

Using participatory research techniques to investigate local notions of malaria in a Nigerian community: focus on field-workers' conduct and behaviour

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with a response from Somesh Kumar

Feedback is a forum for discussion in *PLA Notes*. It features articles which raise common concerns or challenges in fieldwork or training together with a response from another practitioner of participatory approaches. Letters and articles are welcomed for this section, as are your comments on any of the issues raised by *Feedback*.

Introduction

Through a study of local knowledge of malaria among the Ngwa of south-eastern Nigeria, useful insights are emerging about the critical implications of the conduct and behaviour of fieldworkers with regards to the quality of information and data gathered in a participatory study. This article describes some of these insights and comes to the conclusion that practitioners of participatory research methods must conduct themselves in culturally responsive ways if they are to successfully generate information and also grasp where and how the information fits into the entire process of sustainable development.

The study

In 1997, I conducted a detailed study of local notions of malaria among the Ngwa of south-eastern Nigeria. Six trained Ngwa-speaking field assistants helped me during the study. The study took place in a Ngwa community known as Avo. Avo is a hamlet in the Ntighauzor Amairi Autonomous Community of the Obingwa Local Government Area, Abia State, Nigeria. Located 24 kilometres north-west of Aba¹, Avo has a population of 550 persons. Four small patrilineages in total make up the Avo hamlet.

¹ Aba, a town in Ngwaland, is one of the most popular centres of commerce in West Africa.

² See Izugbara 1998 for the findings of this study and their implications for sustainability in healthcare delivery

Methods and gaining entrance into the community

Brainstorming and group interview sessions were the major tools used in the study. These enabled us to achieve a focused understanding of the complex socio-cultural context of malaria-related beliefs amongst the community. In addition, individual interviews were held with some key respondents (for example, traditional healers, members of the community who were already ill, adults, relatives of sick people etc.), and these complemented the two techniques mentioned above. All discussions and interviews were recorded on audiotapes. Copious explanatory notes were developed from reviewing these tapes with fieldworkers. All members of the research team were Ngwa-speaking. This reduced the problem of gaining entry into the community, removed the need to use interpreters and facilitated the process of learning the views of the community itself. Our awareness of the local culture and values within the community made them accept us more readily². However, during the course of the study, certain issues concerning fieldworkers' conduct emerged and it became clear that the good behaviour and attitudes of fieldworkers is vital to ensure the success of a study using participatory methods. In this paper, I would like to share this experience with all those interested in the use of participatory research methods. I expect the issues raised here to make researchers who use participatory research techniques aware of the importance of watching their conduct and behaviour, whilst involved in fieldwork among local people.

Behaviour in the field – why it is important

The way in which researchers go about the task of getting information from local people has far-reaching implications for the success of their study. This was discovered during our fieldwork among the Ngwa. During our stay in the field, we noticed that local people expected to be treated with the utmost respect before they were prepared to co-operate with the fieldworkers. In particular, elderly members of the community were often unwilling to

talk to us when they thought that we had ignored the local norms governing interactions between the young and the elderly. The Ngwa, like most African people, take serious exception to young people probing and testing the intelligence of the elderly. So it was only when we humbly, cautiously and courteously interviewed or questioned them that they talked freely. In many instances, our requests for clarification on certain issues were also misconstrued. The reply of one elderly male participant, when we asked him to clarify some information, is revealing enough.

"I am ready to talk to you provided you will not interrupt me. I will talk first, then you ask questions later".

Generally, adult males preferred requests for clarification to come only after they had finished discussing their views.

The behaviour of fieldworkers while holding interviews with 'key' respondents is also crucial. During our study, we interviewed local healers as key respondents in the community. These discussions provided much of the information required to bridge the gap between theory and practice in health-seeking behaviour. However, for such discussions to be fruitful, fieldworkers must consider carefully how they conduct them. Our experience in the field showed that only when fieldworkers appeared ready to listen to and learn from local healers did they get more in-depth information. A key learning here is that researchers need to be humble and patient and that they must maintain an open mind in order to benefit fully from the richness of local peoples' indigenous knowledge.

How researchers behave toward, or treat, key informants, is another critical issue. Key informants should not be given special treatment in the presence of other members of the community. This is very important so as to avoid causing envy and bad feeling amongst the community towards certain members. For example, two community members generated bad feeling amongst the community because one of our key informants had boasted about an electronic watch that the research team had presented to him. Evidently, community members had started to feel that key informants were getting more than necessary from the research. We had to step in to avoid things getting out of hand. To resolve this problem, we held briefings with key informants and advised them to consider their selection as a service to their community and not as a position of privilege. We also explained to community leaders that our act of giving presents to the key informants was to encourage them to keep to time and to do their jobs effectively.

In the field, researchers must also try to bridge social gaps between them and the study population as much as possible. We achieved this by socialising with the people and by getting involved in the social activities of the

community's daily life. Villagers were very pleased to see us come to their church, play games and drink with them. This developed into a genuine interest of the local people in the fieldworkers/research team. They wanted to know everything about us: the types of food we ate or did not eat; who helped us in preparing food; who we bought things from; whose compound we slept in; which church we would go to next time; whether or not we were married; whether or not we also suffered from malaria; what we thought about malaria ourselves; how long we were to stay with them; whether we had done the study elsewhere, etc. So, before long, we had become popular topics of local gossip, as well as recognised faces in local bars and drinking corners. Local people also gave appropriate nicknames to field workers. Furthermore, local young men and even married men of authority in the community reportedly made advances to female members of the research team.

I also received reports that some male members of the research team were wooing young girls in the community. The male head of one of the patrilineages (Ubakala) told me, in confidence, that he had had reports that one of my field assistants was wooing his daughter. However, it was inappropriate for this relationship to continue and I promised the male head that I would speak to my field assistant regarding his behaviour. To summarise, we found that the active involvement in the local social life and the resulting close association with the people were instrumental in sustaining their goodwill and co-operation toward the research team during the study period.

After barely two weeks in the field, the people were coming to us of their own free will with as much information as they felt to be crucial to the study. There was also a general sentiment that it was up to them to ensure the successful outcome of the study. Community members who just wanted to know what progress we had made and to make sure that certain vital points had been well noted paid visits to us on a daily basis. We rewarded such visits with free palm wine, which we made sure was always available. Callers also went home with gifts of kola nuts, handkerchiefs, etc. These gestures went a long way in securing the good relationship essential for successful community participation and involvement in the study over the period.

Many readers may now be thinking that a team contract would have avoided some of the issues discussed so far. However, whilst a team contract was developed with the research team in order to guide our behaviour and attitudes in the field, many of the issues that have been discussed here did not arise when the team contract was established. This was primarily because the research team, along with the community, were members of the same ethnic group, the Ngwa and hence, there was less of an outsider/insider dynamic. However, this experience has taught me the importance of good behaviour and attitude of researchers in the field wherever they have come from and has led me to suggest other means for

improving continual critical self-awareness for future work. For example, 'daily evaluations' where pilot assessments are conducted in order to identify possible problems as well as daily comparisons of the quality of information elicited by different field workers.

Conclusion

Awareness of the usefulness of participatory research methods in current development initiatives is growing fast. However, as our fieldwork amongst the Ngwa shows, the manner, conduct and behaviour of field workers in a participatory study have critical implications for the quality of the information generated. To conclude, researchers who do not conduct themselves in culturally responsive ways may not have the opportunity to u n d e r s t a n d local ideas and views, let alone relate them s y s t e m a t i c a l l y to the current emphasis on ensuring sustainability in development agendas.

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Response from Somesh Kumar

In the article, C. Otutubikey Izugbara has raised the vital issue of conduct and behaviour of field workers in participatory research. Attitude and behaviour has been a prime concern of PRA practitioners world-wide (Kumar 1997). In fact during the initial stages of the evolution of RRA/PRA, the methods were given most importance, but with its development, practitioners have realised that attitudes and behaviour are even more important than the methods themselves.

Insiders versus outsiders

In this study the members of the research team belonged to the same community and knew about the local culture and values. As the author pointed out, this had the advantage of the team being more readily accepted by the community. However this can prove to be a disadvantage, particularly if things are taken for granted and in-depth probing is not done. I have experienced that the local people tend to tell more things to outside facilitators than to insiders, unless this concerns more sensitive information. Generally whenever insiders ask local people to depict or discuss something, the common reply is '*you are from the same place and know it as well*'. However, they are eager to explain the same issues to the outsiders.

People need to be respected

It is not only the elderly, but also other sections of a community which may be sensitive in most cultures and may feel ignored if they are not given due importance in the participatory process. They also expect to be treated with respect and don't like to be interrupted too often. If questioned on the same items repeatedly (during triangulation) or questioned in a way that makes them feel that they are not being trusted, they may become resentful. However, questioning and in-depth probing is an important aspect of facilitation. Only when the participants have completed what they wanted to say or depict, should clarifications be raised, and raised in such a way that it is clear that those questioning local people are clarifying certain points, rather than doubting what they are being told in the first place.

Frequent interruptions may also disrupt the stream of thoughts of local people. In this particular case, the local people were confident enough to speak out but in most other situations, they may simply withdraw from the process. Therefore, the author is correct when he highlights the importance of listening. In fact, listening is the essence of any participatory work as it reflects the importance you attach to the local people.

Special treatment

The author has also brought up the issue of how to treat key informants but there is no uniform solution. The local situation and context will determine how the key informants should be treated. The team has to be very clear on the implications of the way the key informants and others in the community are treated. In connection with a *PRA Training of Trainers* workshop organised by NIPRANET (the Nigerian PRA Network) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), we stayed in Aukpa-Adoka village, Benue State (Kumar 1999). Although the participants were from Nigeria themselves, most of them did not know the local dialect in the village. We asked the village elders to select a few interpreters from the community and also decide how they would be paid for their work. This was quite successful. In appreciation of the hospitality, time and co-operation of the villages during our stay with them, we

thanked them and presented the chief with two footballs for the village children at the final debriefing/farewell ceremony.

In fact it is not only key informants who matter. The place where you stay during the fieldwork and the people with whom you interact on a regular basis can also have implications on whether some section of the society will get involved in the study. This is particularly relevant in stratified societies.

Rapport with the community

The author has also highlighted the importance of developing good rapport with the community which is fundamental to any participatory research. Participating in the social activities of a community has proved to be a simple and effective way of developing good rapport with the local people. PRA practitioners have used '*do-it-yourself*' as the effective way of developing a good relationship with people. When the local people see the outside facilitators unable to do a routine job such as ploughing a field, transplanting paddy etc. and find the outsider willing to learn from them, the communication pattern changes.

Team contract

It is also important to avoid getting involved in matters that may adversely affect the conduct of fieldwork and relationship with the local people. I have found that instead of the team leader or one person enforcing discipline, it is better to go for a *team contract* where the team members themselves develop guidelines for monitoring their behaviour and attitude in the field and agree to follow the contract along with a mechanism of review and corrective measures.

Other modes

In addition *critical self awareness*, *regular reflection on the behaviour* of the group in the field, use of *video recording* of field workers in action and *support by the other members* actually helps in developing the right kind of attitudes and behaviour. It is important to explain the objectives of the exercise in the beginning and not hide anything or make false promises to the community. Such measures would go along way in building a better relationship with the community.

Conclusion

On the whole, the right kind of attitude and behaviour of the field workers and facilitators is not only desirable but is in fact, essential for achieving the objectives of participatory research.

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Notes

Somesh Kumar was the Founder Director of PRAXIS, The Institute for Participatory Practices, Patna, India.

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