

Participatory methods and animal health research: an analysis of bias.

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Summary

During the past two decades, the 'participatory paradigm' has dominated development thinking. Animal health research is no exception to this trend. Participatory methods are believed to be more 'inclusive' and afford local people greater control over development processes. Nevertheless, little research has been done to substantiate these claims. Therefore, the study assessed bias in the application of participatory methods on three levels: practitioner, community and methodological. The results demonstrated that participatory methods are not immune from a number of serious biases. Indeed, far from being more 'participatory,' many tools had much lower interaction levels, particularly for the less educated.

Introduction

In recent years, participatory methods have become increasingly popular tools in animal health investigations. In particular, the methods have been utilised to assess the perceptions of herders and farmers with regard to specific livestock diseases, service delivery needs and the impact of new technologies. The trend within veterinary epidemiology fits into the wider acceptance of the participatory paradigm by the development community. Indeed, it is believed that the use of participatory methods helps reverse the traditional development roles of aid givers and receivers (Mukherjee, 1993, Guijt and Shah, 1998). Participatory approaches push practitioners to abandon the role of 'expert' and act as facilitators in order to understand local realities from the perspective of those who know them best. In this manner, it is believed that poor people are empowered to express their own dreams, aspirations and needs.

Nevertheless, in practice, participatory methods often fall short of meeting these lofty goals. It is clear that, communities and individuals, under the best of circumstances, are 'trained' in participatory practices. Further, occurrences of empowerment and wellbeing are generally assessed by outsiders i.e. the practitioner or facilitator. This is not to say, that participation is bad or even 'tyrannical', but rather, the *process* of participation involves complex negotiation and mediation among and between the individuals who are involved. Conversely, the *product* of participation is a narrative, the interpretation of which is delegated to outsiders. The quality and hence, the usefulness of this narrative, requires far more critical analysis. To date, little research has been carried out highlighting the constraints of participatory methods. Traditionally, bias within the context of participation has focused on the 'correct behaviour and attitudes' of the practitioner. Practitioners are cautioned to listen and learn, and not to impose their knowledge and perceptions on local people (Chambers, 1997; Catley, 2002). Biases that may be introduced by participants at the individual or community level are generally not discussed. Nor have the issues that the visual methods present been investigated. Visual methods are widely believed to inclusive

and interactive tools in which local people can share and amend the information generated (Mukherjee, 1993). Therefore, the study focused upon the three primary areas in which bias can be introduced into participatory processes: by the practitioner, by the community and via the methods themselves.

Objective

The aim of the study was to investigate potential biases in the application of participatory methods within the context of animal health research. By defining participation as a process that enables the dialogue of local people to be constructed as a narrative for subsequent interpretation by outsiders (LDG, 2003), the study critically analysed the outcome of participatory methods.

Materials and Methods

Four core participatory methods were analysed for bias: semi-structured interviews, focus groups and mapping exercises. In total, 400 individual interviews, 15 focus groups and 50 visual exercises were analysed across three countries: Kenya, India and Bolivia. To assess the impact that the personal characteristics of the practitioner had on the narrative generated in an interview, the frequency of non-responses was evaluated. Discourse analysis techniques were also utilised on responses to reveal bias in question formulation or delivery by the different practitioner groups: male, female, vets, non-vets, local and outsider. Finally, to assess if the personality of the enumerator influenced the outcome of an interview, a simple personality test was devised. Community bias was analysed in two ways. First, to explore the influence of group dynamics on participatory narratives, focus groups were filmed and the level of interaction or 'participation' of group members evaluated. In addition, the degree of agreement between responses obtained from focus groups were compared to those derived from individual interviews. Finally, visual semiotic techniques were utilised to understand the 'layered' meanings present in the images produced. Compositions were analysed for the denotation, connotation and representation. To assess the denotation, of the number and frequency of 'object signs', in each illustration, was evaluated. Conversely, the 'connotation' was examined by detailing the spatial relationship between the object signs and the potential categorisation or order of the image. Lastly, 'representation' was assessed by comparing the placement of the different elements within the map.

Results

The analysis of personal bias highlighted how practitioners suffered from either 'expert bias' in which their field of expertise consciously or unconsciously influenced responses. Or equally prevalent was 'exposure' bias where previous knowledge of the communities or culture prevented detailed narratives from evolving. With regard to communicative competence, overall the gender and/or the country of origin of the practitioner appeared to have less impact on responses than the ability to 'connect' with the individual involved. Hence, the more extravert and open personalities tended to perform better. Further, comparing the responses obtained by veterinarians with those from practitioners from other disciplines suggests that the educational background of the practitioner had a considerable influence on responses. For

example, the number of diseases noted by the veterinarians within the context of a semi-structured interview was approximately 50% lower than the non-veterinarians.

With regard to community bias, group dynamics had a significant impact on the narratives produced from focus groups. Indeed, the contribution of individuals during focus groups were undermined by the size of the group, the formality of the group (organised vs. spontaneous), and by the 'status value' of participants. The 'status value', however, had the largest influence on both the process and outcome of group exercises. While ostensibly perspectives appeared to be offered by the group, the voices and opinions of the more influential always dominated. Further, the narratives derived from the groups tended to be more uniform and less detailed than those obtained from individuals. The results of the methodological analysis revealed that visual methods, far from being more 'participatory,' had much lower interaction levels than other tools. Large differences in representation were found between genders. Equally, when the topic of the illustration was not deemed important, the subversion of the task by the illustrator could also be detected. Consequently, the outcomes of visual exercises are heavily influenced by social roles and personal perceptions.

Discussion

By defining participation as a narrative, and thereby, analysing the role of the practitioner, community and the tools themselves in forging this narrative, it was clear that the tools are not exempt from bias. While quantitative research has traditionally tried to remove the practitioner's influence, participation has embraced it. Although this should not be interpreted as negative per se, it is clear that the unequal power dynamics of facilitator/group or facilitator/individual interactions provide fertile ground for practitioner bias to flourish. Practitioners also need to be aware of the dynamics that regulate the interaction of group members, to minimise domination by the most powerful. Finally, visual exercises may be more, rather than less exclusionary for the least educated and most marginalised individuals. Thus, as currently utilised, participatory methods tend to function as normative tools aimed at achieving consensus. Without further critical analysis, it is likely that the methods will simply be a tool for informing practitioners, with no real impact on the lives of the poor.

References

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