

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### *NURTURED BY KNOWLEDGE: LEARNING TO DO PARTICIPATORY ACTION-RESEARCH*

Susan E. Smith, Dennis G. Willms, and Nancy A. Johnson (Eds.) (1997).  
Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Centre.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a familiar approach for many adult educators and community development workers. Unfortunately much of their experience has not been well documented and frequently remains unpublished. *Nurtured by Knowledge* is one of those infrequent publications that reports on researchers' struggles with PAR methodology and leads to new understandings of demands the approach makes on practitioners and the transformational learning it can invoke. It includes an introductory chapter written by the two senior editors, Smith and Willms; six case studies, each published as a separate chapter by PAR practitioners; and a final synthesis chapter written by Smith. The case studies are from Latin America, Canada, India, and Africa. Four deal with health projects and two with rural development. The authors' PAR experience ranges from none to extensive, and their roles in research include graduate student, volunteer, community activist, and academic.

The book is in part a PAR methods text, it also addresses the difficulties of working with PAR to build an understanding of PAR philosophy and processes. Although the case studies illustrate the potential of PAR to achieve social change, more important to the editors' intentions is that they reveal researchers' insecurities, fears, ethical dilemmas, failures, and personal learnings. From this perspective *Nurtured by Knowledge* is an uncommon anthology of researchers' personal learning experiences—hence the sub-title *Learning to do Participatory Action-Research*.

Dennis Willms describes PAR work as a "journey because PAR is about movement from the way things are to the way things could be" (p. 8). The editors explain that PAR projects are intended to facilitate a journey which results in "transformation on both the personal and social levels" (p. 8). Researchers who live the experience of PAR also journey developmentally. In the Introduction Willms highlights each authors' personal reflections, learnings, and emergent understandings. Smith writes of her own development experience and PAR journeys from a philosophical and spiritual perspective, searching to express the deep personal meaning of her own work.

Each case study is preceded by notes (at times extensive) from the editors which provide contextual material. The case studies vary in depth of their authors' development insights, critical analysis, personal reflections, and writing style. For example, the first chapter, "Cows for Campesinos" by Debbink and Ornelas, was compiled from taped interviews and published as a dialogue. Chapter 4, a case study of AIDS research in Uganda, has four authors, but one

person's voice "speak[ing] on behalf of all members of [the] research team" (p. 87). Similarly, chapter 5, a study of community development among the Aymara of northern Chile, has two female authors, with one writing the story of the experiences of both. Chapter 6, "Pasantias and Social Participation" by Ornelas, was constructed by the editors from an audio tape submitted by the author plus audio and videotapes of the author's presentations made by the editors at meetings and conferences. The editors and authors have gone to considerable lengths to avoid appropriating each others' knowledge and to respect the shared origins of the authors' contributions.

I found Debbink's (a newcomer to PAR) description of his transition from Alberta dairy farmer to Mexican development worker similar to reports by bright students who, changed by their first overseas development experience, abandon undergraduate intellectualism for thoughtful, personal narrative. In contrast, Ornelas (with many years of community work) makes philosophical pronouncements and generalizations, particularly in chapter 6, which I found too frequently expansive and overly confident. The "fit between the practical [Debbink] and philosophical [Ornelas] voices" (p. 13) that the editors construct does not work for me as the editors intended. Chapter 6 in particular offers too much of Ornelas as community development expert and teacher, too little of Ornelas as learner, and too little analysis of the pasantia as a residential popular education method which incorporates PAR.

Two chapters are contributed by neophyte PAR researchers. Mary Law, a faculty member at McMaster, writes about her first experience with PAR from the perspective of an epidemiologist trained in quantitative methods. Her case study reports a project with families of differently abled children in an Ontario community—a welcome context as too often PAR work is only thought of as an approach for "developing" regions. Women's utilization of health services in a small rural community in northern India is the subject of the case study reported by Patricia Seymour, a first year medical student. Unlike Law, Seymour was not an experienced health researcher, neither was her project located in a familiar culture where she could communicate directly with her participants—they spoke no English and she spoke no Hindi.

Another shift in author position, style, and voice occurs with a chapter by Maria-Ines Arratia, who (if my reading is correct) does not engage in a PAR project, but who visits northern Chile and reports on the work of her co-author Isabel de la Maza, who uses participatory methods in her community development work. The arms-length relationship of Arratia with PAR produced an interesting but not fully engaging account, and I wished to hear more directly from Isabel, who works closely with the Aymara communities.

One chapter in particular raises important ethical issues. Patricia Spittal, Janette Nakuti, Nelson Sewankambo, and Dennis Willms document the work of a research team studying the experience of Ugandan at-risk women who fear and suffer the consequences of HIV/AIDS. Their informants question the authors

about resources the team might bring to alleviate their suffering. During the data collection period several informants die and team members experience guilt and doubt about their work, which provides no immediate benefit to the study's subjects. The authors wonder if this project could have been implemented differently through a PAR process which did not require a lengthy ethnographic study—whose early beneficiaries were only the team members themselves. In their introductory notes the editors state "Readers resisting the temptation to sweep strong, personal emotions or ethical doubts under an academic carpet may see themselves reflected here" (p. 87).

The longest chapter is the last, a 90 page synthesis by Smith of lessons learned, concepts linked, and principles explicated—all combined in an eclectic philosophers' brew from which Smith derives principles and a conceptual framework for PAR methodology that she calls praxiology. What is new here is her move beyond social justice principles to establish humanism and spirituality as a foundation for personal practice or vocation. Smith's explication of the principles of PAR and her analysis of the case study authors' reflections and personal learnings are coherently integrated to establish a holistic framework for praxiology. This chapter merits a book length discussion and brevity occasionally detracts from ready acceptance of some assertions and explanations. Her voice in this chapter has some of the qualities of new-age spiritual writing in terms of her use of metaphor, deep personal reflection, and connections to the spiritual aspects of PAR practice.

*Nurturing Knowledge* contributes new insights into the discussions around democratizing research, linking community development and research through participatory processes, and confirming commitment to emancipatory social change. Readers will find issues to debate and to challenge, and reflections to respect and to learn from in this book. As an anthology it has more disparate voices than most, yet the editors sustain a coherent analysis of their authors' experiences and extend thinking about PAR into new areas of researcher vocation and transformation.

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