

**Social Research Association Annual Conference**

**December 7th 2005, S O A S**

**“Some perils and pitfalls of  
participatory research: what the  
PARadigm cannot deliver”.**

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# What are we talking about ?

- “Critical social research” [eg Lee Harvey 1990]
- “Participatory action research [PAR]” [eg William Foote Whyte 1991]
- “Emancipatory research” [eg Danieli and Woodhams IJSRM 2005]

# What is entailed ?

- Critique of conventional research methods, often termed “positivism” [eg OPCS Disability Survey reports, 1988-1989]
- Claim that those who are being researched should be part of the design and conduct of the research

- By extension, that those who are providing data to the researcher have special knowledge of that wherof they speak by virtue of being “participants”
- Such “participatory” research is a means of empowering people and overcoming researcher/researched.
- Ontological considerations mean that a realist ontology - the belief that there is an independent reality to be discovered - is fallacious.

# Are these five propositions sustainable ?

- I want to suggest that there is doubt about each of them, and will try to demonstrate this by means of various examples.
- My general contention is that social research shares a range of common assumptions, which are found in most types of social research.

1. Conventional research methods are “positivistic”, these approaches are not.

- PAR in the study of third world development. Involve those who are affected by development policies eg social research in South Africa; cf Scott, WEAPONS OF THE WEAK on Malaysia.

- Critique of the OPCS Disability Study in the late 1980s by disability researchers eg C Barnes and G Mercer, *Doing Disability Research* [1997]
- What is put in the place of “conventional” social research ? Is not all social research, quantitative or qualitative, to some extent “positivistic” in the research methods which are used?

2. Those who are being researched should be part of the design and conduct of the research.

- Strongly argued by disability researchers in relation to OPCS Disability Survey
- Rowntree Foundation involves users in Advisory Committees for their projects



- How to Enable Young People to Design and Conduct Research - cf Kirby 1999 for Rowntree
- Whose interests are being represented?
- How are those contributing selected ? In what sense are they 'representative'?
- How are the views of the 'participants' fed into the process eg PAR study of Mondragon involved personnel officers

### 3. Those being approached for data have special knowledge

- “One does not have to have been Caesar to understand Caesar” - Max Weber
- Why is one kind of respondent epistemologically privileged over another kind ?

- Whose voice is being heard and why ?  
Cf The UK People's Panel, set up by the Cabinet Office with much fanfare in 1998, based on a 5000 strong panel, and fairly rapidly buried. Persists at LA level, for example in the Birmingham PP and the Shropshire PP.
- What role are such voices meant to play in the policy-making process ? What is to count as 'public opinion' ?

## 4. Participatory research is a form of empowerment

- Depends on what you mean by 'empowerment' ? How can a sample of 5000 voters be said to be a way of representing the views of the British people ?
- Problem of aggregating views in survey research

- Problem in PAR studies: who is being involved in the process of change ?
- Does research lead to change, or does 'participation' become an end in itself, the pursuit of which may even get in the way of actually completing the research? Does form replace content?
- Can research become, as the PAR model sometimes suggests, a form of political mobilisation ? Should it ?

## 5. There is no independent reality to be discovered

- Implication of this style of research that knowledge is context-dependent, and related to the standpoint of the researcher.
- Knowledge is partial and dependent upon one's social location
- Detachment, by extension, is not possible ultimately.

- Is objective knowledge therefore not possible ?
- What importance to accord to technical knowledge as a social researcher eg Cabinet Office standards for government social researchers ?
- What dilution of research quality is involved in the drive to involve users?
- Is a displacement of goals taking place, from high quality social research to 'involved' social research ?

# Conclusions

- Importance of maintaining quality standards in social research; threats from various directions
- Importance of defending the special expertise which researchers possess.
- Maintain a belief in the possibility of some degree of objective knowledge.