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Participatory Research: A Tool for Extension Educators

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Participatory Research: A Tool for Extension Educators

Abstract

Given their positions in communities across the United States, Extension educators are poised to have meaningful partnerships with the communities they serve. This article presents a case for the use of participatory research, which is a departure from more conventional forms of research based on objectivity, researcher distance, and social control over the research process. Participatory research embraces principles such as equitable relations between the researcher and study participants, the production of knowledge, and reflexivity. This article details these principles in more detail and offers some practical applications for Extension educators.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension model is premised on supporting research that informs the education and programs offered to communities across the United States. Participatory research is a departure from quantitative or qualitative methodologies in favor of a more egalitarian and democratic means of conducting research (Krasny & Doyle, 2002).

Participatory research came to the forefront in the 1960's and 1970's during the same period of time as the early civil rights and feminist movements (Hall, 2005). It emerged from a desire among practitioners and social scientists to break from conventional forms of research based on objectivity, researcher distance, and social control over the research process (Lynch, 1999; Freire, 1970). Three key principles of participatory research include the equitable relations between researcher and study participants; the production of knowledge; and reflexivity.

The Importance of Participatory Research

Participatory research addresses the concept of equitable relations. This involves building trust and creating an atmosphere of shared power between the researcher and study participants (Maguire, 2000). This may be influenced by those who initiated the research project (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004) as well as through educational and power differentials (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Differences in education between participants and researcher may create a power dynamic in how each is perceived and may ultimately affect the working relationship (Baker et al., 2004). Additionally, Kapoor (2002) notes how power differentials *among* the participants may affect the working relationship, which, as Maguire (2000) points out, is particularly true if a group has a dominant leader. Achieving shared control of a participatory research project involves the researcher sharing control of the research with the study participants. It is also dictated by participants' time, commitment, resources, and willingness to assume responsibility (Maguire, 2000).

The production of new knowledge is considered an important aspect of participatory research (Lynch, 1999). The production of knowledge is a key feature of many industrialised nations (Gaventa, 1993; Lynch, 1999; Maguire, 2000). In fact, research universities and institutions play an important role in determining the knowledge that is used to create social, economic, and political policies (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004). As a result, there is a moral conviction to recognise the "...vulnerable, marginalised or oppressed research subjects to exercise ownership and control over the generation of knowledge produced about them and their world (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004)."

Dagron (2001) argues that more participatory means of engagement have emerged in recent decades in which the voices of the marginalised and disadvantaged are being heard and used to generate new knowledge. This points to the use of Photovoice (Wang, 1999; Tritz, 2012) and participatory video (White, 2003), which are more accessible research methods regardless of age, ability, or gender. These participatory-based methods provide an opportunity for people to have a "voice" in addressing issues and concerns in their communities.

Finally, reflexivity is another key principle of participatory research. It provides a means by which to analyse the research process by involving the perspectives of both researcher and participants (Tovey, 2008; Pini, 2004). In general, reflexivity is a *process* that assumes that researchers are no different than the ones they study (Law, 1994). It also assumes a willingness to rethink key actions and decisions (via a written journal) as a means of producing better research, revealing the moral, ethical, and epistemological issues of academic research endeavours (Pini, 2004).

Living Up to the Ideals of Participatory Research

Participatory research has gained interest as an alternative approach to research, yet it has not come without criticism. It is often criticised in terms of rigour, validity, and level of reflexivity (Lynch, 1999; Maguire, 2000; Pain & Francis, 2003). Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, and Walsh (2004) argue that it is important for the academy to recognise the value of participatory research and not let it be overshadowed by more dominant methodologies such as quantitative research.

Furthermore, what happens when the research process falls short of these participatory ideals? Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, and Walsh (2004) argue that it is better to recognise and "operate principles of reciprocity, albeit imperfectly," rather than not at all. The participatory research process requires active participation from both the researcher and study participants. Both Maguire (2000) and Gatenby and Humphries (2000) speak of three roles they had during their participatory research project: researcher, educator, and organizer.

These roles are often confounded by the physical distance between the research location and the

university. Several studies illustrate the rural and often remote locations of participatory research endeavours, which limit access to resources and sources of support (Gibbon, 2002; Maguire, 2000; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Tritz, 2011). Moreover, forging relationships with participants,

...can be overwhelming, not unwelcome, but perhaps too needy of us in our own over-full lives. Do we have the time and energy for some conversations? Do we have the knowledge and expertise for some? How do we weigh the risks for ourselves and participants of opening up some conversations? Sometimes we struggle with setting limits in our sharing (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Finally, Chambers (2005) argues that professionals may "sabotage" participatory processes innocently and unknowingly due to their lack of training in participatory-based methods or approaches.

Practical Applications for Extension Educators

Participatory research lends itself as a compliment for Extension educators to research issues and concerns in an egalitarian manner with youth, families, agricultural producers, and community organizations, to name several. This approach offers the potential to inform teaching and service, which Extension educators provide in their communities, while empowering and including the very clients and communities that it serves.

The difficulty in advocating for participatory research is that many educators are trained in traditional research methods, namely quantitative and qualitative methods. The work of Chambers, Freire, Hall, Maguire, Pini, Wang, and White provide a rich source of scholarly work on participatory research methods. These scholars have examined participatory research in the field and provide invaluable insight into the successes and challenges of conducting it, in partnership with community groups.

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