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# Participatory Action Research

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The goal of improving consumer welfare can subtly or dramatically shape the research process, the methods used, and the theories developed. This article introduces the participatory action research paradigm, which is based upon the goal of helping people and employs methodologies that are different from traditional consumer research. Exemplars of action research are analyzed to reveal applications for researchers who want to engage in transformative consumer research. The obstacles and opportunities for doing action research are examined.

Consumer welfare is a long-standing topic of interest within consumer research (Andreasen 1975). Consumer researchers examine at-risk populations, such as children (John 1999), the disadvantaged (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Hill and Stamey 1990), and the impaired (Baker, Stephens, and Hill 2001), as well as a range of controversial issues, such as materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992), consumption of dangerous products (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1994), and compulsive consumption (O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Researchers tackle issues of consumer well-being using positivistic and interpretive approaches. Critical approaches advocating the explicit goal of improving human life are also employed: critical theory (Murray and Ozanne 1991), feminism (Patterson, Hill, and Maloy 1995), and critical ethnography (Peñaloza 1994). Thus, the recent call for transformative consumer research is best framed as an interest in energizing and expanding these ongoing efforts (Bazerman 2001; Mick 2006).

However, some researchers suggest we need different research approaches based on more radical goals and assumptions. Denzin (2001) advocates research that seeks the goal of consumer empowerment, is based on local understandings developed in collaboration with consumers, and employs dialogical methods to generate research that is shared with consumers. Ger (1997) similarly calls for research that increases consumer empowerment, involves underprivileged constituencies, employs participatory and ac-

tion methods, and is based on an understanding of local opportunities and constraints. The purpose of this article is to articulate a research paradigm, broadly labeled "participatory action research" (PAR), which is consistent with these calls. Rather than a radical departure, we highlight the connections between action research and existing research on consumer welfare.

First, we explore the philosophical link between researchers' commitment to the goal of social change and their theoretical and methodological choices. Next, we present the general goals and assumptions of action paradigms, comparing and contrasting them with traditional approaches in consumer research. While action paradigms share a family resemblance, researchers interested in pursuing rigorous action research can take counsel from rich and established empirical traditions. Toward this end, three maximally dissimilar action research paradigms are reviewed, and consumer research applications are offered.

## RETICULATED MODEL AND THE GOAL OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Kuhn (1962) popularized the idea that studies are encapsulated within paradigms with their own internal logic; scientific revolutions represent radical and often irrational shifts between incommensurable world views (Anderson 1986). Interrogations of the historical record, however, offer a different view. Laudan (1984) developed a reticulated model that represents scientific change in a piecemeal fashion, in which researchers can rationally debate individual components of their paradigms. Theories, methods, and aims are all based on a set of implicit ontological and epistemological assumptions. Within any paradigm, methods justify theories and are used to achieve cognitive aims. Similarly, theories constrain the set of viable methods and are consistent with our goals. Nevertheless, researchers can debate the individual components of the paradigm, suggesting that a weak form of incommensurability exists (Anderson 1986).

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The emergence of an interpretive consumer paradigm, for example, unfolded slowly in a disjunctive piecemeal process influenced by philosophical, empirical, and sociological factors. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) sought to explore new theoretical domains, such as the experiential nature of consumption. They were part of a larger group of researchers seeking to import and justify new methods from anthropology and the humanities (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). A dramatic paradigm shift did not occur; instead, gradual acceptance was achieved through the justification of new problems, theories, and methods. For example, Hirschman (1985) first imported evaluative criteria, such as credibility and transferability, to parallel positivistic criteria, but these standards were later replaced by criteria more consistent with interpretive goals and assumptions (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Interpretive approaches spread slowly to the field of marketing (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) and, after 2 decades, are now well established within consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Drawing on Laudan's reticulated model, a similar shift in theories and methods is likely under way as the goal of improving consumer welfare gains prominence. Chakravarti (2006) argues that our current theories assume that consumers possess considerable freedom in their decision making and that these theories need to be adapted to people living in poverty where this assumption is violated. Steenkamp (2005) similarly advises that the research methods used in emerging consumer markets require more group-level analysis and the creation of simpler measures.

The action research approach offers stimulating ideas on alternative methods, theories, and evaluative criteria that can be rationally debated among researchers who seek to develop a transformative consumer research agenda. PAR originated in the United States, spread globally, and is flourishing in the fields of management, education, and economic development. For instance, after years of failed programs, the multilateral development agency, the World Bank, successfully tested participatory approaches, and participation is now a fundamental principle of its new framework for poverty-reduction strategies (Hickey and Mohan 2004). Action research is based on different ontological and epistemological assumptions, which shape the research process and the evaluative criteria employed, and it offers an additional research approach for improving consumer welfare.

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Reason and Bradbury (2001, 1) define PAR as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes." Simply stated, this is a systematic approach that seeks knowledge for social action (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Although many variants exist, action approaches possess commonalities based on their commitment to general goals and assumptions, which are discussed in the next section.

Action research is most easily confused with social marketing, which is the well-defined use of strategic marketing-

mix variables to promote the change of individual behaviors (Andreasen 2002). While good social marketing is grounded in consumer input, action research involves consumers throughout the research process across problem identification, design, data collection, analysis, and application of the research findings. Unlike social marketing, action research assumes that the act of doing research helps consumers develop new capacities and is empowering. Both approaches seek social change toward greater consumer welfare, but social marketing relies on strategic marketing tools to change individual behaviors. Action researchers seek change across individual, group, and national behaviors and develop solutions in collaboration with consumers that are also sensitive to their needs and desires. While these interventions might be similar to social marketing, such as a health promotion campaign, they may also be very different, such as changes in laws or the development of local industry.

## Axiology

Habermas (1971) argues that knowledge is inseparable from the interests that guide it and specifies three types of interests: technical, communicative/practical, and emancipatory. These three interests are each valid but evoke different paths to knowing. Positivists have a technical interest in gaining control over the social environment and use empirical and analytical methods based on instrumental reason. Interpretivists have a practical and communicative interest focused on understanding people and use hermeneutical and interpretive methods. PAR researchers have an emancipatory interest in improving human welfare and use methods of reflection and action (Murray and Ozanne 1991).

Specifically, action research begins with the practical problems of a group of people. As Ger (1997, 116) states, "solutions lie in the local." An important goal of action research is to provide workable solutions to immediate concerns and to develop local human capacities. For example, the Highlander Center, a critical adult education center, helped Tennessee residents research the local dumping of hazardous chemicals by mines. While residents had anecdotal evidence of the dangers, by working with researchers at the center they learned to research and present systematic evidence to influence public policy (Lewis 2001). When people develop new skills and untapped expertise in the process of doing research, they have greater agency (Cleverly 1999). But solely improving practice is not significant unless this research can build, inform, and test social theory (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Action researchers reject the theory/practice divide and believe that applied research can both build theories and solve problems (Brinberg and Hirschman 1986). For example, the work done by the Highlander Center was used to develop theory on grassroots mobilizing among the poor and guided later research on economic development (Lewis 2001). Finally, action researchers are also committed to extending these social theories beyond the local research context to inform wider improvements in society (Ger 1997). Thus, action research

is demanding because researchers are expected to both develop knowledge and work toward social change.

## Ontology

*Nature of Reality.* Like interpretivists, action researchers assume that the social world we inhabit is cocreated, context bound, relational, and situated (Susman and Evered 1978). However, action researchers share with critical theorists the assumption of social reality as historically constructed (Murray and Ozanne 1991). They assume that specific historical interests drive current social practices. Historical, reflective, and change-oriented methods are preferred since they reveal that current social practices are neither natural nor inevitable; society is a human construction to be critiqued and changed on the basis of more-inclusive interests (Murray and Ozanne 2006).

Action researchers also share poststructuralists' concern for the micropolitics of power that shape social reality. For example, Thompson (2004) takes a Foucauldian perspective on power in his examination of consumers' use of natural health mythologies to challenge medical discourses of power. Similarly, action researchers seek to expose how powerful social discourses constrain human potential toward envisioning new social arrangements (Peñaloza 2006). Action researchers realize that these new social forms may result in new patterns of dominance. Rather than the bleak picture Thompson (2004, 173) paints of a "Sisyphean struggle against polymorphic power structures," action researchers are more hopeful that inclusive, power-sensitive, and reflective methodologies can lead to improvements in consumer welfare. While social changes can lead to short-term losses and gains, they believe that real long-term gains accrue in consumer welfare as they strive toward the unrealizable goal of a more just society.

*Nature of Social Beings.* Like those that use critical and feminist approaches, action researchers assume that people have the potential for agency but may be unaware of constraints on their freedom. Powerful social discourses may hide the interested nature of social practices (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Thus, methods of consciousness-raising and reflection are important in increasing actors' capacity to challenge unjust power structures (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001). Action researchers often focus on people who are marginal and who possess the least power for enacting change, such as the poor and the disenfranchised (Somekh 2006).

## Epistemology

*Knowledge Generated.* Given their assumption of an objective reality, positivists seek to generate nomothetic statements that can be generalized across time and context. Interpretivists assume that social reality is constructed and contextual and instead seek thick descriptions (Hirschman 1985). Both approaches generally see the end product of research as a formal article published in a scholarly journal.

For action researchers, solutions to problems are negotiated among the interests of stakeholders with different power and resources (Herr and Anderson 2005). Thus, action researchers assume that knowledge is uncertain, evolving, contextual, and value laden (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Current knowledge represents our best efforts but will likely be revised. Action researchers value social theory that builds upon the understandings of practitioners but extends this knowledge toward new insights that can form the basis for social action to improve practices (Somekh 2006).

Action researchers seek scholarly publication, but they assume that knowledge is jointly owned with collaborators and thus must be shared with the community in culturally appropriate modes. Knowledge is disseminated using popular forms of communication, including songs (Lewis 2001), radio (Swantz, Ndedya, and Masaiganah 2001), theater (Santos 2000), and storytelling (Tello 2000). In Lee, Ozanne, and Hill's (1999) feminist study of Appalachian women's health care consumption, collaborators wrote a script based on the findings, and community members and researchers performed the play locally, which is consistent with the Appalachian oral tradition.

*Causality.* Positivists assume that behavior can be explained as the outcome of real causes that precede it, while interpretivists argue that causes are the result of simultaneous shaping of multiple entities (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Like critical theory, PAR suggests that human actors are influenced by causes and social structures that constrain their awareness and potential (Fals-Borda 2001). Cultural, social, and political processes of everyday life need to be analyzed through a cyclical and iterative process of education, reflection, and action to promote change and social justice (Somekh 2006). Consistent with PAR's assumptions about reality, these processes need to be analyzed within the historical framework in which they emerge. Hence, their notion of causality assumes the interconnection of local realities and macrostructures.

*Research Relationship.* Action researchers reject the positivists' assumption of the consumer as object and the interpretivists' assumption of the consumer as subject. Instead, participants are collaborators in the research project because action researchers assume that people who participate and are committed to the process will generate more thorough social accounts and will be more invested in the successful application of the findings (Reason and Bradbury 2001). This assumption drives many of the methodological choices action researchers make and is unique to action research. Research collaboration also builds new skills and capacities, which is consistent with the goal of developing human potential (Ger 1997). Action researchers challenge the traditional division of power in the research relationship. In postindustrial society, knowledge is an important basis of power, and the current power brokers are the academic and industry researchers who control the production of scientific knowledge (Bell 1974). Hayward (1998, 12) defines power "as social boundaries that, together, define fields of

action for all actors” and freedom as “the capacity to act *upon* the boundaries that constrain and enable social action.” The methodological decision to collaborate with the people studied is guided by a desire to democratize knowledge production and to give more people the opportunity to have voice in defining the boundaries of the possible (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001).

A research “partnership” represents an ideal, but in practice research positionality varies between “insider” and “outsider” status and ranges from high to low levels of participation. Early action research was most often initiated and directed by “outsiders” or consultants coming into an organization and seeking worker input (Lewin 1948). In contrast, researchers might be “insiders” examining their own practices, such as an educator examining his or her teaching effectiveness (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) or researchers examining their methods (Ger and Sandikci 2006). However, between these endpoints exists a range of collaborations with distinct epistemological dilemmas, such as insiders collaborating with other insiders, insiders working with outsiders, insider-outsider teams, and outsiders collaborating with insiders. Moreover, stakeholders may be included as tokens with little power, may be forced to comply, may work cooperatively with outsiders, or may engage independently in collective action (Herr and Anderson 2005). Rigorous action research depends on the quality of participation and the fair distribution of power in the relationship (see Herr and Anderson [2005] for more on the dilemmas of positionality).

### Theory in Action Research

Like most researchers, action theorists seek to observe, analyze, and develop theories of social practices that can be applied beyond the immediate research context. In addition, they realize they have to work with local participants to improve local practices. Toward this end, they must take into account the ideas of the participants whose practices they hope to transform (Somekh 2006); these ideas form the starting point and context of the transformation process. Action researchers struggle with the relationship between academic theories and everyday theories that participants use in their daily lives (Fals-Borda 2001). Academic theories are rigorously tested in experiments in which all but a few constructs are controlled; unfortunately, an inescapable gap exists between these “scientific” theories that focus on a few causal linkages and what may actually work in practice within a dynamic setting with myriad variables. Research may be so scientifically rigorous that it becomes practically useless (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985). Alternatively, practitioners in the field often have considerable expertise, possess insider knowledge not readily available to outsiders, and use implicit theories that are effective. But practitioners may also be guided by prejudice, ignorance, and self-interest and may engage in practices that are harmful.

To deal with these dilemmas, action theorists forge different integrations between academic theories and the everyday expertise of the people they study. For example, some action theorists test academic theories within field ex-

periments following traditional scientific protocol. Practitioners’ insights are sought but then are formally integrated into the theory in the form of a hypothesis that is tested by the social scientist (Lewin 1946, 1948); such an approach is represented by the work in management on the development of theories of worker participation (Margulies and Raia 1978). Alternatively, other action theorists privilege the local knowledge sometimes over scientific theories. For example, some agricultural researchers start with the assumption that the local farmers possess considerable expertise forged from generations of cultivating a specific locale (Chambers 1997). Deeper examination may vindicate or challenge a local practice; nevertheless, researchers start with the a priori assumption that local knowledge is potentially valuable. All action theorists seek to develop theory through direct involvement. Theory development may involve bringing an established theory into the field to be challenged or supported, building grounded theory when existing theory seems inadequate to the task, or formalizing new theories incorporating the implicit theories of the local people.

### Quality in Action Research

Action researchers employ five types of validity that harmonize with their underlying assumptions and goals: outcome validity, democratic validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogical validity (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen 1994; Reason and Bradbury 2001). While it may be difficult to meet all of these evaluative criteria in any given study, researchers strive to meet these criteria across studies. Consistent with the goal of improving human life, action research must demonstrate outcome validity—the research must lead to a successful resolution of the relevant problem. Researchers call this form of validity by different names, such as “knowledge for action” (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995) and “extended epistemology” (Heron 1981), but they all agree that good action research generates practical knowledge for improving human welfare.

However, outcome validity raises the issue of who benefits from the successful resolution of the problem. In response, democratic validity is the extent to which relevant stakeholders in the problem participate deeply and fully in the research and the extent to which their perspectives and needs inform solutions (Anderson and Herr 1999). Democratic validity seeks to maximize alternative perspectives and interests included in the research and the depth and quality of the collaborators’ participation. Given the epistemic assumption that knowledge creation is a collaborative endeavor, outcome validity is threatened when democratic validity is not achieved and those people affected by the problem are excluded (Murray and Ozanne 1991). A common critique of action studies is a failure to include minority groups, such as women in traditional cultures or economically and socially disenfranchised groups (Cleverly 2001). Realistically, researchers entering communities often receive permission by currying favor from those people in power. Considerable time in the field may be necessary to identify

less visible stakeholders and encourage them to participate. Stakeholders may not see participation as in their self-interest, yet researchers can maximize democratic validity by including the participants' interests in potential solutions (Peñaloza 1994). For example, poor widows with no children might be a stakeholder group that is unlikely to participate in a community where power is distributed by gender and where status is based on number of offspring. Nevertheless, the widows' needs may be incompletely considered by speaking to widows with children or interviewing neighbors closest to the widows.

Action researchers assume that people have the ability to reflect upon their social reality and to learn. Process validity is the extent to which problems are investigated in a way that allows for ongoing learning and improvement. A central goal of action research is to develop the capacities of collaborators—the actual research process can help develop these capabilities (Reason and Bradbury 2001). For example, Pavia and Mason (2004) reported that informants found the interviews themselves to be therapeutic. Process validity will be affected by the quality of the relationship between the researcher and participants. As in interpretive research, trust and rapport are important for generating quality data (Hirschman 1985). In addition, allowing collaborators to participate across several cycles of reflection and analysis increases process validity by avoiding premature closure and increasing the opportunity for the consideration of multiple perspectives (Herr and Anderson 2005).

Catalytic validity is the extent to which the research collaborators are invigorated to understand and change social reality both within and beyond the research study (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Beach (2003) suggests two levels of catalytic validity. First, the breaking down of the traditional researcher-researched dichotomy ideally engenders greater mutual respect for the individual capacities of the researcher and the stakeholders. For example, among illiterate villagers, verbal techniques are often used to elicit valuable local knowledge, which both affirms native intelligences and imports useful research technologies that can be appropriated by the villagers for their own use. In Lee et al.'s (1999) study of the health practices of poor women, participants established their own support groups as a result of focus groups. The second level of catalytic validity focuses on the ability of collaborators to secure social change beyond the research site at local, national, and global levels. The aim is to fuse local knowledge and beliefs with critical social theories in order to create practical and workable approaches that are more equitable.

Finally, consistent with the widespread belief in the value of peer reviews to improve the quality of research, dialogical validity refers to having a critical dialogue with peers about research findings and actions. Dialogic validity requires that action researchers engage in debates to challenge the research findings for alternative explanations, inconsistencies, problematic assumptions, biases, failure to include key stakeholders, and so forth (Anderson and Herr 1999). Action researchers often prefer the use of cross-disciplinary teams,

given the complexity of social problems and the benefits realized from dialogue across disciplinary boundaries.

### THREE EXEMPLARS OF ACTION RESEARCH

We explicate three exemplars that have distinctive loci of change and disciplinary foci. The origins of action research are most often attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin (1946, 1948) and his work within organizations in the field of management. We also articulate a more radical form of action research that engages the community in programs of change; we use Paulo Freire's work (1970a, 1970b, 1974) in the field of education as an example of this research paradigm. Finally, we explore Robert Chambers's work on participatory rural appraisal (1989, 1997) in the area of economic development, which has spread virally with equally passionate advocates and critics. Participatory rural appraisal focuses its efforts on individuals within a community as the locus of change. These three researchers seek solutions to practical problems but have evolved different notions of participation and theorize different ideas of power and social change (see table 1). Consumer researchers interested in building a transformative research agenda can use these exemplars to better define their relationship with the people whose lives they hope to change, to explicate a theory of social change to guide their research efforts, and to inspire creative methods of data collection.

#### Action Research

*Origins of Action Research.* A term generally credited to Lewin (1946), action research is creating knowledge about an organization while trying to change it (Elden and Chisholm 1993). In sharp contrast to Taylor's theories of scientific management and control, Lewin advocated workplace democracy, including collaborating with workers affected by organizational problems. The earliest action research studied pressing social problems, such as decreasing discrimination and improving relations with Native American Indians. Well known for his field experiments, Lewin (1948) found that workers who were involved in decision making had higher productivity than workers who had more dictatorial supervisors. Consumer researchers who seek to mobilize consumers would be well advised to involve consumers in relevant decision making. For instance, Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) consumer activists alienated the very consumers they sought to organize when they failed to involve them.

These early variants shared a commitment to the scientific method as a rigorous approach to generating knowledge. As such, action research is consistent with research on consumer welfare that moves out of the laboratory and into the field (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1994). Consistent with its epistemology, theory building in organizational action research is primarily concerned with testing, in controlled settings, a priori propositions, which are informed by participants.

**TABLE 1**  
**THREE ACTION RESEARCH PARADIGMS**

	Action research	Community action research	Participatory rural appraisal
Exemplar	Kurt Lewin (1946, 1948) in management	Paulo Freire (1970a, 1970b) in education	Robert Chambers (1994a, 1994b, 1997) in economic development
Contemporary research streams	PAR (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1989) Action science (Argyris et al. 1985) Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987)	Action research (Hall 1981) PAR (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991) Participatory research (Tandon 1989)	Farmer-back-to-farmer (Rhoades and Booth 1982) Farmer-first-and-last (Chambers and Ghildyal 1985) Farmer participatory research (Farrington and Martin 1988)
Change focus	Organization	Community	Individuals within community projects
Immanent critique	Little focus on the historical process of change	Radical transformation of unjust social structures to help poor	Little focus on the historical process of social change
Imminent critique	Collaboratively come to a new understanding that shapes local interventions	Develop people's capacity as agents of change; develop grassroots organizations; popular education	Bottom-up process employing local knowledge to improve local capacities
Participation	An obligation of citizenship	A right of citizenship	A social responsibility of citizenship
Approach to power	Collaboration: top-down reform by including workers' insights and working within existing social order	Conflictual: bottom-up challenge of hegemony based on shared experience of marginalization	Consensual: bottom-up, populist swell of agreement
Nature of causality	Think-act-reflect cycle of change as never-ending process of improvement	Critical reflection aimed at radical social changes	Small, local, and adaptive change, given the farm as a complex system
Approach to theory	Traditional view of theory but preference for testing in the field	Nontraditional approach that stresses the importance of praxis as theory-guided action	Seeks theories that capture multiple, fragmented social realities
Key methodological practices	Solve practical problems Use the scientific method Employ cyclical inquiry Collaborative relationship	Democratic sharing of power Leverage popular knowledge Dialectic between theory and practice (i.e., praxis)	Interdisciplinary teams Maximize participant control Basket of flexible methods Sequence of methods
Research process	Identify and diagnose problem Develop hypotheses, design research, collect and analyze data Action planning Implementation Evaluation (begin anew)	Community-based identification of problems Collaboratively design and conduct research Take action toward building grassroots organization and social transformations	Develop trust and rapport Facilitate community identification of problem Collaborative learning Select methods, collect and analyze data Explore sustainable solutions
Key evaluative criteria	Was there rigorous application of the scientific method? Did the action generate the desired result?	Is the suffering of the poor alleviated? Are social structures more just?	Were all stakeholders included, especially the marginalized? Are the practical solutions adopted and do they spread?
Criticisms	Use of research to manipulate people Workers' interests are absorbed within organizational interests and may not be emancipatory	Application of theory devoid of an intent to change society Treatment of community as univocal	Distributed and contested nature of local knowledge Difficulty merging local and outsider knowledge Fluid notion of community Ignore macrolevels of change

NOTE.—Parts of this table were adapted from and inspired by Hickey and Mohan (2004), Murray and Ozanne (1991), and Selener (1997).

Field data are used to support, challenge, or expand the theory within the limits of the existing literature. Social change is focused on solving practical problems within the organization.

*The Research Process.* Four ideas unify “classic” action research (Elden and Chisholm 1993). First, action research must rely on scientific methods, and the ideal is field experiments (Lewin 1946). While one can rigorously test theories in laboratory experiments, Lewin argued that one could also unravel social problems in the field and build theory (Elden and Chisholm 1993). Second, action research involves a cyclical research process beginning with joint problem identification and diagnosis. Next, guided by tentative hypotheses, the researcher designs the field study and collects and analyzes the data (Margulies and Raia 1978). The final step of evaluation feeds into a new cycle of analysis and reflection (Susman and Evered 1978).

Third, researchers and clients actively collaborate throughout this cyclical process (Elden and Chisholm 1993). Clients offer practical knowledge forged through their struggle with real-world problems, and researchers contribute theoretical knowledge (Argyris et al. 1985). The concept, worker participation, derives from the notion of organizational citizenship in which participation is both an obligation and an expectation. Client participation presumably develops new capacities and translates into greater client appreciation for ongoing systems of learning. However, given the expertise needed to participate in areas such as hypotheses testing and analysis, consistent client participation is often elusive (Margulies and Raia 1978).

Finally, the researcher and the worker must forge a common understanding of the problem and its solution and implement change. In table 1, imminent critique focuses on specific immediate interventions, and immanent critique focuses on the broad historical forces of change (Hickey and Mohan 2004). In Lewin’s action research, imminent organizational critique is guided by this collaborative understanding, which becomes the basis for specific local interventions (Cooke 2003). Immanent critique of the broader sociocultural and historical forces affecting the organization is usually not the focus of these action researchers.

*Application to Consumer Research.* Many valid paths exist for creating knowledge and social change. We examine a specific consumer study aimed at social change and suggest how an action research approach might bring additional insights. Brinberg and Axelson (2002) seek to improve the nutritional well-being of poor pregnant women, which addresses the welfare of both mother and unborn child. They conduct an ambitious field experiment among women eligible for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food programs, to test the efficacy of nutritional educational messages customized to the dietary practices of individual women. Aided with a computer-assisted nutritional assessment, Brinberg and Axelson (2002) find support for this very cost-effective delivery approach for providing tailored messages.

Action researchers would be sympathetic to the selection of this important problem, the use of a rigorous field experiment, the examination of controllable variables (i.e., educational messages), the inclusion of input from the women (i.e., their dietary practices), and the creation of economically feasible solutions (i.e., computer-assisted assessments). However, an action study would start and end differently. Action researchers would work within the WIC organization, interrogating and including the perspectives of WIC staff and managers regarding the opportunities and barriers for change within their organization. The recipients of WIC aid would be invited to participate in the shaping of the research and interventions (i.e., mothers might request easy and nutritious recipes). Action researchers assume that interventions tailored to the needs of the organization and clients will be more successful. Finally, after an intervention is collaboratively designed, this intervention would be tested.

Action research of a WIC program would work within the existing organization, and change efforts would focus on local refinements of their program. Social power flows top-down from the administrators who approve clients’ participation and interventions. Little effort exists to understand or change the broader social patterns underlying poor mothers’ inadequate nutritional practices.

Contemporary forms of Lewin’s action research (see table 1) offer a relatively safe foray for consumer researchers interested in transformative research. This approach is uncontroversial and widely accepted in the field of management, a wealth of exemplars exist, and rigorous field experiments are well accepted within the field of consumer research. Action researchers also offer valuable methods (e.g., self-reflective inquiry, cooperative inquiry, and dialogue conferences) for practitioners to reflect upon and use to alter their practices (see Reason and Bradbury 2001).

## Community Action Research

*Origins of Community Action Research.* Community action research (CAR) arose in the Southern hemisphere as researchers trained in traditional scientific methods found these methods inadequate for situations involving relentless poverty and human suffering (Hall 1981). The scientific method, with its commitment to the neutrality of the researcher, was ill equipped to offer guidance to researchers faced with marginalized groups caught in persistent relationships of dependency with little access to resources. Similarly, the emphasis on quantification and statistical testing often led to oversimplification of complex social problems (Tandon 1989). These researchers shared a common focus on helping disadvantaged communities develop grassroots organizations and more equitable forms of social and political organizations (for historical background, see Fals-Borda [2001]). For example, Salazar’s (1991) study of child laborers in Colombia led to the creation of local bakery and carpentry shops where children can work safely.

These researchers drew philosophical inspiration from

historical materialism, with its focus on social change arising from class conflict and struggle and its belief in workers as the agents of change. They also employed Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals, which is any person who questions and organizes organically from within a social class, and argued that a critical understanding of peasants' realities could challenge unjust social arrangements (Selener 1997). While inspired by these philosophers, CAR takes a decidedly sociocultural turn. Groups are marginalized not only because of the inequitable distribution of economic resources and opportunities but also through the exercise of power in the social, cultural, and political dimensions of everyday life (Thompson 2004).

"Southern" forms of action research are particularly interested in transforming traditional educational systems. We highlight the influential work of Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire, who taught literacy to peasants in Brazil and Chile. He argues that traditional education assumes a compliant student who is punctual, listens, follows instructions, and is a "good" student. This domesticating education does not encourage those people most marginalized to question inequities, such as inequities distributed by race or gender (Peñaloza 2006). Freire (1970a) suggests that a "culture of silence" surrounds the poor who have little voice in the political process and often internalize the dominant group's negative images of them as unworthy and powerless.

A liberating and "problem-posing" education is based on the central notion of "conscientization," a process of self-awareness involving the transition from seeing oneself as an object responding to the world to seeing oneself as a subject who can transform the world (Freire 1970a, 1974). This analysis is backward-looking because examining history helps us see the constructed nature of the present social reality. But the analysis is also forward-looking to future social transformations. Liberating education develops critical consciousness through dialogue to help people see differences and commonalities among different perspectives. Poor peasants first must move from their current perspective of the world toward greater awareness of their current predicament and the possibilities for change. Thus, critical consciousness requires both openness to new ideas and a constant willingness to challenge these ideas for distortion or the masking of competing interests (Freire 1974).

Community action researchers seek to develop theories that help us understand the nature and types of constraints on human action, amid a shifting social reality. But this theoretical reflection does not necessarily lead to any social change (Selener 1997). Thus, they introduce and privilege the notion of praxis as theoretically informed social action (Murray and Ozanne 1991).

*The Research Process.* The purpose of research is to make people aware of their potential to be agents of change and to create more-liberating social organizations. A community binds itself together by shared experiences represented through common sense, folklore, and popular culture. Instead of building upon the perspective of those people in power, collaborators begin with the perspective of the mar-

ginalized as they employ, celebrate, reclaim, and analyze popular knowledge. Analysis of this popular knowledge is the first step in conscientization. Participants must critically probe their history for any adaptive aspects useful for solving the current problem. Rather than romanticize indigenous knowledge as superior, participants explore both strengths and weaknesses. As active and reflective learners, they can better assess what outside knowledge is helpful or disposable (Gaventa 1988). This process of developing, recovering, and diffusing people's knowledge through various forms of popular wisdom (e.g., oral traditions, art, music, drama, poetry) paves the way toward breaking power monopolies, reappropriating the community's knowledge, and triggering mobilization for more-authentic and independent development (Fals-Borda 1991).

To assure that community members are the primary research beneficiaries, the CAR process begins with a problem originating from the community. The shared experience of marginalization provides the basis for a shared vision for social change. Accordingly, the community is the relevant unit of analysis. Furthermore, within the collaborative community, participation is a right. Toward this end, the community determines the research agenda and fully participates in the entire inquiry, from data collection and analysis to diffusion of new knowledge and research findings.

Throughout the entire research process, the researcher facilitates by helping the community critically formulate problems and access necessary economic, political, or social resources to solve them (Selener 1997). The CAR process fuses theoretical and indigenous knowledge for radical transformation of people's lives. In this dialectical process, the researcher and participants become both learners and partners who benefit from each other's strengths. As Hall (1981) suggests, research, education, and action are inextricably bound in the research process of CAR. First, research involves the participation of people in defining and analyzing their social problems. Second, this process results in new understandings (i.e., education). Third, these revelations inform action. As Freire (1970b, 180) argued, "cultural action either serves domination (consciously or unconsciously) or it serves the liberation of men."

*Application to Consumer Research.* Once again, we rethink an existing research study from a CAR perspective. Belk, Ostergaard, and Groves (1998) use ethnographic methods to study the highly sensitive and challenging issue of the patronage of prostitutes and AIDS transmission. The researchers chose a priori to focus on AIDS knowledge, attitudes, and risky behaviors. They explore this topic through interviews and fieldwork among Thai university students and foreign sex tourists over a 2-week period. The authors weave their findings into a broader historical discussion of Thai cultural practices. Their findings suggest that prostitute patronage is an accepted social activity. Moreover, despite considerable knowledge, the informants engage in risky behavior challenging traditional consumer behavioral models.

CAR researchers would be sympathetic to this important

social problem, applaud that the methods employed highlight participants' perceptions, and appreciate the exploration of prostitution as a historical and cultural practice. However, the entry point of the study would begin with the problems as perceived by the sex workers. Given CAR's focus on power, they would seek to understand and help those who are least benefiting by the current social arrangements. While issues of power were explored by Belk and his colleagues, this would be a central concern for CAR. Methods would be adapted that were sensitive to power differences, were based on the social problems, and involved the sex workers. For example, visual methods might be appropriate given the literacy level of sex workers. "Body mapping" involves women drawing their bodies and discussing their perceptions and understandings of their body, sexuality, and the nature of AIDS (Cornwall 1992). Body maps are particularly useful in exploring the intersection of indigenous and scientific knowledge and are often valuable in creating culturally appropriate health care promotions. Body maps were therapeutic and helpful to South African women struggling against the stigma of having AIDS (<http://www.bodymaps.co.za/>).

A relevant problem that might emerge is the women's inability to negotiate condom usage with clients, which has life-threatening implications. The design of the study might evolve to explore this problem, seeking the sex workers' insights into possible negotiation strategies. An innovative method employed and cocreated with sex workers in the past is the "Mala" or necklace system (Butcher et al. 2000). In Nepal, female sex workers volunteered to be trained as peer educators. These women tracked their daily activities as both sex workers and educators. The women's illiteracy made most methods of tracking infeasible, and they preferred to keep this monitoring discreet from their husbands, who were often ignorant of their occupation. Different colored beads representing various activities were documented on a necklace of beads (e.g., asking clients to use a condom, having intercourse without a condom, taking a friend to the clinic). The Mala also proved to be an effective self-evaluation tool; the necklaces were discussed at monthly meetings, which increased condom usage. While sex workers actively educating their peers is a social improvement, CAR research also seeks to analyze and change broader social structures and cultural practices that sustain the sex industry and harm women.

Freire's CAR represents a sustained focus on the socio-cultural and political forces that constrain human action and reminds us of the importance of macrolevels of social change. The form of social change advocated here is both an imminent critique to reclaim popular knowledge and people's capacity as agents of change and an immanent critique of unjust social structures that constrain people. Toward this end, action researchers attempt to reveal the contradictions that exist between powerful public discourses that often suppress private behaviors. In their feminist study on abortion, Patterson et al. (1995) demonstrated the gap between the public debate and the private dilemmas surrounding this

decision. Participation in research is assumed to be a right; however, power is assumed to be conflictual as marginalized people challenge constraining social structures.

In response to the needs of marginalized people, CAR researchers creatively develop a wide range of methods that may be useful in consumer research (see table 2). Consumer researchers use photographs as a form of autodiving to generate deeper insights from consumers (Heisley and Levy 1991; Zaltman and Coulter 1995). CAR extends photography as a method of consciousness-raising (see table 2). Freire suggests that photos can be didactic triggers for reflection and dialogue. Developed by Wang, Burris, and Ping (1996), "photovoice" allows participants to document their lives and discuss and use these images to engage others in debates on public policy. For instance, through public displays of photographs, breast cancer survivors shared their experiences of cancer and increased their self-confidence (Lopez et al. 2005).

CAR researchers also employ methods of social change, such as Augusto Boal's (1979) participatory dramas. Santos's (2000) participatory theater employed Brazilian street children to author and dramatize their lived world. These plays helped dispel local perceptions of the street children as "glue-sniffers" and subsequently increased the children's self-worth and agency. Serving as a collective tool for political activism, the results of the theater were presented to government officials to change policy on the treatment of homeless kids by the police.

## Participatory Rural Appraisal

*Origins of Participatory Rural Appraisal.* Most of the world's farming is done by over a billion farmers in resource-poor areas. Subsistence farming is characterized by demanding physical conditions (e.g., droughts and infertile lands) and harsh socioeconomic realities (e.g., reliance on family labor and inadequate tools and transportation). In the 1950s and 1960s, agricultural researchers sought to improve subsistence farmers' efficiency through a transfer-of-technology model (Chambers 1997). Based on a theory of modernization, the transfer of technology promoted what was undisputedly presented as the goal of progress and development from subsistence economies to a more industrialized society (Wilk 1996). This approach involved forging solutions off-site and using top-down strategies, scientific expertise, and standardized packaged solutions (Selener 1997).

Within the domain of resource-poor farming, these programs generally failed, wasting billions of development dollars. The breakdown of this model was due to large discrepancies between farmers' real-life conditions in diverse and risk-prone environments and experimental researchers' uniform and controlled settings. Researchers relied on their scientific expertise to generate new technologies at the urban, bureaucratized "core centers," and this knowledge was transferred to rural, isolated "peripheries" (Chambers 1997). The solutions provided treated farmers as passive recipi-

**TABLE 2**  
**PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH METHODS**

Method	Example	Strengths	Weaknesses
Scientific method	Field studies (Lewin 1946)	Systematic and rigorous inquiry Great social legitimacy and status Allows for comparison of techniques	Assumes an educated and well-informed client Requires significant training and expertise
Consciousness-raising methods	Photovoice (Wang 2003; Lopez et al. 2005)	Community action research Documents local realities and educates community members Analysis of photos increases reflexivity Dramatic method to educate and influence public and policy makers Develops positive feelings Transmits cultural heritage	Requires training and basic technical skills Quality of visuals depends upon photographic skills May be unappealing and impractical for some people Takes time May influence policy but cannot help in deciding the policy
Societal-change methods	Participatory drama (Boal 1979, 1995; Santos 2000)	Two-way information flow Compatible with oral traditions Dramatic exploration of problems and solutions Engaging and potentially generative "Rehearsal for revolution" Inclusive and allows different levels of participation	Individual may be swept up in the group Dramatic goal may supersede communicative goal Confrontation and discomfort may lead to nonparticipation Challenging to organize No visual record unless recorded
Visual methods	Social maps (Mascarenhas and Kumar 1991)	Participatory rural appraisal Used individually or collectively Flexible and uses local materials Documents visual literacy Encourages discussion and consensus building Democratic and inclusive of marginal individuals Skills stay in the community	Limited size Best supplemented with other methods New literacies are required and new cultural ideas are imparted
Sensitive methods	Fishbowl (Gordon 2004)	Increases democratic dialogue Increases participation of less powerful Potentially consciousness-raising Explores intersection of indigenous and scientific knowledge Fosters creative expression and therapeutic exploration	Deeper power flows and structure remain Skilled researcher needed to moderate and facilitate discussion Best supplemented with other methods Potentially intrusive

ents and ignored their needs and considerable practical knowledge.

Farmers who actively rejected the Western technologies were labeled as ignorant and resistant to change (Chambers and Ghildyal 1985). Yet the local practices of these “obstinate” farmers were often more successful than the scientific approaches. For example, the Western practice of monoculture was promoted for its efficiency and yield, which worked well in large, resource-rich farms. In contrast, the African practice of interplanting several crops was first assumed to be jumbled and unscientific. Subsequent support for mixed cropping, however, suggests that this practice offers considerable benefits, such as combining different roots systems that use different soil levels and synergistically use nutrients, spreading risk and labor demands, and increasing yields per acre (Chambers 1989).

Increasingly, agricultural research on subsistence farming has shifted from a top-down, scientific perspective to a bottom-up, participatory approach. We draw on Chambers's (1997) participatory rural appraisal, which has inspired innovative methods focused on local agricultural projects (see table 2). Like CAR, participatory rural appraisal emphasizes praxis and the convergence of scientific and local knowledge in theory building (Chambers 1983). However, this approach is more focused on understanding multiple subjectivities and realities within the same locality. Participatory rural appraisal assumes that reality is socially constructed and fragmented and seeks to develop theories that capture this fragmented social reality.

*The Research Process.* Although the research process is a relatively straightforward set of steps, this simplicity belies the considerable problems involved in conducting this research. Given the complexity of social systems, researchers prefer interdisciplinary teams, sustained contact, and dialogue. In consumer research, while the use of ethnographic teams occurs (Sherry 2006), consumer researchers rarely employ multidisciplinary teams (Arnould 2001). In participatory rural appraisal, solutions must emerge from a holistic analysis by both researchers and farmers. Similarly, since these social systems are dynamic, methods must be flexible and responsive to the changing conditions (Selener 1997). Ideally, methods maximizing the control of the farmer (e.g., group discussions) are preferred over methods maximizing the control of the researcher (e.g., structured interviews). Rather than prescribing a single method, a basket of different methods is flexibly employed (Chambers 1997).

Consistent with sound ethnographic discovery, the research team allows enough time to develop trust and rapport with community members (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). High-quality relationships are the foundation upon which good action research is based (Chambers 1997). Although some participatory rural appraisal researchers complete projects in surprisingly short time periods, more commonly they take time developing relationships and understanding different social divisions within the local community and have greater confidence in interventions based on extensive research. In pressing situations, such as the spread of diseases

like AIDS, rapid results may be traded off against deeper field research (Chambers 1997).

The next stage, which might include group discussions with relevant stakeholders, involves working with community members to identify the most-pressing problems needing solutions. One assumes that cooperative social norms will encourage most people to participate. Through group discussions, the research builds social consensus over what problem is perceived to be most important. But including all relevant stakeholders is a challenge (Chambers 1997). Too often, the most disenfranchised and marginalized people are not included in research. Yet, these approaches have had some success in gaining participation even by marginalized groups such as the handicapped. The researcher then acts as a resource and provides information on a range of methods that might be used. Researchers seek methods best fitting with the local situation and problems (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). This methodological flexibility to local needs has generated a wealth of methodological innovations (see the journal *PLA Notes*).

Participatory rural appraisal generally uses several methods guided by the idea of “sequencing,” or using different methods depending on the stage of the research process and the needs of the group examined (Mukherjee 1993). The researcher collaborates with the participants to analyze the results and generate potential solutions. The goal is sustainable solutions relying on local capital and resources and working within existing cultural practices and local organizations (Wilk 1996). Given both the complexity of the farm as a system and the general lack of resources, results generally support small, local, and adaptive changes (Selener 1997).

*Applications to Consumer Research.* Once again we take a consumer research study, that of Arnould (2001), and rethink it from an action research perspective. Participatory rural appraisal draws inspiration from applied anthropology, so it is unsurprising that Arnould's (2001) ethnographic examination of economic development in Niger bears a strong family resemblance. Arnould examines the very practical problems of onion production and marketing using a multidisciplinary and multilingual team. They collect ethnographic data, using a 3-week rapid assessment procedure, and look at multiple-stakeholder perspectives across local, regional, and national levels.

Participatory rural appraisal researchers would share a similar interest in a practical problem like onion marketing that affects the livelihood of thousands. Moreover, the multidisciplinary team and multistakeholder approach is considered an ideal approach since it maximizes democratic validity (Selener 1997), as would the use of the local language and both qualitative and quantitative methods. While the 3-week intensive rapid appraisal might be considered insufficient, this research drew upon previous field studies by the author and other researchers. But this action approach would differ in two areas of emphasis. First, the stakeholders who were most at risk would receive greater attention, such as the poorest of poor farmers. Given the low rates of lit-

eracy, visual methods such as social mapping would likely be used (see below). (It should be noted that Arnould [2001] did attend to the producers who were the least powerful channel members and sought a fair distribution of benefits throughout the channel.) Second, while Arnould got input from farmers and clearly respected their “clever” adaptability, a participatory rural appraisal approach would include the farmers in identifying the problems of primary concern, plumbing local expertise, and enlisting farmers’ participation to solve these problems in the research process. A rural appraisal approach would focus on local community-level changes by enlisting locals to participate on the basis of a norm of social responsibility. Unlike in CAR, social and historical forces are not usually a focus within rural appraisal approaches. However, participatory rural appraisal offers consumer researchers some creative methods to explore local knowledge (see table 2).

People with little textual literacy may have considerable expertise, a possibility often overlooked by those relying on more-traditional methods (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). Cartography, or mapmaking, is a conventional method generally considered to require specialized skills, but rural appraisal researchers adapt this method to explore people’s local knowledge (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). Although maps can be created individually, they are usually developed collectively on the ground using local materials, such as stones, seeds, or colored powders. The ground is expansive, free, and revisable. It provides a level space upon which people can congregate, suggest revisions, and discuss differences. Many different people can participate in the “democracy of the ground.” Although paper privileges the literate, the ground is shared. Working on the ground also requires less eye contact, making participation easier for people of lower social status (Chambers 1997). After people map their realities and localities, these maps can facilitate and encourage group discussion to build consensus. With community approval, maps can be transferred onto paper to ensure a portable and more permanent record. These mapping methods stay in the community as resources and can be appropriated by the locals for new uses, such as documenting the kidnapping of daughters to bolster demands for government intervention (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995).

Participatory rural appraisal researchers also seek out group methods that are sensitive to power. In her study on sexuality in Zambia, Gordon (2004) developed a technique called “fishbowl,” which managed a more democratic dialogue among men and women. Men sat forming an outer circle, and women sat facing together and forming an inner circle. A skilled facilitator posed questions developed by the men for the women to discuss on sexual intimacy and safe sex practices. Positions were then reversed. This technique managed gender-related power differentials by asking men to be silent while women were speaking. A follow-up study revealed that this two-way communication resulted in safer and more satisfying sex (Gordon and Cornwall 2004).

## DISCUSSION

### General Criticisms of Participatory Action Research

The majority of criticisms of action research involve the inappropriate application of methods, such as poor training of researchers, inadequate time in the field, weak research relationships, and shallow participation. We highlight three more-fundamental challenges within action research.

*The Politics of Power.* An ever-present danger is that action research will essentialize the local and ignore power relations (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Participation is never politically neutral and may be used to promote a range of interests (Cornwall 2004). Critics in management argue that the participatory processes are appropriated to further the goal of organizational efficiency and that this interest overshadows the original emancipatory impulses of greater worker control (Greenwood and Levin 1998).

Local knowledge is shaped by the multifaceted micro-politics of power (Thompson 2004). Many different players shape what gets counted as local knowledge. Local elites may benefit disproportionately at the expense of the poor, such as when the largest loans go to local officials (Appleton 1995). Outside researchers also shape the production of knowledge, in moving the project toward the interests of either funding agencies or journal requirements. Locals may seek local advantages, such as wages, but local compliance does not signal acquiescence, and people often have good reasons to pretend compliance (Mosse 2001). Kothari (2001) attacks participatory approaches as just one more grand narrative in which the language of participation and inclusion is used to mask power relations. Even when guided by good intentions, researchers using outside technologies to solve local problems may reinforce the subordination of locals and dominance of the outside expert who must come to the rescue of the community (Waddington and Mohan 2004).

Researchers hoping to do this type of research might give pause to the growing consensus that successful programs of social change must work across multiple levels of analysis. For example, citizens must develop individual political competencies, organize local community projects, and demand a more responsive local and national government (Gaventa 2004). A multilevel approach to social change needs to go beyond local intervention to include political and social changes at the community, national, and transnational levels (Arnould 2001).

*Balancing Local and Theoretical Knowledge.* Forging meaningful links between local expertise and outside theory requires more than a sympathetic appreciation of the value of different ways of knowing (Chakravarti 2006). At times, action researchers may reify indigenous knowledge, treating it as a discrete, uniform entity that can be easily “recovered.” However, local knowledge is “relational, situated, practical, dynamic, positional, unevenly distributed, and often communicated orally or bodily” (Kalb 2006, 579).

For instance, farming practices occur at the intersection of multiple social domains, such as family, religion, and community. Local knowledge embedded in complex, dynamic systems is not easily recovered (Sillitoe 1998). It also emerges from the demands of daily living and is frequently practical, evolving over years of experimenting. For example, the ability to recognize fertile soil may occur through feeling the soil. This knowledge may be tacit and difficult to communicate verbally (Kalb 2006). Understanding indigenous knowledge is a complex process including the deciphering of embedded knowledge. Researchers ignoring such complexities are unlikely to succeed in the long run (Wilk 1996). For instance, in Papua New Guinea, mining companies sought to reimburse local people for damage to their soil. Outside consultants used Western notions of kinship to distribute payments, but kinship in New Guinea is flexibly employed depending on whether the domain is employment, reciprocity, or reproduction. A rigid property-based notion of kinship violated local ideas and resulted in revolt (Kalb 2006).

*The Conceptualization of Community.* Action researchers often assume a unitary and homogenous concept of community, thus masking marginal knowledge, such as knowledge distributed by gender, caste, or age (Hickey and Mohan 2004). CAR, in particular, treats community as univocal and often ignores differences distributed by age, gender, or ethnicity. Although recent participatory rural appraisal studies are increasingly considering differences based on gender, the full complexity of communities as dynamic and overlapping networks of formal and informal power is underappreciated (Ger 1997; Thompson 2004). Cleaver (1999) suggests that community is a more fluid concept. So when, for example, determining water rights, community may be at the village level, but when determining grazing rights, community may be more broadly determined across several villages.

An alternative approach involves identifying different forms of popular agency shaping the local culture and refraining from imposing Western technologies and methods. For example, in a study in Zimbabwe, while many men participated in public debates, few women did. Consistent with local norms, the women used representative participation based on selecting the most articulate and persuasive women among them to represent their views (Cleaver 2001). Thus, an approach that leverages local forms of agency would work within indigenous decision-making practices. Nevertheless, a danger arises that using indigenous forms of participation will further cement existing inequities, such as gender imbalances. Still, this local agency approach rejects indigenous knowledge and local institutions as fixed and, instead, conceptualizes them as adaptable resources. Local forms of communication and decision making can be used but may also be nudged, shoved, and even challenged to be more equitable. Although local elites sometimes leverage their position to gain unequal access to resources, when social changes benefit everyone in the community,

such as in the building of a school, then local elites are constructive forces for change (Gaventa 2004).

## Opportunities for Consumer Researchers

We made philosophical and logical arguments that an emancipatory interest, such as improving consumer welfare, will result in shifts in our methods and theories (Habermas 1971). PAR is an alternative to improving the lives of consumers to be considered along with our current approaches. Regardless of one's paradigmatic allegiance, PAR brings five important issues to the foreground of a transformative research agenda. First, we need to lay out our assumptions about our relationship to the people whose life we seek to change. The positionality of the researcher and the research relationship developed, whether as expert authority, policy advisor, or collaborator, will affect our research process, output, and subsequent applications.

Second, a goal of social change will need to be evaluated by new criteria (or at least a new priority of evaluative criteria). The five validities used by action researchers offer a good starting point from which researchers interested in transformative research might debate the type of evaluative criteria and their relative importance.

Third, given the complex micro- and macropolitics of change, as a field we need to develop more-sophisticated theories of power and social change to realize the goal of increased consumer welfare (Thompson 2004). For example, does power flow from above in a cooperative manner, does it arise as a conflictual struggle from below, or is it dispersed equitably as group consensus is sought? Similarly, who will the change agent be? Lewin's (1948) action research suggests that organizations will implement local, incremental changes. Freire's (1970a, 1970b) action research suggests that consumers will organize to demand change from below. Chambers (1997) sees individuals and local communities, based on shared consensus, as the agent of change. Currently, many researchers advocate job specialization; academics create knowledge, and it is someone else's job to apply it. For transformative consumer researchers, this traditional division of labor may not make sense if we are truly committed to the goal of social change.

Successful interventions likely must occur at multiple levels and depend upon considerable investment of resources. Hailey's (2001) review of nine effective South Asian non-governmental organizations using participatory decision making suggests that these organizations took a long-term approach across years. The staff members invested considerable time engaging in dialogue with and listening to locals to gain an in-depth understanding of the community. Finally, members were personally engaged in relationships with locals based on trust, respect, and loyalty.

Fourth, the nature of many global social problems means we will continue to need more up-close and personal methods (Chakravarti 2006). Certainly, existing methods can be adapted, such as the use of simpler measures (Steenkamp 2005) or multidisciplinary teams (Arnould 2001). PAR offers methods adapted for use with people with significant

visual literacy, such as social and body mapping, and methods that are sensitive to power differences and group dynamics, such as the fishbowl technique. While practitioners deeply believe in these methods, little rigorous research systematically compares these methods. Consumer researchers can contribute their expertise to compare action methods with traditional methods.

Finally, we not only need to adapt our methods but our modes of knowledge dissemination. Consistent with the desire by CAR to disseminate research in the consumers' interest, culturally appropriate and popular forms of knowledge dissemination are needed that are more relevant to the needs and interests of different consumers.

Our field is based on the practical problems of consumers. At the very heart of the study of consumers is a deeply held belief that effective practices must be grounded in the needs and interests of consumers. Thus, it is easy to imagine that a comfortable alliance is possible with the practically oriented interests of PAR. We can learn from action researchers, but we already possess significant theoretical and methodological tools arising from the practical study of consumers. For those of us who are fortunate enough to possess these considerable resources, it is time to move away from the comfort of the sidelines, step onto the field, and charge into the important work of solving our pressing social problems.

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