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ARTICLE

Discovering what the people knew

The 1979 Appalachian Land Ownership Study

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ABSTRACT

The Appalachian Land Ownership Study is recognized as a pioneering effort in the interdisciplinary field of participatory action research. This article analyzes this community-based study of land ownership and taxation in Appalachia to determine what lessons it offers a new generation of action researchers. It demonstrates both the practical difficulties in community-based research as well as the challenges to legitimation that may be launched from policy and social science audiences who embrace positivistic research methodologies and epistemologies. The article concludes with the lessons that the land study offers a new generation of researchers who wish to conduct socially relevant, participatory research. Despite the obstacles and disappointments associated with the Appalachian Land Ownership Study, this article concludes that it had long-lasting political, social, personal and scholarly impacts.

KEY WORDS

- Appalachia
- community-based research
- community development
- land ownership
- participatory action research

> Appalachia has been studied to death by . . . experts. They have discovered what the people knew . . . but their findings have . . . had all the impact of falling stars. (Egerton, 1981, p. 45)

John Egerton wrote in praise the Appalachian Land Ownership Study, which 'spelled out with unmistakable and irrefutable clarity' the structure of land ownership and taxation in Appalachia and their effects upon the region. In contrast to traditional academic research, which Egerton accused of making no impact on the daily lives of the region's residents, the land study sought to shape community and economic development in Appalachia. After conducting research on land ownership and taxation in six US states (Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina and Alabama), the study concluded that land was concentrated in the hands of corporate and absentee owners who paid less than their fair share of taxes (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). It further argued that corporate and absentee ownership of land made it difficult for local communities to prosper. The task force called for land reform and provided specific policy recommendations to shift more of the tax burden onto corporations and the wealthy, protect land owners' rights against surface mining, increase the power of government to confiscate corporate land for alternative economic development and housing construction, protect agricultural land, and institute local planning and zoning to regulate land use and environmental impacts (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983).

Almost none of the report's recommendations were carried out in these states, though some progress was made in the taxing of unmined minerals and protecting land owners from the negative effects of surface mining in Kentucky and West Virginia (Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, 1991). In spite of its limited social change impacts, the Appalachian Land Ownership Study is recognized as a pioneering effort in the interdisciplinary field of participatory action research (PAR) in the United States (Beaver, 1983; Couto, 1999; Lewis, 2001; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Gaventa, personal communication, 8 August 2005). In addition, many of the study participants have hailed the land study as a transformative life experience. Consequently, it is worth revisiting the study to determine what it can teach a new generation of action researchers.

After a discussion of the data and methods used to acquire information for this analysis, this article describes the study, specifically focusing on research methods, epistemology and analysis. I argue that the study, and the criticisms that it inspired, demonstrate the difficulties associated with PAR. Finally, I conclude with the lessons that the land study offers a new generation of researchers attempting to conduct socially relevant, participatory research. Although this study illustrates the challenges in legitimating participatory and community-based research strategies to governmental and academic audiences, it also demonstrates that such efforts are worthwhile.

Methods and data

This analysis is based on a review of the literature produced by the land study project, including the Appalachian Land Study Task Force's report (1983) and various articles and book chapters which reported study findings and reflected upon the research process (Beaver, 1983; Gaventa, 1980a, 1980b; Gaventa & Horton, 1982, 1984; Hall, 1988; Horton, 1982; Horton & Gaventa, 1981, 1984; Liden, 1984; Williamson, 1999). I also examined magazine coverage and reviews of the study, workshop and meeting agendas, meeting notes, code sheets and correspondence (Appalachian State University [ASU] – Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Survey Collection). In addition, oral history interviews were conducted via telephone with 11 key participants in the project during the summers of 2005 and 2006. They include study Co-Directors John Gaventa and Billy D. Horton, Administrative Coordinator, Patricia Beaver, and five of six state coordinators: Joe Childers (Kentucky), David Liden (West Virginia), Charles 'Boomer' Winfrey (Tennessee), Tracey Weis (Virginia), and Cathy Melvin (formerly Efird) (North Carolina). Following suggestions from these interviewees, I also spoke with project researchers, Steve Fisher, Susan Williams (Tennessee) and Joe Szakos (Kentucky) as well as Allen Cooper, a West Virginia activist who participated in organizations related to the land study. Interviews typically lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and focused on their memories of the study, their role in the research as well as their reflections on the impact of the study, its strengths, limitations and the lessons they learned from participating in it.

The Appalachian Land Study: laying a foundation for PAR

After flooding ravaged central Appalachia in the spring of 1977, citizens organized to respond to problems associated with the disaster, including a lack of temporary housing sites. Frustrated by the government's response to the situation, this citizens' group hosted a meeting of regional citizens, activists and academics in Williamson, WV, where they formed a coalition called the Appalachian Alliance. The Alliance then formed a Task Force on Appalachian Land Ownership, which met at the Highlander Research and Education Center in the summer of 1978 (Beaver, 1983; Montrie, 2003). Of the 22 Land Ownership Task Force members, 15 were from citizens groups and eight were from academic institutions. These included faculty, staff and graduate students from Appalachian State University, University of Alabama, University of Kentucky, Mars Hill College, and Emory and Henry College (Beaver, 1983). In August 1978, the task force met with the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) Research Committee to criticize the agency's lack of attention to the structure of land ownership in the region. The ARC invited the group to make a research propos-

al and it did. They suggested a 'decentralized, participatory process' (Beaver, 1983, p. 252) to collect data on land ownership and taxation and its impacts on regional development in six Appalachian states: Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama. The ARC accepted the proposal and provided $131,151 in funding for the study in 1979 and 1980 (Beaver, 1983; Gaventa & Horton, 1982, 1984; email communication from Pollyanne Frantz to Sandra Ballard, 16 February 2007).

From the beginning, the study coordinators saw the land ownership project as participatory and citizens-based research, as conveyed by their paper titles (Beaver, 1983; Gaventa, 1980a, 1980b), choice of presentation and publication venues (Gaventa,1980a, 1980b), and unpublished notes (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection). In spite of the ARC's 'hang-up with key words: participatory research, citizens-based research', the task force persisted in describing the project in these terms (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Background Information Subseries, Box 3, Folder 2).

In addition, the study conforms to Reason's and Bradbury's broad and inclusive definition of action research as a 'participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes' (2001, p. 1). This effort to 'integrate research, education and action' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, p. xxix) sought to improve professional practices and inform public policy, which is also congruent with some of the defining features of contemporary participatory action research (Jordan, 2003). The land study's aim of 'societal transformation', for example, anticipates Jordan's (2003, p. 187) definition of PAR as 'critical, emancipatory and democratic'. Finally, the task force met at the Highlander Research and Education Center and was co-directed by Highlander staff John Gaventa, who built upon the work of Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, and others who have been cited as inspirations for PAR (see Horton & Freire, 1990; Lewis, 2001).

Methodologically and epistemologically, however, the land study represents a *partial* step on the journey from basic, positivistic research toward a PAR model (Fals Borda, 2001; Jordan, 2003). Though the study had participatory components and emancipatory aims, its design did not include several iterative cycles of research and action whereby knowledge is both built and tested through citizen action. Nor did it question the possibility of objectivity or criticize quantitative methods for reproducing power relations and objectifying its subjects (Fals Borda, 2001; Jordan, 2003). Quite the contrary! Though the task force valued qualitative research, it focused primarily on the statistical analysis of quantitative data which it referred to as 'objective' and 'hard' data. In short, the Appalachian Land Ownership Study represents a laudable early attempt to push the bounds of basic positivistic social science and explore a more participatory, reflexive and

action-oriented model of social scientific research. As such, it is a watershed project which offers lessons to contemporary participatory action researchers.

Description of land study procedures and methods

Data for the study were collected by teams of researchers, composed of citizens, students and scholars who had an interest in and commitment to the areas being studied. Each state task force elected its own coordinator while Highlander Center staff member John Gaventa and Appalachian Alliance coordinator Bill Horton served as co-coordinators of the regional effort. Appalachian State University was as the fiscal agent of the project and Patricia Beaver, director of the Appalachian Center there, served as administrative coordinator.

The composition of the state task forces varied from state to state. Some, such as North Carolina, relied more heavily upon student labor than others (Horton, 1993). Kentucky's task force had higher proportions of citizens and community activists (interview with Joe Childers, 28 June 2005). Still, the attempt was made to include community activists and citizens from inside and outside of academia in all the state-level task forces. Each state task force independently elected a coordinator or co-coordinators, selected their own state's sample counties, and determined critical issues upon which to focus (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1984). Eighty counties were chosen on the basis of 'representativeness of the various types of land ownership and use patterns in the region' and 'existence of local citizen interest in developing, completing and using the study' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, pp. 162–163). This increase of eight from the original target of 72 counties was driven by 'citizen interest' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983: 163). Judgments about representativeness and local citizen interest were based both upon previous findings of regional land studies and local knowledge.

Approximately 50 of the original 60 citizen researchers recruited for the project gathered in May 1979 at the Highlander Center in New Market, TN, for a 'workshop' on how to collect information on land ownership and taxation for this region-wide project. At this meeting, the findings of previous studies of land ownership were shared. Researchers were instructed on the types of documents and resources that could be used to determine who owned the land and minerals, how much they owned, where the land minerals were located, for what the land was used, the value of the land and minerals, and the amount of tax paid on land and minerals. They learned how to identify actual owners when their identities were hidden by holding companies and other mechanisms. They discussed how to establish rapport with office personnel within the county court houses and learned how to conduct interviews (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). Activities were 'geared toward the study's other goals of educating local

leaders and linking local groups into a broader network to work together after the research stage' (Gaventa & Horton, 1982, p. 34).

The task force believed that absentee and corporate ownership of land and minerals were barriers for regional economic development and equity and, therefore, focused on identifying and documenting the land and resources owned and taxes paid by absentee and corporate owners of any acreage of 20 acres or more. In addition, they collected information on all large land holdings (250+ acres), regardless of type or residence of owner (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). Because some owners held multiple holdings of 20 acres, these holdings were totaled on a county-by-county basis to determine whether an owner qualified as a 'large' owner or not. The task force chose to sample only property located in rural, unincorporated areas because they expected that large concentrations of land were located there (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). The task force's sampling strategies, as we shall see later, raised questions about the validity of the findings.

They developed a coding instrument for the project based upon those previously used by a study consultant, Nancy Bain, in her 1977 study of southeast Ohio (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). They recorded the identity and residence of the owner in order to code the acreages by 'type' of owner: corporate, absentee, individual, or government. Mineral acres were also recorded and coded in this manner. Type of minerals was also were recorded as well as type of land use: commercial/industrial; uncultivated agricultural; prime agricultural; residential; recreational; developed mineral; and undeveloped mineral (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). The researchers also recorded the assessed and market value of the land and minerals in the sample as well as the tax rates in each state and county and amount of tax billed and paid by owners of the sampled land and minerals. (See Appendix A, a list of data categories compiled from code sheets archived at ASU – Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Box 2, Folder 1.) The task force met again on 14–16 September 1979, 12 January 1980, and 9–10 July 1981 at Highlander Center to discuss research findings and draft reports.

The members compiled and coded over 100 variables for each of the 80 sampled counties. These were sorted into four categories: 1) land use; 2) economic impacts; 3) community impacts; and 4) fiscal impacts. Supplementary data came from the Appalachian Regional Commission's data banks, and other government sources, such as the Census (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). These data were typologized, hypotheses were tested, ratios of land and mineral ownership concentration were determined, indices of tax burden were specified, percentages of land and minerals controlled by various types of owners and percentages of taxes paid were calculated, rank orderings of land owners and ownership types were constructed, and so forth. Counties were sorted into different categories depending upon whether their economies were based on coal, agri-

culture or tourism/recreation. This sorting was based upon value of coal reserves, value of agricultural sales, and receipts from hotels/motels, campgrounds, amusement, and recreation industries (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). Correlations between land ownership characteristics and various dependent socioeconomic variables were examined in all 80 counties.

In a second phase of the research, the task force selected 18 case study counties to focus in-depth and 'open-ended exploratory investigations' on the impact of land ownership and taxation patterns on economic development and quality of life in the region (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, p. 169). Case study researchers examined a variety of documents, including local histories, census documents, planning documents, county development plans, county budgets and local newspapers to compose their county case study reports (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). They obtained information about housing, education, economic development, land use, social service delivery, local politics, and anything else that they and other local citizens deemed to be relevant to understanding how land and taxation affected local community dynamics, power and quality of life (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). In addition, they conducted interviews of local residents, selected by the field researcher in consultation with the state coordinator. They interviewed public office-holders and others who had knowledge of land ownership and usage patterns in the county as well as representatives of various segments of the local population (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). Interviewees were asked how land was used in their counties and to discuss the effect of land ownership on economic, community and fiscal development (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended and conversational. Prompts were tailored to each county, with wording specific to the economic base and local history of the place. Interviewers were instructed to follow up on new topics and issues so that the interview would be 'conducive to the exploration of additional and unexpected relationships' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, p. 170).

After collection of in-depth case study data, the local research drafted a report in consultation with the state coordinator and regional staff. This draft was reviewed and edited by the state coordinator and then passed on to the regional staff at Highlander and Appalachian State University, who verified facts by checking the larger survey, census and other official documents. When interview content contradicted government agency data, interview quotes were labeled a 'reflection of local opinion' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, p. 175). Documents archived at Appalachian State University reveal that representatives of the ARC also read drafts of the reports and provided feedback and revision suggestions. The draft was returned to the state coordinator who collaborated with the local researcher to incorporate the revisions in the final draft. The case studies were included in the final report to the ARC and were also

incorporated into the broader state and regional analysis. The content of the interviews informed report conclusions and its policy recommendations. In addition, quotations from the interviews were interspersed throughout the analysis of the impact of land ownership and tax patterns on Appalachian communities (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). Many of the specialized 'expert' analytic tasks were taken up by scholars. Appalachian State University professor Mike Wise did the statistical analysis; Steve Fisher, Emory and Henry College professor compiled a bibliography of land research readings; Gaventa and Horton conducted content analysis of interviews and did much of the final writing of the reports, with assistance from Patricia Beaver, Steve Fisher, and the state coordinators.

Politics, positivism and participation

Debate permeated the land study from its inception, particularly between the task force and the ARC. The land study task force was a part of the Appalachian Alliance, a coalition of community groups concerned about inadequate governmental response to a regional disaster, lack of access to land and housing for those made homeless by flooding, and the role of new mining practices in causing flood disasters. Its research proposal, as recounted earlier, was invited by the ARC only after the task force had challenged the agency's research priorities. The ARC is a state and federal partnership, its operations and budget must win the approval of Congress, the President and the governors of the 13 states included in the ARC territory. In this context, providing support for a citizens-based research project on a politically controversial topic was a bold and progressive move. ARC staff member Bob Gidez's task of facilitating the land study while simultaneously explaining and justifying the project to various constituencies and superiors was challenging. Finally, because the ARC held the 'purse strings' of the project, it had considerable leverage in the relationship (Beaver, 1983; Gaventa & Horton, 1982).

Negotiation about the project's scope, goals and methods started almost immediately after the task force proposal's acceptance in January 1979. In a letter written to Bob Gidez (ARC) from John Gaventa, dated 21 February 1979, Gaventa assured the ARC that they task force had: 'a) developed an adequate methodology for obtaining the needed information; b) that it could cost-justify the methodology in light of the scope of its work and c) that the information gathered could have public policy uses' (ASU – Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 5).

At a 12 June 1979 meeting with Gidez, discussion centered on the 'need to structure hypotheses to such an extent that there are mutually exclusive categories. X relates to y, etc.' and to determine whether to use cluster analysis or

regression or factor analysis in the quantitative segment of the study as well as the content and organization of the report (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 6). From a public policy standpoint, they agreed that the report should focus on just a few factors and their policy implications (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Box 2, Folder 6). They considered the benefits of completing the case studies before embarking on the statistical analysis or, alternatively, using the quantitative data analysis to select the counties for case study (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folders 6 and 7). In the end, the task force initiated case study research while quantitative analysis was still being completed. As described earlier, counties were selected based in part upon citizen researcher preference and local research capacity, a procedure that the Gidez later chose to downplay in defending the project to political officials from the region (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 7).

When concerns were raised in Virginia, Gidez convened a meeting between Virginia government officials, study coordinator Bob Horton and Virginia state coordinator Tracey Weis. At this meeting on 14 August 1979, Gidez defended the study, calling it 'impressive' and saying that the ARC was getting more for its money with citizens-based research than if they had hired a consulting firm for the job. He denied that the study was a 'witch hunt' or that it would be 'oriented toward land reform'. A task force note-taker observed that Gidez seemed to be calling in favors to secure cooperation with the project. Task force members credited Gidez with helping the study gain 'begrudging cooperation' from government officials in Virginia (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 7).

Gidez played an important role in the project. With Gaventa and Horton, he brainstormed testable hypotheses and discussed the best ways to organize data into categories again on 8 July 1979. Notes taken at that meeting foreshadow problems that would emerge later concerning the validity and generalizability of the case studies: 'In the case studies – is not enough to see simple correlations; must demonstrate that land ownership affects such and such' (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 7). Even though the shift from noting a correlation between two variables to providing a causal argument is a theoretical one, there were no notes documenting a discussion of theory in the archives. Nevertheless, it became clear that the task force posited that land ownership patterns determined local development characteristics which, in turn, resulted in various individual impacts emerged; it is impossible to determine for certain when this theoretical model emerged, however. Stephen Fisher located the

model in an undated document in his files, entitled 'A Proposed Impact Analysis Methodology for the Appalachian Land Ownership Study Based' (Appendix B). No authors were listed on this document. Both Fisher (email communication, 31 July 2007) and Gaventa (email communication, 18 July 2007) reported that the document was developed early in the research process but cannot recall specifically when this occurred. The lack of reference to theoretical issues in ARC discussion notes indicates that potential theoretical disagreements were not sufficiently aired before the report was submitted.

Further complicating matters, a change of presidential administrations placed the ARC in a difficult situation when the 1800-page report was submitted in February 1981 (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983; Gaventa & Horton, 1984). The ARC was under attack by the Reagan administration and, so, the agency was forced to justify its mission and defend its budget in Congress (Gaventa & Horton, 1982). This set the stage for additional negotiation between the study coordinators and Bob Gidez. In notes about conversations which took place on 2 February and 9 February 1981, Gidez expressed disappointment in the uneven quality of the state reports and the case studies, and stated concerns about the report's objectivity. Questions were raised about the Kentucky and West Virginia reports, especially the 'perceptions' reported in the case studies. Both of those documents required 're-working', with special emphasis on how 'perceptions' were presented as fact or as claims that 'may or may not be true'. In addition, issues were raised in the regional report's treatment of strip mining and the energy industry. Study coordinators agreed to treat the state and case study reports and 'working documents' and to revise them for the ARC (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 3, Folder 7).

In notes prepared for a meeting scheduled for 3 March 1981, an unidentified study coordinator conceded a willingness to 'state clearly that the case study info (particularly interviews) are not verifiable in the statistical sense – nor were they intended to be'. Recognizing that non-random samples do not 'prove anything', Gaventa and Horton insisted, however, that 'case studies must be viewed as important . . . They at least tell us how *some members of the community* are affected by land *ownership patterns*'. The ARC insisted that the reports should not refer to current land ownership patterns as a 'barrier' to local and diversified economic development; ARC also asked the task force to focus less on the occupational structure and out-migration from the region (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 3, Folder 2). An unclearly dated set of notes documented Gidez as having said that report 'will probably give us some problems' and that the tone of the West Virginia report would 'hurt the credibility' of the entire project (ASU-Eury Collection, Appalachian Land Ownership Study Collection, Administrative File Series, Computer files 1976–1982, Box 3, Folder 2).

The 14 March 1981 meeting between study coordinators and Bob Gidez concluded the re-negotiation of the report content. The ARC asked the task force to provide a definition of 'land reform' in order to avoid 'confusing' associations with Third World land reform movements. The agency also requested that the word 'must' be replaced with the word 'should' in policy recommendations. Gidez approved of the findings, stating that the ARC had faithfully checked the task force's corrections and was satisfied with '93.8 % of them'. The task force was advised to 'forget the rest'; and the report release date was set for 3 April 1981. The ARC released the land ownership study, but did not deliver on its promise to announce the report's publication to the press. The agency made copies of the regional report available to the public, but not as many as requested; and it refused to release the state reports publicly, because they were not 'objective' (Gaventa & Horton, 1982, p. 37).

In a more surprising move, the agency commissioned a panel of five academic and government land 'experts' to provide a critical review of the report. Gaventa and Horton saw this as an extension of the politically charged debate between the task force and the ARC about the meaning of the 'hard statistical data' (1982, p. 37). Gaventa and Horton maintained that the research design, methods and sampling strategies were sound; the study's interpretations and recommendations, not its research methods, were the real 'sore spots' for the ARC, they said later (Gaventa & Horton, 1982, p. 37). With the commissioning of the panel of critics, the uneasy relations between the ARC and the task force – and between different research paradigms – had finally come to light.

What *do* the people know and how do they know it? Critiques of the land study

The ARC panel of experts commended the land study for providing excellent data on land ownership patterns in the US and showing that a complex citizens-based research was possible (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). The literature review and 'imaginative use of basic data to prove complicated, often subtle points' were also cited as strengths of the report. The regional report was also praised for avoiding the conclusion that land ownership 'was the root of all Appalachian evil' while still succeeding in demonstrating that it was 'a probable contributing cause of much of it' (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983, p. xv). The panel objected, however, to the use of non-random sampling techniques and the selection criteria for individual 'local' owners (250 or more acres) versus government, corporate and absentee owners (20 or more acres). This, they said, introduced sample bias and, specifically, over-sampled in the government, corporate and absentee owners category. The delineation of the categories, furthermore, indicated an equation of 'bigness' with 'badness', which

was further reflected in the tone of some aspects of the study report and its failure to acknowledge 'offsetting contributions' of large land-owning entities in the region. The panel did not approve of the overtly political tone of some of the state reports, arguing that it detracted from the technical competence. It raised questions about interviewer bias as well (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). In addition, state and case study report quality was termed uneven and sometimes the reports contradicted one another, according to the panel. The panel also criticized the task force for occasionally arguing causality based on correlation (see also Gilbert, 1985), for making causal inferences on non-randomly chosen case study counties, and for not systematically debunking competing hypotheses (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 193). In regard to the first critique, it is important to remember that the ARC encouraged the land study researchers to push beyond the notation of correlations in order to make causal arguments. It is ironic that the ARC's panel of experts would then criticize the study for doing the very thing that they agency had encouraged it to do.

In a separate, independent review of the study (Wunderlich, 1984), an economist employed by the Economic Research Service of the Department of Agriculture, criticized the non-random selection process, which he claimed 'invalidated statements about the region or states . . . [Since some] counties had zero probability of falling in the sample, . . . any statements about the states or region have only the status of opinion' (Wunderlich, 1984, p. 434; see also Gilbert, 1985). Rather than praising the study, for its breadth of scope and the high percentage of owners and acreage documented, Wunderlich called it 'massive statistical overkill', noting that what mattered was not the size of the sample but it representativeness (1984, p. 434). He also criticized the study for failing to distinguish between concentration of land ownership and absenteeism.

Not all of reaction to the study was so negative, however. In defense of the study, some scholarly reviewers were favorably impressed with the participatory design of the project (Eller, 1985; English, 1985; Geisler, 1983; Wunderlich, 1984). They pointed out the value of the in-depth, local knowledge in conducting the research, for example (Geisler, 1983; Wunderlich, 1984). They agreed with Gaventa's argument that, because of their intimate knowledge of and commitment to the localities involved, local citizen researchers could produce higher quality data than professional, academic ones (Gaventa, 1980, as quoted in Beaver, 1983). The land study's use of multiple data collection and analysis methods was seen as a virtue of the project, rather than a liability (Geisler, 1983).

One reviewer turned a critical eye to toward the ARC panel of experts, asking why it did not include a 'lay researcher' who might have advocated for different evaluation criteria for their critique (Giesler, 1983, p. xvi). A later review takes up this point, raising the question of whether the ARC panel's evaluations were appropriate in light of the study's activist goals and community-based design (English, 1985). The purpose of the study was entirely ignored by the

panel, which 'presumably at ARC's direction, focused on the merits of the study as research, and research of a *particular kind*', she wrote (English, 1985, p. 64; emphasis added). Because the ARC panel approached the study from a positivistic paradigm, it focused on objectivity, generalizability and contestability of hypotheses. But, as English pointed out, the land study was not *that* kind of a study. As participatory research, it was more concerned about who would learn and benefit from the research. What is needed, concluded English, is a:

> whole new set of criteria for constructing research efforts and then evaluating their validity and lasting worth – criteria that are elastic enough to encompass different types of research but rigorous enough to ensure that the values underlying *both* set of questions are recognized. (1985, p. 65)

English pointed out quite correctly that the land study represents an 'uneasy reconciliation' between two sets of values and two different research models (1985, p. 65).

Years later, practitioners of PAR would write of 'post-positivist' models of science – openly political, value-laden forms of research that question the possibility of objectivity and value neutrality (Jordan, 2003). The land study was not 'there' yet. However, it did openly grapple with two of the 'emergent tasks' identified from the 1997 World Symposium of Action Research: 1) the need for rigor and validity criteria; and 2) the importance of generalizable research (Fals Borda, 2001). In seeking rigor and generalizability, the task force accepted many of the assumptions of positivism that later PAR practitioners might not concede so readily. It held that objectivity was possible and desirable, for example, without explicitly emphasizing that positivistic science is in itself a socially constructed set of practices performed by human subjects as well (Fals Borda, 2001). In addition, the study authors repeatedly referred to quantitative data as 'hard' and 'objective', thereby, granting it more legitimacy than qualitative data and everyday knowledge. The latter was relegated to the category of 'perception'. In this regard, the study continues to reproduce the subject-object split inherited from the 17th century, rather than to challenge it (Fals Borda, 2001). Likewise, the land study task force agreed perhaps too quickly that qualitative data was not 'generalizeable', when it could have more carefully theorized the relationship between the particular and general. Finally, the academic members of the task force convinced activists that it was best to complete the research before initiating activism (interview with Charles Winfrey, 15 June 2005), rather than integrating research with action and building knowledge on the action itself as contemporary PAR practitioners might do (Fals Borda, 2001).

Yet, in spite of these capitulations to positivism, the task force also successfully resisted some of its demands and, thereby, helped pave the way for the PAR that was to come. The land study task force insisted that local 'perceptions' could not be dismissed as incorrect but, instead, were based in reality and could affect

reality. It retained a commitment to collaboration, dialogue and citizen participation. It repeatedly emphasized the importance of practical knowledge and citizen action as research goals. As a result, it chose a sampling strategy based upon local knowledge and on local interest and organizing capacity, thus, purposely eschewing the random sampling favored positivistic science. Finally, in spite of its ongoing committed to objectivity, the study recognized the intimate relationship between power and knowledge – repeatedly stressing that access to information and skills could be empowering to marginalized citizens and insisting that resistance is possible.

Lessons learned

The first lesson from the land study is that this type of research can be transformative, both individually and collectively. By the time the study was published in 1983, land study data had been used by citizens in all six of the participating states (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983). In West Virginia, the land study findings were introduced as evidence for a court ruling which declared that West Virginia's rural counties had been unconstitutionally discriminated against as a result of shortcomings in the property tax system used to fund local schools. The Appalachian land study had its most important impact in Kentucky where it helped form networks and leverage resources that resulted in Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), an organization which continues to develop grassroots leadership in Kentucky and provide a voice for citizens in the state legislature. This project can also be linked, either directly or indirectly, to the emergence of other groups in Appalachia that continue to pursue community development, environmental protection, social justice and democratization in Virginia, West Virginia and Alabama.

At an individual level, the study was viewed as an important, life-changing experience, particularly by students and early career study participants, such as Joe Childers, Susan Williams, Tracy Weis, and John Gaventa. Williams learned research skills and freed herself of the misconception that 'only scientists' could conduct meaningful research. She continued a career in community organizing that has led to a position as Education Coordinator at the Highlander Center in New Market, TN. The land study propelled Childers into law school, a decade as lead counsel for Kentuckians for the Commonwealth where he successfully pursued the elimination of the broad form deed and the institution of a tax on unmined minerals. It inspired in Weis a desire to learn more about the historical dynamics behind the concentrated patterns of land ownership in the region which led to an academic career in history (Brown & Weis, 2004). 'I learned so much from the [land study] project that I scarcely know where to begin', said Tracy Weis (email communication, 29 July 2005). 'It was life-changing; it has served as

a compass for my personal and political life. In particular, [it] demonstrated the power of participatory research.'

'You couldn't be involved in something that exciting and intense for three or four years and not have an impact', John Gaventa explained (interview, 8 August 2005). 'I did devote a fair amount of energy trying to build on participatory action research. I didn't work on land per se as much. But I was then linking to an international group of people thinking about this new research approach. It certainly influenced me to pursue that.' In addition to becoming the Director of Research at Highlander Center, Gaventa helped to found and co-direct University of Tennessee's Community Partnership Center and later took a professorship at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. He continues to cite the land study and considers it to be relevant to his work today.

Clearly, research training, community participation and citizen empowerment were important goals for and achievements of the land study. These purposes should remain a central priority in PAR today. In this regard, the land study enjoyed an advantage over contemporary PAR. In 1979, the land study was breaking new ground for participatory research. The ARC had never funded such a project and did not have experience in dealing with citizens-based research or the kinds of collective action, demands and criticism that might emerge from such projects. ARC's refusal to make good on a promise to circulate the report widely and its commissioning of a panel of expert critics of the report represent rather clumsy attempts to cope with the political implications of a study that escaped the agency's control. Today PAR has been embraced by international development and government agencies, non-government organizations, and capitalist corporate firms. As a result, PAR is in danger of co-optation. Having realized that citizen empowerment is a key product of PAR, various agencies and firms are becoming more effective at targeting, defining and channeling the direction of such empowerment efforts. As Jordan (2003, p. 194) puts it, in an era when the World Bank (2002) proposes to build the poor people's capacity so that they can be more effective clients and consumers, the question of 'for what' are we empowering citizens has never been more important (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001).

Though the task force was always clear in its goal to empower citizens to participate more effectively in public discourse and policy-making around land ownership, land use and planning, and taxation, it did not find a way to incorporate the action component into its original proposal or, later, to secure funding for an action component for this research. In retrospect, land study researchers believe that insufficient attention was paid to the action phase. Based on these interviews, the following suggestions have emerged: 1) set realistic research and action goals that are sensitive to political, economic and cultural differences and varying contexts; 2) plan equally well for the action component as for the research component (including funding and staffing for action); 3) integrate social action together with research activities; and 4) partner with community

and social movement groups to assure that the research does not overshadow the action component of PAR.

Finally, the critical reaction that the study received, largely orchestrated by its own sponsor (the ARC), reminds us of the importance of clarifying epistemological assumptions, justifying participatory research design, and asserting the validity of both participatory practices and everyday knowledge throughout all phases of our research. It is not surprising that the land study, operating in an earlier historical context, did not consistently accomplish these tasks. Indeed, operating in this historical time, the task force found it difficult to challenge the assumptions of positivism at all. The study is not to be condemned for failure to resolve these issues but, rather, to be celebrated for helping to start this journey. Nevertheless, the early experience of the land study illustrates that, regardless of claims to value 'local knowledge' and multi-method research, statistical analysis of quantitative data have a tendency to 'trump' other forms of information, especially in policy and social science research. Avoiding the trap of relegating citizens' knowledge and qualitative data to the realm of 'perception' while elevating quantitative data (census, survey, etc.), to the realm of 'reality' requires careful theoretical work. After 25 years, contemporary researchers may be in a superior position to provide convincing arguments about the merits of qualitative data and of everyday knowledge. Given the current heightened risk of cooptation as PAR methods have become increasingly 'mainstream' (Jordan, 2003), contemporary researchers will likely continue to face challenges in legitimating a PAR model, however.

In conclusion, the Appalachian Land Study provides an inspiration for contemporary participatory action researchers, reminding them of the transformative effect of this research at the individual and collective levels. But, just as the study emboldens us to pursue such research, it also can remind us of the difficulty of both conducting and legitimating this sort of research. The Appalachian Land Ownership Study (1979–1981) still has much to teach contemporary PAR practitioners.

Appendix A: code sheet categories

Compiled from ASU-Eury, ALOSC, Administrative Files Series, Computer Files 1976–1982, Box 2, Folder 1. Code sheet categories for each county were:

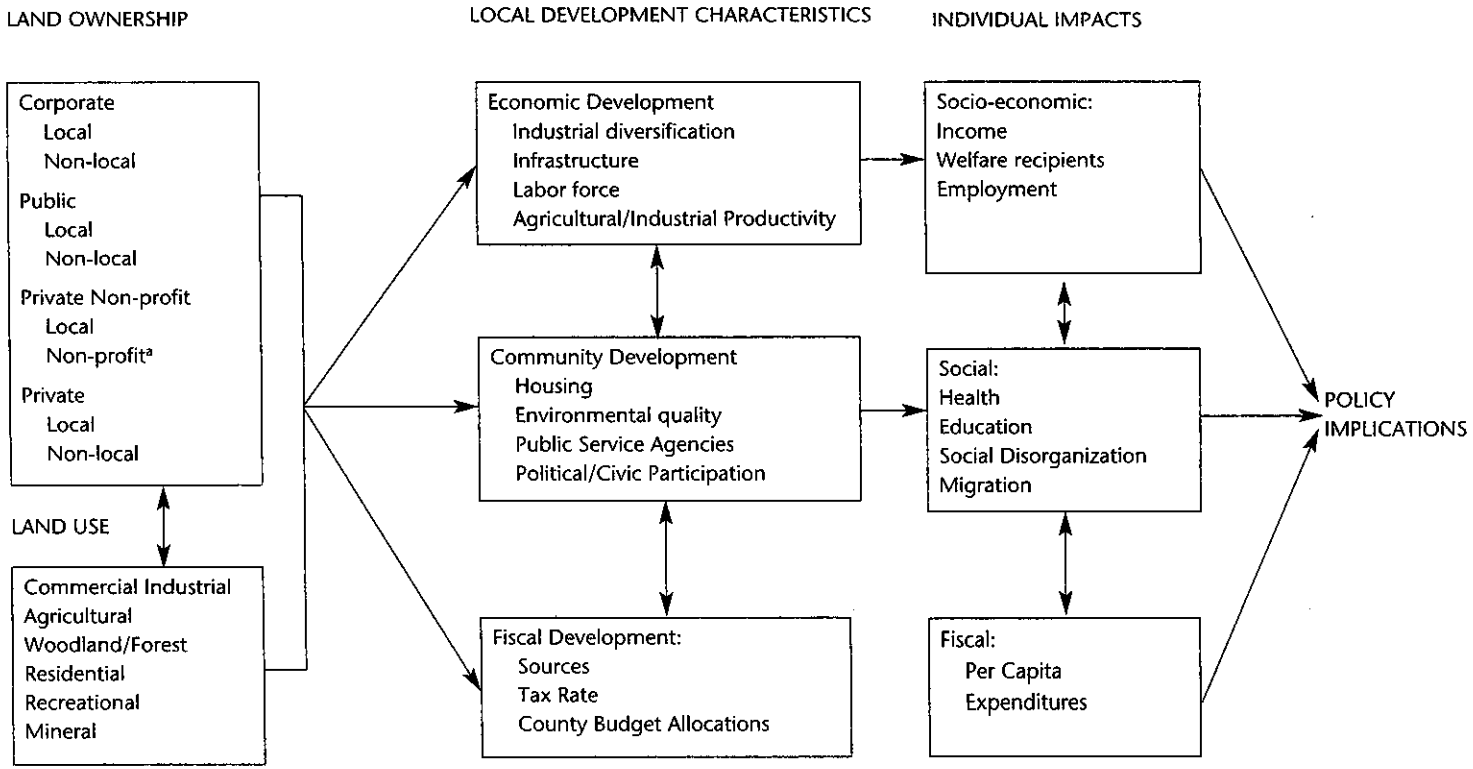
Acreage
Population
Revenue (two categories: general and? [illegible])
Local taxes
Property taxes
Expenditures: general, education, public welfare, hospital, highway, police, corrections, sewage
Expenditures: parks & recreation; general administration
Total debt
Persons per sq. mile
Net migration: 1960–1970 and 1970–1980
Per capita income
Change in per capita income, 1969–1974
Per capita income 1969
Percentage below poverty, 1969
? paid for dependent children, 1976 (could it be welfare expenditures, education?); this is a # of 'recipients'
Total bank deposits, 1976
Persons voting for President, 1972
Manufacturing, 1972 (in millions of dollars)
Service, 1972 (in thousands of dollars)
Hotels, motels, trail parks and campgrounds receipts (doesn't say, assume 1972)
Amusements receipts (1972?)
Mining employment, 1972
Value added mining (in millions of dollars)
Natural resources expenditures
Population, 1970
Rural population, 1970
Urban population, 1970
Coal production in tons, 1976
Mining employees, 1976
Hospitals, 1975
Hospital beds, 1975
Bed rate per 100,000 persons (1975?)
SSI recipients, 1976
Infant mortality, 1974
Serious crime rate per 100,000 persons, 1975

Divorce rate per 1000 persons (no year provided)
Students enrolled in public schools, 1975
For farms of 2500+ acres
# of all farms, 1974
# of all farms, 1969
# of acres in farms, 1974
# of acres in farms, 1969
Average size of farms (in acres), 1974
Average size of farms, 1969
Total cropland (no year)
Total woodland
Other total land
# of individual or family farms, 1974 and 1969
Acres of individual or family farms, 1974 and 1969
# of farms in partnership, 1974 and 1969
Acres of land in partnership, 1974
Acres of land in partnership, 1969
# of corporate farms, 1974 and 1969
# of acres in corporate farms, 1974 and 1969
Average age, 1974 and 1969
# of persons living on farm, 1974 and 1969
Occupations of farmers, all farms, 1974 and 1969
Total value of sales, all farms (no year given)
Average values of sales, all farms
Total year round. Units (no year, don't know what this means)
Total rural year round units
Total occupied housing
Total occupied rural housing
Owner-occupied all
Owner-occupied rural

Note: Box 2, Folder 6 in this series includes notes from a state coordinators' meeting dated 19 June 1979, which also lists under education, 'drop-out rates', a category that is not listed on the archived code sheets.

Appendix B

Impact Analysis Model



[a]I believe that this is an error. I suggest that this should read 'non-local'.

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