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“I’m a leader of all of them to tell the truth”: Participatory action principles for uplifting social work research partners’ identities

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“I’m a leader of all of them to tell the truth”:
Participatory action principles for uplifting
social work research partners’ identities

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For:

Empowerment:
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Abstract

Identity, understood from many vantage points, is continually evolving based on relationship experiences, including those relationships established in social and behavioral research. Whether rendered anonymous in large quantitatively-studied samples, or intimately known in qualitative studies, those contributing to science in a role termed “subject” receive, through the research, definitions of their identities. Because those identities are part of published social research, identities created in the research process become part of the public discourse about persons in the “subjects” situations, and also influence policies that in turn influence persons’ lives. For their part, the identities of social and behavioral researchers also are influenced by research roles. Social work researchers may struggle with being elites as their research process unveils great suffering, which they may be unable to remedy.

Data about the discomfort of those participating in research indicate that the search for alternative ways of structuring research relationships is important. The participatory action tradition, grounded in Freire’s formulation that social transformation occurs as all people recognize their value and power and claim their full freedom, offers alternative ways of structuring relationships between those who participate in research. Data from participatory action research projects demonstrate those who participate in research can discover strengths and realize capabilities for constructively responding to serious social problems. Partners formerly regarded as “subjects” describe empowerment, acquiring education, reflectiveness about their strengths, and the conviction they can constructively respond to community problems. Researchers can find they are inspired by the heroism of their partners, and are more able to bring about policy change as they include processes of advocacy and public education in the research process. Both partners in research can more readily bring about social transformation as they work authentically together.

Introduction

“It’s something when you acknowledge the problem, but when you actually try to do something about the problem, that is when it really works the most. Because anybody can say, ‘Okay, there’s violence.’ But for that one person, or that group of people that’s going to actually stand up and say, ‘We don’t like the violence. We think that there are ways that you can ... go about a situation with a nonviolent approach,’ just knowing that and knowing that everyday when I walk outside of my house I’m faced with ‘Okay, this might be my last day to live.’ With the gun... violence, because I know that you’ve heard, and I’ve even lost count of how many kids died, let alone in the school year, plus the summer... due to gun violence and acts of violence. So just knowing that, and knowing that we, as Stand Up! Help Out! want to make a change and a difference in our community, that’s just amazing to me.”

Purpose

This young Chicago-based research partner¹ describes how it feels to be involved in a youth empowerment, participatory action process specifically directed towards developing alternatives to community violence. Faced every day with threats to her life because she lived in a poor and a violence-laden community, she emphasizes the value for her and her peers of actually “doing” something about community problems rather than studying them. Some of the project’s impact, which she defines as “amazing,” comes from the solidarity she describes using the term “we.” With her peers, through the project she became a co-researcher and co-author of scholarly work, attending college and building a future quite different than the past she had endured. She and other peers in the project have said that their involvement in the project led to a change in identity – from persons suffering under the weight of insurmountable obstacles, to persons who

¹ In this paper, when talking about participatory action research, those who would under other research methods be termed research “subjects” (or members of the “sample”) are called “partners,” recognizing that in participatory action projects, researchers become partners as well.

could, through their actions and solidarity with others, experience affirmation of their capacities and support in achieving their life’s goals (Bulanda and Tyson McCrea, 2012; Guthrie, Ellison, Sami, and Tyson McCrea, 2014).

Halfway around the planet in Nepal, yet another partner in participatory action research about community mediation said,

We started seeing ourselves, those of us who are in and close to the actual mediations, as having resources to contribute to the training, and to see that we ourselves are in the best position to identify our needs, according to the realities of our communities, not according to somebody’s view from outside. This was a big change in how we saw ourselves. (Hari Pandit quoted in Lederach and Thapa, 2012, p. 1)

These powerful illuminations of the potential impact of research on identity led to the exploration in this paper.

Conceptual framework and key questions

Human identities – defined as “The fact of being who or what a person or thing is” and “The characteristics determining this” (Oxford University Press, 2014) are constantly being formed and transformed as people interact, reflect, and internalize relationship experiences. Some major ways identity has been thought of include:

- As developed in stages (Erikson 1993),
- from childhood attachments (Sroufe, Carlson, Collins and Egeland, 2005),
- mediated by language and culture (Tomasello et al., 2005),
- “spoiled” by stigmatizing processes, which are by definition highly context-specific (Goffman, 1963);
- alterable through compassion and mindfulness (Siegel, 2001);
- As generated by consciousness which in turn is an emergent property of brain functioning (Sperry, 1993);

- As socially constructed and relationally evolving (Gergen, 1985; Witkin, 2010) and
- potentially self-asserted over and against oppressive definitions of one’s identity (Collins, 2012; Freire, 1970).

Unlike an “identity transformation” in mathematics, which leaves an object unchanged (Oxford University Press, 2014), human identity is continually co-constructed through relationships. Since research with human “subjects” entails forming a relationship, the relationships that occur through research contribute to shaping the identities of both researcher and “subjects.” But are the “subjects” presented in social and behavioral research truly identical with how “subjects” naturally experience their identities? This paper explores identity co-construction of researcher and “subjects” in the research process, with an emphasis on how participatory action research methods can initiate a “virtuous social cycle” (Castro and Farmer, 2005), reducing structural violence and stigma and advancing social justice.

As suggested above, identities are co-constructed in relationships. Identity also is comprised of what we believe we potentially *can* do (Bandura, 1977). Snyder’s (2002) hope theory illuminates this further: People’s hope thinking is comprised of the goals they formulate for themselves, the specific pathways they envision to accomplish those goals, and even more importantly, their sense of their capability to carry out their pathways and accomplish their goals. This hope-laden aspect of identity arises and is affirmed through compassionate relationships (Guthrie, Ellison, Sami, and Tyson McCrea, 2014). Structural violence (Maas Weigert, 2008) and societal oppressions such as stigma (Goffman, 1963) impact not only the part of identity stemming from past

experiences, but also persons’ hopes for who they can become.

The identity construction that occurs in research may be considerably accelerated as the internet provides more ready access to research studies. People participating in research as “subjects” are more and more likely to experience mirrors of themselves on their computer and phone screens. Moreover, increasingly research journals, previously held in libraries and accessed only by already-privileged researchers, are publicly available and on-line. Now, far from gathering dust on library shelves, research reports can be immediately injectable via the internet into the minds of others.

Identity construction through the research process happens in at least two ways. First, through how people regard and treat each other: Does being involved in research enhance the dignity and creativity of all participants, or is it associated with confusion and disappointment? Secondly, because social and behavioral research has an impact on academic and public knowledge and social policies, the identities of “subjects” reported in research are influential. Does social and behavioral research ameliorate destructive social stigmas and correct falsehoods, or does it absorb and perpetuate them?

Since people are born into social structures that can perpetuate both structural violence and oppressive stigmas and racist stereotypes, social and behavioral scientists committed to social justice now strive for an emancipatory, empowering (Bulanda, Szarzynski, Silar, & Tyson McCrea, 2013; Lederach and Thalapa, 2012; Maas Weigert, 2008; Witkin, 2012) and/or strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 2012). But actually carrying out emancipatory research is not easy.

Among the major obstacles to effective emancipatory research is that both research and policy constructions are grounded in preconceptions that can be oppressive

of individuals’ own subjective experiences of their identities, as Shweta Singh points out in deconstructing multiple models of gender and development in Third World countries (Singh 2007). Whereas Western feminist models emphasize equality between men and women, Singh shows that “For many [Third World] women, adopting the goals of Western feminism would mean losing their families, the primary source of support for the fulfillment of their social, psychological and economic needs” (Ibid, p. 104). Further, imposing Western feminist constructions on policy and development for Third World women has a subjugating impact, as “the task of deciding women’s strategic interests is largely taken over by researchers and planners” (loc cit). Such priorities have profound implications for the research process: Unless Third World women are accorded the power of co-constructing the problems for study and the methods used to study them, research can further silence women’s lived realities and further subjugate women’s potentially more accurate co-construction of their identities.

Similar problems exist within developed countries plagued by profound inequalities, following Patricia Collins’ (2012) metaphor describing contemporary discrimination and prejudice in the United States: Members of devalued groups based on gender, race, ethnicity, status of ability, and sexual orientation function as “props” in dramas in which the plots are created for heroes who are white and/or male. Following her metaphor, the problem in research is that the “heroic” privileged researchers script what their “sample” of persons from various oppressed groups can say and do in producing scientific knowledge and contributing to research-based social change. “Props” are only heard if they speak in their assigned roles of supporting the hero, and they are silenced (marginalized) if they disagree with the hero’s dominant story (2012).

What happens to the data when “subjects” *don’t* play their roles? Is what counts as “evidence” limited to “props” playing their roles? Singh and Collins, albeit within different theoretical frameworks, both emphasize that publicly available knowledge and research-based knowledge can be contaminated by negative preconceptions about persons and perpetuate those false negative beliefs. The consequences for the validity of research are profound: How can research be ecologically valid if the central truths of those participating are hidden by research methods, rather than revealed through them? Solidarity and creative self-expression are essential so that oppressed persons’ self-definitions of their identities and experiences are no longer just secretly held and isolated, but instead can be heard through social research and then correct inaccuracies in public discourse and policy-making.

The topic of identity construction in the research process is especially important given the well-documented contemporary global context of widening income, health, and education inequalities, which all too often are organized around race, ethnic, gender, and disability inequalities (Erler 2012; Mackenbach, Stirbu et al. 2008). How can social work researchers maintain their fidelity to social justice priorities and carry out an enterprise which, unfortunately, is most often the province of the educated and elite?

Identities of “subjects”

“Subjects” roles change in accord with criteria for good science

For some time, the positivistic research paradigm that dominated U.S. research since the 1950s has been criticized for claiming to an “objectivity” that is unattainable, and also for overlooking effects of research on both researcher and “subjects” that are not part of researchers’ hypotheses (Saleebey, 1979; Tyson, 1995; Witkin, 2010). While

positivism² has not been hegemonic in the same way in other countries as it has in the U.S., it provides an interesting case study for considering researcher attitudes of “objectivity” and “neutrality” that can occur from within many research paradigms (including in psychoanalytic treatment and research, as Summers points out, 2013). Danziger describes how the U.S. social and behavioral sciences’ adoption of positivism in the mid-20th century led to a change in the role of the “subject”:

In general, the trend is away from an individualized source with a salient social identity, whose essential function is that of careful observation, and toward an anonymous source, with no relevant identity outside the laboratory, whose function is that of an object of experimental manipulation and scrutiny. In other words, there is a shift away from the expert observer, toward the manipulated object of observation (Danziger 1988, p. 44).

The shift in role definition of “subjects” was in a direction that satisfied now-discredited positivistic criteria for good science. “Subjects” new role created other problems that have been insufficiently recognized. For instance, social stigmas can be abetted by research and are profoundly destructive, as Marie Keenan describes,

Measured and judged as pathological objects, the results of this new ‘science’ on the individuals so evaluated is never the subject of ‘empirical’ or reflective evaluation. The aspiring ‘new’ scientists who call for evidence-based answers to the problems of living and for outcome studies as the only reasonable measure of worthiness for all that we do rarely think about evaluating the social and political ‘effects’ of their own work on the individuals and groups who are caught in their web of influence (2012).

² Positivism as referred to here indicates beliefs from logical positivist and logical empiricist philosophers of science (notably Carnap and Hempel) and related philosophers (Karl Popper) that were imported into social work and other social and behavioral sciences as of the 1950s, primarily in the United States. For further reading see Tyson (1995) and Saleebey (1979).

Pressured and/or disappointed “subjects”

While human subjects guidelines in the U.S. exist to prevent repeating some of the incidents widely perceived to be violations because they negatively impacted persons’ identities (such as Milgram’s studies of compliance with authority in which “subjects” were led to believe they were administering electric shocks to peers, 1963), other issues remain deep in the structure of how research is commonly organized. Martin Orne (1962) carried out a series of experiments demonstrating that “subjects” tend to want to please the researcher, are hip to researchers’ efforts to deceive them, and will simulate responses they believe the researcher wants them to make (p. 778), such as faking hypnotic states. Because the context of experimental situations treats “subjects” as just “stupid automatons” (Orne quoting Pierce, 1962), much of what actually happens between researcher and subjects in research situations gets ignored. He concluded, “the subject must be recognized as an active participant in any experiment, and ... it may be fruitful to view the psychological experiment as a very special form of social interaction” (Orne, 1962, p. 783). The distinguished psychological researcher Ralph Rosnow also described how the narrow, objectifying focus of positivistic experiments with humans actually constrains comprehensive understanding of persons: “when we look at someone who is looking back at us, it is hard for us to apprehend the “watcher” behind the “look” at the same time that we focus on the person's appearance. The more we concentrate on what is overt, the less apt we are to notice the sentient and active person behind the look” (2002, p. 5).

Yet another example comes from R.C. Lewontin’s (1995) critique of the most rigorous extant U.S. study of human sexual behavior. Despite extensive efforts to find

the types of interviewers who would be least likely to trigger sample members’ anxiety about disclosure of sexual behavior (middle-aged white women), the study found that heterosexual men had much more sex than heterosexual women. As Lewontin said, how could this be? Clearly someone was not telling the truth: Either women were under-reporting how much sex they were having, some women were having a lot of sex with multiple partners, or most men were greatly exaggerating their sexual escapades. As Lewontin wisely pointed out, the authors of the study assumed that their methods were “objective” and did not pay sufficient attention to exactly how their methods might have been causing “subjects” to skew the facts they provided. Just as serious is the fact that the study caused sufficient anxiety that “subjects” felt they could not tell the truth about their sexuality, but also were so intimidated they could not forthrightly admit how anxious they felt.

It is difficult to sufficiently understand the extent to which “subjects” are uncomfortable about research experiences because the assumption that “objectivity” has no social cost has caused researchers to throw out valuable data about subjects’ reactions to research processes. Moreover, obviously it is impossible to carry out a study of those who refuse to participate in research because they find it to be unpleasant. One can understand more about the impact of that shift in role on “subjects” by listening to what “subjects” tell us about their experiences.

Susan Estroff wrote the ethnography *Making it crazy* (1981) based on hanging out with persons with severe mental illness, even taking similar medications and going to bars with them. Shortly after the publication of her book, a former “subject” called her to express profound distress at how she was represented in the book. The “subject” felt

betrayed by the representation of herself as “crazy,” especially since she had significantly recovered. Estroff’s profound apologies were not comforting to her, and she hung up insisting that the researcher never contact her again.

It was tragic for Estroff, who had aimed through her book to improve destructively stigmatizing views of persons with mental illness, which at the time included a widespread prejudice that “they” were “incurable” due “chronic” mental illness. She also had the integrity to write about her “subject’s” distress with concern and remorse, questioning the very structure of research and wondering, “Whose story is it, anyway?” Perhaps Estroff’s “subject” would have agreed with Gedas Malinauskas’ (2012) characterization of the negative impact of a supposedly “objective” researcher as a “burglar.” When research is published, it is memorialized and so the individuals’ identities as defined by researchers are fixed in time. By comparison, identity itself is co-constructed and continually evolving.

Increasingly there are data from people who were “subjects” in experiments about what it was like. It is common when working with disadvantaged persons to hear complaints that when they were starving, homeless, terrified by mental illness, or experiencing other forms of suffering, they donated time to advance research, but found either it did not improve their conditions or caused additional distress. An example is the man newly participating in a program for homeless mentally ill clients who refused to answer any questions at all about his identity, stating repeatedly when program staff asked his name or social security number, “I do not want to participate in that research.” When staff finally earned his trust, he revealed he had been a patient in a public research

mental hospital and had scars on his arms from the tissue samples he had donated to a research process he felt had only harmed him.

When disadvantaged persons take time from the struggle to survive in order to participate in social and behavioral research, they generously want to advance science and often express desires that research will improve conditions in their communities. Unfortunately, often enrolling in the study means “subjects” will subjugate their views of problems to the researcher’s problem definitions, hypotheses, theory, and methods of data collection and analysis. Many have complained to me that researchers came and went, and their communities were no better.

Christopher Hall eloquently described his long-term experience as a “subject” in a study of identical twins carried out in Louisville, Kentucky. He and his twin brother Tony were subjected to a myriad of behavioral and physiological tests in the hospital environment and in their home, from the ages of 3 months until they were 36 years old.

His recalls his experience as a child:

To us this [the research center] was a mysterious and dangerous place. The entrance was always locked to protect against homeless people wandering in; and inside were busy scientists and doctors with hard looks on their faces or pasted smiles as they passed in the halls. They were conducting important business and we were their subjects. We felt that as scientists they had the power to unquestionably define us via an intricate, mysterious, and veiled process which was amplified by a policy that did not allow us to know our scores. “How did I do Mom? Did I pass? How did I do compared to Tony, to everyone else?” ...

The mystery of this veiled scientific process gave the data greater significance and evoked troubling questions. Why couldn’t we know? Were these findings something we couldn’t handle? What do these numbers say that I am? ... Is there some larger truth about me? Am I blind to myself? (Hall, 2012)

He concluded,

After 16 years as a testing subject I can confidently state that the

social sciences are remiss, or perhaps arrogant, in not recognizing that objectivity changes the context, the relationship, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the human being invited, or forced, to self subjugate into the relational position of “object.” It is for this reason that I strongly maintain that acts of “objectivity” are acts of relational oppression (loc cit).

One of the more pernicious impacts of the social distance that can be perpetuated by playing out roles of “experimenter” and “subject” is what Lauren Pankratz called the mutual transmission of false beliefs between experimenter and “subject” (Pankratz 2002). She described how this occurs using examples from witchcraft trials, Charcot’s hypnosis experiments, and psychic readers and their subjects. Being on the receiving end of such false beliefs about one’s identity is profoundly wounding. The disadvantaged Chicago youth in our participatory action program repeated a concern that they were either ignored or negatively misrepresented in public media and social science (as violent, alienated, feral, unmotivated, etc.). One valiant young man wrote a poem about how hard he was trying to make a better life for himself, concluding that he did not want to become a “statistic” and hoping that at least “people will say that I tried.”

Identities of researchers

Compassion or indifference in response to human suffering?

“Subjects” may not be the only ones negatively influenced by the impact of “objective” research relationships on identity. Although relatively more privileged, researchers may feel more disconnected as they play out roles that actually distance them from their communities. Muhammad Yunus described this experience most articulately: In Bangladesh, he routinely walked out of giving a lecture on economics and see hungry, suffering people being virtually robbed by money-lenders right outside his university

doors. Deeply unhappy with this situation, he started Grameen Bank by lending his own funds so persons suffering from poverty (called in Grameen Bank “struggling members”) could start their own businesses – with now-spectacular results (Yunus 2006). Not surprisingly, he emphasized, ‘Poverty is the deprivation of all human rights... “ No doubt many social and behavioral researchers who come face-to-face with the human rights violations of poverty feel Yunus’ disquiet, although not all can respond with such creative generosity.

Chris Hall described a form of researcher discomfort well when he related how he and his brother, starting at age 9, began to resist the twin study researchers’ “neutrality”:

We finally began asking the examiners why they were acting so weird. “Just answer the questions,” would be the reply, and the test resumed. A card would be held up and the tester would ask ‘what do you see?’ I see a guy holding a card.” “No, what do you see in the card?” “I see a guy’s fingers over part of the picture in the card.” “No, what’s in the card?” “What did my brother see?” “I am going to ask you again, what do you see?” “A guy getting angry holding a card.”

In retrospect, by rejecting objectification we were choosing to honor our voices in the relational negotiation of self through challenging these outside definitions of who others thought we were or of what we were supposed to become. We ran up to the one-way mirrors and peeked in. We talked to each other during testing by going to the bathroom at the same time. We asked questions about the examiners’ height and weight, if they had gained or lost pounds, how smart they were, if they had kids. The climactic event was when a tester broke under Tony’s persistent questioning about why he was acting so strangely. The examiner got up from the desk and yelled, “I quit, I am not doing this anymore, you’re screwing with these kids’ heads, I will not be a part of this, I can’t take it.” (2012).

That researcher had the courage to discern the research was having a negative impact on “subjects” and to refuse to participate. Many others might wish they could follow his lead.

Anne Harrington describes at length how Western scientific research has tended to assume that the scientific process cannot be compassionate (Davidson and Harrington 2001). When she and her colleagues carried out a study of the impact of compassionate meditation on brain function, they were often stunned by the insights of the Tibetan Buddhist monks who were their primary partners. While some of the monks’ questions were clearly culture-specific in ways the Western-based researchers could not have foreseen or answered (such as how the research procedures would “influence my astral body?”), other questions were clearly based on a viewpoint that compassion was compatible with a scientific attitude. The researchers found they needed to revise their understanding of science to accord with their prized values of compassion (Davidson and Harrington 2001).

Research utilization?

In the context of growing inequalities, research that garners considerable funding for studying impoverished persons in the hope that “some day” policymakers will improve conditions based on such scientific endeavors looks increasingly problematic. With notable exceptions, those who make policy decisions can have limited understanding of what research has demonstrated to be effective in remedying social inequalities. Some researchers acknowledge this problem and are deeply affected by it. Consider Sheldon Danziger, the “U.K. experience demonstrates that if there is a political will to reduce poverty and additional resources are devoted to the task, many public policies can be ‘taken off the [U.S.] shelf’ and put in place to reduce poverty substantially” (2007, p. 10). Perhaps some researchers suffer from vicarious trauma exposure, as they document human suffering yet have inadequate public support for remedies.

Researchers are changing, not just observing

Those who advance a new pragmatist approach to research emphasize that social and behavioral researchers are not disengaged spectators who produce mappings of reality (Baert, 2005). Researchers, like others participating in the research, are always changed in the course of doing research (Ibid). Changed for better or worse? More able to champion justice and truth, or more compromised and so shackled? From the standpoint of contemporary pragmatism, the good that research does becomes a major criterion of truth (Baert, 2005).

Philip Zimbardo’s powerful experience illustrates the transformation researchers can experience. In the 1970s he carried out the famous Stanford Prison Experiment. A mock prison was set up and some clinically “normal” Stanford undergraduates role-played guards and prisoners (Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney, 2000). The researchers were thunderstruck by how rapidly the students’ identities were transformed by the power of their new social situation. Within hours, guards were sadistically treating prisoners and prisoners were responding with bullying of each other and planned retaliations against the guards. Zimbardo himself, as well as visitors to the study including the youths’ parents, became so caught up in the process that it was not until Diana Baumrind visited several days later and told him the study was unethical and needed to be stopped that he called a halt (prematurely according to the study’s original plan). Zimbardo then devoted the remainder of this career as a social psychologist to deepening his understanding of the social contexts that can bring about changes in people’s identity, causing “good people to do evil,” a process he calls *The Lucifer Effect* (Zimbardo 2007).

Zimbardo’s findings illuminate researchers’ social systems, which contain many contextual elements that can cause persons to abandon their ethical commitments. To name just a few, researchers’ social status and income can hinge on allegiance to specified criteria defined not by themselves, but by funders and university authorities (criteria for promotion and tenure, publication of research papers, and for fundable studies) and researchers-in-training can experience considerable social pressure to ignore the negative effects of research on “subjects” (see Zimbardo, 2007 for more).

Research can initiate a “virtuous social cycle”

Empowerment and participatory action research

Participatory action research offers researchers the opportunity to generate what Castro and Farmer call a “virtuous social cycle” (Castro and Farmer 2005). They recount a Haitian man who had lost family and store because poverty precluded medical care for his AIDS condition and his family and customers were ashamed and frightened of his illness. He made a heroically long trek to receive medical care. A “virtuous social cycle” resulted. As his symptoms remitted, fear and stigma no longer prevailed, and he regained both his family and his store. Participatory action research makes it possible to combat rather than perpetuate marginalization and stigma, and to provide education, job skills, and affirmation in place of disadvantage, rejection, and dehumanization.

The focus that follows does not imply that participatory action research is the only way research can meet the aims of empowerment. Certainly research that uses non-participatory action methods can be empowering and result in lasting social change. An example is the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, dominated as it was by service-based values and a partnership between the U.S. researchers and child welfare staff in

Bucharest. The project generated path-breaking findings about the destructive impact of institutionalization on children’s brain development, and the essential and remedial impact of early placement in foster care families. Just as importantly, the research team created much-needed foster care families and built child welfare organizational capacity by allocating at least 50% of the funding to services (Bucharest Early Intervention Project, Zeanah et al. 2006). Moreover, Romania responded to the project with social policies that outlaw institutional care of infants and children, and other EU countries such as Lithuania have followed. Consider that the researchers themselves, far from pretending to neutrality or objectivity, emphasized that an ethic of partnership with child welfare professionals and foster parents in Romania undergirded their project (Ibid).

The aim of participatory action research can be summarized as empowerment. However, it is challenging to carry out that aim in part because the social transformation meanings of “empowerment” (Batliwala 2007) and “participatory” become obscured (Leal 2007). Batliwala describes in depth the process by which the term “empowerment” lost its original political meaning

...Divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalizing it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing (2007, p. 557).

Participatory action research had its roots in Freire’s process of consciousness-raising: Persons defining for themselves the nature of their oppression and processes of liberation (Leal, 2007). Participatory action research aimed to advance that liberation process, expanding it via publication of findings to improve the wider public’s access to truths about marginalized persons and foster genuine democracy. However, Leal, like

Batliwala, emphasizes that packaging and ritualization by elites can lead to the loss of the critical Freirian edge,

Once purged of all the threatening elements, participation could be re-engineered as an instrument that could play a role within the status quo, rather than one that defied it. Co-optation of the concept depended, in large measure, on the omission of class and larger social contradictions (Leal, 2007, p. 543).

In the original meaning of participatory action research for empowerment, the experiences and powers of marginalized persons are engaged and supported so as to nurture real transformation in social policies or other conditions that seemed previously unchangeable due to gross imbalances of power: “Empowerment only becomes a transformative phenomenon when it is constructed through dialogue and action” (Saleebey, 2012, p. 13). Empowerment can refer not just to clients, but also to social workers, who as Granosik notes, can find that participatory forms of research accomplish many important aims, including establishing discourse and creating new pathways by which social workers and clients can develop their influence on the social processes that contribute to their identities (2012).

Social workers can naturally do participatory action research. Anita Gulczynska describes her identity as an “engaged researcher,” as she allowed her caring for youth in Lodz to dominate how she defined her role with them. (Gulczynska, 2012) Over time, she had numerous identities in relation to the youth: as a neighbor, social pedagogue, participant observer, and even as legal guardian for one of them. Finding herself being a “bridge” for them, advocating for them with police and others from whom the youth were alienated and who were even endangering their well-being, she became able to understand the youths’ social networks, alienation, internal power dynamics, and

concerns in a way that would have been impossible had she been limited by researcher roles prescribed by positivistic research methods.

Participatory research in general can be viewed along a spectrum of degrees of participation (Macran, Ross, Hardy and Shapiro, 1999) from studies that empower participants to describe their experiences of a problem, to consumer evaluations of social services, to the most thoroughly participatory in which all stakeholders in a community identify the problem to study, decide how to study it, and are engaged in data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings (Laws, Harper et al. 2003; Stringer 2007).

Thorough-going participatory action research consistently results in better social conditions for those who participate, as well as educating everyone about the strengths and capacities of participants:

Action research approaches learning and inquiry by providing tools for local participants and activists to engage directly in the development of theory related to their work and goals. It has an explicit orientation toward values-based social change that links problem identification, planning, action, and evaluation with the people directly affected in local settings, and increases their capacity to more systematically study and improve their programmatic endeavors (Lederach and Thapa, 2012, p. 6).

Another example of participatory action research that resulted in a “virtuous social cycle” comes from Ruskus and Gerulaitis’ (2009) empowerment of parents of children with special needs in Lithuania. Initially intimidated by and alienated from school staff, with support the parents became engaged with school staff and actively contributed to the care plans for their children. Even more, at the conclusion of the project the parents decided to continue (without researcher input) the parent support group the project had initiated.

Remedying poverty by satisfying people’s hunger for education

Participatory action research can provide opportunities for valuable education, making it possible for people to develop theory about what they are doing that solves important community problems, as occurred in the project Lederach and Thapa (2012) carried out in Nepal. Education occurs through participatory action research as people develop skills in interviewing, data collection, data analysis, writing, presentation, and so on:

The focus on participatory research contributed significantly to the sense of ownership in the development of the community mediation program. In “becoming researchers,” participants learned to pay attention to and value their own experience and capacity for analysis, not as something that others did and gave to them, but as something they themselves were capable of producing (Lederach and Thapa, 2012).

Education occurs as community members discover their opinions matter and make a difference in their community (as noted in the epigram), which then enables people to value their own perspectives and creativity and continue to develop them on their own. One outcome of Lederach and Thapa’s Nepal research was,

A significant increase in their own [Nepalese partners’] self-esteem, in their capacity to participate actively in community processes and wider group decisions, and in their confidence in providing facilitation and leadership in local conflicts. Women and low-caste participants in particular described an important increase in self-esteem and empowerment, often described with the phrase, “We feel confident to speak out and be leaders.” (2012, p. 9)

Participants’ identities confirmed as agents of positive social change

Partners’ conviction of the value of their opinions makes it possible for them to initiate and strengthen constructive social changes. Often partners have been carrying out innovative change processes but may not have recognized their value or contributed them to formal social services. As Lederach and Thapa discovered in Nepal, the community

mediators carried out their work in specifically effective and Nepalese ways. Persons from a different culture or researchers from outside the system of community mediators could not have known which questions to ask and pursue, or how to ask them in ways that the local persons could readily answer.

The youth in Chicago also described how valuable it was to take on leadership roles in data collection and analysis, and tell the truth about their experiences:

Yes, I had opportunities in my groups to be a leader. I feel I’m a leader of all of them to tell the truth. I feel I’m the captain, the king, the man, the leader man! I feel this is my ...[program] to tell the truth (Bulanda, Szarzynski, Silar and Tyson McCrea, 2013, p. 11).

The youth said that the program aspects that meant the most to them were receiving care and compassion from instructors, mentoring community youth, and taking action to solve community problems. The generosity, compassion, and creativity of the youth became obvious as they carried out these helping activities (Bulanda and McCrea, 2012).

Participatory action research was used by Gonzalez and his partners to directly influence the sources of community pollution that were undermining the health of the community where he was working, “Asthmatown” in L.A. The research partners mapped local businesses, including hypothesized sources of pollution, and then also mapped locations of health problems. They identified where pollution was occurring and found direct correspondences between pollutants and community members’ health problems. They reported their findings to local policy-makers, who responded by increasing enforcement of environmental protection standards (Gonzalez et al., 2007).

Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre also found that with participatory action research they could influence social policy (2006). Carrying out an education program in a women’s prison led to an ongoing participatory action group which identified the value

of education for prisoners and also specific conditions in the prison that needed redress (violence against prisoners, corruption in awarding privileges, and so forth). While their partners could not be co-authors because of the concern about in-prison reprisals, the project’s reports were made user-friendly and reported to the state legislature. Consequently, the project contributed to decisions to preserve funding for prisoners’ educational programs.

Towards more valid research

Validity in research refers to the extent to which the data gathered and analyzed reflect the actual conditions under study (Tyson, 1995). Participatory action research readily results in improved external validity, since members of the community under study continually refine the match between the research results and their multi-layered experiences.

Participatory action research leads to improved internal validity in a number of ways. First, making it possible for partners to gather data from each other in ways they are most comfortable communicating advances the likelihood the data will more accurately reflect the partners’ actual concerns. For example, youth in our participatory action project repeatedly underscored that when they were interviewed by peers, they told the truth. Had the interviewers been adult “researchers,” their frank self-expression could not have occurred:

It [the interview] would be different because you would have been stressing, you would have been nervous” and “It’ll be more tense . . . you’ll be a little more nervous (Bulanda et al., 2013).

Being interviewed by a peer “makes the stress go away because you know these people, they are your ages so really don’t have problems answering the questions quickly.” This comfort level was deepened when the teen felt that her interviewer could relate to her. Another student responded to

the interviewer by stating, “It’s like you can get more where I’m coming from (Bulanda et al., 2013, p. 16).

Most problems social workers study are not linear causal processes, but instead reflect causes that are multifactorial, interactive, and emergent (Tyson McCrea, 2007). PAR also improves the validity of research because it embraces multifactorial causation and multiple perspectives: “Participatory action research allows the integration of complex and multiple forms of knowledge, and this is a necessary response to the complex and multiplex nature of cumulative impacts” (Gonzalez et al., 2007, p. 77).

Research including subjective experience has transforming power

Research that aims towards authentic empowerment has several elements. It includes partners’ experiences as they naturally communicate (Leal, 2007; Singh, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2007; Mazeikiene, 2012):

Clearly, we need to build a new language in which to frame our vision and strategies for social transformation at the local, national, or global level. I for one intend to do so not by re-reading Foucault or Gramsci or other great political philosophers, but by listening to poor women and their movements, listening to their values, principles, articulations, and actions, and by trying to hear how they frame their search for justice. From this, I suspect, will emerge not only a new discourse, but also new concepts and strategies that have not yet entered our political or philosophical imaginations (Batliwala, 2007).

For research to be genuinely empowering, research causes disadvantaged persons to feel listened to, respected, and have the ability to “member check,” or authorize the researchers’ analyses and findings.

Participatory research also can be grounded in a deep identification and experiential knowledge of the lives of those the researcher aims to empower, as Jarkiewicz (2012) sought to do in portraying the experiences of social workers who work with severely mentally ill persons by living their daily lives. A similar depth of

commitment occurred via eliciting the autobiographies of partners who had been diagnosed with mental illness, which was the participatory methodology Kaminska (2012) used to “strengthen... the position of the studied persons along the study process. This makes their voice the fundamental source of knowledge about coping with mental illness” (p. 235). As Mazakiene (2012) emphasizes, because biography uplifts the subjective experiences of disadvantaged persons, it endorses an ontology of subjective experience that otherwise can be excluded from public discourse. Kostyrcynka (2012) described what homeless persons told her about creating spaces to come home to, planning how to go from “soup to soup,” deciding whether they would beg or find other ways to survive, and creating a network of their peers, separate from the world of people with homes. Her partners are evidently resourceful, courageous, and connected with each other. Her research offers a bridge on which social workers can build to make respectful connections with homeless persons.

“Engaged” not disenchanted

To stay at the cutting edge of authentic participatory empowerment, social work researchers need a supportive community, in part to compensate for the systems pressuring them to carry out research that guarantees them a niche within the status quo. The problem as famously framed by Kuhn is that researchers are profoundly influenced by their social and psychological contexts, so that:

- scientists’ values are shaped by the priorities of their research establishments;
- their loyalties to specific theories and methods of inquiry are established early in their careers and they find it most difficult to change because it can seem their professional esteem is at stake if they revise their views; and

- they actually cannot see data that differ from their established ways of solving problems (Kuhn 1967 <1962>).

To remain authentically empowering, social work researchers need to do all those things that Kuhn said can be most difficult for scientists in any field. This suggests social work researchers need reflective communities of support within their field, so they can engage in processes that challenge the status quo and revise false beliefs held by themselves or others. An example comes from Stanley Witkin and Dennis Saleebey’s contributions in creating processes of dialogue between researchers that enable them to transform inquiry (Witkin and Saleebey, 2007); or from the CERTS conferences in the EU, which support researchers in moving forward with an authentically participatory agenda (Ruskus, 2012).

Conclusion

Thoughtful consideration of the impact of research processes on the identities of all participants suggests new standards and questions that can be asked of research partners for appraising valuable social work research:

- What was it like for you to participate in this research?
- What was it like for your community to participate in this research?
- Did this research support you and your community’s efforts to solve persistent community problems?

In a context of gross inequalities, if social workers’ aims are to ensure clients secure the political, social, and psychological power they deserve, we win many battles but inevitably lose some. For instance, in our youth empowerment project clients are considerably more engaged than the norm, evaluate the project as very valuable for them, and many describe how they made life-saving decisions influenced by our partnership

(going to college, avoiding potentially lethal situations, nurturing positive friendships).

We could ensure that our youth co-authors had the thrill and honor of academic publication, and earned scholarships from their book sales. We could ensure the youth were supported, as community members attended the many forums youth created on health, safety, and alternatives to violence. Yet, one young man who participated briefly in our youth project was recently murdered. We could not rescue children from abuse when public child welfare officials refused to carry out obligations to protect them; nor could we obtain sufficient care for the caregivers the children said were abusing them because community social services were in such short supply. We could not ensure all youth partners received the educations they needed to gain entry into college. In such a context, social workers need a research process that does not replicate cultural values of responding to human suffering with indifference and/or subjugation.

Social work research of the 21st century can throw off the shackles of neutrality and objectivity and initiate a “virtuous social cycle” (Castro and Farmer, 2005), beginning with making participation in the research process salutary for all. Social workers are naturally in positions where they can harness participatory action research methods to stand their ground of genuine empowerment, continually improving the services they provide, engaging partners in a knowledge improvement process, and documenting what clients regard as most meaningful for overcoming the many obstacles of profound social inequalities. Even though in many instances battles against inequality may be lost, every beachhead counts:

The bottom line is that ...ordinary people hold the power for change... Armed with thoughtful interpretations of our lived experiences, we can collectively craft new interpretations of our shared realities. Imagine the possibilities for our world if we do (Collins, 2012).

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