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## **Kinsey Dialogue Series #2: Participatory Research and Action: Flower, Weed, or Genetically Modified Monster?**

Item Type	article;article
Authors	Kane, Eileen
Publisher	Center for International Education
Download date	2025-04-19 18:48:33
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7941">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7941</a>

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

DAVID KINSEY DIALOGUE SERIES

**EILEEN KANE**

**GroundWork  
Washington, DC**

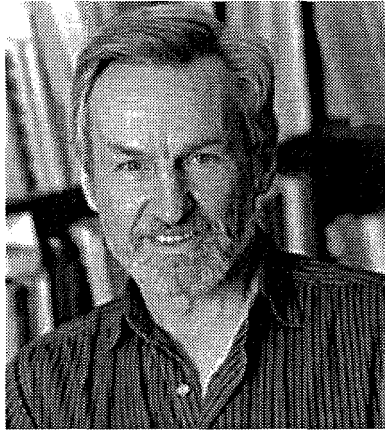
**Participatory  
Research and Action:  
Flower, Weed,  
or  
Genetically Modified Monster?**

*April 2000*

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



**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.

David Kinsey Dialogue Series #2  
Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN #1889536-09-1  
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### *Preface*

This paper is offered in memory of David Kinsey, gardener, educator, and great supporter of participatory approaches. In one of his recent papers, David asked us to look at the process of gardening and see what lessons we can take for education. Why? Because gardening is a never-ending, nurturing process—the words associated with it almost always reflect this. Of course, gardening contains sinister terms such as “deadheading,” “forcing,” and “weed whacker.” But we also have “lazy beds,” “blankets” of mulch, and gentle words such as conserving, protecting, feeding, germinating and supporting. And, of course, we gardeners have heart-warming phrases such as “well-rotted manure”, which are to us what “wicked chocolate” is to the gourmand.

A long time ago, in my own garden in Ireland, someone planted a monkey puzzle tree—a Chilean pine. It looks like a cross between a gibbon and a collection of badly tangled pipe cleaners. It is not native to Ireland, and it never looks happy. I try to do my best for it, but I don't really know what it needs or wants. It probably just wants to be back in Chile, flexing its ghastly limbs in a hotter climate or a higher altitude.

The metaphors we can take from gardening are appropriate not only to education, but to our work in developing countries. No development thrives if it is out of place, forced, ill-conceived, environmentally inappropriate,

or hot housed: witness my monkey puzzle tree, dripping dankly in the dark Irish winter.

For those who don't like gardening, however, there is hope. One of the first principles of participatory research — my subject in this paper — has always been to “hand over the stick.” Hand over the rake, the hoe, the shovel, and let those who own the garden take control. Participatory research is one way of doing this.

## ***I. Introduction***

Over the last fifteen years I have been using participatory research in many areas, and especially to look at problems and opportunities for girls' education in developing countries. In this paper, I want to share some ideas about what I think needs to happen if participatory approaches are to grow and flourish in the future. The question I am asking is, "What *is* participatory research? Is it a sunflower, getting stronger as it pushes toward enlightenment? Is it kudzu, omnipresent and sometimes out of place? Is it a rootless creation, a carbuncle grafted on to the conventional trunk of research? Or is it something else entirely?" More specifically, I am asking, "Can we examine the methods used in participatory research to get some insights into its nature, underlying assumptions and philosophy of inquiry? Can we share what we learn from this examination so that practitioners from a variety of cultures around the world can challenge adapt or accept these assumptions?"



## **II. *What are Participatory Approaches?***

The development world is awash in acronyms, and the field of participation is no different. PLA, or participatory learning and action, is the “family name” for a wide variety of participatory approaches. This paper focuses on two of them — PRA, or participatory rural appraisal, and RRA, or rapid rural appraisal — but I am going to use the acronym PRA except when a distinction needs to be made.

PRA is an evolving approach which emerged in the 1980s. It is a set of behaviors, attitudes and methods that enable people everywhere, particularly disadvantaged people—the poor, women, minorities, children, the handicapped, non-participants—to determine their own agendas for change, identify the issues, assess possible solutions and act on their decisions.

RRA, developed in the 1970s and still going strong, differs from PRA in that it is “extractive.” Outsiders, perhaps with some insiders on the team, determine the major issues; carry out research drawing heavily on local insider insights; and analyze the results. The results are often used for some external purpose such as improving an existing organizational program. “Rapid” is important in RRA—timely results are needed to address urgent problems. Both RRA

and PRA share the same "basket" of methods, or techniques. The difference between them lies in who determines the agenda, who carries it out, and who makes decisions about what to do with the findings. In the case of PRA, it is concerned people or groups, whether local people or organizations, who are intended to be involved in all of these, and action is the intended outcome. In the case of RRA, the process is more "extractive." For example, an organization determines the focus of the research—water, education, or whatever the organizational mission might be—and uses the data for its own purposes, which can include planning a program, or improving an existing one.

Although there are over thirty techniques in the "basket", many have in common the fact that they are aids to group interviews and are drawn from conventional social science research. These include semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and observation. Discussions may be facilitated by using pie charts, matrices, Venn diagrams, seasonal calendars, maps and many other techniques that allow the discourse to be recorded in a form that is visible to all, including non-literate people. Symbols, rather than words, may be used, and weighting, ranking and decisions may be shown by the use of seeds or other readily available objects. The purpose of the latter is not so much to accommodate the needs of the non-literate as to allow changes to be made as the discussion ensues. Often, the

results look like the results one would get by aggregating conventional data. For example, many matrices and seasonal calendars are, in effect, bar graphs. Of course, conventional techniques can also be used. A short survey, for example, can be carried out either conventionally or in an adapted and more participatory form. The relative speed of most PRA exercises is compensated for by an emphasis on triangulation: "mixed" teams of insiders and outsiders, men and women, younger and older, varied disciplines; multiple sources and perspectives; multiple techniques and; a rigorous effort to avoid bias, particularly the kind of bias that arises from consulting only the powerful and more accessible.

PRA has made many contributions. Through it, disadvantaged people in communities and other groups are able to have a bigger role in determining their issues and deciding how to tackle them. They can also continue independently after being exposed to the methods and use what they learn in new situations. Government organizations, NGOs and even commercial organizations get insights and feedback that they would be unlikely to get otherwise, and programs can be more closely tailored to people's needs. PRA need not be exclusively local: results from multiple communities can be used to affect regional or national policy.

PRA can be a particularly supportive approach for

women.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, much development and education in developing countries was tailored to the needs of “man.” (Women, of course, know that “man” may mean “woman” in the same way that “flesh-colored” means “brown.”). But PRA has deliberately sought out and included women, both as team members and as participants in the entire process. In fact, as far as I am able to tell, a majority of PRA practitioners today are women, although most of the people writing about it are not. And of course, in a world where a nearly a billion people cannot read or write and two-thirds of them are women; a majority of the 300 million children not in school are girls; and where a hundred million children live on the streets, the voices of women need to be heard. Larry Summers, former Chief Economist of the World Bank, has said that investing in girls’ education is the single best investment that developing countries can make today. But who has consulted the girls? Who has consulted the women, whom the girls are often staying at home to help?

Another contribution that PRA has made is to enhance the perspective of professional researchers. Good PRA doesn’t insult the disadvantaged, as other, more extractive research approaches often do, and people respond accordingly. Researchers often experience something that may be completely new to them—a welcome from the community, rather than sullen and often legitimate resentment. PRA has also forced many of us to recognize

that we as researchers do not have a monopoly on the production of credible and valid knowledge. Also, it has forced many conventional researchers to bow in the direction of participation, and since the best conventional researchers recognize that PRA is founded on some legitimate moral/political/philosophical positions, they, too, must now claim to be participatory even when they are using surveys carved in stone. This, of course, presents its own problems.

However, despite all these very important benefits, there are some problems associated with using PRA, other than simple, practical ones. I hear development project managers who have goodwill toward PRA saying they can't use it because the practitioners<sup>2</sup> are so "theological" in their philosophy and rigid in their methods that no accommodation can be made to changing circumstances, organizational needs and sometimes community needs. They say such practitioners know only one way to do things and carry on inflexibly, confident in the certainties of their faith.

The other complaint I hear is from some mainstream academics who don't understand what we are doing, because we send so few emissaries across each other's lines. One instance: emic research, which I will be discussing later, was borrowed from anthropology and is now one of the tools in the PRA basket. Ward Goodenough, a primary

contributor to the concept, who is always open to discussion, veers toward the conclusion that PRA is quick and dirty research because emic research, carried out the way anthropologists do, requires a quite sophisticated theoretical understanding, and is often a lengthy process.<sup>3</sup> We don't need to be deeply familiar with every field from which PRA has borrowed methods, but we do need to know the assumptions on which they are based, to understand why and how we have adapted them, and to get the full benefit of exchanges with people in other fields who also use them.

I have a photograph of an educator standing on a vast, uninhabited plain trying to do a transect as part of an education-focused PRA project. She had been shown how to carry out this technique, and believed that unless she used it, she wasn't doing PRA. A transect is a technique which arises from PRA's beginning in agriculture, and involves walking across an area with local people and recording one or more variables such as soil type, land use, ownership, deforestation, etc. currently or in the past. I can imagine limited circumstances in which it might be applicable in an education project—for example, exploring distance to school or dangers along the path, but this was a project on gender sensitivity and classroom management. Her behavior reflected both of the problems mentioned above—she was being “theological,” and she also lacked the flexibility that a

better knowledge of theory can give—what can this technique? What doesn't it do? Can I adapt it, or is there something else I should use? She lacked the background to understand why what she was doing made no sense.

Perhaps these and similar problems could be addressed better by thinking through some of the philosophical issues I want to raise in this paper.

### **III. What Underlies PRA?**

Three “pillars” support PRA: attitudes, behavior and methods. PRA practitioners argue that one of the missing links in development is appropriate personal behavior and attitudes on the part of outsiders and “experts”: among others, recognizing that local people are “experts”, too; that they can do their own research and planning; that reducing bias against the less powerful involves a constant personal and professional battle; and that outsiders should “hand over the stick” and simply facilitate. Robert Chambers, one of the core founders of modern participatory research, has said “Behavior and attitudes matter more than methods, powerful though PRA methods have proved,”<sup>4</sup> and this has been reiterated many times by others. Over and over in the PRA literature, authors fume about the tendency to fixate on methods—the routinization and ritualization of methods, the “manual mentality,” the overemphasis on methods in training programs. In part, this fixation arises because PRA methods are often fun to use. In part, it is because practitioners are insecure—when hot and sticky, baffled and overwhelmed, they want to be able to pull out a familiar method and apply it.

I agree entirely with these critics that methods *per se* matter very little. I will argue, however, that methods *are* behavior and attitudes. They are not only the net that yields the knowledge that fuels the PRA process, but they are also



part of the outward reflection of our philosophy. While many of the methods may have been chosen for their accessibility and their congeniality to participation, they bring with them other characteristics that are worth exploring. I will also argue that unless we put methods in their proper theoretical context, we will aggravate the trend for PRA practitioners to use them for their own sake—to get bound up in process and protocols, with little understanding of the power of various methods and how to adapt them. Even when accompanied by good attitude and behavior, this will eventually present problems.

### *Assumptions About Development and Knowledge*

When do we need to pay attention to methods? When they get in our way—when not examining them prevents our research from being all it might be. To make this case, I want to hold up the PRA “basket” of methods and examine it through a set of questions related to the philosophy of knowledge. I also want to distinguish among three words: rational, irrational and non-rational.

“Rational”, as I will define it here, means based on reason and evidence; “irrational” means flying in the face of reason and evidence; and “non-rational” refers to ideas which fall outside the realm of rationality and which cannot be proved or disproved: God is a loving father; the dog is man’s best friend; we get our rewards in the afterlife;

women are more emotional than men; Nature is like a giant machine; there is no reality except what we construct. Non-rational is not “bad”—it simply operates in a sphere in which “truth” or “correctness” is established by means outside the realm of science, as is the case with religious truths. Most major cultural beliefs in any society are non-rational assumptions: some particularly Western ones, for example, are “work and play are separate,” “time is money,” “nature can be conquered,” “material well-being is a sign of success,” and “God is omnipotent but can only do certain things”—such as curing cancer, while being unable to replace a leg. But as the anthropologist Richard Shweder has said “There’s more to thinking than reason and evidence,” and non-rational assumptions have an impact on practically everything.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s translate this discussion of the importance of non-rational assumptions into an example. Suppose you had to design a school system that would serve several thousand children in a group of neighboring communities. Suppose also that someone gave you a pack of one hundred cards, each containing one assumption: people are basically competitive; people value things more if they invest time in them; men are natural leaders; everything is really in the lap of the gods; local is better than regional; children are simply short adults; learning is best done through example; the golden age is in the past; that all leaders are corrupt; some

things are best left unsaid; children are naturally good; that everything ends badly; too much learning makes a girl unattractive.

Now pretend that you will be dealt three cards out of the hundred, and these three will guide your project. Does anyone think that a project based on the belief that local is better than regional, people are basically cooperative, and children are little sponges for learning will turn out the same as a project based say, on the idea that children can be treated as adults, that we have very little control over things, and that lecturing is the best way to educate?

Most of our assumptions about development, whether they be economically, politically or morally based, are also non-rational—for example, the unilinear assumption that people are climbing a ladder toward a developed state, rather than the current thinking that people are acting adaptively to new situations. So, too, are various assumptions about education: the 19<sup>th</sup> century belief that children are simply small faulty adults, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic belief that children are living in a pure uncorrupted state; and so, too, are the various assumptions about the brain—that it is a sponge, a computer, or an organizational template for information, or a chemical stewpot. Most important for my argument is the fact that the various inquiry-based paradigms within the field of the philosophy of knowledge are non-rational as well. These

paradigms are the assumptions that shape the inquiry methods we use. We can explore them by examining our answers to the following questions: 1) what is the nature of reality; 2) what is the relationship of the observer to what is being observed? and 3) what do the answers to these questions imply for the methods that are used to get knowledge?

One hears these issues addressed every day in the street: "That may be true for you, but it's not for me"; "She only said that because you were there"; "I wouldn't ask him straight out—I'd work my way around to it." Of course, statements like this will not get one into the books alongside Habermas and Chomsky, but they show that we ordinary people are also part of the debate, which I will try to summarize here.

In my attempt to be brief, I will be fair and do equal damage to all the competing philosophies of knowledge. This is not to say that they cannot be summarized in a manner readily comprehensible to most people, it is just that it can't be done in a few lines.

**Positivists** of the past believed that Nature was like a giant machine, which could be taken apart and its parts examined; there was a real world out there, a single reality, that the observer could stand back and observe it; and that experimental and manipulative methods could be used to force Nature to expose the laws on which it operates, so

that they could be predicted and controlled. The result of all this would be “objective” facts. Few researchers would claim to be positivists today, although the so-called “man-in-the-street” still tends to think of this as “science.”

**Post-positivists** have made some adjustments to this: a real world exists, all right, but we humans have limited sensory facilities and intellects to perceive it. We cannot achieve objectivity, but that shouldn't stop us from trying, by examining our biases, using multiple theories, methods and researchers, and by being scrutinized by our peers in the scholarly community.

**Phenomenologists** is a broad category, covering a varying and tempestuous field. The focus is on meaning and understanding rather than “facts.” Phenomenologists argue that there is no objective reality. What is important is reality as people perceive, experience and interpret it. People use models—cultural, historical, group, individual, to organize and interpret their realities. Situations and contexts are dynamic and changing. Knowledge is produced, not discovered. Phenomenologists don't attempt to identify the variables prior to the research—the variables emerge or unfold. In practice, this means experiments, questionnaires and other techniques that pre-determine the categories of inquiry are out.

**Critical theorists**, among many others, Marxists, Freudians, Freireians and feminists, believe, as do

positivists, that reality exists but it's not the one we were told it is—feminists, for example, will say that the world according to the Western white male elite is definitely not it. "Whose reality counts?" is what they ask, as does Robert Chambers in the title of one of his books. Critical theorists argue that values shape the problem, the paradigm, the methods, the analysis and their use. Manipulative, controlling methods are out, and participatory approaches are in. The task of inquiry is to raise people to a true level of consciousness, energize and facilitate transformation.

While PRA has made its development, behavioral and attitudinal assumptions apparent, it has not clarified its philosophy of knowledge or the inquiry paradigms that underlie its research techniques. Part of this may have been explained by PRA practitioner Ian Scoones, who stresses the importance of philosophical and theoretical understanding, and the significance of ongoing debates about the contested nature of knowledge for PRA, but describes the debate, as do many others, as "impenetrable" and "arcane." (1995:19).

Impenetrable it may be, but PRA has surmounted greater obstacles than these. By not giving their inquiry paradigm more attention, PRA practitioners are missing the opportunity to make some unique contributions about methods and theory.

I think, therefore, that at this point in PRA's development we should talk about two areas of concern:

- What inquiry paradigm(s) are implied in PRA's methodological mix. Inquiry methods imply inquiry paradigms, or epistemologies, and vice versa. What are PRA's paradigms?
- How to make tacit themes explicit and to expose them to competing theories, particularly from users in non-Western societies. This, for me, is the thorniest issue, as it is for others who hold views that differ from mine. We all agree that other perspectives are essential; where we differ is how they can be brought in.

#### ***IV. The Relationship between PRA's Philosophy of Knowledge and its Methodological Mix***

One of the most praiseworthy characteristics of PRA practitioners how they plunder disciplines ranging from agriculture to linguistics without hindrance, taking any research techniques that work. This is a far cry from the blinkered methodological purdah traditionally observed by most disciplines—sociologists' surveys, anthropologists' participant observation, and psychologists' measures. If it works, PRA practitioners use it.

Are PRA practitioners as theological about their methodological paradigms as they are about their political/moral ones? If practitioners working in participatory research are asked, "Why do you do what you do?" they are likely to talk about the importance of participation, the value of multiple voices, the need to reduce bias and the importance of better and more sustainable outcomes. In other words, the philosophy that they talk about will be their *philosophy of development* and *the philosophy of participation*, with all its attendant beliefs about behavior and attitudes.

Their answer is a reflection of the literature: most articles about the "philosophy of PRA" focus upon its foundations in critical theory—i.e. its philosophy of development. Such discussions explore the crucial



importance and validity of multiple perspectives and insights in any situation. Almost always, the discussion is presented as a moral/political stance—local people, the voiceless, the less powerful, the poor, women—all have perspectives that will contribute to an understanding of what is happening, and have a right to help construct the picture. So when you ask people working in PRA, “Why do you do what you do?” that is the philosophy they will talk about.

But there is more to “Why do we do what we do?” than the moral/political/development reply. For example, the emphasis on the construction of “reality” through participation and the multiple perspectives is a phenomenological stance, although the term is rarely used in PRA. On the other hand, a few of the research techniques used in PRA have a post-positivistic base. For example, most PRA practitioners are not that keen on surveys but have been known to tolerate them—in the case of RRA when they can be quickly used in conjunction with participatory techniques; in PRA, when the people involved can help to design, administer and/or analyze them.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, this participatory element makes even techniques founded in post-positivism, such as short surveys and semi-structured interviews, acceptable.

Do PRA practitioners argue, along with Guba and Lincoln, that paradigms cannot be mixed or used together

because their fundamental assumptions are different?<sup>7</sup> Or do they perhaps share the belief that the ability to hold two opposing ideas in one's head at the same time and still continue to function is the mark of a first-rate intelligence? For example, Michael Quinn Patton argues that while paradigms may be mutually exclusive as idea systems, they need not be mutually exclusive in use—a “paradigm of choices”, he calls it.<sup>8</sup>

I think PRA practice reflects the last perspective—the selected techniques reflect a democratic stance (i.e., participation) and a utilitarian stance (they produce reliable, appropriate information relatively quickly) and that, rather than epistemological issues, determines their selection.

Let's look again at the issue of methods. Postpositivistic approaches are not confined to surveys in PRA. PRA's methodological centerpiece is semi-structured interviewing. In a semi-structured interview, questions are adapted to meet the circumstances of the respondent, so that wording and some content may be changed to make the interview more meaningful. However, the interviews still have pre-determined features, some of which are shaped by the analytical processes inherent in the devices, such as matrices or maps, and some by the subject of the inquiry, which, even if not determined by outsiders, is often influenced by perceptions of what outsiders will fund. So the structure is

there, and someone chose it. The information is gathered according to some sort of scheme—in the words of R.D. Laing, it is “capta”, not “data” and it has been hauled in by an epistemological net, which catches some things and ignores others.<sup>9</sup>

In this case, the net has a somewhat positivistic weave. In an unstructured interview, in contrast, the format allows the participant to determine some of the agenda and many of the issues, but the interview may still have a general focus that has been shaped by outsiders. Because of its relative openness, it is generally more time-consuming and therefore not commonly used in PRA.

On the other hand, PRA does appear to value some of the more phenomenological approaches. For example, in recent years, “emic” interviewing, borrowed from anthropology and linguistics, is often mentioned as a PRA tool. Emic interviewing is truly open-ended: the researcher poses the first question and from the categories elicited in that and subsequent answers, new questions emerge. It is non-directive technique that can get at a version of shared cultural knowledge. An emic interview looks like an unstructured interview, but it isn't. It is also extremely time-consuming, difficult to carry out, and has been the subject of some past skirmishes in anthropology. (The title of one early foray, Robbins Burling's “Componential Analysis: God's Truth or Hocus Pocus?”<sup>10</sup> gives a bit of the flavor of the

debate.) However, I have yet to see any real evidence of its use in PRA. The card sort technique comes closest, but is so rudimentary that it loses whatever power an emic research approach can bring. This is a pity, because more than any other technique, an adaptation of emic research could allow unique perspectives to emerge. To do that, however, the user needs to know how to do it, not an easy task, and what its limitations are—one of them is time.

So the opportunity to explore the practical/philosophical implications of mixing methods is worth taking. Has it been taken? No. Complementarity of methods has been discussed at great length,<sup>11</sup> but this simply refers to the complementarity of participatory and conventional methods—for example, RRA with surveys, or PRA with ethnography. What about philosophical complementarity? Of course, many of the other social science disciplines have not taken an opportunity to explore these, either. (Interestingly, perhaps the best job is being done in the field of education, which, like PRA, has come late to the use of quasi-anthropological techniques and is now trying to think about these issues—see, for example, Patton; (1990); Guba and Lincoln (1989); and Guba (1990).<sup>12</sup>

However, we might reasonably expect PRA to take a lead in this debate because it has probably adopted more techniques from other fields than has any other discipline, including education. An important contribution, therefore,

might be to engage in a serious reflection on what the methods say about PRA and whether they are sufficiently coherent to form a new paradigm (over-used as that word might be). It would be interesting if PRA, which has broken new ground in so many other ways, would show other researchers what it has learned from this eclecticism. What are the trade-offs? How does one reconcile what appears to be a phenomenological approach—allowing multiple perspectives to emerge, and the desire to use truly phenomenological techniques, such as emic interviews—with the use of “positivistic” techniques?

Even more interesting would be a discussion on the question of what happens as a field co-opts the techniques of others, often lifting them out of the context in which they were developed. What changes about them? Simply their field of application? Or does other baggage come with them? Can you take a method to its full power if you don't understand the foundation on which it rests, as has become the case with the emic approach? Michael Quinn Patton says that in real-world practice, methods can be separated from the theoretical background out of which they emerged.<sup>13</sup> If this means you don't need to know the famous names and the interminable arguments, I agree. But if you don't understand the assumptions, you are only a para-researcher. For example, sometimes I have explained a phenomenological research method to people, only to

discover later that they were using it like drill sergeants, fitting it into a positivistic scheme to make it more “scientific”.

I am not arguing that social researchers have to be satisfied with one paradigm. I tend to agree with Michael Quinn Patton on this. Bernstein has pointed out that “social sciences are dynamic disciplines within which, depending upon the dispositions and power of the researcher, other paradigms can be considered. But a community of researchers should then be ‘able, willing and committed to engage in argumentation.’”<sup>14</sup> And we should go the extra mile in this argumentation. Not only academic theorists, but practitioners, as well, should have a good grasp of these issues. If PRA is about sharing with local communities, with organizations, with groups, then practitioners need to take care to share the deeper issues as well, so that people, particularly those from non-western ideational traditions know what they are getting, and can, if they wish, adapt them from a position of knowledge.

But for many PRA practitioners, as for researchers in every other field, this discussion is still completely academic. And sadly, as in other fields, PRA practitioners use techniques while not really knowing *why* they do what they do; they only know they were taught to do these and have attached a theology to the techniques themselves, rather than to the paradigms on which they are based—a

kind of cookbook approach, rather than saying "Use any technique, providing that it allows multiple perspectives to emerge" some have been saying "Use the techniques which we have been taught and no others."

## ***V. Looking Inward and Outward to Broaden Our Philosophical Perspectives***

My second major point arises directly from the first. We need to get other philosophical perspectives, particularly from users in non-Western societies. To get these, we first need to do what I suggested in the previous part of my paper—explore our perspectives and the assumptions on which they are based.

In PRA, we try to share everything—research, analysis, planning—whatever is needed in a participatory endeavor. But philosophical debate is one area in which we aren't sharing, either within the West or between Western and non-Western practitioners. I think this is because we haven't really fully explored PRA's philosophical perspectives yet, as I have indicated in my earlier discussion.

This is a troublesome issue, and I hope that this paper spurs some further debate, because I suspect that talking about it will show that any current differences in the field are not as great as they might seem. In any event, it is time to discuss these matters. Neil Jamieson's excellent article, "The Paradigmatic Significance of Rapid Rural Appraisal" (1985),<sup>15</sup> is an early work on the subject. Paul Richards' "Participatory Rural Appraisal: a Quick and Dirty Critique" is a welcome addition, as is Cornwall and Fleming's "Context and Complexity: Anthropological



Reflections on PRA" (1995) but there are very few others.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the problem may revolve around the word "theory." I would like to make a point here which may help to clear up some previous misunderstandings that may have led people to run when they heard the word "theory." The Parson in Fielding's *Tom Jones* said, "When I say religion, I mean the Christian religion and when I say the Christian religion I mean the Protestant religion and when I say the Protestant religion, I mean the Church of England." Well, in this discussion, when I say "theory", I am talking about philosophical assumptions, what Jamieson calls "broad, vague and unconscious" paradigms. I am not talking about the middle-range or grounded theory used to shape hypotheses and interpret results. I am equally happy to call them the non-rational assumptions which shape inquiry paradigms, but that doesn't really trip off the tongue.

The kind of theory I am talking about addresses questions such as how does the world work; how do we know about ideas; what is proof; why do things happen; and what can we do about the future?

And the answers are all based on theories—indeed, they *are* theories—they are the basis of the philosophy of knowledge and of the various paradigms I have been talking about. Not discussing them leaves many practitioners with the belief that their methods and assumptions are based on some sort of universal truth.

As I understand it, some PRA practitioners believe that PRA is theory-free. “We don't need theory,” I was told at one conference. That in itself is a theoretical stance, as far as I am concerned, and if it is generally believed among PRA practitioners, it certainly deserves debate. “Look where theory has got the other social sciences” is another comment. Well, even from a PRA perspective, anthropology, for example, has not foundered on theory (if indeed it has foundered at all), but rather on a lack of moral commitment and action orientation.

Is the conclusion that we don't need theory based on the empiricist school of thought, which argues that the facts speak for themselves and neither their origins nor their meanings require any explanation by way of theoretical propositions? Positivism relies on empiricism, the concept of an “objective” world, the detachment of the observer from the observed, and the precision and accuracy of instruments. This does not sound like PRA's multiple perspectives, the observer as participant, and the admonition to use one's own best judgment

Taking the stance that we don't need theory does not do away with theory—it just means that our assumptions remain unexamined. They still affect our research—the agenda, the selection of techniques, the interpretation. And taking this stance also reduces the researcher to the status of a technician. Why does a researcher choose to collect or

produce particular information to begin with? How are the results obtained? Unlike positivism and empiricism, critical theory, which plays a large role in PRA, argues that we cannot reach truth simply by concentrating on techniques of social research. We can't separate what we do from *how* we do it. Most of us, at the end of the twentieth century, have moved beyond that separation, and PRA practitioners are the first to argue it in their philosophy of development, saying that behavior and attitudes matter.

Research methods are not neutral recording instruments—they are lenses for screening the billions of phenomena that come our way, and if they are not neutral, what shapes them? Social researchers are “*always* the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique for doing research other than through the medium of the researcher, and our own understandings as researchers are a precondition of our research.”<sup>17</sup>

“People in the South will develop their own theory” is another comment I've heard. May I say that I presume that they already have, and they need to see that is it legitimate, and indeed a tenet of PRA, to question ours, if we can take the trouble to recognize ours and explain them for what they are—our own non-rational assumptions, which are the best we have to go on at the moment.

What will be really interesting is if we examine our assumptions about knowledge and inquiry, share them with

others in other cultures, and then find that those others disagree entirely. Perhaps they will argue that there are other ways of knowing than those currently in vogue in western societies. Perhaps people in other cultures will argue that the supernatural has a role in the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps some people will place action over structure, as in the case of the Berber, whose seasonal calendar arises from their agricultural decision-making, rather than being a guide for it. As Richards shows:

What then, are we to make of a participatory development exercise that assumes that there is a clear split between structure and action, and where structure takes precedence over action? Put explicitly, what kind of muddle are we in if one set of participants — the organizers — holds the view that the farm calendar being plotted on the flip-chart is a template for agricultural action, and the other group—the rural poor—sees it as an outcome of what they do? In short, is the real worry about PRA/RRA not the legitimacy of its short-cut methods but rather the implausibility of its (unstated) theoretical frame? <sup>19</sup>

Most anthropologists could come up with even more complex confusions that arise when they try to impose Western assumptions on something they are trying to understand.

What are the practical consequences of ignoring all this? First, I think it is condescending to people with whom we work not to make all of PRA's theoretical assumptions as transparent as possible. Second, we are losing some of our

own and their intellectual insights by not opening the debate. Third, my own experience has shown that some practitioners in the North and South are not saying "let's develop our own theories to explain why we produce knowledge the way we do" but rather "we must do things this way because that's how we were taught." It is difficult, although not impossible for people to develop theoretical options if they don't know the existing practices are based on theory. Everywhere, people can and will develop their own theories to explain what they have found in their research but it is more difficult if they don't know that the questions and the techniques which produced the findings are all shaped by particular theories and assumptions that are open to questioning. Finally, and fourth, rather than encouraging reflective researchers, we are creating technicians who lack the kind of flexibility that comes from a deeper understanding of theoretical context.

Is this discussion only for researchers? Can we extend it to people in disadvantaged communities who have experienced PRA as a result of a visit from a professional practitioner and now want to use it themselves? Can they contribute, too, or are they simply "subjects", as they are in conventional research projects, who don't need to bother themselves with all this? It would be good to see PRA participants from such community groups and from many more non-Western cultures contributing more often at

conferences, not simply trained practitioners plus the few participants who have been “professionalized.” To reach this point, we and they need to examine current assumptions underlying PRA.

## ***VI. Conclusion***

I have raised a lot of questions and given no answers. Few in PRA are ready to enter the debate about underlying philosophies of knowledge, theory and assumptions. I can see why: most people use PRA because it leads to practical, useful action for disadvantaged people, just as it is. This is more interesting and satisfying for sensible people than entering into what is too often an esoteric debate. There is also a fear that some will not be able to enter the debate—that their educational preparation limits them, and that what is intended as an inclusive approach will become elitist. I think that once one drops the terminology used in the philosophy of knowledge, which is as user-friendly as a tangle of wire coat hangers, and gets down to the substance, no one will be omitted. Indeed, it is probably a Western assumption that discussions of philosophy these are reserved for a certain impractical elite, such as absent-minded professors. Then too, thinking about these things takes time, and if some specialize in it, does this create classes of practitioners, some of whom are theoretical terrorists and the others foot soldiers? If this happens, it would defeat everything I have been talking about, because the aim is to open this debate and share it with the people whom we are working with in other places.

Perhaps we should go back to the garden and look at our metaphors again—PRA is not a weed, a flower, a monster, but a hybrid. Hybrids are often stronger than their parents, can flourish in new circumstances, and can represent the best of previous generations on many sides. They can also be over-specialized, lack the robust hardiness of their parents, or produce some sterile creations. One never knows by simply gazing at plant, but all the information one needs is there, in the plant's genetic history.

So, I'd like to end on a practical note by suggesting that we gather together a group of forensic gardeners to explore these ideas together. We need special kind of people—just as the good gardener welcomes a challenge, is open to new ideas, and doesn't see her own ego as the focal point of the garden, we need people who are ready to foster new growth, who will not regard these issues as life and death battles, and will not obscure the debate with eye-crossing language. On my own wish-list would be Robert Chambers, of course; Richard Kearney, the Irish philosopher; the innovative educator Quarat'l'Ain Bakhteari, the educator/epistemologist Michael Quinn Patton, the anthropologists Ward and Ruth Goodenough, all in their own ways, expert cultivators, and all assembled in the spirit of David Kinsey, the great educator, gardener and participator.



### Notes

1. PRA is not invariably gender-sensitive: see the work of Irene Guijt and Meera Kaul Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1998.

2. I am using the word "practitioner" in lieu of anything better. I intend it to refer to people who use PRA approaches and methods, including people in local communities who have experienced the process and are now using it for their own purposes. However, my remarks are really directed at people who have assumed a professional or paraprofessional role in PRA work, because it is there that I think some of the difficulties originate.

3. Personal communication.

4. Chambers, Robert. 1996. Foreword to South-South Workshop on PRA: Attitudes and Behavior: A workshop report. Bangalore and Madurai.

5. Shweder, Richard A. 1984. "Anthropology's Romantic Rebellion Against the Enlightenment, or there's more to thinking than reason and evidence" in Shweder, Richard A. and Robert A. LeVine, eds. *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*. Some of these assumptions are more deeply embedded than others: the anthropologist Conrad Arensberg points out that Westerners tend to divide human activities into opposites, and then assign positive or negative judgments to the poles: the structure of the Indo-European languages seems to foster this (*Introducing Social Change: A Manual for Community Development*. Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971). For example, many words are thought to have an "opposite:" up/down, right/left, men/women, even extending into the ridiculous such as car/bus and horse/cow. What is pernicious, however, is the tendency to make two-fold judgments based on principle: moral-immoral, clean-dirty, good-bad. If I took a set of words and asked

which of the pair was "best," we would have good insight into the Western way of thinking: up/down; right/left; white/black; light/dark; good/bad; day/night; clean/dirty; men/women. People in other cultures don't necessarily think that way. PRA principles are frequently phrased in terms of these polarities, or "reversals" — center/periphery, standardized/differentiated, etc. It is a useful consciousness-raising device in the West; it is also a good instance of a Western non-rational assumption.

6. See, for example, Martin Leach and John Kamangira, 1997. "Shotgun Wedding or Happy Marriage? Integrating PRA and Sample Surveys in Malawi. *PRA Notes #28*, pp.42-46. London: IHED.

7. Guba, Egon G. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1989. *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA; Guba, Egon G. Ed. 1990. *The Paradigm Dialog*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.

8. Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA. *Methods*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.

9. R.D. Lang, in Waver, Thomas, ed. *To See Ourselves*, 1974.

10. Burling, Robbins, "Cognition and Componential Analysis: God's Truth or Hocus Pocus?" *American Anthropologist* 1964. 66:20-28.

11. Jo Abbot and Irene Guijt summarize a number of the issues in "Creativity and Compromise: PLA Notes #28. London: IHED.

12. Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA; Guba, Egon G. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1989. *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA;; Guba, Egon G. Ed 1990. The

Paradigm Dialog. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.

13. Patton, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

14. Bernstein, R. 1976. *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 111). We have seen this "argumentation" in feminism, for example, particularly in the area of feminism/the philosophy of science, with intriguing consequences for ideas about "reality" and "objectivity." An early exploration is found in S. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, and *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. S. Harding, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

14. Jamieson, Neil. 1987. "The Paradigmatic Significance of Rapid Rural Appraisal." (Paper presented to the International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal, Khon Kaen Thailand).

16. Richards, Paul; "Participatory Rural Appraisal: a Quick and Dirty Critique," and Cornwall, Andrea and Fleming, Sue, "Context and Complexity: Anthropological Reflections on PRA" both in *PRA Notes #24*, 1995. London: IIED.

17. May, Tim. 1993. *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

18. But even that belief may not be irreconcilable with Westerner discomfort with teleological explanations. As May (1993, *op. cit.*) points out, "positive scientific findings can be accommodated within belief systems. The 'Big Bang' theory of the origins of the universe, for instance, can be incorporated by arguing that God was responsible for that initial occurrence. There is constant interaction between scientific practice and societal beliefs which affect research practice."

19. Richards, Paul (1995) *op.cit.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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