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Participatory Action Research in a community development setting – obstacles and opportunities

Introduction

My paper draws from a project on which I work together with 3 other researchers. We evaluate the work of an arts-based community development agency in a deprived area of London with older people (I refer to this organisation as the 'Centre'). Community involvement and ownership are crucial aspects of the Centre's philosophy. In line with the participatory ethos of the organisation, the qualitative methodological framework of the evaluation combines biographical and observational with participatory action research (PAR) methods.

In the following I concentrate on the PAR component of the evaluation in the form of the so-called *Development Group* (DG). After outlining traditional PAR features and other approaches to PAR I introduce the group in relation to those. Subsequently, I present obstacles to PAR through the DG as well as opportunities that eventually arose from it. But let me introduce the research site first:

The Centre

The Centre is located in an area that faces severe social challenges such as high unemployment, poor health, crime, etc. It started nearly 20 years ago in the semi-derelict buildings of a local church. There, artists were given rent-free workshops by the minister in exchange for teaching classes to the local community. Since then, it has grown organically through input from local people. Today, it is a multi-ethnic secular voluntary organisation that has been awarded healthy living centre status. Its high-quality facilities include the church premises, a nursery, a GP surgery, a café, offices and artists' studios, a park, and facilities for community activities. Over 100 activities for all sections of the population run at the Centre each week. They fall under the categories Health, Art, Education, Enterprise, Environment. Local people attend, contribute to and even manage these activities.

In order to reflect the Centre's action-oriented approach of community engagement in the research design, the external researchers and senior Centre staff agreed on a PAR component to the project in the form of the Development Group. Let me say a few words on PAR in general first:

Participatory Action Research

Much literature exists that presents core features of PAR. Here, however, I can only give a concise overview of selected PAR characteristics that I have extracted from relevant publications. I believe that they suffice to convey a general understanding of the methodology:

1. Respondent participation as partners of researchers, sharing and learning together -> collaboration
2. Researchers are convenors, catalysts and facilitators
3. Participants identify the issue themselves as one they want to address
4. Methods of research are flexible & appropriate to the community
5. Researcher is able to help develop a research capacity in others
6. Empowering process rather than one in which the participants are subjugated & exploited
7. Process includes reflection on practice
8. Fostering direct benefits to those involved in the research process as goal
9. Research results in change in practice

Sources: Neill 1998, in Cameron et al. 2000; Henderson 1995, in Lindsey 1999; Gibbon 2002; Green et al. 1995, in Cameron et al. 2000; Chambers 1983, in Gibbon 2002; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995, in Gibbon 2002

Traditionally, PAR is "a liberating form of research with a political and hence a radical agenda" (Gibbon 2002, p.548). Lindsey (1999) defines it as "a social action process that focuses on the empowerment of oppressed groups" (p.1239, referring to Hall 1992). Much PAR has been conducted with oppressed and disadvantaged groups and communities, often in developmental contexts, to achieve empowerment and generate social change.

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I will now introduce the DG and locate it in relation to such approaches to PAR and to the core features of the methodology.

The Development Group

The DG largely consisted of organisers of activities for elderly people at the Centre. Most of them had been recruited to make up the group by two of my colleagues before I joined the research team 2 years ago. Overall, the group met about 12 times.

The original ideas for the DG, agreed upon by the researchers and senior Centre staff, some of whom would later become DG members, were that the DG would:

❑ Emerge & develop as a group involved in health-related activity for older people, and decide its objectives according to the priorities of its members. Exemplify Centre processes (i.e. allow researchers to observe how groups run at the Centre)
❑ Engage in reflexive self-monitoring (about their work at the Centre)
❑ Ensure the embedding & development of research & self-evaluation skills in the organisation
❑ Help in profiling the work of the Centre to the wider world

One point in which research with the DG differed from other PAR projects was the fact that it was not so much research with an oppressed group (although several of its members come from a disadvantaged community). In fact, almost all of the DG members hold leadership positions and are members of strategic groups in the Centre. Thus, rather than overcoming oppression, collaborating with the researchers was intended to benefit the DG members, and thus the Centre and the deprived community it serves, in the following way: gaining an increased awareness of organisational processes (through reflection & discussion of their work in DG) as well as developing new skills (e.g. self-evaluation skills) as a result of the collaboration are empowering and (can) lead to action that benefits the community.

Aside from this difference from (much) other PAR, a great effort was made to adhere to other principles. There were instances where this worked well and led to opportunities, yet obstacles to PAR through the DG were also encountered.

Obstacles to PAR through the Development Group

One of the greatest difficulties was the very essence of PAR, participation. Attendance of the meetings by DG members was inconsistent, and people arrived and left at different times. Meetings occurred as a result of researcher initiative (researchers had to push for dates to be set), and the researchers had to make extra efforts to get the members to attend (written reminders, gathering people at the beginning of scheduled meetings). This happened despite the fact that the members stressed they valued the meetings as reflective space and opportunity for dialogue with the researchers and other Centre staff. The DG members suggested reasons (1-3) for the patchy attendance at the meetings, which also indicate further problematic issues for conducting PAR through the DG:

1. Members being busy & feeling guilty about taking time out to attend the meetings
Although a PAR approach appears to sit comfortably with the Centre's organisational culture (participatory, action-oriented), aspects of this very organisational culture actually acted as obstacles to PAR: Hyperactively engaging in tasks at the Centre and constantly 'being busy', clearly a part of the organisational culture, was used by the DG members as an explanation for not attending the DG meetings. This can be interpreted as avoiding the reflective space provided through 'being busy', and can be seen as a manic defence against anxiety – reflection (in DG) that might reveal problematic, uncomfortable issues in the Centre's work that need to be confronted is avoided.

2. Negative connotations of research -> resistance
Only at a rather late point in the life of the DG did the researchers learn about an association of 'research' with 'meaningless' forms of monitoring in the Centre. A view of quantitative methods, which equalled 'ticks in boxes', prevailed and affected views of the research project as a whole. Naturally, this did not harmonise with an organisational culture sensitive to creativity, narrative and the visual. Although the overall research project had never been intended as a quantitative monitoring exercise, and the methods the DG would use were to be determined by its members, there had been a failure to

emphasise this enough at the outset of the collaboration, thus resulting in a resistance to participation through the DG.

3. Members' uncertainty about their roles in the DG, and what they were supposed to do for the research - wish for more structure for the DG and its activities

Being confronted with the open, unstructured space of the DG meetings caused anxiety in the members and led to a wish for guidance and a stronger lead from the researchers, which clashed with the principles of PAR and the researchers' intended role as mere facilitators and observers. To a large extent, the research team – initially - managed to sustain their backseat role, which they had assumed in order to provide space for the members to set themselves tasks as their contribution to the overall research project. The members took up this space, and ideas for potential tasks for the DG quickly started to flourish. The continuous stream of new ideas went into different directions, from collecting the stories of Centre users over keeping visual diaries about Centre activities over videotaping activities in the Centre etc. Two main points can be made about this:

Firstly, the DG quickly moved from ideas around narrative methods to visual methods. This posed a problem for the researchers, who had no particular expertise in this field and thus needed to familiarise themselves with it. They did, however, recognise the need to be flexible and use visual methods as the methods chosen by, and appropriate in the context of, the DG.

Secondly, in the stream of ideas newly emerging ideas constantly overtook earlier ones that were not followed through. The reason why many of them were not followed through often had to do with members' work overload and technical unrealism (e.g. lack of skills & money needed to edit video recordings). Yet not following ideas through also created a feeling of the group 'starting all over again' in each session. There came a point when a strong need for the DG to produce an outcome was obvious, and it was at this point that the researchers felt it necessary to become more proactive in order to achieve this.

The idea of creating a visual display that showed the development of and links between activities at the Centre around healthy eating emerged. Although the DG as a whole had much input in the creation of this display, the involvement of the researchers in this phase was not restricted to a backseat role: for example, they 'pushed' the development of the display by giving DG members tasks to do for subsequent meetings. Moreover, the final stages of the development of the display and its exhibition were largely carried by only one member of the DG, an artist, and myself.

The visual display also provides an example of a deviation from PAR principles. Whereas the DG members saw the purpose of the display as presenting activities at the Centre, the researchers actually had their own, different agenda which they insisted upon, namely increasing the visibility and raising awareness of the research in the Centre through including research information in the display. Otherwise [if left entirely to the DG], they felt, the display would result in a PR exercise of Centre activities in which the research component would be lost. Adamant suggestions by the researchers on ways of including research information met with reluctance and were considered too complicated by the DG members. The conflict of interest over the place of Centre activities and the place of the research in the display was finally resolved with a compromise and some information on the research was included, although the researchers felt it to almost have been squeezed out. What the experience around the visual display reveals is that at least then, the DG members as part of a PAR project did not actually think in terms of research and shied away from embedding research in their work.

However, this is not the full story yet. In many respects, the visual display, and in fact the DG overall, can also be seen as giving rise to opportunities.

Opportunities that arose from the Development Group

The creative nature of the task of developing a visual display was an ideal match for the skills of the artist involved in the DG. She showed enthusiasm and quickly adopted responsibility for the creation of the display, yet without overriding the authority of the Group. The project thus had an empowering effect on her and made her emerge as a leader. After the exhibition of the display, when the DG had completed the task it had set itself and had thus come to a natural halt, the artist showed an interest in keeping the DG alive by asking the researchers when it would meet again. This indicates that an expectation of the researchers as organisers remained, but also that the artist had become more proactive with respect to the PAR project. This new enthusiasm proved helpful for the further few DG meetings that were held in order to round up the experience of the DG. For example, the artist was instrumental in

getting people to attend the meetings [e.g. she helped with the invites], and her contributions in the meetings reflected her new enthusiasm for the PAR project [e.g. suggestion to contribute further data].

Following these developments, the artist displayed a wider interest in the overall research project. For example, she offered to conduct interviews and suggested potential interviewees, and subsequently received basic training and jointly with me conducted some biographical interviews. Similarly, another member of the DG and native Bengali speaker was given basic interviewing training and became involved in research tasks beyond the DG such as narrative interviewing, translating & transcribing. With hindsight, the researchers asked themselves whether they should have been more directive in the DG and should have done more to advance research skills amongst the group members. They felt, however, that this could have only been done through becoming teachers, which was not compatible with their assumed backseat role and the principles of PAR.

A theme that came up strongly in the last meeting of the DG was a growing recognition among the DG members of the need for internal research & monitoring & evaluation in the Centre. This was considered important with respect to both the Centre's work itself and funder requirements. In a later discussion amongst themselves, the researchers noted that the Centre was still a long way off being able to evaluate its own processes, and it would still need to learn techniques. Yet based on the discussion in the DG, the researchers felt that they had reached the point of wanting to learn. An Ofsted inspection that had taken place slightly earlier in the Centre might have contributed to this appetite for research & evaluation skills, but the DG had probably also played a role in it.

In sum, on the issue of 'research' & 'evaluation', the collaboration between Centre staff and researchers through the DG has promoted the building of research skills and the wider research involvement of some DG members. In this sense, the PAR project has led to direct benefits for those participants as well as for the Centre as a whole. Beyond those particular members, an increased interest in research & evaluation was observed, something to which the DG can be seen as having contributed.

Further opportunities arose from PAR through the DG in so far as it provided a space for individuals to make valued contributions, be recognised and 'blossom'. This was particularly recognisable for the Bengali members of the group. Stories they told and the reflective exchange in the group highlighted their work, a less well-profiled area of activity in the Centre, and revealed its sophistication. For example: Bengali outreach work with young women focuses on their mothers-in-law – if they like the outreach worker and become involved in activities at the Centre, the young women will be allowed to join Centre activities as well. Moreover, the visual display provided an opportunity to make the work by and with Bengali people visible. This allowed Bengali members of the group to be recognised and shine.

Another development that created a space particularly for Bengali, but also other, members of the group was the fact that a senior and very experienced Centre member left the group at a relatively early stage. This particular member had played a leading role in the early stages of the group, pushing on and urging the participants to use the group for what they wanted to get out of it, keeping the group 'to task'. Her departure, due to a change of roles, left a kind of vacuum that was unfortunate in the sense that she had an existing understanding of research and had much of a contribution to make towards a balanced researcher-participant-collaboration in the PAR project. On the other hand, however, it provided a space for freer contributions by others.

In the sense that the DG provided individuals with a space to contribute and enabled them to 'shine', it was empowering. Beyond that, the members' contributions in the form of stories etc. released sophisticated sociological knowledge (e.g. outreach focussing on mothers-in-law). PAR through the DG thus revealed a fund of transferable informal knowledge about the local community that is potentially very useful for local professionals (e.g. community nurses) and has the potential to affect their practise.

Conclusion

As we have seen, it seems fair to say, at least from a researcher perspective, that the DG as an intended PAR project was a struggle in several ways. But does this mean that it was not successful, or that it was in fact not PAR at all? Let's look at the outcomes:

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❑ The DG successfully met its objective of illustrating Centre processes [for the researchers to observe] – we observed how the group was running, what its strengths (e.g. working with visual methods) & weaknesses (e.g. punctuality) were

❑ It also helped in profiling the work of the Centre to the wider world [e.g. through display]

❑ It was a collaboration whose direction & methods were largely determined by the participants

❑ It resulted in a – albeit temporary – new group that reflected on their practice at the Centre, something for which there had previously been little space in the organisation and that had hence arisen as a need

❑ It contributed to a basic research capacity in some participants that can both be built upon and used for a change in future practice (i.e. to evaluate Centre's work after completion of our evaluation project)

❑ The increased appetite for research & evaluation skills we observed can also be built upon and used for changes in future practice

So although the DG did not work according to a textbook version of PAR, and although it had its difficulties, I argue that in many ways it was successful, and that it was both 'participatory' and 'action'. For us researchers, the project certainly had a great learning outcome, not only in terms of knowledge about the Centre, but also in terms of conducting PAR. Our insights might not be specific to the particular setting of the Centre, and they are thus of potential relevance for conducting PAR in similar/other settings.

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