

## **Critical Subjects: Participatory Research needs to Make Room for Debate**

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### **PSA 2012 Biennial Meeting**

November 15, Session 1

Contributed Papers: Issues for Practice in Medicine and Anthropology

**Abstract:** *Participatory research in anthropology attempts to turn informants into collaborators, even colleagues. Researchers generally accept the idea of different knowledge systems, and the practice of avoiding critical appraisal of alien knowledge systems, common in ethnography, is continued within participatory research. However, if the aim of participatory research is to turn informants into collaborators, or ideally colleagues, the ethical imperative of offering constructive criticism to colleagues should apply to them, too, even if they are seen as representing different knowledge systems than the researchers. Avoiding appraisal of alien knowledge systems is problematic when the knowledge systems of the researcher and the researched are in constant contact.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the staff of Sámi Allaskuvla, especially Nils Oskal, for their generosity during my short visit in 2011, and Jelena Porsanger for her kind answers to my e-mails. Irja Seurujärvi-Kari gave important help in organizing the visit, for which I owe her many thanks. I am also grateful for having had the opportunity to hear some presentations and discuss with some staff members at The First Nations University of Canada during the IAPL conference in 2010. Earlier versions of this paper have been presented in the Conference on the Philosophy of the Social Sciences in Copenhagen on 25.-26.8.2011, in the Finnish Centre of Excellence in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences' seminar in Helsinki on 16.1.2012 and in the VII Ethnology Days on 16.-17.3.2012 in Jyväskylä.

## 1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed the proliferation of different kinds of participatory, collaborative, ethnocritical and co-operative research methods in many disciplines. What the greater part of these methods have in common, is the attempt to change the relationship between the researcher and the researched from one between subject and object to one between subject and subject (Smith 1997, 178), and to turn informants, or local non-academic interest groups, into collaborators, even colleagues. The main focus here is on the use of these methods in ethnographic research. For the purposes of this paper I will call these forms of "academic engagement with outside communities" (Petras, Porpora 1993, 107) *participatory research*. Participatory research is mostly very down-to-earth and deals with questions and social problems that have weight in the daily lives of the communities the researchers work with. The reasons given for the adoption of such methods are mainly ethical, and when also epistemic grounds for the need of participatory research are discussed, they tend to be strongly attached to discussions concerning power inequalities: The position of a researcher is seen as a position of power, and researchers should be aware of the power structures they might consolidate by their work. The importance of the research subject's own knowledge is emphasized. Researchers should relinquish the idea of holding knowledge that would be privileged compared to that of the researched, who typically have a much lower social status than the researcher. Oppressed groups can, according to this vein of thought, be epistemically privileged, and researchers can benefit from their knowledge. (Finnis 2004, Hall 2005, Kurelek 1992, Park 2006, Wylie 2003.) Theoretical discussions about participatory research focus strongly on ethical issues. This paper takes an epistemic point of view, though the argument is nevertheless partly ethical.

Ethnographers generally accept the idea of there being different knowledge systems: people around the world have differing criteria for what is considered as a good argument and what is accepted as knowledge, or an acceptable way of producing knowledge claims. According to a widespread interpretation, these criteria are seen as stemming from - and as an integral part of - a conceptual framework. And the conceptual frameworks have especially earlier on been understood as chiming with *cultures*, understood as holistic systems that ethnographers could interpret. In trying to avoid ethnocentrism, ethnographers have developed research practices in which hasty comparisons between statements made in different knowledge systems are avoided: comparison as well as adjudication can be meaningful only when the position of the statement within its proper framework is understood. Shortly, many ethnographers *avoid appraisal* of alien knowledge systems.

The practice of avoiding appraisal is often linked to some form of relativism. As Mark Risjord has noted (1998), relativism does not necessarily lead to the impossibility of criticism, or avoiding appraisal of alien knowledge systems. But as shall be shown, avoiding appraisal follows easily from methodological conceptual relativism. It can be discerned also from recent ethnographic research inspired by postmodern epistemic relativism - notably, participatory research. The ethical and power-related arguments given for the adoption of participatory methods do not seem to lead to the abandoning of the practice of avoiding appraisal. Rather, researchers are encouraged to adopt a strictly positive attitude towards the local knowledge of the communities they are studying (Finnis 2004). The main goals of this kind of research are often social change, emancipation and 'giving back to the communities'. Accordingly, it seems much more interesting to use local knowledge in research when possible, than to critically appraise it. The ideal situation would be one where local knowledge and

"western" academic knowledge could be seamlessly incorporated, and the informant would thus turn into a co-author and effectively a colleague. But, as I will argue, postmodern epistemic relativism does not offer tools to analyse and deal with situations where the local and academic knowledge systems clash.

Avoiding appraisal is practicable only as long as the research subjects go along with it and the different knowledge systems stay at least somewhat apart. This is not always the case. The typical research subjects of cultural research have become more critical of their role as research subjects than they used to be in the heyday of 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology. This change is by no means limited to cultural research; the general public's attitudes towards science and research have become more distrustful than it used to be (Carrier & Weingart 2009). In cultural research this change nevertheless has some unique features. An extreme demonstration of how research subjects have become critical of their role is the birth of a new and heterogeneous discipline called indigenous studies. Indigenous researchers wish to base their research methods on their own peoples' knowledge systems, which they hold to be different from the "western" ones (Tuhivai Smith 1999). When such critical subjects enter academia, it becomes impractical to avoid appraisal of different knowledge systems, and it seems to become ethically questionable, too: constructive criticism is a researchers' due, and giving it is an obligation. Constructive criticism and avoiding appraisal are not compatible, so the practice of avoiding appraisal of different knowledge systems is ethically problematic when the alleged different knowledge systems enter academia. Moreover, if the aim of participatory research is to incorporate local knowledge with academic knowledge and turn informants into collaborators, and effectively even colleagues, the same ethical imperative applies to them, too, even if they are seen as

representing different knowledge systems. Their knowledge should be critically appraised.

To argue for this position, I shall start by discussing the practice of avoiding appraisal of different knowledge systems in ethnographic research. Then I shortly describe the development that has led to the establishment of indigenous studies, and the general aims of the discipline. Finally I try to illustrate both the practical and the ethical limits of avoiding appraisal of alien knowledge systems in a world where the conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems of the researcher and the researched are in constant contact.

## **2. Avoiding Appraisal**

Maria Baghramian (2010) divides the different kinds of relativism that have been influential during the last century into three main groups: conceptual, cultural and postmodern relativism. I shall use this distinction when focusing on the ways in which one particular question is treated in ethnography: How does a researcher encounter different knowledge systems? And, to be precise, how does one treat them in publications? Especially some insights related to conceptual relativism have formed ethnographic research practices into the direction of avoiding appraisal of knowledge systems alien to the researchers' own communities. As postmodern relativism has had an impact on the development of ethnography and pointed cultural research into new directions, it has indeed challenged some earlier practices, but not the one of avoiding appraisal.

Let us understand cultural relativism as the claim that "there can be no such thing as a culturally neutral criterion for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts" (Baghramian 2010, 31), and conceptual relativism as the holistic view according to which conceptual frameworks influence thought so strongly that "insofar as it is a question of truth or falsity, one cannot legitimately compare statements made in one [framework] with those made within another" (Mandelbaum 2010, 68). In other words, cultural relativists start the comparison of statements arising from different contexts from a point where it is possible to find them conflicting, whereas conceptual relativists question the possibility of this finding. The first has had a significant role in public discussions about moral and political issues, but the latter has perhaps had a stronger impact on the development of ethnographic research methods and practices. It may be said that whereas some earlier cultural researchers have been (and some contemporary ones still are) cultural relativists and some not, fairly many have been and are – when one looks at their research practices – methodological conceptual relativists.

Wittgenstein and Winch emphasized the need to doubt the applicability of our terminology and norms of rationality when evaluating other knowledge systems. According to them, it is not wise to treat religious practices as mistakes (Wittgenstein 1967) or as unsuccessful scientific hypotheses: "Oracular revelations are not treated as hypotheses and, since their sense derives from the way they are treated in their context, they therefore are not hypotheses." (Winch 1964, 312.) Wittgenstein's remarks were leveled against James Frazer, who did make this kind of comparisons, but much before Wittgenstein wrote his comments, anthropologists had questioned the idea of universal cultural evolution, endorsed by Frazer, as ethnocentric and largely adopted methods where the kind of comparison Wittgenstein criticized is

avoided. Different formulations of conceptual relativism fell into fertile ground amongst ethnographers, and in a moderate form conceptual relativism can be recognized in the ways in which ethnographic research was, and often still is, conducted: Researchers, firstly, accepted the idea that different conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems exist, and secondly, they kept the different systems strictly apart and did not make comparisons between claims made in different systems. The rationale behind this was methodological: Propositions that seem *prima facie* to be very similar to ones we could make, can, in fact, when made within the unfamiliar conceptual framework, considerably differ from our ways of thinking, and if we presume to be able to understand them well enough right away to make comparisons to our own beliefs, we might not just make a mistake, but in fact hinder our own understanding of the differences in question.<sup>2</sup>

Strong forms of conceptual relativism are problematic, since they can lead to the claim that different conceptual frameworks are incommensurable, which claim turns out to be difficult to defend (Davidson 1974). Ethnographers, who aim precisely at understanding different cultures, and translating between them, cannot accept the idea of full incommensurability and untranslatability between different frameworks. One of the solutions to this problem is to resort to a hermeneutical notion of understanding and interpreting: though the conceptual frameworks of the researcher and that of the researched are different, it is possible to expand the language of the former so as to express the meanings and nuances of the local expressions of the latter – think of Clifford Geertz's "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973, Risjord 2007). Thus comparisons

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<sup>2</sup> On this point even ethnographers who disagree with all forms of relativism, generally agree. For example Dan Sperber, who hardly can be called a relativist, agrees that "resemblances across cultures may well be superficial; failure to understand this leads to poor ethnography" (Sperber 1982, 161).

between statements made in different conceptual frameworks are possible, but only after the slow research process that bridges the gap between the frameworks.

However, since the hermeneutic process is often seen as never-ending, and because the research questions of ethnographers often do not necessitate many comparisons, the initial methodological abstinence from critical evaluation can develop into a status quo.

By stressing the significant differences between different conceptual frameworks, and accordingly also different knowledge systems, researchers can at the same time treat their informants' beliefs, ways of argumentation etc. in a respectful manner, and still not take them seriously as propositions that should be accepted, refuted, or compared to the researcher's own claims: for example a Native American myth must not be compared to a scientific hypothesis even if they at first sight might seem to contradict each other. It is the researcher's own academic knowledge system within which theoretical debates happen. One of the most beautifully explicit formulations of this stance comes from Talal Asad:

Why have I tried to insist in this paper that anyone concerned with translating from other cultures must look for coherence in discourses, and yet devoted so many pages to showing that Gellner's text is largely incoherent? The reason is quite simple: Gellner and I speak the same language, belong to the same academic profession, live in the same society. In taking up a critical stance toward his text I am contesting what he says, not translating it, and the radical difference between these two activities is precisely what I insist on. (Asad 1986, 156.)



I would like to draw attention to two consequences of this differentiation. Firstly, when the beliefs, arguments and ways of producing knowledge claims of the researched are not appraised, they also cannot be adopted and used by the researcher. Of course it is possible to borrow concepts from other conceptual frameworks and add them to the academic arsenal; *mana* and *potlatch* are well-known examples of this. However, academic theoretical discussions do not happen within the informants' conceptual frameworks, nor do ways of knowledge production glide from their knowledge systems to academic argumentation. We do not see for example researchers invoking their age to back up their arguments, even if amongst their informants epistemic authority would be defined by age, nor do we encounter shamanistic research methods. The different knowledge systems are kept quite strictly apart.

Secondly, methodological conceptual relativism is not a practicable stance for researchers who wish to use participatory methods and blur the difference between informants and colleagues. It can indeed be adopted by those who aim at multivocal research: all relevant interest groups are somehow involved in the research process, and get their voice to be heard, but the different stories nevertheless are left clearly apart (e.g. Rountree 2007). However, if participatory research aims further than this, or if the interest groups want more than just to have their story told, too – if they insist on having it accepted as the truth, not just listened to – then methodological conceptual relativism will not do. A methodological conceptual relativist will treat colleagues and informants (or other interest groups) differently.

As noted earlier, it is easy to see how for example Geertz's ideas fit into the description offered here. But avoiding appraisal seems to be a prevalent practice even amongst researchers whose theoretical positions differ from his significantly. For

example, in the more recent constructionistically oriented<sup>3</sup> anthropology and cultural research the focus has been turned towards the researchers' own societies, their conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems. One of the often-criticized concepts is that of culture, especially when used by ethnographers (Wagner 1975), and with it the idea of different knowledge systems being disconnected. Despite this critique, the knowledge systems of the traditional research subjects of ethnography are mostly (though indeed not entirely) left unapprised. The sharp edge of the often social, but sometimes also epistemic critique points to "our", not "their" beliefs and ways of argumentation (Nader 2011). The practice of avoiding appraisal can be and has often been continued within constructionist ethnography.

As mentioned, it is easy to find ethnographic research that incorporates methodological conceptual relativism in its practices. At the same time it seems to be virtually impossible to find ethnographers who would, on the level of their research practices, be consistent epistemic relativists. A consistent epistemic relativist would have no reason not to invoke their age to back up their arguments, if amongst their informants epistemic authority would be defined by age, or to use shamanistic ways of knowledge production in their research. This does not happen. (Koskinen 2011.) Nevertheless, postmodern epistemic relativism has had a strong impact on ethically motivated theoretical debates in anthropology and the neighboring disciplines. It has engendered much discussion on social and cultural inequalities, and it has had an important role in the development of participatory research. This is because of it highlights the relationship between knowledge and power.

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<sup>3</sup> By this characterization I refer to Ian Hacking's loose definition. When Marilyn Strathern studies parenthood (2011), or when Regina Bendix studies authenticity (1997), they focus mainly on "our" concepts, tell something about how those concepts have been constructed, and hold that they "need not have existed, or need not be at all as [they are]." (Hacking 1999, 6.)

As Baghramian notes, postmodern relativism is Nietzschean: all knowledge is seen as partial, perspective and tied to power structures, which leads to the conclusion that "we can do little more than insist on the legitimacy of our own perspective and try to impose it on other people." (Baghramian 2010, 45.) Research is seen as inevitably bolstering up one perspective or another, and with it, some power structure. Many cultural researchers inspired by postmodern ideas have concluded that if research is unavoidably political, it should try to unravel existing inequalities and give a voice to the oppressed. This is in dissonance with methodological conceptual relativism, since researchers who actively try to defend marginal ways of thinking and knowing, and empower the communities they are studying, of course take sides and commit themselves much more than a methodological conceptual relativist would find acceptable: knowledge systems are kept less strictly apart, and clearly less emphasis is put on the difficulty of translating. Nevertheless, if appraisal is understood as the act of estimating whether a belief, an argument, or a way of producing knowledge claims is valid or not, postmodern relativism does not encourage researchers to appraise the local thinking they are studying. It does not materially challenge the practice of avoiding appraisal, since the aim is not to appraise beliefs and ways of argumentation, but to empower communities and look for ways in which they could beneficially use their local knowledge. The postmodern researcher quite methodologically *supports* the local knowledge systems, and supporting differs from appraisal.

### **3. Indigenous Studies: From Research Subjects to Critical Subjects**

Avoiding appraisal is possible for researchers as long as the knowledge systems they study can be kept at least somewhat apart from their own knowledge systems. This

was clearly the case in earlier anthropology, where the academic discussion happened far away from the studied people, and it is still the case when the postmodern researchers get to choose what parts of the studied local knowledge they might use in their publications. But the situation is not symmetrical: it has been and continues to be much more difficult for the research subjects to avoid appraisal of the knowledge systems of the researchers. The knowledge produced by researchers is often used in decision-making that affects the lives of the researched, so avoiding appraisal of this knowledge is impracticable. It is not surprising that when the researched have become more acquainted with academic research, some of them have become critical of their role as research subjects. Let us now turn to an extreme example of what happens when research subjects refuse to stay in their role, and want to be treated as simply subjects: the heterogeneous discipline called indigenous studies that claims to bring indigenous knowledge systems into academy.

The notion of *indigenous peoples* has gained significant political weight during the last few decades, much because of the active co-operation of the different activist groups who see themselves as representing the different indigenous peoples around the world. One of their most important agendas has been that of taking control of the ways in which indigenous children and young people are educated. The aim is "the establishment of systems of education which reflect, respect and embrace indigenous cultural values, philosophies and ideologies which have shaped, nurtured and sustained our people for tens of thousands of years." (Seurujärvi-Kari 1996, 171-172.) This includes also higher education and research, and so in different parts of the world there are nowadays colleges and research centers such as the First Nations University of Canada and the Sámi University College, dedicated to research based on indigenous knowledge systems.

The idea of different knowledge systems is generally accepted in indigenous studies, and the prevailing interpretation of it is postmodern<sup>4</sup>: Knowledge is inherently tied to power structures, and researchers who belong to the dominant group and produce knowledge about indigenous people can not easily avoid bolstering up the existing power inequalities. This outlook often involves the Nietzschean idea of understanding a different conceptual framework as a violent act of conceptual appropriation: frameworks are seen as rigid and all-embracing, and understanding means the ruling using their own framework and forcing the ruled to the slots that already exist in it. (Kuokkanen 2006, Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Meretoja 2007.) Despite this it is difficult to find indigenous researchers who would question the applicability of the strongly "western" concept of culture when studying indigenous peoples. Quite the contrary, the notion is used widely and hardly problematised, and it is not difficult even to find "generalizations about the culture as a whole" (Risjord 2007, 416) from indigenous researchers' publications. Given the political force of the concept this is hardly surprising.

The methods used by indigenous researchers often resemble participatory research methods and many research projects are very down-to-earth developmental projects that aspire to engage with the community. Nevertheless, in the theoretical discussions much more controversial ideas have been promoted, such as developing shamanistic research methods (Kuokkanen 2000). The message is altogether clear: indigenous thinking – or "indigenous philosophies" – should be accepted within academy, not "simply as interesting objects of study (claims that some *believe* to be true) but as

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<sup>4</sup> There are nevertheless also indigenous researchers who tend to prefer a more Wittgensteinian or hermeneutical approach to the alleged different knowledge systems, and are inclined more towards conceptual than postmodern relativism (Turner 2006, Oskal 2008).

intellectual orientations that map out ways of discovering things about the world" (Garrouette 2003, 10).

The most important aim of indigenous studies is advancing the indigenous identity and self-determination of the indigenous peoples. The main audience is the researcher's own people, so for example a Sámi researcher's work should be directed according to Sámi interests and preferably published in the Sámi language. The openly expressed goal of many of the Sámi researchers is nation-building. (Porsanger 2005, Stordahl 2008, Seurujärvi-Kari 2011.)

Even though indigenous researchers usually understand nation-building as a process of social construction, the building of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), the idea of researchers actively building nations is not new. Disciplines such as ethnology and folklore studies have historically had a significant role in the building of some European nation states. Folklorists were notably active in the building of the Finnish nation in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the discipline has gone through an extensive self-critique due to its nationalist history (Anttonen 2005, Wilson 1976). The earlier nationalist research has been deemed dubious in many ways, and the essentialist grounds of the ways in which earlier folklorists represented the Finnish people are seen as especially problematic.

Indigenous studies has been criticized similarly: indigenous researchers are said to take *cultures* and *peoples* for granted, and make essentialist assumptions about the studied groups and their local knowledge (Kuper 2003, McGhee 2008).

If an indigenous researcher and a folklorist meet in a conference, it is likely that the latter would like to question some of the theoretical premises of the former. The practical limits of avoiding appraisal become clear: avoiding appraisal of the

indigenous researcher's ideas is in this case not a viable option, even if the folklorist accepts the claim that his ideas stem from an indigenous knowledge system. Either the folklorist expresses her reasons for not agreeing with the indigenous researchers' ideas – thus treating him as a colleague, but taking the risk of appraising a knowledge system which is not her own. Or she stays silent – thus denying the indigenous researcher the status of a colleague who deserves constructive criticism.

#### **4. Participatory Research Needs to Make Room for Debate**

Indigenous researchers have achieved something very similar to what participatory research strives for. People belonging to groups that formerly would have been studied by outsider researchers, are now researchers themselves, study their own communities and aspire to base their research methods on their own communities' knowledge systems. Clearly they are not objects of study, but subjects, vis-à-vis other researchers. This has significant consequences for a researcher who accepts the idea of different knowledge systems: indigenous knowledge systems have entered academia, that is, the sphere where critical appraisal of other researchers' ideas is usually encouraged, not avoided. I believe most researchers would agree that "subjecting hypotheses, data, reasoning and background assumptions to criticism from a variety of perspectives" (Longino 2002, 205) is an indispensable part of academic knowledge production, and, accordingly, that it is a researcher's duty to offer criticism to fellow researchers. When indigenous knowledge systems enter academia, the partly ethically motivated practice of avoiding appraisal collides with the ethical obligation of offering criticism to colleagues.

The practice of avoiding appraisal has been continued in participatory research in the name of the ethical imperative of endorsing the knowledge systems of the oppressed. Nevertheless, if the aim of participatory research is to change the relationship between the researcher and the research subject from one between subject and object to one between subject and subject, and to turn informants into collaborators, or effectively even colleagues, the ethical imperative of offering criticism applies to them, too.

When different conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems are in constant contact, research methods and practices that enable the people who see themselves as belonging to different knowledge systems to communicate with each other on a fairly equal footing, subject to subject, are clearly needed. That is, participatory methods and practices are needed. But at the same time, when different conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems are in constant contact, the practice of avoiding appraisal becomes both practically and ethically problematic. In other words, such notions of conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems, as well as such theoretical stances towards them, that do not enable criticism between and across the borders of the different frameworks and systems, are less and less usable in ethnography. They do not lend themselves well to the articulation of the aims of participatory research. Methodological conceptual relativism suffices well for the needs of multivocal research, but not further than that. Postmodern epistemic relativism is inadequate in situations of epistemic conflict. To paraphrase Bernard Williams (1974), when shamanistic ways of producing knowledge claims are no longer only in notional confrontation with academic knowledge production, but have become a real option for researchers, there has to be room for genuine disagreement and debate between the researcher and the shaman.



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