The Role of Emotion in Community Based Research

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Eik Street cedar tree is an eight hundred year old giant living within the city of Tofino and the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. In May 2005 I saw the Eik Street tree for the first time as part of a group of 16 students from a University of Victoria Environmental Studies class on Community Based Research.[1] The course included a nine-day trip to Clayoquot Sound as "a unique first-hand learning opportunity to become familiar with the people and place of Clayoquot Sound", which was intended to "ground discussion of course theory and issues in concrete examples" (quoted from the course syllabus).

One of the first group exercises of the trip was for each student to write down his or her impressions about the tree. What is striking about the tree, which grows 20 meters from the main road running into Tofino, is not its massive width or dizzying height, but the cage that shackles the tree's trunk, locking it to the ground not through its roots as with other trees, but instead with metal chains. The cage and chains wrap around Eik Street tree to "protect" it from being cut down. Deemed dangerous to nearby buildings if it were to fall, the tree was going to be cut down as a preventative measure. Facing few alternatives, some members of the community of Tofino raised 80 000 dollars to build the cage and allow the Eik Street tree to continue to stand.

The sight of the shackled tree hits me, first and foremost, as an extravagant effort. Clearly, it marks great commitment and collaboration on behalf of community members to both conceptualize the cage as an alternative, as well as raise funds to realize it. These community qualities are reminiscent of the logging blockades that have made Clayoquot Sound famous (see Shaw 2002). Both efforts, the blockades and the caged tree, I consider to be motivated by great passion. I cannot fathom any greater reason for spending the time, energy and money to chain a tree that serves such little ecological purpose (as it is surrounded by human made city structures, metal, and invasive plant species) than powerful human emotions.

So I wonder - what are the implications of emotion as the motivator for environmental action? And as the course proceeds and I learn more about Community based research (CBR), I see parallels between the roles that emotion plays in environmental action, and in community based research. The transition from environmental action to CBR is a logical one to me, as I see both as means to challenge our society's continuing problem of inequality.   CBR represents a spectrum of research involving communities, and my discussion will centre on participatory research (PR), a form of CBR that has the goal of affecting social change (Greene et al. 1997). This paper will demonstrate how the philosophy and practice of participatory research requires emotionally involved individuals, but also acknowledges that these emotions carry some strong implications that researchers must analyze and understand in order to allow participatory research projects to contribute to social change in positive ways.

Participatory research is the process of producing new knowledge by systemic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purpose of education and

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social change (Macaulay 1999: 777). It is considered "community based" because of the control communities have over the research project and results. The term community is not limited to meaning people joined together through geographic limits, but also those brought together through similar cultural, social, political interests (Green et al. 1997: 53). PR does not focus simply on communities, but rather on problems within communities that can be reworked by actively engaging community members to work towards their own solutions. Rather than the research results solely serving the professional lives of academics and building up the pages of peer reviewed journals, the benefits of the research reach the community. It is through the research process (as much as or even more than the outcomes) that the goals of participatory research are achieved; goals such as fostering individual and community empowerment, motivation and solidarity (Fischer 180).

Participatory research is distinct from traditional positivist forms of science in many ways. The history of positivist science in communities includes some harmful research conducted in and on communities, where scientists swoop in to get their research data and leave again, without addressing community problems or informing the community of the research results. PR represents an alternative to this entrenched style of research where the researcher remains detached from participants. Instead, PR approaches the research/participant relationship from a less hierarchical position, valuing the knowledge and contribution of each, in an attempt to serve the real interests of the participants (Fischer 2000: 174). Although at the core of PR are honorable goals to rework equality, PR still represents an inherently unbalanced relationship. Many participatory researchers acknowledge that the community partners experience little power within dominant society (Harris and Clover forthcoming: 5, Fischer 2000: 174). Academic researchers have a specialized set of knowledge and skills that are privileged and rewarded above knowledge held by the average community member.

Through the formation of trust and commitment between community and researchers, PR is a tool in leveling the power dynamic. For example, in a participatory research project carried out in rural Newfoundland, two of the co-researchers explain that an initial step to their project was to conduct workshops, in which the primary objective was to learn about the community (Harris and Clover forthcoming: 7). The workshops provided a chance for the community participants and the researchers to get to know each other, and for the researchers to gain a sense of community priorities and concerns. The authors recommend that in order to gain the confidence of the community, researchers should become immersed in the community by attending activities such as church gatherings and local festivals. Gaining confidence is required to heal the "healthy distrust" communities have of outside experts wanting to help (Harris and Clover forthcoming: 10). These researchers are experiencing success, since they feel they are forming close ties with many community members in their three visits to the south-west coast of Newfoundland (Harris and Clover forthcoming: 6).

Cathy Kurelek (1992) records similar stories of building solid relationships with a community to make research goals possible. To initiate her work with the Innu of Labrador, Kurelek got to know community members by living with them for months, doing household work and learning local skills (Kurelek 1992: 81). She believes that to do effective participatory research you need to get to know the people with whom you work, and allow them to get to know you (Kurelek 1992: 85). In support of this, the success of her work writing a life history with Innu women has improved the longer they work together (Kurelek 1992: 81). Mary Law (1997), in her experience of PR with parents of children with disabilities in Ontario, explains that the interviews she conducted with parents were described by them as friendly visits rather than traditional interviews. In addition to relationship building, she emphasizes that success of PR rests on someone who fundamentally respects the world view of others (Law 1997: 54). Individual skills

are necessary, perhaps to aid a sense of trust and ensure researchers adhere to the ideals of PR. But of course it becomes easier to respect someone's perspective, to listen and be willing to understand if a friendship exists. And friendships are created through PR. Cathy Kurelek returns to visit her friends in Labrador for purely social reasons (Kurelek 1992: 86). Mary Law maintains contact with the parent group even though they no longer rely on her support (Law 1997: 56).

Clearly then, emotion fills an important niche in CBR, particularly in PR. What is surprising is in how many contexts emotion plays a role. Within the relationship formed between researchers and community participants, feelings of loyalty, privacy and heightened expectations are created, as is common in friendships. Expectations can exist among community members who have high hopes for the research process and results. This can have dangerous implications, as expectations for research can be unrealistic, and projects do not always succeed (Macaulay 1999: 777). Does an emotional investment in projects cause further harm if results are not realized than in research where participants are emotionally detached? Community members are not the only research participants to have expectations; researchers have their own hopes for the research; raised by working with people they call friends. Mary Law admits she had to struggle not to let her own thoughts bias the work, especially when she knew of a path she believed would be beneficial to the parent group she worked with (Law 1997: 53). Her research methodology dictated that the group create and follow their own path, unaffected by the direction of the work she imagined for them, because the process of creating ideas and contributing to the work was part of the empowerment process for the community (Law 1997).

Allowing the project to proceed without researcher input can be a challenge when specific outcomes are hoped for. Expectations increase in PR because it is, by definition, political (Harris and Clover forthcoming: 5). Therefore personal passionate commitments are inherent; in fact such commitments are required for PR to take place because it makes heavy demands on time and energy. Community demands on the researcher can exceed what the researchers are able or willing to give to the project (Macaulay 1999: 777). PR is often incongruous with academic objectives, taking a great deal of time and involvement outside of research *per se* and in ways that academic training does not prepare a researcher for.. The time and effort community based researchers contribute to participatory projects may go unrecognized within the university (Kurelek 1992: 92). For all participants, PR can affect professional commitments and personal life. To support this work, there must be an incentive for contributing to a research project. Personal political beliefs, such as supporting community empowerment and creating change will likely go a long way in motivating participants to continue the work. Personal investments and friendship-based expectations can serve as a motivator when challenges arise.

Personal political investments can have negative implications, for example obscuring a researcher's ability to help. Emotion can play a problematic role within the desire to help a community resolve problems or become empowered. To conduct research, researchers must have an education, must have the economic support to travel to and from the communities and devote time and energy to the work. Fischer writes that invariably, the people who are able to help are from privileged, elite group in society (Fischer 2000: 188). Marullo and Edwards, in their discussion of how universities should foster social change, write that the goal of social transformation is a value laden objective (Marullo and Edwards 2000: 897). Into whose image will society be changed? Researchers possess mobility; they are able to choose which research projects to devote their skills, and to an extent which problems will be addressed. If a relationship precipitates the project then this issue of power may be avoided, but in many cases, the research project is identified before a relationship is created (see Law 1997 and Harris and Clover forthcoming). Communities in need of research support may experience hardships such

as poverty, effects of colonization, political and environmental disenfranchisement. Political motivations and feelings of guilt by the researcher for their own privilege can be intrusive and have negative effects on the research process and the community involved.

The desire to help carries with it some strong implications. Marullo and Edwards advocate for the university party to be aware of the distinction between charity and social justice and reflect on which their work is producing (Marullo and Edwards 2000: 900). Charity is work that, although motivated by good intentions, can only result in ameliorating negative consequences of a situation. To do research for social justice means looking at the structural problems that create a negative situation. Social justice shares some of its goals with PR: empowering people so they can then meet their own self determined needs (Marullo and Edwards 2000: 901). Clearly identifying the root causes of the research problem avoids what the authors call the "dysfunctions" of doing charity work - the sense of superiority that emerges from the researcher in their ability to help. They warn that when work is motivated by such feelings, even the band-aid job charity does will not be sustained (Marullo and Edwards 2000: 901). How can CBR avoid the misguided, harmful effects of research motivated by guilt or the desire to feel superior? Understanding the multiple contexts where emotion plays a role may help prevent the potential harmful effects of misguided emotions.

But there are often emotional distractions that can interfere with the ability to be level headed. Empowerment and education of community is a stated goal of PR. This can involve a sometimes intense educational experience, as community members become empowered, changing roles within their communities and taking direction of the research process (see Law 1997 and Harris and Clover forthcoming). There is also often a development process for the researchers as professionals and individuals. The relative newness of CBR as a method of conducting research means that researchers have to be willingly to make mistakes and learn from them (Kurelek 1992: 81). PR calls for skills that might not be relied on within the walls of the university, "including diplomacy, negotiation and a willingness to engage the 'other' in a respectful manner over long periods of time" (Song and M'Gonigle 2000: 986-7 as quoted in Harris and Clover forthcoming: 6). Frank Fischer writes that an often overlooked but extremely important psychological dimension of participatory inquiry (and by extension CBR) "is finding ways to sidestep one's own and other's defensive responses to the painful process of self reflection" (Fischer 2000: 188). PR ideals and methods abandon the "myths" of objective and value free science, and while accepting the reality that the researcher has their own values, they must come to terms with re-evaluating them. Researchers may find themselves immersed in an unfamiliar context, not sure of the role they play. In positivist science, the researcher knew where they stood- at a distance that ensured "objectivity". But the relationships in CBR make the role of the researcher unclear, especially in communities of a different culture (Kurelek 1992: 85).

Although researchers face their own personal development challenges, they remain the participant with arguably the most capacity to consider the implications of emotion in CBR.   The onus is really on the researcher according to Fischer, who says that the validity of the research depends on the high quality, critical, self aware, discriminating and informed judgments of the co-researchers (Fischer 2000: 180). This explains why Mary Law (1997) emphasizes the individual ability of researchers as key to the success of a PR project. Researchers have the intellectual experience to analyze the research process and their role in that process, to avoid the many harms that emotion can create – such as misguided intentions, heightened expectations, re-creation of social hierarchy. A strong belief in the philosophy of PR as a method of achieving social change can help the researcher find their place within a project.

Focusing my thoughts back in Tofino again, I now see the shackled Eik Street tree as a misguided effort. The community members were resolved to see the tree stand no matter the appearance or cost.   Although both are surrounded in emotion, there is no longer a parallel between my impression of the tree and the environmental action it represents, and CBR. Part of the reason lies in my understanding of the philosophy and practice of PR. The genuine attempt to overcome the social hierarchy in which PR takes place is reinforced by both parties getting to know each other. Their intimate work together and relationship of trust and commitment will foster mutual respect and sensitivity that might be the best chance of overcoming inequality. The challenges of having community members and researchers with strong political interests is not simply a threat to objectivity, but a vital component for the research to take place, because those strong interests are required as the motivating forces behind work that is time consuming and at times not professionally rewarding. At the same time, the many implications of personal and professional motivations, politics and passion in CBR require a researcher who can critically examine these interests, and harness the emotions constructively to make CBR a success.

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