

Social geography: participatory research

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This second of three reviews of action-orientated research in social geography focuses on one area of this work which is thriving. Moving, like many good ideas, from the field conventionally viewed as 'development' to wider application, participatory research (PR) has seen rapid expansion in recent years (see Breitbart, 2003; Kesby *et al.*, 2004; Pratt, 2000). It has particular attractions for social geographers, who are beginning to contribute to wider debates and critiques around its philosophies, theories and practices. They face, too, all of the problems involved in getting academic geography 'onto the streets' (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004).

I Why social geography, why now?

1 A space for action

In creating new spaces for engagement beyond the academy 'where researchers and participants can reshape our understandings' (McIntyre, 2000: 3), PR is one answer to recent calls for more relevant, morally aware and nonhierarchical practice of social geography which engages with inequality to a greater degree (Cloke, 2002; Gregson, 2003; Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999; Pain, 2003a; Proctor and Smith, 1999). Fuller and Kitchin (2004) place it as the most recent and promising chapter in radical geography's 35-year history. The keystone of PR is that it involves those conventionally 'researched' in some or all stages of research, from problem definition through to dissemination and action. Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher.¹ Education and knowledge building are also often viewed as important outcomes. PR involves, then, a collaborative and nonhierarchical approach which overturns the usual ways in which academics work outside universities. Moser and McIlwaine (1999) outline three further benefits – conceptually, particular tools are effective for exploring interrelationships (in their research, between violence and poverty); operationally, PR can contribute to community projects and help to join up those with differing aims (e.g., mainstreaming the issue of violence on other programmes); and in terms of capacity-building it often involves training local researchers, NGOs or activists.

No single discipline is responsible for the development of PR (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003). The current interest has evolved from 'participatory rural appraisal' techniques used in community development work in the south (Chambers, 1997), but PR dates back to the 1970s (Whyte, 1991; Freire, 1972) and has roots in earlier action research frameworks (e.g., Lewin, 1946). Feminist critiques of conventional research and early forms of PR have had a major influence since the 1980s, with feminist principles including reciprocity and critical questioning of who benefits from research outcomes, and feminist scholars, prominent in PR (e.g., Kindon, 2003; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2000). Social geographers' work draws on several approaches, reflecting their sensitivity to context, including 'participatory rural appraisal' (Kindon, 1995; 1998; Rocheleau and Thomas-Slayter, 1995), 'participatory urban appraisal' in cities where communities are diverse and difficult to define (Moser and McIlwaine, 1999), 'participatory mapping' which is becoming a keystone in development and research activity in Latin America (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003), 'participatory action research', more common in high-income countries (Cahill *et al.*, 2004; Cameron and Gibson, 2004; McIntyre, 2000; Pratt, 1999) and 'participatory appraisal' used with marginalized communities in Britain (Fuller *et al.*, 2003a; 2003b). Given this diversity, the depth of participation defines PR for many (see Herlihy and Knapp, 2003; Kesby *et al.*, 2004; Pain and Francis, 2003). This review includes examples from both developing and developed countries, but emphasizes the latter, where participatory approaches and surrounding debates have a shorter history.

2 The spatialities of participatory research

PR is well suited to the subject matter and approaches of social geography. First, specific participatory techniques such as mapping and timelines are useful in highlighting the spatial and temporal dimensions of issues (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003; Kesby, 2000). Secondly and more broadly, participatory approaches lend themselves to research where people's relations with and accounts of space, place and environment are of central interest. Investigation of how certain cultural identities are tied to place is a common concern (McIntyre, 2003; Kindor, 2003; Offen, 2003). PR is designed to be context-specific, forefronting local conditions and local knowledge, and producing situated, rich and layered accounts. It often results in thick descriptions of place, as 'in representing the voices of a neighbourhood, one also represents the neighbourhood itself' (Mattingly, 2001: 452), although Sanderson and Kindon warn that 'participatory processes produce knowledge *specific to their process and participants* rather than "uncover" "local knowledge"' (2004: 125; their emphasis). Thirdly, PR encourages and enables the drawing of multiple connections between issues and processes at different scales. Cahill (2004) describes how young women moved from their concern with the particular local problems they faced in their neighbourhood to awareness of their wider global context and causes such as gentrification. Nonetheless, as Mohan (1999) suggests, there is a contradiction between the global causes of social and economic marginalization and PR's focus on local and personal knowledge or a sometimes utopian notion of development where the state disappears.

3 A strategy for countering exclusion

One of the main benefits of PR perceived by social geographers is its ability to forefront the perspectives of marginalized groups and actively challenge social exclusion with them (Cahill, 2004; Chambers, 1997). PR is a method for bringing new voices into the academy, not just incorporating a singular voice of 'difference' but interrogating different perspectives and the spaces between them (Cahill, 2004). Those currently receiving most attention in participatory social geography research are children and young people. This was prompted by wider imperatives about children's participation and the fact that the power relations involved in age are so unequal (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Hart, 1997), and also because the bulk of work in children's geographies has had no impacts for children (Smith, 2004). A number of researchers have used PR to uncover children's experiences of rurality. Leyshon (2002) spent 14 months undertaking research in villages in southwest England, holding multiple roles as researcher, youth worker and representative of a voluntary youth organization which sometimes conflicted. Nairn *et al.* (2003) set up Youth Advisory Groups to advise on the design and dissemination of their research. Juckes Maxey (2004) reports on participatory research undertaken to consider the nature of young people's participation in adult-organized groupings. Others have focused on marginalized groups of young people in urban areas. Young (2003) examines the effects of residential restructuring on young people's identities on a Scottish estate, while Cope and Halfhill (2003) are exploring the conceptualizations of urban space of children of colour in low-income areas of Buffalo. In inner-city New York neighbourhoods, McIntyre (2000) focuses on how 11–13-year-olds negotiate exclusion and violence in daily life, and Cahill *et al.* (2004) explore economic change and young women's social identities. Leavitt *et al.* (1998) conducted related research in a poorer Los Angeles neighbourhood. In Herman and Mattingly's (1999) work, also in inner-city areas in California, young people explore connections to notions of community and participation in public space. In northeast England, Fuller *et al.* (2003b) have worked with graffiti artists on their views of legal sites, while research on experiences of crime victimization and fear has engaged with young offenders, homeless young people, those excluded from school and those labelled at risk of social exclusion (Gaskell, 2002; Pain, 2003b; Pain and Francis, 2004).

Owing to the impact of postcolonial perspectives on research methodology and ethics (McEwan, 2003; Peake, 2000), PR is also widely used with ethnic minority groups and indigenous populations. Here research often concerns identifying local knowledges and rights, and is harnessed by communities for change on their terms (Kendon, 2003; Herlihy and Knapp, 2003; Smith, 2003). One issue which has been more visible here than in work with (perhaps less empowered) young participants has been clashes between the ethical and moral standpoints of academic researchers and participants. Randstrom and Deur (1999) argue that we need to go beyond Eurocentric conceptions of ethics, as concepts such as 'confidentiality' and 'benefit' are understood very differently between individuals and across cultures (see also Kendon and Latham, 2002; Kitchin, 1999; Sanderson and Kendon, 2004).

Elsewhere in feminist geography, PR has proven effective in highlighting women's labour, needs and rights within a broader context of gender relations (see the landmark work of Townsend *et al.*, 1995), for example McIntyre's (2003) study of the

lives and communities of working-class women in Belfast, Pratt's (1999) collaborative research with migrant communities of women in Canada, and Vera Chouinard (personal communication, 2004) on women's struggles for employment rights in Canada, France and Guyana. In one of the first applications of PR to gender and development, Kindon's (1995; 1998) work with rural, illiterate Balinese women revealed strategic gender needs which were masked by gender myths about equality. The research of Opondo (2003) and colleagues has established highly gendered patterns of labour in Kenya's tobacco-farming economy, and raised issues with workers in the cut-flower industry ranging from employment insecurity and sexual harassment to inadequate maternity leave (Dolan *et al.*, 2003). Peake (2000) has conducted extensive research in collaboration with the women's development organization Red Thread into experience and perceptions of domestic violence and reproductive health in Guyana. Kesby's (2000; 2003) research has engaged with women on issues around HIV in Zimbabwe, while in Canada Emily Freeman (personal communication, 2004) is developing 'illness journeys' with women diagnosed with endometriosis (see www.endostudy.com)

A small number of geographers have worked participatively with people with disabilities (see Chouinard, 2000; Kitchin, 2001). H. McFarlane (personal communication, 2004) has developed techniques to enable participation of visually impaired women and women with various physical impairments in her work on the sociospatial barriers to motherhood, while Chouinard (personal communications, 2004) is directing a virtual and community-based disability research and training network. Others have focused on issues for poor urban communities including financial exclusion in northeast England (Fuller *et al.*, 2003a) and the impact of violence on social exclusion in Colombia and Guatemala (McIlwaine and Moser, 2000; 2001). Cieri (2003a) has conducted innovative research with lesbian women, comparing their mental maps of social space with official representations of gay Philadelphia.

II Revitalizing methodology

As well as having strategic benefits, PR is one of the most exciting new areas for methodological development. It has introduced a new toolkit, participatory diagramming, which is adaptable to any setting, effective at drawing in people normally excluded from research, and able to overcome some barriers to participation of culture, literacy or disability. Diagramming has been used in social geography within and outside a broader participatory approach (Fuller *et al.*, 2003a; 2003b; Kesby, 2000; Pain and Francis, 2004; Young and Barratt, 2001; for a critique, see Pain and Francis, 2003). Participatory mapping is one variant also growing in popularity (see Herlihy and Knapp, 2003), demonstrated in Cravey *et al.*'s (2000) research with farmers on health concerns over agricultural chemicals, and Hartfield's work with multicultural communities reassessing sites of built heritage (Hartfield and Kindor, 2003).

A small group of critical geographers has employed arts techniques in PR, a more established practice in community development, demonstrating the 'unique communicative and social power that the arts can exert within the public sphere' (Cieri, 2004: 2). Pratt and Kirby (2003) observe how nurses raised political issues through the medium of theatre. Bailey *et al.*'s (2004) research on the impact of foot and

mouth disease on British farmers' well-being involved an art exhibition as part of a multimethod strategy to create 'citizens' epidemiologies'. In Herman and Mattingly's (1999) research with young people in inner-city areas, they collaborated with community arts projects including theatre (see Mattingly, 2001), music, dance and photography. This provided 'spaces of self-representation and articulation' for young people's benefit (Herman and Mattingly, 1999; 210) and 'spaces of encounter between ourselves and the communities we study' (p. 219)

The rich accounts which emerge from PR tend to be based on qualitative inquiry, but methodological dogmatism is rare, since the central concerns are appropriateness to context, the depth of participation and nature of outcomes. As the dualism between critical research and quantification is further dismantled (Kwan, 2002; Peake, 2000), there are exciting possibilities for combining participatory research and geographical information systems (GIS) in order to democratize and harness technology for bottom-up social change (Abbott *et al.*, 1998; Elwood, 2004; Williams and Dunn, 2003). For example, the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University is integrating GIS across a range of areas in its participatory neighbourhood revitalization work (<http://policy.rutgers.edu:16080/cupr/rcopc/>). Participatory mapping can be an antidote to growing domination of GIS and GPS technologies in mapping resources, needs and rights (Stocks, 2003). Participatory 3-D modelling (Rambaldi and Lanh, 2003) involves standalone relief models which can be linked to GIS, but which provide handleable user-friendly tools for people to collect and analyse data. Cieri is using texts and tools of visualization drawn from geography, the arts and popular culture, and multilayered cognitive maps (see <http://www.acme-journal.org/Volume2-2>) as means to rewrite the rules of communicating geographical information in her work with lesbian women (2003a) and African Americans (2003b).

Other innovative methods becoming popular in participatory social geography include self-directed photography with young people (Leavitt *et al.*, 1998; Leyshon, 2002; McIntyre, 2000); 'photovoice' used by McIntyre (2003) to combine photography with women's accounts of their lives and communities; participatory video, which for Kindon (2003) provides 'a feminist way of looking'; storytelling, collage and community resource inventories (Kindon, 1995; 1998; McIntyre, 2000); and personal diaries, film-making, tape-slide presentations and e-mail (Leyshon, 2002). Peer research has been used to give participants further control of fieldwork (Megan Blake, personal communication, 2004; Cahill *et al.*, 2004; Gill and Pain, 2002; Nairn and Smith, 2003).

III Input into wider debates and critiques around participation

As PR has been taken up relatively late by social geographers in any numbers, many have reflected on its philosophies and practices and their implications for wider issues around academic praxis. These reflections include some vociferous critiques.

1 Power

Power and empowerment are central concepts in PR, both in attempts to minimize the 'us and them' between academic researcher and participants, and

in reversing conventional assumptions about who owns and benefits from research (see Kindon, 2003). However, the conceptualization of power has been one of the main issues of contention in a growing critical literature (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). As well as sometimes essentializing power in terms of 'haves' and 'have nots', and romanticizing primitivist notions of 'the poor' and their relations to 'elites' (Mohan, 1999), participatory structures have their own underlying relations of power (Pugh and Potter, 2003). For some, these strengthen rather than reverse traditional relations in the research process, for example in reauthorizing other knowledges as more organic and primitive (Mohan, 1999). A parallel is provided by Sanderson and Kindon (2004) in their account of the crosscultural production of knowledge in the participatory development process, which is not always inclusive of alternative and indigenous knowledges and sometimes subordinates them rather than increasing their power. They argue that this danger needs to be actively and critically negotiated by practitioners and researchers. In a promising area of development, social geographers are currently drawing out the connections and mutual insights between PR and poststructuralism (Cameron and Gibson, 2004; Dempsey and Rowe, 2004; Kesby, 2004). Kesby's recent work has been concerned with the ways that power shifts and reforms within and through PR processes.

The concept of empowerment in PR has been criticized for implying a paternalistic relationship between researcher and researched and ignoring the extent to which people can self-empower (Leyshon, 2002). There is a tendency to assume that power can always be transferred, that academic researchers have this intention and that participants are willing to be empowered in this way (Kitchin, 1999; Wilton, 2004). Given the increasing use of PR in policy research, geographers need to be wary; 'empowerment' can mean empowering people to take part in the modern sector of developing societies (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001), and participatory processes may give an impression of change while serving to contain planning or stifling dissent (Pugh and Potter, 2003).

Inequalities within communities are sometimes poorly reflected by PR, as has been illustrated in the subordination of women's voices and interests unless these are explicitly addressed (Guijt and Shah, 1998; Lennie, 1999; Maguire, 1987; Momsen, 2003). The power relations which participants are enmeshed in can make it difficult to participate fully, even where they wish to. In researching violence, for example, some are reluctant to speak where it would jeopardize their safety (Moser and McIlwaine, 1999). In practice, academics often have most input and retain overall control in research (Pain and Francis, 2003). Monk *et al.* (2003) document the differential power relationships at work between participants on a large collaborative project. Their reflection on the position of librarians and clerical staff within the project and within the University hierarchy implies that notions of 'broadening participation' could go much further.

2 Ethics and reflexivity

In geographical research, ethical codes have tended to be about having no negative impacts, not about the need to have positive impacts. Viewing ethics alternatively as 'processes that bring about more just social relations' (Herman and Mattingly, 1999; Kindon and Latham, 2002) not only brings academic and participants' notions of

'ethics' closer (Randstrom and Deur, 1999), but necessitates a far more active approach to participation and change. The gold standard of reflexivity, for example, does not directly benefit those who take part in research (Herman and Mattingly, 1999). There is no long tradition of reflexivity in PR. The relationship between having an activist stance and self-reflexivity is a troubled one, despite often arising from the same set of politics (Kobayashi, 2003). Sometimes participatory research is reported almost as though there is no researcher/writer voice or perspective, only a 'community' view (Pain and Francis, 2003). Because of these dangers, critical reflexivity is vital, both to explicate the role of outside researcher and knowledge (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003; Wilton, 2004) and to examine how far goals of empowerment and change are being met (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Negotiating ethics as part of participatory research processes enables greater reflexivity by all involved (Kendon and Latham, 2002).

3 Representation

One of the central tenets of PR is that research participants self-represent, rather than being represented by those with authority. PR provides one of the best opportunities for 'the retelling of certain geographies that are taken for granted because they emanate from authoritative sources' (Cieri, 2003a: 149), a concern that has been central to feminist methodologies, poststructuralist theory and critical social geography. For Mattingly (2001), in her account of using theatre as a powerful means for young people to represent their concerns, this type of representation occurred in two ways. First, through 'narrative authority', which gives traditionally powerless groups the power to shape the way their identities are represented and, secondly, through the ability of community theatre to represent the 'symbolic economy' of a neighbourhood, in this case a symbolic economy of multiculturalism.

Despite some concerns having been raised over the reality of participatory practice versus its sometimes glossy (or glossed-over) presentation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 1999; Pain and Francis, 2003), major questions remain over the interplays between academic researchers, other participants and the vehicles and outlets in which findings are presented. At the analysis stage, some address this by asking participants to undertake data analysis or verification; others attempt to represent exactly what all participants said; some use mainstream modes of qualitative analysis arguing that transparency of procedures is important (Pain and Francis, 2004). Our position eventually necessitates having to, as Leyshon (2002) puts it, transfer 'meaning from one context – the field – to another – the academic'; geographers doing PR ultimately represent others one way or another (Cieri, 2004). For Cameron and Gibson (2004), a poststructuralist approach to PR insists on multiple local representations and knowledges, which must be 'approached with a degree of caution... not blindly accepted at face value as inherently transformative' (p. 8).

We also theorize, which has received little attention in accounts of geographers' activism (Dempsey and Rowe, 2004), yet theories and understandings are unlikely to be shared by those with different cultural backgrounds (Randstrom and Deur, 1999). Staeheli (2004) recounts her dilemma in taking a theoretical approach which involves dismantling dualisms which her research population used specifically for political effect. Often, too, the topics and categories which PR begins with arise

from academic or policy perspectives, and so claims of 'bottom-up' research are limited. Social geographers have been more successful in collaborative writing, some jointly attributing academic publications (e.g., Pratt, 1999; Townsend *et al.*, 1995; Cahill *et al.*, 2004), and many others co-authoring reports, press releases, websites and other materials (see Cahill's www.fed-up-honeys.org for an example).

4 Centre or margins? The squeezing of PR

So PR has much to offer current debates about doing social geography. At the same time, growing institutional pressures affect geographers' ability to undertake action research approaches such as PR (Pain and Bailey, 2004), as 'The desire to maintain the power of the academy in knowledge production and the desire to shape the education system for the purposes of the status quo . . . pressure academics to produce certain kinds of knowledge and to undertake particular types of praxis' (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004: 10).

Obtaining funding for PR is not straightforward, where participants are to be involved in setting research aims and contributions to 'the cutting edge' cannot necessarily be predicted. Neither is effecting change, one of the main motivations behind PR, guaranteed (Blackburn and Holland, 1998; Pain and Francis, 2003). Dedicating time to the many activities involved in PR is difficult. Researchers may be partially integrated into outside communities – though these relationships can become fraught with difficulty (Monk *et al.*, 2003) – but feel isolated from other geographers. While PR is taking place across a wide scope of social geography, it is not highly visible, reflecting the elitist division between theory and action in geography as well as the assumption that PR only involves the second. That the practice of PR is gendered is at the heart of this; women and feminist geographers predominate. PR is simultaneously more public outside geography, and more private within it, than other forms of activism, blurring personal and professional lines and lives, and often involving reciprocal/caring roles (see Pratt, 1998). In highlighting this issue I am wary of essentializing either women researchers in geography, most of whom do not use PR, or PR itself, which can be done in different ways.

IV Conclusion

Most of the research projects included in this review resulted in action and change by and for research participants. Some social geographers also encourage students to experience participatory research (see Cope and Halfhill, 2003; www.geog.psu.edu/phila/description.html; Public Interest Research Groups in Canada www.pirg.ca), provide training for nonacademics (<http://northumbria.ac.uk/peanut>) and engage in parallel debates over participatory approaches in policy and planning spheres (e.g., O'Reilly, 2003; Perrons, 2004; Townsend *et al.*, 2002). Despite strong critiques, and ultimately irresolvable debates over whether a nonhierarchical academic/subject relationship is possible, there are clear benefits to social geographers doing PR, using legitimacy gained from academic status and ability to engage in 'scientific discourse' to actively work against inequality (Fuller, 1999; Wilton, 2004).

PR often represents a vast improvement on conventional modes of research, but occasionally theory and practice have a tone of moralism and 'near religious fervour' (Mohan, 1999: 44), of knowing what is best for participants, a surety that the academic's political and theoretical slant on their problems is the right one and a failure to engage in self-critique. This underlines the continuing importance of self-reflexivity and critique, demonstrated in much of the important and effective research of feminist and social geographers referenced here.

Notes

1. The term 'academic researcher' is used to distinguish geographers' involvement in this process from that of other participants.

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