

Tales from the Natives: Declining Response Rates and the Promise of Participatory Methods

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In recent years there has been a growing unwillingness by the general public to participate in social research. (Purdon and Nicolas 2002) This tendency has been attributed to a general disenchantment, particularly within the most disadvantaged in society, with the whole consultation/research process. Research fatigue has often become the norm as people feel that although they may have taken part in the past the results have often led to a situation where there is still a large gap between what they need and want and what they actually receive, which in turn, leads to 'democratic despondency' [Macaskill 2002]. The result of this for social research has been that there have developed large sections of society that it is becoming increasingly difficult to research using conventional methods and when such methods are used sampling strategies are skewed as rather than being a representation of the general public it is increasingly becoming an unrepresentative sample of those who agree to participate in research. In an attempt to counter this escalating disillusionment with the social research process more collaborative approaches have been utilised, such as participatory action research, which seeks not only to answer the questions of the researcher but also attempts to address some of the issues faced by those who are collaborating in the research enterprise.

The model of participatory research advocates putting research capabilities in the hands of those who are traditionally the focus of social research so that they may identify ways themselves of transforming their lives. It is a means of preventing an élite group i.e. social scientists from exclusively determining the interests of others, in effect transferring power to those groups. Therefore, this approach blurs the distinction between the researcher and the researched and indeed as both collaborate, as equals, in the investigative process; choosing methods, analysing data, and sharing options for action, maybe such role distinctions are redundant. However, this increasing trend toward developing more participatory approaches both to social research methodology and to the development of social policy poses some interesting considerations for some of the central tenets of the social sciences.

Going native

One of these central tenets, which is an inherent feature of all social sciences, is best illustrated by the anthropological concept of 'going native'. This term refers to the situation where the researcher identifies too strongly with the values and perspectives of those they are researching and therefore loses sight of their "objectivity". This fear of the researcher 'going native' is based on the belief that it is not the researcher's role to gain insight into another culture by 'going native'. But rather, their role is to appreciate the values of other cultures through systematic academic techniques of observation and analysis.

However, the term 'to go native' does not have its origins in social science but was originally a term used by the British military as they administered their colonial empire. During this period often a small post of British soldiers oversaw a large geographic area and population, removed from British military and culture. To counter any threat of these colonial

administrators 'going native', the army had strict rules and regulations for these isolated officers that included shaving each day, dressing in full uniform and following a rigid schedule of duties etc., this was to ensure that there would be no loss of the 'civilizing' regimentation and discipline of British culture and by extension British rule.

The link of this notion to academic study was brought about by early anthropologists, who were often closely linked to colonial administrations, typically taking for granted the superiority of their own Western Colonial cultures. Therefore, covertly embedded in the concept of 'going native' is an assumption of the inferiority and domination of the native's perspective. 'Going native' in the context of social research means losing one's footing in the dominant culture of government or university and dangerously toying with adopting the ways and perspectives of the inferior people. Inherently, at the least, the term still retains some of its 'othering' connotation which is contrary to the ethos of a participatory research approach which is seeking to establish a consensus approach, based on equality of status.

Again, intrinsic to a more participatory approach to the research process is that it attenuates the boundaries between researchers and the researched. Adopting more participatory approaches entails turning 'lay' people into researchers a role previously within the domain of the professional. However, by commissioning research subjects, or natives, to actively cooperate in the research process there is an integral element of going native built into the very research design. Although such research can offer the promise of access to social networks and knowledge that more traditional approaches would take years to develop, embedding the 'researchers' in the world of the native also brings to the process a number of tensions or possible pitfalls not associated with more traditional methods. For example research partners live in the communities which they research on a full time basis and continue to live there after the research has ceased. This, in turn, has ramifications for how such native researchers manage their identity both during the research process and after. Managing these in-built tensions, between the requirements expected of these two roles, is a continual challenge due to the multiple agendas of research partners.

Particularly from the end of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first social scientists are realising that we live in a different world from that inhabited by those that established the discipline. Their perspectives often do not fit a world where social and technological changes have led to an attenuation of boundaries of time and space and where the whole categories of what constitutes *them* and *us* have become blurred. In many instances researchers are in an environment where they share cultural capital with those who are the focus of the research. Indeed, it can be argued that there is always a degree of this in any social research setting as we are all humans. More recent theorists of the research process, such as Rosaldo (1993) and Jenkins (1992), realise so-called natives do not 'inhabit' a world completely separate from the one researchers 'live in'. In relation to research that seeks to be participatory and empowering, with its ethos of joint problem solving, it is ever more difficult to ascertain who is the researcher and who is the researched or native. If such an approach is to be adopted it is important to contest such established boundaries and fears of going native and encourage people to reflect on and incorporate both the promises and drawbacks of both perspectives. The notion of going native needs to be reconsidered in this context. If the inherent power bias imbedded in this notion is contested then if the researcher is to be critiqued for 'going native' then the next consideration should be, native to what culture, that of the local community or that of the university, government or funders?

Toward a new conception of natives' perspectives

Participatory approaches seek to attain a position where the aims of the researchers and the researched coalesce. However, in the more macro research environment this is a complex position to attain. For example, for all the grand theorizing of the post-modern turn in social research that has led to the call for more participatory multi-vocal methodologies, ultimately an academic's career is dependent on the amount of publications they produce. The production of academic papers however is often of little consequence to those outside the academic community - their desired outputs tend to be more immediate and material. Also, there may be other agencies who have other agendas that they wish to satisfy via the research process. Funders, for instance, require research reports produced in language which may well mean very little to other research partners who have participated in their production.

It is probably impossible to attain a situation where all these multiple agendas can be replaced by one participatory schema that all parties can work toward but adopting a mutual approach to managing these different agendas has the possibility to result in a mutually enlightening experience for all those concerned. Participatory approaches offer great promise for overcoming the very real challenge of the declining interest in and response rates to social research. Adopting these more participative reciprocal approaches, however, will entail a more fundamental reconsideration, on the part of social scientists, of some of the mainstays of what it means to do 'proper' research, one of which will be what value has the natives' perspective in relation to others.

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