Participatory Action Research

Introduced by Prof. Shula Ramon

Participatory Action Research (PAR) attempts to integrate the principles of action research with those of participation by either those researched and/or a variety of untraditional partners to research, such as people who use social work. The two traditions will briefly outlined, with the strengths and weaknesses of their integration in PAR focused upon. The value of this approach to social work will be focused upon, following a couple of relevant examples.

Reading material attached:

Background reading:
Service users and carers’ involvement in social work education: lessons from an English case study
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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Within the larger context of the search to improve social work practice in Europe, this article presents a case study of a UK innovation in social work education with the potential to radically change social work practice. Following governmental requirements, Anglia Ruskin University has introduced systematic involvement of service users and carers in the training of a new undergraduate degree since September 2003. The conceptual and value base, the structure, staffing, and main activities are outlined; the main achievements and obstacles are highlighted. Mindful of the danger of slipping into tokenistic involvement, the project has included an action research evaluation component exploring the views of all the project’s stakeholders thus establishing the project as an evidence-based educational innovation. The findings highlight the value of service users and carers’ involvement on the qualifying social work degree, of the action research design of the evaluation, and the steps needed for the cultural change required for such an involvement to become more comprehensive and embedded in the degree.

Keywords: service user and carer involvement; social work education; evaluation; action research

In contextul eforturilor de a imbunatati practica serviciilor sociale in Europa, acest articol prezinta un studiu de caz al unei inovatii educationale britanice care ar putea schimba radical practica de asistenta sociala. In urma unor cerinte guvernamentale, din septembrie 2003 Anglia Ruskin University a introdus implicarea sistematica a beneficiarilor serviciilor sociale si a sustinatorilor lor in pregatirea profesionala a asistentilor sociali. Pentru a evita o incluziune tokenista, proiectul a inclus o componenta de cercetare-actiune pentru evaluarea opiniilor tuturor participantilor in project asadar bazand aceasta inovatie pe evidenta. Studiul a demonstrat valoarea implicarii beneficiarilor de servicii sociale in pregatirea profesionala a asistentilor sociali, precum si valoarea stilului participativ si democratic al cercetarii. Studiul a clarificat de asemenea pasii ce trebuie facuti pentru a crea schimbararea culturala necesara pentru ca acest tip de contributie sa devina parte integranta a cursului de Asistenta Sociala.

Cuvinte cheie: implicarea beneficiarilor de servicii sociale si a sustinatorilor lor; educatia de asistenta sociala; evaluare; cercetare-actiune

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Introduction

The realities currently faced by European societies (globalisation, ethnic diversity, social exclusion, and unlimited exchange of information) impose new challenges for social workers. Within this context social cohesion becomes a focus of political concern. Efforts are being made by international organisations to develop a common professional framework. New approaches to practice and implicitly to education are needed to meet the challenge (Jones and Radulescu 2006).

European social work degrees vary in content and in the balance of theoretical and practical training. The International Federation of Social Workers is developing a European Framework for Quality Assurance of the Social Professions and has identified the involvement of service users and carers in the running and development of social services as a key element in the social worker role (Jones and Radulescu 2006). Uniquely in Europe, the UK is setting up to achieve this objective by formally requiring universities to ensure the ‘formal and systematic’ (NISCC 2003, p. 9), ‘ongoing … core … and essential’ (CCW 2005, p. 5) participation of service users and carers in all aspects of social work education. This covers teaching; selection, admission, and assessment of students; design and evaluation of the degree; and course management (DoH 2002, p. 9). The purpose of the agenda is ‘to ensure that newly qualified social workers have a thorough understanding of the standards of practice, processes and outcomes that service users and carers want’ (Levin 2004, p. 8), and that they enter practice with a user involvement agenda.

The development of the new UK degree in social work is partly in response to the Bologna process (Confederation of EU Rectors 2000), the EU agreement which seeks convergence of the higher education systems and requires professional undergraduate qualifications to be of at least three years duration.

The new degree was also seen as an opportunity to advance social work education by making it mandatory for the educational institutions to provide service user and carer involvement (SUCI) in the new training programmes (DoH 2002, NISCC 2003, SSSC 2003, CCW 2005), with each university receiving a small annual grant towards the costs from the respective regulatory bodies. Although other countries (e.g. Brazil, Canada, Israel, US) offer examples of user involvement in education (Shor and Sykes 2002), to the best of our knowledge the UK is the only country where this is a mandatory requirement. This makes it important to explore critically the British existing evidence in order to understand the obstacles and opportunities that systematic user involvement within a social work degree may entail.

In this paper we present the Service User and Carer Involvement programme developed at Anglia Ruskin University, a university located in the East of England. At undergraduate level the university provides a three-year social work full time course and a four-year part time course. Our account covers the setting up years of the project, 2003–2005, and discusses the process of developing such an initiative based on an action research evaluation.

Values and conceptual underpinnings of SUCI in social work education

The terminology referring to people benefiting from social care and health services has been controversial at all times, due to the perceived imbalance of power between those who invent it and those who carry the label (Heffernan 2006). Service user is a term adapted by social work from social policy in the early 1990s. It since has
permeated the UK health and social care policy, research and practice. Yet Heffernan (2006) argues that while the terminology is meant to imply involvement, being invented by professionals (the powerful group) it may in fact work against it (p. 827). Our participants rejected the service user label suggesting consultant as a term reflecting their role within the project, conferring dignity and status. To avoid confusion, however, in this article we will refer to service users and carers as consultants only when discussing their involvement in the project.

Service user involvement in British social work education has taken place unsystematically since the mid-1980s, initiated by individual lecturers (Ramon and Sayce 1993, Beresford 1994, Humphreys 2005, Manthorpe et al. 2005). It gained momentum in the 1990s as the user movement in the UK became stronger, alongside the focus on training for anti-discriminatory practice and social inclusion (Levin 2004). Less has happened in terms of carers’ involvement, perhaps because the carers’ movement is yet to fully develop in the UK. Thus far even less of such involvement takes place in English social services (Carr 2004).

The values underpinning SUCI include respect, equality, genuine partnership, social inclusion and empowerment (Beckett and Maynard 2005). The wish for genuine partnership between the different stakeholders in social work stems from an equality agenda as much as from the realisation that unless such a partnership exists, users and carers will not be sufficiently motivated to pull their full weight into the joint change effort which social work entails.

Social inclusion is an integral part of the equality agenda, and SUCI provides a good example of it in social work education by treating users and carers as givers rather than as only takers. The outcome aimed at is for social work students to ‘treat service users as active participants in service delivery rather than as passive recipients’ (Levin 2004, p. 9).

Empowerment is mentioned at times both as an underlying value and an objective of user and carer involvement. When not tokenistic, SUCI can enhance empowerment. The introduction of systematic SUCI in social work education is also underpinned by the wish to learn from service user and carer experience in order to improve the performance of social work. This implies that social workers recognise their knowledge and practice limitations and value service users and carers’ experiential knowledge as a source of insight (Beresford 2000, Payne 2003). The readiness to learn from experiential knowledge reflects a postmodernist, non-positivistic epistemological approach (Hugman 2003), as opposed to modernistic, positivistic perspectives dominant in medicine, the natural sciences, and government circles.

SUCI is based on the recognition that although social work students engage with service users and carers in their practice placements, the power imbalance within the encounter makes it difficult to share experiential knowledge. When the power differential is reduced and the service users and carers feel respected for what they can offer, they are more able to share their perspective. A favourable background for such sharing is facilitated in our project by treating service users and carers’ experience as possessing expert knowledge, and through fair payment.

The postmodernist view of power includes its positive ability to create changes (Foucault 1979, Rees 1991). SUCI is about changing the power imbalance between service users and carers, and workers by recognising the centrality of the former’s perspective to social work knowledge. This shift also implies not only less power for social work educators and practitioners in monopolising the knowledge base of social work.
work, but also that the contribution of educators to knowledge has to be re-thought (Maglajlic 2003).

Viewing users and carers as givers, which SUCI promotes, reinforces the strengths approach, developed within North American social work (Saleeby 1992), aimed to move from the deficit model (focused only on the weaknesses of users and carers) to locating strengths, present or potential, and working on developing these further. The strengths approach is linked to the social model of disability, developed largely by service users who were also activists and social scientists in the last 20 years of the twentieth century (Campbell and Oliver 1996). This model proposes that the limitations of any disability lie in the social barriers to the inclusion of people who have specific disabilities. It opposes the prevalent attitude that a person with a disability is disabled first, with all of his/her qualities being conditioned by the disability. This approach calls for people with disability to act collectively as well as individually towards enabling disabled people to lead a fulfilling life as defined by them, and calls for change in professional attitudes and practice accordingly. We lack evidence as to how widely the strengths model is accepted and applied by social workers across different areas of social work practice in the UK and continental Europe.

The Anglia Ruskin (ARU) SUCI project

The new Requirements for Social Work Training (DoH 2002) emphasise 'practice and the practical relevance of theory', requiring the involvement of service users and carers in all parts of the design and delivery of the programme (p. 9). This requirement is open ended, thus giving educators the opportunity to develop their own models of involvement.

The team

At Anglia Ruskin the SUCI project has been developed and run by a team of teaching and research staff and the model of involvement has been informed by individual lecturers’ experience and knowledge of relevant literature (e.g. Ramon and Sayce 1993, Beresford 1994). People with current or recent experience of public and voluntary social or health care services were appointed as site3-coordinators for the project, responsible for organising the consultants’ involvement, networking and making the project known. Appointed for eight hours weekly they were also responsible for organising a site project advisory group (PAG). Within the PAG, representatives of local organisations (some of which were user-led), academic staff, and students met to discuss site relevant issues related to systematic involvement, networking, and the events organised by the project. A steering group composed of academics and the SUCI site-coordinators met once per semester to oversee the project, while a senior ARU lecturer took responsibility for the day-to-day management of the project.

In the first two years the project has involved 18 consultants, bringing their experience and expertise from areas such as mental health; physical disability; learning difficulties; services for older people; services supporting parents and young people (Table 1). While a smaller and constant number of consultants would have been an equally valuable model we preferred to create a larger pool of consultants to
The involvement

The involvement of consultants within the modules concentrated around a mix of 'personal testimony', and a 'consultants as co-trainers' model (Manthorpe 2000). The presenters described their direct experience and degree of satisfaction with social workers and social care services within various conceptual contexts (e.g. empowerment, discrimination) and in relation to various social work tasks, as relevant to students’ learning objectives.

Apart from direct presence in the classroom the lecturers, in partnership with the consultants and the coordinators, have envisaged other involvement styles (Table 2).

As an exploration of the implications of involvement in student evaluation a group of consultants was also invited to co-assess with lecturers students’ presentations within the Innovations in Health and Social Work module, and in the revision of some modules. The experience was valued positively by the students, consultants, and staff, marking an important step forward. A more substantial involvement in marking assignments was however seen as controversial, given the concern that the consultants would not be sufficiently qualified to have an involvement in students’ summative results. However, examples of other universities in the region involving service users and carers in the students’ presentations indicate this to be an appropriate type of service user contribution in assessment, raising the issue of the need for further cultural shift among our lecturers.

Service users and carers were also partially involved in the admission process by suggesting questions included within the admission interview. We have looked at the possibility of having consultants as co-interviewers, an innovation which other universities have implemented, but we lacked the financial resources to pay consultants for the over 250 interviews we run per year. Authors evaluating the implementation of the GSCC requirements note the variation of what universities were able to achieve in the first years of the initiative (Levin 2004).

A successful type of involvement was and remains the Information Fair. This event offers students and lecturers the opportunity to meet informally with a variety of service users, carers and representatives of local organisations and engage in an informal dialogue.

We have recognised that practice teachers have an essential role in facilitating opportunities for students to engage in service user involvement in practice, thus
applying the experiential knowledge received from the consultants. While limited resources prevented us from extending SUCI to their workplaces, we nonetheless have begun to raise the practice teachers’ awareness about it and identify their support needs for the implementation of such involvement.

**The resources**

In line with recommended best practice (Levin 2004) all consultants were paid for their contributions at guest speaker rate for teaching, and a smaller honorarium and travelling expenses for other types of involvement. As expected with a growing project, the initial GSCC funding has been insufficient and had to be matched by the university. The most needed resource was more paid time for the SUCI coordinators and for the project manager.

**The evaluation of the SUCI project**

As this was an innovation previously not applied at this scale, and mindful of the danger of unwittingly slipping into a tokenistic mode of involvement, the team has systematically evaluated the project for the first two years. This was identified as best practice by Levin (2004). The evaluation had a one-cycle action research design allowing ongoing implementation of change and the exploration of what works and

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**Table 2. Types of consultant involvement.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement within classroom</th>
<th>Involvement outside classroom</th>
<th>Media and literature</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of involvement used at ARU</td>
<td>Presentation by consultant</td>
<td>Contribution to student admission</td>
<td>Books, chapters and articles written by service users and/or carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dividing students into small groups, discussing each with a consultant, and reuniting the group for general discussion</td>
<td>Involvement in the evaluation of the course and of the SUCI project</td>
<td>Input on student presentations</td>
<td>Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel discussion with up to five consultants</td>
<td>Other possible types of involvement</td>
<td>Informal conversation in class between the consultant and the lecturer followed by discussion time with students</td>
<td>Student visits in the community to meet service users and carers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role play – exercises on experiencing disability, mental health difficulties, etc with the help of guests from organisations or community groups</td>
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<td>Audio tape material</td>
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what does not work in the project (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). It involved all the project stakeholders: consultants, PAG members, academic staff, students, and practice teachers. The aim was to ensure that the project is evidence-based, and that it benefits from feedback throughout. The research had an element of third-person research practice (Ladkin 2004) by adopting a holistic and participative approach to the inquiry. All stakeholders were involved in generating and interpreting knowledge about the project’s effectiveness, thus contributing to the changes identified as necessary. This research approach was chosen to reduce the anticipated tension that the required culture change might create by ensuring a participatory process of shared work.

The areas addressed by the evaluation reflect those identified by previous authors (Beresford 1994, Levin 2004), focusing on the actual experience of involvement by all key stakeholders. The research was led by the then SUCI project manager (Professor Ramon) and conducted by an ARU researcher (Roxana Anghel), and has been funded from the Research Assessment Exercise, a UK research funding scheme for higher education.

Published reports on user involvement in social work education and informal discussions with peers indicate that the evaluation of the ARU project is in some respects unique in its systematic and holistic focus on all aspects of the involvement and from all stakeholders. Some UK universities have also collected stakeholder views about the involvement of consultants in social work education (Humphreys 2005, Baldwin and Sadd 2006, Robson and Johns 2006). The 2006 GSCC report mentions involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of the course by consultants operating across 67% of the responding universities (GSCC 2006, p. 24). This referred mainly to evaluating the reactions of the participants to different aspects of the degree with some cases of participation in review meetings.

**Research design**

The study was conducted in three sites, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as appropriate to the focus of inquiry and the stakeholder group (see Table 3). Although the questionnaire is not an ideal data collection tool in action research studies (Gray 2004), in this instance it was considered adequate for the purpose of ensuring anonymity, wide distribution, and completion within the time required. The data obtained are largely qualitative as all questionnaires were mainly based on open-ended questions. The data have been analysed thematically and some

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<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FT Students year 1</td>
<td>2003-04 and 2004-05</td>
<td>167 (71%) Baseline and end-of-year questionnaires (two years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FT Students year 2</td>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>22 (31%) Focus groups × 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCI consultants</td>
<td>April–May 2005</td>
<td>15 (83%) Semi-structured phone interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAG members</td>
<td>Sept–Oct 2004</td>
<td>15 Semi-structured phone and face-to-face interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>BA lecturers</td>
<td>April 2004</td>
<td>13 Face-to-face and phone interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice teachers</td>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>22 Questionnaires</td>
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responses permitted quantification. Each data collection tool looked at group-specific themes as described below and the analysis followed these themes.

First year students completed baseline and end of year questionnaires looking at the development of their understanding of user and carer involvement, and their views on the usefulness of this type of training. In the second year students were involved in focus group discussions on the impact of the project on their learning.

The consultants were interviewed in the second year on the positives and the negatives associated with acting as educators; their needs and expectations; the meaning that the involvement had for them; their strategies for coping with difficult emotions generated by the experience; and the message that they would like to convey to social work students.

The PAG activity and progress in achieving genuine and systematic involvement was also evaluated by the participants.

The views of the BA social work lecturers on the structure of the project, and its impact on their teaching were collected through interviews in the first year and questionnaires in the second. Given that not all lecturers involved consultants up to that point the questionnaire distributed to the BA lecturers had two sections. The first explored the experience of involving consultants, its positives and drawbacks. The second explored the views, hopes and worries of the lecturers who did not involve consultants. Out of 19 teaching staff, the first section has been completed by 10 respondents and the second by one. While the response to the second section cannot be generalised, it offers some insight as to the reasons for which not all lecturers took up the challenge up to that point.

Given the numbers, location and workload, a questionnaire was again chosen when exploring the views of practice teachers. It focused on their practice related to user involvement within the service placements and on whether their services had specific policies to enable collective user involvement. We were also interested in whether users and their carers were involved in placement planning, student selection, evaluation of student practice and final assessment, as well as in teaching, learning, or supervision.

All stakeholders have been invited to make suggestions for change.

The research has been discussed by the PAG’s members regarding the design and the interpretation of the findings. They contributed to the instrument design by suggesting changes in terminology or additional questions, and worked in small groups on possible solutions to the issues raised by the findings. Participation in the interviews provided an opportunity to impact on the programme through feedback on its approach and the content.

**Findings**

**Students**

Most social work students considered the involvement of service users and carers on the course as an important part of their training which gave them the opportunity to empathise with the consultants, see them as human beings, develop skills and get ‘the view from the inside’. The consultants’ input made teaching ‘real’ for them, and made them aware of the impact that social work services and professionals have on people’s lives. It enabled them to distinguish between the positive and negative aspects of social work, and to understand how theory relates to practice.
When you are given a case study you are not working with a real person. [The involvement] gives you some of the emotions [...] and that came across a lot more clearly than writings on a piece of paper.

One year into training, second year students felt that they gained a better understanding of the role of the carers, and were helped to see service users and carers as survivors rather than as victims. They also saw the unique value of this opportunity, a view echoed in other universities (Humphreys 2005).

No lecture could have made that impact on me.

Some also felt that meeting the consultants made an impact at a personal level.

Made me stop and think.

Changed my whole way of thinking.

However, some of them reported struggling when the consultants presented an exclusively negative feedback about social work, and suggested a more balanced account. This finding mirrors that of other reviews, acknowledging that ‘dissatisfaction and even conflict may be an inevitable part of the user participation process’ (Carr 2004, p. 19).

Preparation of students and consultants prior to topic-focused involvement, balance of presentation, as well as debriefing was suggested. Follow up group discussions incorporated in the curriculum to revisit and internalise new knowledge were suggested by students as good practice that would increase the effectiveness of the consultants’ involvement in their education.

Consultants

The consultants responded to the call to participate as educators for a number of personal reasons

...I’ve got something to give.

It helps clarify my thoughts about things by talking – a way of looking back analytically to my experience.

For me it’s a privilege ... it is a right for a user ... it moves away the focus from the professionally defined need.

I feel I’m doing something for the future.

Overall their feedback refuted initial concerns that their involvement could be perceived as exploitative. Instead they enjoyed working with the students, finding them generally open minded and engaged, and seeing their involvement as a platform for highlighting important issues. However, they criticised the lack of briefing and debriefing, and some reported problems such as perceiving participation as failure (one respondent), fatigue during involvement, and some difficulties related to access and time allocation.

One of the most important issues raised by some consultants was the students’ reaction to the negative views about social workers that they expressed during their presentations. This made them realise that students need to develop a broad vision of people’s difficulties, and suggested that the programme should accommodate honest
expression of feelings as ‘it is not only about making it friendly – sometimes the users are angry’.

They requested adequate induction focused on the aims, planning, and expectations from their involvement prior to the event. They also highlighted the need for decent attendance, and the mediation of the dialogue between students and consultants by the lecturer to minimise tension. They expected the programme to consider their needs, work from a strengths perspective, and avoid causing anxiety.

The consultants hoped that the students would retain key messages about the value of ‘being human’, passionate about the job, empathic, a good listener, open minded, reflective on their role in people’s lives, patient, diplomatic and respectful when making decisions as a social worker.

PAG members

The consultant PAG members were motivated towards participation mainly by their wish to change the system and the attitudes of social workers towards a more inclusive and empathic practice. PAG members saw their participation as an opportunity to network, develop skills, have a voice and use their expertise. However in their eyes the approach of the SUCI team was not entirely conducive to partnership. PAG members complained in the first year that the project had an intellectualised approach with difficult language and information that was difficult to manage. They felt that they had no clear image of the degree curriculum as a whole. They also felt that the experience of the consultants is stretched to fit the modules, which felt tokenistic. A mentorship scheme, and guidelines and support for newcomers were suggested as best practice. Also they recommended the recruitment of a variety of consultants, and development of a more informal meeting structure, less prone to be dominated by academic staff. They requested a more central position for the project within the degree. These issues highlight recurrent shortcomings at the beginning of such projects (Beresford 1994, Baldwin and Sadd 2006).

BA lecturers

Overall the feedback from the lecturers who involved consultants was positive. Most respondents appeared committed to the philosophy underlying the requirement for service users and carers’ involvement and to allocating the necessary resources to this initiative.

It is about equity, balance, dignity and truthfulness.

One lecturer however preferred not to ‘idealise’ the development being apprehensive about whether ‘sharing the teaching’ is the right term to describe the involvement.

The lecturers’ views converged with that of the students, seeing the involvement as having clear benefits in bringing teaching ‘near to what’s real’, offering students a more ‘human’, fresher perspective than the academic one, ‘counteracting stereotypes’ and introducing students to complexity early. It also offered real-life examples of helpful and unhelpful professional attitudes and behaviours.

The negatives referred to insufficient preparation of students, which resulted in some cases in disrespectful, negative and challenging attitudes especially towards those consultants who presented exclusively negative views. Adequate preparation of
the consultants was also seen as directly linked to the quality of the delivery and its meaningfulness to the students’ learning objectives. Lecturers also expressed appreciation of the role of the site-coordinators and the structure of the project, which made it ‘workable in practice’.

The feedback from the lecturer who did not involve consultants highlighted the crucial role of the site-coordinators who need to develop close contact and teamwork with the lecturers.

**Practice teachers**

Most practice teachers (16 out of 22 respondents) found it difficult to implement the new requirements for service user and carer involvement within their services due to lack of specific policy and training. However most gave examples of how service users and carers were already involved in evaluating student’s practice (64%) and the final assessment of students’ learning (86%), quoting verbal, written, formal and informal methods. The service users’ feedback questionnaire was a common tool but was acknowledged as inefficient as few were completed and returned, while some service users were unable to use them. Less involvement was evident in relation to students’ teaching, learning and supervision on placement. In some services (36%) though, some opportunities were created through workshops, service user groups, and by being co-observers of the students’ professional behaviour.

The practice teachers highlighted the need for a protocol, guidance, and a unified format of student assessment across universities. They suggested that increased support from the university would enhance team cohesiveness and would ensure correspondence between academic teaching and their own professional knowledge. They felt that due to the daily practical concerns of their jobs they do not have an opportunity to update their knowledge about research and other developments in the field and consequently sometimes feel out of tune with the students.

Following the evaluation it became obvious that a closer collaboration with practice teachers is needed, their involvement being essential to ensure that the knowledge accumulated from the consultants is successfully transferred into practice. Two meetings were organised resulting in a forum initiated by the practice teachers, as they felt that one of their main difficulties was the lack of support and contact between them. However due to lack of additional funding the university was not able to contribute to the forum.

**Information Fairs**

The Information Fairs were relatively well attended but the evaluation form was returned only by some (between 30% and 50% of the attendees on each project site). All respondents appreciated the event as very useful, giving them insight into issues they were otherwise unaware of. These included the stigma associated with accessing social services; the importance of good communication and partnership with service users; and the stigma around mental health, old age, and sensory impairment. Suggestions for improvement of this event referred to increasing the variety of organisations invited. The guests (users, carers and organisation representatives from an average of 11 organisations per site, per event) also enjoyed their dialogue with the students. They found the events useful in enabling to be heard and to network with the other participants.
From the project perspective, the Information Fairs offer opportunities for users and carers to demonstrate their ability to give to the community and to be present as partners for social workers.

**Implications of the findings for the SUCI project**

The evaluation has had some impact on all aspects of the project: structure, content, procedure, and overall culture of the course. Following each data collection phase the data were interpreted together with the PAG members. This process has generated significant changes in the way the project is run, as described below.

Some of the findings related to the experience of classroom-based involvement, and the interaction between students and consultants, suggested the need for an ethical and procedural framework to protect the interests of consultants and students. Consequently a Protocol & Ethics document was constructed. This provides guidelines on preparation, involvement on the day, debriefing, and ethical aspects related to access and support to students and consultants. It also emphasises the consultants' control over the personal information they choose to disclose and over their participation.

The feedback has also resulted in training offered to consultants by the site-coordinators. The training focused on gaining confidence, effective presentation skills, dealing with disclosure, and issues related to expectations and students' learning. While this training has not been formally evaluated the informal immediate feedback from participants was positive.

Students felt the need for a variety of examples of social work from a larger diversity of consultants. While this has been tackled with variable results across the two sites (see Table 1) involvement of some user groups, such as children and young people, was difficult to arrange. The gatekeepers of children's services felt that the university is an intimidating environment for children. More financial resources would have allowed creative solutions to this issue, such as creating a DVD with children and young people's views on social work topics, or bringing in a group of them to talk with small groups of students.

The lecturers' feedback has influenced the working style of the site-coordinators. They have intensified their presence and contribution within the academic team meetings, and have initiated one-to-one meetings with lecturers. This has resulted in systematic involvement available in the academic year 2005/2006, including some modules with more than one consultant session.

The findings have also impacted on the format of the PAG meetings, which have become more informal, with service users or carers chairing the meetings. Most work was carried out through a small-group discussion model, ensuring equal space and supportive atmosphere for personal contribution. The language of the discussions and of the written materials generated by the course was also altered to increase accessibility.

The requirement for user and carer involvement in social work education has required cultural change among lecturers and at the management level. The first two years of the SUCI project constitute the first steps towards this change, the action research evaluation having the role of pulling out the issues affecting it, which we then acted upon with some degree of success. The presence at management and departmental meetings of the SUCI co-ordinators has generated awareness of the
role and importance of this requirement, resulting for instance in additional financial support.

**Conclusions**

Systematic user and carer involvement in the new British social work degree is a relatively new and radical development, reflecting change in perception about the role and contribution of users and carers to social work knowledge. It is also rooted in the wish to establish genuine partnerships within education and social care, which have the potential to reduce the power imbalance thus far inherent in both.

The first two years of our project have provided a challenging experience marking the beginning of the shift in the local culture of social work education. With some exceptions, by the end of the first two years the project has made a good start in terms of staff members’ commitment. It was further enhanced by the readiness of local organisations and user activists to collaborate fully with the project, and by the warm reception consultants received from students. Its key successes have been comprehensive involvement in teaching on the BA degree (after the evaluation the project extended also to the MA degree), and a sound participatory project structure. Other areas of no less importance, such as participation in curriculum building, organising involvement for part-time students, and more work with practice teachers are awaiting further development.

One of the main obstacles encountered by the project was the limited resources of funding and time. This has impacted especially on work with the practice teachers, on maintaining momentum generally, and in involving some more difficult to reach groups of service users. Some areas of involvement remained insufficiently explored (e.g. involvement in admissions), while other UK universities made more rapid advancement in these areas. However such an endeavour takes time to develop the trust and the appropriate parameters to ensure that the consultants’ contribution is efficient and valuable for all involved.

The on-going evaluation has been an indispensable tool in enabling us to reflect and learn alongside developing the project. The action research framework has proved an appropriate design for the purpose of the evaluation of the SUCI project. It empowered the participants, enabled change and improvement of the project as it evolved, and fostered immediate action and reflection on its consequences. While most of the stakeholders were not involved in initiating the research, they were included in instrument design, feedback, analysing the findings in small-groups sessions, and in planning further action. Thus the programme has benefited from a development grounded in the views of all those involved. The two-year span of the research was also appropriate as it allowed the collection of data that then informed the systematic planning of the third year of the project. The longitudinal approach offered information on the process of change and on the internal politics dimension inevitably central to all innovation and evaluation (Robson 2002). The findings mirror most of the suggestions in the literature related to best practice in user and carer involvement in social work education (Beresford 1994, Levin 2004).

The evaluation has also demonstrated that the structure of the project, and the PAGs as fora facilitating input from users and carers into its running represent good practice and should be maintained. The usefulness of users and carers’ involvement has also been amply demonstrated. Overall the evaluation has proved its trustworthiness through the extent of the change generated through collaboration with the
stakeholders (Reason and Bradbury 2001), which assisted the project in meeting its classroom-based objectives.

This has been an example of interventionist responsive evaluation (Gray 2004) concerned with the stakeholders’ self-reported first impressions of the process, and with the project’s activities and their immediate outcomes. While this has been a useful first step, we need more in-depth and rigorous evaluation of the outcomes, looking both at the content of the consultants’ input and the longer range outcomes such as its impact on students’ and lecturers’ practice.

In conclusion we have learned that the implementation of systematic users and carers’ involvement is rewarding in the short term, but demands a considerable commitment over a long period of time.

This approach to users and carers’ involvement is a response to the IFSW suggestion for updated approaches to social work practice and education needed to prepare the social workers for the new challenges created by globalisation and a changing society (Jones and Radulescu 2006, p. 414). It is new to social work internationally, and it would be useful for it to be tried out in other countries too (Haug 2005). Our experience shows that it offers a unique resource for training with the potential to transform social work education, but only if a genuine everyday partnership is fostered at every aspect of the training. It will be in social work practice that its ultimate test and value lie.

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Notes
1. Each of the four UK countries has a social care regulatory body: the General Social Care Council for England (GSCC), the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Scottish Social Services Council, and the Care Council for Wales.
2. Hereafter referred to as ARU.
3. The project has been implemented on three sites: the Anglia Ruskin Cambridge and Chelmsford campuses, and the City College Norwich, a partner institution.

References


Participatory action research and social work: A critical appraisal
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Participatory action research and social work
A critical appraisal

Karen Healy

Participatory action research (PAR) is widely endorsed as consistent with social workers’ commitment to social justice (Finn, 1994; Hicks, 1997; Mathrani, 1993; Sarri and Sarri, 1992; Sohng, 1992). At the beginning of the 21st century, when widespread social injustices confront social work as never before, PAR promises to connect local action to large-scale, progressive social change. As Reason (1994: 325) contends:

As I read about the work of practitioners of participatory action research, whose emphasis is on establishing liberating dialogue with impoverished and oppressed people, I understand the link between power and knowledge . . . It seems to me to be urgent for the planet and for all its creatures that we discover ways of living in more collaborative relation with each other and with the wider ecology. I see the participative approaches to inquiry and the worldview they foster as part of this quest.

The goal of this article is to offer a critical appraisal of the promise of PAR for social workers. Such an analysis is important because in the context of popular support for this model many questions are suppressed.

In this article I will use postmodern insights to critique the assumptions on which PAR rests. In addition, I will draw on my practical experience as an observer and facilitator of PAR processes and, more recently, as an educator and consultant to PAR.
projects. Through these exposures I have become increasingly critical of the practices and potential of PAR. My concerns pertain to claims about power, confusion about research methods and the prescriptions for change that infuse much of social work’s engagement with PAR. I will turn now to an overview of the historical development and core assumptions of PAR.

What is PAR? A historical overview

PAR synthesizes investigation, education and action. Brown (1993: 250) differentiates between the northern tradition of PAR, which is focused on organizational reform, and the southern tradition, which is ‘committed to working with grassroots groups to promote fundamental social transformations’. It is the southern tradition and its influence on social workers’ understandings of PAR that is the concern of this article.

The first ground-breaking PAR studies emerged in the mid-1970s, at a time when critical theories and social change movements made inroads into social sciences and social work (Maguire, 1987: 49). PAR is strongly shaped by Lewin’s (1948) theory of action research and an amalgam of critical social science perspectives. The key influences include the work of Marx and Engels (Hall, 1981: 8), Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Fals-Borda, 1980: 19; Gaventa, 1993: 93). PAR is also aligned with modern social movements such as ecological movements (Gaventa, 1993) and feminism (Finn, 1994; Maguire, 1987).

PAR is often connected with the liberation movements of the central and southern Americas (Fals-Borda, 1987; Gaventa, 1993; Lykes, 1988). The work of Freire is frequently cited as a seminal force in the development of PAR (Finn, 1994: 30; Gaventa, 1993: 34; Hall, 1981: 8; Selener, 1997). As an educator working with the poor in Latin America, Freire developed critical approaches to adult literacy education enabling ‘individuals to identify and analyze their own problems and influence their own situations’ (Sohng, 1992: 5). There are, of course, examples of PAR used in developmental contexts outside the Americas (Mathrani, 1993; Swanyz and Vainio-Mattila, 1988). However, the prominent position occupied by writers from this region in defining the links between PAR and development practice leaves many of the implicit cultural assumptions of the methodology unexplored. Later in this article I will highlight how some of the cultural assumptions underlying PAR constrain its application in the Asia-Pacific region.
What are PAR’s core assumptions?

Many of the core assumptions of PAR are consistent with progressive forms of social work. These include, firstly, that the original causes of oppression lie in macro-social structures, such as those associated with capitalism and patriarchy (Reason, 1994: 328). This assumption leads to a further claim that genuine change can only be achieved via the transformation of the social order and, hence, that PAR must contribute to change at this level (Fals-Borda, 1987; Hall, 1981).

Secondly, PAR draws on the conflict theory position expressed by Tandon (1981: 22): ‘Broadly speaking, all societies are characterized by two sets of people: the haves and the have-nots. The dynamics of society are such that the haves want to maintain their positions of privilege and power and the have-nots want to usurp it.’ Gaventa (1993: 36) refers to PAR as ‘guerrilla research’ because it is intended to expose and confront the powerful. Thirdly, participatory researchers advocate a radically egalitarian relation between researcher and participants (Selener, 1997: 8). Radical egalitarianism requires the elimination of differences through the equitable distribution of tasks and roles in the research process (Finn, 1994; Hall, 1981; Sohng, 1992).

Finally, PAR is intended to empower participants to take control of the political and economic forces that shape their lives. This involves well-recognized social action strategies, such as consciousness-raising and collective action (Fals-Borda, 1987: 330; Tandon, 1981: 24). In addition PAR derives from the recognition that in the globalized world knowledge is power (Gaventa, 1993). Through involving oppressed people in knowledge building, participatory researchers seek to create more holistic understandings and better maps for changes than is possible through traditional science or, indeed, unreflective forms of activism. As Selener (1997: 28) claims: ‘Participatory research assumes that returning the power of knowledge generation and use to ordinary, oppressed people will contribute to the creation of more accurate, critical reflection of social reality, the liberation of human potential, and the mobilization of human resources to solve problems.’

There is considerable convergence between PAR and many contemporary social work approaches, particularly progressive forms. Both models emphasize the inseparability of processes and outcomes. Participatory researchers and critical social workers seek
to raise the critical awareness of oppressed peoples and to encourage collective responses to social disadvantage. Both are utopian in their intention to create a just social order. With the dramatic transitions occurring in the welfare state across the Western world, strategies that promote social inclusion are needed now as never before. Hence, PAR seems consistent with the urgent priorities of social workers who advocate social justice with service users.

Below I turn to a critical appraisal of the approach. The analysis will be structured on three areas of concern: power, method and processes of change.

But what do PAR workers do? Questions of power

As a researcher, educator and consultant to PAR projects, I am often asked, and indeed, ask myself, what do PAR workers do. The PAR literature is remarkably unenlightening, as there are many imperatives against the recognition of researcher power in PAR. In particular, the continuing exercise of power and expertise is incompatible with the radical egalitarian stance espoused by participatory researchers (Reason, 1994). Hence, participatory researchers tend to define themselves more by what they do not do rather than by their actions. This is evident in the terminology used by participatory researchers which stresses the importance of ‘working under the guidance of the people’ (Mathrani, 1993: 351) and acting as a ‘resource person’ (Sohng, 1996: 85).

Yet in spite of the edict against the explicit use of power, PAR does call upon research workers to exercise power in a variety of ways, albeit differently from that associated with the use of power connected to traditional forms of research. As Reason (1994: 334) acknowledges: ‘paradoxically, many PAR projects could not occur without the initiative of someone with time, skill and commitment, someone who will almost inevitably be a member of a privileged and educated group. PAR appears to sit uneasily with this.’

Moreover, there is considerable evidence in the activist literature to demonstrate the use of worker power in initiating and facilitating activist processes. For example, in the PAR literature, research workers are routinely invited to: initiate research (Alder and Sandor, 1990; Reason, 1994); establish the groundwork for the project through preliminary consultation and evaluation of the issues (Healy and Walsh, 1997); promote participant involvement (Sohng, 1992); facilitate meetings (Mathrani, 1993); raise consciousness and promote activist attitudes (Finn, 1994; Maguire,
and initiate the sharing of power itself (Finn, 1994; Maguire, 1987). All these actions require the worker to actively influence the process and thus are illustrations of worker power.

The view that participation emerges in the absence of researcher power mutes recognition of the productive uses of such power in PAR. The failure to acknowledge the positive or negative operations of researcher power in PAR does not mean it disappears, but that such recognition is sent underground. As Phillips (1991: 134) observes, ‘Power that is acknowledged can be subjected to mechanisms of democratic control; power that is denied can become unlimited and capricious.’

Ironically, too, the radical egalitarian stance can contribute to patronizing practices in which research workers downplay their role at each stage of initiating, organizing and completing PAR projects. I have witnessed the paradox between the power aversion rhetoric of PAR and the continuing realities of worker power played out on many occasions. Repeatedly I have observed researchers claim that participants assumed a primary role in the research process, even in the face of considerable contrary evidence. For instance, these claims can persist despite vast disparities in time and knowledge committed by researchers compared with other project participants. Indeed, these assertions may even be maintained when the researcher receives formal acknowledgement of his or her core role in the form of first- or even sole-author status on research products.

While the dissonance between the claims of PAR and its actuality seems lost in researchers’ explication of the processes, rarely is it so for participants. For example, in evaluating a PAR project that I facilitated, participants commented on the positive and negative aspects of power that remained in spite of my commitment to reducing power differences. On the one hand, participants saw some operations of power as useful for maintaining collective cohesion and direction amongst participants. On the other hand, participants emphasized the power to which I continued to have access, such as that connected to my privileged educational status. These differences remained no matter how hard I tried to erase them. Because of the inevitability of power in PAR, Chataway (1997: 754) argues that such differences be incorporated in the research process, as she states: ‘It may be inadvisable even to strive to eradicate the influence of power on the research relationship, since this is the nature of the context one is trying to understand.'
Instead the goal might be to gain a better understanding of the influence of existing power by observing its effects on the research collaboration."

The radical egalitarian ethos of PAR pre-empts enquiry into the positive and the negative effects of power in the research/action context. Our understanding of PAR is the poorer because of it.

**PAR and the will to power**

Given the extensive focus on negative operations of researcher power in progressive social workers’ writings about PAR, it is surprising to find little reflection on even the overt forms that PAR itself produces. This contributes to a contradiction between the participatory researchers’ stated desire for dialogue and their intention, as acknowledged by Selener (1997: 27), to ‘disindoctrinate’ the other through such dialogue. This paradox is highlighted by Rahnema (1990: 205), who asks: ‘Are they really embarked on a learning journey into the unknown where everything has to be discovered? Or, are they concerned more about finding the most appropriate participatory ways to convince the “uneducated” of the merits of their own educated convictions?’

The problem is not only that the researcher holds a critical truth that he or she seeks to share or even impose. It is also that this intention is cloaked in the veil of dialogue, equality and even intimacy. Yet participants who fail to comply with the critical truth claims underlying PAR face a variety of sanctions from participatory researchers, including being viewed as uncooperative, wrong, sustaining a ‘primitive’ consciousness, or even as being subject to ‘counter-revolutionary influences’ (Rahnema, 1990). It seems that PAR, as a product of modernity, is shaped also by its categories of right and wrong. In so far as the truth claims embedded in PAR remain unproblematic for participatory researchers, the potential for dialogue is significantly constrained.

**Method and PAR: is it science?**

Participatory researchers are committed to knowledge development. Yet exactly how they actually go about doing research tasks is shrouded in mystery if not outright contradictions. PAR is frequently described as a research method (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 1997). However, because most authors focus on processes of investigation rather than elaborate on the techniques used to gather
and analyse data, it is better described as a research methodology or theory of research. (See Crotty [1998] for an explanation of these terms.)

PAR derives from critical epistemology. This tradition challenges the scientific establishment, its claims to objectivity and methods of operation (Crotty, 1998). In PAR the knowledge of the expert and the citizen are represented as opposites and the methodology is intended to revalue the knowledge ‘derived from experience, commonsense and citizenship’ (Gaventa, 1993: 22; see also Hicks, 1997). As part of this quest, PAR contributes to new possibilities for analysis and presentation of information. For instance, Reason (1994) argues that one can incorporate non-traditional knowledge methods, such as the presentation of analysis via dance, drama or photographic exhibitions. Yet despite the stated openness to different ways of knowing, the majority of PAR projects reported in the social science literature depend on established ‘scientific’ methods, such as the use of large-scale surveys, focus groups and interview data (see Chataway, 1997; Herr, 1995; Lykes, 1988; Wagner, 1991). The problem lies not in participatory researchers’ use of scientific methods, but in their failure to reflect on the paradoxes of doing so.

In the PAR literature there is inadequate enquiry into research methods and to questions about rigour in the context of the uncertainties in which participatory researchers work (Mangan, 1993; Swepson and Dick, 1993). Instead, authors advocate their position for or against established scientific methods, usually without acknowledging there is even a debate to be had. As Swepson and Dick (1993: 2) explain, ‘Having had to fight against the dominant paradigm, they [action researchers] often also react belligerently towards other action research paradigms.’

**What is the measure of change?**

Drawing on the grand critical theories of modernity, participatory researchers seek nothing less than the progressive transformation of the social order. Yet exactly what counts as transformation remains unclear. It is undeniable that PAR can contribute to social progress in local contexts. Reports of research outcomes include: social inclusion; local participation; and improved service user participation in design and delivery of services (Healy and Walsh, 1997; Chataway, 1997; Sarri and Sarri, 1992). Impressive as the reported outcomes of PAR processes are, they pale in comparison
with the rhetoric of the new social order to which participatory researchers aspire. To add to the confusion, many participatory researchers express disdain for local forms of social action as limited, if not antithetical, to radical social change (see Hall, 1981: 13). For example, Chataway (1997), who is a participatory researcher, reports on her initial reluctance to accept participants’ desire to study the divisions amongst them, in part because this seemed so insignificant compared with the major disadvantages they experienced.

What is required, it seems, is a radical interrogation of PAR discourses which separate structural from local forms of change. The grand claims do not assist participatory researchers to lift their eyes from the ground; but, instead, lead to the exaggeration of the outcomes of PAR. A challenge for participatory researchers is learning to celebrate the forms of local change based on solid relationships that PAR can assist us to achieve; for it is precisely this outcome that the rhetoric of PAR precludes researchers from recognizing. As Rahnema (1990: 218) observes, ‘Relationship is the opposite of . . . superficial relations. It is the mirror in which one can see oneself as one is. And one cannot see oneself that way if one approaches it with a conclusion, an ideology, or with condemnation or justification.’

Questions about collective identification

Challenges can be made also to the universal prescriptions for action proposed by participatory researchers. At its most basic, PAR promotes change by encouraging the participation of oppressed people in knowledge building and action. Yet, such participation is not necessarily experienced as empowering. As Chataway (1997: 760) notes: ‘One of the few powers experienced in some traditionally disempowered groups is the possession of more information about themselves than dominant group members. Giving up this information can feel like surrendering a scarce resource.’

Similarly, although collective identification may be useful when a pre-existing identification motivates participation in PAR, all too often it leads to the prescription of unity. Post-structural theorists, particularly Foucault and contemporary feminist writers (Cixous, 1981, 1994; Scott, 1994), observe that identity is constituted through language and hence identities are contextually variable. From this view, collective politics is not the expression of common true
identities, for identifications are always in construction. The formation of collective identifications is impositional in so far as it leads to glossing over differences that may be critical to participants’ self-understanding (Chataway, 1997).

Post-structural insights challenge the imperatives towards group identification and taking sides that infuse the PAR literature (see Maguire, 1987: 7). The oppositional discourse of PAR assumes that the status of individuals as powerful and powerless is fixed through their position in broad social structures. While as activists we must vigilantly witness the negative expressions of structural power in the lives of oppressed people, the assumptions of PAR can disempower by refusing to recognize that even relatively powerless people participate in power (Yeatman, 1997: 137). Rahnema (1990: 216) contends that ‘as long as the people remain hypnotized by a concept of power as institutionalized violence, they are disabled in their creative efforts aimed at cultivating their own life sources of power’.

The contemporary contexts of social work activity

Many of the published accounts of PAR are undertaken by academics engaged in it outside their employing organization. Although academic researchers report obstacles to implementing PAR in those contexts (Sohng, 1992), the threats do not usually reach the sanctions, such as marginalization and even employment loss, that can face workers who step outside the highly constrained positions some of them occupy (Laragy, 1997). From my encounters with practising social workers in contemporary environments, I respect the need for them to be highly strategic in promoting change. As Lane (1997: 39) observes: ‘perhaps as social workers, we need to become skilled at swimming with the crocodiles while accomplishing our tasks. Being an advocate for social justice requires the talent to know when to risk and when to wait.’ An approach such as PAR which promotes oppositional action does not easily accommodate with this perspective.

The marginal status of social workers as researchers is a further obstacle to the use of PAR. For it is one thing to give up the status of scientific investigator, as some researchers have done, to pursue PAR; it is a much more risky thing to do if one was never regarded as a researcher, as is the case for most social welfare professionals. In addition, as welfare administration throughout the Western world is increasingly driven by market principles, social workers’
tasks are being streamlined and aspects of their work sourced to external organizations. As research has rarely been accepted as a core task of social work activity, this is an aspect of practice that is particularly vulnerable to outsourcing. In the Australian and New Zealand contexts, social workers have to compete alongside large commercial enterprises in tendering for research and service delivery programmes. Whether PAR has sufficient legitimacy to be accepted as a framework for research and evaluation, especially when contrasted with the might of research proposals based on established scientific models, remains to be seen. The circularity of participatory research processes, and its intensive time and resource requirements, put it at a competitive disadvantage in relation to the economic efficiency and measurement of outputs valued in the post-bureaucratic welfare state.

Cross-cultural applicability: some problematics for the Asia-Pacific region

Advocates of PAR frequently cite its cross-cultural applicability and in many instances use its application in central and Latin American regions to justify this claim (see Selener, 1997; Sohng, 1992). What remains unacknowledged is the reliance of PAR on Western cultural traditions that recognize conflict, protest and dissent as features of social progress (Pharr, 1990: 206). For instance, Pharr (1990) asserts that commonplace expressions in Western cultures, such as the notion of clearing the air, demonstrate the accepted importance of conflict in these societies (see also Tannen, 1998).

Although the conflict theory position underlying PAR may be acceptable to certain population groups, such as some central and southern American cultures, it cannot be assumed that these values are equally applicable to other cultural contexts. In particular, the relevance of this position to the Asia-Pacific region, from which I write, is questionable. Many Asian cultures endorse values, such as respect for authority and saving face, that are incompatible with the public expression of conflict (Pharr, 1990; Martin, 1998; Chu and Carew, 1990; Tannen, 1998). In her study of Japanese cultures, Pharr (1990: 227) concludes: ‘The notion that conflict is desirable – that, like bitter medicine, it is ultimately good for the body and soul, and for the State itself – is profoundly alien to Japanese, be they social theorists, politicians, or ordinary citizens.’

The insights of studies in the Asia-Pacific region invite caution in
the promotion of PAR as a cross-cultural methodology. One danger is that in its emphasis on conflict PAR can debase alternate culturally appropriate change strategies (Martin, 1998; Pharr, 1990; Tannen, 1998). Moreover, change approaches that are insensitive to these cultural differences are likely to be met with resistance from participants. As Chu and Carew (1990) advise: ‘[t]he adherence to the view that those in authority should be heeded, also has consequences for community work as it may prove to be difficult to enable a community made up of largely Chinese people to use strategies involving conflict as a means of achieving results. Such strategies may be seen as a challenge to those in power and therefore in conflict with the teaching of Confucius. (p. 8)’

Conclusion

In this article I have highlighted the problems of PAR that remain despite its endorsement as an alternate methodology for social workers. I recognize the potential of PAR for achieving meaningful insights and action. Yet I contend that social workers have inadequately attended to the limitations of this methodology. Participatory researchers have much to gain from the interrogation of their claims and practices as well as from encounters with some aspects of postmodern thinking. For example, post-structural theorists recognize the positive and negative effects of power (Gatens, 1996: 88). This view may free participatory researchers to acknowledge the forms of power on which their practice relies and the constraining as well as the liberatory effects of PAR. Such a questioning of PAR can contribute to its considered use, based on sober assessments of its strengths and limitations for achieving social justice in the contemporary contexts of social work. As Foucault (1991: 343) maintains: ‘My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.’

References


Healy: Participatory action research

Participant or protagonist? A critical analysis of children and young people's participation in São Paulo, Brazil

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Participant or protagonist?  
A critical analysis of children and young people’s participation in São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract
This article extends current debates on participation through exploring the concepts of participation and protagonism using reflections of practitioners working in NGOs in São Paulo, Brazil. Based on doctoral research, the article explores how current understandings of both participation and protagonism within Brazil can help to extend current Northern debates.

Keywords
Brazil, children and young people, Latin America, participation, protagonism

Introduction
This article highlights key findings of doctoral research undertaken in three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in São Paulo, Brazil. The research set out to explore the practice of developing and implementing children and young people’s participation in community-based NGOs in order to understand the complexities of what can often be portrayed as a straightforward...
process. The article focuses on the concepts of participation and protagonism, exploring how research participants’ understandings of these terms can be used to push forward current debates within Northern literature. I begin by tracing the emergence of protagonism within Brazilian social policy, providing an overview of how the concept evolved and a brief overview of more recent critiques. I then move on to explore research participants’ views utilizing these reflections to facilitate a critical analysis of recent thinking within Northern literature.

Participation debates: The development of youth protagonism in Brazil

In the UK children and young people’s participation is in a conceptual muddle. Widely used yet ill-defined, particularly within the English-speaking world (Lansdown, 2010), participation can refer to anything from a physical presence in a specific space to autonomous decision-making. Although there have been numerous attempts at definition (see for example, Fajerman and Treseder, 1997; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) these have had little impact on language and the word ‘participation’ continues to be widely used to refer to distinctly different situations. While participation is argued to be embedded within the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Skelton, 2007) and the influence of the CRC on the surge in interest in children and young people’s participation has been recognized (Lansdown, 2010), a ‘credible and coherent body of theory to inform this practice’ is still lacking (Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2010: 3). In Brazil however there has been a deeper and arguably more effective debate on the meaning of participation. Within the field of social work the historical development of the legal frameworks in Brazil indicates a deepening awareness of the complexity of participatory practice. The Lei Orgânica de Assistência Social (Organic Law of Social Work) introduced in 1993 marked a move away from the ‘assistencialismo’ (‘assistance’/‘assistance’) of previous decades. The idea that the role of the social worker is to provide for the dependent, invariably poor, population shifted towards a more politicized position. Rather than as a form of help or favour, social work began to be linked to citizenship. Within this framework the role of the social worker was to work with individuals, groups and communities to claim and defend the right to citizenship (Paz, 2009). The explicit linking of rights to citizenship appears to be a key differentiating factor when taken alongside Northern debates. As eloquently noted by Rizzini (2011: 70), ‘Brazil is a country where many adults throughout history did not feel they were respected as citizens. This feeling is still quite present in contemporary society. In consequence, the notion of citizenship is a potent rallying cry for
the less powerful.’ Citizenship continues to be a focus of NGOs and civil society groups in Brazil (Cornwall et al., 2008) and due to the emphasis on ‘citizen participation’ within both the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (*ECA*) (Statute of the Child and Adolescent) and the Organic Law of Social Work, the concepts of citizenship and participation remain heavily intertwined within Brazilian debates.

Integral to the legislative changes were the wider changes that were occurring within Brazil during this time. Brazil had been under a military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985 and experiences during the struggle for democracy are argued to have ‘shaped the experiments that took place over the following years to create institutions that could ensure the accountability and responsiveness of the new democratic state’ (Cornwall et al., 2008: 3). The 1988 Brazilian Constitution not only established the formal transition to democracy but also sanctioned the decentralization of policy-making and established mechanisms for citizens to participate in the formulation, management and monitoring of social policies (Coelho, 2007). This led to Brazil being regarded as ‘one of the world’s most important laboratories of democratic innovation’ (Gaventa, 2004, cited in Coelho, 2007: 35). A useful example of the commitment to citizen participation is highlighted by the reversal of the term ‘controle social’ (‘social control’) during the process of democratization. Rather than the traditional understanding of social control, when it signifies the control exercised by the state over its citizens, the term was reversed to signify the control exercised by civil society over the state (Paz, 2009). It was during this period of debate and change that a new term emerged: protagonism. Participation as a concept was viewed as insufficient to incorporate the right to citizenship as it failed to move away from the assistentialist perception of ‘giving’ voice. Instead, the concept of protagonism was advocated as incorporating the individual as a protagonist or an active agent within her or his own life and community. Crucially, protagonism brought the two elements of participation and citizenship together.

This contrasts significantly with Northern debates. As highlighted by Beresford and Croft (2001: 296) in their analysis of participation within social work and social care in the UK, ‘Arrangements for participation in social work and social care have predominantly been based on a consumerist agenda’ and while participation has become a prominent concept within practice, its relationship with citizenship remains somewhat unclear. As the recent special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* illustrates, citizenship remains a debated and elusive concept within Northern literature. Furthermore, when taken alongside the principles of participation as laid out in the CRC, the notion of citizenship becomes
even more blurred due to the current focus on political citizenship and the resulting focus on competency as a measure of ability (Van Bueren, 2011).

In Brazil, another significant legislative change to occur during this time was the introduction of Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) in 1990. Advocated as one of the most advanced pieces of legislation for children’s rights in the world (Da Costa, 2008), the ECA conceptualized children and young people as subjects rather than objects of human rights. As stated in Article 15:

The child and the adolescent have the right to liberty, in respect of dignity as human beings in the process of development and as subjects of civil, human and social rights guaranteed in the Constitution and by law. (Governo do Brasil, 1990 [my translation])

In a recent review of children’s citizenship in Brazil, Rizzini eloquently highlights how the legislative changes impacted upon societal attitudes. Summarizing the powerful shift in language away from use of the term ‘menor’, Rizzini states:

One consequence of the new legal language and rhetoric was that the distinction between children and menores became unacceptable in a short period, at least in public discourse. Indeed, the word menores and the phrase minor in irregular situations became politically incorrect. The discourse of protecting abandoned and delinquent children that predominated in nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to the 1980s, shifted to a discourse of guaranteeing and protecting children’s rights, with an understanding that these rights are comprehensive and cover all aspects of a child’s life. (2011: 69)

As a consequence of both the shift in focus towards the guaranteeing of rights and the increasing recognition of individual agency, there also began to be a debate about children and young people’s own role within the guaranteeing of rights. The term ‘protagonismo juvenil’ (‘youth protagonism’) evolved during this time in an attempt to incorporate both the guaranteeing of rights and the idea of each individual’s own active agency within the wider community. Da Costa (1997: 65) was a key figure in this debate and he developed the following definition of youth protagonism:

Youth protagonism is based upon the presumption that what adolescents think, say and do can transcend the limits of their personal and family surroundings and influence the course of events in community and wider social life. In other words, youth protagonism is a form of recognising that the participation of adolescents can generate decisive changes in the social, environmental, cultural and political reality where they are inserted. In this interpretation, to participate for an adolescent is to involve themselves in processes of discussion, decision, design and execution of actions, aiming, through their involvement in the solution of
real problems, to develop their creative potential and their transformative force. Like this, youth protagonism, is just as much a right as a responsibility for adolescents. (my translation)

For Costa, youth protagonism is the active participation of young people in ‘real problems’. The conceptualization of youth protagonism as active participation in decision-making has also been elaborated by Barrientos and Lascano (2000, cited in Stamato, 2008), from Peru and Argentina respectively. They propose an integral programme of capacity development for young people at four interactive levels:

**Basic capacities**: self-esteem, identity, humour, optimism, hope and creativity;

**Participation**: related to confidence, autonomy, socialization and reciprocity, capacity to interact with your surroundings;

**Protagonism**: capacity to actively participate in the elaboration and implementation of initiatives that can transform adversities and involve capacities of vision (strategic thinking), proposition, negotiation and management/implementation;

**Social action for development and citizenship**: capacity for active participation in the planning and construction of your own future, of your family and your community, fulfilling your family, social, economic and political roles. (Barrientos and Lascano, 2000, cited in Stamato, 2008 [my translation])

In contrast to global Northern literature on children and young people’s participation (see for example the review of models of children’s participation by Malone and Hartung, 2010), Barrientos and Lascano stress that these four levels of youth development are *interdependent*. This is significant as it challenges the more static sequential and hierarchical theoretical models that have come to dominate Northern discourse.

Yet interestingly, despite the more advanced discourses of youth participation and protagonism within Brazilian literature, the widespread adoption of the ‘protagonism’ as a term has created a new wave of critical analysis arguing that the term remains ‘imprecise and multifaceted, anchored in different theories, methodologies and ideologies’ (Stamato, 2008: 56 [my translation]). Although founded on the notion of youth empowerment, youth protagonism is now coming under scrutiny for being a basis for sometimes contradictory theoretical and methodological conceptions (Stamato, 2008). In a recent comprehensive critique of the concept, Magalhães de Souza argues that despite the legal basis in ECA, within governmental and non-governmental organizations young people continue to be viewed as objects rather than subjects of interventions:
Youth protagonism . . . is a discourse of adults, produced and shared by international organizations, government departments, NGOs, businessmen and women and educators, in other words, by adults that dedicate themselves to the integration of young people, who are considered the object of the intervention. The youth protagonist is the object and not the subject of government and non-government policies and measures. (Magalhães de Souza, 2007: 10 [my translation])

This highlights how, despite the comprehensive debates within Brazil regarding the role of children and young people in society, the perception of children and young people as objects of protection rather than subjects of rights even within these more advanced debates has yet to be fully overcome.

I argue, however, that despite more recent criticism, protagonism can still significantly add to current Northern discourses of children and young people’s participation. Participation has become increasingly mainstreamed within UK social work since the 1990s however despite ‘user involvement’ becoming a key requirement within service delivery the effectiveness of much user involvement is still ‘open to question’ (Beresford and Croft, 2004: 61). Children and young people’s participation has the extra complication resulting from the ‘conceptual shift’ that took place within the social studies of children and childhood since the 1990s. Despite the recognition of how ontological questions on what constitutes ‘childhood’ influenced the development of the CRC and resulting discourse and practice, there remains a ‘pervasive perspective of children as “adults in waiting”’ (Skelton, 2007: 177). When analysing Northern literature it becomes clear that while there have been a number of attempts to differentiate between the numerous forms of participation, classifications still tend to rely on the differentiating between types of participatory intervention rather than adopting differentiating language. For example, Lansdown (2010) argues that children’s participation can be broadly classified at three levels – consultative participation, collaborative participation and child-led participation. While valuable, the focus of the classificatory approach to definition remains on differentiating between different forms of participation rather than casting the net more widely to question whether indeed the term itself contributes to rather than diminishes confusion.

**Learning lessons from Latin America: The study**

I worked with staff members of three NGOs in São Paulo to plan, implement and reflect upon a range of participatory methods with children and
young people attending project activities in order to unravel some of the complexities of participatory practice. All three NGOs were relatively small in terms of staff numbers, ranging from a staff team of seven through to a team of 23. Two of the NGOs were based in central São Paulo and worked in neighbourhoods characterized by a predominance of commercial outlets and collective accommodation known as ‘cortiços’ where various families divide the same physical space with little privacy and poor living conditions. Within these geographical areas there are also a large number of people living on the street, including children, young people, adults and families. The third NGO was located in a municipality on the periphery of São Paulo city with the highest population density in the state of São Paulo. The area is characterized by precarious housing conditions, higher levels of violence than found in other municipalities and low income levels. The multidisciplinary team aims to minimize factors leading to social exclusion through group and individual support to young people and their families alongside providing educational and recreational workshops and community services. One element of the research process with all three NGOs were individual introductory and exit interviews with staff members and it is this element of the study that provides the empirical data for this article. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Portuguese with all staff members (independent of role) and lasted for between 20 minutes and two hours. All the interviews were then transcribed, analysed and coded in Portuguese using qualitative data analysis software. A modified version of grounded theory was used for data analysis throughout the fieldwork through the use of reflections and memos, and these were used to form coding categories on which to base data analysis. In total, 40 staff members across the three NGOs were interviewed. During interviews staff members discussed and reflected on their understandings of participation and protagonism (for full discussion of methodology, see Jupp Kina, 2010). Through a detailed analysis of participants’ reflections I was able to build a picture of current understandings of these concepts amongst the participants. It is this aspect that I argue can add significantly to current Northern debates.

Differentiating between participation and protagonism: Moving beyond political participation

Participation is really broad, isn’t it. Participation in what? Youth protagonism [hesitates], with protagonism they are participating effectively in something. (Jorge, NGO staff member)
As Jorge highlights, a key difference between protagonism and participation is that protagonism is more defined. It is when someone participates effectively in something. However, this raised the question of what constitutes ‘effective’ participation? At the most basic level, the majority of responses from staff members indicated an understanding of effective participation being young people doing things for themselves without the interference of adults. But we are still left with the question: what does this mean in practice? What is the process that permits young people to work free from adult interference?

The idea of control and autonomy emerged as central differentiating factors between participation and protagonism. When asked to define the difference between participation and protagonism in her introductory interview, Tânia, an NGO coordinator, replied:

*Tânia:* I’m not exactly the expert on this, I don’t have much understanding about this, but [hesitates] I think basically protagonism is closely linked to the search to guarantee rights, to involve the young person in this search, it has everything to do with the autonomy of this young person. How to define participation? [hesitates] It’s to be able to give ideas, to debate ideas in order to make a decision, it’s more or less that.

*Victoria:* What is the purpose of participation and youth protagonism in your opinion?

*Tânia:* The purpose of youth protagonism is to stimulate the young person towards this autonomy, to this search. Participation is to be able to really hear what the child has to say, what the family has [to say], it’s not just listening for the sake of listening, it’s to really listen and to give importance that what each person brings is really rich. How you listen and what you do with the information.

Tânia clearly differentiates between participation as a process in which the child or young person plays only a partially active role, with the adult assuming the responsibility for hearing what the child or young person has to say and acting upon the information, and protagonism as a process whereby the young person is actively involved in the claiming of their rights. This was further elaborated by João, another coordinator at the same NGO:

*But if within participation you opened up for them to be inside, here with protagonism they are inside and act on [what happens]. So it’s sovereign. Your role is much more to provide incentive or as a mediator, something like that. But they are different objectives, maybe participation as the start of a protagonism.*
Both Tânia and João view participation as being when the role of the adult remains central – ‘you open for them to be inside’ – whereas with protagonism the objective is for the young person to have autonomy. As a consequence, the responsibility of the ‘adult’ moves from hearing the child and acting upon what they say to one of mediator or the provider of incentives. So in response to our question of what is the process that permits a child or young person to work free from the interference of adults, Tânia and João indicate that central to this is recognizing the role of the adult: from ensuring that a child or young person is listened to and towards the facilitation of autonomy. In other words, they indicate that protagonism is reliant upon those who are facilitating the process of recognizing their own role and required skills.

Yet Tânia’s definition of participation and protagonism also takes this one stage further. She integrates the role of the young person with the overall aim of the process. For example, while the aim of participation is limited to involvement in a specific process, such as taking a specific decision, she views protagonism as broader and connected to the claiming of rights. For Tânia, protagonism has a wider and more politicized aim which goes beyond involvement in specific decisions or discussions. If we briefly return to Northern literature, the distinction between active and passive participation is a key aspect of the various definitions of participation. For example, passive consultation is seen as the most basic level of participation and child-led participation as the highest (although not necessarily the ‘best’). However, the wider and more politicized aim implied within Tânia’s definition of protagonism is missing from the Northern definitions of participation. Children and young people may be participating, but the question of why still remains broadly unanswered. Although there is often mention of advocacy or awareness, raising the explicit reference to children and young people being actively involved in the search for the claiming of human rights is often lacking within theoretical debates (see for example, Francis and Lorenzo, 2002, cited in Malone and Hartung, 2010). Indeed, the focus on participation within existing social and political structures, such as voting in elections, rather than the broader conceptualizations of participation in everyday activities through the ‘geographies of micro-politics’ (Weller, 2007, cited in Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2011) has led to criticism. As Percy-Smith highlights:

I argue that this preoccupation with political, rather than other forms of participation, is one of the dilemmas with current theories and practices which seek to articulate young people as active citizens . . . One could argue that a radical shift towards widening opportunities for democratic participation should
challenge the ethos of dependency and control of state institutions and structures and instead celebrate emerging countercultural orientations in citizen participation, wherein the agenda and form of participation is driven by citizens themselves rather than solely in relation to the state. (2010: 108–109)

A key conceptual difference, therefore, between participation and protagonism is that protagonism goes beyond the notion of participation in pre-existing social and political structures and links to wider issues of citizenship. It is one potential mechanism for challenging the currently rather limited conceptualization of participation as participation in pre-defined ways and shifting towards the recognition of participation as mechanism for collaborative decision-making and action.

Further elaborating on this, Eduardo, another coordinator at the same NGO, clearly differentiated between the active participation of someone in a decision-making process and the internal learning and personal development of the individual. In discussing his views on public participation, Eduardo uses the example of participatory budgeting to highlight how participation should be evaluated in terms of developing critical thinking rather than physical presence or inclusion. Participatory budgeting was introduced in Brazil within the 1988 Brazilian Constitution as a means of decentralization and public accountability through creating deliberative spaces and mechanisms for allocating municipal budget resources (Avritzer, 2002). However, as Eduardo articulates, there is a need to look beyond group processes to analyse the internal development of those involved:

_Eduardo:_ I see something more internal than communitarian, it’s a liberal ethic, of the individual. I think it’s more important to make a process completely within the person than mobilizing the whole neighbourhood to vote in participatory budgeting. I think I see it being more relevant that the young person does all the critical thinking within themselves than a physical mobilization of people.

_Victoria:_ So it’s more about the process than the result?

_Eduardo:_ Yes, it’s more about the process than the result. It’s an internal process, people tend to evaluate participatory budgeting by the amount of people who voted, which is good, of course, but if the young person has a critical spirit, even if they didn’t vote I think this is more important. Of course, voting is the final objective but I see a lack of critical spirit. I am uncomfortable if there is a participatory budget process where two or three say what the masses have to vote for. I think this is just as undemocratic as if there was no
Eduardo’s view is that a focus on internal learning and the development of a ‘critical spirit’ means that a decision not to participate can be essentially more participatory than ‘active’ participation such as voting on a particular issue. What is important is the way in which this decision is made. The final action, or non-action, may be more visible but more important are the internal processes of learning upon which the final action is based.

The lack of attention paid to non-participation is another area that has been identified as lacking within Northern literature. As Cornwall highlighted in her extensive review of participation, ‘participatory initiatives tend to be premised on the idea that everyone would want to participate if only they could. The active choice not to participate is barely recognised’ (2002: 56 [emphasis in original]). This is an example of the focus within existing theoretical frameworks on action rather than process. Assumptions about participation being morally right and positive for all (if only society would allow it) have resulted in a failure to include individual processes and individual benefits, as these have been drowned out by hailing participation as the holy grail for a better society (see for example the discussions in Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The lack of an agreed definition and the tendency to focus on the overall goal, to ‘get them participating’, has left the processes by which this goal is achieved on the sidelines. Indeed, the confusion between purpose and process within participation has already been identified within social work practice in the UK. As noted by Braye (2000: 9), ‘participation is presented both as a means to an end and as an end in itself, and at times the purpose and the process appear indivisible’. This creates a central problem, as the lack of clarity means that the internal learning and development of each person involved in a participatory process becomes immersed in the same confusion. Yet it is only by addressing the internal learning and development of each individual that participation can ensure itself against becoming an oppressive as opposed to empowering force. Using the ideas of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational pedagogue, freedom can only come about through the recognition of oppression by the oppressed and anything else amounts to a ‘false generosity’ (1996 [1970]: 26). Therefore a further conceptual difference between participation and protagonism is the internal processes of learning and development that produce the ‘critical spirit’. This takes the recognition of needing to move away from the focus on participation in pre-defined ways and towards participation in everyday community settings (Percy-Smith, 2010).
one stage further, and highlights how the lack of attention to individual internal learning within current participatory processes creates a danger of participation amounting to little more than a ‘false generosity’ that does little to challenge the status quo.

**Participation then protagonism: Recognizing participation as a process of learning**

While broadly reflecting more recent thinking within Northern literature that participation is a process that involves learning as well as the idea of making a difference (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010), the majority of participants also identified that while participation and protagonism relate to different actions they are not independent of one another. The consistent view was that of a process; that participation leads to protagonism. Research participants consistently stated that participation is a fundamental element in developing youth protagonism. In the words of Carla, an NGO staff member: ‘... they go together. They are different words, but the actions are [hesitates] there’s no way for a young person to be a protagonist if they don’t participate’. In other words, to be a ‘protagonist’ you need to have experienced participation. The idea of participation being the first stage of youth protagonism was further elaborated by Beatriz, an NGO staff member who worked in a child protection team:

**Beatriz:** Participation is the idea of developing the young person, to bring out their desire, to help with this [process] in some way, depending on what is proposed. But to wake up the young person’s desire. Youth protagonism would be planning, to help direct the young person so they can plan both small things within the group and manage to express their thinking about their own life.

**Victoria:** Do you think that they are two different things or are they linked?

**Beatriz:** They’re completely connected because by waking up the young person’s desire, you wake up the desire to participate, so [the young person] is able to plan, to organize their ideas.

For Beatriz, participation is waking the desire in the young person and it is this that becomes the foundation on which to develop youth protagonism. Yet while this highlights the interconnected nature of participation and protagonism, it also raises the question of how a young person moves from knowing what he or she wants and actually achieving that end. What are the elements that move someone from participation to protagonism?
One fundamental aspect raised by Paulo, a director of one of the participating NGOs, was confidence. This particular NGO has an ‘open-door’ policy whereby children, young people and community members are free to enter all areas and offices within the building. Essentially, this NGO had opened up the physical ‘space’ for children and young people through the institutional decision to invite them ‘in’. Throughout the fieldwork I noticed the impact that this appeared to have on the sense of ownership and confidence of many of the children and young people who spend time ‘hanging out’ at the NGO. Crucially, it appeared that the children and young people gained skills and experiences through their engagement with this ‘space’ (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2006). Paulo felt that the ‘open-door’ policy had had an impact on both participation and protagonism through developing self-confidence:

Paulo: I wouldn’t say they’re the same thing, but having children and young people participate, as participators or whatever is a fertile field to have ‘protagonismo juvenil’ – really strong actions – people are ready for it, basically.

Victoria: So when you say fertile field you mean it’s growing . . .?

Paulo: Being confident. Yeah, it’s things, people are confident, they build up confidence because they’re allowed to. It’s a little difficult to explain, like these children who come in here, just the fact that they can come in and talk builds confidence and then they can say I want to do this, I want to do that, all the rest of it. What I think is that it’s rather organic . . .

Fabio, an NGO coordinator, also spoke about the connection between confidence and the process of developing protagonism. Fabio viewed protagonism in the same way as Tânia, believing that protagonism is achieved through autonomy. However, he highlighted the process that needs to be undertaken in order to achieve this:

From the point of view of developing autonomy I think that it’s this, the child identifying first what he or she doesn’t like or and what he or she does like, and thinking what he or she can do to change this, what are the alternatives. Very often it’s what he or she needs before being able to see the alternatives, it’s developing self-esteem, self-awareness.

For Fabio it is through the experience of participation, through building the self-esteem and self-awareness necessary to be able to ‘see the alternatives’ that facilitates protagonist action. Crucially, this indicates that it is the experience of learning and personal development that comes through participation that facilitates the development of autonomy, and it is through the
development of autonomy that moves an individual from being a participant to being a protagonist. In other words, it is precisely through the experience of participating that facilitates a young person moving from identifying what they want and actually achieving that end. In short, participation *facilitates* protagonism.

Theoretical frameworks of participation in Northern literature are curiously silent on the processual nature of the participatory relationship and how the experience of participation facilitates the learning and development that moves an individual towards protagonism. For example, Hart’s ‘ladder of children’s participation’ (1992), which remains the most influential model within the field (Malone and Hartung, 2010), utilizes a categorization approach to distinguish between possible types of adult–child interaction. This approach, while useful in the analysis of past actions, fails to incorporate the processual nature of participatory practice. It focuses on *what* is done rather than *how* it is done. The static nature of the categorization approach implies that the adult needs to decide the level of participation that they would like to aim for, which then sets out the amount of ‘space’ the adult will need to provide. The ‘adult’ remains in control of the process. For a framework of participatory practice to be truly representative of reality it must, at the very minimum, represent the processual nature of participation. Instead of focusing on the categorization of participatory practice, the reflections of the participants in this research indicate that a more effective approach to conceptualizing participation would be to represent the experience of participation; to focus on what each individual (adult or child, facilitator or participant) within a participatory process needs to understand and experience in order to *develop* participation. As Paulo articulated so clearly, participation is an organic process, it is not just ‘done’ but is developed over time and it is through focusing on how this process is developed that will provide a more effective and representative framework for participatory practice.

**Conclusion: Learning lessons, extending debates**

Within this article I have utilized the experiences of practitioners to try to suggest one possible mechanism for bringing some clarity to the conceptual muddle that participation finds itself in within Northern discourse. Through providing an analysis of the terms ‘participation’ and ‘protagonism’ as used within Brazilian discourse and practice, the aim of this article has been to widen debates and question whether the continued use of the term ‘participation’, despite the recognition of the widely different situations to which it can refer, actually contributes to confusion. While a number of critiques of both participation in general and children and young people’s
participation in particular have emerged over recent years (see for example, Beresford and Croft, 2001, 2004; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Malone and Hartung, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2010), no other term has yet to be proposed that embraces the conceptual differences between different forms of participation that have been identified. Through providing an analysis of protagonism, this article has identified key conceptual differences between participation and protagonism. First, protagonism connects participation and citizenship, facilitating a shift away from the current focus on political participation and participation in pre-defined ways, towards the recognition of participation as a mechanism for collaborative decision-making and action. Second, protagonism embraces the idea of non-participation through focusing on the internal processes of learning and development. This helps to ensure against the danger of participation becoming a mechanism for reinforcing rather than challenging the status quo. Finally, the article has highlighted the interconnectedness of the two concepts and argued for a move away from the categorical approach within theoretical frameworks. After all, if participation is a fluid process of internal learning, then a theoretical framework must, at the very minimum, attempt to represent this fluidity.

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1. Due to limits of space all quotes are in English. All translations are my own.

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