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Participatory Action Research and Anti-Poverty Community Organizing: Methodological Considerations and Preliminary Findings

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Abstract: The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning project is working toward building and integrating city-wide anti-poverty efforts. This paper examines the use of a Participatory Action Research framework for undertaking a quantitative survey and qualitative case study. It presents and analyzes the role of community/university collaboration, the nature of participation, and the outcomes in terms of actions and learning. Through the findings and reflections emerging from this project, the paper discusses key questions about participatory approaches in the studies of community organizing and implications to adult learning and education practices.

Introduction

This paper uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a framework for conducting community-based anti-poverty research. The purpose is to examine the use of this research methodology in community practice and how it can create conditions that help move research processes toward participation and partnership.

PAR is presented as inherently complex, marked by circular processes, multiple visions, power imbalances and struggles. It is argued that through these complexities the positive aspects and potential of PAR emerge. Participatory Action Research, as a theoretical and methodological perspective, provides a framework for people to go back and forth between action and reflection, opens up opportunities to be aware of dynamics among people, and allows for continuous learning and the re-evaluation of knowledge and understanding.

We aim to capture the lived experience of researchers, practitioners and community residents within a case of PAR and illustrate the complex, often contested and contradictory nature of its processes and outcomes. Using the case of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project, we describe the processes, stories, key moments and learning taking place. This allows for a discussion around the dynamics within PAR in community development and organizing, and how it can be used to open up spaces for learning and understand and recalculate barriers in participation. This paper comes from a place of reflexivity, where, as integral to the process of PAR, we see this as an opportunity to be self-critical, revisit our opinions and create room for new understanding.

Literature Review

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is fundamentally about partnerships, collaboration and information sharing, whereby researchers and practitioners in community development together integrate research and action to improve conditions in people's lives (Park, 1993). By recognizing that transformative information comes in many forms and from many sources, a PAR approach is built upon the belief in people's ability and right to name their struggles and be their own agents in knowledge-building and action. In PAR, there is an aim for researchers to work with, rather than for, marginalized or disadvantaged groups. By putting research capabilities into the hands of the community, PAR promotes the development of common knowledge and critical awareness.

Participatory methodology has been seen to be an effective way to ensure that community-based research contributes to positive change processes (e.g. Martin, 1995; Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004). As groups organize, there is a need to understand more about the situations that people are facing. PAR legitimizes the struggle for power. Reid, Brief and LeDrew (2009) emphasize the role of power both within the research process and in the broader societal context, promoting reflexivity and examination of power relationships.

Theories of Learning

Theories of learning in adult education cast a wide net to include learning in any form in any situation. Foley (2001) suggests that learning can be technical (ex. specific tasks), as well as social, cultural and political (ex. how people relate to each other, who has power and how they use it). Learning consists of formal and deliberate learning, such as in organized courses, trainings and workshops; but the majority of learning is informal, outside of organized formal courses including anything learned by oneself or with other people to gain knowledge, skill or understanding. Informal learning can be purposeful or incidental, occurring by acting and reflecting on action (Foley, 2001).

Learning is complex and diverse, and is central to human life. Educational opportunities are pervasive in people's lives; struggles and learning are everywhere (Foley, 1999). Learning dimensions in community sites, including workplaces, educational institutions and families, can generate significant human learning "that enables people to make sense of and act on their environment, and to come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings" (Foley, 2001, p.78).

Similar sorts of informal and incidental learning can be found in instances of social action. Learning in community organizing is embedded in the process and occurs continuously and spontaneously (Chovanec, 2006). Being implicit and incidental, informal learning is often hard to distinguish and measure, and may not be understood or recognized as learning (Foley, 2001). Nevertheless, theories and research on informal learning stress its prevalence and power

Participation in Anti-Poverty Organizing

Theories of community organizing explain processes and practices that create opportunities for group formation and address social issues collectively. The value of experiential knowledge has been recognized as a valuable resource for social action (Bowen 2007; Hardina, 2003). There is a growing consensus to move away from external 'expert' solutions to finding participatory strategies and local solutions (Fay, 1987; Hart, 1981). This

emphasizes the autonomous and collective capacity of individuals to define and influence the direction of their own lives.

While many validate the focus on individual knowledge, there is concern whether participation alone can lead to collective action or social change. Freire (1971) describes the creation of knowledge or participation as not enough; it must lead to action that will change the status quo. Although PAR provides an opportunity for gathering local knowledge on activism, the nature of participation carries different meanings for different groups. Mobilization around poverty requires due process and equitable engagement.

Successful mobilization should consider the diverse range of experiences that constitute the lives of people living in poverty. PAR can provide a critical lens to understand this range of experiences and people's connection with others who might share a similar vision.

The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) Project

APCOL is a five-year project that aims “to develop an integrated, city-wide perspective on community anti-poverty organizing efforts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with an emphasis on the contributions of popular education and learning processes” (APCOL; www.apcol.ca). The project employs a mixed-methods approach, including eight case studies and a Toronto-wide quantitative survey.

Survey Development and Administration

The APCOL survey employs a participatory approach to quantitative research. Following the PAR framework, community-university collaboration is built into each phase of the survey project, from instrument development and survey administration, to data management, analysis and dissemination of results.

In the development of the research instrument, APCOL researchers and community partners cooperatively developed a survey. It was initially constructed through a review of existing literature and interviews with key community members. At this stage, preliminary versions of the survey were created and brought to the survey committee.

The committee consisted of both community and university members, jointly involved in decision-making regarding issues of instrument design. Over the period of a year, the committee discussed the framework, approach, dimensions, questions, language, terminologies and ethics of the survey. This process was time-intensive and took enormous efforts on both sides. For example, there was an ongoing debate about the term ‘anti-poverty’, as to whether it would be understood the same way by different groups of people.

Pre-testing of the instrument was carried out in neighbourhoods in which community partners lived and worked. This on-the-ground exercise of using the survey provided opportunity for the tool to take shape for practical use. Importantly, it gave explicit feedback on the survey instrument on what worked and what did not. Two graduate student researchers, when piloting the survey, spent three hours knocking on doors in high-rise apartment buildings, to have only one person agree to do the interview. Conversely, when one of the same students went door-to-door with a community researcher who lived in the area, everyone agreed to participate. Survey piloting demonstrated the power of social connections, and contributed significantly in terms of survey sampling strategies, community relationship development and team building processes.

The use of community researchers and graduate students provided opportunities for skills development and leadership within and across both groups. This collaboration looked different in each neighbourhood, ranging from survey ‘blitzes’, where community researchers and graduate

students interviewers came out to a weekly market in Kingston-Galloway, to pairs of interviewers – one community member and one student – working together in Weston-Mount Dennis. Having community members and graduate students support each other in survey administration contributed to better research – more eyes and ears to capture important information and perspective coming out of the interviews – as well as learning opportunities on both sides. Graduate students gained increased knowledge of the work of various community groups and issues faced by different communities, and community interviewers had the opportunity to learn about the research process and how the university works.

The collaborative community/university approach was not without contradictions. Even simple things like deciding where to hold a meeting had implications for who is in a position of power. When deciding meeting locations, bringing together people who live and work in very different geographical locations meant that someone always had to travel. Care was taken to ensure that academics didn't privilege their schedules over that of the community members. A conscious effort was made to have as many meetings as possible held in the neighbourhood spaces run by partnering community organizations. At one point, community researchers requested to meet at the university as they saw it as a place that they would like to gain more familiarity with, to see what really goes on there, and to be a part of.

Overview of the KGO Housing Case Study

One of the first studies conducted for the APCOL project was in the Kingston Galloway – Orton park (KGO) neighbourhood¹ with activists addressing housing challenges in the community through organizing and advocacy.

The KGO case study was conducted in partnership with Social Planning Toronto and their current Toronto Area anti-poverty campaign. The process began by hiring seven community leaders who worked directly with the APCOL community co-lead.

The APCOL leaders organized five focus group meetings to develop a local housing strategy that addressed the needs of youth, seniors, newcomers, people with disabilities and people living in public housing. Following the focus groups, the team organized a housing forum where residents had the opportunity to learn about resources and how to get involved with housing campaigns in KGO and the GTA.

Through carefully facilitated meetings that addressed issues specific to the community, participants were encouraged to not only learn from facilitators, but more importantly, from each other. Trainings focused on interviewing techniques (for research as well as organizing efforts), followed by facilitation methods. Another component of the campaign was the political aspect, where participants met with local politicians. In preparation, trainings included discussions of the various roles of government, strategies for influencing policy-making, and coalition-building techniques. Also, participants were encouraged to attend committees on housing and anti-poverty initiatives in order to broaden their understanding of the issues and report back to the group.

At the centre of the study was the learning process, and participants engaged in various workshops and trainings, as well as 'learning-in-action'. Every week, participants came together for 'conversation circles' to discuss various community issues and consider potential solutions for making a change in their neighbourhood. During every session, participants encountered new stories and connections to the issues facing residents. As the case study progressed, they became intimately familiar with each others' experiences and capacities as activists. By reaching out to

¹ KGO is located in East Scarborough representing the Municipal ward 43 and parts of the provincial riding of Scarborough-Guildwood.

other community activists, APCOL leaders learned more about how others are overcoming poverty-related issues. By making participation accessible and non-threatening, the case study provided a means to engage in community activism. From the seven community leaders, five continue to be involved with APCOL in varying capacities.

Discussion of Findings

A discussion of the findings emerging from the APCOL survey and KGO case study is as complex as the initial research process itself. As outlined throughout this paper, the PAR methodology involves participation and decision-making by groups of residents, community organizations, graduate students and faculty. Thus, any discussion of findings needs to encompass varied opinions and perspectives. This section of the paper reflects a collaborative process between community and university members.

Addressing Power Dynamics

In line with the project's mission and methodology, this case study and survey have emphasized the importance of examining and addressing internal and external group dynamics. Several strategies were implemented in order to provide participants with the space necessary to engage in such discussions. First, there was concerted effort to have discussions around building community power through the political process. Through learning about power relations, APCOL leaders identified their relationship to those 'in power' and learned to define their goals for participation, frame arguments when developing advocacy strategies and open dialogue with politicians and policy-makers.

Second, there was a conscious attempt to address and eliminate power imbalances within the group. In KGO, participants entered the case study from various backgrounds and there were clear power dynamics, particularly relating to age and organizing history. Through a sharing of different notions of what *organizing* and *activism* mean, participants came to understand their individual and group roles, and how they fit as a piece within the organizing puzzle.

Similarly, power dynamics emerged within the survey process, strongly relating to survey knowledge and history with APCOL. Interestingly, this effect was observable across both community and student researchers, where project experience seemed to carry the most weight in terms of credibility. This was overcome through ongoing opportunities to be involved in different ways, such as group trainings, mentorships, survey administration, data entry and analysis. Spaces were opened for participants to engage and become APCOL 'experts' based on their expertise and interest.

In the case study and survey, it was clear that open communication and acknowledgement of the dynamics led to improved participation and engagement with the project. As the project continues, this is an issue that we continue to reflect on and adopt new processes and methods to address power dynamics.

Building Leadership for Anti-Poverty Activity

The process of understanding one's experiences as connected to others is well documented throughout APCOL. Much of this learning emerged as people found new ways to construct challenges. For one leader, learning about the challenges facing others provided new strategies to overcome these issues;

If it wasn't for seeing what other people are going through, and what other people were dealing with then I wouldn't know. I would only know my own problems. And...yes I'm worried about my own problems, but it's not my problem...they're not only my problems. Other people are going through the same thing that I'm going through. I may not know them. I may be pissed off as hell because I didn't get my housing, I didn't get my three bedroom. I got stuck living with my mom. But there's people out there living in one bedroom with five kids... there are so many different issues that need to be taken care of, but you can't do it by yourself. That's why you need groups to get together and ... sometimes they don't work but that's why you keep pounding and you keep doing what you gotta do. That's what I feel that [APCOL] is. Get people together; find out what's going on. (KGO17, APCOL KGO Housing Case Study)

While seemingly simple, *getting people together* must take place with the learning process in mind and with the objective of building a movement for change. At the beginning of the project, participants were unclear as to the role of learning in their community activity. One of the most valuable contributions cited by APCOL leaders throughout the case study was the opportunity to work collectively to build their understanding of anti-poverty organizing and develop new strategies for social change.

Understanding Social Networks

In both the survey and case study, space was opened up for community and university members to reflect and learn individually and from each other. In addition to the core group of participants, relations across communities were developed. The development of *social networks* was a notable outcome – bridges across age, gender, ethnicity and religion were built among local activists. While several members of the team already had strong connections to each other due to personal and familial ties, most began with limited ties. One community researcher reported that the survey experience helped him develop a stronger sense of himself as someone who could engage with new people;

I didn't know I had it in me to deal with different kinds of people. Although mostly the people I interviewed are from my country, from the Philippines, still they have different personalities that I didn't know I could deal with. (Interviewer17, APCOL Thorncliffe Survey Report).

While traditionally there may be weak ties across groups of newcomers, seniors and youth, participants developed strategies to bring these groups together. This had the effect of strengthening their own group process as well as broadening anti-poverty organizing.

Another important aspect of building social networks came through story-telling. As community leaders unveiled their history of activism and conditions that made them who they are today, they were able to connect with one another in profound ways. Although leaders were at different places in their journey, they shared how reflexivity is a key factor in taking an active role in the community. Through the process of story-telling, participants identified where they were as leaders in the community and recounted steps that brought them to that stage. This brought about analyses of their struggle with systemic barriers, how to fight back to establish justice, and see where they want to be in the future.

Some APCOL members cited that in reflecting on their own stories, as well as consulting with others about activism and poverty challenges, their eyes were opened to different issues.

APCOL participants broadened their understanding of the conditions of poverty, shared differences of opinions, learned more about themselves and started seeing people in a different light. By being aware of each other they opened up to let others participate in the learning process while staying conscious of their disagreements and differences. They were able to identify different learning tools to explain how poverty is shaped and perpetuated while finding and developing local strategies.

Conclusion

Understanding the complexities of participatory research, especially in the magnitude of a five-year project, we have demonstrated some of the challenges and potentials emerging as we move forward.

We have presented some of the actions taking place in communities throughout Toronto. Reflections from those involved in community organizing demonstrate the importance of these activities for overcoming poverty. Rather than addressing learning as a footnote to community organizing, there is a renewed commitment to engaging residents using popular education techniques that not only inform, but *empower* participants to take action for social change. The APCOL project has allowed participants to broaden their scope of community organizing to engage with other communities and organizations that may have previously seemed unrelated to neighbourhood-specific community activity. Through this learning process, local participants, organizations and academics can more effectively build coalitions across various issues of poverty in the GTA.

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