THE PARTICIPATORY RAPID APPRAISAL METHOD OF RESEARCH ON CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY IN JORDAN

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CURRENT CRITIQUE OF DISABILITY RESEARCH

Traditional research has played a part in the oppression of people with impairments by conceptualizing disability as individual tragedy to be pitied rather than as embodied in social relationships (Rioux 1994). As a result, it is argued that the assumptions underlying some methodological approaches have been consistent with other negative and exclusive behaviors and attitudes relating to disabled people within wider society (Stone/Priestley 1996; Rioux/Bach 1994). For example, survey methods have characteristically treated disabled people in Jordan, as elsewhere, as passive subjects of the research enterprise, thus contributing to their marginalization. The survey of 1991 on the situation of disabled people in Jordan conducted by the Department of Statistics and Surveys (DSS) is an example of past research which is regarded as *disabling* (DSS 1991). The emphasis of this survey was on assessing the needs of families rather than the disabled individual. As a result, this research did not substantially contribute to a comprehensive identification of the needs of disabled people, nor therefore to meeting such needs as might be defined by disabled people themselves.

Although disabled people have frequently been treated as passive research subjects (Abberley 1987), in recent years they have increasingly rejected the individualistic tragedy view that has been presented by traditional research and are calling for a more democratic paradigm in researching their needs. Although some previous research which has utilized an emancipatory framework could occasionally be said to have transformative potential, it is clearly not emancipatory in terms of the two primary principles of empowerment and reciprocity which are essential for any research with transformative potential (Zarb 1992). Disabled people have advocated an *emancipatory paradigm* whereby they are in greater control of the research process and its production

(Oliver/Barnes 1997). This new paradigm is consistent with a theoretical approach which looks at disability as socially created and a culturally produced form of oppression, or what is known as the social model (Oliver 1990/1996; Abberley 1987). The key feature of this approach is a re-definition of the social relations of research production (Stone/Priestley 1996; Priestley 1997) and it is the practical relevance of interpretive research to the lives of research participants in removing the disabling barriers which is the most important theme of the emancipatory paradigm (Oliver 1992).

The emancipatory research is an approach which emphasizes greater control of disabled people over the agenda, participation in the research and gaining strength in the process. Although this research recognizes that most research serves the powerful, it challenges inequality by supporting people in the creation of their own knowledge and strengthening their abilities and resources. Emancipatory research – which advocates democratization of the research process and initiative coming from research beneficiaries, so far as possible – bears similarities to a wider category of participatory methodologies. Oliver (1992) advocates an emancipatory approach which minimizes the role of outsider expertise and maximizes the full role of disabled people in the production and ownership of the research. He argues that disability research should not be a technique carried out by expert able bodied people, but should constitute part of disabled people's struggle to challenge the daily life experience of oppression. This suggests that a researcher's expertise should be put at the disposal of disabled people to enable them to become empowered. However, Oliver contends that research can never directly empower people, since empowerment is something that disabled people must claim for themselves. Research, he suggests, can only facilitate this process when people have come to address their own disempowerment irrespective of those individuals who have in some way benefited from that disempowerment in some way in the past. In conclusion, Morris (1992) sets out four elements which she regards as fundamental for an emancipatory approach:

1. The research should play a role in personal liberation.
2. The personal experience of disability should be revealed clearly.
3. Non-disabled researchers must present themselves as allies and resources.
4. Disability research and disability politics are of general relevance to all social groups.

In practice, it has proven extremely difficult to implement an emancipatory approach. Disabled people are frequently denied any opportunity to take part in research, and researchers are often not willing to make their research accessible to them (Barnes/Mercer 1997). This is especially true in the South where disabled people until recently have been denied any opportunity to influence the agenda of the research process, which has typically involved the use of survey methods which in themselves have proved to be inadequate in researching disabled people's needs. This may be largely because the dominance of the medical model of disability, which in some way fuels the more general belief that disabled people are not able to participate in the economy because of their personal inability. Given the problems associated with implementing emancipatory research, especially in the South, and in order to remedy past inadequacies of traditional research, it is important to use an approach based on an alternative participatory research model for studying disabled people's economic needs and rights in which the role of researcher is changed as far as possible from that of controller to facilitator who puts professional research skills at the disposal of disabled people.

DISABILITY RESEARCH IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE PROMINENCE OF PARTICIPATORY RAPID APPRAISAL METHOD

The analysis of the literature on disability shows a tendency to support the use of a participatory approach when researching disabled people in developing countries (Helander 1993). Participatory research is an approach which has been evolving in recent years, particularly in developing countries, and has been the subject of different interpretations. French (1994) pointed out that the main aim of participatory research is to involve people in an active way at every stage of the research process including topic selection, determination of methodology, and evaluation. It also aims to educate decision makers, especially those involved in some part of the research process. That is, they can learn about the local culture and the specific circumstances of the community which helps in a better understanding of the needs of these communities when making policy decisions. In this sense, this method is considered to be a democratic tool which can accelerate social change. This is because it allows a greater degree of participation by the target group along with policy makers in controlling research production.

One participatory methodology particularly common in developing countries is PRA. Although not used extensively in disability research, it has been suggested as a method which has a particular relevance to disabled people in Jordan. Its advocates regard it both as a means of eliciting useful and reliable data and ensuring the involvement of beneficiaries. Some of those advocates see it as having similar potential for democratizing the relationship between researcher and researched as emancipatory research. While not a method which has therefore been used extensively in disability research, it has undoubted potential in this regard, especially in settings in developing countries. PRA is a specific form of rural rapid appraisal that was introduced for of variety of reasons – largely the limitations of time and funding which have been associated with conventional approaches such as traditional surveys. These approaches perpetuate the problem of misunderstanding the needs of the poor and have tended to make inappropriate provision for them (Thies 1991). While proponents of PRA argue that it offers improvement over some conventional techniques such as surveys, others contend that it complements surveys. Perhaps what matters here is the fact that PRA serves to improve the quality of data obtained, and this can be used especially for further decisions (Turmusani 1993). As a method of needs assessment, PRA is based on informality and a high level of participation of the target group (Thies 1991; Chambers 1983; Chambers 1994a; Bunch 1982). It is characterized as a comprehensive, practical, and quick means, as we will see shortly, to identify, analyze and evaluate their own situations and generate solutions to certain problems.

PRA provides opportunities to learn from and with local community members in order to understand the complexities of a certain topic in a broader manner with regard to the topic rather than focusing on gathering very accurate statistics on a certain list of variables related to the topic. It can be argued that PRA may be distinguished from other methods in terms of the cost associated with it, the level of transfer of power to disabled people within the research process, and speed of application in the field. As in other methodologies, rapid appraisal methods including PRA use well designed tools for data gathering and analysis appropriate to the task at hand, such as direct observation, semi-structured interviews, ranking, as well as gathering data from different sources, which helps to achieve more accuracy (Niio Ong 1991; Murray 1994; Chambers 1983; Bunch 1982; Theis 1991).

They cover a variety of methods and techniques, but all these tend to have the following characteristics in common:

- They permit greater speed compared with conventional methods of analysis.
- They involve working in the field, and emphasize learning directly from those in the locality.

- They combine a multidisciplinary approach or what is called *triangulation*[1] with flexibility and innovation.
- They place emphasis on producing a timely insight, hypothesis or *best bets* rather than final results or fixed recommendations (Pratt/Loizos 1992; Chambers 1994b and Theis 1991).

However, PRA is different from other participatory methods such as participatory rural appraisal mainly in shifting power from outsiders to the locals or at least sharing it by allowing a greater level of participation of the target group in the whole process of research and decision making (Pratt/Loizos 1992; Thies 1991). PRA is also described a creative method in the sense that it allows greater opportunity for using, amending, or adding a certain tool according to the requirement of the research at any stage of the field work. Also it gives the opportunity for continuous revision of the data gathered and quick decisions for further gathering. Nevertheless, research of this kind has some weaknesses and limitations: The first is a weakness related to community co-operation and participation. The PRA method might perpetuate a dependency attitude within the target group who then expect an outsider to do most of the research work. The second weakness concerns the skills and objectivity of researchers. The third weakness is related to target group representation such as when the target group can really participate in all phases of the research, does it consider representatives of gender, area, background, etc. The major limitation of this participatory research is the limited level of disabled people's participation in controlling the research process. In practice, research on disability issues in the academic field tends to involve co-emancipatory research or collaborative research. True participatory methods focus on allowing disabled people to be fully involved in the research process and in decision making as well (as part of their emancipation).

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE PRA-METHOD TRANSFERRED POWER TO DISABLED PEOPLE?

Evidence shows that discrimination is the key problem that pervades the lives of disabled people in Jordan, compounding the consequences of their disability and pushing them to the margins. Research findings on the economic needs of disabled people in Jordan reveal the severe disadvantages experienced by disabled people in the areas of employment, welfare benefits, access, and mobility. Although many disabled people viewed the satisfaction of their identified needs as a matter of charity, a substantial number of them rejected this charitable attitude and called for access to the same rights and opportunities as other members of society. Awareness is the solution and information is the most likely approach to overcome the basic ignorance that creates discrimination. It can be concluded that accurate information on the condition of disabled people could be obtained from research that allows the involvement of disabled people themselves in the process and the control of its production, as this may constitute a step in their emancipation (Turmusani 1998).

This section explores how far the involvement of disabled people in the research process via PRA has helped to translate their individual experience in life into political actions. Prior to that, however, a note on the empirical research will be provided. The empirical research on which this paper is based investigates the economic position of disabled people in Jordan and assesses how disabled people themselves evaluate their economic needs and priorities, with secondary emphasis on the way in which existing legislation is addressing this issue. The main concern underlying this research is its contribution to a change in attitudes towards disability issues and particularly to the economic participation of disabled people being viewed at the level of society instead of that of the individual. This research, which was conducted during 1996–1997, concerned a target group of 181 disabled people who were interviewed within the course of this research to give information regarding their needs and priorities, including their needs for a positive change in attitudes towards them. This target group included males and females from both rural and urban settings, all of whom had sensory impairments (blind, deaf) or were physically impaired and were attending vocational, sheltered, and self employment programs in the Middle Region of Jordan (Turmusani 1999). Throughout the process of research the awareness of those who took part in the discussion of their own condition as individuals is moved to that of social structures that restrict their development and consequently perpetuate their passivity and inhibit their emancipation. Although the medical understanding of disability has dominated and influenced those who made up the sample in this research, the collective response of those who made up the focus group sessions has revealed a political perspective in the way they viewed their needs and rights. It was observed that there was a personal progression in thought for those individuals who took part in the focus group. They sometimes got involved in the discussion and moved their views from the (individual) personal to the societal and from charity to a perspective of rights.

Consequently, this (the involvement of disabled people in the research process) would stimulate their emancipation and help their empowerment. Empowerment here means allowing and enabling disabled people to take control. It is a process whereby disabled people are left to explore the extent of their potential and overcome their limitations dictated by the negative attitudes of society. Therefore, it would seem appropriate for a participatory policy agenda targeting disability issues to consider the environment as the focal point of action.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to highlight the extent to which the PRA method can play a role in facilitating the emancipation of disabled people. The idea is to allow disabled people to be in full control over their lives, in line with the social perspective on disability. The paper shows that there are number of limitations associated with PRA when implemented with disabled people, which may limit the level of transfer of power to them. Thus, there is a need for caution when using participatory research, especially if it involves academic work. The paper concludes by reaffirming the need to distinguish the role of researcher from that of controller to facilitators by putting their expertise at the disposal of disabled people. Disabled people should not only be regarded as a partners in the research process but also as owners of research production. In brief, this paper explored the political and methodological issues involved in doing disability research and how this can contribute to the development of a more emancipatory approach in future disability research in Jordan.

NOTES

1 Triangulation means multidisciplinary team, data from different sources and places and using different tools for data gathering.

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