CONFERENCE SPEECH – Participative Research Methods

Thanks for inviting me to speak today about participative research methods. I must say, it's hard not to be struck by the irony of discussing participative processes in research in such a non-participative way. So, hopefully, you'll excuse the inconsistencies between what I'm saying and what I'm doing.

So, participative research methods. I think if we can do participative research methods in 20 minutes we can easily change the world in a day.

Let me start by saying something about research generally. I know that whenever we discuss research people switch off, the energy changes and your probably sitting there already thinking about what's for lunch or where your going tonight.

However, whether we as individuals are interested or not, research is a critically important thing. This may be stating the obvious to many of you but, research is the way in which we generate knowledge in our society and this has far reaching implications for us. Our research processes develop knowledge that then becomes the definer of what we consider true or false and the many ways in which we live our lives. It forms the basis of our policy decisions, our decisions about appropriate services, etc.

Just consider that it was not that many years ago that research generated knowledge about the brain sizes of women and black people compared to white men and the social, political, economic and personal consequences were huge, as a result of that research.

So, it is very important, even if we do find it boring or irrelevant - the way in which knowledge is developed and therefore the way in which research is carried out is fundamental.

In the past traditional forms of research have been scientifically based in that they have required reliable, valid data in order to prove a certain hypothesis. Scientific research and knowledge is based on the premise that there is one unified, knowable ultimate truth out there and if our scientific processes or methodologies are pure enough we will discover this truth.

This means that research processes that adhered to these pure principles were meant to generate the truth. Now clearly there are many examples to suggest to us that this is not the case, my previous story being just one example of many.

Partly because of this there have been serious challenges to the scientific ways of generating knowledge as always being the only true ones. This is a significant thing because scientific knowledge has resisted many challenges because of its self-maintaining nature. Because scientific knowledge says that there is only one way of finding the truth, any awareness gained through other means is immediately discredited.

So this shift that is occurring has come about because of a crack or a break in the hold that the scientific paradigm has over knowledge development. There are now many perspectives that are actively challenging the scientific way as the only and best and also many new methodologies that are developing which are attempting to generate knowledge in alternative ways to the strictly positivist or empirical ways of the scientific paradigm.

So why should be take the time to talk about participative research processes? My fundamental reason for doing that is that I believe that the way we go about our research, and therefore go about generating knowledge, is critically important in terms of what

knowledge is generated. So that knowledge that we generate by participative processes is likely to be much more able to lead us to change in relation to social issues and issues of injustice.

I'd like to make 3 points about participatory research.

1. Firstly, participatory research is about the meaningful involvement of the people for whom the research is designed to be helpful.

    *   Let me give you an example. In a big research project that I am just completing, I wanted to find out how we could work with marginalised young people in ways that might lead to real change - for them and for society. So I made the decision to go to these young people and to youth workers and talk with them about it.

    *   Now what is significant here is two things. Firstly, there is a widespread belief in participative research that the subjects of the research are also the experts. This is about valuing the knowledge that they already have as being the truth.

    *   The second thing about this relates to levels of people's participation. So it wasnt just enough for me to go to these young people, I had to think of ways in which I could facilitate their meaningful participation in a process that usually would feel alienating and judging of them. So its about meaningful participation, not just tokenistic involvement. This meaningful involvement has to occur at all levels of the research process and it is about recognising the expertise of these people and giving them power and control over their involvement.

    *   For example, in relation to my earlier comment about the non-participatory nature of this session, I could have decided to try to make this session participatory by asking people to talk to the person next to them about their experiences with research or to put up your hands, etc., but this in itself does not make my process participatory. In fact I would go so far as to say that this is tokenistic involvement rather than participatory processes, because I've asked you to participate but done very little to really remove the obstacles to your meaningful participation or to facilitate it in any real sense. The same is often done in a research context, we ask for the participation of others and yet we don't value their experiences as much as our interpretations, or we structure it so that their participation is only token.

2. The second point I'd like to make about participatory research is that the research is not an end in itself to be achieved by any means, it needs to use a good process.

    *   So this point is about the process of generating the research and goes back to my initial point that participatory research values the connection between what we find out and how we find it out; this is so that we can trust our end product because it's been generated using a good process, and also because the role of research, according to this process, is also to achieve change, it's not just an end in itself.

    *   Let me give you another example. I was involved in a project that involved us doing a needs analysis and service recommendations about the needs of young

people in a particular geographical community. We approached this task from a participatory process and this meant that instead of being content with a process that pulled together existing information and made recommendations based on what we saw and what we didnt see, we developed a process that would do two things. Firstly, the process was designed to facilitate the involvement of the community generally and specifically young people in that area. This was so that we could get an inside view about what the issues really were in this community, the stuff that the census and more superficial means of investigation don't get at. Secondly, it was designed to resource the community, to develop an awareness about young people's issues and begin the process of developing a community response to young people's issues.

- So for example, we ran workshops (information gathering and giving), we held discos, we held a youth festival, used community arts to develop posters, a radio show, etc.

- Participative research operates on a number of levels at the same time. So whilst we were gathering valuable information, we were also developing links in the community, raising awareness of young people's issues, and facilitating the development of skills and self-esteem in lots of individual young people in that community. Many of these things are still continuing to have their effect, they have a life past our involvement. It's more than just carrying out research.

3. The final point I'd like to make concerns the whole notion of change. I've already suggested to you that the way that we generate knowledge effects the knowledge that we generate, and now I'd like to take that one step further by saying that the knowledge that we generate can either be instrumental in maintaining the way we live or in changing it.

- I firmly believe that change can occur on many levels through the use of alternative participative processes. The last example I gave illustrated the way that research of this sort can result in community based change. It is also true of the individual lives of those young people who were involved, and this is primarily the case because the research process offered them control over their involvement and participation.

- One of the other levels of change is about my belief that traditional research generates knowledge that is separate from people and because we use this knowledge to develop policies, etc., I think this is why many of our initiatives end up not being effective. If we base our policies, programs and service deliveries on knowledge generated from research practices that are about connecting with these people and valuing their contribution on all levels, then I think that can lead to policies that are much more likely to be effective and therefore to lead to some sort of real change in the lives and living standards of people.

- The other level of change that I would like to leave you with may, in the long run be the most significant of all. By developing relationships with people, by being open to hear their stories and allow ourselves to be touched by their honesty and their truth, is a very powerful force that traditional research protects us from.
- Participative research is about allowing ourselves to be touched by the experiences of others and to do something active about that, something that may assist in making a difference.

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