PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH USING VISUAL METHODS

Participatory action research (PAR) is a method of investigation which merges theory with action and participation while challenging institutionalized methods of collecting and curating knowledge. It relies on the accumulation of knowledge through participant action and seeks to advance the interests of underrepresented groups and classes.

THE USE OF VISUAL METHODS IN PAR

Broadly, visual methods involve the use of photography, video, artwork, and other media in research and engagement activities. Using visual methods opens a space for creativity, where new ideas, interpretations, and subjective knowledge can enter a discussion. In PAR, visual methods can become central to participant-led investigations of issues that are pertinent to a particular group of people, in a particular context, and at a particular time. They provide an accessible medium and structure to participants who may be engaging with certain questions or topics for the first time.

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews are fraught with power dynamics and other limitations. PAR, however, is a methodology widely used to support subjective expression and understanding. Subjectivity is not always readily accessible, especially to marginalized and oppressed groups. These groups have often internalized the objective descriptions attributed to them and their reality by dominant groups, who possess control over how knowledge is produced and what makes it socially useful (Rahman, 1991).

THE INFLUENCE OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Much of the theoretical underpinnings of this work can be traced back to Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy. The aim of critical pedagogy is to initiate a process in which individuals, working not in isolation but collectively as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to reimagine them (Darder et al., 2009). Tools used in PAR such as problem posing and the investigation of themes are drawn from critical pedagogy practice. A tethering to critical pedagogy means that PAR is not a neutral activity. Characterizations of poverty as self-inflicted, the treatment of root causes through the transfer of technology, and the initiation of activities as mechanisms to deliver pre-packaged solutions are all rejected outright by the paradigm.

Paulo Freire on subjectivity and objectivity

The concrete reality for many social scientists is a list of particular facts that they would like to capture; for example, the presence or absence of water, problems concerning erosion in the area. For me, the concrete reality is something more than isolated facts. In my view, thinking dialectically, the concrete reality consists not only of concrete facts and (physical) things, but also includes the ways in which the people involved with these facts perceive them. Thus in the last analysis, for me, the concrete reality is the connection between subjectivity and objectivity; never objectivity isolated from subjectivity.   (1982, p. 29)

CASE STUDY: USING VIDEO TO MEDIATE FARMER INTERACTIONS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MUKONO, UGANDA

The impacts of climate change and other rapid changes are taking their toll on farmers in Uganda. In order to ensure systematic and equitable local adaptation to climate change, the link with local government needs to be strengthened.

The HyCRISTAL project addressed this gap between government and local stakeholders using targeted advocacy and communication. The project used PAR to engage members of the farming community in a knowledge exchange process with local government leaders in Mukono, Uganda. A visual methods approach engaged "Farmer Champions" with the aim of creating video stories about adapting to climate change. The purpose of these videos was 1) to be shareable resources that other farmers could watch in order to learn adaptation strategies, and 2) to be the foundation of an exchange with local government officials with the hopes of initiating a dialogue.

Over 20 people attended the exchange, including key officials such as the district Principal Administrative Secretary, the Director of Natural Resources and Environment, and the district Secretary for Production. A communication link

between the Farmer Champions and the district leadership was established, with commitments from the latter to continue engagement and provide resources for the production of more videos. Building on their experience, the Farmer Champions held a successful meeting with officials of the National Planning Authority at its headquarters in order to highlight the needs of smallholder farmers in the context of the climate change. Ultimately, Mukono District Local Government increased funding for targeted agriculture extension services in that financial year.

This activity won an Engagement and Impact Award from the University of Reading in 2020.

Figure 1: Farmer Champions in Mukono, Uganda develop a storyboard for a film © Grady Walker

CHALLENGES TO MAINSTREAMING IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

When PAR is implemented as an engagement or research activity in an international development paradigm, there are numerous challenges that will need to be reconciled at the outset, which begin with recognizing that control over both the shape of the activity and its direction will have to be negotiated. While levers of control in participatory research have largely been dismantled in post-colonial social science, their use persists in the development sphere (Walker et. al, 2020). As development practice is increasingly influenced by calls for 'decolonization' and subversion of its historical 'white gaze' (Pailey, 2019), the benefits offered by PAR approaches, with their established track record and rich theoretical tradition, are receiving more recognition from establishment actors.

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