Participatory Research into Community Psychology within a Local Context

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Abstract

The aim is to present a series of participatory action research studies focused on town development and inhabitants' needs. The paper discusses how to construct a field investigation that pays attention to people's narratives, as well as how to elaborate a *substantive theory*, which is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon.

The assessment of the trustworthiness of the intervention is also examined. For a better understanding of how to conduct an intervention in a local community, this paper deals with methodological questions concerning triangulation of sources and sampling strategies. Research instruments such as narratives, community profiles, and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis are discussed as regards their use within grounded theory methodologies and participatory action research.

Introduction

Intervention within local communities requires specific instruments and methods in order to find out about the social, relational and economic dimensions existing in the area. "Because there is very little guidance with regard to methodologies that promote social transformation…" (Montero, 2009, p.75): As Maritza Montero points out, social action calls for specific professional attitudes and this article will present our own expertise and research strategies.

Community psychology is the discipline that gives voice to the experience of inhabitants and favors communication between all the different social and political forces which promote various interventions of social transformation. Within this discipline, the ecological model emerges as crucial for explaining the interaction between the different factors and levels (micro, meso and macro) that constitute the social situation and that create a dialogue between the different factors that interact within it. In fact the ecological approach allows us to identify the connections between the individual and the collective, as well as the objective and subjective dimensions, and to carefully examine these interactions (Prilleltensky, 2008; Christens & Perkins, 2008). This perspective effectively analyses the various different structural, relational, cultural and socio-economic viewpoints, focusing on the need for considering all these different aspects together and thereby allowing us to understand how events and facts are "situated" in the mind of the observer.

Furthermore, the ecological model assumes that community integration is the adaptive result of direct influences from the community context, social connections, networks , personal and group characteristics. This paper intends to focus on implicit factors which represent the strong points of a qualitative approach to the study of social contexts. They are the basic elements in the training of the researcher who wants to operate within urban contexts in a participatory way. Within this framework special importance is attributed to the narratives produced at the individual and group level, and to the restitution and collective discussion of their perspectives and representations.

Our research team paid attention to both the contextual reality of the research participants and to the identification of methodologies allowing us to investigate the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences in relation to their life contexts (Arcidiacono & Procentese 2005; Arcidiacono, Procentese & Di Napoli, 2007; Arcidiacono, Procentese & Baldi 2010; Arcidiacono & Di Napoli 2009; Procentese, Di Napoli, & Iuliano, 2007). These issues have a significant effect on the implementation of an intervention, and with this in mind the following criteria are analyzed: 1) contact strategies, 2) the definition and analysis of context, 3) building the research team, 4) sample building, 5) the choice of investigative tools used and their construction, 6) data analysis, and 7) the restitution and the definition of future interventions.

The Preliminary Framework

The method we followed required the establishment of a research context that would belong to the researchers, to the social and health workers involved, to the participants in the study, and to the final target population. Therefore, the researchers had first to define:

- The construction of the relationship of the researchers with the first contacts within the local context;
- the analysis of needs and resources;
- the best composition of the research group;
- the best composition of the steering committee;
- the research design;
- the tools and instruments to be used.

The Contact

In all our activities at a local level, the first phase of the participative research project was the contact between the researchers, the citizens and the stakeholders. Through listening and mutual knowledge, a relationship of mutual trust was built up between the participants in the research project. Intermediary figures trusted by the host community arranged preliminary contacts for meetings to be held with people known to be the most authoritative in the research context. The literature (Hanlin et al., 2008; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005) shows the need for prolonged preliminary contact, but if there is already a strong contact with some reference figures in the territory it may not be necessary to wait long before starting the research. In our experience, the presence of bridging figures between the group of researchers and people within the context being investigated was a necessary pre-requisite and it was accompanied by the research of experts, scholars, social workers, members of associations and researchers who, in their various different capacities, are familiar with the territory studied and with the topic being investigated. They are involved in relational, professional, family, political and cultural contexts, and they facilitate the comprehension of local problems while favoring contact with various entities, institutions, associations and individuals, as well as permitting access to local information.

For example, in order to establish a study with the Muslim immigrants of San Marcellino, we initially referred to a student of our university who was highly respected in the context of the local organizations. He therefore allowed us to build up a relationship of trust with the community within which the research was conducted and he facilitated relationships with the citizens and key people of the area (Arcidiacono & Procentese 2010).

Analysis of the Needs and Relationship with the Participants

In any study it is essential to listen to the needs and motivations of local people that lead to the construction of a joint objective and a shared agenda with the inhabitants and the entire community. A commitment from the community towards putting data emerging from the research to good use is a further prerequisite for an intervention with a transformative aim. If this is not present, it is the task of the researcher to arrange initiatives of sensitization aimed at its activation.

To this end we established appointments for meeting the local contacts, acting as mediators of our requests to the citizens, and we then arranged meetings for sharing and discussing ideas with them. These meetings were held both in the initial phase of the participatory research and at subsequent moments, in order to redefine the aims of the intervention to be implemented. In the latter meetings we set up special exhibitions by the citizens, allowing us to have a picture of the ideas that were emerging and to redefine these ideas together with the various social protagonists. We will give specific examples of this later on.

The Research Team

In our action research activity we focused on the idea that the research team would preferably consist of researchers who, in addition to their scientific competence, should have experience in the local context, and would therefore allow the whole group to understand the values and the life-styles of the local culture, thereby facilitating connections and relationships with people, as well as with local institutions. In the research conducted in the old town-center of Naples, for example, we relied on the connections of some team members who lived in the area or nearby and who had significant social contacts and relations with people committed to the promotion of the district and its livability (Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2005). We also met a local shop-owner who mediated our relations with the people who frequented the area we investigated but who were not actually residents.

The research team was also integrated and supported by senior researchers with experience in data coding and categorization. The research group aimed to encourage the expression of reflection in its members with regard to their attitudes and expectations, as well

as obtaining their feedback on the information and knowledge acquired.

The Steering Committee

Another distinctive element was the constitution of a mixed steering committee (SC) that included some of the research group members and some reference people from the community investigated (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This group guided the research process, established and verified the objectives, made decisions and defined strategies. In some cases, an ethical communication code is established so as to recognize the role of inhabitants in the research decisions and to define the empowering function that the research must have for the community, while taking its values and principles fully into consideration.

We had in mind Nelson and Prilleltensky's suggestion (2005) that the cooperation should take place with mutual respect and consultation, such that, while no partner can veto the dissemination of results, those who disagree with the interpretation of the data can express their point of view in oral or written form and propose that the materials collected should not be distributed if they do not contain specific reference to the partners' differing positions, but that any party in disagreement cannot actually prevent the release of the results.

The steering committee (SC) distinguishes a participatory action research study from a research project with a transformative aim in a professional and academic environment (Arcidiacono, 2008). The construction of a SC is a priority, although it represents a challenge to the traditional scientific power and authority that the researchers see themselves invested with.

We may consider, for example, a research project (Arcidiacono & Procentese 2010) within a community of immigrants in the Campania region that has the local mosque as its main reference point. Already in the first meetings for setting up a SC, consisting of the local imam and members of associations for migrant rights, spurred our research group towards a participative management of the research. We received prompt information from them on the main problems deriving from immigration policies and on the wider context of the interviewees, on the typology of the sample, on the way local people established mutual relationships, on the right methods for establishing local contacts, on the dissemination of the results and also various considerations regarding the aim of the project as a

whole. Furthermore, in order to increase their knowledge of the local context (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005, p.271), researchers were invited to gather observational data and field notes of two kinds: a) descriptive field notes about what they observed (including direct quotes) and b) analytical or reflexive field notes in which they recorded their impressions, feelings, intuitions and insights.

The Community Diagnosis: Community Profiles and SWOT Analyses

In all our activities data was collected in order to carry out the community analysis through the acquisition of knowledge related to socio-environmental, demographic, institutional, anthropological and employment characteristics, according to the methodology of *community profiles*. *Community profiling* allows local inhabitants to understand the particular problems and strengths that characterise their community. Martini and Sequi's (1988) approach was improved by Francescato and Tomai (2005), so that now this method of analysis consists of eight profiles (territorial, demographic, economic, service, institutional, anthropological, psychological and future). It proved a useful tool for us for diagnosing and formulating the priorities of community intervention and action. In our research undertaken in Naples in 1999, a careful analysis of the profile led us to identify the importance of unemployment and of young people's strategies for dealing with this (Arcidiacono, Sommantico & Procentese 2001). We then conducted a *SWOT analysis* as a strategic planning tool used to evaluate the *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities*, and *Threats* investigated by means of *community profiling*. It allows the researcher to specify the final objective of the project and identify the various internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable to achieving that objective. It is elaborated by means of a critical reading of the community profiles of Naples by the research group and with the help of focus groups consisting of local residents. In order to conduct a complete analysis of the community we preliminary ask ourselves how the data and information collected through the profiles represent points of strength or weakness of the local context and its inhabitants (Arcidiacono, 1999).

The Research Design

In our participative study with inhabitants and communities, a key issue was, as previously mentioned, the sharing of decisions (within the SC), the restitution of results to the community and the reflexive attitude of the researchers. The grounded

theory methodology (GTM) (Corbin, & Strauss, 2008) is a leading method which, thanks to the categorization and coding of data and the attribution of meaning, makes it possible to appreciate the attitudes and opinions of various different research partners. One of our goals was therefore to use the GT approach in order to investigate the meanings of all the social interactions we encountered.

Our challenge was to improve participatory processes in the research and to have a more critical perspective, while encouraging social change. Our action research consisted of creating new forms of comprehension among local inhabitants and the researchers, so that their actions should not be blind, without reflection or comprehension, or like a theory without action and therefore devoid of meaning. In a wider sense, the theories that contribute to the development of the community lead to new forms of social interaction, and supply an important guide for community action (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p.4).

According to the simple slogan of Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, and Lord. (1998) - "*Nothing about me without me*" - we defined the methods as well as the objectives of the research in a participatory way. The sharing of aims and procedures, the identity of the researchers and protagonists of the study, and the joint decision regarding the subject of the research were all especially relevant topics.

The Procedure and the Method

The entire process of the research had a cyclical structure involving the redefinition and revision of what had occurred during previous phases. The phases that followed each other consisted of:

- Sampling
- Gathering of data: citizen narratives
- Coding procedure and data analysis
- Assessment, communication and dissemination

Sampling

Much time was dedicated by the research group and the steering committee to deciding and defining which were the most important experiences to be recorded. In order to get to know a context, the basic criterion is to identify the stakeholders and key people. In this case, it is interesting to illustrate how we used Martini and Sequi's model (1988) for identifying the key people to be interviewed according to the criteria of "theoretical sampling". We took into account the participation of citizens who, due to their variety of interests, were representative social protagonists in the local context.

They were chosen both from among the leaders of the so-called *in community* which refers to politicians with local administrative powers and the representatives of social or cultural services, business and commerce, and from the *out community*, involving powerless social minorities, people who help out in informal ways, and minority or opposition politicians. In large urban contexts a valid evaluation must also take account of people belonging to different working categories, and institutional, political or cultural bodies that are active in the area being investigated.

We then had to specifically select information-rich participants (Patton, 2002). Much time was dedicated to identifying people who would have a function of supplying information relevant to the research aims. Defining the key people was a job for both the research team and the steering committee. The latter proved to be especially useful in finding participants with the right characteristics.

Citizen narratives

The story of places and events is also the story of how those places and the relationships established within those places are seen, as such, it is not a search for an *a priori* truth, but for what the interviewee holds to be true. Our interviews therefore examine the places and the lives of the people who inhabit them through their own subjective perceptions.

In this context Legewie (2006) proposed the *narrative interview*, an instrument that combines maximum opportunities for the spontaneous individual expression of the interviewee with the advantages of a grid that consent the expressive qualities of different individuals. It is therefore a very open and yet rigorous form of interview. In Labov's interview procedure (1981) the narrators were invited to explicitly reconstruct their situation and experiences as they saw them at that specific moment. Schütze (1983) clarified that the interview begins with narration as the starting point, and following this explanatory questions relating to that narrative are asked. For Legewie, Schütze's contributions remain important. In Habermas view, an assessment of the following conditions must be carried out:

- Ability of the parties to communicate (language, cognitive and relational ability)
- A shared social environment
- Voluntary participation and a reflexive and aware attitude
- Mutual esteem

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- Motivation to participate in the interview
- Willingness to cooperate

The validity of the interview depends on the way it is conducted. In accordance with the theory of the communicative act, for Legewie the interview must be understandable and must express objectivity (in the reading of the phenomenon), authenticity (in the expression of the interviewee), and correctness (in the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer). It is also clear that the interview should not be maneuvered or guided. Its relevance consists "in its openness to the subjective constructions and complexities of the experiences of the interviewees" (Legewie, 2006, p. 79) .

In our experience with local and organizational contexts, we always adopt a compromise between a post-positivist approach and a constructivist approach. Our research interviews and the analysis of the data are performed in a post-positivist way. When drawing up a community profile, performing organizational analysis, identifying stakeholders and defining key people we emphasize the existing socio-environmental dimensions. Thus the careful preparation of the protocols for individual and group interviews and the triangulation of sources allow the qualitative instrument to determine the truth. The intention to understand the experience narrated and the meanings attributed to it in social, historical, political, cultural, relational and qualitative contexts is an integral part of the constructivist paradigm.

Our approach thus moves between the socio-environmental and relational data of a context and the way in which its inhabitants make sense of it. Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, p.431) are concerned with deviance and empowerment narratives. In our experience with local and organizational contexts, we deal with individual and community narratives. With the aim of recognising the forms of social interactions between the inhabitants of a community and/or the members of an association of a group involved with it, the stories of the events and of individual and collective experiences allowed us to understand the needs and the resources of the social protagonists, as well as those of the context and also allowed us to identify problem areas and strong points, in addition to intervention strategies and aggregation strategies (Hanlin et al, 2008).

Individual and group interviews. According to Hiles and Čermák's definition, "narrative interviews combine a situated occasioned action perspective, together with a view of the individual" (2008, p.151). When intervening in the local contexts, rather than

using an open question along the lines of "tell me about your city, or your experience at school…" or similar, we preferred to use individual and group interviews that rather than being a biographical interview, are topic-focused . These interviews were carried out by expert interviewers or trained, who are able to sustain a conversation in which the interviewee feels at ease in expressing their own thoughts relating to the area investigated

The interviewers are assisted by an interview protocol summarising all of the areas to be discussed. According to Patton (2002), it should be a guide to the interview, containing a number of stimuli and questions, all of which are not necessarily asked. The interviewers are therefore provided with a protocol, to which they refer if the interviewees try to bring up another topic, or gives only a brief description.

It is clear that the preliminary work of the research group and the steering committee aims to illuminate the specific areas and issues to be explored. To exemplify this, we may consider the interview protocol used for investigating the relationship between belonging and planning in a group of young people from the province of Naples (Arcidiacono & Di Napoli, 2009). In this case the interviews were recorded in their entirety and later transcribed. They include: 1) personal biography of interviewees, memories and feelings connected with their place of belonging; 2) representation and perception of the urban space; 3) sense of belonging and integration; 4) connectedness and emotional ties; 5) representation of the place and investigation of its real strengths and weakness; 6) opinions regarding the neighbourhood (these questions aim to explore the level of commitment of young people towards their own community and to what extent they feel responsible for it); 7) plans and personal outlooks (here the focus is on the interaction between the interviewees' personal future and their sense of belonging within the community); 8) outlooks and plans for the town/neighbourhood (this section analyses possible changes occurring in the community, so as to explore how young people perceive these changes, how they participate in them and what obstacles and resources there may be); 9) their wishes for their city, town or village in relation to their own future plans; and finally 10) a suggestion for a motto, a film, a book or a story that would best represent the distinctiveness of their town and its citizens.

Both the group interviews (focus group) and the individual interviews were only conducted following previous contact with the interviewees during which

they expressed their willingness to take part in the research by means of the interview and to participate in the "giving back" meetings. In order to collect the opinions of the interviewees regarding the topic being studied, an interview protocol was elaborated with the aim of facilitating the expression of the interviewees, taking into account the cognitive, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of their frame of reference. To this end, the interviews consisted of introductory questions in order to promote conversation, followed by more in-depth questions allowing for a greater range of expression, exploratory questions on the specific area investigated, transitional questions for passing from one area of investigation to another, and closing questions. It is worth pointing out that each single interview was the responsibility of the researchers, but that the study entrusted the SC with the task of discussing and identifying the specific areas to be examined and planning further additions, changes, or substantial modifications.

Data analysis

The coding is the core procedure of the research group, which discusses and shares procedural decisions. The process of codification, as defined by grounded theory, is a cyclical process, in the sense that in the open, *axial codification phase* the researcher reverts from the raw data back to the concepts, and then returns to the data in the *selective codification phase*.

In the first phase of interpreting the textual material, after reading and codifying only a few interviews, each researcher formulated his/her own suggestion for codification in the form of a memo. Then the research team discussed together the preliminary codifications and reformulated them in such a way that the collected data should help them better understand the situation of the interviewees.

Criteria of trustworthiness. The quality of research depended on the sampling criteria, the recruitment strategy, the skills of the interviewers (they were all trained in interview techniques), careful procedures of data categorisation, and the reflexivity of interviewers and the coding team.

It is also interesting to reflect upon the criteria of validity of the qualitative research, especially in view of *triangulation of sources* and *reflexivity*. In fact the studies were organised in such a way as to ensure triangulation of the sources, procedures, investigators, etc, and the cross-checking of the validity of the collected data.

In order to achieve trustworthiness and dependability (Lincoln & Guba 1985), an important validation criterion is *credibility*, ascertained by focusing on the triangulation of sources and methods, and ensured by prolonged engagement. In a more ecological perspective (Flick, 2004), differences between researchers (regarding their geographical contexts of belonging, and personal motivation) were carefully considered in order to establish the validity of the data. Time and resources were necessary for setting up meetings and productive interactions, and mediating between different components. Access to the various contexts and to the people active in them was the result of the considerable energy and specific know-how invested to this end.

Catherine Stein and Eric Mankowski (2004) speak of developing the procedures of *reflexivity*. This is the process by which the researchers reflect on the impact of their personal history, their set of values, and their social and relational status to the participants. The researcher's subjectivity cannot be ignored. In this sense, *reflexivity* is the opposite of what in traditional basic research is referred to as *objectivity*.

It is however evident that our adherence to the constructivist approach, due to the situational interpretation of the data collected and the importance attributed to reflexivity, were accompanied by the naturalistic criteria for trustworthiness: triangulation of sources, detailed description of procedures for transferability, and external verifications of results (Rappaport, 1990).

 Assessment, Communication and Dissemination

Restitution and civic exhibition. Discussing the findings developed through both group research and the steering committee is an intrinsic part of our approach. An important stage of this approach, which distinguishes it in both method and aims, is to return the findings that the collection of narrative materials and discourses has produced to the inhabitants, who are the protagonists in the social process.

The discussion of information with the protagonists of the local context and the authorities is one of the criteria for evaluating the quality of the research. Richards (2005) calls this stage *member checking*. It is important both in the postpositivist approach, in which it has the function of external validity, and in the constructivist approach, which allows for the expression of the reflexivity of the researcher and the situativity of the participants.

Although this is easy from the organizational point of view, determining the significance of the findings is more complex. The researcher must consider how the data can become an instrument of social action and how it can influence decision-makers.

At the local level, on the basis of what was revealed through the process of "giving back", a group study was carried out to propose a possible intervention based on what was discussed. In this case politicians, traders, shop-keepers and members of associations from the territory were asked to identify the resources for the management of the future planning and possible further partners. The citizens' exhibition is another means for reaching these goals (Legewie, 2003; see also Arcidiacono, & Legewie, 2006; Arcidiacono, Legewie, Mordini, & Dienel, 2006; Arcidiacono & Legewie, 2010).

The evaluation of the research process. The evaluation-meetings constituted an important moment of the research. They aimed to encourage reflection on what emerged from the analysis of the context and from the first meetings with the inhabitants, in order to identify further elements that did not emerge, or that were disputed.

In this case, there was a final evaluation followed two years later, which investigated the activation of individual and collective empowerment and of the difficulties in the interaction of various social components of the community (Procentese, 2006). Research carried out in area of Campi Flegrei, which ended with an exhibition presenting the interviews and photos taken by the inhabitants, in which local authorities and citizens re-examined the data collected regarding critical local zones and possible interventions, was supplemented by follow-up interviews with the research participants two years later. These interviews identified significant issues that had prevented the implementation of a process of change. It was evident that processes of change require suitable and sufficient timescales (they cannot occur in a short period) and that it is necessary for the local population to be supported by specific interventions. It was also highlighted that a concrete implementation of the projects requires the active and attentive involvement of politicians and administrators.

Final Considerations

The current study encourages reflection upon the methodological aspects implicit in research work in and with local communities and upon how it is necessary to understand the multiple aspects which constitute the civic system in order to activate change processes.

In order to enter into relationships with local people and motivate them to undertake the study in collaboration with the researcher, it is necessary to understand their local cultures. In addition to this aspect, the epistemological constructivist perspective imposes the need to identify tools aimed at revealing the construction of meanings attributed to the individual and collective situation within these living contexts. At the same time, the scientific community required us to examine to the criteria of validity of the work carried out.

The constructive nature of the knowledge requires us to recognize that the results of the researcher's work are not only objective, but that they require interpretation in order to give meaning to the perspectives of the study participants.

Therefore, the research process illustrated above, although identifying the phases of the work, also involves the coexistence of the two processes of knowledge and intervention. According to a constructivist perspective, knowledge of the research is not neutral, but this knowledge leads to the construction of meanings that can trigger off processes of social transformation. In that sense the tenor or idiom with which the research is described is fundamental, as there is a risk that it might lead to reductive labeling and can therefore prejudice the whole research process by creating a strong bias. This explains our careful attention to the narrations in discussions through which the interactions and the processes are built. This issue is particularly significant in a process of participative research.

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