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Participatory geographies

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This collection of papers aims to reflect and stimulate debate on research in geography which employs participatory approaches. It is both a celebration of the arrival of participation in human geography and related disciplines, and a timely reminder that participation itself is inherently spatial: we suggest that geographers have major contributions to make to participatory theory, practice and change. Participatory approaches have been employed for several decades by researchers engaging with critical pedagogy and systems thinking within sociology, education, community development and environmental management. In the last few years there has been a surge of interest and application in geography, so that participatory geographies have now reached critical mass (see Breitbart, 2003; Kesby et al, 2005; Kindon, 2005; Kindon et al, in preparation; Pain, 2004; Participatory Geographies Working Group, 2006).

The emphasis within geography to date has been on charting some of the distinctive benefits of participatory approaches within particular contexts: new methods, knowledges and social change outcomes. Geographers have also begun to engage critically with wider debates about participation, so that there is now a diversification of intellectual dialogue which requires closer scrutiny (see for example Cahill, 2004; 2007; Cameron and Gibson' 2005; Kesby, 2000; 2005; Kindon, 2003; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Mohan, 1999; Moser and McIlwaine, 1999; Williams, 2004).

Surprisingly, however, the specific relations between participation, place and space have received little attention, and this theme issue begins to address this gap (see also Kindon and Pain, 2006).

Participatory research describes a family of approaches wherein those conventionally 'researched' are directly involved in some or all stages of research, from problem definition through to dissemination and action (see Hall, 2005; Kesby et al, 2005; Kindon, 2005; Pain and Francis, 2003). Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher. The approaches emphasise social change as a potential valuable outcome of research. Thus participatory approaches have been heralded as offering opportunities for more emancipatory and empowering geographies with transformative development as their key objective.

They are gaining in popularity in light of recently voiced concerns about the intellectual and practical limits of the cultural turn and the need to 'rematerialize' human geography (Lees, 2002; Gregson, 2003; Philo, 2000), continuing debates over relevance (Beaumont et al, 2005; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005; Imrie, 2005), and the perceived failure of mainstream qualitative methodologies to affect change beyond the academy (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Participatory Geographies Working Group, 2006). In particular, critical, feminist and postcolonial social and environmental geographies are being strengthened by this new means of putting principles and politics into action, working with research partners outside the academy in ways which give equal weight to transformation and knowledge production (see for example Cahill, 2004; Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Kindon, 2003; McIlwaine and Datta, 2004; McIntyre, 2000; Peake, 2000).

Although they share some philosophical and ethical tenets, participatory geographies have no strongly formed common identity. While participation is an intrinsically

spatial practice, and the development of participatory approaches outside of geography has increasingly borrowed spatial terminology and concepts (see Kesby, 2005; and his paper in this issue), there is still relatively little sense, inside and outside the discipline, of what is distinctive about participatory geographies. As the papers that follow show, participation, space and place are mutually constitutive. Firstly, spatial strategies, concepts and methods form central features of participatory theory and practice. Secondly, participatory processes in turn influence and constitute space. Thirdly, participation demands attention to scale: not only because it begins from a concern to prioritise local subjects and concerns and ground-up processes (Chambers, 1983; Fals-Borda, 2001, Freire, 1972, Maguire, 1987), but because its frameworks of understanding provide ways of relating local concerns to the personal, the national and the global (Cahill, 2004). Its processes provide a means of connecting displaced events and causations at practical and ideological levels through the use of powerful tools. These in turn begin to address hierarchical and scalar theorising of social and spatial processes (see Marston et al, 2005). Fourthly, several geographers have begun to acknowledge that all participatory research is embedded within particular places and spaces (see Ellie Jupp in this issue). These contexts are fundamental to how participation operates, practically and politically, and inform the shape of its outcomes. Fifthly, there are connections to be made between other recent areas of geographical theory, such as non-representational theory, and understandings of participation (Kendon and Pain, 2006).

The papers which follow arose from the first ever session on participatory geographies, held at the International Geographical Union conference in Glasgow in 2004¹. The contributors to this session reflected on varied projects in different parts of

the world, highlighting common opportunities, challenges and tensions for participatory geographies, and new directions for theory, practice and action. They raised important questions about the implications of participatory approaches for the practice of human geography more widely, the production of disciplinary knowledge and the relation of geographers to power in research processes.

In Mike Kesby's paper the emphasis is on retheorising participation from a geographical perspective. He addresses the poststructuralist critiques, led most notably by Cooke and Kothari (2001), which have criticised participation as a fundamentally modernist and instrumentalist project, guilty of entrenching rather than destabilising traditional hierarchical relations between researcher and researched. The increasing institutionalisation of participation within much research and policy has indeed produced some of the worst excesses of extractive practice. This critique has reverberated powerfully throughout the social sciences and become another reason for many academics to abandon or avoid participation as too problematic.

Geographers have been at the forefront of counter-responses however (see Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Kesby, 2005; Williams, 2004), and here, Mike Kesby forwards a constructive and sensitive argument informed by his research experiences on HIV risk and young people in Zimbabwe. He seeks to reconcile participatory research and post-structuralist critiques, and provides a compelling counter-critique of recent theorisations of power, empowerment, agency and the spaces of participation. Rather than be scared off by the problematics raised by poststructuralism, or continue to produce tidy accounts of participation that fail to acknowledge its complex relationships to power, he argues that we might reach 'a

more positive reconciliation’, and ‘deploy (carefully) the resources of participation in attempts to effect empowered human agency and facilitate socio-spatial change’.

Participatory research involves continually moving between local detail and wider theoretical questions (see Cahill, 2004). In the second paper in this collection, Ellie Jupp also takes on the issues of knowledge and empowerment by discussing her field experiences of using participatory methods in research on public space with young people in the UK. She gives an honest and uncompromising account of moments of awkwardness and silence in her research, and participation which seemingly does not live up to its promises. But she underlines the importance of accepting these moments as valid interventions, which led her to open up to forms of knowledge that were less abstracted and more embodied and situated. The messiness of participatory research is instructive and is itself informed by spatial contexts and processes. This realisation, is more helpful for other researchers than textbook pretences of a ‘gold standard’ (Kesby et al, 2005).

Ellie Jupp’s paper ‘focuses on moments of failure and difficulties in order to open up, rather than close down, how we think about participation in social science research’. She also views participatory knowledges as performative and located within particular sets of social relations, times and places. Knowledge is made through research processes rather than there being a singular version of the world awaiting detection, and participatory research not only allows for, but embraces, multiple realities. Sceptical views of participation tend to construct it in much narrower terms; Demeritt (2005), for example, suggests that participatory geographies have an instrumentalism about them which parallels that of more traditional relationships between academics

and policy-makers, and that participatory researchers might be engaged in the antithesis of blue skies theorising. Yet, as Ellie Jupp demonstrates, participatory research should be explicitly about the openness, emergence, surprise, tensions and irreconcilability that often make up the process of co-researching with non academics.

Fran Klodowsky's paper focuses on the socio-spatial contexts of participatory research. She explores their importance for methodological choices and possibilities for participatory working, particularly in our collaborations with public bodies. With reference to two of her projects in Canada, one on homelessness and one on gender and diversity, she highlights the challenges of neoliberalism in shaping the spaces in which research choices and outcomes are made. Rhetoric about partnerships with community groups has increased in Canada's municipal governments as elsewhere, and yet the possibilities for genuinely democratic processes are often squeezed. As Fran Klodowsky notes, things played out very differently on the two projects, as a deeper model of participatory research was embraced in the gender project. She offers insightful reflections on how to judge the role of participatory research in 'deliberalizing' space, a concern which occupies many researchers who work between community groups, public organisations and the academy.

While both projects were successful in highlighting the concerns and experiences of marginalised groups, she suggests that both could also be viewed as playing to the double-edged neoliberalist agenda of regulation/inclusivity. Like Mike Kesby and Ellie Jupp, she argues strongly that participatory research must be understood as open and fluid, its progress shaped by social and political conditions, so that practice

becomes 'not an abstract ideal but rather about the art of the possible – understood reflexively – in a variety of venues and spaces'.

Together, the three papers in this collection present a rich engagement with the elements of theory, practice and action in participatory research, as well as their inseparability and co-construction. The papers point to the value and necessity of engaging space in discussions and analyses of participatory research, if we are to generate both processes and outcomes which are sensitive to place, power and politically-sensitive outcomes for participants.

Finally, the commentary from Caitlin Cahill, whose own work has involved a long-term participatory engagement with young womyn from New York city grappling with gentrification and racial stereotyping (Cahill, 2004; 2007), provides further connections between the papers in this collection and wider themes within participatory theory and practice.

After two decades of participatory work in human geography, we suggest that no geographer can afford to ignore the questions and challenges it poses, just as none can afford a completely cavalier attitude to the question of who their research benefits (adapted from Parfitt, 2004:540). The challenge facing us now is to how best negotiate the inherent ambiguities and contradictions of participation within our practice, at the same time as opening up spaces for the dissemination of new insights and possibilities for transformative knowledge and action. Specifically, as participation gains institutional power, we need to consider what (following Williams, 2004) this power can be made to do. Geographers are in an ideal position to find out.

As Mike Kesby concludes in his paper, ‘if we are really convinced of the importance of space to social analysis we must find ways to make the complex tools of critical human geography accessible to ordinary people in and through participatory praxis so that they can identify the spatial embeddedness of powers affecting their lives [and] develop critical cartographies and alternative spatial representations as a resource for empowerment’.

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Notes

¹ Sessions on participatory geographies have since been held at the Association of American Geographers annual meetings in Denver (2005) and Chicago (2006), the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers annual conferences in London, UK (2005 and 2006), the Canadian Association of Geographers Conference in London, Ontario (2005) and the International Geographical Union conference in Brisbane (2006).

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