



## II. Co-enquiry in theory

### The roots of co-enquiry: participatory research, action research, and community-based participatory research

In the last three decades *participation* has become an essential element for the transformation of modes of intervention in indigenous and local communities, particularly in the context of development and conservation, and particularly in many developing countries where there are significant power differentials between the external (often foreign) researcher and the local ‘researched’ population. In the intervening years, participatory research theories and practices have been revised, adapted, critiqued, improved and variously debated to great extent (Hall 1975, 1981, 1992; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Vio Grossi, 1988; Gudynas and Evia 1991; Israel et al 1998; Ander-Egg, 2003; Gonsalves *et al*, 2005, Cooke and Kothari 2001, Hickey and Mohan 2004).<sup>1</sup>

The values and ideas inherent to the concept of Action Research are also highly relevant to co-enquiry. According to Reason and Bradbury, action research is:

“...a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1)

In brief, action research – which is also known as participatory action research – is a grounded, participatory approach that takes as its priority the production of practical knowledge for resolving people’s problems (Wallerstein and Duran 2003). While co-enquiry may not always be solution-oriented, practitioners of co-enquiry agree that for the approach to be fully internally coherent it must respond to community needs, which are very often targeted at resolving problems. In this sense, the values of action research also belong to the co-enquiry framework.

The other core value of action research – that it embraces different ways of knowing in order to enhance collective knowledge – is *mutual learning*, or the importance of humility, openness, and overcoming epistemological barriers that see one way of knowing as better than another. The concept of mutual learning is the natural partner of co-enquiry, as it underscores the importance of equality in the learning process and learning outcome, while also pointing towards the win-win consequences of adopting a research approach that enhances the potential for learning amongst all partners. Co-enquiry’s potential for innovation, depth and reliability of research outcomes is manifest in the process of mutual learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of participation can be mobilised and implemented in a many different ways in the research context: from least participation to community control over the research process (see Annex 3).



In its most progressive form, PAR has become commonly known as Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), an approach that establishes community members and researchers as equal partners – in terms of sharing power, resources, credit, results, etc. – in the research process and that seeks expressly to focus on issues of concern for communities rather than on the production of knowledge for the sake of it (*ibid.*).

In a community context, co-enquiry (also known as co-inquiry or cooperative enquiry) is similar to CBPR; yet the authors of the COMBIOSERVE manual prefer the term ‘co-enquiry’ because (a) it synthesises the concept of equality between research partners in the “co-” prefix and (b) replaces the narrower concept of research with the broader one of ‘enquiry’, opening up the process to embrace epistemologies, including modes of investigation, that do not necessarily follow mainstream research structures. It also overcomes some of the limitations that the terms ‘community’, ‘participation’ and ‘research’ implicitly contain.

#### **Comment: What are we talking about when we talk about ‘community’?**

The term ‘community’ is a useful shorthand for describing a group of people who share a living space, a territory, kinship ties, a local economy, and so on. Yet, time and again, the term has been used in a way that does not reflect the reality of ‘communities’ as they are, all over the world. Anyone who has spent time in any form of community knows that they are not homogeneous, harmonious, and bounded. Communities are, on the contrary, characterised by internal differences in wealth, status, wellbeing, and power; by fluidity and porous boundaries; and by internal conflict (see Agrawal and Gibson 1999, 2001), key references on the dangers of deploying the concept of community without examination). Furthermore, what constitutes ‘community’ can change quite rapidly over time, depending on “what is at stake in the moment” (Fortmann et al 2008: 250). Community members aspirations are also different – often competing and conflicting: what we understand as ‘community goals’ depend on which goals are taking precedence at the particular moment of engagement with researchers.

Despite these issues, it is commonly accepted that the term ‘community’ is more useful than not, and it is widely used when discussing co-enquiry. One of the principal reasons for continuing to use the term and concept is that local people often use the term to describe their social setting. In the experience of the authors of this COMBIOSERVE manual, Chinantecos have a very clear understanding of what their ‘communities’ are, who the members of those communities are and how they function. The most important rule for external researchers is to respect and use the terminology and concepts given by the local groups they are working with.

Having said this, external and community researchers must remain mindful of the complex and contradictory realities of ‘community’ life throughout the research process. This will enrich the co-enquiry process and research results. Community researchers can also be encouraged to reflect on the complexities of their ‘community’ through participant observation, a method described on p.33 in Chapter V.

### **State-of-the-art and innovations in co-enquiry**

The concept of co-enquiry has a long history, particularly in British academic circles dealing with epistemology and action research. Leaders in the field of the co-enquiry approach are John Heron and Peter Reason, who have, since the late 1970s, published



extensively on the topic. The present document is intended as a hands-on manual for the implementation of co-enquiry, so rather than engage in a full literature review, we encourage readers to explore the bibliography (in which we include Heron and Reason's key texts) and resources pages.

Throughout the 1990s, a number of textbooks and guides on cooperative inquiry have been published on cooperative inquiry, principally John Heron's (1996) *Cooperative inquiry: research into the human condition* and Peter Reason's (1988) *Human Inquiry in Action* and (1994) *Participation in Human Inquiry*. These textbooks provide comprehensive accounts of the cooperative inquiry method, including the theoretical framework, philosophical underpinnings and guidance on implementing the method. However, their drawback is that they are not accessible to a broad readership, nor can they be used as a hands-on field manual. While Heron, Reason and other's approaches to co-enquiry are laudably rooted in robust philosophical reflection and analysis, we perceive that the language and style used in the available literature may be far removed from the possibilities of practical application of co-enquiry in the field. There exists one practical toolkit for doing co-enquiry, produced by the Beacon North East initiative (Beacon North East 2012). As an 8-page brochure that contains key concepts and tips for implementing co-enquiry (from the position of the institution), it provides basic information and tips for the implementation of the process (see Ideas boxes p.14 and 31)



### Ideas: Key elements of a co-enquiry approach (adapted from the Beacons North East Co-enquiry Toolkit (Beacon North East 2012):

**Cooperation and collaboration.** Although the concept of working *with* rather than *on* people is simple, in practice a lot of (participatory) research that is supposedly carried out *with* people still results in outcomes that are *on* people. The principle of full cooperation must be a constant, from the first steps of research design, to the dissemination of collaboratively produced results.

**Participation.** Philosophically, this means that all aspects of human life are interconnected and that every person has an important role in the research process. Practically, it means that every member of the research process (including community members) has a voice and an active input in planning, implementation, write-up and dissemination of the research.

**Equality.** This contains the principle of mutual respect: every member of the research process has equal right to a voice and a vote in decision-making, every viewpoint is valid and listened to, and decisions are reached consensually.

**Co-production.** New research knowledge is co-produced; no form of knowing (e.g. academic or expert knowledge) is privileged over another (e.g. experiential or traditional knowledge), as they are all considered equally valid.

**Social Justice.** The research has social justice outcomes: it has a positive, transformative impact on community life and aims towards community self-determination, empowerment, and autonomy.

**Political engagement.** Researchers are politically engaged in the issues faced by the communities they work with and committed to supporting their struggles. Any collaborative research is likely to engage with a number of different political struggles; while these are likely to render research more complex, they should be embraced by researchers as fundamental elements of the co-enquiry process.

**Ethics.** All aspects and stages of the co-enquiry process are rigorously assessed according to the highest ethical standards (see Annexes 1 and 2).

**Trust.** This is a key component of the co-enquiry relationship. Trust is fomented through full disclosure of project information, through explicit commitment (political, social, intellectual, emotional) on the part of researchers and communities, and through maintaining open lines of communication.

**Time.** Community decision-making processes often require significant time; community members are also keen to respect to specific calendars – agricultural, cultural, political, economic, educational, ritual, etc. – that mark daily life. Power imbalances between communities and researchers are most obvious when university or donor-controlled research schedules take precedence over community needs. Respecting community timetables foments trust, underlines community control over the research process, and permits indigenous philosophies and innovations to emerge.

**Mutual Learning.** As collaboration progresses, researchers and community members will ‘get better’ at doing co-enquiry and at learning from each other. Being mindful of lessons learned and teaching experiences as they are happening is an essential component in the personal and collective growth of those engaged in co-enquiry.



## Co-enquiry and academic research

While co-enquiry continues to generate a great deal of academic and practitioner interest and discussion, they remain complex aspirations that are sometimes difficult to justify or implement fully in university settings. Within an increasingly commoditised, competitive and audited Academia, researchers find themselves bound to ‘rules of the game’ that are often rather incompatible with participatory research (see Hall 2005), let alone the deeply collaborative approach to research we are calling co-enquiry. The constraints on academics include the pressure to publish according to strict regimens of impact factor and authorship order, time pressures, job insecurity, and funding shortfall to name a few. These constraints tend to reduce the ability and desire of researchers to engage in innovative and partnerships with non-academic partners. It is important to note that there are many academics pursuing co-enquiry approaches, and many departments and institutions welcoming these progressive approaches, yet these are often academics and departments that do not receive deserved recognition because they remain underrepresented in formal academic literature.

In the face of these complexities, we wish to re-propose – and substantiate – arguments that have been made by other proponents of co-enquiry: that not only is it more fair and just to adopt a co-enquiry approach when carrying out academic research with communities – particularly on people-centred topics such as community-based management strategies for conservation – but it has the potential to improve the validity, quality and relevance of research (Brydon-Miller *et al.* 2003; Gall *et al.* 2009; Vaillancourt 2005). The remaining hurdle in the move towards handing the reins of research to community hands is one of institutional will rather than one of methodological frailty. In proposing a holistic alternative to conventional academic practices, co-enquiry challenges received wisdom regarding what constitutes successful research and the competitiveness of results obtained.

Finally, for co-enquiry to be successful, integrity and intention are as important as a willingness to engage in co-enquiry actions, a desire to improve the participation or a wish to enhance academic results. In other words, researchers must be deeply committed to the process of transformation – towards self-determination, empowerment, and full community control of the research process – that co-enquiry foments.

### **Basic differences between ‘conventional’ research and co-enquiry**

In this chapter we describe the key differences between conventional research and co-enquiry research processes. The most important difference between conventional research and co-enquiry lies in the location of power in the research process. Although communities may be invited to collaborate and even participate in conventional research programmes, ultimately the researchers control the process. In co-enquiry, communities are the ones in control of the research process, and have the power to start, stop, and modify the process as they wish. Communities call upon researchers to respond to community needs, not the other way around. Co-enquiry, in this sense, goes further than participatory research as the balance of power is squarely with the communities rather than shared between communities and researchers.



Another fundamental difference lies in the objectives of the research. Conventional research has a number of different objectives – to create new knowledge for the wider academic and lay community, to publish, etc. – of which one may be, in some cases, to benefit the communities research institutions work with. Co-enquiry research has as its main and most important objective to benefit the communities involved in the research process, and, arguably, the emancipation of the communities involved (see Chapter VIII).

A central objective of co-enquiry and many other participatory research approaches is to build, through the research process, community capacity to respond autonomously to current and future problems. In cases that conventional research processes provide support to community capacity-building, these are not central elements of the research process nor do they generally result in communities feeling they have the ability to autonomously lead future research processes.

As mentioned, the entire research cycle of co-enquiry is adapted to be controlled by community researchers and community members. At the end of the research cycle, once data has been produced, in the co-enquiry framework, the communities own the data and decide what to do with it. In this sense, co-enquiry also fundamentally differs from participatory research in which the data is controlled in partnership by both researchers and communities, or conventional research, in which the researcher alone controls the data. It may be that co-enquiry research processes do not result in publications or further dissemination, if the community does not wish it, because in a co-enquiry setting communities are in control of how research results are disseminated (see Chapter VII).

Co-enquiry is a tool of the anti-oppressive research methodologies toolbox: it seriously engages with radically different ontologies and epistemologies and can profoundly challenge conventional academic approaches (see Ideas box below, p. 17-18). In the view of the authors of this manual, when carrying out research with communities, particularly historically marginalised/oppressed communities, co-enquiry should always be the preferred approach.



## Ideas: Anti-oppressive, Critical and Indigenous Research Methodologies

Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) coined the term ‘anti-oppressive research’ as a way of discussing a series of methodologies, including critical social theory, feminist approaches, emancipatory research in the line of Paulo Freire (see below) and indigenous methodologies, that challenge positivist social science. These can be considered ‘transgressive’ research approaches as they consistently challenge the inherent power dynamics of conventional academic research. In their search for ways of addressing these unequal power relations, anti-oppressive approaches generate unorthodox theoretical and methodological solutions.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing movement to rethink, radicalise and decolonise research processes. If this methods manual covers the co-enquiry stream of this movement, in this box we briefly survey the ‘anti-oppressive’ stream (see bibliography for an overview: Brown and Strega 2005, Ristock and Pennell 1996, Smith 1999, Denzin, Lincoln and Smith 2008, Mihesuah and Wilson 2004, Mertens 2009, Chilisa 2012).

These approaches tackle the very epistemological foundations of conventional research. Building on postmodern and poststructuralist exposés of how most scientific knowledge is produced, organised and circulated according to White, male, Enlightenment-based paradigms, anti-oppressive research “takes seriously and seeks to trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes” (Brown and Strega 2005: 7). It cracks open the black box of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ knowledge and research, by proposing that diverse forms of knowing are legitimate and deserve space in academic research, and by making explicit the political practices of creating knowledge. Researchers operating in this model are required to question and challenge how their position, history, location, race, culture, gender, and so on shape their worldviews and research ideas. They are required to make a commitment to those they work with, personally and professionally, with a view to making empowerment, emancipation, social justice and resistance central aspects of the process and outcome of research (Potts and Brown 2005: 260).

This challenge is highly politically charged, given that most universities and research centres still operate from the premise that the classic research model is impartial, objective, “innocent in intention and effect”, race- and gender-blind and apolitical, and is the only way to achieve the truth. Knowledge gained by researchers who locate themselves politically and socially is considered inadequate, or of a lower status, in these contexts, as self-reflexivity implies identifying emotions, personal self-interest, political values and cultural codes – all of which threaten academia’s ability to produce truth claims (Brown and Strega 2005).

An integral part of anti-oppressive approaches are what are known as ‘critical indigenous methodologies’, which provide for both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers the opportunity to carry out research from within a radically different framework, leading to results that innovate, create and inspire new solutions to questions posed. Increasing numbers of indigenous scholars are contributing to the development of a critical indigenous research (Wilson 2008; Cochran et al 2008; Dezin, Lincoln, Tuhiwai Smith 2008; Hart 2010; Kovach 2010; Chilisa 2012). Weber-Pillwax (1999) provides a succinct set of principles that frame indigenous methodologies: (a) the interconnectedness of all living things, (b) the impact of motives and intentions on person and community, (c) the foundation of research as lived indigenous experience, (d) the groundedness of theories in indigenous epistemology, (e) the transformative nature of research, (f) the sacredness and responsibility of maintaining personal and community integrity, and (g) the recognition of languages and cultures as living processes.



Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2001, 2003, 2008) has consciously developed an indigenous research paradigm, which he presents in his books *Research as Ceremony* (2008) using in conjunction an academic-style text and a story-telling-style text, generating with the reader the type of relationality that epitomises indigenous research approaches. Wilson (2008), followed by Hart (2010) and Kovach (2010), have developed an indigenous theory, practice and methods – rooted firmly in indigenous ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology – that seek to exit the tired binary comparison with Western thought.

Being rooted in indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, critical indigenous research can resist the pressure to be academised, institutionalised or otherwise sanitized for appropriation by conventional research discourse and practice. This has been the case with once-radical research approaches like Participatory Action Research, which has been sometimes been co-opted by the mainstream, and in the process de-politicised, neutered, and in some cases, rendered part of the toolbox of subjection (see the Ethical Issues chapter p-28-30 and, as an example of the literature on this topic, the classic collection edited by Cooke and Kothari 2001). Maintaining the spiritual and sacred roots of indigenous research as the foundation of the approach helps to ensure that it will not be ‘disciplined’ for institutional purposes (Garoutte 2003).

The beauty of the critical indigenous methodological approach, as well as other anti-oppressive approaches, is that they can be mobilized by academics of all genders, races, backgrounds, orientations, etc. so long as the researchers are willing to do the work, ask the questions, challenge themselves emotionally and intellectually, and stand up for social justice in the face of multiple institutional pressures. As Potts and Brown (2005: 283) conclude:

“Always being reflective about yourself and your work is not easy. Just when we think we’re getting it right, we realize we’re only getting it better. Becoming anti-oppressive is not a comfortable place to be. It means constantly reflecting on how one is being constructed and how one is constructing one’s world.”

Yet, increasingly, it is precisely this complex challenge that makes adopting an anti-oppressive methodological approach so inviting to researchers working with indigenous and other marginalised communities.

On the other hand, some researchers may argue that for research to be objective and valid, there are cases in which it is more appropriate to carry out research that follows a more conventional approach, i.e. that outside experts are required to implement it. This is argued in particular for research that touches on topics that community members might not feel comfortable talking about with community peers, for issues of confidentiality. In our view, if the communities are not able to carry out the research themselves, then it is probably not as relevant to them as research they *are* able to implement. Furthermore, in many cases, it is likely that community members feel more comfortable speaking openly with a community group rather than with external researchers carrying out conventional research.

However, there may be cases in which a community feels that conventional research processes would better suit their needs. It is important that such a position be respected, as communities must be empowered to make their own decisions about what kind of research approach they wish to take, and for what research outcomes. Such a decision must be made with the full knowledge of the diversity of options available to them along



the spectrum of research approaches, which goes from strictly conventional to co-enquiry, and the implications of each option.

### The co-creation of sciences

Some of the most important differences between conventional and co-enquiry research processes are rooted in the fundamental ontological, epistemological and value differences between conventional science and the endogenous science of indigenous peoples or rural communities. In a recent and innovative publication *Towards the Co-creation of Sciences*, Haverkort et al (2013a) have sought to demonstrate, through case studies, the possible approaches to co-produce knowledge and science through a transdisciplinary approach. Their fundamental argument is that it is possible and necessary to envision the complementarity of conventional and endogenous science and to work towards co-creation of sciences through open dialogue and mutual learning.

Their basic definition of science provides the ground for equality between different epistemological systems:

“Science is a body of knowledge formulated within a specific worldview and value system and classified under a theoretical framework. It includes the processes for producing, storing and retrieving knowledge, formulating assumptions, general principles, theories and methodologies, and it involves the active role of a specific knowledge community that has reached consensus on the validity of these processes. The knowledge acquired and the resulting science is always limited and subject to modification in the light of new information and insights.” (Haverkort et al 2013: 13).

Given this basic definition of science, they make a series of propositions that make inter-science dialogue and the co-creation of sciences possible (Haverkort et al 2013b: 42). The first is that none of the sciences can “claim absolute truth or scientific certainty” as each science has strengths and weaknesses. All sciences are built on a number of essential factors: worldviews (ontology), ways of learning, theories and knowledge concepts (epistemology), and values; all sciences are equivalent. Secondly, given the great differences in worldviews, methods and values, it is impossible “to use the parameters and criteria of one science to assess or falsify another science”. Thirdly, each science can be enhanced and explore new paradigms through intra-science and inter-science dialogues. Finally, they consider the plurality of sciences and asset for cultural and scientific sustainability and for addressing current world problems (see also Ideas box on Anti-oppressive, Critical and Indigenous Methodologies, below).

Such premises open up the possibilities for the co-creation of sciences and co-enquiry in new and empowering ways for communities. This approach highlights the importance of self-reflexively examining one’s worldviews and values prior to engaging in a co-enquiry process, as these fundamentally influence how participants engage with the process. This is true for community members and researchers alike. Only when values and worldviews are explicit, and each participant is fully aware of the impact of their cultural baggage on the co-enquiry process, can the work of bridging differences in worldviews and values begin.