

The Theoretical Foundations of PAR – Part II

In the previous installment of this three-part article on Participatory Action Research (PAR), I briefly discussed some of the historical trends and professional disciplines that fed the development of PAR as a research approach. In this second article, I discuss a couple of the theoretical assumptions that help define its philosophical orientation.

The primary objective of PAR is to empower disenfranchised populations through knowledge development. That is, PAR assists marginalized populations to develop knowledge that they can use to confront and overcome entrenched or dominant elites. This idea is based on at least two theoretical assumptions: 1) the social construction or relativistic nature of reality and 2) the accumulation of power by those who control the mechanisms of knowledge creation.

Stringer (1996) provides a fairly cogent summary of the notion that reality is relativistic and his ideas echo many current Post-Modern thinkers. He can be summarized as follows: The nature of social reality - unlike physical reality - is unstable because humans are not mechanistic and because they interact with the social world in ways that alter both it, and their perceptions of it. Because experience and perception vary greatly by individual, the idea of reality as a uniform state is untenable and therefore, is instead seen to be largely subjectively defined. This idea gives permission to disenfranchised groups to question widely held assumptions about the nature of the world (i.e., common knowledge and truth) as expressed, largely, by majority groups or those in positions of power.

Secondly, the development, role and functions of knowledge (which forms the foundation of reality) are not necessarily benign and egalitarian. Michel Foucault suggests that what becomes seen or held as “truth” is dependent on the mechanisms of its generation, or, as he describes, by its “discourse” (Prado, 1995). A discourse is a truth-generating process that contains rules for how truth is created and who can participate in this creation. Members of a given discourse are accorded the right to discuss, modify and advance certain ideas, consistent with the discourse, as truth. Opposing “paradigms,” such as those concerning the subjective vs. objective nature of reality, would be viewed as having developed out of different discourse processes and by different memberships.

Discourses also vary in their respective levels of power and those with greater power are more able to assert and reinforce themselves as representing truth. In addition, truth and power work together to create ever-increasing levels and concentrations of power, lending greater credibility to the ideas contained within some discourses over others. Lastly, and most importantly, there is a potentially insidious side to this knowledge-power concentration. That is, those who control what are seen as the legitimate mechanisms of knowledge creation (for example, objectivity and the scientific method) and the truths that develop from their application, can use their knowledge to exploit those outside the discourse.

PAR observes that elite groups disproportionately control the mechanisms of knowledge development, and often use this power (knowledge) to exploit or oppress certain groups. PAR itself can be seen as a discourse process that aims to give disenfranchised groups the ability to generate knowledge and power through research activities. The activities are designed to “return to the people the legitimacy of the

knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems [i.e., discourses], as fully scientific, and the right to use this knowledge as a guide in their own action.” Fals-Borda (1991). This use of the research process as an empowerment tool has the added benefit of developing within disenfranchised groups the skills they need to independently sustain their actions and work toward the realization of their legitimate causes. In the final part of this article, I will discuss some of the research methods used in PAR.

References:

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