

White Paper for the AAG's Retreat on
Catalyzing Research on Geographies of Broadening Participation

**Challenges to Broadening Participation:
Definition, Representation, and Power Relations**

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Fostering genuinely inclusive participation is challenging, whether the targets are within higher education or extend to other aspects of society. This brief paper addresses three challenges to broadening participation:

- arriving at a definition of participation,
- understanding the significance of representation,
- probing power relations that provide the context within which participation occurs.

My notions and suggestions arise from efforts to broaden participation within the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers (a regional professional organization that includes geography faculty, students, and professionals) and are couched as well around research interests that focus on identity studies (more specifically, indigeneity, race, ethnicity, and gender) and water governance, and most particularly where these two seemingly disparate arenas intersect. Emerging with great force in recent decades, attempts to broaden participation are at one such intersection.

Definition

In my experience, the term participation (or social participation) is on less firm footing within the U.S. than in many places outside the country. Lacking a commonly accepted definition, broadening participation seems to convey different meanings depending on the setting.

In some cases, achieving (or enhancing) diversity is equated with broadening participation, based on the reasoning that including more people from different identity groups translates into broad-based participation. But when colleges ask an individual to check a box (or boxes) to establish identity, for example, the identities have already been framed in particular institutional ways and the choice of how to represent oneself is placed beyond an individual's control. Equating diversification with broadening participation in these instances, suppresses the complexity of multiple identities that individuals embrace, many of which vary across space and time (and, thus, are geographically contingent). Without being attentive to the processes by which individuals give significance to particular identities, equating diversification with broadening participation may lead to a rather simplistic gauge of inclusivity, one that also neglects assessing the capacity of different individuals and groups to take action. There is a related issue with this notion of participation in the American context. Substantial resistance to diversification exists, perhaps due to the strength of individualism in the U.S. and the associated resistance to embracing social identities as significant to life experiences and institutional structuring. Such opposition may hinder initiatives to broadening participation based essentially on increasing diversity.

Others use collaboration as a synonym for broadly-based participation. This is a somewhat more active notion of participation in which individuals or groups (usually referred to as stakeholders) debate, consult, and make decisions associated with an endeavor. Participation in this sense has often been idealized. Whether applied to international development, water governance or the discipline of Geography, participation as a form of collaboration is typically painted in broad strokes as inherently positive and essentially beneficial. People, including scholars, have been moved to speak in glowing terms about participation as promoting democracy, as a reflection of the 'true will' of the people, as the triumph of local knowledge or as empowering the masses. Used in this sense, the cachet of participation is similar to that of community, which often conjures up rosy images of shared interests, cooperation, and neighborliness. Yet over a decade ago, Agrawal and Gibson (1999) persuasively argued that adherence to the rarely defined or carefully examined concept of community deflected more meaningful analyses that account for the varying interests, multiple actors, and institutions that influence decision-making. The same sort of critique applies to collaborative participation as well. Loosely defined or unexamined boosterism of participation has significant consequences. Cooke and Kothari (2001) put it in stark terms, participation leads to a new type of tyranny within the context of international development. In the wake of their harsh critique of participatory initiatives, others have begun scrutinizing collaborative participatory initiatives analytically, looking at the problems that arise as well as the potential for genuine transformation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Huffman, 2009; Berry and Mollard, 2010).

Representation

A few years ago at a luncheon event at a regional geography conference I had a conversation with a young woman who received the African American Graduate Student Travel award the previous year. She expressed her dismay at feeling as though she was put on display at the awards ceremony. As we spoke, it became clear that, as an African American graduate student in a region with few other black geographers, she wanted little to do with being either a token or a role model. Her story was her own and she felt no need to be a representative. While she was grateful for the funding, she resisted the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" narrative she felt framed the award ceremony. She was also fueled in part by regrets she had while participating in a broader disciplinary initiative that highlighted student diversity within Geography, a process she felt was designed to represent "the other" rather than to reflect her more complex identity and stories. Perhaps bolstered by our lunch-time discussion, she took the opportunity to re-frame matters for a large gathering at the annual banquet. While others quietly accepted their awards, she took the opportunity to speak her mind.

Within the context of broadening participation, representation poses the question, why are some parties involved while others are not? The criteria used to determine who is represented and why they participate are significant. In the story above, the grad student was understandably cautious about speaking on behalf of others and avoided framing herself as representing African Americans, women, graduate students or even geographers. She is not alone in steering clear of being branded as representative. In research about participatory initiatives in India, Nepal, and Peru, it was quite common for women to avoid serving as water governance representatives, despite being deeply invested in water matters. Sometimes this was due to competing demands on their time, in which they had little

time and not enough interest. At other times, there was a sense that representation served others purposes, but may be counter to one's own best interest. Without being fully invested, people were justifiably wary of participation, especially if they feel it legitimize an endeavor, reinforced an organization or co-opted good alternatives (Berry, 2010; Zwarteveen, Udas, and Delgado, 2010).

Who does the initiating participation matters as well. Rather than turning down opportunities, the absence of certain individuals or groups is often a direct result of not being invited or allowed to participate. Along with a definition of what participation signifies (see the last section), decisions about who gets to participate and in what sorts of roles have the capacity to fundamentally alter organizations and undertakings involved in participation. As a result, it is rare that these decisions are left to chance.

Power Relations

“Participation is inherently political as well as economic, embedded with stresses that arise among competing values, rights, and interests” (Berry and Mollard, 2010, xxi). Because of this, understanding the dynamics of participation means probing issues of power that provide the context within which participation occurs. Such analyses are less directed at impugning the motives of those involved in participation, than designed to grasp the nature of authority and how political economic control is exercised. Often this start by recognizing who is in a position to define what participation means and what their interests are. For example, when cast in the glowing terms of collaboration, the rhetorical appeal of participation may prove to be at odds with actual experiences. In other cases, the unexamined notion that participation is intrinsically beneficial may serve as a kind of façade that perpetuates the interests of the already-powerful (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mollard, Vargas, and Wester, 2010). Issues of representation – who is represented in participatory initiatives, by whom, and why – are also attached to power relations. In tribal water rights negotiations in the western U.S., for example, there have been times when simply agreeing to participate has been turned into a political advantage and other instances where refusal to participate has shifted the axes of power to the less advantaged. All of which is to suggest that power matters and I might add that geographers have some remarkable skills in making sense of power.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that grasping the potentials, limitations, and implications of initiatives to broaden participation involves probing definitions, examining issues of representation, and honing in on power relations. While geographers with interests in politics, economics, and identity issues have not been particularly active in research on participation, there seems much to contribute, particularly by building on recent research concerning participation in the fields of international development, environmental management, and water governance.

References

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