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Participatory research: Opportunities and challenges for research with women in South Africa

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Synopsis

The basic underlying principles of participatory research have long been found to be useful and meaningful for conducting women oriented research. In South Africa, with its history of inequality on both the gender and the political front, the conspicuous scarcity of programmes utilizing participatory approaches for research with women, specifically, is regrettable.

This article reports on a participatory project conducted with a group of Coloured women from Eersterust, a suburb of Pretoria, South Africa. The outcomes of the project re-emphasize the correlation between the fundamental aspects underlying both participatory research and feminist research, and point out the noticeable positive impact that the experience had on the women participating in the project. The article concludes by challenging researchers to take advantage of the opportunities that the increasing use of participatory research approaches can hold for future research with women in South Africa. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In whichever context we decide to do research, we need to ask ourselves where we want to go with our research and what we want to achieve. Not only do the questions that we ask in our research reflect our priorities, our values, as well as our concerns, but every aspect of our work is also influenced by the paradigms out of which we choose to operate (Arnst, 1996, p. 114; Maguire, 1987, p. 27). In this way research can play a valuable role in the process of change by providing useful information in order to understand the background and processes needed for working towards such change (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003).

On the broad research front, South Africa has begun to further scholarship directed at understanding Africa and the country's role on the continent. The aim of the National Research Foundation (NRF), for example, is to generate researchers in fields uniquely defined by the country's context and position by providing opportunities for research in clearly identified focus areas (NRF (National Research Foundation), 2003). On a narrower front, the feminist movement in particular is an area in which an authentically South African research agenda is being constructed (Steyn, 1998, p. 43). Although Women's Studies and Gender Studies are both relatively newly developed fields of study in South Africa (the first programme was established in 1995), there are already seven major universities that offer such pro-

grammes (South African Women's Studies, 2003). The developments and outcomes of a variety of endeavours in women's oriented research, though particularly laudable on the one hand, on the other hand also serve to focus attention on the importance of recognising that the ultimate goals of social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, i.e. equal conditions for all women in South Africa as envisaged in our constitution, have not yet been fully realised.

The statement by Olesen that the complexities and problems of women's lives are serious enough that a diversity of approaches, methods, and topics of research are required (Olesen, 1998, p. 322) rings particularly true for research with South African women. Research methods need not be limited to the conventional as new approaches open up possibilities of a wide variety of processes not previously considered. This paper argues that the participatory research approach is one such non-conventional method through which women's issues and concerns in South Africa can be addressed in a meaningful and feasible way.

Participatory research operates from the basic premise that every human being has worth and should be treated with respect regardless of that person's status in society (Servaes, 1999, p. 110). It is a methodology in which the subjects of research are actively involved, offering a way for researchers and participants to join in the search for solutions to problems—an approach that does not violate the dignity of the people by controlling or dominating them in any way.

Many examples of the use of the participatory approach in the feminist arena can be found in the general literature, and many opinions have been raised and debated concerning the issues and problems surrounding the applications of the methodology (Rose, 2001). This article is not an attempt at entering into any methodological debate. Although participatory research is not unknown in South Africa, its application in programmes concerning women is limited, and its use in feminist research is particularly wanting. Using a participatory research project conducted with a group of women as an example, the main aim of this article is to re-examine the relationship between participatory research and feminist research approaches, and to explore the potential merit of participatory research methods for investigation with women, specifically within the South African context.

Issues confronting the women of South Africa

In South Africa, as in many Third World countries, African women formed the backbone of the economy and social development. They were traditionally the cultivators of land, and communal ownership of land guaranteed access to all, including women (Aniagolu, 1998, p. 9; Ginwala, 1991, p. 63). European invasion, colonialism, and "Victorian notions of missionaries on the role of women in society" (Ginwala, 1991, p. 63) displaced many such traditions. The resulting sexual division of labour, with women being trained to be domestic workers and only the men provided with agricultural and other practical training, played a major part in denying women a measure of economic self-sufficiency.

Women of colour in South Africa, moreover, did not have to contend only with imperialism and colonialism, but also with the realities of apartheid. A major characteristic of the apartheid society was its divisions based on race and class, which were in turn deeply entrenched within a patriarchal structure (Bazilli, 1991, p. 6)—a structure that ultimately affected all women, including white women, in South Africa. Patriarchy in all its manifestations contributes significantly to the exploitation and oppression of women (Bhavnani, 1993, p. 27; Ravenhill, 1999, p. 17). Patriarchy has been, according to Bazilli (1991, p. 9), the one definite non-racial institution in South Africa, and the social and cultural structures associated with the different positions of men and women in society define the parameters within which the domination of men over women takes place (Bazilli, 1991, p. 9; Ramphele & Boonzaier, 1988, p. 153). One of the major effects of such a hegemonic value system, according to which minorities and women are invisible and valueless, is the sense of powerlessness that comes with self-negation and negation by others.

In South Africa this combination of discrimination and subordination, not only on economic and social levels, but also emotionally and intellectually, had a substantial detrimental effect on (especially non-white) women's growth, development and empowerment, resulting in what Finnemore (1995, p. 27) aptly terms "a wasteland of human potential".

- Women have been significantly economically disadvantaged. Colonial conquest and sexual division

of labour denied women access to means of production and economic independency (Aniagolu, 1998, p. 9). In addition, the formidable array of laws affecting social and economic separation on grounds of colour resulted in widespread unavailability of many of the basic resources such as affordable energy, primary health care, access to clean water and other basic amenities, imposing a heavy burden on women (Cawood & Potter, 1996, p. 15).

• Violence against women is another major impediment to the development and empowerment of women. In spite of recent denials on government level, rape statistics still reveal South Africa as having of the highest reported rapes in the world (Rape Crisis Centre, 2005). Violence is both a reflection of unequal power relationships in society while also serving to maintain this inequality.

• Partly related to violence is the right of women to have control over their own bodies, in that they have to be able to control not only their reproductive rights, but also the access of men to their bodies, all which should be regarded as preconditions to women's basic rights (Cawood & Potter, 1996, p. 16; Sadie & Van Aardt, 1996, p. 88). Within many cultures in South Africa this basic principle is not acknowledged.

• Economic dependency on men, furthermore, makes it difficult for women to gain control over matters such as sexually transmitted disease by, for example, convincing their partners to use condoms (Steyn, 1998, p. 49).

• Girls are often disadvantaged in the area of access to education and training due to early pregnancy, household work and sexual abuse (Cawood & Potter, 1996, p. 16). Undervaluing a girl-child often results in an adulthood of oppression (Finnemore, 1995, p. 20).

• Female illiteracy is a reality in South Africa (as in the rest of Africa) and is to a great extent, especially in rural areas, the result of traditional attitudes about women's mainly domestic role in society. Very often men resist initiatives by women to become literate (Von Horsten, 1997, p. 21).

• Women are disadvantaged by the social justice system. Even though sexism is outlawed by the constitution, many instances of inequality and dis-

crimination are still found. The Communal Rights Bill that was recently passed by parliament, for example, reinforces the power of traditional leaders but also reinforces negative implications for rural women (Govender, 2004, p. 18).

Addressing women's issues

There had been a tendency in South Africa to see the struggles and experiences of women of colour as part of the struggle against apartheid and this meant that the democratic movement was inclined to regard the liberation of women as being secondary to national liberation (Kadali, 1995, p. 75). Saks (1997, p. 79) feels strongly that battles over national identities had a direct bearing on gender relations and roles. Before 1990 the hegemony of apartheid defined the political domain and issues related to women were either pushed from the political agenda for not being "political" enough, or had to stand back for the larger goal of the national liberation struggle.

The transition to the "new" South Africa, however, created the opportunity for women to politicise women's issues. Collaborative initiatives between women of all races and the determination that women's issues would not be relegated to a subordinate role once liberation had been won, served to emphasize the presence of women in politics and their resolve to create an enlightened environment (Ravenhill, 1999, p. 14; Steyn, 1998, p. 42). As a result of these efforts gender equality is firmly entrenched in the constitution of SA and a number of measures in the form of new Acts, amendments to Acts, and national programmes, were and are still being taken to address various issues relating to equality, discrimination, health, violence and crime.

Changing the status and circumstances of women in such a relatively short period of time can deservedly be seen as a "gender revolution" and considered as being "unique in the history of gender justice activism anywhere in the world" (Ravenhill, 1999, p. 14). South Africa is, however, still in the process of undergoing social change and the need for reciprocal understanding of all components of our society is very real. In order to aspire towards and attain true freedom of women through "emancipation from all forms of oppression" (Mandela, 1994), thorough research in-

vestigating the issues relating to the needs of women in South Africa is required to complement the goals achieved on the political front.

When it comes to addressing women's concerns from a scholarly point of view, Kadali (1995, p. 77) calls specifically on academics to play a more prominent role in feminist research, as she regards academic feminism not only a socio-political tool for change but also an intellectual activity for the construction of new knowledge. Nkululeko's suggestion that African researchers must develop new theories, constructs and concepts that capture what is real in Africa rather than merely applying what is formulated elsewhere (Dabi Nkululeko, as quoted by Steyn, 1998, p. 48) is an objective that should still be taken seriously. It is therefore important that we develop, understand, and apply research methods and methodologies that are relevant to the specific context of the South African woman.

Research with women

The life experiences of women cannot be universalised, as the meaning of being a woman differs, depending on the particular place, situation, and time (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Riano, 1994, p. xiii). South African society is marked by diversity and historically has been a very divided society (Steyn, 1998, p. 42). However, although South African women, as a result of differences across race and culture, do not share a common history, they do share common histories of (male) oppression (Ravenhill, 1999, p. 14). It is in relation to this that one can re-interpret Kadali's appeal (1995, p. 75) that there is a need for (all) women to move away from (regarding themselves in the context of) "woman as victim" (and) to (strive together towards seeing themselves) "woman as empowered citizen".

Social science research methodology has traditionally been biased strongly in favour of quantitative approaches. While not claiming that quantitative research is "imbued with machismo values" (Deem, 2002), these approaches have more often than not reflected the notion that the experiences and priorities of men are central and representative of knowledge creation (Robinson, 1993, p. 2). Women are of the opinion, and research has shown, that these views distort their experiences by translating them into categories pre-determined by (male) researchers (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 85; Mies, 1991, p. 67; Olesen, 1998, p. 304). Women-oriented researchers thus take the point of view that in order not to be subject to the definitions and traditions of others, the appropriate form of research with women is inter alia that in which women participate in decisions affecting them and which has the empowerment of women as an integral part of the process.

Feminist research is an approach that complies with these requirements. Although the search over the years for a distinctively or uniquely "feminist methodology" was not conclusive (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Deem, 2002; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 98), the fundamental basis of a feminist approach to research with women is the belief in an approach to knowledge that places women at the centre of research and analysis. Feminist researchers point out the importance of the uniqueness of women's experiences, of relationships and the centrality of affiliation, the construction of identity through intimacy, nurturance and other relatedness, and the importance of dialogue, participation, reciprocity and cooperation in women's ways of knowing. Feminist research is thus research that makes women's diverse situations the central problem, thereby utilizing feminist concerns and beliefs as valuable research resources to ground the research process (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Brayton, 1997; Olesen, 1998, p. 300).

Participatory research methodology offers another potentially valuable means of addressing women's concerns in a significant manner. Participatory research arose from a thorough questioning in the field of social science research, succeeding in breaking with the practice of conventional accepted methods (Servaes, 1999). It is a methodology that actively involves the subjects of research, allowing people to take part in projects that serve their unique individual aspirations and needs. The basic tenet of the participatory research method can be summarized as: equity and active involvement of the subjects taking part in the research process; resulting in knowledge generation and the development of critical awareness; leading to identification of needs and priorities, em-

powerment, self-confidence, decision making and problem solving.

Feminist researchers have long been interested in participatory research methodologies (Rose, 2001) and the feminist movement had an important influence on the debate and development of participatory research, enriching the theory and practice thereof (Tandon, 1996, p. 22). Although participatory research has as its central theme empowerment and the creation of knowledge, the methodology as it emerged in the 1970s initially centred exclusively on the perceptions, problems and experiences of male power. However, a feminist critique of participatory research being gender-blind developed in the mid-1980s and it asked whether this potentially emancipatory research approach was for the male oppressed only (George, 1996, p. 119; Maguire, 1987, p. 50; Weiler, 1991, p. 451). Central to this question one can discern the problem fundamental to feminist inquiry, namely that of who can be a "knower" (Olesen, 1998, p. 303)—a query that refers to both women as subjects of research and women as researchers.

Projects by earlier researchers such as Braimoh (1995), De Koning and Martin (1996), Maguire (1987), Mies (1983), Small (1988), and Weiler (1991) to mention but a few, specifically demonstrate the significance and feasibility of the use of participatory research methods for research with women. As feminist researchers accumulated more experience with implementing participatory research approaches, they became more aware of a variety of barriers and limitations (Rose, 2001). However, even though these latter researchers have become less confident about the possibilities of the strict application of participatory principles, it has not diminished the potentially meaningful contribution and overall significance of the approach. It therefore seems reasonable to advocate that the methodology should be utilized to a greater extent in research projects with women in South Africa.

History has shown that there is a need for empowering the women of South Africa in their intellectual and everyday lives. In this article, a research project, exploring the feasibility of using a participatory research approach as a method for determining the information needs of a group of Coloured women in South Africa, serves as illustration of how the practical implementation of participatory research techniques and the unique characteristics of participatory research, brought to the fore those essential features and outcomes that research with women aims at.

The participatory research project

Background

The Coloured population of South Africa has its origin in the contact between various ethnic and racial groups at the southern tip of the African continent over a period of more than 300 years. The Coloureds, as a mixed race group being neither white nor black, are classified as a distinct racial group in South Africa, and represent about 9% of the total population (The Coloureds of Southern Africa, 2005).

The decision to conduct a study to determine the information needs of Coloured women was originally taken within the context of the enormous gap in studies of information needs of previously disadvantaged women in South Africa, and the conspicuous dearth of studies concerning Coloured people in South Africa (Penzhorn, 2002, p. 240). Qualitative research methods not only offer significant advantages for feminist research, and conform to basic feminist principles (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Deem, 2002), but are also extremely suitable for the study of information needs as they are concerned with discovering the facts of the everyday lives of people, and provide a flexible approach to collecting data (Kaniki, 2001, p. 196). The use of the participatory research methodology for conducting this project with women was thus considered an attractive as well as a practical alternative to quantitative methods and techniques traditionally used in information needs research.

Participatory research methodology

Participatory research has its roots in development when, in the early 1970s, many people in the development community began questioning the top-down approaches dominant in the previous decades. This reaction gave birth to the implementation of approaches more participatory in nature. The participatory research technique was first brought to inter-

national recognition in 1972 when Paolo Freire, within the context of his work with adult literacy programmes, coined the term "conscientisation". Freire (1995) believes that people who have lived their lives in marginalised and deprived positions need to develop a critical insight into the structures and ideas in society and themselves that place and maintain them in positions of inequality.

Participatory research is a collective inquiry as opposed to the individual nature of traditional research methodology (Tandon, 1988, p. 12). It combines three activities or collective processes: (i) *investigation* involving the people in posing and solving the problem. Together the people try to understand why and how the problem exists; (ii) an *educational component* assisting people to develop skills in collecting, analysing and utilizing information; and (iii) *action* as a way for researchers and participants to deal with specific problems (Maguire, 1987, p. 20–30; Hall, 1984, p. 290).

In contrast to traditional research methods with rigorous processes of planning, observation, and evaluation, there is no such strict methodology for participatory research (Servaes, 1999, p. 117). The underlying principle for developing models for participatory research is to approach this from the basic premise that the unique conditions of individual projects should determine the methods applied. It is noticeable, however, that even though no prescriptive methodologies exist, most of the authors and researchers studied in the literature follow distinctive steps or stages in their investigation.

Conducting the research project

This specific information needs project was never intended to be an actual developmental project as the broad aim of the research was to investigate the application of participatory research techniques in a non-developmental subject area. It therefore soon became clear that it would not be simple to categorise and apply the series of steps and activities of the research process strictly according to phases found in the literature. For this project therefore, phases that broadly corresponded to but were different in detail from phases identified in the literature, and which were uniquely suitable for the project, were adopted. The following is a very brief summary of these stages in order to give some indication as to the manner in which the project was conducted.

Phase one: entering the community

The project was undertaken with a group of women belonging to a prayer group in the Coloured suburb of Eersterust, near Pretoria, South Africa. The group, consisting of Christian women from diverse denominations, has been in existence for about 9 years and the women get together in alternating homes every Tuesday with the sole aim of praying for the community of Eersterust. Entry into the community was facilitated by the fact that a colleague was involved in various community projects in Eersterust over the years where some of the women of the prayer group were involved in, and not only knew the people there, but also had a cooperative and trusting relationship with the members of the community with whom she worked. Another expeditionary factor was that the involvement of the prayer group in the research project was offered voluntarily.

Phase two: Initial meetings

Informal preliminary discussions with the group with regard to the research project as a whole were held. The term 'information needs' was strange to them and various ways of clarifying the concept had to be employed for them to understand it sufficiently. Most of the women were, however, familiar with the concepts of research and interviews, and eventually general consensus was reached concerning their participation in the project. It was decided by the women that the research would be conducted in their homes after their regular weekly prayer meetings had taken place.

Phase three: Subsequent meetings

After arriving for the research discussions which took place after the regular prayer sessions for some time, the researcher was told to come earlier so as to be able to take on active part in the prayer sessions themselves as well. Participation and discussions around the 'research' issues were marked by enthusiasm from the group throughout the time spent with them. Data collection methods and ways of recording the data were decided on by the women themselves and adaptations to the processes made as circumstances dictated.

Phase four: Withdrawing from the group

The project was planned for a period lasting about 10 months and towards the end of the designated time the group had to be prepared for the withdrawal of the researcher from the prayer meetings. Although it was clearly stated at the beginning of the project that it was to be a temporary involvement, the researcher had by that time become such an accepted member of the group that withdrawing became an emotional issue that had to be handled with much skill and sensitivity.

Phase five: Ongoing action

Apart from the research results obtained by the researcher from the discussions around information needs, the compilation of a booklet aimed specifically at the women of the Eersterust community, containing information and tips derived from the research undertaken, was identified by the group as being another good tangible outcome for the project.

The process of working together with the group of women was to a great extent one of discovery. New insight was obtained concerning the need for information in all areas of the lives of the women and many creative ways of solving their needs were generated during the research process. A consolidated "list" of information needs was composed (Penzhorn, 2002, pp. 247–248) and ways identified in which the newfound knowledge could be practically applied to solve problems, thereby benefiting not only themselves as individuals but also the community of which they formed an integral part. Building on the existing strength and composition of the group the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and the sharing of new ideas and information between the researcher and the participants became part of an enriching learning experience.

Outcomes of the project

From the literature studied and while conducting the abovementioned project, it became clear that, in their search for new methods that go beyond traditional methods, feminist research and participatory research share many emancipatory, transforming intentions. One of the most evident areas of convergence is the debate between quantitative and qualitative research approaches that has been apparent in both participatory research and feminist research. Participatory research challenges the concept of the world seen from a dominant, quantitative paradigm. Feminist research denies that there is only one way of reality and only one way of investigating it (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 85; Maguire, 1987, p. 87; Mies, 1991, p. 67; Klein, 1983, p. 87; Rose, 2001).

Furthermore, when the processes and results of this research project are appraised against the characteristics of participatory research and the underlying principles of feminist research, the significance of the participatory methodology for research with women is revealed. Some of the more prominent issues that emanated from the project that point out (i) the separation from traditional research methods and accentuate the correlation between the fundamental aspects underlying both the participatory research and feminist research approaches, and (ii) highlight the impact that the process had on the women who participated in the project, are the following:

• Participatory research maintains that no human being is capable of making pure objective observations. This challenges the traditional principle of scientific neutrality and the dichotomy of subject and object, and forms one of the fundamental issues in participatory research (Tandon, 1996, p. 20). In the same manner feminists recognise that subjectivity is a valid part of theorising. One of the cardinal issues in feminist research has been the insistence of feminists in redefining the notion of objectivity (Robinson, 1993, p. 15) and recognising the prevailing "bogus objective–subjective dichotomy" (Maguire, 1987, p. 87).

The setting of this project in the homes of the women, with the researcher being unconditionally accepted as part of the prayer group, would under any circumstances be contra-indicative of objectivity. After only a couple of meetings with the group, it became very clear to the researcher that it was impossible not to become involved with the women in the group on a subjective level, identifying with them, and sharing problems—all of which contributed substantially to obtaining information in a relaxed and unforced manner. In contrast to many other information needs studies where the mere fact of obtaining a list of needs meant the fulfillment and termination of commitment, this subjective involvement has resulted in sustained contact between the researcher and the women up to the present time.

• Reciprocity–the concern that not only the researcher but also the participants in a programme should gain something from their involvement in the research–is another important principle in both participatory and feminist research (Deem, 2002; Kronenburg, 1986, p. 255).

The unique nature of the project, combining participatory research with information needs research, provided a learning environment in which the women could identify needs that they had never thought of or verbalised before. Personal needs such as *employment*—how to write a CV, where to find someone to give references; *education* of children; and *housing* were some of the issues that formed a major part of initial discussions. Other needs such as information on *welfare* e.g. the plight of the elderly—where to get help and advice if the elderly were abused; *finance*— how to start your own business; and *legal issues*— how to draft a will, or how to go about divorcing your husband, followed.[1] With some assistance from the researcher the group came to understand these 'everyday problems' as needs for which information was desired, to critically examine the needs, and then to think of practical ways to solve these information needs by identifying sources of information on the specific issues raised. The women revealed a wonderful openness and eagerness to learn and to hear about subjects and situations that they were unfamiliar with. In return, the researcher not only obtained research results, but the women shared many insights into their lives and their approach to problems that the researcher could learn from and be enriched by. The relationship between the women and the researcher very early in the project evolved into a mutual companionship that contributed to the ease with which sharing of ideas could take place.

• Both participatory research and feminist research address power relations between researcher and researched. Participatory research is based on a process of dialogue: cooperative inquiry and trust between researcher and researched (Servaes, 1999, p. 112). Feminist research is sensitive to power relations between respondents and researchers, ensuring that the research process does not exploit the women involved by continuously working toward respecting and maintaining participant trust (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Deem, 2002).

Even though it was made very clear from the beginning of the project that this was to be an explicitly *participatory* project conducted on an equal footing, a natural hesitancy by the women was apparent at the first couple of meetings. The women in this prayer group are, however, a strong group with many natural leadership qualities, and once they were convinced that the researcher meant what she had said about "power sharing" on all levels, they accepted the situation naturally and participated actively in all areas of decision-making. The group decided on the format of the meetings and what the topic(s) of discussion were to be for example. A scribe was assigned to take notes, and they decided that the results were to be consolidated into a list of categorised information needs by grouping the common themes discussed at the meetings. The researcher was in the fortunate position that the actual results of the research were not the main concern, but the sharing process itself. This meant that the possibility of tension between attainment of the research goals for the project, and goals as envisaged and planned by the group of women in the course of the project, did not arise. Even though discussions often veered towards general issues that had nothing to do with the research topic, the researcher made a point of never taking control of the direction the process was taking. This trusting relationship that was established eliminated any possible "power-problems" and furthermore broke down any cultural barriers that might have existed and thus contributed to continuous open discussion and dialogue.

• The two research approaches both emphasize the importance of addressing the personal experiences of research participants. Participatory research maintains that positive results cannot be obtained from research programmes that fail to take into consideration the world-view of the people involved (Freire, 1995, p. 80). Feminists, like participatory researchers, ground research in experience, acknowledging the validity of women's real life experience (Brayton, 1997; Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Mies, 1991, p. 66).

The issue of personal experience was implicit from the beginning of this project. The aim of the study was solely to determine whether a participatory research approach could successfully be applied for the identification of the information needs of this specific

group of individuals. The researcher therefore did not employ any tools or techniques that could influence research results such as demarcating the subject area through questionnaires, for example. The project was on the whole approached without any preconceived anticipation of specific results. The wide range of information needs that were identified during the course of the research project evolved entirely as a direct result of ideas generated and actions initiated by the women themselves, based on their unique circumstances and experiences.

• The requirement in quantitative research that the researcher remains neutral in order to prevent "contamination" of involvement with the conditions of subjects' lives and circumstances presents another area of discussion. Both participatory research and feminist research challenge the necessity of a detached relationship between researcher and researched. The emphasis is on change in the lives of the people, implying involvement and effective intervention (Brayton, 1997; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 99; Klein, 1983, p. 87).

The establishment of an open rapport between the women and the researcher encouraged working together towards the common goal of investigating and identifying the information gaps/needs in the daily lives of the women in the prayer group. As mentioned previously, a special trusting and unreserved bond developed between researcher and researched. As a result of this positive relationship the possibility existed that the project could be seen merely as "a pleasant episode in the lives of the women..." (Mies, 1983, p. 137). However, although the project did not immediately link up to some form of ongoing action, various programmes such as compiling an information booklet (as initially proposed by the women), and computer literacy programmes focusing on women in the Eersterust community, were two of the community projects that were envisaged for the future as direct outcomes of the research project.

• Participatory research as well as feminist research rejects the emphasis on the search for generalisations about the nature of human behaviour. When designing a study for research, methods are proposed to fit a particular group and results used to benefit those specifically involved in the research (Deem, 2002, Maguire, 1987, p. 92; Tandon, 1988, p. 7).

This study was not intended to be either a typical developmental project or a conventional information needs research project, and as was mentioned earlier, the researcher was therefore free from the danger of approaching the women of the prayer group with a pre-planned set of research procedures or methods for data collection and analysis. Not only were the phases according to which the project was conducted modified to suit the specific group and situation, but flexibility of plans and activities as to where meetings were to be held, what the subject(s) of discussion would be, and other characteristics of the project such as the structure and agendas of meetings, and how the results of the 'research' were to be utilized, were all controlled and decided upon by the women themselves. These all depended on, and were adapted to, the specific circumstances and requirements of the women, as the time and occasion presented themselves.

• Although the idea of empowerment may, according to Rose (2001), sometimes be used in a simplistic way, empowerment and knowledge creation are understood to be fundamental underlying concepts in participatory research and feminist research (Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 2003; Kronenburg, 1986; Maguire, 1987; Rose, 2001).

Information needs was a concept that the women in the study had never consciously encountered before. The idea of formally documenting and naming what was previously experienced merely as everyday problems and difficulties, as *information needs*, was a revelation that challenged them to actively deliberate on methods for discovering, identifying and discussing these needs. In addition, being able to critically explore and also articulate the possible underlying reasons for their newly identified information needs, was an empowering process. It was inspiring and exciting to experience how often members of the group would arrive at a meeting with suggestions for solutions to problems, reporting on how they had approached the problem or need and how it had been practically resolved.

The positive and empowering impact that the project had on the lives of the women can be clearly demonstrated by the way in which the acquired knowledge enabled them to bring about change in their personal lives. Three examples will suffice: one

of the women went to see the school principal about problems her son was experiencing, something she had previously been afraid to do on her own. In another case the local (difficult) welfare officer was contacted regarding a feeding scheme for an elderly mother. During the course of the research project two of the women who were unemployed deliberately started seeking jobs. One got full time employment as a nursing assistant and the other got a job as a receptionist at a doctor's office.

As the outcomes of the abovementioned research project demonstrated, the use of a participatory research approach contributed to the realisation of the women participating in the project that they are able to determine the course of their thinking and that of their own lives. The underlying principles and characteristics of participatory research not only comply with the basic requirements for women-directed/feminist research, but also enhance the research experience both for the researcher and for the participants in research projects. The impact of similar projects and experiences could bridge gaps and serve as examples for transforming existing relationships, practices and inequalities so especially needed in South Africa.

Conclusion

The use of participatory approaches in general has considerable potential in South Africa. The Freirian process of conscientisation used by small university groups in literacy work in the early 1970s, for example, had enormous consequences when the internal anti-apartheid movement took note and utilized the underlying principles (Aitchinson, 2001, p. 139). There is furthermore, according to Burton (2001, p. 221), a commitment to participatory methods and to participatory research as the most appropriate way of establishing necessary action in development interventions.

Various participatory projects have been researched and implemented in areas covering diverse fields and disciplines in South Africa such as: a drama-based AIDS education programme in black secondary schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal (Preston-Whyte & Dalrymple, 1996); rural community development projects (Ayee, 1993; Van Vlaenderen & Nkwinti, 1993); in Social Work (Van Rooyen & Gray, 1995); and doc-

umenting conditions of life in migrant labour hostels in the Western Cape (Ramphele, 1990).

Examples of participatory research projects involving women specifically are, however, very sparse and appear to be conducted mainly in health-related fields such as those by Dada and Ross (1995) and Templeton and Van Wyk (1999). George (1996, p. 119) points out that the participation of women themselves in the planning and implementation of any research programmes that will affect them directly is essential. The positive reactions and enthusiasm encountered during the information needs project discussed in this article clearly illustrate the significance and the need for research that results in an experience of confidence and empowerment that active participation brings. The scarcity of participatory research projects with women is therefore to be deplored.

Research with women in South Africa should continue to strive towards making a real difference in the lives of the women concerned. We are convinced that the positive results achieved by the application of participatory research methods in this specific project, and the consequences of the increasing use of the methodology by women researchers in a variety of research fields, could have an important and meaningful impact on the lives of women in South Africa. Researchers conducting projects with women need to address this challenge.

Endnote

[1] For a detailed exposition of the information needs that were identified, see article by Penzhorn (2002, pp. 247–248).

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