultural and educational revival efforts as well as through civic defense. This could be satisfying for participant researchers, yet the enemy is of such enormous proportions that little appears to be gained from isolated efforts. How can we facilitate the deconstruction of global trends that are adverse to people's interests? How can we limit the self-devouring, entropic tendencies of capitalism?

5. *Scientific Research, Education and Political Action.* We know that education, information, research and scientific work are geared toward the maintenance of unjust power structures. How then can we tilt the scales of responsible knowledge production so that the recipient-beneficiaries of research and schooling are also the common people who have been the victims of capitalist exploitation and abuse?

Here we deal with the classic clash between intellectual rationality and political expediency. The 1997 World Congress agreed to assume a sense of moral responsibility in research and action, with clear political consequences. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how existing unbearable situations can be resolved with people's countervailing power. Research, action and education committed to social justice and progress, and with a new humanism, appear to be the solution, because P(A)R necessarily involves democratization. Participatory democracy, built from the bottom up, with supporting social, political and cultural movements, should be a natural result of our work.

6. *Alleviation of Conflict, Violence and Repression.* We have seen that P(A)R can reveal the imageries and representations underlying the logic of conflictual, violent, and repressive acts. We know that we can provide keys to preventing these

acts as no other methodology can, and we can discover

their roots in dire poverty, misery, lack of awareness and hunger exacerbated by economic systems. They can be fought with known means made available by the technological revolution. Can we push for meta-narratives like pluralistic socialism, which past experiences have shown as possible and convenient? How much longer can we tolerate pursuing a suicidal track by not resisting the inhuman trends implicit in dominant systems of thought and action?

7. *Construction of an Ethnogenetic Emancipatory Ethos.*

This pinnacle of sociocultural values appears to be the most general, overarching challenge that we face if we are serious about mitigating the present ethos of uncertainty. This task may be doubly difficult. It will require deep conceptual preparation for an alternative scientific paradigm, insightful and pointed discussion, and effective decisions so that the propositions which result can be applied to local practice, where they count most.

Let's not be modest. As recalled here, there have been ongoing theoretical/practical skirmishes since the 1970's over a new paradigm and another ethos. We recognize this by the positive role played by Professor Kinsey and his colleagues at the Center for International Education in the United States, and in Southern countries. We have moved together from the participatory and utopian theories of the past toward the threshold of another set of theories on modernist liberation. We have done this with the guidance of intellectual and political giants. Now, alert philosophers of action, postmodernists and critical theorists must reflect on their theses and consider their deeds, and convert them into useful tools to help liberate the majority of humankind that continues to suffer under oppressive power systems.

Can we be participative students and agents of change and work together to assist in the intellectual and political movement for people's self-reliance and empower-



ment? Can we join together to defend life and the pursuit of relevant, useful science? Can we commit ourselves as scholars and citizens to this epoch-making task?

The need to construct an altruistic ethos for heterogeneous forms of cultures, time, spaces, and peoples implies a worldwide effort to combine intellectual, political and economic resources from the North, South, East and West. For a time, our concerns about the relationship between knowledge, power and justice developed independently in our respective regions. These parallel developments had important consequences. Now however, and perhaps as the result of our common need for an alternative scientific paradigm, we are beginning to merge (cf. Chambers 1998).

Our tasks as participatory scholars and practitioners are ever more clear. The rising universe of critical intellectuals will facilitate the construction of pluralistic open societies

in which oppressive power, the economy of exploitation, the unjust distribution of wealth, the dominance of militarism, reigns of terror, environmental abuse and other plagues are proscribed. Many of us concur on these vital issues, particularly with regard to our insistence on the humanist utilization of science, knowledge and techniques. Such appears now to be our global commitment.

How we merge and the way in which we articulate the plurality of our research and action work will also determine the future survival of our PR "schools" and the promise of our efforts as they are applied in local environments, including our communities, cities, and families, and in enterprises, churches, the art and communication media, universities and colleges.

As we approach the new millennium, it is great to think that P(A)R will continue to do its share to find better

scientific, technical and social ways to improve living conditions and enrich human cultures. We must thank kindred figures like David Kinsey and his colleagues at this great educational Center and elsewhere in North America, for helping to articulate such lofty ends with enthusiasm and effectiveness.

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