PY 912: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: GENDER, RACE & POWER
GUIDELINES FOR INFORMATION GATHERING EXERCISE
OR COMMUNITY MAPPING

The initial phase of a participatory action research project necessitates the development of a base
of knowledge about the area where you hope to work, the people who live in this area, and their
issues/concerns. In Maguire's words this means "gathering and analyzing existing information
about the research area and about the central problems faced by people" (p. 40).

One should begin this phase prior to entry into the community (or organization) where one will
work - assuming that one is not a member of the community - OR prior to the initiation of this
particular research project - assuming that one is a member of the community. Obviously it is
critical how you define “the community.” Clearly there are many understandings of community
and within each community there are many sub-communities and you cannot become an expert
on all of them. However, in addition to the more global analysis of the "broader community" you
should develop some background information about the particular group/organization/sub-
community with whom you hope to work, e.g., members of

The researcher should make use of the multiple forms of data available to him/her about the
community. These include census data, neighborhood publications, city-wide comparisons,
national surveys, organizational histories, documents, newspaper articles, etc. You should be
able to describe the community residents statistically (populations, sub-populations, education
levels, income levels, literacy, ethnic and racial composition, etc.) and the resources of the
community, i.e., its institutions (including, schools, hospitals, stores, banks, police, transportation
system, etc). You should also note any particular geographic characteristics that might
distinguish this community. For example, is there a river that divides the community? You
might want to note any climatic factors that might be relevant - for example, intense snow storms
for five months out of the year, unbearable heat for three months, etc. Finally, you should
identify the various community organizations as well as the community's leaders. To the extent
possible you should identify the formal and the informal leadership structures.

Through gathering this information you will begin to develop ideas about the central problems
experienced by people in this community, and, as importantly, by particular subgroups within the
community. This latter point is particularly important in thinking about research that takes
gender, race and power seriously. For example, are the problems similar or different for women
and for men? For whites and for African-Americans or Latinos or Asian American or Native
Americans? What voice or role or power do local women have in community organizations? in
its institutions? which ones? (See Maguire, page 106, point No. 4 for other examples.)

If you are actually developing a PAR project this is also an opportunity to begin to make personal
contact with leaders in the community and with community organizations. They can both serve

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1 This is an excellent exercise for those planning to collaborate in a PAR project. You may do
the exercise in teams but should each write your own paper.
as key informants as you gather information about the community and as future resources in your actual work. You might ask them to make the same kinds of observations you have been making and note these. This is NOT a formal interview. You are interested in another person’s experiences with and reflections on the community/group. You should also take advantage of previous contacts and resource people within the community and its sub-communities.

Obviously you cannot identify all of the resources, all of the institutions, etc. However, you should strive for a more global view initially, and then look to develop more in depth data about the institutions, organizations, forces that impact most directly on your research interest (or on the research interests of the community group with whom you are collaborating).

WRITTEN SUMMARY (double-spaced, typed, 8-10 pp): Begin with your observations of the community/group. Be sure the be as explicit as possible, sharing details of the community or group and organizing the data that you have gathered in a representational format that allows you to interpret it, clarifying the problem/issue focus for your future research. You should also include a summary of what you have learned from any of the informants consulted. You may choose visual as well as verbal representations for your report. You should attempt to organize the diverse sources of data towards a focus on the particular area of interest you hope to pursue in your research - although at this stage of your planning this may be quite broad - e.g., exploring the impact of urban violence on immigrant youth’s experiences.

Consult at least one source that discusses information gathering, rapid appraisal or community mapping for field research and discuss this article/book in light of your experiences. Summarize your “findings,” that is, what you learned about this community/project and your interpretations of your observations. What have you learned from this exercise about the community/group with whom you hope to engage? What questions do you have about the community based on these observations? About the exercise? What additional information do you need prior to engaging in a participatory action research project with this community? What ideas do you have about how you might go about getting these questions answered?

Finally, include a reflexive statement, that is, your reflections on the experience of doing this exercise. Summarize what you have learned about yourself as a researcher. What has this method taught you? How did you feel “in context?” What, if anything, changed in you over the time that you spent gathering this information? What would you do differently the next time?