Participation in Social Research: "Quijotism" or Construction of a World View?

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Participation has become a buzzword and lost much of its impact. Nevertheless, there are enough arguments to revisit the concept and its use in social research. One of them is that it is part of a tradition of action and participatory research which acquired specific features in different parts of the world. In Latin America it was, and still is, very much integrated with the idea of social transformation and democratisation of society. The question posed is how to avoid the pitfalls of either a romantic view of participation or a demagogical one. The article deals with some of the reasons to revisit participation, as well as some understandings, conditions and strategies for participation.

Key words: participation, social research, participatory utopia, dialogue

Introduction

The diversified and frequent use of the word participation has produced distrust regarding its significance and relevance. This cannot be attributed only to some malignant forces intended to manipulate people for consumption or gain them for their ideologies in a somewhat perverse way. This may also happen, but it is not the whole story. First, if participation is on the agenda from left to right, from kindergarten to research centres, from community organisations to international policies, there must be something worthwhile in the idea which should not be overlooked. The reasons range

from growing individualism to the little confidence in representative democracy or, still worse, for any other political system. Nonetheless, these are very real reasons.

There is also a romantic view of participation which is equally responsible for disqualifying the idea as a whole. To idealize the role of participation for producing relevant knowledge and solving problems does not contribute to "saving" the idea. What seems to be needed is a realistic view of the participatory utopia. Participation in its full sense will remain a utopia while we live in a world permeated with contradictions and conflicts. The ideal communicative situation simply does not exist in the real world, from the smallest to largest levels. Utopias, as the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano reminds us, are made not to live in, but to help us walk.[1] And a Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, tells us that one makes the road by walking.[2] This means that participation should not be seen as an end product, but as a process which can only be learned by participating.

In this article I will deal with five dimensions pertaining to participation. First, I explore some arguments in defense of participation. There are discarded, *a priori*, as mentioned before, manipulative as well as romantic perspectives which can best be seen as deviations from one or more arguments. In the second section I deal with some meanings of participation in research practice. Then follows a reflection on the conditions for participation and a short description of some strategies used by research to implement participation. Each of these items should serve the general purpose which is expressed in the title through the two metaphors which complement each other. From Orlando Fals Borda I borrow the idea that in spite of the mainstream tendencies which do not know what to do with participation in re-

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[1]   "Utopia is there on the horizon. I come two steps nearer, and it drifts two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon moves ten steps. For more than I walk, I will never reach it. What is Utopia for? It is there for this: That I don't stop walking." (From the poem "Para que serve a utopia", by Eduardo Galeano). [My translation].

[2]   "Walker, your footprints are
      the way and nothing else;
      Walker, there is no way,
      one makes the way by walking" (from the poem "Andares", by Antonio Machado).
      [My translation]

search, there may be no possible shortcut to the deep social changes needed today. It may look like Don Quijote's battle against the windmills. The other metaphor, borrowed from Peter Reason, points to the utopia which seems to be worth producing: a participatory worldview, which in the expression of the Zapatistas in México could mean a "world in which there is a place for all".

Why participation? Five arguments

The five arguments below can only be separated for didactic reasons. In many cases they overlap, and in others one may exclude others. For instance, in a broad understanding of politics, all arguments are also political. On the other hand, the pragmatic argument may undermine or at least overshadow the dialogical or ecological argument. There may also be other arguments which can be added. I think of the aesthetic argument, in the sense of a sharing and understanding that engages the senses in a radical and profound way, and which reaches beyond the realm of the theoretical and practical discourse (Aram, 2011). Or the ethical argument based on Kohlberg's moral stages theory, where the joint confrontation of moral dilemmas is the way of achieving justice-oriented growth, and the more recent studies on perspective taking (Edelstein & Keller, 1991; Keller, 2012).

The pragmatic argument: There are pragmatic reasons for having people participating in decisions that affect their lives. This argument corresponds to people's overall motivations to participate. There may be broader humanitarian and ideological reasons, but there is also the question about what good it brings for daily life, for improving concrete living or health conditions. Even if our time is marked by individualism and competitiveness, there are also countless experiences of participation and solidarity. In Brazil, the social economy movement counts thousands of initiatives from persons who come together and organise themselves to produce their living. Analysis may point to the longtime effect on social structure, but this is usually not the primary agenda of the members. For instance, the *Mãos + limpas* ("cleaner hands") co-operative of women started with the production of soap as a source of income a town in South Brazil. The ecological aspect of their work in recy-

cling used kitchen oil is largely the consequence of further interaction with similar organisations, academic advisors and city administration.

Besides, there is a difference in participating in a process that promises immediate benefits, and in a research project whose aims do not coincide with the practitioners' interests, as usually happens within academic contexts where the researcher is supposed to (also) present specific "products" for a different audience, i.e. his/her peers, the financing agencies and the publishing vehicles. This means that the pragmatic argument cannot be taken for granted, and presupposes a process of mutual persuasion. It is not that researchers have theories and practitioners do not. They have different theories, as Palshaugen (2006) has argued convincingly. But it will be not on the level of theories that they will find a common language, not necessarily a consensus, but on what he defines as "practical discourse", a discourse which has to do with *doing*.

There are many studies in social policies and work place research that use the efficiency argument for promoting participation. In terms of policies it is argued that participation in studying the conditions for implementing and also for evaluating them increases the level of involvement of the stakeholders, which is crucial for success. In the work place, top down decisions are seen as counter-productive in processes of change and innovations. As early as 1974, a researcher at Tavistock Institute would conclude: "Participation of the individual in the decisions affecting his work, in development of job content and organisational relations and in planning of changes is fundamental. Participation plays a role in learning and growth and permits those affected by changes in their roles and environments to develop assessments of the effects" (Trist, 1989, p. 15).[3] These are relevant pragmatic arguments, but praxis itself, as we have seen, may push the group to go further.

The political argument: The political argument for participation in research has two main features. One of them is participation as enabling each subject to say his/her own voice. This is one of the cornerstones of Freire's approach, and is equally valid for education as for research. Freire was

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[3]   Part of the keynote address to the Conference on Work Improvement and Industrial Democracy of the European Economic Community, Brussels, 1974.

confronted with what he coined the "culture of silence". There was no void of culture, since humans don't grow up and live in a social and cultural vacuum, but a culture that was silenced by forms of knowledge that didn't recognise the other's existence. To say one's word is a pedagogical-political instrument for pronouncing the world, and this is not the privilege of the researcher. In this sense, research is a way of co-pronouncing the world which is posited as a gnosological object between subjects.

Another feature of the political argument is the participation of research in the construction of hegemony in Gramscian terms. This view is prevalent in the recent practice of participatory research in Latin America, especially among research projects with popular social movements, with social economy or social policies. I quote From Maria Ozanira da Silva e Silva (2011), who uses participatory methodologies for evaluation research on social policies: "[…] I develop evaluation research, aiming to contribute to raise information that is important to the public decision-maker, but, above all, information directed to the production of knowledge committed to social struggles, including the universalisation of human rights, thus contributing to the social movement of constructing citizenship."(p. 120)

Both dimensions are important, but the second cannot be seen as a substitute for the first. The researcher may eventually lend his voice and expertise to make the voice of the group or person be heard in some other spheres. It is a quite common and legitimate expectation, for example, to have the report of the experience presented to authorities. But there is no substitute for people to develop their own voice and speak for themselves. The instrumental view, even if critical and politically progressive, will eventually obfuscate the participation of each subject in a collective project, leading to reductionism in thinking and activism in practice. In other words, action and participatory research is an instrument for *conscientisation* and empowerment of subaltern groups in their struggle for emancipation, but it can be seen as such only insofar as the saying of each one's word is not suppressed, even for good causes. History should have taught us that even good intentions can be transformed into nightmares once this basic assumption of democratic participation is not respected.

The epistemological argument: Knowing can no longer be conceived of as an individual act for reasons that have become common sense among researchers. Paulo Freire (1995) has put this magnificently in *À Sombra desta mangueira* ["In the shadow of the mango tree", published as *Pedagogy of the heart*] where he says that whenever he comes to this, symbolic, place he is adverbially alone but substantively in communion with others. In other words, even when writing up the project or the report, the researcher is engaged in a learning process with other subjects whom he may meet through the literature he uses, the informal conversations in the process, the persons within or behind the data he/she is using.

A recent intellectual movement around what is called "epistemologies of the south" has tried to call attention to the reductionist vision of modern ways of knowing and, respectively, the need to promote the "emergence" of alternative ways of relating to the world and to knowledge. Against this "metonymic" (taking a part for the whole) vision which is a characteristic of modern science, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) proposes the coexistence of different knowledges and temporalities. For instance, when a member of an Andean community tells us that in their culture the past is not behind, but in front of their people as a guiding force, he is questioning the modern linear way of interpreting history, where we move from past to the future. Or when they say that in their understanding there are not only five senses to interact with the world, there is an amplification of the possibilities of knowing through intuition, dreams, and other senses not recognized as such by classical science.

We can also bring into play in this argument the neurological factor. From common sense we know that different perspectives allow us to recognise different aspects of the same object. Neurological research is making us less confident in our perceptions. "First, we have to part from a dearly acquired, even if many times not formulated explicitly assumption, namely, that our eyes, ears and noses do not provide sufficient and clear information about our environment to our brain" (Borst & Grothe, 2011, p. 52).[4] Our brain would

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4   Translated by me from German: "Als Erstes müssen wir uns von einer lieb gewonnenen, wenn auch häufig nicht explizit formulierten Annahme verabschieden, nämlich der, dass unsere Augen, Ohren oder Nase unserem Gehirn ausreichende und eindeutige Information über unsere Umwelt liefern."

simply not have enough information to solve this problem of light and shadows. In the encounter with objects of the physical world, it operates on the basis of guesses. Why should it be different with objects of the social world?

I see in this piece of research a lesson that calls for humility in describing and analyzing our world, and the importance of developing a participatory reflexivity. Let me finally bring into this discussion the thoughts of John Shotter (2010) who, following Wittgenstein, argues that we should not think of ourselves as static thinkers, fixed in one or other system, but as beings capable of adopting attitudes and orientations that help us *move around* and so being more able to *know how to go on*. He suggests the image as if we were living within a permanent fog, where we need to act like blind persons who have to *sense* instead of seeing. However, what we sense cannot be considered the objects themselves, but possibilities which these sensed realities present to ourselves for taking the next steps. This is certainly a powerful reason for not walking alone.

The dialogical argument

There is not much literature about dialogue in research. In most handbooks of qualitative research there is plenty of information about interviews and instruments of data collection, but very little on dialogue. An exception are the books *Midwifery and dialogue in Organizations* (Kristiansen & Bloch-Paulsen, 2005) and Dialog und Entwicklung: Kommunikationstheorie, Aktionsforschung und Strukturreformen in der Arbeitswelt (Gustavsen, 1994). Quite interestingly, both refer to dialogue in organisations and both are from Scandinavian countries. Could it be related to the inherent difficulty with dialogue in research, even in participatory research? While there may be some understandings, or misunderstandings, of participation without dialogue, it is impossible to conceive of dialogue without participation. Why is this so in research?

First, it is difficult in a research situation to assume a symmetrical and horizontal position of all the subjects. The professional researcher indeed has methodological and theoretical resources that differentiate him/her from the other participants. However, does this mean a higher level in a hierarchical view of knowledge? Is "common sense" the knowledge of the "others"? Isn't

it the same as to say that the colonisers brought with them religion, while the original inhabitants of Abya Yala (Latin America) or Africa had superstitions? A simple example may illustrate how the researcher's theory may be quite irrelevant for a given context. While talking with members of communitarian bakeries in the outskirts of a Brazilian city, we thought we had a marvelous solution and brought up the idea of a co-operative to buy flour in large scale. The women told us that this would not work since a) it is time consuming and expensive to move from one "barrio" to the other (they obviously use public transport); b) there is the local grocer who with his small business plays an important role in the community and who is part of the chain of social and economic relations. Whose theory is better?

In Latin America, the dialogical approach has its main exponent in Paulo Freire, who in turn was greatly influenced by Martin Buber's I-Thou versus I-It relation, by Emmanuel Mounier's personalism and Karl Marx's notion of alienation, the last one taken through Erich Fromm's readings as well as Marx himself and, as Freire would say, other extensions of Marx. Dialogue is not just an interpersonal relation, much less a teaching method. For Freire it is the matrix for humanisation, in contrast to the anti-dialogical matrix which, for being authoritarian and manipulative, leads to dehumanisation. Dialogue is the matrix of a truly revolutionary praxis because it represents a rupture with oppressive interpersonal relations and social structures. In Freire's thought, there is no "final" definition of what it means to be human, expressed in his concept of "being more." Humanisation is a historical possibility as much as is dehumanisation, both possibilities working in permanent tension. The same applies to alienation, which is not part of the nature of a class or individual who need to be illuminated by an intellectual vanguard. Alienation is a historical human condition to be dealt with, not overcome, through praxis, i.e., action and reflection.

The dialogical argument for participation in research, therefore, may be one of the most radical challenges to classical social research. If taken seriously, the "dialogical turn" (Phillips et al., 2012, p. 2) would imply nothing less than a revolution also in research, changing the way professional researchers relate to each other, to their co-participants in projects, to the world around them.

The ecological argument

The ecological argument is related to an emergent worldview which takes participation to a more profound, guttural level. It has to do with the critique of Western thinking which introduced dichotomies (mind and body, history and nature, humans and non-humans, etc.) that may have allowed or promoted technological progress, but that at the same time lead humanity to be confronted with its limits in terms of its survival on the planet. There is today abundant literature arguing for the interdependence of all the elements that make up our planet, including human life (Bateson, 1997; Morin & Kern, 1995).

Peter Reason and Hillary Bradbury (2010, p. 6) wrap up this tendency with the concept of a *participatory worldview*: "A participatory worldview, they write, places human person and communities as part of their world, both human and more-than-human, embodied in their world, co-creating their world." It is a paradigm which competes both with the modern world view where the researcher was supposed to be an objective observer and with the postmodernism/poststructuralism emphasis on the "text". The latter's deconstruction of the myth of the modern world is necessary, but in the end they leave us without a ground for action. "We need to find a way of acknowledging the lessons of the linguistic turn while not ignoring the deeper structure of reality, and propose that a more creative and constructive worldview can be based on the metaphor of participation" (ib, p. 7).

The ecological argument in terms of research assumes the development of a "solidary sensitivity" (Assmann & Mo Sung, 2001) which goes beyond the usual academic training in research methodologies. There is much to be learned about knowing and knowledge from the people we work with in our projects, and who are capable of highly complex definitions as the one mentioned above, using different language and different rationalities.

Understandings of participation in research

Transparency (information/communication): This is the most elementary meaning of participation, but nonetheless a complex and not always easy process. It starts with the development of the social research project, where

trust has to be established and the forms and the level of involvement negotiated. Many projects do not go beyond informing the participants about the objectives, and at the end returning the results to the participants. This information and devolution, while important, is far from being sufficient for defining a project as participatory. Transparency is an ethical condition for any research project, and is increasingly becoming the object of analysis of the ethics committees. But we should want more. It is quite common that graduate students ask about what to do with the results, since they may "hurt" the group. If this risk exists, a relationship which allows critique from both sides has not been established. Also the researcher must be open for suggestions, sensitive to the group's dynamic and to particular personal situation, and he may be told this in many forms. There is much to be learned from Sherlock Holmes when it comes to paying attention to details, but the idea of a researcher who alone, or with the help of a Watson, discovers the murderer and at the end gathers the whole family in a room to tell the truth, usually to the surprise of everybody, does not fit into any category of participation.

Task sharing: In traditional research, the roles and tasks are defined beforehand and this is not a question to be dealt with. There may be a distribution of tasks among the group of collaborators (members of a research group, students, and others), but the question related to the field to be researched is usually about the best ways of approximation to the people in order to get the appropriate data. Every researcher knows that this is not easy with any type of methodology.

Once participation enters the game, things get more complicated, since there are more stakeholders actively involved. The common understanding is that once people lack training, their chance to participate in the process in a relevant way is very limited. Experience shows that this is not quite so. In our research process a person expressed it in the following way: "There are many people who come to our community to make research. Well, we already know the answers they want to hear." Presuming that people are able to participate in gathering and sharing information, we designed a seminar in which a group of about 20 persons from different groups that made up our research field was introduced to the methodological approach, identified "generative themes" (Freire, 1997), developed techniques to have people

express themselves about the issues relating to the life and relevance of particular community organizations. These co-researchers later also worked with the groups and wrote up reports that we used in the analysis, in which they also took part in later seminars.

Co-determination: Transparency, information, task sharing are important, but are they sufficient to characterise a participatory process? Marianne Kristiansen and Jörgen Bloch-Paulsen define participation with the much stricter concept of co-determination. As they put it "We define participation as co-determination. Ideally, employees, managers and action researchers co-determine the goals of their cooperation, co-design the cooperative processes, as well as co-evaluate and co-communicate the results" (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011, p. 350). Dialogue is the way of breaking up "social concrete blocks" which are "man-made-unproductive relational patterns that over a period of time stiffen into unquestioned assumptions and alienated organisational patterns which are taken for granted" (Kristiansen, 2007, p. 29).

Co-determination may be an ambitious goal if taken in a broad scope of potential stakeholders or people affected by a given research project. It seems quite impossible to avoid a pre-selection of groups or persons which will be more involved in the process, and others may even feel left out. But there is also the possibility of dealing with this problem in an open way. In my own experience with research in an academic setting, the simple fact of establishing a dialogue and ask participants what would be their interest in a given study, opens the possibility of collaboration which goes beyond information, devolution and task sharing. This is still far away from co-determination, but any attempt in this direction seems worthwhile.

Conditions for participation

Broadly speaking, the conditions can be summarised in two sets of arguments. The first ones are related to the subjective perspective of the stakeholders and the second ones to the institutional framework.

Personal conditions: Dialogue and participation happens between people, and therefore the quality of the relations is of utmost importance in participatory research. Among the many subjective conditions we can underline the

researchers' commitment to values which are beyond the immediate results of a research project. As expressed by Orlando Fals Borda (2010, p. 34): "Can we […] be participative students and agents of change, and work together in order to assist in this intellectual and political movement for people's self-reliance and empowerment, for the defense of life an the pursuit of relevant, useful science? Can we omit ourselves as scholars and citizens to this epoch-making task?"

Under personal conditions we also have to consider the objective possibilities of people to participate. We have experiences from workplace research where participation did not work because research meetings had to be held outside the regular shifts of the workers. In schools, teachers are busy attending their classes, and may not be able to organize an agenda for group discussions. There is still the difference of the organisation's agenda (schools, NGOs, etc.) and the professional researcher's agenda, especially when he/she is connected to the academy. This may be one of the reasons for many projects that announce a participatory methodology ending up using quite traditional proceedings in the research practice.

Institutional framework: Research is done with people who live in different and specific social arrangements, which do not necessaryily allow the same openness to carry out research with them. Let us take the example of three exponents of the action and the participatory research movement, Orlando Fals Borda left the University in Colombia (and his country) arguing that there were no conditions to do research the way he understood this endeavor. Later, under at least formally democratic conditions, he resumed the academic life in his country.

The same happened with Paulo Freire. His methodology was considered subversive by the military dictatorship in Brazil. In the records of his hearings we read that his "method" of *conscientization* was indeed a method of indoctrination, not different from Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. Freire also returned to his country 15 years later, and became an important intellectual mentor in the process of democratisation.

In Europe Werner Fricke analyses the changes of conditions for participatory action research in organisations in the last decades. There were conditions, especially in the Scandinavian countries, which supported the devel-

opment of democratic participation on the work place. In recent years the development of work place relations within neoliberalism have changed these conditions. In his analysis he cautions: "We are here touching an important point: The socio-political context of action research. It is not sufficient, I think, to discuss action research on the basis of single AR cases only. There is always a socio-political constellation which is favorable or in the contrary unfavorable to action research in general, to projects and programmes." (Fricke, 2011)

Strategies of participation: Some examples

Reviewing the literature of action and participatory research, we are surprised with the creative processes developed to enhance people's participation. In this section we will not present an inventory, but describe briefly some strategies developed in research projects. They are not intended to be models to be followed, but are tools that worked in specific contexts and which may inspire the creation of new ones or their "recreation". There are different "communicative ecologies" which allow or require the development of strategies suited for a given context. One set of such emerging communicative ecologies is related to the new digital media, where we are confronted with alternative forms of communication and of participation. (Dick, 2009). I will present three experiences of what could be called conventional research, one of them from the origin of participatory research in Latin America, one from a Scandinavian country and one from our own research experience in Brazil.

The circle of culture: The circle of culture was not just a meeting in circle for learning how ro read and write. For Freire (2009), the reading of the world preceded the reading of the word, and the circle of culture was a place to do both. The circle followed a previous research movement where an interdisciplinary team consisting of sociologists, pedagogues, linguists and other professionals, together with the community, would identify and codify *generative themes*. These would then be used in group discussion to deepen the knowledge of the world and ways of acting upon it. Reading and writing was part of this process.

The circle represented a rupture with the classical hierarchical teacher/student relation. This, however, should not be understood as the rejection of the possibility of a lecture or the presentation of a topic by one who previously prepared it. The circle of culture was more than a strategy, representing the dialogical and inter-subjective character of knowing.

The dialogue conference: In the research practice of Bjoern Gustavsen in the context of the LOM Program in Sweden (1994; 2007) the *dialogue conference* is the core area for dialogue. The purpose is to ensure that all participants have equal opportunities to participate while at the same time creating the possibility to reach practical conclusions. The conferences usually have the duration of one day and a half and take place at a conference center. Among the basic guidelines are the following: There are no lectures; the participants themselves are the essential source of problem-posing, of thesis and ideas; the participants are competent to make contributions (even if partial); there are two modes of group organisations: small discussion groups and plenary sessions where decisions have to be taken (democracy is not only about discussion but also decisions). It is a process in which the group identifies areas which are problematic; searches for ideas which signal the possibility of solutions; and look for the possible next steps in the direction of a vision of a better organisation.

The research "mutirão": The word *mutirão* is used in Brazil to characterise a work done co-operatively to accomplish a specific task. It is quite common in peasant communities where at times of harvest the neighbours come together to help each other, often someone who is sick and therefore would lose his crop if there were no help. It is at the same time a social event, and it used to culminate in a party. Today, the word is more widely used for intensive co-operative work. It is also with this understanding that we baptized a three day research work with a great variety of groups and individual participants in the city of Curitiba (Brazil). Members of the research group from the university, which is located in another city (Porto Alegre area) spent three days carrying out "circles of evaluation", individual interviews, visits, observations and study of documents. There were regular meetings of the co-ordinating group, written reports of each activity and informal encounters with participants. The data produced during this *mutirão*, which had been

preceded by a detailed preparation, was later analyzed and again discussed with the participants in a seminar. The report was used as input for restructuring the NGO's programme. (Streck &Adams, in print)

Conclusion

In this article I argued for participation in social research as more than a strategy to obtain the acquiescence of the people with whom we carry out research, or to obtain immediate gains, as efficiency and increased productivity. Participation, as understood in this paper, is a way of promoting active citizenship in the sense of enabling everyone to be part of the production of relevant knowledge that will shape their institutions and societies. It is a way of fostering a culture of participation in which different forms and modes of participation can grow together, mutually challenging and complementing each other. Democracy is about the "wisdom of the many" (Roth, 2011, p. 79), as much as it is the care for each individual's wellbeing. It is the difficult balance between promoting equality and respecting differences.

However, as much as we may consider participation relevant and necessary, it cannot be considered a panacea for the social and political problems, neither is it sufficient for guaranteeing the quality of research. It introduces some new validity criteria, such as the quality of the relationship among the research subjects, but it does not preclude other validity claims developed by the scientific community. It is also not suggested that there is no valid research outside the scope of participatory methodologies. For instance, large scale quantitative research is a premise for participatory research which is usually of qualitative nature, and needs these larger frameworks.

Taking participation seriously challenges us to reposition ourselves as researchers in relation to the people with whom we carry out our work, and those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of our work. This is the inescapable political dimension of participation. It also challenges us rethink the role of academic institutions and research centers in producing socially relevant knowledge.

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