PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS A PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: Empowerment can be seen both as a process and a goal of Participatory Action Research (PAR). While most studies have focused on outcomes of empowerment, the process of empowerment has received little attention. We argue that participants' empowerment can be enhanced through purposeful interventions at different stages of empowerment process involving discovering oppression, conscientizing, mobilizing, maximizing, and creating a new order. The present paper analyzes a PAR project in a disadvantaged municipal district aiming at enhancing residents' participation in community development through the Change Laboratory Method. The results emphasize the importance of dialogical reflection in the empowerment process.
Keywords: Change Laboratory, Empowerment, Participatory Action Research

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) is something that tries to combine participation and action. Participation means that research is not done on people but with them, whereas action refers to concrete problem-solving. Accordingly, PAR has its roots in both participatory and action research traditions. Firstly, it origins from liberation theology, neo-Marxist approaches to community development, and liberal human rights activism emphasizing people's empowerment through collective action. Following Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed

(1970), the PAR is aligned with the values of social justice and inclusion, with the aim to promote positive social change for disadvantaged people (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2001).Secondly, PAR traces back into action research approach initiated by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) in academic settings. Lewin proposed iterative cycles of problem-definition, fact-finding, goal-setting, action, and evaluation to simultaneously solve problems and generate new knowledge. While participatory research gives PAR its ethical values, action research gives the demand for scientific rigor, and those should be integrated in a research process. Participants should become co-researchers and agents of change through participation. A research project should grow a collaborative enterprise characterized by shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward social action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

This paper is based on the three-year PAR project *Caring and Sharing Networks* aiming at enhancing residents' participation and developing efficient means for residents and stakeholders' collaboration in urban and community development. The project was focused on a disadvantaged municipal district in southern Finland, consisting of the administrative centre of the city with surrounding neighborhoods of 30 000 people. The area is characterized by different historical layers in terms of construction and waves of migration, mainly refugees, from the 1970's onwards. Cultural diversity in daily life is reflected in a high proportion of immigrants and more than 70 spoken languages. In the light of social and economic indicators, the area represents the least advantaged district in the City of Espoo. Due to social housing, problems of poor people and immigrants are interwoven. The area is also underrepresented in the city council and other democratic bodies due to low turnouts in local elections. Within the prosperous city, the area has been exceptional over decades resulting in its stigmatization.

The present research project was initially motivated by two main observations: residents' low involvement and a lack of systematic collaboration among stakeholders in various endeavors of community development. Our initial interviews with residents revealed scattered networks, bureaucracy of city administration, feelings of powerlessness, and frustration, as well as a lack of knowledge and citizen skills. This led us to examine the concept of empowerment more closely. In the beginning, we simply defined empowerment as a growing critical awareness of ones' own situation and capacity to act on that awareness (Lundy, 2005)and further as a process in which a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives (Rappaport, 1981). The research process however unfolded the complexity of the concept of empowerment and its importance for successful

participatory action research. The aim of this paper is to explore, how PAR interventions can enhance participants' empowerment process.

The remainders of the paper are structured as follows. First we discuss the concept of empowerment in the context of PAR, followed by the descriptive analysis of our main intervention the Community Workshops, aiming at enhancing empowerment and social change, complemented by a case example. Finally, conclusions are drawn upon how PAR interventions supported the empowerment process.

The Concept of Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has raised considerable interest across various disciplines and practices, including political and social sciences, education, social work, management, and community psychology. Consequently, it can be seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that takes place at individual, group, and community levels. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome that can be enhanced and evaluated (Hur, 2006). It is expected that PAR would enable a social process that results in positive changes within individuals, organizations, communities and societies. A successful empowerment process would result in a greater sense of control, social participation, and expanded options in individuals' lives. In communities, it can generate increased resources, enhanced connections, and solidarity towards other groups, resulting in the improved quality of life (see Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

While most studies have focused on the outcomes of empowerment, the process of empowerment has received little attention. This may be due to its unpredictability over place and time which is closely related to the dynamic nature of power itself. Power is not an isolated entity but something that exists in all relations; it can be shared and strengthened as well as be lost. According to Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, p. 98), power is a combination of ability and opportunity to influence a course of events. Ability is bounded to individuals' agency and self-determination, whereas opportunity refers to external and structural factors that can be transformed through collective action. Consequently, individual and collective empowerment can be distinguished (Hur, 2006). In this paper, we focus on the process of empowerment and its collective outcomes which we regard as critical for a successful PAR project. For this purpose, we next introduce a model of empowerment developed by Mann Hyung Hur (2006) basing on the theoretical synthesis of a variety of cross-disciplinary studies on empowerment.

The Process of Empowerment and PAR

According to Hur (2006), an empowerment process forms a path including five progressive stages or steps: discovering the existence of stratification and oppression, conscientizing, mobilizing, maximizing, and creating a new order. The first step is dissatisfaction with individual, administrative, social, or political circumstances, reflected in the sense of powerlessness. Both the oppressed and change agents discover the reality with psychological and social pathologies. These insights lead to the second step, the process of conscientizing, in which people gain awareness of how social and political structures affect their experiences and contribute to their powerlessness (Freire, 1970). They start to conceptualize and understand oppression and social stratification, that is, how groups are differentiated and located in a hierarchical order, and foster confidence in change by developing necessary knowledge. The third step is to take initiatives in empowering the oppressed and mobilizing collective action to make a difference in prevailing circumstances. The stance at this stage is assertive and even aggressive in the face of opposition and open conflicts. The fourth step is to maximize empowerment by sharing power with an increasing number of people. At this point, "people feel able to utilize their confidence, desires, and abilities to bring about real change" (Hur, 2006, p. 530).At the final stage, a new social order overcoming oppression and social injustice is created and established.

At the first sight, the process of empowerment delineated above seems quite idealistic and raises concerns about the possibilities of a single PAR project to accomplish it. Greenwood, Whyte, and Foote (1993) see PAR as an emergent process that begins with participatory intent and continues building participatory processes into the activity within the limits set by participants and local conditions. We do believe that the empowerment process can be enhanced by careful planning. At the initial stages, participatory practices should support development of community belonging, and participants' involvement in joint activities. At the advanced stages, the role of researchers is diminished to facilitating efforts to gain control over organizations, and building a community in order to establish a new social order. In more specific terms, individuals' access to knowledge has been regarded as fundamental for conscious-raising. Originating from Freire's (1970) classical work, collective learning and knowledge creation have been emphasized. This is encapsulated in the value of reflexivity, according to which a research project should provide an educational component and emerging knowledge should be accessible to all stakeholders, and those should also be involved in the interpretation of findings and recommendations of change (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005). Consistent with this, Foster-Fisherman et al. (2005) found that giving a

voice to participants as local experts, fostering deep reflection by probing questions, and exploring diverse perspectives through meaningful dialogue boosted participants' empowerment.

While above mentioned are general guidelines for successful PAR practices, we next introduce and discuss the intervention method of the present project, the Community Workshops, and its impacts in more detail within the framework of the empowerment process, covering the stages of discovering oppression, conscientizing, mobilizing, maximizing, and creating a new order. Then we will illustrate the process with a case raised by one of the participants.

Community Workshops

For the purposes of the current research project, a special method of the Community Workshops was designed and implemented to promote positive changes in community development. The Community Workshops is an abbreviated application of the Change Laboratory® (CL), a formative intervention method based on the theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987, 2007; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). The CL has been planned to promote innovation and learning within organization but has been increasingly used in cross-boundary development. Researchers act as interventionists providing tools to participants for envisioning, designing, and experiment with novel forms of activities. The rationale behind interventions is to expand participants' understanding about the objects of development work enabling shared goals and enhancing collaboration. Each workshop has a specific purpose to deepen the collective learning and innovation process (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). In the present study, the CL method was modified for purposes for urban and community development including five successive workshops as follows: (1) Charting the current situation; (2) analyzing disturbances and conflicts in current practices of urban development; (3) shaping objects for future development; (4) planning experiments for new practices, followed by an experiment period of two months; (5) evaluation of experiments and decision-making about their consolidation. Table1 shows how the stages of empowerment are intertwined with the topics of the workshops and their main interventions.

Table 1. Empowerment Process and Main Interventions in Community Workshops

Stage of Empowerment	Topic of Workshop	Main Interventions
Realizing oppression	Charting the situation	Mapping the disturbances
Conscientizing	Analysing the disturbances	Double stimulation through mirror data and Triangle Model
Conscientizing	Shaping new objects within the zone of proximal development	A speech by the CPC director Future Memorizing
Mobilizing	Planning experiments	Project plans Cross-evaluation of plans Inviting new actors
Maximizing	Experimenting new practices	Collaborative action Inviting people
Creating a new order	Evaluation and decision-making on consolidating new practices	Team assessment Process evaluation

Forty-nine invited people attended the workshops, varying from 24 to 38 people across the workshops. The participants involved residents and members of resident associations, managers of regeneration projects, city planners, civil servants, representatives of non-profit organizations and local parishes, and managers of shopping malls. Invited people were recruited via personal contacts and research interviews, and they were expected to represent diverse motivations and perspectives into community development. The workshops were purported to be a bottom-up process, and the researchers did not anticipate one dominant issue to emerge due to scattered interests identified through interviews.

The workshops were scheduled to start at 04.30 p.m. in a local city hall and took approximately two and half hours. They were managed by a consultant qualified for practicing the CL method in collaboration with four researchers who acted as group facilitators. The workshops consisted of plenary discussions and small group sessions that were stimulated by presentations of pieces of research data, speeches about future lines of development, and various innovation methods. For research purposes, all workshop activities were recorded and documents photographed.

CL Interventions as Enhancing Empowerment Process

Even though the CLis based on cultural-historical activity theory representing neo-Marxist approaches (Vygotsky, 1978; Il'enkov, 1982) it is not explicitly aligned with the concept of empowerment so far. The aim of the CL is to build transformative agency through collective learning and empowerment has obviously been regarded as a by-product of this

process. It is however possible to identify potentially empowering elements and specific interventions in the CL process as follows (see Table 1).

The first workshop started with charting a current situation with defining weaknesses and strengths through dialogue that creates common understanding beyond individual limits and allows expressing dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger with the prevailing circumstances. The participants generated a detailed overview of the developmental challenges of the area, including poor image, unequal treatment in city resource allocations, slow decision-making procedures, a lack of common premises, and low social cohesion. They also raised possible explanations for the unfavorable development. Equally important, they also voiced strengths, such as uniqueness, cultural diversity, and local actor networks, creating confidence in taking action. At the second workshop, actual conflicts raised by the participants were analyzed through the double stimulation method that helped them to broaden their viewpoints and perceive implicit oppression embedded in structural elements (see below). There were four cases to be analyzed, and two of them stimulated a lot of discussion on unequal treatment and racism in public decision-making procedures. It seemed that these discussions boosted the participants' motivation and sense of solidarity, even though they the cases themselves were only partly carried into further problem-solving in the successive workshops.

At the third workshop, the participants created a new vision for future development and started to plan new practices that would solve currently identified problems within the proximal zone of development, that is, near future (Vygotsky, 1978). A director of City Planning Centre was invited to give a speech on future lines of urban development in the municipal district that raised a critical dialogue. The participants realized that the official vision did not include social and cultural aspects of development, and they started to wonder whether "a social scheme" could be included in planning procedures. The director admitted that town planning was not capable of adequately addressing complicated problems issued in the workshops and invited the participants to join solving them. This idea was carried into the fourth workshop, in which the participants teamed up and generated plans for novel experiments, including co-planning a community house, establishing a co-operative regional development team, and organizing a multicultural food festival. The two-month experiments mobilized wide circles of local actors: residents, shopping malls, non-governmental organizations, and city servants. Finally, the experiments were evaluated and decisions made upon their consolidation at the final workshops. The established new practices initiated to

transform old order to a new one in their environments, and researchers continued to support the process after the workshops.

The Method of Double Stimulation

Double stimulation is a special method to enhance participants' awareness about contradictory circumstances, and deserves therefore further explanation. The main idea is to enable participants' movement between personal experiences and their conceptualization. *Mirror data* serve as the first stimulus and consist of ethnographic data evidencing disturbances and conflicts in current practices. They are collected by researchers and participants in various ways, such as observing events, interviewing actors, shadowing practices, or studying documents. Mirror data are presented to participants in order to make contradictions visible, challenge various interpretations and to get them engaged in seeking new solutions.

As the second mediated stimulus, researcher-interventionists provide theoretical tools to participants for analyzing and interpreting the mirror data. Of crucial importance is a triangle model of the human activity system with six components: the subject, the object, tools and instruments, the rules of participation, community, and the division of labor. The triangle model is used to identify contradictions within and between the components that are seen the origins of repeated disturbances and conflicts in everyday practices (Engeström,1987; 2001, see Figure 1). Two types of stimulus serve different purposes; mirror data make participants confront unpleasant facts of the current activity, whereas theoretical tools help them to distance themselves from emotionally difficult situations. Movement between concrete observations and abstractions is important, because it fuels participants' learning and change(Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013).Double stimulation can be expected to stimulate the process of conscientizing and was the most evident at the second workshop which is further illuminated with the story of the Gallery Espoo Bridge as follows.

Case Gallery Espoo Bridge

Astrid is a civil activist who has lived in the area on and off since 1956. She is an independent researcher with an interest to develop new forms of work in civil society. She got involved in local NGOs, especially with a local artists' association, and started to pursuit their interests. The driving force for her activism was a win-win ideology; because NGO contribute markedly to the revitalization of a local community, the city should facilitate their functioning among others by providing premises. This would free them to implement their true mission in

the area. Consistent with the win-win ideology, the City Planning Centre (CPC) had offered their showroom premises for the artists' association for free during the last nine years, and the association has established a gallery therein. Because of the city's budget cuts the CPC considered it could no longer pay the rent for the gallery to the municipal agency administering the real estates. In this process the artists' association learned that the CPC had paid the all rents to the administrative centre of city estates on the behalf of the association. If the gallery would now be unable to pay the rent it was probable that the premises would stay vacant in future, because there was not any stakeholder interested in renting them in the sphere of vision.

Astrid with her artist friends was troubled with the situation, and they had tried several ways of taking action, such as contacting civil servants, giving statements in local events, organizing a petition, writing to local newspapers, and mobilizing local people. These efforts seemed to fail at the time Astrid joined the Community Workshop. Because the issue was urgent, it was selected as a case for the contradictions analysis at the second workshop. An exchange between the association and local politicians on the local newspaper was read aloud to all participants as the mirror data. Then people interested in developing the issue further grouped together and started to discuss the situation in terms of the Triange Model as the second stimulus (see Figure 1). The group consisted of Astrid, a new-comer activist in local politics, a manager of a city housing company, and a researcher-interventionist. Other group members were not engaged in the gallery activities, and not so much touched with its fate but still ready to offer help in problem-solving.

Figure 1. The analysis of disturbances Case Gallery Espoo Bridge)
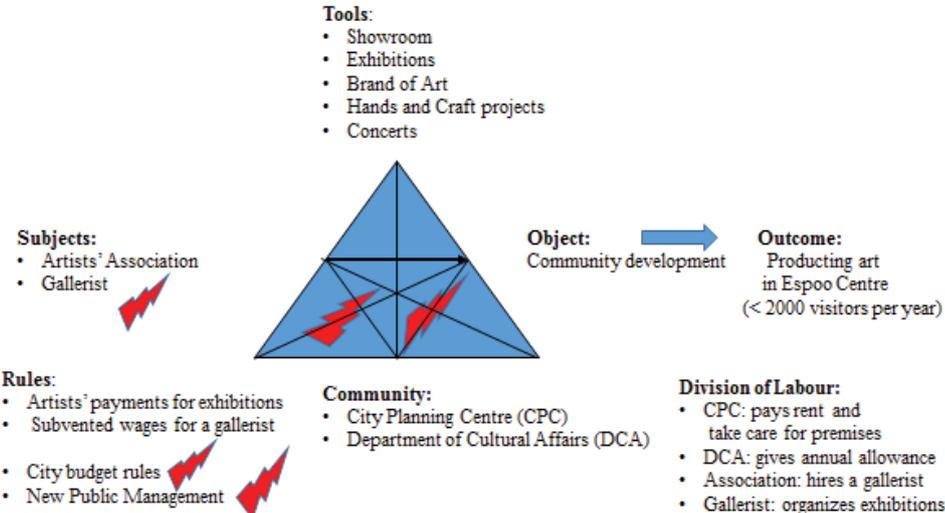
As Figure 1 shows, one of the main contradictions was identified with the members of the community that could be expected to participate in the division of work by providing premises to the gallery. The question was raised whether the CPC it was the right partner at all: should not it instead be the Department of Cultural Affairs that would share the gallery's goal to promote art in the area? One of the group members knew the history of the gallery, and believed that the strong role of the CPC was due to personal ambitions of former civil servants. The group believed that the Department of Cultural Affairs would indeed be more appropriate partner to help the gallery. Secondly, the general lack of grass-roots premises was largely due to complex rules within the city budget, resulting in the weird situation in which it is more preferable to keep premises vacant than allow citizens to use them at the low price. This compromised the association's object to revitalize the community through producing art to people. Thirdly, the group members thought that the gallery should employ a gallerist with a long contract to develop activities, instead of six months government-subvented contracts. The members gave also ideas for diversifying activities, such as clubs for immigrants and networking with other associations.

At the end of the session, the group presented their analysis to other audience to get feedback and to elicit further insights. Complex rules and a lack of co-operation between administrative units were also evidenced by other cases, pinpointing to the subordination of citizens vis-à-vis the city administration. The group interpreted it to manifest the New Public Management ideology threatening endeavors of the civil society. Some participants also pointed out that the artists' association had enjoyed a privileged position among all associations over years and those might be feel jealousy instead of compassion.

The successive workshop revealed that other participants were not interested to advance the interests of the artists' association alone, but wanted to include it into the emerging network of all actors providing meeting places to residents. Astrid was delighted of this opportunity and joined the group starting to plan a new community house which would be a nexus of local citizen activities. The group organized a two-week-event in a shopping mall and succeeded to mobilize wide circles of local people to give their opinions and engage them in further planning. Astrid did not however compromise her mission to advocate interests of artists but continued doing it in the context of emerging cooperation that would enable sharing resources and collective power against prevailing New Public Management ideology. Her insisted efforts along with that of others in the artists' association finally gained success and the gallery's story had a happy end. An agreement was reached between the Department of

Cultural Affairs and the City Estates Centre concerning the rent for the showroom until the building will be demolished according to the zoning plan in fuzzy future. Astrid experienced the networking taking place among the different actors in the project, civil society activists, city administrators and researchers as very promising. To her it was one step closer to the critical mass that is required to achieve her win-win objectives.

Conclusions

The present findings showed that the empowerment process can be purposefully built into a PAR project. Almost 50 people representing diverse interests joined the Community Workshops to solve problems of their living area, leading to collective action to transform current practices in urban development. As pointed by Whyte and Foote (1993), participation seems to be a process that takes place within the limits of participants and local conditions but can be nurtured and supported through planned interventions. Next we briefly discuss main conclusions drawn from this study.

Interventions followed a path of development with the emphasis of the conscientizing stage which can be regarded the most important for critical consciousness-raising. The double stimulation method matches with Freire's (1970) method of *conscientização* in which participants' lived experiences are decoded through abstraction, inducing critical perception of reality. Consistent with Freire's thinking, the double stimulation purports to maintain the concrete and the abstract separate from each other but still interrelated in a dialectical tension, allowing reflective shifts back and forth. We used the triangle model (Engeström, 1987) as a tool of abstraction which helped the participants to broaden their viewpoints and identify disturbances as sources of discontent and oppression. Experiences of oppression were however attributed to structural factors, rather than to direct power relations between the oppressed and oppressors that were rarely named by participants. In welfare Nordic societies, oppression may take more subtle forms due to more nuanced social stratification than in traditional class societies, thus requiring sophisticated analytical methods.

Even though we have highlighted the importance of methodology, it does not mean that empowerment could be reduced to therapeutic discussion. The purpose of the multi-voiced dialogue is to promote critical reflection that in turn fuels action to transform the environment. In successful PAR projects reflection and action are balanced (see Freire, 1970). The current participants' actions were strongly supported through scheduled project planning, pushing them towards action. There is however a danger that forced actions remain "empty" activities without reflection that is critical for transformative learning and action. Astrid

exemplified a participant who succeeded combine reflection and action in her activities. Admittedly, she represented a citizen activist with multiple skills of influencing, but similar developments could also be tracked among less skilled participants who were able to learn through peer support. The common thread among the participants' successful projects was that they were based on small wins; while sharing their local expertise, they in return achieved significant small-scale improvements in their lives (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout, 2010).The complexity of urban development challenges both laypeople and citizen activists, as well as experts and academic researchers.

Acknowledgements

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