



ATD

FOURTH WORLD

FALL 2017 NEWSLETTER

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Fall News 2017

What knowledge do we need to fight poverty?

Donna Haig Friedman is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Social Policy, McCormack Graduate School, University of Massachusetts Boston. She participated in a panel discussion at the "June 2017 international conference Rethinking Our World from the Perspective of Poverty"—An historical, anthropological, epistemological approach with Joseph Wresinski. This abstract of her contribution speaks to Participatory Action Research (PAR) in general and ATD Fourth World's Merging of Knowledge (MoK) approach currently being used in the research on the Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP).



Donna facilitating a Merging of Knowledge group in New York

“Of comprehensive knowledge about poverty and social exclusion - knowledge meant to inform, to explain, and to lead people to action - academic research will never be more than one component among others. Namely, it is the information component, partially explanatory, and thus lifeless. It will remain lifeless as long as two other components of knowledge are missing. These two autonomous and complementary components, which will add life and meaning, are:

- the knowledge which the poor and excluded have, from their first-hand experience, of the twin realities of poverty and the surrounding world which imposes it on them;
- and the knowledge of those who work among and with these victims in places of poverty and social exclusion.”

Joseph Wresinski - “A Knowledge that Leads to Action”, UNESCO, 1980

These challenging words, spoken by Joseph Wresinski in the 1980's, go straight to the heart of the matter --- the most fundamental of struggles related to building knowledge to liberate the worlds' people from poverty. In my experience, the forces within academia that work against inclusion of those most directly affected by poverty are formidable, as Wresinski has said, but are not insurmountable. These forces disparage participative research approaches, leading young scholars away from these ways of building knowledge.

Participatory Action Research, a learning, acting, reflecting social change research process, is based on the belief that social science needs to be directed toward making the world a better place --- an emancipatory, liberation objective --- especially for those living in miserable life circumstances and lacking the power to change the societal forces that exacerbate and sustain these harsh realities. At its core, this way of building knowledge relies upon those most directly impacted by hardship to be the drivers of the process, in partnership with academics and others with a stake in collectively learning and acting to bring about social change.

ATD's long-standing Merging of Knowledge (MoK) approach is situated within the rich, historical tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR) across the world. When implemented well, the MoK methodology and processes engage people with the direct experience of poverty as co-planners and co-creators of knowledge. Significant power is in the hands of those living in poverty...(continued on the next page)



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(continued from the previous page) When done well, they are active agents in every step of the research process contributing their thinking, along with researchers, practitioners and other stakeholders, on the core research questions, the learning processes, the analyses, the writing and dissemination, and the actions for positive change.

Accomplishing these objectives is anything but easy, given the scale of ATD's research projects: most are transnational, such as the very complex Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) enterprise currently underway; the cultural, linguistic, economic, historical and social contexts are extraordinarily diverse; and the spectrum of participants involved as activists, practitioners, academics, policy makers and others is wide. Two questions stand out for me as an ATD research partner and ally: How can true reciprocity --- authentic participation of those directly affected --- become more normative when it comes to research on poverty? With respect to ATD's MoK approach, what elements are essential and which elements can fruitfully be adapted within other local cultural contexts --- ensuring soundness and credibility?

Each site for MAP Research plans the outreach and some parts of the facilitation according to their unique context, while following the steps of the same research project. We wanted to share the processes the project goes through locally by looking into how research groups are actually happening in some of the sites around the United States.

We asked people who have been involved in MAP Research this year to tell the MAP story from their angles of participation. Who did they invite to participate, why, and how did they carry out the outreach? What other factors were taken into account? Here are some of the answers from Gallup, NM, Oakland, CA, and Boston, MA.

Laura Jijon, Director of the Adult Education Center, UNM-Gallup North Campus - Gallup, New Mexico

The team in Gallup spent months contemplating the peer groups. We felt several complex issues in our community needed to be acknowledged: violence, addictions, and historical trauma. While these are important to any definition of poverty in this region, we also realized that this discussion itself could trigger trauma. Subsequently we had a number of valuable conversations—based on our experiences—about how to be true to the tragic reality yet not cause more damage to the participants. For this reason, our groups were only open to our students who know and trust the other participants and facilitators.



Then we explored the diversity of regional cultures, specifically Navajo, Zuni, and Hispanic, considering how traditional values and language variations influence the groups. This also included discussion of immigrants, and it was suggested that we have an immigrant group in the future.

Next, because our region is vast and isolated, transportation is a challenge; ATD Fourth World arranged to pay for mileage or public transportation. Additionally, we arranged to include food at each meeting to address the pragmatics of not having hungry participants and to offer the emotional comfort of sharing a meal.



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Then we agreed to have two facilitators per group—one from ATD Fourth World and one from University of New Mexico. This allowed us to represent the different organizational perspectives as well. And all facilitators were bilingual. Based on scheduling of all involved, the timeframe for meetings was condensed to four meetings in two weeks.

Finally, based on both cultural views and backgrounds of traumas, we decided to segregate our first peer groups based on gender, thinking that might allow participants to more deeply and confidently address the emotionally-charged topics, so facilitators were also gender appropriate.

Peggy Simmons, President, Board of Directors ATD Fourth World USA; MAP Facilitator, Oakland, California



St. Mary's Center is a West Oakland, CA based senior service provider offering comprehensive services to extremely low income, housed and unhoused seniors and at risk pre-schoolers. St. Mary's Center operates transitional houses for homeless seniors and adult women as well as an emergency shelter for persons 55 and older in the winter. They also address senior hunger through serving hot lunches 6 days a week and facilitating nutrition, medication safety, and exercises classes in senior buildings across the city.

Through their Hope and Justice program St. Mary's Center provides a supportive, educational environment where seniors engage in social justice activities that reflect their local and statewide legislative priorities: hunger, housing and homelessness. Senior advocates partner with social justice organizations to create a formidable poor people's movement for positive change that stretches from Oakland to the steps of the state capitol in Sacramento. They are very excited about the MAP project which they believe gives them an opportunity to share their lived experience in a new and satisfying way.

Our Oakland MAP project is centered on senior poverty. The group of activists includes seniors, all with lived experiences of poverty and homelessness. We are happy with the diversity of our groups of academics and practitioners who work directly in the fields of senior poverty and homelessness. Janny Castillo, St. Mary's Center Hope and Justice and MAP facilitator said, "I was a little worried that the process was going to open old wounds for our activists. Instead, by our second class, I learned that engaging in this process does not cause harm, but is actually a vehicle for healing."

St. Mary's Center has hosted an International Day for the Eradication of Poverty event for the last 10 years. This year, our last MAP session was on October 17, doubling our reasons to celebrate. St. Mary's Center is such a perfect fit for MAP and I am excited about deepening the partnership with them as well as facilitating this research.



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Erin Graves and Amy Higgins, Researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Massachusetts

Why we joined

One of the most compelling critiques of poverty research and poverty alleviation programs is that they misunderstand the very people and problems that they attempt to confront. Studies find that often academics and professionals do not have the sufficient level of knowledge or skills to work with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and may lack a substantive understanding of the daily reality of people living in poverty. Moreover, poverty changes by context. People experience poverty differently in Burundi than they do in the United States, and measures such as income or nutritional intake do not fully capture these differences. That is part of the reason that Amy Higgins and I were interested in participating in the Merging of Knowledge exercise that ATD Fourth World Movement invited us to join.

As researchers focused on low income communities, we rarely, if ever, engage in participatory action research, of which the Merging of Knowledge process is a prime example. We were challenged in this methodological approach to let go of our “scientific” definitions of poverty. We considered how current approaches to understanding poverty could vacillate between illuminating how people experience poverty and obscuring it. The dimensions of poverty we noted operating in the Boston area in 2017 included not only material deprivation but also a current political climate that sometimes contributes to the reproduction of poverty rather than providing access to basic human needs.

What we got out of it

Our contribution to the process was only to bring out the academic perspective on the dimensions of poverty, and thus the full merging will happen when the activist and practitioner data is incorporated. We look forward to how our work is now merged with the findings of the practitioners and activists. We are also excited at the prospect of using the Merging of Knowledge approach in other aspects of our research to enable stakeholder knowledge to inform policy changes more broadly.



Erin Graves



Amy Higgins



The commemoration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty at the United Nations, October 17, 2017.

#StopPoverty: Justice and Love Finally Brought Together

What does life mean if people around us are dying, unnoticed? What does life mean if children deny themselves the right to dream, even saying, “I never dream. What’s the point? My dreams won’t come true anyway”?

What does life mean when mothers are forced to ask themselves, “If I let social workers take my unborn child into care, as they want to, will they still let me raise my older child? Or will they take him away from me as well?” What does life mean when young people are excluded from social and educational programs because they make other people afraid, or because everybody has given up on them and their families? What does life mean when advocates speak up for justice in the name of people living in poverty, but without a real encounter with them?

And what did life mean for Joseph Wresinski, the boy living in deep poverty who grew up to bring everyone together on October 17 thirty years ago today?

On that day, he bore witness to “millions of children, women, and fathers who have died from misery and hunger,” to “the poor of all times, still poor today, forever on the road, fleeing from place to place, despised and disgraced,” and to “the millions of young people who have no reason to believe or even to exist, and who vainly search for a future in this senseless world.”

This world in which the frantic quest for security by those who have a lot deepens the insecurity of those who have nothing! Following his lead, men and women, children and young people all around the world, like us today, have refused to accept guilt, have rejected the notion that extreme poverty is inevitable, and have refused to let their minds go to waste.

They dare to reach out to people from another world, who were educated and raised differently. They have shown that, when hearts, hands, and minds are open, bridging gaps is possible after all: gaps between neighborhoods where people are scared and those where people live over-protected in ivory towers, gaps between people feeling desperately useless without work and people who are constantly overworked, gaps between the least powerful and the most powerful people in the world.

Together, people from all walks of life meet to defend the rights of those who have nowhere to go except to places where no one would want to raise their children. By coming together in this unique way, all these people discover how to take pride in recognizing one another as part of the same human race, all capable of changing in ways they never before imagined. They are igniting hope that the world can be freed from poverty, and hope of finding still more ways to come together.

In this way, they have responded to Wresinski’s questions at the gathering of defenders of human rights on October 17, 1987, questions they invite each of us to respond to again today:

“What about you? Are you going to pave the way for a new world where justice will prevail over profit and exploitation, where peace will prevail over war, where justice and love can finally be reconciled?”

Yes, it is for us to continue daring to meet together like this, on October 17 and every day.

