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**27**

**'We Make Progress Because We are Lost':  
Critical Reflections on Co-producing  
Knowledge as a Methodology for  
Researching Non-Governmental Public  
Action**

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## Introduction

"In 1977 we thought that we knew where we were going. Today, by good fortune, we have no idea where we are going and we make progress because we are lost and we are forced to use the compass of Action Research. In those days, we thought that history was the bus to the New Jerusalem. Today our eyes are sharper, and we can see that history is a bus without a destination board" (Molano, 1998:8)

"When the group was working in what I experienced as 'collaboratively', there was a particular pace to participants' contributions, a sense of one idea building on another. Most importantly, there was an edge of uncertainty about the whole process, a wondering of where it all might be leading, but an acceptance (by most members of the group) to carry on without needing a fixed endpoint. It is only through enacting collaboration that I know these things..." (Ladkin, 2005:115)

Researching non-governmental public action raises the question: are we researching 'on' such action; are we increasing understanding 'of' such action or are we researching 'with' those involved in such action? This paper will explore how in our research with non-governmental actors we approached these questions. The original proposal was based on certain premises: the research should be interactive rather than extractive and should involve 'co-producing knowledge'. These premises were based on a general familiarity with action research methods, but there was no clarity about how they could be applied to a large-scale multi-site and multi lingual research project. There is, however, a family of action research methodologies with a fairly long history and our research endeavour is related to this family. The first section of this paper outlines some of its key components and reviews how it has articulated its epistemological basis. Has this methodological field of inquiry managed to establish a credible basis in a theory of knowledge? The second part explores how far our own efforts at co-producing knowledge measures up to some of these premises. As the quotes above suggest, methodologies which sincerely build research processes with practitioners and activists lose considerable control. The creativity lies in the unexpected and contingent. This is in tension with academic conventions, timescales and funding regimes. Co-producing knowledge has to navigate not disregard these tensions and the final section is a reflection on this. What are the pitfalls in practice to this methodology and how can they be overcome? Does our experience of using this method demonstrate that it not only produces a better 'quality' of knowledge, embedded in the experience and meanings researchers and research participants have articulated, but also contributes to change in ways that extractive inquiry methods do not?

## **The production of knowledge with the 'researched': the participatory methodologies family and their epistemological quest**

The idea of co-producing knowledge 'with the researched' emerges from a family of methodologies which attempt to "generate knowledge about a social system while at the same time, attempting to change it" (Lewin, 1945, quoted in Drummond and Themessl-Huber, 2007); which claim: "it is right and possible for poor and marginalised people to conduct their own analysis and take action" (Chambers, 1997:107) or which have built on feminist theory to show "the highly problematic nature of the representation of research" (Whose voices? Whose perspectives? Whose theories?) (Schrijvers, 1997:21); which is experiential and where "the subjects of the research contribute not only to the content of the research i.e. the activity that is being researched, but also to the creative thinking that generates, manages, and draws conclusions from, the research" (Heron, 1981:153) and which is based on a 'participatory worldview' rather than a positivist distinction between science and everyday life, where "the validity of our encounter with experience rests on the high quality, critical, self-aware, discriminating and informed judgments of the co-researchers" (Reason, 1994:11).

These methodologies share a challenge to the premise of positivism that truth is only found through standing outside the object of knowledge. The methodologies posit that truth, as far as it is possible to make claims to it, springs from the quality of the relationships built with the 'researched' i.e. from deeper engagement with rather than distance from the 'object' of knowledge. They also challenge methodologies which have sought to get closer to the lived reality of the researched, such as anthropological 'participant observation', but which do not aim to give the 'observed' a role in the research process. Wright and Nelson argue that participatory research is in fact the opposite of participatory observation:

"The principle of participatory research is that people become agents rather than objects of research and the priorities of this approach are opposite to participant observation. The first aim is for the research to increase participants' understanding of their situation and their ability to use this information, in conjunction with their local knowledge of the viability of different political strategies, to generate change for themselves. A very secondary aim is to contribute to disciplinary knowledge with its double edge of both advancing our understanding of hierarchies and power, and of contributing to world-ordering knowledge" (Wright and Nelson, 1995:51)

Cooperative inquiry, one member of the participatory research family, also distinguishes itself from mainstream qualitative research, where a range of methodologies are used to study people in their social settings and the meanings they give to their situation. However, unlike cooperative inquiry, mainstream qualitative research only negotiates access to people's settings, the practical management questions and (sometimes) interpretations of data (Heron, 1996:9). Cooperative inquiry, on the other hand, is a "political and epistemological commitment to researching *with* other people" (ibid), as will be discussed further later on.

Participatory research has reacted *against* positivism and other qualitative research methods. But over the decades it has also come to construct its own intellectual terrain and the deeper meaning of Heron's 'political and epistemological commitment'. There are differences within the family of methods, but these differences indicate that this is an open field of methodological innovation, still subject to critique and further innovation. The next sections will focus on four cousins in the family: Cooperative Inquiry, Feminist transformatory research, Action Research and the body of methodologies which have largely emerged from the global South and development thinkers and practitioners: Participative Action Research/Participatory Rural Appraisal/Participatory Learning and Action (PAR/PRA/PLA). It will first give an overview of how these different forms of participatory inquiry have evolved, and secondly, explore their quest for a distinctive epistemological foundation.

### *The Participatory Methodologies Family: A brief history*

Individuals have arrived at participatory research methodologies from a variety of disciplinary and personal experiences. The four cousins we are focusing on in this paper share much in common, despite distinct starting points and origins. One immediate tie is that of politics. Some methodologies emerged explicitly in the effervescence of the 1960s. John Heron, in his brief history of 'co-operative inquiry' dates it to 1968-6, and a personal and political discovery which led him to place the interacting values of autonomy and co-operation at the "heart of any truly human social science" (Heron, 1996:2). Action Research dates its formative influence earlier, to the social psychologist and pioneer in change through group participation, Kurt Lewin who died in 1947 (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Lewin too was a socialist and concerned with black and Jewish minority rights. From Lewin came the phrase which encapsulates some of the politics of the participatory methodologies family: "The best way to understand something is to try and change it"

(quoted in *ibid*:19). The appropriateness of the projected changes in social structures emerging from any Action Research are then proof of the effectiveness of the theory proposed for understanding those structures. Action research found its high moment in the 1960s when it was associated with radical politics. It has undergone a rebirth in recent years and practitioners still stress their commitment to social change and justice, as the editorial for the first issue of its dedicated journal, *Action Research* expressed it in 2003:

"We all can, and must, do our part to contribute to the goal of achieving greater social justice and each of us brings a unique set of experiences and talents to the task. But even given the diversity of disciplines, locations, and perspectives, there do seem to be certain characteristics common to many of us currently engaged in this practice. For one thing, we're basically a hybrid of scholar/activist in which neither role takes precedence. Our academic work takes place within and is made possible by our political commitments and we draw on our experience as community activists and organizers to inform our scholarship." (Brydon-Miller et al, 2003:20)

Although, this field of inquiry shares a progressive political outlook, voices from the global South, indigenous and female voices have had (as with other fields of knowledge production) to struggle to assert themselves. Feminism has played a significant role in opening up new ways of thinking about research and the subject/object distinction. The politicisation of women's struggles for equality also led many feminists to question patriarchy in disciplines and academic institutions as well as in epistemologies and methods. Peter Reason has even gone so far as to suggest that there is a gender distinction in Western forms of knowing which separate and give superiority to the intellect and conceptual language over experience and knowledge expressed intuitively or in practical, affective, analogical or spiritual forms: "language, concepts and analysis are among the archetypal qualities of the masculine; participation is among the archetypal qualities of the feminine" (Reason, 1994:13). There is a discussion to be had about the essentialist implications of the term 'archetypal', but the point resonates with Shriver's argument that as women researchers engaged with emergent ideas of action research, they also challenged the idea that women could be simply added in to it, and argued for changing the theoretical and methodological rules which shaped it (Schriver, 1995, reprinted 1997:20). Feminists began to use their subjective experience of being 'Othered' to problematise subject/object distinctions in anthropological research. They also recognised the challenges of creating more equitable relations in research processes, particularly in contexts of political repression and violence and of giving and



integrating voice into research. Schrivers (ibid:22) challenged the very vocabulary of the research process:

"I like to avoid terms like the 'researched', 'informants', respondents', and 'interviewees'. We need terms which do not create dichotomous, hierarchical oppositions between an active subject and a passive object. The term participants perhaps best expresses the more egalitarian relations between researcher and those with whom the research takes place."

The research project to be discussed in this paper intuitively chose this linguistic route. However, Shrivers reminds us that it is through feminist deconstruction of the gendered character of power that we arrive at a means to analyse the gendered practice of participation and participatory research. And such understanding has led women to place particular emphasis on empowering others to do their own research (Olesen, 1994).

Participative Action Research, Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action brought together activists and researchers from the global South, particularly South Asia and Latin America with activist researchers from North America, Europe and Australia. Many of the latter were involved in community-based approaches to knowledge production before they had a 'name' for their activities<sup>1</sup>. Canadian Bud Hall (Hall, 2005), considers participatory research to be a 'movement', which emerged with the establishment in 1976 of the International Participatory Research Network and expanded greatly over the ensuing decade. Its origins lay in the global South, and Hall (2005) records an historic visit in 1971 to Tanzania by Paulo Freire, which he organised. Hall (2005:5) quotes from one of Freire's talks during his visit, words which express the importance of the experience of the Global South to the premises of this field of inquiry:

"I think that adult education in Tanzania should have as one of its main tasks to invite people to believe in themselves. It should invite people to believe that they have knowledge. The people must be challenged to discover their historical existence through the critical analysis of their cultural production: their art and their music. One of the characteristics of colonization is that in order for the colonizers to oppress the people easily they convinced themselves that the colonized have a mere biological life and never an historical experience."

Paulo Freire has been a major influence on rethinking knowledge, learning and change and on the participatory research family. My own introduction to this field comes from its Latin American sources, notably the work of Freire, but also, Alfredo Molano and Orlando

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<sup>1</sup> Interview John Gaventa, 30/6/08

Fals Borda in Colombia. This work was always deeply political and embedded in the failure of mainstream post Second World War development discourses to address poverty, inequality and oppression. Development practitioners and academics from the North built on this body of thinking and practice from the global South and helped give it a global significance. The field has been associated with radical left politics but at the same time, it has distanced itself from revolutionary parties as such. Alfredo Molano explains:

"We who adopted Action Research inherited two forms of radicalism: fundamentalism, tied to the Cross and the sword; and political radicalism, a road opened up by Mariategui, Gaitán and Che Guevara. Our radicalism was tempered by the militant tolerance of an Ulf Himmelsstrand, and Andrew Pearse, a Paulo Freire or a Rodolfo Stavenhagen. In most of our papers, there were direct references to the class struggle and frequent quotations from classical Marxists or the famous intellectuals of the left. But it must also be said that as a matter of principle, Action Research distanced itself from revolutionary parties and the schematic discourse of the Communists....Action Research was more an invitation to skepticism, opening the door to criticism with greater freedom, and to commitment with greater sincerity."

Distance from orthodoxies and closeness to the everyday lives of poor people characterise the agenda of those who engage in Participative Action Research in the global South. In 1977, the First World Symposium on PAR was held in Cartagena, Colombia; the United Nations Research Institution for Social Development (UNRISD) launched its Popular Participation Programme that same year, and the premise that rural development required listening and learning from the rural poor rather than imposing paradigms upon them was taken forward in institutions and organisations around the world.

The main pioneers in the 1970s were from the global South (Fals Borda, 2006). Many of the early proponents of the methodology from North as well as the South had worked with peasants, such as Andrew Pearse from the UK, Gerrit Huizer from the Netherlands, Molano and Fals Borda from Colombia. Myles Horton in Tennessee set up the Highlander Center, based on his upbringing in the rural South of the US, which taught him that poor and working people are their own best teachers. John Gaventa, joined Highlander in the late 1970s and was doing research on land tenure patterns with Appalachian mining communities when Bud Hall visited Highlander and invited him to the Participatory Action Research meeting in Lubjana in 1981. There he met figures such as Rajesh Tandon who founded PRIA in India and Orlando Fals Borda.

From engagement with peasant and rural life under threat from capitalist modernisation, state and landowner violence and 'development' itself, Rapid Rural Appraisal emerged as a means of enabling peasants to teach the 'experts'. This later became PRA/PLA, associated with Robert Chambers and others. A range of other participatory methodologies have arisen from these which rather than research tools, offer a range of approaches for empowered learning. They foster alternative forms of knowledge production, where people set agendas and gather and analyse data, using diverse methods based on oral traditions, visual forms, music and drama. From this branch of the family, came the challenge from the global South to those northern researchers engaged in action research and other such methods to recognise the contribution from that part of the world. But PAR, PRA and PLA were also challenged by feminists such as Pat Maguire and Yolanda Wadsworth to recognise and address their own patriarchal character.

All these participatory research methodologies sought to challenge the power relationships involved in different forms of knowledge production. Expert knowledge loses its centrality, and no longer is research about extracting information from the poor in order to generate disciplinary and 'world-ordering knowledge' (Wright and Nelson, 1995, reprinted 1997:51) but:

"The aim is to use comparative and theoretical knowledge to enable participants to understand their situation and to work out how to act upon it. It has been grandly claimed that the purpose of social investigation changes from creating expert knowledge as professional property, to generating citizens' knowledge." (ibid:51/52)

A particular engagement with radical but not orthodox politics shaped this family of methodologies and led them to subvert mainstream understandings of the meaning and use of knowledge. But they are not all setting out to do the same thing. In 1997, the members of the 'family' and associates came together in Cartagena again. The meeting was called, the World Congress of Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, Space and Time, and it brought the Participatory Action Research family together with the group which had coalesced around Acton Research, Action Learning and Process Management associated in particular with Peter Reason's Research centre on co-operative inquiry in the University of Bath's School of Management. The event also marked the spread of the idea of participation in social, economic and political research and its institutional embeddedness in some 32 Schools in five continents (Fals Borda, 1998:xii).

The convergence conference took place as participatory methods and ideas spread and came to be taught by the time of the 1997 conference in at least 2,500 universities in 61 countries (Fals Borda, 2006:353). At the same time, it came to be appropriated by organisations which did not come out of radical politics. The World Bank and many development donors had begun in the 1990s to embrace participatory methodologies and 'mainstreaming' was forcing this field of practice to sharpen its theoretical and political edge. Robert Chambers (1995, reprinted 1997) explored the opportunities and risks as the paradigm of development shifted from things to people. While a progressive step in some respects, it became entangled in what he describes as "normal professionalism, normal bureaucracy, normal careers and normal teaching" which drive "top-down standardisation and pressures for speedy action" (ibid:33). One reason why this appropriation of radical ideas for mainstream application was possible, may be linked to the under theorisation of this field of practice. John Heron (1996:7) has argued that Action Research and Participatory Action Research have tended not to focus on theory building or constructing a research method for exploring any aspect of theory of the human condition. Rather they are methods of research into ongoing practice by practitioners for practitioners. PAR is more concerned with improvisation than the formal cycles of learning and action emphasised in Action Research. It also depends on highly educated and committed facilitators working with poorly educated and impoverished people. They all share, he acknowledges, a concern with social oppression, however he makes the following distinction between PAR and co-operative inquiry (ibid:8):

"The initiating researcher in PAR goes out from a privileged setting to co-operate with and help to liberate people in an underprivileged setting, and leaves his or her own privileged setting unchanged. Co-operative inquirers who are exploring the first steps in living in a self-generating culture see their privileged setting as deformed and seek a transformation of it."

While this may not be entirely fair, as many PAR researchers will be fully aware of the contradiction of their position as privileged facilitators of processes for the non-privileged, nevertheless the distinction provokes an important question. Despite some shared political roots, are these participatory methods trying to achieve the same goals? What kind of knowledge do they claim to produce and what kind of change? How in practice do power relationships become transformed within and beyond participant groups? Even within the methodologies such power relationships play out, between North and South participants for example. As Peter Reason argues in his comparison between three approaches to participatory inquiry (1994), for those involved in PAR, their cooperative

inquiry cousins are caught up in psychological and micro processes of small groups to the detriment of wider political questions, while for cooperative inquirers, PAR writings "romanticise the goodness and democratic tendencies of the common people", and do not consider sufficiently how participants in democratic movements need to challenge their own approaches to power. Action Research and PAR/PLA may have given less attention to these questions for the reasons Heron alludes to, nevertheless, and perhaps because of the risk of appropriation and subjection to normal professional logics, progress has been made on the epistemological foundations of all these methods. There is still an element of theoretical and philosophical eclecticism, but some epistemological premises have begun to emerge more clearly over the last three decades or more. The following discussion tries to elicit some of the key premises involved as an entry point into the reflection on our own research methodology.

### *The Epistemological Quest*

As well as shared political roots, some of these methods also acknowledge a shared epistemological heritage. The rejection of positivist premises, i.e. that the world is a knowable set of objective elements waiting to be known and that in order to know, the inquirer should and can be distant, outside or neutral to these elements, has led practitioners of action research methods to hermeneutics. As an interpretive epistemology, hermeneutics assumes the world is subjective (Greenwood and Levin, 1998: 68), and that the knower is as much part of this subjective world as the object of knowing. All forms of action research and co-operative inquiry emphasise the need to understand people's subjective experience and the meanings they give it in context. Phenomenology is another philosophical source for action researchers and one which developed a modern take on hermeneutics, which is in fact an ancient field of study of religious texts. Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, and later Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have been particularly influential and have highlighted the importance of the historicity of human experience, its location in specific time, history and culture. Once this is recognised:

"it is clear that we must distinguish between some notion of an 'objective' understanding or interpretation which is unattainable and meaningless, and reach for an interpretation which is 'intersubjectively valid for all the people who *share the same world* at a given time in history'. Understanding can be seen as a fusion of two perspectives: that of the phenomenon itself, whether it be an ancient text, the life of an historical figure, or a current

social or psychological event or process; and that of the interpreter, located in his or her own life, in a larger culture, and in an historical point in time" (Rowan and Reason, 1981:133)

Most participatory and action researchers (cf Fals Borda, 1997) from our family pay tribute to phenomenology and the questions it has posed around "knower and known, meaning, interpretation and truth" (Ladkin, 2005:109). They are searching for alternative ways of thinking and knowing to the 'hardwiring' in Western mental processes derived originally from Cartesian and Enlightenment philosophies and which obliged social scientists to seek synergies between their methods and explanatory processes and those of the natural sciences. The pursuit of what is true and false, of precision, measurement and linear causality have been challenged in the course of late twentieth century social science, but nevertheless are still reference points for most social scientists and those making social policy. Participatory and action researchers have had to work particularly hard to find and justify the epistemological challenges of their methods and gain acceptance in the academy. If a new way of researching human and social processes implies a new way of *thinking* and *interpreting*, how does the participatory researcher distinguish his or her interpretations and the kinds of 'truth' which the research generates? How does the participatory researcher defend validity claims?

Co-operative inquiry was the first of our methods to acknowledge these challenges and has arguably gone furthest in addressing them. As such it forms an important benchmark for assessing our own co-production of knowledge method. This circle of researchers have attempted to build an epistemology which takes into account the subjectivity of experiences of researcher and research subjects and how their form of inquiry can generate a better quality of knowledge. It is of better quality, it is argued, because it is derived from the meaningful experiences of all participants, is relevant to everyday lives and can lead to change which is self-generated and appropriate to those lives. The following key principles have been extracted from the efforts of cooperative inquirers and other action researchers to clarify and justify their field of knowledge.

- '*A personal, circular and contradictory process of knowing*' (Rowan and Reason, 1981: 136). Cooperative and participatory approaches to research stress the cycles and circularity, the 'moving to and fro between experience and reflection' (Heron, 1996:4) of their methods. There is a process of acknowledging prior (assumed) knowledge of the whole and allowing this to be corrected and deepened by knowledge of the parts as further knowledge is generated and wider contexts of knowledge are revealed, in a

dialectical process of change through conflict and opposition (Rowan and Reason, 1981:130) 'Going round in circles' ceases to have the negative connotations it does for traditional logic; 'we have as it were, to leap into the circle of understanding before we can start' (ibid:135).

- '*Contingent potentialities*'. In a more recent attempt to further theorise the field of Action Research, Drummond and Themessl-Huber(2007:435) have sought to explore in more detail how 'contingent potentialities' can be liberated when you 'leap into the circle' from the perspective of Action Research. The authors use the work of Giles Deleuze and his distinction between life as the 'actual' in multiple and diverse forms (from cells to stones to thought to consciousness, to actions and action research projects), forms which are in reality always becoming, and the interaction of these with the 'virtual'(cf. Deleuze 1994:263-265). The virtual is a realm beyond the conscious mind, of unthought possibilities which can nevertheless be actualised depending on how we relate to and what we affirm in the actual (Drummond and Themessl-Huber, 2007). They can return to the actual as conscious thoughts and feelings. The authors use the example of a waste ground which a group of residents want to turn into a community market garden. As they affirm this potentiality of the waste ground, the waste ground itself has become something different, it has become plans for something else. Allowing for open-ended, previously unthought potentialities in participatory research processes distinguishes it from linear, output oriented and structured projects of inquiry.
- *Intelligent Agency, the Researcher and the 'Other'*: Co-operative Inquirers and Action researchers think a great deal about their own subjectivity in the research process. John Heron in his early attempt to build a philosophical basis for new paradigm research invokes as a starting point the identity of the 'researcher'. He or she sees him or herself as an intelligent and self-directing agent, within relatively determining conditions of inner needs and environmental factors. The researcher, argues Heron, cannot apply to research subjects a model which is logically distinct to explanations for his or her own research behavior: 'Hence my subjects become my co-researchers: together we decide what possibilities for intelligent self-determination are to be investigated through action. If the subjects are *not* privy to the research thinking, *they will not be functioning fully as intelligent agents*. For a self-determining person is one who generates, or takes up freely as his own, the thinking that determines his action' (Heron, 1981:22, author's italics). This establishes one of the guiding principles of cooperative inquiry: a valid science of persons must engage with human beings as persons. The separation between the researchers who do the thinking and the subjects who do the behaving is simply inconsistent with

such a premise. Here, the very ambiguity in the concept of 'subject' often clouds the debate. Subject might refer to the autonomous person or someone who is subject 'to' another authority including the scientific researchers:

"In a science of persons, all those engaged in the inquiry process enter the process as persons, bringing with them their intelligence, their intentionality, and their ability to reflect on experience and to enter relations with others – and, of course, also their capacity for self-deception, for consensus collusion, for rationalisation, and for refusal to see the obvious that also characterises human beings" (Reason, 2003:205).

- *Critical Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity*: How is subjectivity in the research process taken into account while remaining open to full engagement with the 'Other'? Critical subjectivity is partly about the reflexivity which enables the researcher to notice and acknowledge his or her frames of reference in an inquiry. This has become a fairly widespread practice in non positivist social science. But it has been suggested, that this runs the danger of degenerating into excessive self indulgence unless it is balanced by "curiosity and attention to 'Other'" (Ladkin, 2005:119). Such attention enables the researcher to encounter the 'Other' more fully on their own terms, consistent with phenomenological preoccupations with engaging with phenomena in ways which enable them to speak for themselves. Critical subjectivity, in other words, is closely related to critical intersubjectivity. In co-operative inquiry, there is a will to recognise the value of direct and meaningful encounter between human persons who create language together, something which in itself symbolises shared vision and experience. Traditional researchers generated not a shared view of persons from their encounter but statements 'about their subjects' who do not contribute to the statements: "The result is a set of alienated statements hanging in an interpersonal void: statements about persons not authorised by those persons in relation. For a science of persons as agents, my considered view of your reality without consulting you is a very different matter from our considered view of our reality." (Heron, 1981:27).
- *Truth and the extended epistemology*. Cooperative Inquiry seeks to address the questions of truth and validity in research through what has become known as the 'extended epistemology'. It does not seek a postmodern relativist solution to these questions, but a lateral one rooted in efforts to build an intellectual, philosophical and practical challenge to positivism. In other words, the form of knowing most associated with science, which Heron calls "propositional knowledge" is extended to include at least three other forms. *Propositional knowledge* is a claimed fact or truth about the world,



which is most associated with scientific statement. Propositions, it is argued (Heron, 1981:27) influence and inform our perception of the world, but they do not constitute the world nor is perception reducible to those propositions. *Experiential* knowledge is also part of any process of inquiry. This is knowledge which arises from knowing a person, place or process in face to face encounter and interaction. Such knowledge transcends the propositional. The propositional enables me to construe what is before me through linguistic ability to describe it in words and concepts. Experiential knowing "combines empathy and imaginal grasp" (Heron, 1996:205), and in later formulations by John Heron it is understood as the grounding knowledge, which propositional knowledge complemented by *practical knowledge* are derived from. Practical knowledge encompasses the skills and what Heron (ibid:27) calls 'knack' or proficiencies which cannot be fully acquired from written instructions. There is a fourth non-linguistic form of construing and knowledge in space and time, which Heron (ibid:28) calls *presentational*. This is linked to imagination and an ability to see something as part of a spatio-temporal whole which transcends the immediately present. It enables humans to orient themselves in space and time and coordinate perception and action in their environment, just as animals who have no linguistic capacity have to do all the time. Humans can construe the unique spatio-temporal signature of a presence in its wholeness and interpret this through words and creative form, as artists and poets do especially well.<sup>2</sup> Presentational construing can also feed into propositional construing which can conceptualise linguistically what is seen, heard, and felt. However, total presentational construing of a person is still grasped extra-propositionally and needs to be cultivated as a way of knowing. Some anthropologists recognise this when they include non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, in their observations. For co-operative inquiry, humans construe presences in time and space more completely through interaction with the 'Other' rather than observation of the 'Other' or observations of the 'Other's' interactions. Empirical knowledge of persons for the cooperative inquirer is most adequate when an interdependence evolves between propositional, practical and experiential knowledge combined with the fullest kind of presentational construing:

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<sup>2</sup> Heron has refined his understanding of presentational knowledge over time and described it in (Heron: 1996:33) as 'evident in intuitive grasp of the significance of imaginal patterns as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms'. See also Heron, 1992

"when researcher and subject are fully present to each other in a relationship of reciprocal and open inquiry , and when each is open to construe how the other manifests as a presence in space and time. And knowing how to construe and encounter persons in this way is a skill or knack, which is a critical sort of practical knowledge involved in doing effective research on persons" (ibid:31).

Knowledge is validated when each of the four kinds of knowledge is validated by its own internal criteria for preventing distortion and in the skills required for that, and by its interdependence and congruence with all the other forms of knowing (Heron, 1996:33). Cooperative Inquiry seeks to fully distinguish ideas of validity and truth from positivism, even critiquing non-positivist social science which nevertheless seeks to assess validity in reassuring terms of quality, trustworthiness, credibility and transferability etc, including a version of truth as corresponding "with facts" (Heron, 1981:160). It has developed validity procedures which address the problems which can arise through "uncritical subjectivity" (Heron, 1996: 131-157), both in informative and transformative inquiry. These procedures include the idea of inquiry cycles of interaction between reflection and action (Heron, 1988). While not questioning the terms 'truth' and validity' it seeks to re-ground them in acknowledgement of the different ways of knowing and the human mind's creative capacity rather than the existence of an objective truth waiting to be discovered by one form of propositional knowledge. Recognition that knowledge comes through 'mutual awakening' (Heron, 1996:14), or participatory knowing which recognises that truth claims rest on subjectivity, is critical to the undermining of the positivist claim of the researcher's objectivity as a reliable and often categorical claim to truth.

- *Action and knowledge* The political character of our family of participatory methods has meant that the types of truths revealed "should be emergent but of importance to those involved in their disclosure" (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:12). Reason and Torbert (2001) have argued in a paper which sought to strengthen further the epistemological basis for action research, that the 'action turn' could be considered as significant as the 'linguistic turn' in realising the transformational potential of the social sciences. The action turn takes the diverse critiques of positivism in the course of the twentieth and twenty first centuries and argues for a vitalised linkage between propositional and experiential knowledge which enables those involved in action situations to understand them better and act in them more effectively:

"We argue that since all human persons are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct taken-for-granted realities, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes *directly* to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are part"

(authors' italics,

<http://people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/Papers/TransformationalSocialScienc.htm> downloaded 11.4.08, pg 4 of 33)

- *Democratising Content or Method: Strong and Weak Co-operative Inquiry* Cooperative inquiry not only distinguishes between traditional forms of research where the subjects of the research "are kept naïve about the research propositions and make no contribution at all to formulation as the stage of hypothesis-making, at the stage of final conclusions, or anywhere in between" (Heron, 1981:19), but also between weak and strong forms of cooperative inquiry. In its strong form, the subject actively contributes to creative thinking at all these stages of the research process. In its weak form, the subject is merely informed of the research propositions and invited to assent or dissent. Another aspect of this distinction is that between democratising content of the research so that co-researchers take part in all decisions about the research, and democratising method, which goes beyond this and includes operation decisions including what methods are to be used to democratise the content (Heron, 1991:9).

## **Co-producing knowledge in practice: challenges from co-researching municipal innovations in non-governmental public action**

"A true human inquiry needs to be based firmly in the experience of those it purports to understand, to involve a collaboration between 'researcher' and 'subjects' so that they may work together as co-researchers, and to be intimately involved in the lives and praxis of these co-researchers" (Rowan and Reason, 1981: 133)

The benchmarks of cooperative inquiry are very demanding of a research project. They are in a way more demanding than Action Research and PAR/PRA/PLA. They challenge academic institutions to radically rethink the endeavour of research. But the very high standards which are set are also a permanent reference against which to assess claims about involving the researched in a research process. They help us avoid rhetorical claim making to impress funders and audiences. They help reflect on the power dynamics in all spaces of human interaction, including research spaces where academics bring privileged access to resources of time and money with them as well as benefits of education and access to institutions and platforms. It is incumbent upon all of us who aspire to conduct rigorous research which is driven by ethics and principles of social change and social justice, to take these benchmarks seriously at least. In the process of discovering their limitations in practice, they can also be refined and theory and practice reconciled more fully. To be fair to some of those contributing to building the foundational principles of the field of inquiry, they recognise the challenges current realities pose:

"Ideally there is full reciprocity so that each person's agency is fundamentally honored in both the exchange of ideas and in the action. This does not necessarily mean that all those involved in the inquiry enterprise contribute in identical ways. An inquiry group, as any human group, has to struggle with the problems of inclusion, influence and intimacy; people will take different roles, and there will be differences in both the quality and quantity of members' contributions. In particular, one or more members may have initiated the inquiry as part of their organizational role or more informally; these members or others may act as facilitators of the inquiry process. How the group manages these potential differences in power will affect the quality of its work. Thus while ideally full consensus will be reached on all decisions, this is rarely practical; at a minimum everyone involved needs to be initiated into the inquiry process, and give their free and informed assent to all decisions about process and outcome." (Reason, 1994: 326)

Our own research project aimed to analyse with participants in new spaces for municipal participation how they impacted upon those spaces, what they learnt and whether they changed anything. The research methodology aimed also to strengthen their participation in accordance with their agendas for change. We mostly worked with non-governmental participants but in two cases, we worked with municipal employees (Medellin) and with political representatives (Salford). In the UK contexts we did not work with the poorest of the communities, but with a middle range of community and voluntary sector professionals (Bradford and Manchester) as well as (Manchester) with a grass roots community group. In the Latin American contexts we mostly worked with poor communities, but in one case (Medellin) with a more middle class neighbourhood as well, which was participating in the participatory planning and budget process. In one case (Porto Alegre) we did work with some of the poorest of the city's residents, the rubbish recyclers; but here the field research was unable to pursue the methodology. The field researcher in this case, has argued that when working with people on the permanent edge of survival such methods are problematic. In terms, therefore of exploring the challenges of co-producing knowledge, we included a range of social actors in varying positions to power and authority and access to resources.

We worked in the global South and the global North; our field researchers ranged from recent postgraduates, to experienced academics, to action researchers from the non-governmental sector<sup>3</sup>. Our research process included six research sites, a total of 14 case studies, in four different countries and Spanish, Portuguese and English languages. The project is much more complex in its demands than is common to the participatory research methods family, where they are more often based on single site projects and discrete processes. We could assess our methodological approach through each sub-local case study level. However, the project also aimed to transcend the sub-local and contribute to local city level learning, trans-city/ transnational learning and ultimately theoretical insight grounded in the knowledge co-produced from these multiple layers about whether and in what contexts new spaces of participation offer meaningful opportunities to transform policy or redirect it towards the (differentiated) needs of participants. To complicate the picture further, this grounded theoretical knowledge was intended also to offer practical guidance in the policy field i.e. we hoped that the research would feed into practical thinking about participation and participatory institutions. Multiple

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<sup>3</sup> They were Zander Navarro in Porto Alegre, Omar Uran in the case of Medellin, Margarita Lopez Mayo in Caracas, Sergio Baierle in Porto Alegre, Davina Miller in Salford, Heather Blakey in Bradford and Lucy Brill in Manchester.

feedback and influencing objectives such as these are becoming more common in larger research projects, so in a way, this research tests the viability of bringing new principles to contemporary discourses around taking research into practice. We will begin our reflections on the co-production of knowledge dimensions of our research by comparing our premises with those of the participatory inquiry family and then exploring the practice.

### *Our Co-Production of Knowledge Premises*

- **A weak rather than strong participatory inquiry** We can characterise our research endeavour as on the weak side of participatory inquiry. The original research design was drawn up by one person, due to the logic of the research funding process. The field researchers were chosen for their known commitment to a progressive socio-political agenda of challenge to inequality and poverty and a critical position towards positivist inquiry. However, they did not all have a conscious option for co-producing knowledge; two at least were closer to the critical individual intellectual model. The methodology was discussed with all field researchers and refined in our two team meetings and two subsequent visits to each of the field sites by the research director. However, it was never going to be a uniform approach. Some field researchers were less connected to the social activists and participants they were to research with than others. Travel and logistical difficulties often got in the way of building greater connectedness. Researchers trained in the separating and distancing logic of the academy, do not find the transition to a more equitable logic that easy. It is counter cultural as far as the academy is concerned. Equally, the accumulated history of research used in extractive ways and the distance between the intellectual and the lived world which has resulted, mean that building relationships between academics and non academics, and in particular with poor and disadvantaged people has many preconceptions to overcome on both sides. Sometimes there is animosity or cynicism, but more often and particularly amongst the poor, simply no recognition that they could contribute to 'knowledge'. Our main premise was that the 'researched' would agree to collaborate with the field researchers because the research would help them to reflect on their social reality and practice. However, given that the key framing propositions of the research did not include the participation of the researched, this premise had to be tested by doing and would be weakened by lack of ownership from birth. The first stage of the research was to see how far different groups would be interested in such collaboration and then to work with them on whether the research questions we had outlined without their participation cohered with issues of concern to them. We developed a methodology which would involve continuous dialogue

with the researched around emerging issues, and we aimed to 'democratise the content' of the research whenever we could, by changing our pathway according to responses. We did not however, include our research participants in the operational decisions. The extent to which we shifted direction was the decision of the researchers not the 'researched'.

- **Data Collection and Participatory Inquiry** Cooperative inquirers have challenged the non positivist researchers who include so-called 'hard data' components in their research for purposes of enhancing credibility with the mainstream. This research did combine methods, and reflects contradictions in a research process which must appease a predominantly positivist policy and research environment while attempting non positivist research. Nor were we able to develop a process which involved our research participants in the collection of data, something which injects a participatory component into the rigorous gathering of information. The latter would have been very time consuming for the scale of our project, and is an example of sacrificed participatory components to funding and time logics. Our research data collection took the form of participant observation and field diaries. Participant observation was intended to mean taking part in participatory activities with our research participants, rather than classical anthropological distanced observation. Indeed, the aim was to support reflection and encourage analysis amongst them in a way which would strengthen their change agendas. As will be discussed later, in practice, this took slightly different forms in all of our case studies. We also conducted interviews with participants and other informants, in a positivist effort at some kind of triangulation of evidence. We used Nvivo software to add rigour to the qualitative data, and this is another point where the research method does become exclusionary of research participants. The data is reviewed and analysed by the researchers rather than with the participants. The project would have had to have been far less ambitious to have allowed the time for co-analysis. This division of labour does generate a differentiation in terms of processing knowledge which creates distance between researcher and researched.
- **Feedback and Iteration** The compensation for this in the design of the research was in the feedback processes, which aimed to ensure that analysis was shared with research participants in ways which enabled their knowledge to reshape the propositions of the field researchers. This feedback was expected to be continuous as researchers and participants built their relationships and knowledge flowed 'to and fro' between them. There was also cross site knowledge sharing and iteration, through the presentation and discussion of a document in all three languages which summarised the key findings of

the research. The exposure of research participants in each research site to the learning from the other was intended to generate new thinking with a more conceptual content from the comparative elements within and between research sites. The outcomes of the discussions fed new dimensions into the research. Another compensation we have introduced to our lopsided and weak effort at participatory inquiry, is to offer to our research participants the 'right to reply' in the final publication.

- **Extended Epistemology : Recognizing multiple forms of knowledge** The idea of co-producing knowledge recognises that knowledge is plural and that our research participants provide knowledge which is turned into propositional knowledge - by the researchers - for dissemination to academic and policy audiences. It is the recognition of the value of the experiential knowledge which propositional knowledge draws on, that formed a core element in the methodology and which encouraged field researchers to work with their participants not to merely extract from them, and to value how they articulated their interactions in whatever ways they expressed them. Experiential knowledge does not always, however, include critical self reflection on experience for various reasons. There was a difference even within our Porto Alegre cases, between the group of popular educators with whom we worked, AEPPA, from a poor region of the city but one where local women had been through a long process of such self reflection and had reached the point where they could progress claims outside the locality, and the (mostly female) rubbish recyclers. In the former, the research identified issues such as the dangers of concentration of leadership and the feedback resulted in a serious discussion in which it was clear that the women had already taken steps to address this and the research only stimulated further discussion and reflection. In the latter case, various factors had "resulted in an inward movement towards the daily routines of the (recycling) unit" (Navarro, 2008:4), and co-production of knowledge proved very difficult. Our research did not include presentational, imaginal knowledge forms, though art, media and other expressions of social experience might in hindsight have been fruitful. The research did rest on 'knack' or practical skills, which in the case of our field researchers was often the ability to build horizontal and transparent relationships with research participants. This is not easy when academics are viewed by the 'researched' as privileged or founts of all valid knowledge, or a potential source of resources in a few instances. Such attitudes are an ongoing legacy of our narrow view of knowledge, which is also mirrored in academics' views of themselves. Co-production of knowledge to be successful requires self-challenge on these assumptions, something which often takes place in hindsight rather than in the process itself. In our own research, there was a



productive tension between the field researchers in terms of their individual generational, gendered, class and professional social identities and locations. These factors facilitated or diminished the potential for our methodology to fulfil its premises, and are a source of learning about what is possible and what is not.

- **Ethical premises and difficult questions: challenging as well as collaborating in co-production settings** Our premise for this research was maximum transparency about aims and objectives and our own capacities. This ethics was a fundamental ingredient of the methodology, however it does not guide researchers when dealing with specific difficulties arising between researchers and researched. The relationship between the two is based mostly on a verbal agreement, or sometimes a written compact. One of our researchers did use the latter. Questions of anonymity in citation are agreed and what information can be used for which purposes. However, the participatory inquiry family does not discuss enough the conflicts and difficulties which can arise in cooperative research methodologies. There is a very thorough discussion of power and knowledge (eg. Cornwall and Gaventa, 2008) . However, inequalities and differences generate resentments, anger and resistance to learning new things and sharing knowledge. Research participants are embedded in complex situations and these often generate hard questions about power relationships in themselves. How far does the researcher challenge participants (the reverse should also be possible, of course)? If the research generates knowledge and understanding about problematic questions, what is the responsibility of the field researcher towards the research participants? These questions are relevant to a number of our case study settings, but were not as clear as they might have been when we embarked on the fieldwork.
- **Unexpected and Unpredictable: Learning from Being Lost** Co-production of knowledge is a less certain and controlled methodology than traditional research. This is its strength. It celebrates contingency and the unexpected, as these are indicative of a robust, sincere and democratic engagement between researcher and researched. It is not always comfortable, as planning and certainty are much more reassuring methodologies for the researcher who needs to reach a conclusion about an issue and draw – often unnaturally – a process to closure through the propositional knowledge generated at the end of a certain time frame. However, co-production retains the freshness of messy social reality. Researcher and the researched embark on a journey together in which knowledge is continuously exchanged and practice developed along new lines. Our aim with this research was to value and support any unexpected and emergent new areas of thinking and practice as well as new relationships. Given that the

research team had very different experiences, some much more embedded in formal academic discourse and practice and others much more in action and praxis, a minimal set of principles was better than a fully elaborated plan. But, another component was that this research genuinely aimed to be guided by process and context. It was from the beginning an attempt to learn by doing and assess how far recognition of the 'researched' as an active contributor of knowledge strengthened not only the quality of the knowledge but also the capacity of the knowledge to influence change. The connections which this research methodology enabled us to build in the UK with the non academic world, resulted in the award of three practitioner fellowships<sup>4</sup>, who made use of our research in ways which were greatly strengthened by the autonomy of their own funding to pursue agendas of their own. These have enabled the research to generate knowledge for wider audiences. Although there is no direct equivalent in Latin America, we have examples of a distinct range of unexpected knowledge and learning generated from this research. In Medellin, for example, there was an interesting cross fertilisation between the grass roots communities we worked with and the public employees, who were very active in our feedback workshop and demonstrated how much they had used the opportunity of involvement in the research process to reflect on their practice. Our original expectation had been that it was the grass roots communities who would mostly engage with the research to strengthen their agendas. In Bradford, our research with the practitioners who were experimenting with participatory budgeting has fed into the government decision to expand such experiments nationally.

### *Co-Production of Knowledge in Practice*

Our 14 cases studies have thrown up a vast range of issues with respect to the implementation of the research method in practice. This final section captures a selected number of issues with illustrations from our cases.

**Prior Relationship between Researcher and Researched** It helps a great deal when researchers have an organic relationship with the researched, prior histories, and prior trust. Academics stepping out of the university have to overcome years of academic training, career incentives and reputation risks in deciding to work in collaboration with non academics and particularly poor communities who are very used to thinking of

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<sup>4</sup> Practitioner Fellowships were awarded as part of the NGPA programme on a competitive basis and have enabled several of the projects in the programme to support practitioners to do an independent but related piece of research.

themselves as 'ignorant'. In our Bradford case study, the researcher found that assumptions about how academics work had to be overcome in order to build the relationships required for co-production to work. She found an expectation amongst people that research only exists to further the careers of academics, and that she was expected to guard her 'data' (Blakey, 2008). Our research showed that in the cases where the researchers were embedded in histories of action research with the researched or other relationships, the fluidity and sustainability of the relationships was strongest and such suspicions did not have to be overcome. Where the relationships had to be built from scratch, trust had to be gained, and given that we had not built the research project with our chosen partners, the challenge of ownership was greater. In one case in Bradford, one of the prospective partners felt they did not have the time to work collaboratively, and this might have been different if we had built the research with them. In one of the Porto Alegre case studies, the field researcher had great difficulty getting to the activist base of the partner group as the leader acted as a gatekeeper and very little could be done without his permission. The feedback process, which included raising this problem, proved much more protracted and difficult than expected, although the field researcher had given considerable support to the activities of the group and had earned a great deal of respect. In Caracas, the research was greatly enriched by the relationship of trust the researcher built, although she did not have prior relationships. However it is not clear how much the research findings subsequently benefited the groups we worked with. This was due to objective circumstances and contingent events, however, as much as researcher/researched relationship history. In one case, government policy shifts left the project partners in limbo over the future; in this case the research findings did generate critical discussion and a contextual understanding of what had happened, but was not able to strengthen the progress of the group. But in the other, a landslide destroyed the houses and water pipes which were being laid as part of the participatory water delivery process which was our case study. This meant that the research findings could only be handed over rather than discussed in depth. A spin off from this work, however, was the audiovisual archive with photos and videos of the two year participatory water improvement process which the field researcher created and made available to the research participants. This record will help the group to keep a record of their activities and the subsequent tragedy, which may serve them in the future (Lopez Maya, 2008) Prior relationships with the researched can, however, also lead to dilemmas around what kind of support a researcher should give when problems of survival emerge. In one of the Manchester case studies, the partner organisation which

was known to the researcher entered a funding crisis as the research began and the activities the research would have focused on could not be taken forward. This led to a challenge for the researcher who did not wish to abandon the group. In the end, the case study was used to reflect with the group some of the reasons why their particular approach to grassroots work had become difficult to fund.

**Agenda Convergence, Divergence and Vacuums** The assumption we had made was that the non-governmental actors we would work with had a clear agenda of what they wanted to achieve and would happily recognise the value of engagement with academics. This was not the case in all of our case studies. We mostly avoided the temptation to step into this vacuum, and tried instead to support the group's agenda construction through the research. However, it did mean that our aims were not necessarily clear to the people we were working with. Every effort was made to explain that this research was about mutual learning, but if only the academics are really aware of the potential, it is not a very equitable and meaningful process in the end. This problem is also a reflection of the inability to build the research agenda with each group from the beginning. Nevertheless, where this was a problem, it did not mean that no learning took place on the side of the research participants. Our field researchers did not wait till the formal feedback sessions before sharing insights and reflections and the ongoing dialogues did often help participants articulate agendas more clearly. Another set of issues which emerged centered on whether the researcher should share the specific agendas of the participants they were working with. In the Bradford case, the researcher took the view that co-producing knowledge requires "a level of trust that is based on a sense of shared objectives...which allows the researcher to become a partner and a fellow actor, rather than an outside observer. I suggest that research premised on co-production of knowledge with the 'researched' precludes the possibility of neutrality. It does not preclude disagreement." (Blakey, 2008:4) . This researcher argued that rather than make it difficult to challenge and question research participants, agenda sharing and convergence enabled her to be taken seriously when she raised some difficult issues. In this case, the researcher was able to feedback observations on the participatory budgeting process which at first created some unease, but which later was seen to have helped the practitioners consider other angles on the process. At the same time, the researcher learnt about the real challenges practitioners face when they have to balance demands from different political and institutional actors. In our Medellin case, the researcher was part of the strategic municipal team implementing the participatory

planning and budgeting process (albeit with a background in non-governmental public action). In that sense he was an insider (researching with neighbourhood groups involved in the process) but also an outsider (a municipal employee) to the groups he was working with. While this position enabled him to work with complete understanding of the process, it introduced some ambiguities in terms of whether he shared objectives with the groups he worked with. In this case, the researcher did not find it easy to tackle directly the controversial question of "community oligarchs" (Uran, 2008) which he observed in the neighbourhood, although in feedback sessions the issue was raised. Our research suggests that there could be a plurality of situations when implementing this methodology, and there is not always a straightforward convergence of agendas. While sharing agendas can enhance trust and allow for more open discussion, it may also make it more difficult to deal with conflicts and differences in the research process.

## **Conclusion**

Although a weak variant of co-operative inquiry, we consider that our research method gained hugely from its efforts to ensure that the 'researched' were participating in the process of knowledge production. At the very least, it ensured respectful engagement rather than objectification. It promoted ethically based relationships. It aspired, with partial success, not to extract knowledge but to interact with research participants. The feedback and field visits of the research director linked the multi sites and gave some potential for global learning at the local level as well as our global team level. We gained insights which we would not have done by distancing ourselves, and we were able to ensure that something was left behind from the research which might also encourage more critical reflection on practice amongst non-governmental actors in the future.

Hindsight tells us that if the research participants are not involved from the beginning in designing a process which they have actively demanded and wanted, there will never be a complete understanding of the significance of the methodology. If the research participants do not have a clear agenda of their own, the researcher may be tempted to step in more deeply; we mostly avoided this but nevertheless learnt to recognise the risk. Our efforts demonstrate that when working with poor and deprived communities in complex environments, the 'self determining agency' of the 'researched' may be limited by objective conditions, by gatekeepers within groups, by divisive and fragile funding regimes and other factors. This generates power imbalances which undoubtedly weaken the horizontality of the co-researching ethos. These imbalances and pitfalls of real research processes are not always captured in the conceptual literature, partly because the range of possibilities is very diverse

The limited timetable of funded research means that researchers end up exiting from situations they create, and potentially contributing to the cynicism felt by non-governmental actors when outside actors enter and leave. In at least leaving behind the preliminary findings, there is a sense of a physical reminder which could one day find itself being re-read in a different context. And as explained above, in at least one case we left visual material as well. Our continuous dialogue with our participants showed something of our sincerity in trying to give back as well as take from. Undoubtedly, the level of participation, of engagement and of real understanding of the methodology varied. Social positioning played a key role. The poorest in the Recycling Unit in Porto Alegre did not grasp what we meant, and our researcher reminds us of the dangers of

thinking that people who have to focus on survival could easily prioritise a research process of the kind we proposed.

Co-producing knowledge is a methodology in construction and will always be in construction. It is a challenge, like all participatory methods, to the traditions and conventions of the academic mainstream. The trials and tribulations of our methodology suggest that an experimental mindset is needed to embark on a shared journey between researchers and activist/practitioners. Participatory inquiry has not yet managed to challenge the dominant positivist approach in our mainstream institutions. Nor, we argue should it become an equally reified, hegemonic research methodology. It has many problems of its own to resolve. One criticism is that it leaves outside a range of voices and actors who are not in the inner group of the inquiry. However, the values of co-producing knowledge suggest a constant awareness of such boundaries and exclusions, and these exist in some form in most methodologies.

Co-production of knowledge is one methodology among many; but it is one which takes seriously the ethical and political questions around knowledge production. It is important that researchers begin to recognise the plurality of knowledge and validate those who consider themselves 'ignorant' for being outside the academy. At the same time, this could encourage more respect for the kind of knowledge academics generate and for its relevance to practitioners. By working with activists, practitioners, policy makers, politicians and professionals we can begin to see how this plurality of knowledge can facilitate the change processes needed for progress in our societies. More experimentation would enable the difficulties which emerge to be ironed out. A greater disposition in the academy to encourage the enhancement of the participatory component in research, through more flexible funding and output regimes, and to reward the academic who works in collaboration with non academics, is necessary if this is to take place. The difficulties of this kind of work need to be recognised, in particular the potential conflicts and failures which can be due to social contexts, political moments, exclusionary paradigms as well as to the lack of the skills or knack which is needed for cooperative and collaborative inquiry rather than individual extractive research.

The weak form of co-operative inquiry, under which we locate our own efforts, reflects the reality that conditions, contexts and constraints in a positivist dominated academic and policy community make a full commitment to cooperative inquiry very hard. Costs are involved in all kinds of ways. Real material costs in that the process is often longer as it

involves negotiating and navigating uneven power relations between researchers and research participants. Non material costs include tensions between the output culture and individual claim making that academic conventions expect. The individual academic renounces to a considerable extent individual recognition for knowledge production within a cooperative inquiry methodology and allows his or her intellectual capital to be invested in a collective endeavour which recognises the knowledge of others as equivalent but different intellectual capital. Many intellectuals are reluctant to do that, and this cannot be discounted as lack of progressive commitment. The critical lone intellectual voice clearly has a role and in itself can challenge the logic of conventionalisation and reification in the world. These could also invade the family of participatory methodologies as they convert to propositional language as it translates and codifies the complex and unpredictable practice of participatory inquiry. Many of the intellectual ideas which inform the participatory inquiry field, were generated in fact by the lone theorist. This wealth of critical ideas, from Habermas to Bourdieu and Deleuze, has enriched the field of inquiry, helping it to shape its theoretical identity with and against them. However, the lone critical intellectual must take responsibility for limiting the change potential of his or her ideas. The argument for participatory forms of inquiry lies ultimately in their potential to work with knowledge producing agents of change, ensuring that ideas about the social world are informed by and return to those who can best use them.



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