Participatory Social Work:
Research, Practice, Education

editors

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Małgorzata Kostrzyńska, Brian Littlechild**

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Here We Are:
Our Journey to Participatory Research

The book you are holding has taken a long time to compile, and is a result of a complex process that has led our thinking about participatory research in social work to this very place. This process explains to a large extent the structure of the publication and its diversity, even though we did not plan for it and it came as a surprise, which is why it is now worth devoting some introductory pages to it.

We need to start by stating that the history of empowerment of research participants, usually service users, was in each of our cases different, but the individual differences mostly arise from the location in two empirical cultural traditions: Polish and British.

The sources of Polish inspirations for a monograph devoted to participatory research can be traced back to the activity of the European Resource Centre for Social Work Research (CERTS). More than ten years ago, we initiated as part of it, a discussion about more democratic forms of research in the field of social work, held in a gradually growing circle of representatives of academic networks from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, and Poland.[1] The initial aim of CERTS and its

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 [1] The relationship between the Department of Social Pedagogy represented by the Polish editors of this volume and the Centre dates back to 2000, when seminars set up by the CERTS started. Its focus has been the development of epistemological and methodological

seminars was to get to know different perspectives on analysis of broadly defined social work in member entities; however, at a certain stage of our search we reached fiercely disputed yet differently understood positions in each of the member states participatory methodologies.

Today, we can even say that they have allowed us to create an alternative methodological paradigm, but the beginnings did not go as far as this. Our original idea was to systematise social work research, taking into consideration the degree of "theoretical" and "physical" participation. The first aspect describes to what extent the researcher (academic) assumes the perspective of the research participant as an epistemological starting point for empirical conclusions. We extended this continuum from the scientist's normative perspective (negligible theoretical participation) to the understanding interpretive paradigm based on social constructivism. The other dimension of participation concerned the extent to which the researcher is physically present in the research participant's environment. Thus the defined continuum spreads from quantitative survey research (without any meeting between a researcher and a research "subject") to long-lasting participant observation. It seemed to us that such dimensions would form a matrix within which nearly all social research methods could be located, according to the level of service users' participation in them. At that time, it was difficult for us to imagine a possibility of co-creation of research by academics and service users, which is why we reduced the participation of the latter to the representation of their perspective (theoretical participation). In consequence, knowledge, even though it was not co-created, was produced with respect to the service users' perspective.[2]

The next stage of development involved adding the third dimension, meaning discursive participation. The adoption of the service users' perspective not only enriched the theoretical conclusions of particular studies, but also changed the scientific discourse in this area, which potentially might affect public debates over the issue indicated. In other words, we acknowledged the political representation of the users' point of view in academic and public discourses, and the methodological consequences this entailed (Granosik, 2014).

Despite some interesting examples of studies of our foreign colleagues, at this stage of collaboration we were unable to treat the participation of

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aspects of social work. The seminars, always conducted in the two official languages of the Centre (French and English), were designed with the intention to create a platform for experience exchange as well as to consider the idea of building a possible partnership for future joint research projects. Over a long time of dynamic development of the activity of this Centre, its president was Ewa Marynowicz-Hetka, Chair of the Department of Social Pedagogy at the University of Łódź.

[2] This stage of work on participatory social work research was documented and discussed in a collective monograph (Marynowicz-Hetka, Gulczyńska, Granosik, 2011).

users as the fundamental methodological assumption. The real turning point in our thinking about participatory research came when the Polish editors of this volume encountered more radical forms of user participation, which are indicated by the process of empirically based co-creation of knowledge. What we mean by that are numerous experiences and publications by such authors as Peter Beresford (Brunel University, United Kingdom)[3], Katherine Tyson McCrea (Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work, USA) and Lewis Williams (University of Southern Queensland, Australia), all showing different variants of participatory research and practice including considerable participation or even control on the part of service users.

This made us realise how limited the idea of participation had been in our earlier conceptualisations. Moreover, thanks to these works, we discovered analogies between action research empowering service users and the Polish tradition of social pedagogy based on the revival of human strengths. Even though the original idea of Helena Radlińska – the creator of social pedagogy in Poland and the first Head of the Department of Social Pedagogy at the University of Łódź[4] – concerned action rather than research, the direction of changes seemed obvious: to include the interested parties in the activity that concerned them. In H. Radlińska's concept of social work, the notion of "social" "describes the goal of the action (for the community) and the methods used to undertake this action (through the strengths of the community)" (Lepalczyk, Marynowicz, 2001: 197). Social work was understood as "a conscious activity to reconstruct collective life based on eliciting, multiplying and improving human strengths, and organizing them to work for the good of people" (Radlińska, 1961: 305). Her social work's goal was "to analyse the conditions of a life to emancipate and elicit the creative potential of individuals, and not solely to adapt them to society" (Lepalczyk, Marynowicz, 2001: 197). The aim defined in such a way was to be achieved by the creation of a community: "Its structure is multi-dimensional, as it concurrently describes the goal of acting (for the community) and the manner of achieving the goal (using the strengths of the community)". In other words, in enhancing social change one cannot limit oneself to the social worker's activities "for the community" but also "by the community" (Lepalczyk, Marynowicz-Hetka, 2001), which clearly validates the idea of service users' participation.

The effect of this symbolic intercultural encounter was another joint monograph on participatory research in social work published in 2014 (Gulczyńska, Granosik, 2014). It was created thanks to, among other things, the involvement of the already listed researchers as well as our

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[3] The Author of the chapter: *Radicalising Social Work: Involving Everyone; Including All Our Knowledges*; in this volume.

[4] It is Poland's first Department of Social Pedagogy which she organized between 1945 and 1950.

Lithuanian (Social Work Department at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania)[5] and our Polish colleagues (Department of Social Pedagogy, University of Łódź, Poland).[6] This time it was a publication in Polish, so it provided, to a greater extent, academics, practitioners, and potentially also service users with diverse international experiences concerning participatory social work action research, within this locality.

The idealised enthusiasm characterising our perception of participatory approaches at the time was more and more frequently accompanied by some critical thought, mostly inspired by the post-Foucauldian philosophy. One could not emphasise enough the inspiring role of Marek Czyżewski (Institute of Sociology, University of Łódź, Poland)[7] and his team, with whom, over nearly two years, we examined the issues of power in the research and activity of social pedagogues, and particularly to what extent they fit within the process of creating neoliberal subjectification through the educationalisation of social reality.[8]

In consequence, these meetings gave rise to our discussions of the contested, ambivalent and tension-laden nature of participatory research and the ways in which participatory methodologies may become tools for more subtle and hidden forms of governance. The political significance of participatory research that manifests itself in this perspective does not require any lengthy introductions. We even get the impression that participatory research is one of the most significant forms of social life democratisation in a knowledge society. It is also hard to ignore the shift in the function of universities resulting from such research: from knowledge creation to the creation of mechanisms for knowledge (society) democratisation.

The road leading to participatory research was in some ways different from, and also in some ways similar to, the perspective of Prof. Brian Littlechild, the other editor of this collection. In England and the wider UK, the very first ideas of taking into account service users' and carers' views, the precursor to greater service user participation, were presented in the

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[5]   Jonas Ruškus, Gedas Malinauskas, Natalija Mažeikienė from Social Work Department at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania.

[6]   Three of them have also contributed to this publication: Małgorzata Kostrzyńska as the author and co-author of two parts: *Challenges Faced by Social Pedagogy Academics in the Course of Participatory Action Research with Homeless People and Street Workers as Co-Researchers* and *Participatory Response to Needs of People Who Experience Homelessness: the Example of "Homeful – Homeless" Box Project*; Anna Jarkiewicz the author of the chapter: *Theory and Practice of Participatory Approach in Schools: an Example of the Future Youth Schools – a Forums Project*, and Izabela Kamińska-Jatczak the author of the chapter: *Lines of Activity Addressed to Families: Limiting the Participatory Approach as with Casework Practitioners*.

[7]   Marek Czyżewski is the author of the contribution *Pitfalls of Participatory Approaches*, in this volume.

[8]   Some of results of this cooperation were published in the special issue of Societas/ Communitas (2013).

research of Mayer and Timms in 1970 (Mayer, Timms, 1970). This book, and its approach/findings, had a major effect on Brian and his understanding of and motivations in my work – as it did on many other academics and practitioners. It laid the ground for much of what has happened since in social work in the UK.

The development of coproduction of services and individual care plans for service users and carers has been hailed as an important way forward in relation to diminishing the power imbalance between professionals and how they view how they should deliver services, and the views and experiences of service users and carers themselves. There is growing international recognition that areas of professional jurisdiction should be opened up to greater public scrutiny, debate and power-sharing (Plotnikov, 2016). This has been an important area of development in delivery of services in both health provision and in social work in England, particularly in work with people with learning disabilities, people with mental health problems, and children looked after in the public care. However, there have been criticisms from some service users that coproduction is just a way of getting service users and carers to take responsibilities for their own disadvantages and problems, and therefore attention needs to be paid to make it a reality that this is not the case in relation to challenging oppressive stereotypes, policies and interventions. In addition, some argue that this is based on the idea of individual rights, and therefore service users and carers being involved at this level, but not the highest policy and legislative levels in relation to societal views and actions. One of the main protagonists of service user power, Peter Beresford, is both an advocate for coproduction, but also a critic of some of the ways this is actioned in practice- or not- and how "lip service" can be paid to it but not really happening in everyday reality (Beresford, 2013, 2015). The importance of, and some examples of, recent developments, and reflections on these developments, in the area of coproduction and collaboration between professionals and service users and carers are set out in the chapters in this book written by Brian, and the Creating Links group, from the University of Hertfordshire.

Brian's personal interest in collaborative coproduction work in the areas of projects, teaching, policy-making and research came from his continuing dissatisfaction in ideas and paradigms in these areas that placed professionals and academics at the apex of a pyramid structure of how knowledge is seen to be constructed, operationalised, and given credence. The paradigm of allowing professionals and academics higher value in terms of their learning, views of the world, and ways of engaging with service users and carers which did not fully take account of the power imbalances within these relationships – did not seem to fit with the ideas of social work values in relation to human rights, participation, and social justice in relation to how problematic issues are framed, and responded to

in a way which fully takes account of these issues, and allow service users and carers the greatest amount of possibility to be empowered as equal partners in the construction and dissemination of knowledge. Consequently, over the last 15 years, Brian has been instrumental in developing the Creating Links group in its initial phases at the University of Hertfordshire, and has been involved in a number of research projects, taught modules and sessions which are co-produced. This interest has been fortunately one which has been shared with colleagues in the European Research Institute Social Work.

So, luckily for the further development of our thinking about participatory research, our paths crossed in the ERIS association with its seat at the Ostrava University (Czech Republic), which aims to intensify research activities in the field of social work based on partnership agreements[9] as part of cooperation between partner universities across Europe. Within this network, not only did we find space for discussions and planning participatory research projects, but also new contributors to this publication, who considerably broadened the socio-cultural context of the experiences presented. These contributors are Doris Böhler (University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg, Austria)[10]; Davide Galesi (University of Trento, Italy)[11]; Alice Gojová and Kateřina Glumbíková (Ostrava University, Czech Republic)[12] and Hilaria Soundari (Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed University, India).[13]

Recognising the significance of tradition and the special interest in participatory practices at the Department of Social Pedagogy of the University of Łódź, ERIS gave us a mandate to organise the Participatory Social Work: Approaches, Barriers, Critique conference, which was held in Łódź on September 29–30, 2016. This was the event where we met

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[9]   The mission of the Institute is to carry out high-quality funded research projects involving the Institute's European partners, and to produce European-funded teaching and learning materials for social work and social care programmes. For this purpose, it brings together researchers in the field of social work from more than ten countries, who work on joint research projects and traditionally meet during the ERIS annual conference organised by different member academic centres and in the Spring School, which gathers PhD and MA students (from all over the world) for a few days each April at the Ostrava University in order to present, support and discuss research projects conducted by students and young researchers. The president of ERIS is Oldřich Chytil from the Ostrava University. For more look at: https://eris.osu.eu/.

[10] The author of the contribution: *Learning Together: Social Work Students and Service Users Reflect Critically on Their Diverse Life Experiences*, in this volume.

[11] The author of the contribution: *Ethnopsychological Consultation: a Tool for Strenghtenning of Partnerships in Multicultural Social Work*, in this volume.

[12] Authors of the contribution: *Dilemmas in Participatory Approaches to Social Work*, in this volume.

[13] The author of the contribution: *Contemporary Scenario of Participatory Social Work Research in Rural India*, in this volume.

and encouraged to write a chapter the following persons: Geof Dix, Di Bailey, Adam Barnard and Linda Kemp (Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom)[14], Sue Hollinrake, Sara Spencer (University of Suffolk, United Kingdom)[15], Katarzyna Czarnota (University of Adam Mickiewicz, Poland)[16], Witold Mandrysz (University of Silesia, Poland)[17], and Magdalena Sasin (University of Łódź, Poland).[18]

A wider spectrum of participatory practices was covered thanks to inviting some special guests. Contributions of Rita Bertozzi (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy)[19]; Chiara Panciroli and Francesca Corradini (Catholic University of Milan, Department of Sociology, Italy)[20]; Eliška Černá and Lenka Polánková (Ostrava University, Czech Republic)[21]; Marek Mikulec and Kateřina Glumbíková (Ostrava University, Czech Republic)[22] and Participants of the Creating Links Group (University of Hertfordshire, United Kingdom)[23] added new perspectives on participatory solutions to social issues and questions covered in our publication by other authors.

Presenting the story of how we reached the present stage, we are by no means suggesting that this is a universal evolutionary path of development. On the contrary, we believe that participation can be understood very differently, depending on the cultural context and institutional conditions, and so it can develop in various ways. Moreover, it would be really non-participatory to impose only one vision and development path on this approach.

The experience that we have jointly created teaches that publishing texts on participatory research is – from the academic point of view – very

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[14] Authors of the chapter: *Doing Participatory Action Research: Reflections on Criticality and Social Justice from the Researchers' Perspective*, in this volume.

[15] Authors of the chapter: *Co-producing Community with Disabled Researchers and citizens -the challenges and potential for successful collaboration*, in this volume.

[16] The author of the contribution: *Participatory Research with Romanian Roma Immigrants Living in Polish Settlements: Methodology, Results and Barriers*, in this volume.

[17] The author of the contribution: *Participatory Budgeting: Action Research Procedures in Community Work*, in this volume.

[18] The author of the contribution: *The Project of Artistic Workshops with Students: Achievements and Challenges of Participatory Practice in University Curriculum*, in this volume.

[19] The author of the contribution: *Empowering Migrant Youth through Participatory Approach in Social Work*, in this volume.

[20] Authors of the contribution: *Doing Participatory Research with Families that Live in Poverty: the Process, Potential and Limitations*, in this volume.

[21] Authors of the contribution: *Empowering Community: Theatre of the Oppressed as a Tool of Homeless People's Emancipation*, in this volume.

[22] Authors of the contribution: *Difficulties Faced by Researchers in Participatory Practices: An Example of Research with Roma People*, in this volume.

[23] Authors of the contribution: *"Creating Links": The Involvement of Service Users and Carers in the Provision of Social Work Education in England*, in this volume.

difficult. One has to accept diverse ways of presenting co-created knowledge, styles, and even text structures. We have decided that strict adherence to academic standards would be an effective barrier to knowledge co-creation, with some of its forms having no chance of getting published.

We hope that this publication represents different perspectives on participation in very diverse fields of social work. We wanted this publication to be positive regardless of how critical of themselves can representatives of different approaches be. Positive, however, does not mean naively idealising, which is why it also contains chapters that describe the risks and weaknesses of participatory research.

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Have a nice read
Editors

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Part I

CHANGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

GEOF DIX*, SUE HOLLINRAKE**, SARA SPENCER***

Co-producing Community with Disabled Researchers and Citizens: the Challenges and Potential for Successful Collaboration

Abstract

The chapter discusses the development of a collaborative research project, involving a service user-led Coalition of Disabled People, a local authority and a local university. The collaboration was set up to inform the Coalition's strategic planning and to raise awareness of disability issues locally, mapping assets and resources for/of disabled people, as well as needs and resource gaps. The initial pilot of this "listening project" is critiqued here. It adopted an inclusive approach to the differing roles and competences within the project co-ordinating team, whose members worked together to recruit and train disabled researchers and engage a small sample of participants. The project drew on ideas from emancipatory disability research to inform its approach. The discussion evaluates the benefits and challenges of a collaborative approach to data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings, to achieve meaningful change locally, critically reflecting on praxis and the project's effectiveness.

Introduction

This contribution will critique the development of a collaborative research project, involving a service user led Coalition of Disabled People, a local authority and local university within the eastern region

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of England. The project was set up to inform the Coalition's strategic planning and to raise awareness of disability issues locally, mapping assets and resources for/of disabled people as well as needs and gaps. The following discussion will look critically at why and how the research developed as a collaborative project between the Coalition, the university and the local authority. It will critically explore some of the issues that arose as the project progressed and in particular will examine the tensions and benefits of recruiting and training local disabled people to conduct the research interviews, to be part of the process of analysing the data, incorporating their contribution as insider researchers and as "experts by experience". Findings from the research are considered along with the importance of acting on these to achieve the desired impact of promoting change.

Historical context of disability research

Historically, disability research has arisen out of a critique of mainstream research that was seen to serve the (mainly able-bodied) researchers more than the disabled people being researched (Oliver, 1992). Mike Oliver offered this critique within a wider discussion and theorising about the position of disabled people in Western society, in which a number of disabled scholars were debating the relative significance of impairment and disability, with some, for example disabled feminists such as Jenny Morris (1992), placing an emphasis on the personal experience of impairment, whilst others were exploring the sociological aspects of disablism (e.g. Oliver, 1996; Barnes, 1998). The interconnectedness of impairment and disability, and the effects of the one on the other within social, cultural and material contexts were also theorised (Thomas, 1999). Goodley (2017) provides a useful summary of the different strands within the development of disability theory. Disability research, like feminist research that draws on Feminist Standpoint Theory (Stanley, Wise, 1983; Ramazanoglu, 2002) has a particular "world view" which is that the central focus is on disabled people and their concerns, that research should be done with and not to them, and that the outcomes should be beneficial for disabled people. The aim is to capture their lived experience, listen to their stories and influence change, through a "lens" that sees the social construction of disabled people as oppressive. Again, there is a parallel with feminist research methodology, with its emphasis often on the subjective, using a qualitative approach that is flexible, to embrace the detail of peoples lives.