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# Action Research and Participatory Research: An Overview\*

Michel Thiollent

In this article, we outline the main elements concerning the evolution of action research and participatory research that we have come across in the last decades. These concepts have come closer together along the years, and have become a strong methodological alternative, especially in people-driven projects. They have gained ground in the scientific world, in the fields of social science, as well as in other more conservative domains, as demonstrated by some of our experiences in Brazil. Their importance in the context of teaching, in universities and educational projects alike, is also stressed. The aspect of participation is defined in more detail in regards to the different degrees and forms of participation, as well as its religious component in Brazil. Action research and participatory research are, finally, methodologies that, in light of their potential for encompassing the stakeholders' view in the results and developing a sharing culture, must constantly be renewed in order to evolve and always be a rich source of knowledge and critical thinking..

**Key words:** action research in Brazil, participatory research, historical context, social practices, education for people

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## **Distant origins and recent rapprochement**

The purpose of these notes on some of the key issues about action research, participatory research and their evolution is to contribute to the debate on the current situation of this methodological proposal, and formulate some ideas for a possible renewal, through local applications and the expansion of international co-operation.

Action research and participatory research have distinct and even distant origins, the first one coming from the social psychology applications by Kurt Lewin, in the 1940's USA, the second from consciousness raising practices and the liberation theory developed especially in Latin America, from the 1950 and 60's, in social, religious and educational contexts and, in particular, under the impulse of Paulo Freire. These methodological currents (action research and participatory research) have found applications in several sectors of social science (education, especially adult education), social service, rural extension, organisation, communication, political practices, as well as in the fields of collective health, nursing, environment, etc. From the 1980/90's, and now more sharply, current trends tend to converge and, in certain cases, to merge into a consistent alternative methodology, in partial opposition to conventional methodologies derived from positivism. This rapprochement was encouraged by Orlando Fals Borda and has reached an international scale with the interaction of southern and northern hemisphere researchers. This alternative is not monolithic, and develops itself in various intellectual environments and institutional arrangements. It is not a matter of demanding a single body of knowledge, with closed borders, because we are dealing with a family of proposals and procedures that have a common democratic will, with participation and co-operation between the parties involved, sharing a vision of social transformation.

I have followed this rapprochement between action research and participatory research from the early 1980's. I took part in some epoch-making events, such as the Brazilian Education Conference (CBE) in 1981 at Belo Horizonte, with Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, and a participatory research meeting organised by Pedro Demo at the National Institute for Pedagogical Studies (INEP) in Brasilia in 1984. At that time, still under the military dictatorship, there was a strong expectation of democratisation of education and social life

in every aspect. The action research and participatory research proposals contributed to nourishing the hopes of change. I do not know if these were met during the following years: in my view, the years of “redemocratisation” were well below expectations.

Then, over the years, there were ups and downs in the boldness of participatory methods. They lost momentum with the early 1990’s neoliberalism, but gained ground again with the social projects of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso and also Lula governments. Today, participatory methodology is relatively well thought of in certain academic areas, as well as in areas of social and environmental action. It is even required in the clauses of major projects financed by international agencies.

In Brazil, the contributions made by Paulo Freire, Carlos Rodrigues Brandão and João Bosco Pinto are important and often referenced. Meanwhile, the action research model I helped to disseminate had an impact above expectations. The small unpretentious 1985 introductory book went through its 18<sup>th</sup> edition in 2011, and still is adopted as a textbook in many places and in different social and technical areas (Thiollent 2011).

### **Search for a methodological alternative and popular research**

Action research and participatory research have been oriented as alternatives to the dominant paradigm in the field of applied social science and, moreover, as proposals for a research and education committed to the ideals and practices of popular culture. At times, favourable scenarios for people-driven projects make the relationship between participatory research and popular goals almost “natural”, considering that the dominant social spheres do not value participation or turn it into a mask and, furthermore, make use of information and knowledge conceived in other paradigms.

Among the supporters of action research and participatory research, some researchers radicalise their choice, turning these methods into a procedure of cultural activity, or a policy solely dedicated to popular ends in accordance to the view of stakeholders, with no account of scientific or academic entities. Without denying the possibility of affirming the popular preference, other researchers adopt a more professional perspective, in which the methods are

used in professional activities of social, educational and other areas, and the results of the research, apart from responding to the demand of the stakeholders, may also generate academic works and papers published in scientific journals. The use of the knowledge that is thus produced is subjected to explicit ethical criteria, if possible, under the supervision of an assessment committee.

### **Insertion in the humanities and social science paradigms**

Participatory methodology has been associated with many philosophical conceptions of the humanities and social science. Generally, this methodology presents itself as an alternative to positivism, still prevailing in much of the academic system, to functionalism and other paradigms of the last few decades, that are regarded as conservative or based upon mechanistic or physicalist view of the humanities. In terms of action research and participatory research, some authors have favored historical-critical, dialectic, humanistic Marxist, phenomenological, constructivist/constructionist approaches. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, there are also connections between action research and Dewey's pragmatic conception, as well as other more recent pragmatists' views, sometimes with a relatively critical dimension. In turn, in the French-speaking world, some attempts can be found that bind action research with certain forms of existentialism (Desroche 2007/Barbier 2002), psychoanalysis and post-modern thinking.

Recently, the advance of qualitative research methodologies in the humanities and social science has become a notorious fact, in the USA as well as in Europe and Brazil. As an alternative to the emphasis that was generally given to quantitative research methods and data processing, the current methodology emphasizes methods and techniques of collecting documentary, verbal and visual data, with a classification processing (categorization and interpretation), aided by qualitative research software (NVIVO, ATLAS-TI, etc.). The most commonly used qualitative research methods are the techniques of narrative and episodic interview (apart from the well-trodden focused interviews), focus groups, the case study method, life story, discourse analysis, action research or various forms of participatory research.

This brings a new legitimacy to participatory research, following the expansion of qualitative research, breaking the near monopoly of quantitative research that functioned as a sign of scientific validity and respectability in the academic world. In certain cases, the opposition between qualitative and quantitative is not absolute and a quali-quantitative compromise is sought, perhaps more tenable than the polarized positions (Cressell 2007).

Clearly, when we consider action research as a possible method, practicable alongside qualitative methods and techniques, which can make use of such specific techniques (interviews and focal groups for instance), the idea of transforming action research into a research standard or paradigm, or even a science in itself, is abandoned. This view of a plurality of methods, operating in a multi-paradigmatic space, currently seems like the most adequate epistemological stand, which avoids attitudes of truth monopolisation. It is an open position, with no imposition of predetermined procedures, conducive to dialogue between various actors whose knowledge is different.

### **Application areas of action research**

Participatory methodology has been applied to educational research and, in general, to the other applied social sciences (management, communication, social services, home economics), though in a limited scale. It has been quite requested in the health areas (nursing, health promotion, family medicine, occupational medicine) and even in technological areas (ergonomics, production engineering, information systems, agriculture and cattle raising, architecture and urbanism).

### **Concrete experiences in Universities**

Without intending to cover the numerous participatory experiences that occurred in Brazilian universities in the last couple of decades, I will indicate here those with which I came in contact:

- a) Experiences on institutional projects for negotiation in training activities (University, Labor Union and Ministry of Labour) between the years 1997 and 1999. A special case was the project on training and local develop-

ment in the city of João Monlevade-MG, a project in which the Metallurgists' Union took part, with the mayor's office and some of the city's NGOs. A training plan for the unemployed was prepared, as well as a local development plan.

- b) An experience on a plan to train nurses and nursing assistants at the University Hospital of Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora.
- c) Experiences on projects managed by the Technical Solidarity Programme (SOLTEC) at the Polytechnic School of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, since 2003, promoting Solidarity Economy and involving several federal, state and municipal partners: for instance, participatory projects, based on action research methodology with the fishing community of Macaé (ADDOR, 2006), in Rio de Janeiro slums, etc. These projects were the source for public policies and, academically, they generated many dissertations and doctorate theses, as well as dozens of articles and conference papers. They featured a strong interdisciplinary component, mixing engineering, applied social science, education, information technology, and environmental studies.

### **The space occupied by action research and participatory research in universities**

In universities, participatory methodologies have suffered some sort of discrimination, and have not always been supported by funding agencies. However, in the last ten years, it is indisputable that they have gained ground in many universities, mainly in the public sector, as well as in some private and confessional universities, and also in community colleges. Despite having contributed to the accomplishment of graduation projects, dissertations and doctorate theses, it was in activities of University Extension<sup>1</sup> that participatory methodology met its greatest growth, due to it being a space of

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian public universities are required by law to develop activities of teaching, research and extension. Though very disputed in regards to its definition, the latter refers to actions that promote a transformative interaction between university and society [TN].

sufficient liberty for the implementation of participatory projects in different fields and scales (group, institution, local and regional). This fact was amply discussed during Extension Project Methodology Seminars (SEMPE), organized since 1996 in several Brazilian universities.

### **Action research and participatory research as sources of procedures for teaching and planning**

Apart from being research methods, with observing capability coupled to action, action research and participatory research also aid projects and practices that are not limited to *stricto sensu* research, but that encompass teaching procedures, activity planning, evaluation of social programmes, etc.

Participatory planning is a well-established notion that assembles different practices in which the stakeholders collectively define the purposes, objectives and targets to be reached, as well as the evaluation criteria for a planned activity. There are many proposals of this kind that are applied in rural or urban activities, and also in organisations or institutional projects.

In the case of teaching, especially in the context of adult education or continuing education, action research has played a fundamental role in the elaboration of contents and teaching procedures, in accordance with the needs and vision of the stakeholders.

### **Action research as a basis for developing educational projects**

Action research is often used to develop projects in education or training, following a number of settings or modalities. There is a long tradition of educational action research in school contexts of English-speaking countries, based on the Stenhouse or Elliot experiences. This trend is relatively little known in Brazil, and I do not know if it was ever really applied there.

There is the Henri Desroche conception, developed by Guy Avanzini in the context of adult education, which served as a starting point for the deep elaboration of André Morin's systematic and integral action research (2004), applicable to many fields. Part of this contribution has been translated and divulged in Brazil. Some works are still being published. The authors in question are quite cited in Education journals and some researchers apply the

principles of this methodological proposal in their projects, or in the training of their research teams (for instance, at the SOLTEC/UFRJ).

Now, historically, in Brazil as in Latin America, the connection between action research methodology and the development of educational programmes has mostly been implemented based on Paulo Freire. This three-phase process (research, thematisation, programming) has become the benchmark for many projects. It has been widely discussed by educators and researchers (Gajardo 1986) and presented in a very operationalised fashion by João Bosco Pinto (1989).

### **Interference of the stakeholders' view in the research results**

This aspect is discussed as an objectivity problem (or a lack of objectivity) of action research or participatory research. The truth attained would be relative to the stakeholder's view; each would have its own, which is antagonistic to any conception of science. Nevertheless, whoever has taken part in real experiences, with stakeholders in a concrete situation, can see that the results are never ordered by either actor. A research conducted with explicit methodology and ethics does not beget falsified results because of particular interests. In participatory projects with unions, municipal representatives, companies, NGOs, etc., the results do not express the interests of these entities if taken separately. The process of dialogue and the researchers' role generate a negotiation of the meaning of the problems and possible solutions. The researcher's role is not to be the spokesman for one of the interlocutors, but rather an analyst of the situation, considering the implications, actions and reactions of the actors and their effects on that given context.

### **Differentiation of the types and degrees of participation in the projects**

In the fields of social science and methodology, the term "participation" can have several meanings, forms, types, and degrees of intensity. It is sometimes confused with other terms such as "collaboration" or "co-operation". Furthermore, the term may also be rhetorically used in political or overtly ideological discourses.

We cannot address all these issues within the limited framework of this article. We shall observe that, very often, the term “participation” or the adjective “participatory” are associated to research as if it were a simple, complete and crystal clear characterisation. The research is or is not participatory. If it were not then it would have to be conventional, positivistic, quantitative, etc. This dichotomy seems misplaced.

In a framework very cited among French-speaking authors, Henri Desroche established a complex typology of the forms and intensities of participation in action research projects. This typology assembles three dimensions: explanation, application and implication, and, according to different degrees of intensity, it combines them into eight types of participation, from the most complete, namely “integral”, to the weakest, namely “occasional”. André Morin’s idea for an integral action research relies on the first of the eight different types that Desroche defined.

Desroche and Morin’s conception has an important influence in terms of action research. It was adopted sometimes in a modified or criticised manner by other researchers (El Andaloussi 2006). Be that as it may, it offers clarity for classifying research projects and for their operating procedures, taking into account the individual and collective dimensions of the interaction process. After reading these authors, we cannot conceive research participation as a binary issue, either yes or no, all or nothing at all. There is much subtlety and differentiation in the way of conceiving or perceiving participation.

In other contexts, the use of the notion of degree or level of participation can also generate some doubt, because participation refers to an expressed, experienced or perceived quality in the relationships between people or different parties. It corresponds to a fact that cannot be quantified or assimilated to heat measured in temperature degrees, or to the level or height of water in a tank. We have said that about qualitative research despite the fact that, nevertheless, there are many attempts to quantify participation, through social indicators, scaling techniques or sociometric measures.

In a simplified way, we might consider certain degrees of participation only in a qualitative manner. The first would be non-participation, required by unilateral research procedures, or manifested by the disinterest of the

observed towards the proposed research. The second would be a simple inquiry of those concerned, without any effective commitment. The third would be a limited participation, suggested by the researcher and accepted by those researched. The fourth would be active participation, beyond the level suggested by the researcher, and with a creative performance of those researched, who are also interested in conducting and developing the research itself. In this case, there is a social or political interest and an emotional involvement.

Another argument that is sometimes pointed out consists in questioning the neutrality of the term “participation” and its derivatives. The term is stressed in social or political discourses whose assumptions refer to a conception of democracy or justice that belongs to the occidental worldview (conservative, reformative or modernising), whose acceptance in terms of values might vary according to places, cultures, religions, communities, etc. In certain cases it might even be refused. According to this line of interpretation, there is a sort of ethnocentrism in adopting participation as an undisputed category, which from being a value or criterion of appreciation, becomes a methodological category, supposedly based on an epistemology.

Participation as a research methodology requires some caution. It cannot be an undisclosed term, imposed on a population whose culture does not necessarily give it the same meaning or relevance. It is important to observe and discuss with those concerned, how they see their own participation in the research process and the eventual consequences of this in real life.

### **Participation and religious practice**

In Brazil and Latin America, participatory research has often been associated with practices of a religious background or with a social intervention in connection with a religious action, pastoral care in particular. Though the sources may be different, there is a certain analogy between the procedure of seeing-judging-acting of left-wing Catholics, and the circle of action and reflection of an action research or participatory research with no religious reference.

Action research can be conceived without any religious reference or connotation, and yet not be seen as rational or enlightened. Even though there are no great illusions about the power of reason in the social and political context, it seems possible to analyse and elucidate the actions and strategies of a situation's conflicting actors, with no religious assumption, in order to reduce barbarity or to find satisfactory solutions.

### **Action research and sharing culture**

Action research is increasingly practiced in large or medium-sized projects, inserted in and managed by institutional arrangements involving government, universities, foundations that support research and other entities. In most cases, it has ceased to be that artisanal or almost militant practice of yore.

Action research promotes a culture of information and knowledge sharing. In this sense, it should be verified if every actor is really interested in sharing with the institutional arrangement that supports him. The entities accustomed to the conventional consulting model might find it strange, because they are used not to share for, on the contrary, the relationship between consultants and consulted is kept explicitly asymmetric. The consultant always considers himself as the holder of knowledge and monopolises the proposed solutions, which are the object of his compensation. He cannot share his knowledge or expertise, for it would render him dispensable.

In its practice, action research resembles a sort of aide to minimise the effects of this asymmetry. This cultural difference may explain why action research is rarely applied in business environments in Brazil. The business world only hires consultants and technical managers with conceptions that are in tune with their immediate interests, and bound to management fads and the "gurus" of the Business area.

In the conception of action research used in the socio-technical approach, during the 1960's and 70's, and applied in companies, there was an initial agreement defining the relationship rules between stakeholders (board of directors, union and the government sector involved in that particular research problem). This conception, sometimes called tripartite management,

has been applied on a large scale in Scandinavian countries, but has met serious ideological obstacles in Brazil.

### **For a renewal of action research and participatory research**

In Brazil, the participatory vision of pedagogy and social research was developed based on the legacy of Paulo Freire's and his disciples. João Bosco Pinto's contribution to the explanation of the transition from Paulo Freire's pedagogy to the method of action research seems unequalled (Pinto/Angel/Reyes 1973).

On the philosophical level, this participatory vision has been marked by the influences of existentialism and humanist Marxism, very present in the mid-nineteenth century. In the ideological-political level, this same view ranged from the reformist and modernising Christian Democrat conception, to the radical socialist conception associated with revolutionary ideals or with liberation theology. In a more circumspect manner, this vision encouraged many militants of the democratisation cause, before and after the period of the military regime. Today, the political situation and prevailing ideologies are quite different. The participatory proposal can evolve due to new forms of organisation and communication. The values and beliefs have also evolved.

In order to remain favorable to participation, the actors attached to democratic values can develop their initiatives, including research and planning activities, with action research and participatory research methods. But it is necessary to revise and enrich the approaches, theories and procedures, in light of the changes and improvements that have occurred in recent decades.

The starting point for the revitalisation of the prospect of participation in research and knowledge was given by the efforts of authors such as Orlando Fals Borda, who helped bring action research and participatory research closer together, giving them an international dimension, with more interaction between researchers of both hemispheres. From local subject or semi-artisanal practice, action research and the methodological, and even paradigmatic, changes that are associated with it have become internationally discussed issues, with experience exchanges, and a broadening of themes that are no longer limited to those associated with poverty.

Since 2005, IJAR's initiative, in the English language, will no doubt consolidate this approach and interaction between researchers from different continents. Furthermore, in recent years, we have facilitated the contact and exchange of ideas with French-speaking authors, by means of a translation programme of introductory books and manuals on action research. Influential authors such as Henri Desroche and Guy Avanzini (France), André Morin and Hugues Dionne (Quebec) and Khalid El Andaloussi (Morocco) already have books available in Portuguese. Thus, the Brazilian public has a "library" of reference books in their own language, which enable them, in part, to update and diversify the methodological resources.

Another front for strengthening the investigative perspective on participation and action consists in recovering the memory of research projects, educational experiences, life trajectories of individual, groups and collective actors, that have generated valuable knowledge or wisdom, but that tend to fall into oblivion, due to academic rules and the laws of the editorial market. Thus, in many parts of Brazil, and in the Northeast in particular, there are rich collective and singular experiences of people (educators, union members, community leaders, progressive priests, etc.), whose teachings deserve to be remembered and stored for posterity. Modestly, I have tried to do something in this sense, with two characters whose works are of the utmost importance: Charles Beylier, priest and sociologist, who died in 2004 and worked in the Northeast for 35 years; and João Bosco Pinto, who died in 1995 in Pernambuco, and developed the fundamental principles and the practices of action research, especially in the rural area, in many different Latin American countries and in the Northeast of Brazil. These are but two names of many whose contributions should not be forgotten although with proper investigation, there would be dozens more. This also extends to groups, militant or not, who have acted in different contexts and times.

Another important consideration: I think that, from the perspective of action research and participatory research, one should focus on the work that constitutes the research, creation or production of local knowledge. It is clear that in times of globalisation, we cannot confine ourselves to our own islands of conviviality, speaking only the local dialect. However, there is undoubtedly an effort to be made so that we may have a dialogue in tune with our

interlocutors. In order to work with indigenous people, for instance, I think that we must know the languages they use in their own cultural background. This principle must be extended to all linguistic communities, in the name of a respect for cultural diversity.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the great quantity of existing and unsolved social problems, of different orders and domains, that require diagnostics, identifications, solutions, interpretations and evaluations, we may consider that participatory methodologies, currently adequate, will thrive, since they make for a far superior level of quality and effectiveness than conventional, unilateral and authoritarian methods.

Nevertheless, there is a risk of it being undermined or trivialised. Though under pressure to respond to the purposes of those who wield political or social responsibilities, a participatory methodology must resist the allure of power (and also the power of allurements), so as not to become a procedure of convenience or a mere consulting technique, with the same misconducts that these often entail. It takes a strong commitment to the stakeholders, who must be considered as effective participants and not mere extras who are only eventually consulted on minor subjects. A critical stand must also be assumed in the production of knowledge. It is not only about responding to immediate demands, the aim is to build new knowledge, criticising the current situation and proposing possible courses of action and strategies.

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