

How to go on? An ethnographic return to the ‘rough ground’ in PAR

Mark K. Watson

Abstract: Inspired by philosophical concerns with ordinary language, I write as a practitioner (and ethnographer) frustrated by how pictures of research that reduce action to quests for rational consensus seemingly blind people to the spontaneous and realistic pull that PAR exerts on participants to return to the “rough ground” of everyday life. Drawing on the case study of an Indigenous radio show in Montreal, I look ethnographically at the transformative qualities of Action (Research) as woven into participants’ response to the more ordinary and immediate question: how to go on? I suggest that what matters in participatory-action is not so much knowing or the failure to know than acknowledging and accepting (or accommodating or refusing) others’ positions and commitments.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research; ethnography; Wittgenstein; voice

¿Cómo Seguir Adelante? Un Retorno Etnográfico al “Terreno Áspero” en Investigación de Acción Participativa (IAP)

Resumen: Inspirado por las preocupaciones filosóficas sobre el lenguaje común, escribo como practicante (y etnógrafo) frustrado por cómo las representaciones de la investigación que reducen la acción a la búsqueda de consensos racionales aparentemente impiden a las personas ver el empuje espontáneo y realista que la IAP ejerce sobre los participantes para volver al “áspero terreno” del día a día. Partiendo del estudio de caso de un programa de radio indígena en Montreal, observo etnográficamente y de otras maneras las cualidades transformadoras de la (Investigación) Acción en cuanto que se teje como parte de las respuestas de las personas participantes a la pregunta más común e inmediata: ¿Cómo seguir? Sugiero que lo que importa en la acción-participativa no es tanto el saber, o la incapacidad de saber, sino el reconocimiento y aceptación (o acomodo o rechazo) de las posiciones y compromisos de los otros.

Palabras clave: Investigación Acción Participativa; etnografía, Wittgenstein, radio comunitaria

February 2016: CKUT studios, Montreal

I am in the basement studio of CKUT90.3FM, a campus-community radio station in Montreal. It is early morning but everyone on the Inuit radio team is excited to hear Reggie’s voice.¹ A journalist from APTN, Canada’s national Indigenous broadcasting network, is also there.

1 Although all participants’ names are available in the public domain, I use pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Evan, the Inuk producer, gives a signal and the journalist starts filming over Alasie's shoulder as Reggie's voice is patched into the studio. "Is that you Reggie?," Alasie, the host, asks in Inuktitut, smiling as she adjusts her headphones with both hands to better catch Reggie's voice on the end of the line. "Yeah, it's me, it's me Alasie....I'm here" Reggie replies warmly. The journalist is doing a story about Alasie, a charismatic and much loved Inuit elder and social worker in Montreal, interviewing Reggie on *Nipivut*, the first Inuit radio show in southern Canada. Like a dispiritingly high number of Inuit in Montreal since the mid-1980s, Reggie had been living on and off the streets for a number of years. Calling in from a local shelter, he was on the radio that morning talking with Alasie about being in the news.

One bitterly cold night the previous week, Reggie had seen a young man huddled outside a McDonald's at a major intersection in the downtown core. As he tells Alasie in his own words, when he saw the boy he saw himself as a younger man, alone and struggling on the sidewalk; that is why, Reggie says, he crossed the street, knelt beside the boy and gave him his coat: "here, this'll make you warmer" he said. What Reggie didn't know was that the boy was not homeless but a student who had come up to Montreal for the weekend. His friend had been filming his "street experience" from a discrete distance across the way for a class project. Astonished by Reggie's selfless act, the students uploaded the video to YouTube. Within days it had gone viral. Word spread and journalists began contacting Reggie for interviews, APTN included, but Alasie, who knew Reggie well, was the first and only contact to speak to him about what had happened in Inuktitut.

That morning on *Nipivut*, Reggie got to express his story in his own words. When he put down the phone, Alasie wiped away the last of her tears. "Wow, that was emotional" she sighed, turning to tell the journalist that giving Reggie the opportunity to speak in Inuktitut had changed everything: "as soon as he started to talk about his life in Montreal," Alasie said, "he started crying and talking about his mother."

I watched the APTN national news run the story that night. The three minute segment spoke movingly of Alasie and Evan's commitment to mobilise the power of community radio to amplify the voices of Inuit, like Reggie's, across the island of Montreal and beyond. It also highlighted the transformative actions being taken *by* Inuit *for* Inuit in challenging the mostly negative portrayal of urban Inuit in the mainstream media. I felt, if only briefly, I had glimpsed change through participatory action happening in real time, but in ways that I knew I still could not quite yet grasp or find words for.

Introduction

Nipivut means "Our Voice" in Inuktitut. The bi-weekly radio show went to air in October 2015. It started as an "action" of a participatory social history project before becoming the cornerstone of a long-term Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiative organised around Montreal Inuit community development called "Mobilising *Nipivut* | Mobilising *Our Voice*". To be clear, by PAR I refer to a practice of action-oriented inquiry that directly benefits the individuals involved by prioritising their needs, agency and participation throughout the entire process (see Kondon, Pain & Kesby 2007). Drawing on the host Alasie's lifelong commitment to the well-being of fellow Inuit, the *Nipivut* show exemplified the intent of PAR in its attempt