



Stories on research, research on stories

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A B S T R A C T

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This article deals with a group of researchers involved in Participatory Action Research projects on biodiversity and who volunteered to take part in a "storytelling" experiment. Their "stories" were used to describe this new type of research collective comprising various partners, including researchers and managers, focused on obtaining directly useable results. These relatively unstructured groups constitute a forum for debate where scientific knowledge is combined with management know-how to produce tools for use outside the collective.

The originality of this work lies in the fact that the descriptions of these collectives cannot be separated from the method used to produce those descriptions. The scientific community is not in the habit of expressing itself via stories. Stories are a flexible and open-ended means of instilling order in a changing world and their "capabilities" are in themselves an interesting result. In our opinion, the action-research collectives described and the stories produced are homologous. At the end of this experiment, we perceived the collectives and stories, in metaphorical terms, as archipelagos of relationships and meaning.

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1. Introduction

Storytelling can be an occupation at which some people excel and stories can serve as an early-learning method for children, but certainly not as a research technique. That is, however, what a sociologist proposed one day to colleagues who work regularly with agricultural technicians and environmental managers. Even more surprising is the fact that they accepted. They saw the proposal as a chance to better understand the value of their research and the motivations behind their decision to work in research. It did not come easily, but they learned over time to talk about their work. Whether about mundane or more appealing topics, storytelling became a means to produce material for the social sciences. That is the subject of this paper.

In this work, we profile the collectives of researchers and stakeholders involved in management projects for agricultural biodiversity. As commonly used, the term "collective" refers to a group of people interacting. We use the term here in the Latourian

sense, underlining the heterogeneous composition of collectives. In order to properly address biodiversity questions, socio-technical networks composed of people from research institutions, technical and political spheres should be constituted. Another key characteristic of the collective in the Latourian sense (Latour, 2004) is the association of humans and nonhumans. We will see in this paper how objects of nature, pieces of knowledge and operational tools have played an active role in the process of creating collectives. This contrasts with a current assumption of a separation between nature and society ("two houses"). One of the main characteristics of these collectives is that they constitute a forum for debate where scientific knowledge is combined with management know-how, yet they function in an open, changing environment that makes it difficult to determine where innovation takes place. The knowledge produced is then transferred to tools for use outside the collective. This takes place in a context of internal-external tension with the drawing of "boundaries" because the research collective, in the process of achieving autonomy, must also manage its relations with the outside world. It must engage in effective action, in short, reorganize the world if only temporarily.

Another specific aspect of our analysis is that it is based on group storytelling. Storytelling is often criticized as being a trap, but we see it as a creative means to explore the relationships and meaning created in the action-research collectives. What are the capabilities

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manifested by the narrated stories? The answer to this question was surprising. The described collectives, our results, and the stories, our method, all have similar traits, like members of the same family. They point to unforeseen relationships and are an attempt to elicit meaning, something that we will try to illustrate using an archipelago metaphor. The collectives described by the stories are "islands" lying at the cross-currents where the various relationships between individuals and organizations meet. How they are perceived by different people is by no means obvious. But when narrators "create" stories, they reveal relationships and build up meaning, as much for themselves as for those listening.

2. Participatory action research (PAR)

Participatory action research (PAR) is becoming increasingly popular, particularly when urgent solutions are required for difficulties in environmental management. The notion of the "hybrid forum" that emerged almost fifteen years ago (Callon and Rip, 1992) is now being tested in situations that can no longer be considered marginal. Researchers now relate in many different ways to their field of study. In this respect, PAR proceeds by defining a "problem" and then attempting to solve it by bringing together various players who are all ready to accept changes in their way of thinking and acting. This technique comprises a wide variety of approaches and disciplines (Charles and Ward, 2007; Monceau, 2005) that nevertheless have one thing in common, i.e. the researchers involved often jeopardize their careers (Hubert, 2002) because their colleagues view the technique as ambivalent and open to criticism. Those colleagues contest the theoretical standing of the researchers or their capacity to truly modify a real-world situation or political decisions (Bennett, 1996).

And in fact, a number of researchers who see a social aspect in their work are not at ease with the situation (Hemment, 2007). When engaging in "applied" research, they feel the need to clearly indicate the social position they occupy with respect to the community with which they are working and to present their ethical views and their responsibilities (Bennett, 1996). Certain schools of research, influenced by Marxism, feminism or post-colonialism, have made clear their desire to participate in social change. For the involved researchers, a lack of engagement is equivalent to ignoring the issues (Hemment, 2007) or giving up on efforts to achieve emancipation and social justice (Lamphere, 2004). In this case, researchers are no longer experts, but partners in the field. They become a part of the community (Austin, 2004), an "equal participant", while attempting to enhance the capabilities and means of action of the other participants (Lamphere, 2004). Instead of serving as the "object" of the research, the participants were the "subjects", the driving forces of the research. In this sense, PAR is not only a research method, but also a means to bring about social change, a style and a philosophy (Hemment, 2007).

This implication in the action raises questions concerning relationships within the groups. Due to their implication, the people involved discover each other, learn the answer to the question "why are we here?" and the intentions of each participant. That implication obliges researchers to reflect on the various power structures involved in their participation (Lamphere, 2004). Those structures also determine the conditions in which knowledge is produced. Whereas such conditions are specific to the group, the knowledge can be made available to a larger audience, enter the public domain and assist in formulating new policies (Lamphere, 2004).

Understanding the researchers who partake in applied research may also entail the acknowledgment of aspects brought to light by the sociology and anthropology of science (Callon et al., 2001; Latour, 1995; Latour and Woolgar, 1979). These disciplines have

shown that even the most straightforward research is not confined to the lab or an ivory tower. They deal with social and political concerns expressed by researchers in constituting strategic alliances with the State, companies or various groups in order to gain legitimacy and funding. The sociology and anthropology of science reveal "how science actually occurs". They shed light on how practical and political issues are translated into scientific questions. The latter reduce reality, the macrocosm, to the microcosm of the laboratory. The reverse route is used to pull information out of the labs and make it widely available. Acknowledging that research is not confined to an ivory tower implies that knowledge is distributed not only among researchers, but among other partners as well. And the conjunction of the two frequently feeds into what the above authors called "socio-technical" controversies.

Society increasingly calls on researchers to contribute to solving agricultural and environmental problems requiring urgent solutions. The latter cannot be produced by "ivory tower" research. Their complexity makes it necessary to combine knowledge not available to researchers alone. Participatory action research was previously considered to be the realm of researchers motivated by political or personal choices. But today, many of them are regularly asked to take part in "management" situations, especially in the field of natural resources. The shift of PAR into the mainstream has often led to efforts to codify its procedures and methods. But there would be no point in isolating the new procedures from the social and symbolic hierarchies that exist between researchers and non-researchers. That is why, above and beyond procedural aspects, we decided on a more reflexive approach. The essence of this article addresses the commitments of researchers working with agricultural technicians and environmental managers attempting to maintain biodiversity.

3. A reflexive approach

The researchers discussed here are involved in projects run by the Northern Alps Scientific Group (GIS), an organization with long experience in participatory action research. GIS is a partnership between research institutes (Inra, Cemagref, etc.) and organizations involved in agricultural development (Chambers of agriculture) and local development (local governments). During the initial years after its founding, GIS carried out studies focusing mainly on agricultural production. Projects were conducted in small work groups with various participants, including representatives of farming interests, technicians working with farmers, representatives of the cheese-making sector and farmers themselves. Starting in 1995, its work broadened to include the environment, product quality and regional development. A number of new participants, such as personnel from regional and national nature parks, and members of nature conservation associations have also become full-fledged partners in new projects.

The GIS researchers carry out both "targeted" studies (producing tools for use in the field) and more "scientific" research addressing issues concerning development and environmental management. They thus routinely engage in participatory research and see themselves not in an ivory tower, but as part of the world they study (Roybin et al., 2001). They are constantly on the lookout for new methods to evaluate their work and to take a reflexive approach. Two of them accepted the proposal of a sociologist met during a project set up by the French Ecology Ministry dealing with "Biodiversity, agriculture and public action" (DIVA) (Mougenot, 2011). The sociologist suggested participating in a storytelling project, a rather unusual endeavor for researchers (Mougenot, 2011).

Five other colleagues accepted the adventure and a total of eight people constituted the group, including a sociologist, two

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