

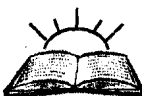
Unit 11

Participatory Method

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 11 you will be able to

- ❖ Locate the participatory approach to social research within the theoretical and methodological debates in main stream social sciences
- ❖ Provide the historical background of the emergence of the participatory approach
- ❖ Discuss the bases of participatory research methodology
- ❖ Compare conventional research methodology with the participatory approach to research
- ❖ Describe the operational dimension of the participatory approach and the uses of participatory rural appraisal.

11.1 Introduction

Unit 11 brings you to the end of our multi-dimensional discussion on research methodologies. In some ways we have undertaken a long route to reach this point where research becomes an all-pervasive activity to include you and me in the process of understanding the social reality. You may not fully agree with the approach and general tenor of Book 1. All the same you would find that you got a chance to be familiar with the main currents of methodological debates in the social sciences. While reading Book 2 and Book 3 you may like to refer back to some of the units in Book 1. Unit 11 will also be one of those units you would like to come back to. Mainly because the participatory approach has put forward a critique of value-neutral research and has argued for the inclusion of the researched in the process of inquiry into the social world, it is easier for you to relate to the approach. Let us see what is participatory approach.

11.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

We have already seen in our discussion on the comparative approach why and how it is important to make a distinction between common sense

and sociological approach. Indeed a fundamental point that marked the beginnings of a social science of society was a self-conscious break with the common sense perception of reality. The taken for granted reality was not considered a valid starting point. To use an analogy[®] from natural science it meant that even if people perceived that the sun did set in the west and rose in the east, science could ably demonstrate that the sun did not move and the earth did. This is so despite the solid fixity of the lived experience of being in the earth. To recapitulate Emile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* that social facts must be treated as things is a blunt affirmation that social phenomena belong to the realm of nature. Empirical science has to come to conquer prejudice and illusion in human beings' ideas about nature before social conduct can be examined scientifically. The latter is an especially difficult accomplishment, for prejudice and illusion are actually part of our social life. To regard social facts as things is to perform the act of detachment necessary to recognise that society has an objective existence, independent of any particular one of us; hence it can be studied by methods of objective observation.

For long the idea that it was actually possible to observe and study reality from the outside and from a location that was nowhere and everywhere, persisted. Even though the Marxist approach at one end and the phenomenological view at another challenged such an idea of neutrality, the feminist approach made a more recent serious theoretical challenge to this idea. From another position, the participatory approach has also raised this issue.

Before we move on to detailing both the historical context of the participatory approach and its main features, I would like to draw attention to another similarity between the implications of a feminist and a participatory approach. This is the entire issue of disciplinary boundaries and their sanctity. It is widely recognised today that a relationship exists between disciplining knowledge and the rise of academic disciplines, as we know it today. We also know that a particularly theoretical approach believes that we can draw clear domains of research, thereby break social reality into different parts like the economic, the political, the sociological, to be studied by different disciplines. Such a compartmentalised approach assumes that the theoretical tools developed by the disciplines are neutral and scientific. Using them, or doing normal science in such a case is adequate, without questioning the paradigms provided for. Both the feminist and the participatory approaches have questioned this. It is not just that there are suggestions for applying new techniques of research but the very epistemological basis of research has been opened up to reformulation.

It may be a useful exercise at this point to dwell on how the feminist and participatory approaches move on similar paths.

They both question the notion that traditional social research was indeed

value-free, universal and objective. They believe that the term universal standpoint in a caste, class, race, gender divided world cannot be universal. In other words the dominant view of society is represented as the universal viewpoint.

They question the objective approach advocated by mainstream[®] scholarship.

They pose a challenge to the conventional disciplinary boundaries and advocate an interdisciplinary approach to conventional academic scholarship.

They promote the idea of an active engagement with a cause in society. For instance the feminist approach broadly would seek to incorporate gender analysis pursuant to the finding that much of what was practiced as value-neutral and objective knowledge was actually male-centred. Similarly the participatory approach too would agree that the voices and views of the marginal groups, whether based on class or caste or gender, were not adequately taken note of. Hence an active attempt methodologically has to be undertaken to redress this.

From the above description of similarities between the feminist and participatory approaches, you can easily make out that while applying the approaches we can gainfully use academic research for social change. You can see this expressed in an avowed close link between the feminist theory and the feminist movement, or, in professing a self-conscious commitment to gender equity when researching.

They believe in recognising diversity not just in society but also in the construction of social knowledge.

Having looked at the similarities between the feminist and participatory approaches to social research, let us now turn to the historical context within which the participatory method emerged.

Before discussing the historical context, let us complete Reflection and Action 11.1.

Reflection and Action 11.1

Participatory research assumes that its method makes the research a tool for development, because the dialogue between researcher and researched in a common process of learning gives an impetus to a process of education and awareness of those involved in it. Imagine yourself to be a part of such a research process. How would you reflect the participatory approach in the very organisation of research?

While identifying the needs of the target group, whose view would you seek and why?

Local opinion leaders

The people themselves

A government agency

A centrally sponsored scheme

11.3 The Historical Context

The effort in this unit is to communicate that approaches to study social institutions arise in the context of a society's concerns of the times. In Unit 9 you would have noticed the academic western context within which the comparative approach arose. You would have also noticed in Unit 10 how the feminist approach is inextricably linked to the growth of the women's movement. In this sense, as we have just noted, there is more in common between the feminist and participatory approaches.

To trace the history of the emergence of the participatory approach, we refer you to such educators of adult learners as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire from the countries of the South. They opposed the idea of schooling and put forward a pattern of alternative pedagogy. This process later crystallised as the concept of participatory research. They facilitated a parallel discourse between the teacher and the taught. This was, as Tandon (1996: 20) said, to 'establish the control of the learner over his learning process'. This was the basic frame of participatory research. In 1974-75, a group of educators of adult learners coined the term 'participatory research' and the International Council for Adult Education gave it a concrete shape by adopting it. In all areas, including the non-governmental organisations, where research concerns the problems of social change and development, the term has gained currency. While commenting on the methodology and applications of participatory rural appraisal[®], Mukherjee (1997: 27) wrote,

A central concern for many of these agencies has been rural development. We thus had the development of the Rapid Rural Appraisal or RRA developed as a methodology in the 1970s, influenced by Farming Systems Research (FSR) and other methods. Some of the early path breakers of such methodology were Robert Chambers, Peter Hilderbrand, Robert Rhaodes and Michael Collinson who along with others met in Conferences at the Institute of Development Studies in October 1978 and December 1979. It soon spread to different parts of the world and in the mid-eighties there was a wide array of experience from the applications of RRA in different field situations.

In his Introduction to his book on Methodology in Social Research, Mukherji (2000: 46-49) has traced 'major influences and inspirations that fed into its evolution as a concept and practice of research'. One can do no better than reproduce in Box 11.1 his concise account of the influences and inspirations.

Box 11.1 Major Influences and Inspirations in the Evolution of Participatory Research

- i) The *sociology of knowledge*, which relates ideas and ideologies espoused by social groups to the positions they occupy in the social structure. Therefore, alternative histories can be written of those struggles and voices that have not been recorded, and they can create histories (ideologies). The knowledge that may be generated by these marginalised (subaltern) groups can become the condition of change and transformation in their own lives through the process of knowing, learning and education.

- ii) *Action research*®, which was 'recaptured in Latin America and subsequently became the basis for participatory action research', emphasising 'the notion of action as a legitimate mode of knowing, thereby taking the realm of knowledge into the field of practice' (Tandon 1996: 21).
- iii) *Phenomenological thinking* which 'legitimated experience as a basis of knowing' thereby expanding 'the basis of knowing beyond mere intellectual cognition' (p.21).
- iv) The *debate on development* paradigm which was critical of top-down, expert-designed development projects and programmes, and brought in the issue of "people's participation, community participation, participation of those whose development is being attempted as central actors in their own development" (pp.21-22).
- v) The emergence of *a new structure of civil society* through the institution of non-governmental organisations.

Let us now turn to appreciating the key features of participatory research methodology that has currently found many followers in different disciplines of the social sciences.

11.4 Delineation of Key Features

In sharp contrast to the idea of *detachment and value-neutrality* propagated by the early comparative approach, the participatory approach is open and emphatic about *attachment and partisanship* with the marginal groups whose perceptions, they argue, have been marginalised in social science knowledge. According to Partha Nath Mukherji (2000: 46), participatory research methodology is based on three important conditions, which we reproduce here in his words in Box 11.2.

Box 11.2 Bases of Participatory Research Methodology

- i) There is a target community/group, which is in felt-need of changing its underdog (oppressed, marginalised, exploited) situation to a more favourable one.
- ii) This target group in cooperation and conjunction with an acceptable, external interventionist-oriented researcher, formulates research goals, participates in data collection and, as far as possible, also in analysis and drawing of conclusions, which directly feed into decision-making relating to community action for change/development
- iii) The ultimate aim of the external researcher is to attempt to ensure complete 'ownership of knowledge' (e.g., of the health system, technology, management techniques) by the target community. Participatory research is thus a process, specifically directed towards ameliorative or transformative change/development in the conditions of life and living of the group/ population, who themselves are participants in the research process.

with the so-called traditional or conventional research methodology, let us also gain an idea of what the concept of participation entails. The term has of course received different interpretations and meanings in different contexts. Let us confine ourselves to the context of social research and in this context, you can say that participation has at least three dimensions.

- ❖ Participation entails the involvement of all those concerned with decision-making about what and how something has to be done.
- ❖ Participation involves mass contribution to the efforts for development. This implies the involvement of all those affected in the implementation of the decisions.
- ❖ All those involved in i) and ii) share in the outputs of the efforts planned and implemented for development.

These ideas about participation refer to the entire socio-economic processes of a society and therefore concern the researchers of social processes of change and development. There is no doubt that there exists a wide gap between the macro-level goals of a society and what generally happens in the name of participation. Often, the participation of the people in the actual work implementing a plan or programme is projected as community participation. In our opinion, unless the community shares in decision-making about planning and implementation of the plan or programme, we cannot name it as participation. Mere acceptance or occurrence of unpaid labour in the name of participation is the worse form of actual exploitation of labour. In this sense, you may argue for making a distinction between the participation of just a few local individuals and the **organised** involvement of the community as such. We need to also be cautious about going overboard and expecting the full autonomy of the community in controlling all activities of a plan. In real life situations such a notion of participation may not be feasible from any angle. All the same the idea of participation or of community participation, as we have developed in this paragraph, is only a logical progression of the ideas put forward by the educators of adult learners. In this sense, participation has an intrinsic value for participants and the researcher is also one among the participants. Most importantly, community participation ensures incorporation of indigenous knowledge and expertise into implementation of development plans. This leads to freedom from dependence on so-called professionals. Participatory research is a process, aiming to bring about improvement in the conditions of living of the people, who themselves participate in the research. Its by-product is the ownership of knowledge in the hands of the people, making for sustainability of improved conditions of living.

Mukherji (2000: 47-48) has presented 'some of the basic tenets of so-called academic/ traditional/ conventional research (CR) methodology as perceived by action researchers/social activists who advance the

argument for participatory research (PR) methodology. This is because the latter is generally counterposed against the former' (see Box 11.3).

Box 11.3 Counterpoising Conventional Research against Participatory Research (in the words of Mukherji 2000: 47-48)

i) The interventionist role of the subject is a prime condition of PR – the scholar is committed to bringing about social change. The ideal position that an external subject-object distance should be maintained so that the situation being studied can remain unaffected by the subject (social scientist role) is considered untenable.

ii) It follows that in PR there is no scope for value-neutrality. It is applied towards desirable directed change and development.

iii) The top-down approach of CR, in which the researcher and her/his institution decides 'upon the focus, methodology and outcome of the study', and regards the people who are studied 'as objects who are there for the convenience of the researcher' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 12), has to give way to research which is viewed as 'a process which the people go through...as a step in awareness building about the situation of the oppressed' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 16). Most CR methodologies, it is argued, originated in the West with an explicit objective to control its subject people (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 4). In contrast, *empowerment* of the *marginalised* through the research process is the avowed goal of PR (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 21).

iv) CR focuses on scientific rigor in the explanation and/or understanding of phenomena, which is then disseminated to the scientific community through accredited journals. It is assumed and expected that knowledge so generated sooner or later, will contribute directly or indirectly to practical application through social policy, social work and action research. PR, on the other hand, 'is viewed no more as a study of a people, but a process which the people go through and as a step in awareness building about the situation of the oppressed.' in which ideally, research 'is with and for the people and not on them' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 18).

Box 11.3 shows that participatory research criticises conventional research for its apparent insensitivity to the problems at the "grassroots". Conventional research on the other hand criticises participatory research for its lack of scientific rigor. But you would note that participatory research does not view itself as the "sole alternative" to conventional research. Fernandes recognises the value of so-called conventional research both in the mobilization of people and in projecting macro-realities essential for policy arguments. According to Mukherji (2000: 47-48), participatory research as discussed above by Fernandes and Viegas is a kind of tool-oriented method. We are here discussing methods or techniques of research. You may say that advocating an integration of the elements of both is an example of mixing methods that are suitable for inquiring into the practical objectives of a participatory plan. Mukherji (2000: 49) is also raising an interesting point about such macro theories as hermeneutics, post-structuralism, critical realism, which do not subscribe to positivism, but they are equally a part of the conventional research in the sense that they have little use for mobilising participatory

action research. Rather, Mukherji says, "The sweep and strength of the currents that such macro-theories generate in society often create the very conditions for grassroots actions to become significant and necessary".

The question comes up: how to design one's research to make it promote those social values which are implied in the search for increased participation? As a matter of fact, established research institutions fit into the prevailing class relations that ensure benefits to the upper and middle-strata researchers only. Participatory research on the other hand assumes that through its method, research can itself turn into a tool for participatory development. Both the national and local power structures are by and large not conducive to accept the force of **conscientisation**® once it comes into existence due to participatory research methods.

Practitioners of participatory movements would certainly welcome research if it would help them to understand their own social identity, to become cognisant of their relationship to other social relationships affecting them and the greater potential of shared resources at the larger-than-one's family level.

The inclusion of questions on participation into one's research requires selecting key issues for inquiry. The criteria for selecting the issues need in turn be participatory. Here, the most important point is to beware of the rhetoric of participation, which is almost universal in all spheres of current discourse. Here, one quick Reflection and Action exercise would be in order to drive the point home.

Reflection and Action 11.2

In an international **seminar** on participatory approach, a participant described in the following words his country's commitment to participation.

"After the detailed programmes have been well planned, we tell the people exactly what to do so they will understand their responsibility to **participate.**"

Respond to this application of the notion of participation by writing answers to the following questions.

Do you perceive a sense of participation present in the above statement?

Who is planning and who is taking the responsibility to participate?

Should those planning and taking the responsibility to participate be two different sets of people?

In advocating participatory research in the social sciences, we need to accept the fact that building participatory practices and institutions is a dynamic and gradually evolving process in response to social needs and values and available skills and resources. Participatory approaches cannot be either legislated or adopted in a matter of days. They generally grow over time with experience, practice and analysis of what works and what does not.

To return to the beginning, one has stressed throughout the Unit 11 the importance of the linkages between the overall theoretical assumptions,

the approaches and finally the appropriate field techniques that follow. It is but natural that the concern with development, with wanting to represent and incorporate the views of different sections of society would lead to a shift in the actual mode of doing field work. Thus a participatory approach has been spelt out to imply a participatory field appraisal. I very briefly touch upon the more widely used forms of the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA).

Rapid Rural Appraisal or RRA is a way of organising people for collecting and analysing information within a short time span. It can be defined as any systematic process of investigation to acquire new information in order to draw and validate inferences, hypotheses, observations and conclusions in a limited period of time. It has flexibility to adjust to situations because it does not imply or recommend a standard set of methods to be applied in each case. The methods vary from situation to situation and are determined by local conditions, local problems and objectives at hand.

As a methodology for agricultural development RRA was developed for quick field-oriented results with objectives as follows:

- ❖ Appraising agricultural and other needs of the rural community;
- . Prioritising areas of research tailored to such needs;
- ❖ Assessing feasibility of developmental needs and action plans;
- ❖ Implementing action plans, monitoring and evaluating them.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a methodology for interacting with villagers, understanding them and learning from them. It involves a set of principles, a process of communication and a menu of methods for seeking villagers' participation in putting forward their point of view to make use of such learning. It initiates a participatory process and seeks to sustain it. PRA is sometimes known as Participatory Rapid Appraisal where the emphasis is on both 'participatory' and 'rapid'. The emphasis on rapid is more in terms of data collection, which is compared to conventional survey methods.

11.5. Conclusion

There are many valuable lessons to learn from the participatory approach. However it is extremely important not to expect a magic wand kind of effect from this participatory approach. There is a danger of participatory approach (if used indiscriminately and without adequate theoretical training and historical awareness) becoming a handy tool of doing micro level studies that do not connect with the macro world. This disengagement with the macro world was always important but never as much as now in a global milieu. It is more so in the case of participatory approach, which appears to be rapidly changing into a set of unquestioned techniques (PRA) and losing ground with the epistemological assumptions

upon which it rose. While its brazen critique of value-neutrality is important, it is also important to be careful of hasty research entirely attached to the agenda and needs of non-government organisations and donor agencies. The significance of academic research cannot be overstated. In western countries the recognition for pure research exists, an imperative need for the sustenance of any democratic society. Not only is the emergence of **a new structure of civil society** through the institution of non-governmental organisations that Participatory Approach advocates important, **so are older forms of civic society institutions like the social science departments in universities**. The reduction of social science research to tools of participatory development programmes would be disastrous both for democracy and development. In this respect, Mukherji (2000: 50) advises, "Participatory researchers need to draw their understanding of social reality from these (theoretical) perspectives to discern at what level of change and development their researches are pitched – problem-solving largely at the symptomatic level or also reaching out to the systemic level?"

In the end we can conclude that the crucial feature of participatory research concerns the attitudes of researchers. This in turn determines the conceptualisation and conduct of the research activity. In this sense participatory research raise both professional and personal challenges that go beyond the issues of authorship and production of knowledge.

Please do not forget Reflection and Action 11.3.

Reflection and Action 11.3

If the definition of participation is "the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control", how many dimensions of participation would you like to cover in your research in a participatory mode? One example of a dimension is participation as an encounter between social classes/ interest groups and confrontation between local and metropolitan interests. Try to find out other similar dimensions.

Further Reading

Mukherji, Partha Nath 2000. **Methodology in Social Research: Dilemmas and Perspectives**. Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd: New Delhi (especially pp. 13-84)