Participatory research in community settings: Processes, methods, challenges.

Kevin Kelly and Mary van der Riet (2000) In M. Seedat, S. Lazarus & N. Duncan (Eds.),
Theory, method and practice in Community psychology: South African and other perspectives.
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Abstract

In this chapter we look at the unique characteristics, processes, methods, challenges and problems associated with the conduct of social research in community settings. The emergence of the 'participatory research' paradigm has challenged researchers to rethink their motives for doing research and to adopt a more needs-driven and problem-oriented approach to conducting research. The need to involve communities in the research process places a set of demands on researchers, generated within the community or context of the research, which reshapes the way that the research process is designed and how it is managed. Having described the emergence of participatory research as a distinctive paradigm and outlined the foundational characteristics of the paradigm, the authors describe the challenges of doing participatory research in societies in democratic transition. They then go on to describe three broad processes in the interaction between researchers and communities. Some unique methods are described which have been developed specifically for facilitating these processes in community research settings. The chapter goes on to outline some of the challenges and problems involved in doing research in and with communities. Some of these problems are understood to present unsolved and ongoing challenges to the development of the participatory research paradigm.

Study objectives

In this chapter we:

- Look at the unique characteristics, processes, methods, challenges and problems associated with the conduct of social research in community settings.

- Outline the emergence of the Participatory Research (PR) approach

- Show what is distinctive about this approach

- Examine the core processes and methods of PR

- Explore some of the difficulties involved in conducting PR

- Develop a critical understanding of the approach

Emergence of the participatory approach

The traditional distinction between applied and basic, or pure, research is often brought to the fore in discussing the issue of 'relevance' in psychology. The issue of relevance has been seen as tied closely to the need for research to take directions which are more 'applied' in the sense of being designed to identify or solve problems. In the technological world this refers to research which is designed to discover or invent a solution to a particular type of technical problem. In the social sciences it refers to research which is driven by the need to overcome pressing social needs or problems. The attempt to address problems is the distinguishing feature of applied research. In the case of pure or basic research the researcher is driven more exclusively by academic or theoretical interests, and sometimes purely by curiosity. If research were to be driven only by academic interest it would follow to say that it would not be by design that discoveries end up having a social value, or serving a pressing social need.

It should be pointed out that certainly in the physical sciences and also to an extent in the social sciences there are marginal areas where the distinction between applied and basic research is not all that clear. For example, psychological research into early child development while not directed at solving a particular problem, will most likely be useful in helping to understand the preschool socialisation needs of children. This will in turn assist policy makers in developing social programmes in this area. In this instance the chain of accountability between the researcher and existing social needs is somewhat indirect, but nevertheless the research is of positive social value. In this Chapter we will address approaches to research in the social sciences which are explicitly designed to be of use and to solve problems in community settings and where the chain of accountability between researcher and community is of utmost concern.

The approach to research which is discussed here has gone by various names, all of which relate to the direct engagement of the researcher with the context of study, which in our case is research in communities. We will use the term **'participatory research'**, abbreviated as **PR**, to describe the broad category of research approaches with which we are here concerned. Central to all of them is the careful maintenance of an ongoing relationship between the researcher and a community whose needs and problems are the reference point to which the entire research process is accountable. The function and nature of the relationship between researcher and community, the different forms it may take, the methods which are used to facilitate it and the challenges which attend it are the subject of this Chapter.

The participatory research movement

A scientific paradigm may be understood as a comprehensive system for gaining knowledge of the world, whereby is prescribed the way in which information of the world is gathered, organised and interpreted. In 1981, Peter Reason and John Rowan published a collection of essays which brought together ideas from a number of different, emerging fields under a common banner which became known as **new paradigm research**. They defined it as such:

> *New paradigm research involves a much closer relationship than that which is usual between the researcher and the researched: significant knowledge of persons is generated primarily through reciprocal encounters between subject and researcher, for whom research is a mutual activity involving co-ownership and shared power with respect both to the process and to the product of the research. (p.489)*

In the community development field the term participatory research, at about the same time, became the rallying point of the new paradigm, and was used to refer to an emerging

approach to research which involves a close, collaborative working together of researchers and those who are the subjects of study. In the field of community development the term PR has been defined thus:

> *We have used the term (participatory research) to emphasize the necessity to involve those persons who are the supposed beneficiaries of research in the entire research process. We are specifically talking about the participation of the working classes, the peasants, the exploited and the poor in an analysis of their own reality. (Hall, 1982, p7-8)*

The methods used in participatory research are designed to bring the researcher to **understand** the specific qualities of a given context or person and the experiences, issues and problems which are unique to that context or person. The emphasis is on the term 'understand' and participatory researchers in community settings interact, listen, observe, reflect and question with a view to gaining an insight into what it is like to be a member of a particular community or to be **in** a particular kind of situation. **Understanding** in this sense means to gain knowledge of a person's life or a community's situation as if you are the other person or community you are trying to understand; that is, from their point of view. Understanding from the point of view of being in that situation, as one of them, or **being** the other person, is sometimes termed **empathy**.

PR involves a fundamental accountability of the researcher to the way in which a community understands itself and its problems, but the participatory researcher is also committed to developing the self-understanding of the community in ways that did not exist prior to the PR intervention. So the goal is not simply to show people what they already understand or to lead them to an expression of needs which they are already aware of. The goal of the research goes beyond this. It is to extend self-

understanding in ways which did not previously exist. It will be shown how participatory researchers do this, by utilising their position as skilled outsiders to develop the capacity of communities to think about their problems in new ways which allow for new kinds of social action on the part of communities.

Exercise 1. Insider and outsider perspectives

Think of a situation in the past about which you now, after time has passed, have come to feel very differently about. In small groups discuss examples of this kind of experience which show how we sometimes get to know a context or a situation differently after it has past, or when we are removed from it. See if you can relate such examples to the difference between insider and outsider perspectives. Consider whether knowing a situation like it **really is** means knowing it only from the perspective of the person experiencing the situation, or whether the outsider's perspective also has something to offer.

Using your own examples, discuss which perspective is:

1. more objective

2. more knowledgeable about the details of a situation

3. more capable of being critical

In PR the method of enquiry is usually conceived of as being a **dialogue** between researcher and community. The researcher as an outsider enters into a process of dialogue with the community and this dialogue is a research process; that is, it is a form of research which occurs in the context of a relationship between different parties, and is characterised by the exchange of views and reciprocal interaction. In some ways it is not unlike the

process of psychotherapy, where the therapist (researcher) enters into a dialogue, the goal of which is to understand a particular issue or problem. The purpose of this understanding, as we shall presently see, is to bring about change of one sort or another.

Thus far we have established that the new paradigm concerns a different relationship between the researcher and the research context, that the researcher has more than a purely scientific interest in the area of study, and that the research enquiry is designed to make a difference to the situation which is being researched. In the latter sense the researcher is involved and participates actively to change the situation being researched.

The approach of PR is a challenge to the idea of the researcher being neutral and uninvolved. PR is explicitly engaged to bring about change; it is done for a social purpose, rather than only to find out about something. Thus PR on women's issues may be done specifically in order to empower women or solve their problems. Thus the research is seen as part of a social process or project.

Before going further in describing what PR entails, it is necessary to pause and examine the term participation and its centrality in the community and health development fields.

Participation in the community development and health fields

Theories and strategies of development have historically promoted the expansion of physical and economic resources in the context of increasingly centralised planning and control over the distribution of resources (Coetzee, 1987). This so-called 'modernisation' approach emphasized the stimulation of production and it was supposed that the development of resources in the economic system as a whole would result in the eventual spread of benefits to the nooks and crannies of the system. This approach has gradually been superseded and it is now fairly widely recognised that modernisation has not been successful as a strategy of development in the so-called 'Third World'. Recently theorists have challenged the idea that the injection of resources into an otherwise unchanged system would necessarily lead to development and there appears to be much evidence to support the refutation of this approach (Korten, 1990; Rahnema, 1990).

Proponents of the more recently emerging **'people-centred development'** paradigm have adopted an alternative strategy for development. This approach sees development as a process whereby members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilise and manage resources. This is intended to lead to sustainable improvements in the quality of life which are consistent with the peoples' own aspirations (Korten, 1990). People-centred development calls for people to be involved in decisions about development interventions and the implementation thereof (Brown, 1985). Community participation in the determination of priorities, identification and allocation of resources and the selection of problem solving strategies lies at the heart of this approach to development (Brown, 1985; Erasmus, 1992).

It is easy to see how the emergence of this approach to development, focusing on community participation, was fertile ground for the PR movement. The term 'participation' is central to the people-centred approach to development. Those involved in facilitating development have used the principles of PR to guide their attempts to involve communities in identifying their own needs and problems and in developing strategies for improving the conditions of their existence. For example, Brown (1983) utilised people-centred development and PR as a tool for maximising local human resources to deal with local concerns in India. The PR approach has been used in many countries all over the world from South Africa to Peru and Tanzania to the Caribbean (Dubell, Erasmie, De Vries, 1980; Ellis, 1983; Hall, Gilette, & Tandon, 1982; Kassam& Mustafa, 1982).

> ## Box 1. Development and South Africa
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> What it the main focus of development strategies currently used in your own country? For example, the current South African government has tried to implement development policies which have a people-centred focus (consider the Reconstruction and Development Programme - RDP, the Masakhane Campaign which focuses on creating appropriate environments for development, and the Growth, Empowerment and Redistribution policy - GEAR). They have done this in response to the major discrepancies between different sections of the population from impoverished rural areas to the 'First World' quality of the metropolitan areas. The RDP aims to bring about changes by meeting basic needs, developing human resources and building the economy. It has a strong emphasis on peoples' participation in this process arguing that "development is not about the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about active involvement and growing empowerment" (ANC, 1994, p.5).
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> It seems that these programmes have the appropriate philosophy to lead to people-centred, participatory development. However, there are a number of factors which prevent people's participation. Firstly, there is political pressure to achieve visible changes for the government to stay in power. This negates the participatory process within the RDP because participation cannot be hurried. There is also pressure for the delivery of basic needs, which tends to overpower the development of human capacity. This is partly because of a lack of understanding of the concept of participation in development on the part of the general populace, but also a realistic demand for the provision of a better lifestyle.

There are numerous definitions of 'participation' to be found in the literature on development. Cohen & Uphoff (1977) describe participation as people's involvement in decision making about what should be done and how, in implementation of the project, in sharing in the benefits of a project and in evaluation of the project. In reality one would not usually expect to find all members of a community involved in all aspects of the project and it is more usual to find that the majority of a community only enjoy the benefits of the project. Cohen and Uphoff (1977) maintain that in examining how participation occurs in a particular project, consideration should be given to (a)where the initiative starts (from above or below), (b)what inducements for participation are involved (how voluntary or coerced it is), (c)the structure and (d)the channels of participation. Furthermore, they suggest that consideration should be given to (e) duration and (f) scope of participation.

The concept of participation has also become a central concept in the context of community health projects. Through the development of the 'primary health care' (PHC) movement there has emerged a need to understand what the notion of participation means, and might mean, in the context of health-

development. Participation has been described as the cornerstone of PHC (Kasege, 1991) and is referred to in the founding document of PHC, the Alma Ata Declaration which was adopted by the World Health Organisation in 1978. A clause in the declaration reads: "The people have the right to **participate** individually and collectively in the planning and implementing of their health care". In this respect the PHC approach to development is an elaboration of the 'people-centred development' approach and is set against the 'modernisation' equivalent in the health terrain, an historically profession led, top-down approach to health planning and service delivery.

Rifkin (1986) reviews over 200 case studies of PHC projects and suggests a classification of health projects according to different forms of participation involved. She suggests that there are three broad approaches to community participation in health projects. The first

involves little direct community participation except in the sense that the formal health system reorients itself towards providing more accessible professional services. It involves the extension of professional services into the community and there is no direct participation of community members except insofar as they are the recipients of the improved service and their projected needs are taken into account by health planners. The second approach involves direct community consultation but within the parameters of a specifically health services oriented project, that is, by way of involving people in determining what health services they need. The third approach involves a comprehensive strategy of community development. From the perspective of this approach the quest for health is regarded as inseparable from the quest for better living conditions and greater control over the material resources which affect the well-being of the community. Self-

reliance is one of the key elements in this approach and the community perceives itself to have control of a broad process of community development. The community of people who stand to benefit from the development is involved in analysing its own problems, seeking solutions and taking the required individual and collective action.

We can see from the above that both in the general field of community development and in the field of health there has come to the fore a recognition of the need for communities to be the driving force in their own development. Attempts to involve communities in expressing their needs and finding their own solutions have invariably involved the meeting of funders, developers and governments with the people. Standing in between these stakeholders are the researchers and facilitators who practice PR. It is meaningful to describe two broad principles which guide the work of participatory researchers, and these will be outlined following.

Cornerstones of participatory research in community settings

Apart from PR involving an ongoing relationship between researcher and community which has the qualities of a **dialogue**, there are two other fundamental ideas in PR which set it apart from other research models, and give it the status of a distinctive paradigm. All three of these characteristics may be present in research which does not deliberately support the participatory ethos, but in PR they are the very foundation of the research process. We will now go on to discuss the second and third of these under the headings **'Praxis: research as action'** and **'Research as empowerment'**.

Praxis: research as action

The concept of **reflexivity** was originally used by sociologists to refer to the manner in which descriptive statements come to have effects which change the context being described. An often cited example is the publicised prediction of a shortfall in production of a certain crop, which causes farmers to plant more of the crop because prices will be high, which in turn causes a surplus of the crop and thus changes the predicted outcome. In general the term has come to be used to refer to the way in which research has an impact upon the context of the research.

In the paradigm of the scientific experiment the effects of the experimenter's presence would typically be controlled so that the object of research could be seen as it would be were the researcher not to be present. Reflexivity is controlled and under ideal conditions the researcher would have little or no effect on what is observed. To a certain extent researchers are able to overcome the effects of their own presence; i.e. to overcome a phenomenon which is known in the context of experimental work as **experimenter effects**. However, those promoting PR have argued that it is ultimately not possible to overcome such effects and that we should acknowledge the effects and see them as

inevitable, so that they can at least be taken into account. They have shown that even the asking of questions of a person can make the person think differently about a situation and thus have a reflexive effect. A question may throw a focus on a situation which forces an interviewee to think about the situation in a new way, or perhaps for the first time, and thus changes their experience of that situation.

The understanding and theories which we develop through research, also have a reflexive effect. They influence how we see the options for action which are available. For example, if I understand the problem of crime as being a consequence of inadequate policing, it is unlikely that the underlying socio-economic causes of crime will be addressed in thinking about solutions.

Participatory researchers eagerly accept that research is reflexive. They recognise that the theories which are developed in research and the self-understanding which communities and individuals develop through processes of self-enquiry, have an effect on the actions they are likely to take. Participatory researchers then harness reflexivity and use it as an instrument of change. The word **praxis** is often used to describe the circular relation between understanding and practice. Praxis may be defined as a form of social intervention which is **at one and the same time an idea and an action**. Because ideas about social life offer certain kinds of possible solutions and exclude others they are also invitations to act in certain ways and not to act in others. When an individual or community is involved in trying to analyse its own problems the participatory researcher sees the work of understanding and analysing as the beginning of a path of action. The term praxis is a useful one for the participatory researcher to describe the close relation between ideas and interventions or actions. The importance of this to the PR process will become more evident later in the chapter when we discuss the development of critical perspectives in PR and particularly in the discussion of the work of Paulo Freire.

Research as empowerment

In the development field it is generally understood that the need for development in a community follows from a situation where that community lacks access to the ability to mobilise resources to develop in a desired direction. The community in question is usually understood to have become alienated from the resources which are needed in order for it to develop in a desired direction. The nature of such alienation invariably involves marginalisation of the community from the means of exercising power (political, economic, technical, intellectual, etc.) to bring about changes, and the participatory process is seen as a way of correcting this. In general the need for PR is motivated by the need to bring about some form of co-operative action between a community and an outside resource or agent, in the hope of improving the conditions of existence of the community. It is not surprising, therefore, that the term 'empowerment' and the term 'participation' are so closely interwoven (Kieffer, 1984; Swift & Levin, 1987; Werner, 1988). Indeed participatory processes are usually conceived of as a means to developing a community in such a way that the community begins to participate more actively, in one way or another, in tasks and benefits associated with access to resources and increased decision-making power. This implies, according to Freire (1972), a changing relationship between those who have been historically dominant and those who have been marginalised from the exercise of power. It is surprising therefore that more has not been written about the relational dynamics between participants in development projects. There is a lack of literature dealing with how participatory relationships are formed and sustained between parties who are grossly different in terms of access to skills, resources, education, political power and the sense that their own individual efforts can make a difference. The participatory researcher stands between funders, developers and governments on the one hand and communities on the other; and attempts through research processes to assist the

community to mobilise itself to a point of being able to overcome its own marginalisation and to assume positions of greater power. This is sometimes referred to as a move towards greater self-regulation on the part of a community, where the community is able to determine its own destiny to the extent that it enjoys greater power in relation to the forces that govern its functioning.

The United Nations (UNRISD, 1979) defines participation as the **capacity for influencing** the decision making process at all levels of societal organisation. In this sense the term refers to the means of collective action by the various population strata or interest groups and its reference includes public measures to stimulate or channel such actions. The expansion of popular access to the means of control over the natural environment and over the institutions which influence socio-

economic existence, is understood to afford greater scope for human growth and enrichment (UNRISD, 1979). In this sense participation is conceived of as a form of **empowerment** (a topic dealt with at greater length elsewhere in this book) and the term is frequently invoked as a countermeasure to the 'disempowering' effects of colonialism and other institutions of oppression.

Participatory researchers see one of their primary tasks as identifying the inherent **capacity** of people in terms of what resources and skills they have and what capacities they lack in the process of bringing about their own development. Following this, participatory researchers envisage the development process as necessitating engagement of a community building process which involves the acquisition of new capacities for action; a process known as **capacity building**. Capacity building, which can take many forms (Van Vlaenderen & Gilbert, 1992), 'enables' people to participate actively in development processes and usually entails some form of skills enhancement. This can mean many different things ranging from training in skills for proposal writing, workshop facilitation, and literacy, through management and administration skills. It would also typically involve developing the capacity to be aware of problems. The last of these is a central focus in the Freirian method which will be discussed below. Under optimal conditions of community building one would expect to find an increased involvement of those who previously did not have the capacity to participate fully, in all phases of participatory project development. Herein lies empowerment. It follows that development projects should incorporate within their objectives the need to build the capacity for active participation.

It should be mentioned that terms such as 'empowerment', 'participatory' and 'capacity-building' have been subject to a great deal of debate and contestation. In practice they often prove to be difficult to institute and some of these difficulties will be discussed later in this chapter and at other points in this book.

The building of capacity is both a **means** and an **end** in community development. It is a means insofar as it is necessary in order to assist a community in engaging with existing resources and mobilising development resources and activities. It is an end insofar as the enhancement of the capacity to develop is actually the desired outcome. In the people-centred approach to development it is seen as being achieved by the community itself, rather than delivered to the community by an outside agency. It is in this sense that development can be seen as a process, and not a product which can be passed from one group of people to another. To the extent that a community develops the capacity to develop itself, the function of those agencies which attempt to seed or initiate development is gradually diminished.

Chesler (1991) describes the need to mobilize consumer activism in health care through the medium of self help groups. The effectiveness of self help groups, or any other community based health interest groups, in bringing about meaningful change in the health system, is dependent upon their organisational and communicative capacity (the

ability to communicate their needs effectively in the hallways of power) to engage in dialogue at a level where structural changes in the health system can be brought about. In development projects this is often a problem. It often happens that as projects move beyond the initial needs assessment phase the community whose needs have been assessed becomes increasingly disengaged from project activities, because they often do not have the capacity to engage in project planning beyond expression of their needs.

It is arguable that not all development projects require the same degree of capacity building. In the health field for example, it is necessary to distinguish between projects which involve a comprehensive process of community health development, and those which are more task specific or 'selective' in orientation (Rifkin & Walt, 1986; Foster, 1982). In the latter case the specific objectives of the development process are pre-

determined. In the former case the initial objectives are very general and oriented towards facilitation of a comprehensive process of community development. Following Kieffer (1984) and Korten (1980), such comprehensive processes of community development always require capacity building, and this takes time, perhaps years. More focused or specific projects often concern the delivery of particular services to the community where the development process involves no more than successful **advocacy**, often on the part of an external agency, which involves acting on behalf of the community in gaining access to decision makers or policy makers. In such cases the capacity of the community to engage in further processes is not necessarily developed, although the quality of life for the community may change. In many respects advocacy, which involves a group with strong capacity for engagement with sources of power and influence using this capacity on behalf of the community, does not do much to empower the community. As La Gaipa (1990) has found many professionals are comfortable with traditional non-

equal, one-directional relationships with laypersons that engender dependence and indebtedness. Participatory researchers on the other hand would tend to want to be facilitators rather than actors in the situation, although because of the capacity they have in gaining access to necessary resources, they are likely sometimes to act on behalf of communities in an advocacy type role. They tend to downplay their own power in a situation. This underplaying of the real power they have in the development context, which is also power in context of the relationship of researcher and community, may pose a problem as will presently be shown.

As much as participatory researchers might want to have democratic relationships with communities where there are no power differences (differentials) between themselves and the communities they work with, in reality they do have a greater capacity and hence more power at many different levels. In the following section we will go on to discuss these power differentials and in so doing will introduce a problem inherent to the PR model, which needs to be carefully thought about.

Dialogue and participation in the transition context

In the process of rapid democratic transition (for example in South Africa) there may occur a pressure for rapid transformation of existing public services through 'community participation' in the planning and implementation of new services. The recent history of South Africa is such that within a matter of a few years only, the idea of community participation in political and social processes has replaced a system of unilateral, government dominated public service policy formulation and implementation. Having evolved over such a short period of time, the transition towards greater community participation in the utilisation of resources and the planning of services, has accentuated the difficulties involved in the co-operative working together of parties who are grossly different in terms of their relative capacities to engage in planning and implementing new

service programmes. The 'transition' situation also typically involves the working together of people who were, until fairly recently, deeply committed to political struggle rather than co-operation. The history of this struggle and the legacy of the past inevitably continue to create a degree of suspicion and mistrust and will arguably do so for some time to come. These factors militate against the development of shared understanding and co-operative action and there became a need for there to be greater understanding of how these problems undermine community development initiatives, and how they can be overcome.

Frequent reference to the 'dialogical model' of communication can be found in the participatory development literature which suggests a similarity between the concepts of 'participation' and 'dialogue'. 'Dialogue' is seen as a kind of communication context which enables participation. The problem with this model is that it sees dialogue as a 'means' through which participation should proceed, but in reality the community development situation almost implies that at the outset there will be different capacities for engaging in dialogue amongst participants. This is obviously more apparent in situations of sudden transition, such as may be found in recently democratised countries.

Habermas (1984) suggests that dialogue requires an equality of participatory capacity and in our opinion this makes problematic the use of the term 'dialogue' to refer to the 'means' of community development, where the capacity for engaging in the participatory process is inevitably less for some of the participants; that is, where 'partners' differ greatly in terms of access to legitimate and dominant modes of participation. Habermas's (1984) 'theory of communicative action' outlines the 'speech conditions' which are likely to lead to dialogue. These conditions refer to communication contexts where there is no domination of the dialogue by one of the participants to the dialogue, or by one of the perspectives represented and there is an equality of discursive opportunity between participants. By 'discursive opportunity' is meant that all participants have an equal opportunity to express themselves effectively in the context of the discussion.

Often it seems that people have equal opportunities, but there are deep structural reasons why they are not in fact equal. Such reasons may include certain ways of speaking enjoying more legitimacy in the context. So language which seems more educated, or more ordered, or more in keeping with professional, academic and scientific standards may overshadow other ways of speaking which then do not enjoy the same kind of influence. This means that certain voices remain marginalised, unless these people get someone to speak for them. The capacity for communicative engagement is one that is not as easily learned because it is largely a product of education and experience and this means that capacity building for effective communication is not easily achieved.

Schrijvers (1991) in an article entitled 'Dialectics of a dialogical ideal' is somewhat pessimistic about the possibility of dialogue in development contexts. She outlines the difficulties involved in bringing about dialogue in the context of two participants wielding different degrees of power in a research situation. She suggests that dialogical forms of communication can be established most easily if there are only small power differentials in the research situation, a condition she describes as 'studying sideways' as opposed to 'studying down' or 'studying up'.

There are many other reasons why imbalances of power may be present and which therefore make 'studying sideways' difficult. Environmental and societal conditions under which PR takes place can have a significant negative impact on the relevance and effectiveness of a participatory initiative (see box 2).

Freire (1972) provides a conceptual way of overcoming the problem of using dialogue as a method in a context where dialogue is not easy to establish. He suggests that dialogue is both a 'means' of communication *and* a 'goal' towards which communication strives; that is, it is both a method and a goal. To the extent that the context is 'anti-dialogical', or not

Exercise 2. Factors which militate against dialogue

Can you identify other factors which would militate against dialogue? What about psychological factors which make it difficult to express yourself in certain kinds of situations? Try to imagine and analyse situations where you experience insecurity or lack of confidence, or perhaps the feeling that you will be treated negatively if you express your feelings.

conducive to dialogue (Freire, 1972), we might say that **dialogue is not a means so much as an ideal towards which participatory projects should strive**.

It is exactly in those situations where dialogue is not easily attained that participatory methodology is usually proposed by funders as the most appropriate approach. Almost by definition development work requires joint action and decision making between partners who differ in their degree of familiarity with and access to dominant modes of participation, and hence in their 'capacity' to take an active role in participatory research/ development initiatives.

This returns us to the earlier discussion of capacity building. If we are not to be naive in hoping to bring about dialogue between researchers and communities we should not assume that the community is empowered to participate in a dialogue at the outset of the process. Many of the methods which follow are explicitly designed to build the capacity for dialogue; they are **dialogue enabling**. Furthermore PR processes would ideally be accompanied by education and training efforts which gradually improve the resources of the community so that they are more likely to be able to participate in an effective way in all aspects of the research process, including proposal writing, meeting facilitation, decision making, conflict resolution, administration, co-ordination and management. But it should be remembered that lack of empowerment in these areas is often the reason for the community needing outside assistance in the first place and properly designed PR processes will attempt to develop participatory or dialogical capacity as one of the fundamental objectives of a project.

The reader might consider whether this approach is a way of 'pushing' oppressed communities into a world of technology, science and 'western democracy' which negate community's 'indigenous' modes of decision-making, advocacy and action. This is a question well worth debating and one which is debated in the literature of PR. One response to this criticism might be to say that the ability to make one's needs known and have them responded to does require development of the capacities mentioned, but this does not necessarily negate the legitimacy of a community's own modes of doing things.

Indeed in good PR these action resources would be harnessed and would be fundamental to the action initiative. The South African struggle against apartheid attests to this. Oppressed South Africans achieved their ends using their own means. It is worth considering whether a marginalised and isolated community in the rural Eastern Cape would be as effective as a national movement with international support. Very marginalised communities may lack participatory capacity to the extent that they can't even make their voices heard.

Processes and methods

Getting involved as a researcher

How does a researcher engage with a community in order to facilitate dialogue, empowerment and reflexivity? One of the first issues to take into consideration in addressing this question is the gap that exists between academic and community settings. We must recognise that most research projects use terms and follow conventions which are familiar to researchers but very foreign to the everyday life context of a community. The way in which a researcher bridges this gap is a key element in effective participatory engagement. The researcher needs to be attuned to a number of key communicative processes which, in more conventional research, are not considered at all. To make the shift to a participatory model, it is crucial for PR practitioners to engage in a process of self-reflection about their own role and behaviour in the research setting. In this section we will make explicit some issues which, when taken note of by the researcher will significantly alter the researcher's behaviour in the research setting. It is these issues which affect the power relations in the research setting and will shift the power balances in the research setting towards a more dialogical and democratic ideal. It should however be remembered that the ideal in such situations is rarely attainable. It is rather an objective which is constantly strived for.

In examining how we set about establishing a satisfactory relationship between the researcher and the research context, it is useful to outline a framework for thinking about the ways in which researchers get involved in community contexts. As mentioned previously, Cohen and Uphoff (1977) argue that consideration should be given to where the initiative starts, from above or below, or from within or outside of the community.

It is useful to think in terms of three broad modes of initiation: the researcher contacts members of a community; the researcher is asked by an outside party (the government, a non-governmental organisation, or a donor agency) to engage with the community; and the community calls on a researcher to undertake research in the community. In addition, these modes of initiation are broadly linked to the researcher's motive for involvement. These might be mainly academic purposes (the first mode of initiation); to influence policy (mostly the second mode of initiation); or to engage in a learning, empowering and conscientizing process (perhaps the second and third mode of initiation). By conscientizing we mean a process which allows the participants to see their situation, its problems, challenges and potentials, in a different way.

The PR approach is aligned with this last motive, in which the primary aim of the research is the development of individual capacity within the community to understand their life situation, and development of their own potential to take action to improve the quality of their lives. In the PR approach, participation implies that outside researchers and local participants are involved in a joint inquiry, an educational process and a programme of action related to problems of mutual interest (Van Vlaenderen, 1993). Ideally all parties become learners, they share control over the research process, they commit themselves to constructive action as opposed to detachment, and their participation promotes empowerment as well as understanding (Brown, 1985). This may seem to imply that the

researcher is the 'expert' conscientizer who has something to give the 'unschooled' community. This is not intended and we will presently describe how central the community's own knowledge and understanding of problems are to the entire process of PR.

This notwithstanding, we propose that with each mode of initiation it is possible to effect a PR process, if certain issues in the relationship between researcher and research community are taken to heart. Firstly, it is of critical importance that a community be approached in an appropriate manner which will lay the ground for the development of trust and co-operative action. Whether a researcher is invited, or approaches a community directly, there are a number of issues which are crucial to take into account. These concern gaining and maintaining access to the community, negotiating an understanding of and agreement to the objectives of the research, and negotiating the nature and results of the engagement with the community through the research process. Secondly, it is of critical importance to question **what** it is that the researcher studies. We propose that an understanding of the **local knowledge** (this will br described later in this section) of a community is essential to the PR approach. Thirdly, the mode of functioning of the researcher influences the dynamics of participation. Concerning the latter we will presently examine the modes of the researcher as activist, as consultant and as ethnographer.

The first issue concerns **gaining and maintaining access to the community**. Thornton and Ramphele (1988) argue that communities are not homogenous entities. Communities have multiple subgroups, each with differing access to power and resources within the larger community. A common mistake is for the researcher to make contact with the most visible and articulate member or group of the community, but, they argue, "visibility may serve as a strategic substitute for representation" (Thornton and Ramphele, 1988, p.32). Chambers (1985) comments that it is easier for researchers to talk to people who are most like them: who are well educated, who speak their language, and who are confident and articulate. However, these individuals might not be truly representative of the community's interests. For example, they might represent particular political interests, or they might represent only the youth, or the male members of a community. Contact with these individuals might create suspicion and mistrust of the researcher by excluded groups. Van Vlaenderen and Nkwinti (1993) comment that it is difficult to make an *a priori* assessment of local dynamics. An understanding of local dynamics will only come in time, through close co-operation with the community. Once the initial contact has been made, the researcher should encourage and ensure the participation of representatives of all groupings in the community, for example, women and the elderly.

This process, which can be called **building and maintaining rapport** with the community, must be seen as an on-going process, and not only a preliminary stage of the research. In essence, this process entails a sensitive 'listening' to all views expressed by individuals in the community, whether these be verbal or shown in behaviour. It is time-consuming and requires patience and insight. For example, should numerous meetings with representatives from the community fail to take place, the researcher should attempt to understand why this is happening. Perhaps the community has not yet reached a consensus decision on an issue, and does not want to present an image of disunity to the researcher. Perhaps there are underlying tensions about the issue which is being researched, and no individual in the community is prepared to confront the researcher with these.

Researchers often believe that their research is of the same importance in the lives of the community members as it is in their own. Perhaps the research is of no direct relevance to the community members, and other more pressing issues have overshadowed their interest in the PR process. There needs to be a sensitivity to the ongoing life process in the community. For example, a death in the community needs to be properly mourned and might affect the research process; members of a rural community might have to travel long distances to towns for pensions and salaries and therefore might be absent from the village

during parts of the research process; and, in poverty-stricken areas peoples' attitudes to seemingly wealthy outsiders fluctuates with the availability of basic resources such as food and fuel during the month.

In fact, paying attention to these local fluctuations in mood and availability often generates important, although informal, research data. It is this process which enables the researcher to 'get a feel' of the local dynamics of the situation as well as the issues, tensions and disagreements, which are important in the lives of people in this community, but might not be expressed to the researcher. Besides not being considered part of the research process in conventional research, this process of rapport-building is constrained by lack of time and financial resources. It is necessary that this process be budgeted for in the initial research proposal. Donors, unfortunately, are often reluctant to fund this stage of the research and this constitutes a problem for researchers in this paradigm.

A second crucial issue in laying the foundation for the development of trust and co-operative action, and one which is part of the **rapport-building process**, is **negotiating an understanding of, and agreement to, the objectives of the research for the community**. In a development research project reported by Van Vlaenderen & Nkwinti (1993), the researchers had to explain in a community meeting that they did not provide funds, but were tasked to assist the community to identify its needs and the priorities among them. The community debated this and was divided about the usefulness of co-operating with the researchers and unclear about what it expected from the researchers. The community decided that they needed time to discuss these issues amongst themselves and would have to hold another meeting with the researchers. At this second meeting, which was better attended than the first, the researchers facilitated a brainstorming session about the needs, problems, expectations and questions of all participants and tried to clarify common themes on the multitude of problems and issues raised. They reported that although the process was very slow and difficult, it had the effect of making the community members feel 'listened' to and thus become more open to the process of engagement. It also helped the researchers to develop a more realistic picture of the development challenges in this context. Through engagement in this process the researcher develops a relationship with the community through which good participation is facilitated. This lays a solid foundation to the rapport between community and researcher and an opportunity to begin the process of capacity building.

In addition to negotiating the objectives of the research, the researcher needs to **negotiate the nature and projected outcome of the community's engagement** in the research process. Researchers are frequently seen as better resources than community members and the researcher needs to be careful not to raise expectations which cannot be met. This can be done by being explicit about what can be provided, and what the community members will have to provide for themselves. Being clear about the limitations of the research process is also important.

We now move on to examining **what** it is that the researcher should focus on in research in community settings. PR assumes that communities have well established **systems of knowledge and information, and carefully developed techniques of management and problem-solving**, which have been their survival resource in harsh conditions (Van Vlaenderen, 1993). This local knowledge resource is the basis from which participants engage in the research process. This concept of **local knowledge** has its roots in new developments in cognitive psychological theory which suggest that there are differences in the way people think as a result of experiencing different contexts for thinking. This idea has historical roots in the theory of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who, in the 1920's argued that all our higher mental functions have social origins. They appear first on an interpersonal plane, in our interactions with others. The essence of these interactions is then internalised, to fundamentally alter our ways of thinking and our intra-

psychological processes (Vygotsky, 1978). The significance of this view is that it is this knowledge which forms the basis for any intervention. Expertise in managing the challenges and conditions of life in a particular context are rooted in that context. The researcher needs to understand what it is that constitutes this base of knowledge, skills and strategies of survival. Gilbert (1995) argues that local knowledge is the **everyday knowledge of a community of practice; the collection of ideas and assumptions that are used in a community of practice to guide, control and explain actions within the specific setting**. Eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) argues that local knowledge can be understood as **common sense operating as a cultural system; it is a body of colloquial wisdom**. Gilbert (1995) argues that engaging in different communities of practice will generate different forms of knowledge and resources for thinking. It is this point which researchers need to bear in mind. Activities within communities differ in terms of the structure, goals and means for achieving these goals. In order for any research intervention to be well grounded, thorough and within the grasp of a community's potential, there is a need to acknowledge and tap into this knowledge resource. The researcher should initiate and play an active role in the process of accessing local knowledge, indigenous technologies, survival strategies and resources which will serve as a foundation for the development of an appropriate action plan. Exposing and building on indigenous knowledge and resources has two effects: it reduces the likelihood that a programme intervention will de-

skill and undermine the local people and increase their dependency on external suppliers and experts; and secondly, it serves to highlight areas of values and beliefs which might be obstructing critical reflection on the part of the community about a particular problem. However, there is a corollary to this argument. The researcher, too, has a 'local' knowledge, one which makes researchers competent in their own setting. Researcher's engaging in processes requiring community participation should understand that their own ways of doing things and understanding things are no more intrinsically valuable or correct than the community's and should not be imposed by way of 'expert advice or guidance.

Exercise 3. The value of local knowledge

It could be argued that giving value to local knowledge is merely romanticising what is old and conservative. It could also be argued that romanticising such knowledge serves to keep (for example) the rural poor in their place, and deny them access to technology and progress. What do you think is the value of listening to, recording and working with local knowledge? What are the problems and constraints of local knowledge?

The third main component of laying the ground for the development of trust and co-operative action is that of the mode of engagement of the researcher. We mention the modes of the researcher as activist, consultant and ethnographer, but go into the researcher as ethnographer in more detail.

A researcher may engage as an **activist** in a particular field in which case the researcher will be quite forthright about the intention to change social conditions in a particular direction. Much feminist research has been done along these lines, where feminist researchers have engaged in research on women's issues, not as impartial researchers, but in order to facilitate change in a way that is most likely to be effective and to be in the interests of women. A **consultant**, on the other hand, would tend to be less driven by particular social causes and would become involved in order to impart skills or render services as a professional. There are a wide range of ways in which researchers can get involved and the way in which the researcher enters the context and engages with the different stakeholders cannot be strictly prescribed in ideal terms that cut across all

situations. However, amongst the approaches to social science research which provide insight into the different possibilities of engagement, the one which is most noteworthy is the anthropological method of ethnography.

Research as ethnography

Spradley (1979) argues that ethnography is the "work of describing a culture. The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view...Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people" (p.3). Within the ethnographic approach, there are a variety of techniques which allow the researcher to become the 'learner', amongst these are 'going native' (directly experiencing what it is like to live as a native to that context), and cultivating the ability to ask naive questions, such as an apprentice would. However, a core principle in ethnography centres on the way in which the researcher is involved in the everyday activities of the community. This is not necessarily structured involvement. It could involve a 'listening survey'. This is not the traditional survey in which the researchers decide beforehand which facts they are going to find out about and work from very precise questionnaires. In this approach, the researcher listens primarily to unstructured conversations in which the community members feel relaxed and talk about things that they are most concerned about. This occurs in places such as markets, buses, homes, washing places and taverns. The researcher as ethnographer listens especially for feelings about meeting basic needs, relationships between people, community decision making processes, education and socialization, recreation, and beliefs and values (Hope and Timmel, 1984). This means that research methods are adapted to the context of work and the researcher simply gets involved in such a way as to be maximally exposed to how the community functions at all levels.

In the traditional sense, anthropologists conducting research go and live in the 'field', or the community setting. They immerse themselves in a setting, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible, whilst observing how people perform their everyday activities. In fact, the data collection technique of **participant observation** is the mainstay of ethnography. For example, if the researcher wished to understand the role of women in a community, she would live in a home in the community for perhaps a few months, and make daily records of her observations of the activities and functions of women in a particular community of practice. In some PR approaches, participant observation involves becoming a participant. The researcher might ask to be taught the tasks which a woman does, in order to more fully understand them. More directed forms of enquiry are also part of the ethnographic approach. Spradley (1979) refers to the use of the 'grand tour' type question - a questioning technique in which you ask the research subject to guide you through a familiar everyday activity. In the 'researching women' example, the researcher would meet with individual women in their work contexts and ask them to describe very generally what their jobs entail. A woman might identify particular tasks which she does each day, for example, collecting water or firewood, making meals, looking after children. A 'mini-tour' question would be a more focussed question on something that arises from the 'grand-tour' response. For example, the researcher might discover that some tasks a woman does are done collectively, like collecting firewood. The researcher would then ask the woman to describe a typically trip to collect firewood: who does she go with, where do they go, how do they select appropriate branches, how do they carry these branches. The researcher would pay particular attention to words and phrases which she uses, because it is these contextual terms, the 'slang', or colloquial terms of the woman, that will provide opportunities for insight into the meaning of the experience of being a woman in that context. Spradley (1979) argues that "the essential core of ethnography is (the) concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand. Some of these

meanings are directly expressed in language; many are taken for granted and communicated only indirectly through word and action. But in every society people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organise their behaviour, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world in which they live" (p.5). In the process of being an ethnographer, the researcher becomes a learner, a student of the 'culture' of the research community. Spradley (1979; 1980) and Ellen (1984) are two excellent sources on the ethnographic approach.

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Exercise 4. Conducting a mini-tour

In the environment around you, at your university, college, or town, identify a job that you do not know much about (for example, how a librarian works, or how a hawker makes a successful sale, or how a waitress manages many different orders). Ask a person in that job to describe a part of the job they find most difficult. Listen carefully to how they describe the job. What words do they use that are unfamiliar to you? This is their 'slang' or colloquial expressions. What techniques do they use to manage the difficult situation? Ask questions which help the person to tell you more, for example, 'Can you give an example of how that happens?'

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So far we have highlighted the issues and methods in the process of getting involved with the community. A second aspect of processes and methods, is that of fostering community involvement.

Fostering community involvement

There are two central tensions which need to be addressed in fostering community involvement. The one involves identification of a coherent, distinctive community; and the other concerns awareness of the inherent heterogeneity of communities. The challenge to PR is to involve all parts of the community in the research process, whilst acknowledging the stratifications within communities, and the different affiliations of sectors within the community.

Any community, in order to be a distinctive community necessarily has some form of homogenous identity that makes it distinctive and sets it apart from other communities. Thornton and Ramphele (1988) argue that the term 'community' is used "to denote aggregations of people who have something in common, such as a common residence, geographic region, and shared beliefs, or who claim membership in a common lineage structure, or who are distinguished by similarities of economic activity or class position" (p.30). In a very well defined community (eg. the mentally ill aged who live alone far from clinics in a particular community) it is relatively easy to outline the **target community** and its needs. Some communities are more homogenous than others and in doing research in such communities we would expect to be able to define what the community's needs are without having to encounter very many tensions or differences of opinion. Research in very specific communities is often like this.

However, coherent communities may also have considerable variation or heterogeneity within their ranks. It is all too easy to overlook the complexities and tensions within a community in attempting to develop general statements which may be applied to the community as a whole. For example, in developing an understanding of the needs of the aged in a particular community it would be easy to make general statements about this group and overlook, for example, the specific needs of the aged who are disabled or mentally ill, or to overlook the different needs of the married and the single.

We suggest that there are different steps in the process of managing these tensions. Firstly, it is necessary to be wary of individuals or small groups of people who claim to represent the interests of the community. At the outset of a research process the volunteers who become involved, or the community leaders, or the representatives appointed by the committee, tend not to be representative of the community in general. In fact it often makes little sense to speak of the needs of the community in general. A community represents a conglomeration of a range of different needs: those of the young, the old, women, men, employed and unemployed are some of the categories which may be represented within a community. Even if those who step forward to participate are legitimate representatives, what they stand for needs to be evaluated in respect of the extent to which there is an ongoing dialogical process between themselves and the broader community which they represent.

Secondly, within the process of community consultation, the researcher should attempt to evaluate the different interest groups within a community with respect to the issue at stake. It is always necessary to identify distinctive differences or stratifications within the community. For example, in the case of assessing the health service needs it may be necessary to distinguish between two groups on the basis of a criterion which superficially seems to have little to do with health, but which makes a great difference when one goes into questions about the accessibility of health services. For example there might need to be taken into account the stratification between those who have access to transport or resources to pay for transport, and those who do not. If we neglect to do this, the way in which we go about conducting research may lead us to a biased evaluation of the characteristics of the community.

Thornton and Ramphele (1988) argue that development projects world-wide have been known to reinforce inequalities in the countries where they have been initiated, by not paying sufficient attention to the patterns and problems of existing social relations. For example, those who actually carry the burden of child-care and who make decisions on health-care issues are often ignored in favour of 'leaders', usually males, with special interests of their own (Chambers, 1985). Women are particularly vulnerable to being further disadvantaged by 'community' development projects. "Whenever there is a need for voluntary community action it is the women, who are already over-burdened, that have to give their often non-existent leisure time for communal efforts like village health work, building toilets, promoting literacy, etc." (pp. 34-35).

Thirdly, having evaluated the groupings involved, it becomes important to ensure participation of the different groupings. Here we come to a practical challenge which is critical to the success or failure of PR. How can the researcher foster the involvement of the uninvolved? In answering this question, we refer the reader back to the section on dialogue and participation in the transition context. To summarise, it is clear that appropriate dialogue is very difficult in a context of unequal capacity. We stated that **dialogue is not a means so much as an ideal towards which participatory projects should strive**. Below we outline three techniques which attempt to address this issue by creating environments which are 'dialogue enabling'.

There are a wide range of facilitation methods for fostering community involvement. These methods range from general techniques for facilitating communication and interaction within groups, to more comprehensive methods. Many examples of the former methods can be found in the 'Community worker handbooks' (Hope & Timmel, 1984) based on the work of Paulo Freire. These include 'ice-breaking exercises' (getting a group to relax and introduce themselves), listening skills, and group games for exploration of relational dynamics.

A number of comprehensive PR systems have been developed, which provide some

solutions to the problem of initiating dialogue in community settings. For example, the **Planning for real** approach detailed below caters specifically for non-verbal interaction; it deliberately employs methods which do not require verbal fluency. The **Participatory Rural Appraisal** approach draws on the idea that dialogue can be developed through participation with others in activities which show what the community knows (local knowledge). It also facilitates the researcher gaining access to the marginalised sections of a community. These two methods for fostering community involvement are outlined below.

Planning for real

The Planning for Real approach developed under the auspices of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation (NIF) in Britain as a community planning process. It is based on the concept of making three-dimensional (3D) models of geographic areas, and providing opportunities for members of a community to participate in the reconceptualisation of these areas through an "alternative currency to words" (Gibson, 1980, p.204). By this is meant that in the process of interaction with the community development task, the other community members and the researcher, an individual community member does not have to be articulate, well-educated, or confident in speaking in front of other people. An alternative way of expressing one's views is facilitated. In this way it helps residents of communities and professionals to work out, and then share in implementing, joint plans of action for neighbourhood regeneration.

A typical 'Planning for real' exercise consists of the following steps. A model of the town is constructed and set out in a public place, such as a local hall. Each building or space, for example a park, is drawn on movable cards. Through public advertising of the event, members of the community are invited to stroll into the hall and contribute their views on the siting of, for example, the library, or a sports field, or a new community centre. This they do **non-verbally**, through moving the cards marked with diagrams of these structures. They are encouraged to identify problems in the design of their town, and, non-verbally, to suggest solutions to these problems. This technique puts everybody on an equal footing as they move around the model shifting cards as they see fit. Instead of the "eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations" (Gibson, n.d. p. 5) of traditional community meetings, which benefit those who are fluent and confident in speaking publicly, everyone's views converge on the subject matter - the model and its possibilities. Once an individual has placed a card with a suggestion on a particular spot, the suggestion is depersonalised. The suggestion does not 'belong' to anyone anymore. The suggestion enters the public space of the model and has a legitimacy and status which is unconnected to the person's social status. With a physical model of their neighbourhood to play with, timid people can physically put down their ideas. Gibson (1991) comments that often people who put down an idea wait for others to talk first about it, and then say themselves, 'I agree with you'. The contribution of the 'experts' such as engineers, town planners, lawyers and city treasurers in the community is limited in this part of the process. Rather, community initiative is encouraged and facilitated. The foundation of the approach is the acknowledgement of local knowledge and commitment. Professional advice serves as a back up - "experts are on tap, not on top". Once contribution to the model is complete, follow-up groups are formed to work out the main recommendations in more detail, to negotiate between conflicting interests and priorities, and to put them across with the weight of the whole community behind them. This is done through a planning process in which time (now - soon - later) is contrasted with the resources that are available (we can do it on our own - with some money and advice - only with expert advice - we have to pass it on to someone else) on a chart (see box 3). For example, the community might decide that a pre-school is a development priority for them. The planning process towards achieving this goal encourages the community members to realise their resources and their constraints. Thus they would ask themselves

questions such as: We need to build the preschool, can we do this as we are, or do we some financial assistance, and the expert advice of a builder?

3. The participatory feasibility planning process (Gibson, personal communication)

	We can do this as we are	We can do this on our own	We can do this with some money and advice	We can do this only with expert advice (we pass the buck)	We can do nothing at all
NOW					
SOON					
LATER					

The NIF argues that development initiatives work when a handful of local people gain the confidence to set something up - at first perhaps a bulk buying scheme, or a creche - and then find out how to involve other local people and develop a working relationship with professionals which could lead to the growth of community businesses, improving housing, or community facilities (NIF brochure, n.d.). It is thus a technique which helps residents' groups as well as local authorities.

Thus, through the use of a physical, three-dimensional model and a directed planning process, a number of things are achieved: interest in the development of the community is gained through an eye-catching technique; people's inputs are purposefully organised, without individual confrontation; ordinary community members and professionals begin to establish working relationships; the problems and possibilities of development are presented visually; and the suggestions and priorities are collectively agreed upon and are visually presented in a way that all will understand.

Gibson (1993) argues that seeing what could be done, and what should be done, is the key which unlocks commitment. Experts and ordinary people working together using this method generate a sense of mutual confidence and staying-power, which provides the motive force. In addition, no one has to make any concessions, or run the risk of appearing to condescend (Gibson, 1980, p.204). In fact, Gibson (ibid) reports that a group of architects were surprised at the latent capacities the model suddenly revealed in their clients, when they utilised it with a housing co-operative in Liverpool. A further example is that of Meadowell, a low-income housing scheme in Britain which experienced a high degree of vandalism and gangsterism. Through the Planning for Real process this community managed to revitalise their town by fostering co-operative relationships between community members and experts, and, more significantly, building links between community members themselves (Gibson, 1993)

Planning for Real can help the community to see things and plan in relation to a comprehensive and integrated vision, to co-ordinate its actions with the backing of friendly professionals and to concentrate its resources on a realistic development programme which has roots in the community. The programme therefore has a better chance of surviving and being safeguarded by the community, than would a programme planned by, and delivered to the community, by outside agencies.

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA)

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is a research methodology involving various activities which emerged out of a need to do research more rapidly with results being more immediately available to be used by communities and development workers to make decisions.

The emphasis on participation developed as a result of disenchantment with the way that development initiatives would often lead to information being taken out of the community and being collated and interpreted in the researcher's offices, with key responsibilities for information collection and interpretation resting with outsiders. When the techniques used are compatible with the local dynamics of the moment, and when the methods complement rather than replace indigenous forms of expression and problem-solving, participation is maximised.

PRA is a methodology with a specific philosophy about the role of people in their own development. The focus is not just on gathering information, but the recognition of how empowering the process of gathering this information can be. PRA utilises a variety of tools, which have an emphasis on activities. One of the underlying assumptions in PRA is that **activity** encourages people's commitment to the process, it accesses those who are not literate and who are often marginalised in the community, and it emphasises collective work, which provides a more secure environment for participation than, for example, interviewing an individual. Some of these techniques are mapping, drawing Venn diagrams, walking across a piece of land and drawing up a 'transect', doing livelihood analyses and semi-structured interviews (Theis & Grady, 1991). These tools are outlined in Box 4. These methods aim at equipping communities with the necessary tools for identifying, analysing and solving their own issues. Engaging with a community in these activities develops an awareness within people of their own life situation and of their own potential to take action to improve the quality of their lives.

Box 4. Tools of participatory rural appraisal

- **Direct observation** of events, processes, relationships or people

- **Semi-structured interviews** are informal, guided discussions with key informants, or groups of community members

- **Ranking and scoring** are analytic tools which order information according to importance or preference

- **Participatory planning, budgeting and monitoring** of the research process

- **Group discussions and analysis** of information

- **Diagramming** is probably the most significant of the PRA techniques because it facilitates communication and stimulates discussion. Some of the diagramming techniques are:
  - **Mapping** which accesses information on resources, infrastructure and demography are drawn on all surfaces from paper to using sticks and stones on the ground.
  - **Transects** which are diagrams of land use obtained by systematically walking with informant through an area whilst asking questions and observing
  - **Seasonal calendars and daily routine charts** are diagrams which articulate the main activities, problems and opportunities in a community through the daily or annual cycle
  - **Time trends and historical profiles** encapsulate people's accounts of the past and may include major epidemics, droughts, or changes in customs and land use
  - **Flow diagrams and Venn diagrams** highlight the institutional relationships in a community and assist in identifying and solving problems by analysing how they are inter-connected
  - **Livelihood analysis** diagrams are used to interpret the behaviours, decisions and coping strategies of households. For example a Pie chart might be used to analyse the income and expenditure of a group in the community.

Visual representation of problems, situations and histories is a major part of the PRA approach. It is significant in two senses. Firstly, visual material helps to demystify the research process by making the collection of information and its analysis opaque, obvious and available to the group of people engaged in the exercise. Secondly, visual representations of information, or pictures of one's surroundings, enable one to take a new perspective on the situation. Readers might think of times when they have seen their town on a map, and been made aware of the type of land which surrounds it, and the distances between their own town and surrounding towns. In addition to providing this chance to see the 'overall picture' instead of just one's own perspective, collective production of visual material facilitates communication and dialogue between members of communities; makes knowledge and ideas public; provides a holistic picture of events; and allows for information to be owned, verified and added to by participants. Because the visual representation is drawn up by a group, an individual becomes aware of how his/her own knowledge overlaps, or is different to that of other people in the community. Visual representations facilitate the involvement of the more marginalised members of a community, the non-literate, very shy members, because it relies less on formal education than, for example, being able to write responses down on a survey questionnaire.

Although there are various ways of implementing a Participatory Rural Appraisal, a typical application would take place as follows. After it has been agreed to conduct a PRA process in a community, the community would elect a few members to become trained in the PRA approach. This group of people, plus the more experienced PRA facilitators enter a two to three day training period. This serves to familiarise the experienced facilitators with the community dynamics, and the community members with the philosophy, approach and tools of PRA. During this process, the team decides on the main questions to be asked of the community, and the PRA techniques to be used for this. The next three to four days involves the PRA team working with identified groups in the community with the PRA techniques. For example, asking a group of community members to draw a map of their village on the ground; or conducting a livelihood analysis with a group of women in which the team, with community members, interviews each household on its composition, income, expenditure and livestock. After this period of 'data collection' through activity, the team undertakes to compile this information, and conduct a preliminary analysis. The data, and the analysis are then presented to the whole community in the form of a workshop, or meeting. This is the preliminary stage to the identification of problems, resources and challenges to the community, and the discussion of action to resolve these issues. Thus the community members have been involved in the planning of the research, the implementation of the research process, the analysis of data, the construction of the research report, and the drawing up of recommendations and action plans.

PRA is a very powerful process, but depends greatly on the quality of facilitation. Chambers (1992) argues that it can, unfortunately, be seen as a quick fix, or used too routinely and rigidly. Skilled facilitation is necessary, as methods alone do not constitute a research paradigm.

Box 5. Participatory rural appraisal

Participatory rural appraisal can be used to:

- assess the development needs of a community

- identify priorities for further research/development action

- assess the feasibility (social and technical) of planned interventions

- implement development action

- monitor development action

It is based on the following principles:

- it optimises tradeoffs: what needs to be known against measuring only as accurately as necessary

- it offsets the bias of urban outsiders with that of the local rural reality

- it involves learning as you go where process and goals of the study are modified during the research process where necessary

- it emphasises learning from and with the rural people, gaining from indigenous physical, technical and social knowledge

- local people perform the activities: choose the methods, draw the diagrams and maps, run the workshops, and adapt the methods to the local conditions.

Developing a critical perspective

In this section we will focus on an often overlooked but crucial aspect of PR. This involves the introduction of critical perspectives into contextual research. We hope to bring readers to the point of seeing that the act of understanding a context involves both standing in that context, and taking the perspective of standing outside of the context. Standing outside, and the benefits of this perspective, sometimes referred to as a 'distanciated' perspective, are very important in PR, as is the perspective of 'standing in' or 'the insider's perspective'.

The role of critique in social research is well explained by the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas (1972) in his book 'Knowledge and human interests', who describes psychoanalysis as the paradigm for the critical social sciences. While he has been criticised for using this analogy, and we should be careful in applying the analogy in a general way, it nevertheless is useful for making a particular point. He understands psychoanalysis as being a method for bringing about self-reflection, where what is taken for granted, or given at face value, is reflected on with a view to exposing the limits and false conceptions we have about ourselves. In psychoanalysis the patient comes to see the limitations of his/her self-understanding and develops new forms of self-understanding which can be the basis for new kinds of action. This can be conceived of as a process of critical enquiry, which leads to the sweeping away of misconceptions and the letting go of old beliefs, assumptions and taken-for-granted meanings, to be replaced by alternative conceptions.

When we ask people what they feel, or what they desire; and ask them to account for their opinions or attitudes, and the motives for their actions; what can we expect in terms of them being able to respond to our enquiry? The answer to this question from a critical perspective is that we cannot expect them to be able to completely account for themselves. This is not as patronising as it may seem and there are good reasons to believe that the psychological life of an individual or group cannot be completely understood if one only has access to the empathic perspective (see section 1.1). The outsider's perspective helps us to understand ourselves better and this idea lies at the heart of the PR endeavour. In a satisfactory PR process the researcher or facilitator and the community continually have their understanding of events and processes challenges and enlarged, as they begin to understand an event through the insider's and outsider's perspectives respectively.

Let us consider a few examples of how understanding of a situation may be improved if we for a moment stand outside of the situation and view it from a distance (**distanciation**).

We are concerned here with what can be said, for example, of a moment in time by virtue of the perspective of hindsight. We would not have to look long to find our own examples of how the benefit of questions posed after an event allows us to make statements about the event, which we would want to say are true of the event, but were not known in the context of the event. Pause to think of an example of how your understanding of a situation changed and improved over time. A different kind of example is the way in which someone may know a person such that we might say that she knows the other person better than that person knows herself. It might be said that in some respects a mother is better positioned to know who a child is, and what the child is becoming, by virtue of seeing the child in his/her complete life history context; which is something that the child is unable to do. The child knows him/herself only in the context of the present and its immediate surrounds. By virtue of being in a situation, of living in a moment, we are often prevented from seeing the broader contexts in which our experience is mounted, and prevented from understanding the meanings which we live in a 'received' or taken-for-granted way. In the same way we may begin to see our home community in new ways only when we are away from home; or when we see it through the eyes of an outsider.

The above gives reason to believe that sometimes we can better understand experiences by getting a distance from them. The PR practitioner attempts to move backwards and forth (see also 5.2 on **Balancing distance and engagement**) between understanding something from the empathic perspective (see section 1.1) and seeing the situation from a distance. By bringing distanciated perspectives to communities the practitioner attempts to bring the community to a fuller and better understanding of its predicament and then to assist the community to translate this understanding into programmes of action.

The critical theory model sees its **theories** as transforming social life when these theories are introduced into people's self understanding. Thus critical theory relies on reflexivity (see section 2.1) to bring about social change. More particularly the critical model aims to change social life by overcoming the state of alienation which distances human beings from an understanding of the true state of their being and which prevents them from understanding their condition. By showing people the shortcomings of their self-understanding it is intended that they will begin to understand in ways which are less compliant with the forces of social domination and this will make them more inclined to resist and know how to change these conditions. Thus theoretical perspectives may sometimes enhance our self-understanding. The models for understanding social life developed by theoreticians, can help to illuminate for us the reasons why we do things, beyond the way in which we spontaneously and naturally understand ourselves.

Freire (1972) suggests that the historical understanding which a community has of its own conditions of life may be the very reason why the community is unable to find creative solutions which are likely to change these conditions. Freirian method is radically committed to **praxis** (see section 2.1), and the method is based on the need to bring a community to think differently and particularly critically about the causes of the negative conditions which prevail in the community.

"True reflection leads to action but that action will only be a genuine praxis if there is critical reflection on its consequences." (Paulo Freire, 1972, p.41). This quotation sets the stage for understanding Freire's **action-reflection** cycle, which consists of a model for ensuring that critical consciousness becomes part of the PR effort. Reflection on action involves an appraisal of both successes and failures. The successes are celebrated and a cause for motivation, whilst the failures and mistakes make for the need to more deeply understand the causes of a problem and the necessary solutions which will lead to the desired transformation of daily life. The continual reflection upon the consequences of actions and the evaluation thereof is envisaged as an ongoing process that should accompany all actions at all times. However, it is an ideal process and its implementation is

sometimes far from the ideal. It is sometimes much easier to blindly proceed with a programme of action than to be self-critical and go back to planning and re-designing the intervention.

The action-reflection cycle is often structured into PR through the process of **programme evaluation**. There is a particular form of programme evaluation known as **formative evaluation** where the evaluator engages in the process of evaluating not to assess whether the programme has been effective or met its objectives, but by way of developing the programme along the way. The findings of the evaluation are arrived at in the interests of developing and improving the programme rather than simply to assess the effectiveness of the programme. The latter is known as **summative evaluation**. In formative evaluation the evaluation is seen as being intrinsic or built into the intervention, and evaluators will attempt to develop within the programme the capacity for ongoing self-evaluation. In a participatory way the researcher evaluates the progress of the project and feeds back findings to those with interest and involvement in the project, so that the research process proceeds in the form of a series of specific implementations or interventions, and evaluations thereof. Actions are performed and then evaluated, and this evaluation becomes the basis for further action which is again evaluated, and so on. The researcher's function is to become redundant by ensuring that the implementation and evaluation of the programme occur in concert. Thus an evaluation or research committee may be set up and a procedure generated for their conducting their own ongoing evaluations. In other words the community learns to evaluate its own programmes and learns to be critical of its own interventions.

As a participatory researcher one feels the pull of both sides of the continuum from being an involved participant to being a distanciated observer. PR practitioners at different times feel the pull to one side or the other. Funders will often demand an objective, 'standing outside' perspective, whereas community members will demand empathy, engagement and concern. One prescription which seems to provide some guidance in mediating these competing pulls is that the researcher should maintain a moving, flexible relation to both sides and to be open to being influenced by both demands. Furthermore, researchers should be self-reflexive and transparent concerning their own 'needs' and academic demands.

As has already been said, the process of critical reflection is a strongly developed feature in the work of Paulo Freire, the philosophical foundations of which are laid out in Freire's (1972) 'Pedagogy of the oppressed'. This short but challenging book has laid the foundation for a great deal of practical work in the community development field. An interesting and valuable Freirian method is discussed following and you will be able to see how the method involves a practical implementation of many of the points made above.

The dialogical method of Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire popularised the word **conscientization** to represent the awakening of critical awareness or consciousness. Critical consciousness is characterized by the development of a critical understanding of culture which goes beyond everyday understanding of problems.

The first stage of a typical Freirian intervention begins with researching the peoples **thematic universe**. The themes are the ideas, values, hopes and concepts by which people live. Freire intends by his methods to take these themes and show the contradictions and tensions within them. In particular it is intended that the method lead to an understanding of how a people's understanding can limit their experience and make them 'fatalistic' in the sense of not expecting anything different.

These themes are then coded into a representation which depicts some of the central constituent elements of a community's thematic universe. This may be in the form of a

painting, a photograph, a poem, a poster or any other method of representation.

This representation is presented back to a community in a group discussion context conducted by a facilitator, PR practitioner, or as Freire calls it, an animator. People are required to describe what is happening in the code and to 'unpack' the story of the code. Codes are typically structured so as to present ambiguous images to people which will lead to much discussion and differing interpretations. For example the code used in the exercise below was developed in a community context to generate thinking around some aspects of community policing.

Having begun to divulge their ways of understanding what is happening in the code, and having begun to develop a grasp of the themes through which they think about the code, the facilitator then turns to ask them if the kind of situation depicted in the code occurs in their own community. Having already entered into talking about the code from the perspective of their own thematic universe they easily begin to talk about their everyday reality in terms of the themes which matter to them. Thus the method begins with understanding an external situation and then examines how these ways of understanding work to structure everyday reality. Once this reflection is underway it is the facilitator's task to challenge the understanding which underlies everyday action. Through this the participants in such exercises are brought to realise that their understanding constitutes a problem and they are challenged to deepen and broaden this understanding. The process of beginning to see their understanding of situations as limited is termed **'problematising** their understanding'. Once they have understood that their own understanding of the situation is what limits effective action, alternative ways of understanding are explored that are then developed for their practical import. Practical courses of action are developed on this basis.

It is not always easy for a group to discuss freely those issues which are most deeply important to them. Real life is often too close to understand, and it helps to project one's understanding onto an external image, before turning to understand one's own situation. The code enables us to step back a couple of paces and looking at the problem from a distance, to think about it a little more objectively.

Exercise 5. Using aFreirian code

Use the 'Freirian' questions below to discuss a picture which was developed at a workshop with trainees in a development organisation in the Eastern Cape.

Description: what do (did) you see happening in the poster/play/photograph, etc.

First analysis: why is **it** happening?

Real life: does **this** happen in real life?

Related problems: what problems does **it** lead to?

Root causes: what are the root causes of **these** problems?

Action planning: what can **we** do about **it**?

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Specific project vs community-development approach

Rifkin and Walt (1986) make a distinction between **'comprehensive'** and **'selective'**

approaches to health development. A distinction is also sometimes made between comprehensive community development programmes and **'focal'** projects. The former have less narrowly defined goals than the latter and the goals of a comprehensive community development process, while being broadly circumscribed in an area such as health or crime prevention, are not laid out prior to the project taking place. The latter are focal in the sense of having a particular focus, and are often sponsored by funders who have a particular interest in an area. In such instances the funders make known that there are funds available for certain kinds of projects and they liaise with communities with a preconceived idea about the broad shape of the proposed project. The difference between these approaches are significant from the perspective of PR.

Participatory researchers with expertise in a special area (eg. HIV prevention) will often be required, when the programme has more comprehensive objectives, to participate in ways which take them out of their area of experience and expertise. When the development project is not primarily accountable to a funder-

imposed focus there is no foretelling what the final focus of a project may be, nor when the project will be completed, if ever. Such programmes will typically be open ended with no envisaged completion date. This makes time planning difficult for the participatory researcher. Participatory researchers working on a consultancy basis or for a development agency are thus often inclined to opt for more focal or selective involvement. The positive effect of this is that it leaves the initiative for the comprehensive development process firmly in the hands of the community. The negative side is that the participatory researcher is inclined to want to limit research efforts to particular issues which can be dealt with in a clearly set out time schedule, but which may not be the issues which the community has energy for and the need to tackle.

Problems in a community are never isolated and a problem in one area is often linked to a problem in another area. For example, high levels of unemployment are often linked to crime problems and alcohol addiction is often linked to family violence. A thorough analysis would tend to show how problems are linked together and a comprehensive needs analysis as part of an initial PR exercise would outline the nature of these links. But often the links only become apparent as the project proceeds and this means that new areas requiring PR intervention emerge well after the initial PR process has begun. This is very apparent in relation to the **assessment of needs**.

People can know what they lack or what they need only to the extent that they know that an alternative is possible. To give an example from a community health project, amongst the needs expressed by the communities involved in a needs assessment process were needs which related to the domain of psychology. Yet the community could not and did not directly express their need for psychological services, because they did not know what psychologists have to offer. When they were told that psychologists can assist teachers to detect early signs of learning problems the need for psychologists became apparent to the community. Oddly enough this was a need which the community did not know they had, at least until the service was introduced as a possibility. This often happens in PR and it means that 'movement of the goalposts' is more likely than not to be a part of comprehensive community development processes.

This inevitable feature of PR and the organic, changing shape of community development needs, is a challenge to participatory researchers. They have to learn to balance their own needs for order, structure and planning with the realities of how needs are shaped and developed during PR interventions. There is no easy prescription for overcoming this difficulty. Some PR workers deal with it by offering their services to communities on a consultancy basis, or offering their services at certain points in a development process; for example, needs assessment or programme evaluation. Such consultants ideally attempt to

leave their skills behind in the community by developing the community's ability to perform these tasks themselves; for example, by conducting self-survey type needs assessment processes which a community can conduct itself at a later date should further needs assessments be necessary. Programme evaluation consultants would attempt to build evaluation processes into community development processes by developing an ongoing system of reflection on actions. But the expertise of the consultant is usually not easy to replace.

On the other hand there are advantages in the consultancy approach to PR in that the initiative for the development process as a whole remains in the hands of the community. This can be empowering but there is also a risk that community development programmes will grind to a halt because of the lack of capacity and expertise in the community, or because the effective management of the programme by the community is compromised by the very problems which the programme is designed to overcome. Loss of momentum and lack of visible progress, in spite of good intentions may lead to the total demise of the initiative, or at least to apathy.

Thus the issue of how selectively or comprehensively the PR practitioner gets involved is an open one without easy solutions. A participatory researcher may opt for either more selective or comprehensive engagement but the choice is probably a matter best settled according to contextual needs in each community development initiative.

Balancing distance and engagement

Engagement of a researcher in a research project, following the participatory model, is a collaborative effort that would lead under optimal circumstances to increased participation by the community at all levels. The researcher will ultimately walk away from the community and ideally the functions served by the researcher will be taken on by the community. Throughout the research process the researcher adopts what might be termed a 'proxy' role. It is a proxy role because the researcher is a 'stand in' or substitute given that the community presently does not have the capacity to perform those functions (eg. proposal writing or fund raising) without the researcher. To the extent, however, that capacity building has been a part of the PR process the researcher can withdraw in the knowledge that the researcher's function as an outside agent has become redundant. Throughout the process the researcher endeavours to create a context for eventual withdrawal. The researcher's engagement is thus concerned with creating circumstances which prepare the community for independence. This is not an easy process to successfully achieve and there is always the difficulty that outside consultants such as researchers will create a form of dependency.

Often the frustrations experienced by participatory researchers are like illness symptoms which they should listen to and which will inform them of imbalances in their way of being involved. When researchers experience the community as apathetic, for example, it may well be that the researcher has not engaged enough to know what people are feeling. People are apathetic for reasons, and the researcher may lose touch with these and hence attribute qualities such as apathy to the community, without a real understanding of what the apathy says about the non-

participatory way in which the research is being conducted. Alternatively, the researcher might develop strong negative feelings about particular interest groups or perspectives, in which case the researcher should take heed of the need to gain some distance and develop a greater degree of objectivity in relation to the process as a whole.

The degree of engagement and distance is an issue which should be held in consciousness by the PR practitioner at all times. Both of these qualities serve positive functions and both

have negative consequences. Balancing distance and engagement and keeping a dynamic tension between them is probably the greatest art involved in PR.

The problem of consultation and legitimate representation

PR relies upon and builds on the capacity and legitimacy of local community organisations. For intervention programmes relying on PR to be effective, an institutional base is needed in the form of independent member-controlled local organisations which are able to solve problems and make demands on the broader socio-political system without the continued effort of and dependence upon a development agency. Usually PR leads to the development of a project team consisting of representatives of the community, the researchers and the developers/funders. A difficulty may arise in such contexts where decisions are made which although they might express the views of the project organisation, do not necessarily represent the community and certainly not the range of views existent within the community.

This could be termed a problem of **representation**. The issue of representation is very central to community research and in any situation where people claim to be representing others there is the possibility of misinterpreting the real needs of others or speaking on their behalf in ways which are less than accurate. This is a danger inherent to the situation, because proper consultation with communities is a costly and time consuming process and either the funds or the time may not be available to consult all interest groups on new matters which may arise.

There is a need for PR practitioners to deal with the issues raised above by continuously questioning the understanding which emerges, as to its accountability to community opinion, and particularly new and emerging bodies of opinion. This has to be balanced against a tendency of PR practitioners to want to get on with the business of implementation of a project and perhaps completion of their involvement. The dialogical process is one which should never be laid to rest and the dialogue should always be open to finding new directions and to being corrected. Under time pressures, usually externally imposed (eg. in the form of funder expectations), it often happens that the need to make progress has precedence over the need to understand the complexities of representation.

In effective PR work the researchers continually ask themselves whether the understanding or analysis of problems is a fair and correct image of what is to be found on the ground, in the minds of members of the community. In boiling down community opinions into summaries, PR practitioners or specific community members may easily impose their own interpretations, and this eventually leads to resistance and conflict when community interest groups discover that their views and interests have been distorted or are not satisfactorily represented. The challenge to represent all views and to provide a balanced overview is inherent to PR, but it is one of the most difficult areas of this work for which there are no easy solutions.

Kelly and Van Vlaenderen (1996) point to the need to create a culture of reflection upon dialogical processes in the context of development projects. By continually subjecting group processes to critical reflection, the possibility that the project management takes on a life of its own, divorced from the community, will be averted. Ongoing critical reflection on the representational processes involved in the project may seem unnecessary at times, but when a meeting is paused in order to discuss the dynamics of what is going on in the meeting, it is sometimes astonishing to see how much negative tension has been glossed over in the attempt to make progress. A commitment to continuously seeing the marginal opinion, to hearing the voices of the unrepresented, is indispensable to the laying of firm foundations. Otherwise one merely plasters over rifts which will certainly emerge at a later date and undermine the success of the project.

Dealing with the larger context

There is a strong need take into account in participatory development projects, the context out of which a project emerges. This point is endorsed by Cohen and Uphoff (1977), Kieffer (1984), and Swift and Levin (1987). The 'context' may involve the history of previous encounters with participatory researchers or other experts, as well as the broad socio-

political history of the society. These histories are present in the minds of the participants (some more than others) and in the ways in which they have been historically prepared to engage with the other partners. For example, in South Africa certain kinds of institutions (eg. hospitals) continue to be seen as places of domination and sites of elitism, and initiatives arising out of these institutions are likely to be regarded with suspicion in some communities.

This means that a research process should always be understood as being situated or embedded in a larger process which will have an effect on such factors as motivation and trust. Whether we know it or not, whenever we participate in social life we participate in processes that were laid down before we entered the scene and which we participate in without knowing it. Recognition and acceptance of this reality is an ongoing challenge to the participatory researcher. Great care should be taken to understand the background contextual forces at play and to take them into account, as forces impacting on the dynamics of the research process. For example, being a so-called 'white' researcher in a community which has historically experienced great oppression at the hand of white people, means that one is initially likely to be treated with mistrust. Researchers thus need to know that their identities are not determined only by how they see themselves, but also by history and how others see them.

Progress, commitment and capacity building

It is common to hear community researchers express frustration at the lack of engagement on the part of the community. Paulo Freire (1972) speaks of apathy as a characteristic of communities who have come to accept that their situation is unlikely to change in any meaningful way. He says that eventually the quality of **'fatalism'** may set in which means that the community accepts its poverty or domination as inevitable, as if it were the destiny of the community always to be like that. Freire has made a study of this in his 'Pedagogy of the oppressed' and his methods are all ways of attempting to reverse fatalism and to get a community to realise that it can take charge of the conditions of its existence.

The South African struggle against racist oppression and exploitation provides a good example of how communities can break out of fatalism by taking direct responsibility for changing the conditions of their existence. The methods of resistance and struggle took many forms, which were determined by the capacities of those communities to achieve their broad aims. But now in the post-apartheid era many community organisations, and in particular non-governmental organisations in the development field, have had to reformulate their objectives and ways of working. In many respects it can be said that the new challenges have called on different skills and new capacities have had to be developed. Community members, however, have not been able to as quickly realign themselves and might be said to lack the capacity to contribute as meaningfully towards the new project of reconstruction and development as they did to the struggle against apartheid. In this context the capacity building function has become of foremost importance in PR, for building the foundations of meaningful commitment on the part of communities to the reconstruction and development process.

Commitment and motivation should be understood as being driven by the sense of being able to contribute and having a feeling that one's efforts can make a difference. Being

involved in a consultation process where one is aware that one's efforts are not really making much of a contribution eventually erodes the will to participate. One's efforts will not make a difference to the extent that one does not have the skills to contribute whether it be through facilitating meetings, conducting community surveys, knowing the technicalities of the subject matter, or speaking confidently in professional forums. It is thus important for community researchers to build commitment by developing the capacity to do these things. When people feel that they are doing something real and significant, commitment is seldom a problem and apathy is rare.

Community researchers face a dilemma between doing the work of capacity building and getting on with making the kind of progress that is going to be easily visible to funders or their institutions. Often they are not able to proceed because the community capacity is not present and their plans have to change to accommodate the need to first attend to something which they had previously taken for granted. This makes the paradigm a challenging one to work in, because the extent to which capacity-building work is necessary is not always able to be foretold, and researchers working within tight time frames and according to fixed plans are likely to become discouraged at the difference between their expectations and the realities of trying to do research with communities who are ill-equipped to engage in such processes.

It is helpful for participatory researchers in such circumstances to realise that capacity-building **is** progress and that real progress is in any case determined at the community end of the PR relationship, and not at the researcher's end. At the community end of the relationship capacity building means laying the firmest foundation, which will ensure that any walls built will be secure and lasting.

Conclusions

Contemporary social theory shows us that human beings have available to them multiple ways of understanding their own needs and realities. There are religions, political theories, personal beliefs, traditions, conventions, rules, laws and a great many more sources from which we draw our understanding of ourselves and social life. When we begin processes of social or psychological research we necessarily begin the enquiry by trying to understand how people presently understand themselves and their past, present and future. We try to enter into their worlds and experience what life is like from where they stand. We call this empathy which we have defined as understanding a social context or human subject from the perspective of what it is like to be in that context, or to **be** that person. However, even as we begin to enquire with them as to what they think and feel, what they need, what they should do, and so on, it becomes apparent that the result of the enquiry only partly lies already formed waiting to be discovered and understood. The greater part of what we seek in such enquiry is yet to be formulated, and will only be discovered with reflection, by adopting new ways of thinking and different perspectives. In this sense the outcome of such enquiry is created in a dialogue between the enquirer and the context of enquiry. As such the outcome may be something quite new, previously unthought and unimagined. Viewed in this way participatory social research is a forward-looking, productive and creative endeavour. It involves developing new hybrids between local knowledge and other, perhaps new, possibilities of understanding.

Thus the answer to a participatory research question is not something waiting there to be seized upon like an essential truth, and upheld as a discovery about what a community feels or thinks. Or rather, it is not only a 'discovery', but a 'creation' as well. It is to be established and not simply found. It is arrived at by mixing what a community already thinks and feels with the possibilities of experience and action which arise through the research process itself. In this sense it is a constructive and creative process. It has been

shown in this chapter that the distance of the researcher and the researcher's ability to ask positively motivated but critical questions, is a vital part of the research process and particularly so in relation to the establishment of new forms of action.

We would like to conclude by reaffirming our emphasis on the importance of understanding the dynamics of the research relationship; that peculiar meeting of expert and community and the tensions inherent to this meeting. We have tried to show that these tensions are a part of the territory. Not only are they unavoidable but they are productive. However, they need to be managed because creative tension can all too easily become the basis of conflict. For this to happen the nature of the relationship between researcher and community needs to be further studied and understood.

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