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COMMENTARIES

Diffusion, Decolonializing, and Participatory Action Research

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Abstract Miki Takasuna describes knowledge transfer between elite communities of scientists, a process by which ideas become structurally transformed in the host culture. By contrast, a process that we have termed knowledge transfer by de-elitization occurs when (a) participatory action researchers work with a community to identify a problem involving oppression or exploitation. Then (b) community members suggest solutions and acquire the tools of analysis and action to pursue social actions. (c) Disadvantaged persons thereby become more aware of their own abilities and resources, and persons with special expertise become more effective. (d) Rather than detachment and value neutrality, this joint process involves advocacy and structural transformation. In the examples of participatory action research documented here, Third World social scientists collaborated with indigenous populations to solve problems of literacy, community-building, land ownership, and political voice. Western social scientists, inspired by these non-Western scientists, then joined in promoting PAR both in the Third World and in Europe and the Americas, e.g., adapting it for solving problems of people with disabilities or disenfranchised women. Emancipatory goals such as these may even help North American psychologists to break free of some methodological chains and to bring about social and political change.

Keywords Knowledge transfer · De-elitization of knowledge · Communities in science · Indigenous psychologies · Participatory action research

The history of Japanese psychology offers one model of ideas for the future in the sense of knowledge transfer. Let us recapitulate its main features here (Takasuna 2007). Psychology arrived in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century through

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Japanese who studied in the West and Western psychologists who came to Japan. Conceptually, Japanese psychology descended from Confucian thought and it retained a preference for holistic theory well into the twentieth century. Psychologists transitioned from a kind of mental philosophy in the nineteenth century to a perception and attention focus in experimental psychology at the turn of the twentieth century. Representatives of this initiative in experimental psychophysics included Yujiro Motora and his student, Matataro Matsumoto, who trained at Johns Hopkins (with G. Stanley Hall) and at Yale University, respectively. Japanese experimenters apparently employed the Leipzig model of experimental practice involving a high-status single subject as subject and a low-status student or laboratory assistant as experimenter (Danziger 1990). Today, the roles are generally reversed, with the high-status person administering the experiment and the low-status person serving as experimental subject. Yet the topic of this paper—and one important future for psychological method and practice—is the elevation of the poor, the disenfranchised, the colonized, the female and the non-Western person of color, to the status of equal partner and beneficiary in social scientific research.

Experimental design is not the only way in which Japanese psychology resembled or emulated psychology in the West. Evolutionary theory gained immediate popularity in Japan through lectures there in 1877 by Edward S. Morris, an invertebrate zoologist. The receptivity of the Japanese public toward evolution may have derived from the popularity of monkeys, as well as the belief in the transmigration of souls from monkeys to humans. The Buddhist belief that animal souls can turn into human souls contrasted sharply with Christian belief in the separation of the soul of human from brute (Takasuna 2007).

We see that, in this instance, methods and theories from one culture came to be transplanted and transformed in another culture. This example of experimental practice seems to fit a diffusionist model of scientific change whereby ideas from the West took root in the East. We cannot be so sure that this continued to be the case for other methods and other times, even in Japan. By the end of the twentieth century, however, signs appeared that Asian psychologies were creating models of their own (e.g., Paranjpe et al. 1988; Pe-Pua 1989).

Diffusion Versus Decolonialization

Let us familiarize ourselves with diffusion in the discipline of history before turning to the social sciences and finally to psychology. “The idea that Europe was more advanced and more progressive than all other civilizations prior to 1492 was the central idea of classical Eurocentric diffusionism” (p. 52 in Blaut 1993). After World War II came an effort to explain the causes of the “European miracle” (p. 54). But if the miracle represented progress, how to explain the poverty that came of colonialism? The wealth that accrued from slavery became a key factor in the rise of capitalism (Williams 1944). This critique of diffusionism came from non-Western historians as well. Abu Lughod (1989) argued that Europe was not more progressive in 1350, and Said (1979) showed how Eurocentrism contained an

ideology of superiority. Gran (1996) actually braved an account "beyond Eurocentrism" by tracing histories of nine countries including Russia and the Soviets, Iraq, India, Mexico, Albania, and the Belgian Congo. In history of psychology, we finally have a collection of chapters treating India, China, Turkey, "the three worlds," "universalism and indigenization," and "the Eurocentric order of the social sciences" (Brock 2006).

Turning to the history of the social sciences, the prevailing view is that North American psychology rose to ascendance from nineteenth-century European psychology. This took place from 1850 to 1950 or even 2000, and scholars have reassessed it in economic and institutional terms—such as "market economy and selfhood" (Sklansky 2002), "the politics of knowledge in the postmodern age" (Cravens 2004), "postwar support for psychology" (Capshew 1999), and "political culture in an age of experts" (Herman 1995). Diffusionism is not addressed but implied, since these books take psychology in the United States as the gold standard. Even a Dutch book with a much larger scope in early modern origins of psychology takes European–North American outcomes as the end point of a knowledge transfer from Europe (Jansz and van Drunen 2004).

But one can also find counterexamples of resistance and genuine creative innovations coming from the non-Western world. Let me refer to this, following the Mexican applied anthropologist Stanhagen (1971), as "decolonializing" or "de-elitization":

> Can books about peasants be brought to the attention of, discussed with and used by peasant organizations? Can studies on urban migrants be made to help labor unions and neighborhood voluntary associations to better understand, and thus solve, their problems? Cannot studies on social movements ... be shorn of their scientific and scholarly paraphernalia and made available to the revolutionaries themselves? (p. 336).

The principles expressed in this quote have "thick textures" in local sociopolitical struggles over the right to own land, the right to an education, and the right to be heard in court. They bring us to the threshold of participatory action research (PAR), a method that has been developing since the 1970s in response to what were sometimes viewed as ethnocentric and even oppressive North American research methods in non-Western countries. As is clear from just this single example in Mexico, PAR is not homegrown American. The situation is more analogous to the Japanese who went abroad and brought back bits of psychology from abroad.

In the early 1970s Paulo Freire of Brazil, whose middle class parents fell into poverty under a dictatorial regime, devoted his educational efforts to working with the masses to offer instruments for self improvement beginning with literacy (Freire 1973 [1969]). Orlando Fals Borda of Colombia wrote a book on military subjugations of peasants in 1967 and began to promote participation observation research with the poor and for the poor; they aimed to create agrarian entrepreneurs and a rural middle class (p. 100 in Fals Borda 1969, 1979). PAR came to be applied in places such as Nicaragua, Tanzania, Columbia, Latin America, India, and the United States of America, while taking philosophical cues from approaches such as

Marxism, feminism, and critical theory. Its main purpose is to achieve some positive social change for groups that are traditionally oppressed, through making those people into researchers themselves, thus educating them and empowering them to make the changes they need (Fals Borda 2001).

Further Origins of Participatory Action Research

Various sources have placed the origins of PAR in the 1960s and 1970s. A Finnish social scientist, Swantz (1975) spent 1965 to 1970 at the Bureau for Research on Land Use and Productivity of the University of Dar-es-Salaam (Hall 2001). She initiated a number of projects with participatory change in Tanzanian communities. Hall (1975, 2001) described the events of the time period firsthand. Working in the research and practice of adult education in Tanzania in the early 1970s, Hall found it very clear that standard social science research methods were not appropriate. He felt that the standard methods brought with them an oppressive ideology, did not describe the social reality of indigenous people, failed to get community involvement, and weren't even very good science.

Hall (1975) identified several areas in which the existing methods of working with indigenous underprivileged peoples, i.e., survey research, were unsatisfactory:

> The survey research approach oversimplified social reality and was therefore inaccurate.... [It] was often alienating, dominating or oppressive in character.... [It] did not provide easy links to possible subsequent action.... [Its] methods were not consistent with the principles of adult education (pp. 25–27).

As Hall (1975) saw it, research based on isolated individuals, and even aggregates of data on individuals, could not reliably state what the social behavior of a group would be. Given that traditional data collection only occurred at single points in time, it was ahistorical and therefore also could not describe social change.

This failure to achieve its own goals was in addition to active harm committed in the name of science: applying North American and European techniques to the Third World gave an illusion of scientific credibility but was actually ethnocentric. Researchers and research methods both came from institutions, while the participants in Hall's (1975) research were indigenous people, particularly those with no such education. Because institutions were assumed to be the only viable sources of research methods, the indigenous people were not encouraged to be creative or to analyze their own social situation. Therefore, not only would the researchers not be able to interpret their data for the cultural situation of participants, but the participants would be essentially told not to solve their problems on their own (Hall 1975).

This problem was not unique (to either survey research or to Africa) and had indeed been described by others. In short, Westernized, upper-class-based research methods are alienating to participants in non-Western and/or oppressed cultures. Failing to recognize that a methodology brings with it an ideology leads to unhelpful interpretations of data, while disrespect to the participants ensures that they will be unwilling to participate in applying the "findings" from those interpretations. The complexity of social groups needs attention in order for good

science to be performed. PAR, a technique which involves the community members as agents in the process itself and not merely as sources for the data collection, may do just that.

The Philosophy

Hall (1981) put forth several principles for PAR that can be viewed as representative. These examples have been referenced and expanded various times since then (e.g., Brydon-Miller 1993, 2001; Hall 1993). We quote the following characteristics:

- The problem originates in the community or workplace itself.
- The ultimate goal of the research is fundamental structural transformation and the improvement of the lives of those involved. The beneficiaries are the workers or people concerned.
- [PAR] involves the people in the workplace or the community in the control of the entire process of the research.
- Focus of [PAR] is on work with a wide range of exploited or oppressed groups: immigrants, labor, indigenous peoples, women.
- Central to [PAR] is its role of strengthening the awareness in people of their own abilities and resources and its support to mobilizing or organizing.
- The term "researcher" can refer to both the community or workplace persons involved as well as those with specialized training.
- Although those with specialized knowledge/training often come from outside the situation, they are committed participants and learners in a process that leads to militancy rather than detachment (pp. 7–8).

As such, PAR can be viewed as a combination of investigation (or research), education, and action. The emphasis, however, is not on the "research" component at the expense of the other two. Here, the nature of the researcher's "participation" is helping people to learn for themselves. The knowledge that is being generated is "popular knowledge": the practical and personal knowledge of ordinary people, as opposed to the "official" knowledge that is disseminated by people in power. By being taught how to engage in research, the indigenous participants aren't just being educated to become additional minds in the institutionalized world of research, but rather they are being given the tools to learn about themselves and their society (Hall 1981).

However, this leads to another central part of PAR: the "action" component. Enhancing the participants' self-understanding necessitates enhancing their self-consciousness. Discussing the issues of the ordinary people will necessarily lead to social transformation as the individuals come to understand the system in which they live. In the words of Brydon-Miller (2001), "the goal of PAR is transformation" (p. 76). PAR is fundamentally based on addressing social issues, as well as providing transformation both for the community and for the views of the realm of research. Such a methodology may require flexibility about what is a valid way of generating knowledge. North American and European research has generally been empirical, statistical, and replicable, and such methods have only generated knowledge along the limited lines proscribed by the institutions—they have not uncovered the "popular knowledge" of the oppressed people.

The Relationship, Methodology, and Outcomes

How PAR can actually be applied can be seen, for example, in the work of Brydon-Miller (1993). At this time, Brydon-Miller worked with individuals with disabilities in Western Massachusetts to help them learn how to identify accessibility difficulties and to self-advocate. By assisting in the advocacy process and taking concrete action in a community, they were ultimately successful. The "popular knowledge" generated here was that of the individuals who were being ignored by those in power—by the owners of a local mall that was not adequately accessible.

However, PAR is not solely about generating publishable "knowledge," but is fundamentally devoted to improving the situation of oppressed groups. The researcher is an outsider but is also a learner like the "subjects," and must relinquish control over the direction of the research. In the end, these participants-come-researchers in Massachusetts received a sense of community, expertise, and ownership of the research—a sense of empowerment that had been lacking. Further, on a scale more apt to impress those who still demanded a "bottom line," the group did succeed in causing an elevator to be installed in the local mall and setting the legal precedent that such accessibility improvements were necessary (Brydon-Miller 1993). In a sense, this was a return to the Leipzig model, in that the "subjects" of Brydon-Miller's research had the highest status (Danziger 1990).

This example is far from unique. Further cases of and discussion on PAR include Chataway (1997), as well as Chataway, Lykes, Piran, and Tandon, Kelly, and Mock (all in Tolman and Brydon-Miller 2001). These apply the principles to Mayans, girls in school, and African-American communities. The work of Maguire (1987) is often referenced for speaking of women as ignored subjects in participatory research up to that time, and discussing various topics in which researchers and the oppressed work together for social change. In considering all of these, it becomes clear that PAR can function as effective research by giving power to oppressed people. The researchers aim to get these people themselves to use their creativity and to work for social change, because those living in the situation have the potential to be the greatest experts on it. "Feminist-grounded action research is immersed in this activist, relational tradition" (p. 63 in Maguire 2001).

A Method for Social Change Imported from the Third World

Participatory action research in which the process and the outcomes are equally important as the data arose in non-Western contexts during the late 1960s. By fundamentally combining research, education, and action, PAR allows oppressed and/or ignored populations to both learn about themselves and learn about the social systems which may be treating them unjustly. With this increased self-understanding, the participants are empowered and are able to engage in social and political change. Through simple acts such as using the local language of an oppressed culture within a larger nation, the research is truly owned by the people in question.

A generation after its origin in non-Western liberation movements, PAR has entered the mainstream in North American social science. In the words of Wadsworth (1998) cited in the unsigned *Wikipedia* entry on PAR: "it aims to be

active co-research, by and for those to be helped" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_Action_Research). PAR directly challenges the status quo and it grants oppressed groups the ability to accomplish things on their own outside of said status quo. Not only that, but having such an integrated relationship between researcher and participant allows for a more comprehensive understanding of a situation, which is therefore more accurate and more scientific.

In conclusion, Takasuna writes about transfer of knowledge between elite communities of scientists. Presumably the scientific community of psychologists in Japan became structurally transformed through the efforts of Japanese psychologists who returned from abroad and planted ideas in native soil. By the 1970s, a new and larger vista opened up in method and theory of psychology, one that embodied de-elitization. De-elitization means (1) that participatory action researchers leave the laboratory to work with an oppressed or exploited community to identify a problem. Then (2) they learn by listening to that community what solutions might be implemented, after which they help community members acquire the tools of analysis and action to pursue social change. (3) Disadvantaged persons thereby become more aware of their own abilities and resources, and persons with special expertise become more effective. (4) Rather than detachment and value neutrality, this joint process involves advocacy and structural transformation.

In the case of PAR documented here, Third World social scientists (Freire, Fals Borda) worked with indigenous populations to address problems of exploited farmers, e.g., literacy, community building, land ownership, and political voice. Western social scientists (Swantz, Hall, Brydon-Miller, Maguire) sought inspiration and methods from the above scientists, and then joined in promoting PAR both in the Third World and in Europe and the Americas. Indigenous and oppressed groups (e.g., women, people with disabilities) welcomed the opportunity to be heard and to be supported in their emancipatory projects. A project of global reach such as this may even help North Americans to break free of some methodological chains and to bring about social and political change.

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Richard S. Hetley specializes in vision research involving perceptual illusions and mathematical modeling. His wider methodological interests led him to this topic, which evolved from indigenous methods to participant observation to social action and finally participatory action methods. He hopes to teach some day in a program that encourages more than one specialty area. Currently in graduate study, he is doing research and taking practicum in teaching. He expects to spend two more years and graduate with a Ph.D. focused in vision.