Community development research: Merging communities of practice

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Abstract Academic researchers in developing countries are increasingly called upon to gear their research efforts towards solving contemporary social problems. The dominant research paradigm in their academic institutions is however not conducive to such endeavours. This paper proposes a participatory paradigm, based on the principles of activity theory, as a basis for community development work. The paper elaborates on the process needed to develop a participatory research project and presents two examples to illustrate the characteristics of such an approach.

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, educational institutions in developing countries have been increasingly called upon to assist governments and civil society to research and resolve contemporary social problems. Universities and research institutions are urged to be more involved in community development research, and funding is increasingly conditional upon the expected socioeconomic benefits of research outputs. However, the dominant research paradigms are not necessarily conducive to the new requirements. A shift is necessary from theoretically driven research, in which the researcher has full control over all the aspects of the process, including the aim of the research and the results, to a participatory approach in which researcher and research participants negotiate the process.

This paper aims to assist researchers in developing countries to respond to the call for ‘socially relevant research’. It proposes an alternative research approach, based on the sociocultural and activity theory approach (Vygotsky, 1967), to conceptualize and guide community development research. Its main emphasis is on the nature of the interactions between the researcher and the research participants (communities) in community development research.
Communities of practice

Community development research is, for the purpose of this paper, defined as research into socioeconomic issues that affect communities negatively and require interventions for change. Such research involves both a diagnostic and an intervention component. It is argued that the nature of the interaction between the researcher(s) and the research participants is an important determinant of the level of success of community development research. In order to conceptualize this interaction, I will borrow ideas from the sociocultural and activity theory approach (Wertsch, 1998). Activity theorists argue that in order to understand the nature of the interaction between people, one needs to focus on the joint activity in which they are involved. Human behaviour is seen as socially and culturally mediated towards a purpose, obtaining meaning within a social context. Lave (1991) uses the term ‘community of practice’ to capture this idea. She argues that an activity is socially situated. It takes place in relation to other activities, is linked to institutional practices and to the actions of others. A community of practice provides goals, structure, meaning and values/rules, significance and tools for those engaging in the activity.

Within this framework a development research process can be understood as a meeting of two different communities of practice in a joint activity (Gilbert, 1996). The community of practice of the researcher, whose activities are embedded in certain goals, rules, tools and values, interacts with the focal community, whose activities are embedded in its own goals, tools, rules and values. This is captured in Figure 1 below.

The community development process: subsuming or merging

The meeting of two communities of practice in the framework of community development research can follow one of two scenarios. In the first and most common scenario, the researchers’ practice dominates and their goals, tasks, tools, rules and values are imposed on the focal community. The result is a re-defining of the focal communities’ issues and problems.

Figure 1 Community development research as a meeting of communities of practice.
into the discourse of the researcher, who in turn develops an intervention strategy, informed by the new definition. This may lead to a significant change in the focal community during the development intervention process. However, experience has shown that once the researcher departs, the focal community often reverts back to its own previous definitions, goals, rules and tools and the changes evident during the intervention process are not sustained. Worse even, as a result of the intervention, focal communities may have been alienated from their prior community of practice, not having the capacity to sustain the goals, tools and rules. In such circumstances people are left without the everyday wisdom and tools to manage their lives.

In a second scenario, the joint activity between researchers and research participants involves a negotiation of goals, tools and rules of both communities, resulting in new emergent goals, tasks, tools and rules rooted in the development context. This allows for a more equitable, mutually constructed understanding of the issues and problems of the focal community, and provides a base for jointly designed and executed intervention with a greater likelihood of being sustainable (Gilbert, 1996). This scenario is presented in Figure 2.

**Facilitating the merger of communities of practice**

The merging of communities of practice requires a different research intervention from the dominant positivist approach. It requires a process which makes explicit the characteristics of both communities and which facilitates continued negotiation of the differences between both communities, leading to a joint understanding of the development issue and eventually a jointly owned intervention process.

In the development literature, the concepts of rules, tools and goals are

![Figure 2 Merging of communities of practice.](image-url)
captured by the notion of local knowledge, defined by Gengaje and Setty (1991), as the common sense wisdom that comes from everyday life activities rather than formal learning. It refers to the whole system of knowledge, including concepts, beliefs, values, goals and perceptions and the processes whereby these are acquired, stored and transmitted. Local knowledge refers to ‘what is’, but also to ‘how things are done’. Local knowledge is located in people, is not normally consciously reflected upon and is only rarely written down. In other words, it is tacit knowledge. Local knowledge serves to shape people’s mental maps (Van Vlaenderen, 1999a). If the aim is to develop a genuinely joint activity, it is imperative that the researchers ensure that the local knowledge of the focal community is made explicit and incorporated in the development research process.

The intervention process
A research intervention process starts with the identification of a problem that the development intervention aims to address. Typically, the researcher describes a development issue from its own theoretical or professional perspective. A problem is identified as a ‘malnutrition problem’ or a ‘hygiene problem’ or a ‘food production problem’. This casting of the problem sets the direction for all subsequent phases in the process, since it determines what data will be collected and what strategies developed. However, to allow a merging of communities of practice, it is important that from the very start the issue or problem is defined jointly by both the focal community and the researchers. The researcher needs to facilitate a definition of the issue that incorporates the concepts and categories of the focal community.

The second and third phases in the process, data collection and analysis are closely linked to phase one and to each other. Data collection is informed by the question and sets the framework for the analysis. Researchers have developed an array of tools geared at capturing and analysing data within their professional paradigms. Typically, such tools include questionnaires, observation and interview schedules, statistical and content analyses. In Scenario 1, the use of such tools results in a translation of the focal people’s knowledge into the researchers’ cognitive language. Answers to survey questionnaires are squashed into response categories of the researchers. If, however, the process aims to be participatory, a different set of data collection and analysis techniques may be more appropriate. Open-ended and group-based data collection methods, in which the researcher is a facilitator, allowing the data collection and analysis processes to be led by the focal community, are needed. Methods that have been used successfully include participatory research appraisal techniques, Freirian codes, focus groups, popular theatre and community video (Van Vlaenderen, 2001). These are congruent with a holistic approach to research, in which the process of data
collection, analysis and the development of an intervention strategy are integrated and shared by all stakeholders.

The next phase in the research intervention focuses on the development of a strategy for intervention. If the scenario has been one in which the researcher has taken full control of the cognitive shaping of the research issue, through the identification of the problem and the control over the data collection and analysis process, the intervention will inevitably become the responsibility of the researcher. It will be firmly embedded within the community of practice of the researcher and may have cognitively alienated the focal community to the extent that it is not in a position to actively contribute to the design and implementation of the intervention. As a result, the intervention will have little potential for sustained results. Opting for a participatory data collection and analysis approach may remedy this. In order to illustrate this, two examples are presented.

**A participatory needs analysis: the use of self-surveys**

The first example focuses on a participatory needs analysis project in the Healdtown District in the Eastern Cape Region of South Africa (Van Vlaenderen and Gilbert, 1993). The project was initiated by a development trust and aimed at assessing the feasibility of converting an old school building into a community resource centre for the surrounding villages. A research team was engaged to conduct the analysis and provide recommendations.

The project commenced with visits by the research team to all the villages of the district to introduce the project, to gain approval and cooperation and to develop a plan of action. In response to a request from the villagers, a committee consisting of representatives from each of the villages was formed to coordinate the needs analysis. The committee was able to act on behalf of the communities and undertook to provide ongoing feedback on the research process to the different village communities.

Facilitated by the researchers, the committee ‘workshopped’ the research design and the tools to be used. As part of the overall design, it was decided to conduct a socioeconomic survey in each of the villages. Several workshops were held subsequently to design the content and format of the questionnaire. The role of the team was to facilitate this process by eliciting ideas, critically evaluating suggestions and providing advice when requested. There was lively debate on the kind of information required, the type of questions to be included and the particular formulation of the questions. A draft of the questionnaire was compiled and the project team had it typed and duplicated. The questionnaire forms were then returned to the representatives of each of the villages, who called community meetings in their villages to explain the aim of the questionnaire and the procedure for
completing the forms. It was agreed that the youth organizations in each of the villages would collect the information. The completed forms were jointly analysed in a committee workshop, which required educational and organizational input from the researchers. The research team compiled the final reports. A round of village meetings followed to report back the outcomes of the analysis. As a result, it was decided to organize a conference at which all the villages would present their village profiles to invited guests from local and international NGOs and donor organizations in order to develop plans for the resource centre.

The self-survey conducted in the Healdtown district contained several characteristics of a Participatory Research Approach. The data gathering process (the survey) was organically connected to an action process (the conference) and the process relied on village local knowledge. Committee members largely determined the content and format of the questionnaire and the survey was conducted by the local youth organizations. The process had an empowering effect on the local people. They expressed excitement about the fact that they had themselves compiled a profile of their community which they were going to present to the outside world. The process of consultation between the project team, the committee and the community at large ensured participation of all the people involved in the process.

However the process had its problems and shortcomings. The committee that worked together with the team consisted of a very specific subgroup. They were all men with the highest educational levels and the most powerful positions in the community. As a result, the concerns, interests and ideas of other less powerful subgroups may not have been captured in the process. Although the research team worked with the committee to develop and analyse the reports, the rough data analysis of the questionnaires was taken away by the research team to refine the results and to prepare and print the reports. When the reports were brought back to the committee, there was a feeling of ‘disownership’ by the committee members. They had difficulty making the connection between the analytical data they compiled and the reports prepared by the researchers on the basis of that data. We had failed to build their capacity in all the aspects of the research process. A lot of effort was needed to bring the reports ‘back’ to the committee.

A participatory needs analysis: the use of video

The second example focuses on a participatory needs analysis project in a village in the Eastern Cape Region of South Africa (Van Vlaenderen, 1999b). This project, funded by a local development agency, commissioned a research team to conduct a needs analysis in order to develop a development strategy for this village.
After several introductory meetings with the local Residents Association, one of the members argued that the plight of the community could not be adequately captured in words only and he suggested the production of a video film to reveal community needs and problems. At a residents committee meeting, it was agreed that members of the Residents Association would write a scenario for the video and the research team would provide the technical assistance. The Residents Association established a working committee, which prepared the scenario. Subsequently, a large community meeting was held at which the ‘Video Project’ was presented to the whole village for approval.

The filming was done by one of the researchers, according to the scenario and under his guidance; several villagers participated in the filming. A 45-minute video was produced that took the shape of a series of interviews. The Association’s chairperson assumed the role of reporter and interviewed key people from the various sectors of the community. The video followed the structure of a guided tour of the village, which put the interviews into context. The tour included visits to the defunct primary health care clinic, the communal gardens, the village water tap, a villager’s zinc house, the village communal land, small business projects (pig, chicken and sewing and knitting projects) and the youth choir and soccer association. In the interviews, problems related to the above issues were presented. The video was subsequently viewed on several occasions. Villagers felt that the grave circumstances in which they were living were well reflected in the video and they believed that it would be a great help in negotiating development aid for the village. Initial plans were made to form working groups around the different issues portrayed in the video. The video production contained several characteristics of a participatory research approach and proved promising for a sustainable intervention process.

The process of producing the video, which was facilitated by the researchers, had a stimulating effect. It encouraged villagers to work together for the development of their village. First, the Residents Association committee members worked jointly towards the production of the scenario for the video. Second, in order to provide a representative picture, key people in different spheres of community life were engaged to participate in the video and as such they became part of the process. Third, by calling a large community meeting to discuss the video project and having a significant representation of villagers during the filming, a large portion of the community became part of the project and had an opportunity to contribute.

The video stimulated a communal process of analysing and prioritizing development issues by the villagers, facilitated by the research team. In writing the scenario, the various issues of importance had to be identified,
analysed and agreed upon. The viewing of the video and subsequent discussions, partially stimulated and coordinated by the researchers, assisted further in the joint analysis and prioritizing of the community’s development issues. As a result of the video production process, the community had developed confidence for action and subsequently, several activities were initiated. Working committees were formed around issues such as transport, chicken projects and health care. Those villagers who had previously been involved in these issues but had become discouraged due to the lack of facilities and problems, had been given the opportunity to present their issues to the community in a medium of their choice (the video). They felt encouraged to renew their efforts.

The possession of a copy of the video provided the Residents Association with the confidence to approach a donor agency for funds for their projects. The community took the initiative to contact the donor agency, invited its representatives to the village and presented them with a copy of the video, accompanied by project proposals for several community projects. Some of the projects were subsequently funded.

However the process also had its problems and shortcomings. The community’s lack of technical facilities to film, edit and show the video, independent from the research team, created a sense of dependency and dis-empowerment. After the filming, the product was taken away, to be returned only several weeks later (in a slightly different form due to editing) and could only be viewed at the discretion of the research team (need for TV, generator, etc.). In a sense, the participatory process had been jeopardized by maintaining rigid divides in skills between the research team (technical experts with regards to the video) and the community (providers of the content of the video). This endangered the organic nature of the data collection and action process. Whereas the video production had been an empowering and fruitful process, the product of the process was disappointing.

Conclusion

This paper problematizes the discrepancy between the demands made on social science researchers in developing countries to contribute to community development research in their societies and the conceptual and methodological tools used by these researchers. A plea is made for the adoption of a participatory research approach, which has the advantage of engaging rather than researching local communities and which links research with action, ensuring more sustainable intervention outcomes. Activity theory is suggested as a suitable theoretical framework to conceptualize participatory community development research. It needs however
to be emphasized that participatory research is a not an easy endeavour and that despite an adherence to the theory of participatory research, practical constraints and community dynamics may provide obstacles to a successful participatory approach.

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References


