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## UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPING PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH

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In the chenopod shrublands of southern Australia, continuous grazing at conservative stocking rates produces rangeland degradation (Hunt 1995). This begs the question of why there has not been a focus on researching alternative grazing management practices. In this paper I outline some of the factors that may be standing in the way of scientists and land managers working together in large scale participative research projects to develop superior and continuously improving methods of land management. I believe that our progress towards totally sustainable land management will be slow until we understand the historical context and the social and institutional behaviours that stand in the way of participative research. The purpose of my poster is to stimulate reflection and conversations to achieve a deeper understanding of this apparent impasse in the management of our natural resources.

The educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1972) claimed that community development happens when individuals and communities free themselves from the restraining forces against becoming fully human. He claimed that this can be achieved in oppressive regimes through critical reflection and initiating actions to overcome the oppressive forces. These forces can act at a personal and political level. In essence, he claims it is about learning how to love.

Maturana (1988) researched neurobiology and developed theories on the biology of cognition. He argues that cognition in a living organism happens in a closed system. No one can predictably influence another by depositing information and the degree of influence of one on another will be determined by the quality of the relationship between the two. The necessary quality is *mutual acceptance*, which Maturana speaks of as love: 'the emotion that specifies the domain of action in which living systems co-ordinate their actions in a manner that entails mutual acceptance'. Can a quality relationship in participative research develop between scientists and land managers when there is a perception that the scientist holds the privilege of knowledge and the power of regulation?

In an analysis of the transfer of technology model of agricultural extension, Freire (1973) argued that it is 'anti-dialogical' and incompatible with true education. Far from dialogue, he claimed that a process of agricultural extension that deposits information, is actually cultural invasion in a process of domestication of human beings. The invaders penetrate the culture and impose their own view of the world, ignoring the peoples' creative potential. Freire argues that capacity building of producers must be more than developing technical proficiency; it must develop the capacity for critical reflection. Such critical reflection will frequently result in challenges to oppressive forces in society. Freire developed theories and practices for the 'conscientization' of people to enable them to identify social, and political contradictions and to take community action against these oppressive elements. I propose that critical reflection on the historical social and political context of the development of land management practices may serve to break new ground in the search for sustainable land management.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1983) studied the nature of power in society and how we can become 'trapped in our own history' if we avoid reflecting on how individuals and institutions exercise power. He urges society to continually analyse and question the reigning power relations particularly as oppressive forces are often accepted as givens in contemporary society. In the context of this paper, it is the privilege of knowledge and institutional power that warrant continual questioning. Dallos and Dallos (1998) argue that power relations frequently operate at both structural and ideological levels. Although intertwined, different strategies must be employed to deal with each. For example, developing quality relationships between scientists and land managers will not directly affect oppressive pastoral lease regulations.

Hill (1991) suggests that all cultures have merely scratched the surface of their potential for psychological development. This undevelopment results in much of the oppression in society today

which manifests itself in our inability to nurture ourselves, others and the land. For the first time in our history we now have the tools to recover from our psychological distress. Hill states that it can be a terrifying journey but a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of genuine sustainability. In this context I ask if we need to critically reflect on deeply personal issues before will be ready to take on the demanding personal challenges of genuinely participative research?

Russell *et al* (1989) reviewed agricultural extension and concluded that there was no consensus as to what defined extension; there was no theory to support it and funding institutions were dissatisfied with its effectiveness. Ison and Russell (2000) went on to conduct a participative research project *with* pastoralists in the assumption that pastoralists themselves were effective researchers. By reflecting critically on this three-year research project they developed an alternative model for agricultural extension and rural development. This model effectively makes transparent the power relations that operate among interest groups with 'seemingly contradictory goals'. A key feature of the model is 'that the accepted needs of the key stakeholders [in this instance, the pastoralists] are being addressed and adequately met (as judged by the stakeholders themselves)'. This model puts into practice many of the concepts expounded by authors quoted above and as such, it threatens the power of individuals and government institutions. The authors state that genuinely collaborative work is hard work and that it requires nurturing and sustenance of participants. It requires 'mutual respect and the valuing of difference – of leaving space for the other ... it is an emotional process and needs to be recognised as such'. Their book 'is about breaking out of a research and development tradition in which emotion or emotioning, is considering (sic) to have no part to play'. The pastoralist participants themselves claimed that the project developed their confidence to ask question of people in authority and to understand their industry and take action to improve their lot. 'Our little steps have turned into monumental leaps'.

In the context of the 'shifting camp' theme of this conference, the literature cited above suggests that if genuinely participative research is to be undertaken, it will demand a move into some unknown and personally challenging territory.

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