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Doing Participatory Research with Families that Live in Poverty: the Process, Potential and Limitations

Abstract

The contribution discusses a practical application of the participatory research approach in the field of poverty. The research was implemented with a high degree of participation, and the collaboration of some families who were living in a marginalized neighbourhood of Reggio Emilia, a small city in Northern Italy.

In the contribution, the potentialities and limits of this approach are presented. In particular, the benefits from the perspectives of all participants are described and analysed. The research process contributed to strengthening the co-researchers' capabilities and raised their consciousness.

In conclusion, a description of the usefulness and added value that participatory research provides to the field of social work and the future of research in this field is given.

Introduction

This paper presents a participatory research project in the field of economic poverty from April 2015 to January 2017.

Participatory research (PR) (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995; Narayan, 1996; Bergold, Thomas, 2012) provides for the collaboration, as co-researchers alongside the professional researcher, of people who are experiencing, or have experienced in their lives the topic under investigation. Although this

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approach is still not widely implemented in Italy (Bertozzi, 2007; Marcu, 2014), the researchers decided to apply it in the poverty field to study its strengths and weaknesses.

This paper sets out to describe the steps of the research implemented by the authors and put in evidence the limits and advantages of using this approach in the study of poverty in the field of social work.

In the implementation of this particular approach, the researchers referred to the Relational Social Work (RSW) method (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2011; Folgheraiter, Raineri, 2012, 2017) because some of its methodological indications could guide them in some fundamental phases of research process.

The first section describes the RSW method and highlights why the researchers used that as the tool to orient themselves in the complexity of the PR process. Subsequently, the contribution presents a brief description of the PR approach and its application in the field of poverty. Later the paper illustrates the research carried out in Reggio Emilia, a small city in the Northern part of Italy, describing the steps followed by the researchers in its implementation.

In the second part the limitations and potentials of the participatory approach in the field of poverty are described, as observed by the researchers and those who followed the entire research process. In particular, the analysis of the benefits from the perspectives of all research parties is presented.

In conclusion, the authors argue that the PR approach can give added value to research in the field of social work.

The participatory research and the relational social work method

The authors and their research group follow the Relational Social Work (RSW) method (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2011; Folgheraiter, Raineri, 2012, 2017) in the professional practice of social work and they have studied its application in the research processes.

In studying the international literature concerning the PR approach (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995; Narayan, 1996; Bergold, Thomas, 2012), the authors found an affinity with the principles and the theoretical basis of the RSW method.

In the implementation of this research, the researchers followed some suggestions of the RSW method that were effective guidelines for them as they wanted to achieve a shared and co-constructed knowledge production.

The RSW method, in the framework of relational sociology (Donati, 2010) and relating to constructive social work (Parton, O'Byrne, 2001), anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 2002, 2012) and anti-discriminatory social work (Thompson, 2006, 2011), focuses on relationships as the basis for change. It is a practice paradigm in which practitioners identify and resolve problems by facilitating coping networks (conceived as a set of relationships between people who are interested in a shared aim) to enhance their resilience and capacities for action at both the individual and collective levels (Folgheraiter, Raineri, 2017). The central idea of RSW is that change emerges from reciprocal help both between people in difficult circumstances, family members, friends and neighbours and between the network and the social worker. The practitioner helps the network develop reflexivity and enhance welfare, and – in turn – the network helps the practitioner understand better how she/he can help, even when the goal is to counter structural inequalities (Folgheraiter, Raineri, 2012). This approach uses humanistic and relational sensitive practices in social services because it emphasizes that users, carers and their relatives should all have a voice and as much power as professionals.

Participatory and inclusive methods of working are engaged in mobilizing and developing support and problem-solving networks. For this reason, RSW is a suitable approach for the researcher who wants to experiment with PR because it gives clear instructions on how to develop participation that focuses on people with resources and experiential knowledge and can support co-constructed knowledge.

The researchers who want to facilitate participatory research processes can find in the indications of this method practical guidelines on how to work with people in each step of the research, so as to support the exchange and contribution of all participants towards a common aim, in this case, a research aim.

The participatory research approach

It is difficult to establish the origins and the development path of participatory research because its diffusion has reached different fields and geographical areas. Some scholars highlight a connection between this approach and action research (Lewin, 1946). Others place its origins in the awareness and emancipation movements of Latin America in the 1970s (Freire, 1970).

According to Deepa Narayan (1996), there are two macro approaches in social research: conventional research and PR. Conventional research is characterized by being created by “experts”, strangers or outsiders to

the situation being investigated, who collect quantitative or qualitative data about, for example, people, communities, organizations or situations, without “objects of the research” being involved in the process. Therefore, an experienced researcher who investigates and explores a subject or a phenomenon, even when it is represented by individuals, communities or groups of people, remains passive. In PR, there is a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the subject. The professional adopts an open and understanding attitude towards those who experience, or have experienced, the researched situations. The expert provides them with useful knowledge and tools to make them active participants in the course of research process. The professional researcher is no longer the one who studies the “research object”. The latter also becomes an active participant.

PR is therefore characterized by being implemented “by” the people who constitute the research target. Therefore, it is not only “about” them (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995; Bourke, 2009; Fleming 2010; Littlechild et al., 2015).

The degrees of participation may differ according to the stages of the research. The concerned persons can choose not to participate in all phases of the research, and each person can decide how much time and energy he/she dedicates to each stage of the process (Faulkner, 2004; Aldridge, 2015). The central objective is the participation of the concerned persons. This also forms the core of the philosophy that underlies this approach. The group of people who consent to take part in the proposed research process will form what we here call the “steering group” (Stevenson, 2014). The fundamental idea is that the subjects, who are traditionally seen as “research objects” in the PR process, take on the role of co-researchers and communicate with researchers at every step (Redmond, 2005; Lushey, Munro, 2014).

Participatory research and the study of poverty

The concept of poverty in sociology does not have a univocal definition. Over the years, different definitions have been applied to this phenomenon. This led to different and varied ways of studying and researching the topic by using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Narayan, 1996). The difficulty of describing the phenomenon led researchers to involve people who have experienced economic deprivation first-hand. Therefore, this area represents an interesting field of application for the PR approach. In the studies of poverty at an international level, there has been extensive development in research using a participatory approach (Brock, McGee, 2002; O'Connor, 2002). The increased attention to actively including the

poor and socially excluded has led to their greater participation in the field of knowledge production (Appadurai, 2006). Involving the poor and socially excluded in the research process leads to a twofold advantage. First, it favours the possibility of escaping from the processes of impoverishment. This is possible by acquiring new knowledge, developing empowerment processes and establishing new bonds and relationships between the involved parties. Second, listening to the voice of those who live in economic difficulty enriches the knowledge of the poverty phenomenon with a new perspective: that of those who experience this phenomenon. This also allows researchers and scholars to look at poverty in new ways (Dovis, Saraceno, 2011). The participation of people who have experienced economic difficulties can help examine aspects of the phenomenon that were previously neglected, and their active involvement in the production of knowledge makes a substantial contribution to rethinking the policies and services aimed at fighting poverty.

In this implementation of the PR approach, it was decided to focus on poverty because the recent challenges in studies in this field at an international level have highlighted how the PR approach can promote both better understanding of the phenomenon and the co-production of knowledge that lays the foundation for processes of change in terms of policies and services.

The process of PR on poverty in Reggio Emilia

In the research presented here, the PR approach was tested in the study of both the impoverishment processes and the aid networks that are locally implemented to help impoverished families respond to different types of needs: food, housing, school and educational support for children, psychological and emotional support.

The chosen territory was a neighbourhood of Reggio Emilia, a small city in Northern Italy. The choice was made because in recent years, this Italian city has decided to invest in community social work processes. The researchers worked in this area as social workers, working daily with families experiencing poverty. This process favoured contact with people who were willing and motivated to accompany the researcher in the research process.

This city of 171345 inhabitants (in 2015) is located in Emilia Romagna, the region with the second lowest level of relative poverty in Italy. In 2016 the families classified as relatively poor represented 10.6% (Istat, 2017) of the families in Italy and in Emilia Romagna they represented 4.5% of the families living in this region. However, starting from 2008, the data confirm

an increase in poverty in large families and in working people (working poor) throughout Italy and also at the regional level.

This has led to an increase in the number of families who turn to social services for help in the city of Reggio Emilia. In fact, in 2015, 33.4%¹ of the beneficiaries of the social services are professionally “workman”, confirming, also in this case, the regional data on the impoverishment of the so-called “working poor”. The data show that 56.4% of beneficiaries (1512) are Italian and 43.6% (1167) come from other countries, mainly Morocco, Albania and Nigeria. In the Reggio Emilia area, immigrant families represent 16.9% of the entire population and the increase in immigrant minors from 2005 to 2015 was 59.9%.

The chosen neighbourhood – with 4352 inhabitants in 2015 – is characterized by a large presence of immigrants (33.2% of the area’s population).² From the data, we can also deduce a strong presence of minors, in a higher percentage than the elderly residents, a trend that goes against the rest of the city. In fact, the city average of minors in 2015 is 18.7%; in the territory under investigation it is instead 22.4%. Furthermore, an in-depth study on information on immigrant minors reveals that, among all minors, immigrant minors account for 20.3% in the city, while in the chosen neighbourhood the percentage rises to 40%.

The chosen neighbourhood is also characterized by a vast network of services, both public and private, aimed at supporting people in economic difficulty. Different, both for legal nature and for mission, are the subjects that pursue this aim and each of them promotes and implements different policies and services.

The presence of large families and immigrant working people, with characteristics of high risk of poverty, as well as concentration of many social services in this area, were the features that made this territory interesting for the purposes of the research.

The initial research purpose

The PR approach gives the researcher the opportunity to define his/her initial research purpose through a query based on a personal thought, or on a specific interest of the entity commissioning the research (Faulkner, 2004). By starting from this, the first purpose is to identify the co-researchers who will support him/her in the investigation process. The first step is

¹ Data source: database of the Social Services of the municipality of Reggio Emilia (accessed: 14.03.2018).

² Data source: database of the Social Services of the municipality of Reggio Emilia (accessed: 14.03.2018).

represented by sharing and redefining the research purpose with the group of co-researchers (Narayan, 1996; Maiter et al., 2012).

The research purpose presented in this paper was defined in cooperation with people involved in the community social work projects and was initially formulated as follows: What aid networks do people in economic difficulties locally create to respond to their different types of need: housing, food, emotional and psychological needs, need for educational support for their children and so on?

The constitution of the steering group and the first steps of the research

The international literature addresses the theme of establishing a group of co-researchers with different points of view (Shaw, 2005; Beresford, 2010; Fleming, 2010). In this research, we chose to involve people who had experienced poverty in different ways. The idea was to invite into the group people who, in different ways, had experienced moments of economic difficulties in their lives, including both staff and volunteers who had worked closely with these people to help them overcome these difficult moments.

The composition of the co-researchers group did not represent all the types of subjects who had experienced poverty present in the territory, as would be found in a statistical representation. Following the recommendations of the RSW method, the selection criterion was the level of motivation (motivation assessment) of each member to invest time and effort in the research. The aim was to mediate between this element and the presence in the group of people who could bring, based on their own experience, different points of view.

The established criteria were threefold: experience of moments of economic difficulty, personal interest in reflecting upon conditions of his/her own life situation, and a desire and ability to deepen the knowledge on that common experience by talking to others.

It was decided to start with individual interviews and the proposal of participation in the co-researchers group. We were trying to reach people who were particularly collaborative and active in community social work projects in marginalized neighbourhoods of the city. Furthermore, the social services providers were asked to propose the initiative to some of the people they helped who were also involved and interested in the topic and able to formulate ideas in a group context. It was also chosen to present the proposal to professionals and volunteers who were active in the fight against poverty in the area. During the individual interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of research and participatory methodology. Not all people to whom the proposal was made agreed to participate.

The research also involved the institution of the City Third Sector, the Solidarity Centre of Reggio Emilia ONLUS, which financed it. Thanks to its support, it was possible to offer economic compensation to the co-researchers who took part in the research (Bergold, Thomas, 2012; Nind, 2014; Aldridge, 2015) in recognition of their time, skills and knowledge (Faulkner, 2004).

Finally, the steering group was composed of seven men and women of different ages and backgrounds, who had experienced a period of economic difficulty, a social worker from the Third Sector body that financed the research and who, for a number of years, followed the community social work processes in the area, a volunteer of the Caritas Service from the local Church, and one social worker from the City Social Service Providers.

The steering group met to define the research process. All the steering group meetings were recorded to track the steps taken and were later analysed by the researchers to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen research approach.

In the initial phase, the meetings were dedicated to introducing the team members, getting to know each other and exploring the research topic. Specifically, the research purpose was redefined in cooperation with co-researchers. Starting from the question posed by the researcher, the proposed purpose of the research was redefined with the members of the steering group. The group suggested aspects or elements that the researchers did not initially consider but were central to those who had experienced the phenomenon of economic poverty. Their feeling that the purpose of the research was also owned by them strengthened their motivation to participate in the proposed project and contributed to a sense of belonging to the group (Folgheraiter, 2011). In addition to what was presented by the researcher, the co-researchers considered the relatively less well-known reasons and events that led individuals to find themselves in situations of economic difficulty. The steering group expressed its willingness to investigate the impoverishment processes. The research purpose was expanded to include, in addition to the support networks established in the area, the study of the stories of people in conditions of economic poverty.

During the following meetings, the researchers explained the PR approach and its different phases to the other members of the steering group, including training; definition of the sample and of the survey area; definition and construction of tools; data collection; and data analysis and report drafting.

The international literature indicates how the group can participate either in every phase or in only some steps of the research (Aldridge, 2015). In the research case presented here, the researchers chose to offer the group the opportunity to participate in the whole research process,

leaving each member free to choose their own level of commitment and participation, with some ultimately participating in some phases and not in others.

In the training phase, the researchers provided the co-researchers with some basic concepts of social research. Thus, all members, regardless of their level of education and professional experience, could actively participate in the research planning and implementation. The purpose of the training was to explain to the steering group members what social research is, how it works, and to present the existing research methodologies and different tools available for data collection. Each method was briefly described with a presentation of its limits and potentialities, considering its concrete implementation in the PR approach and, above all, its contextualization with respect to the research purpose that had been redefined.

This training phase was followed by a discussion among co-researchers about different research tools described. The appropriateness of choosing one tool rather than another based on their practical application to the research field in question was considered. With the relevance to methods of data collection and analysis, a qualitative methodology was chosen because it was better adapted to the research topic and the group characteristics. The discussion then shifted to the available tools within qualitative methodology. Finally, it was decided to use an interview tool. Many members expressed their fear about their ability to conduct this phase of the research. The emergence of these issues made the group to choose the structured interview as the instrument. Having precise and well-defined questions that touched all the defined themes reassured the co-researchers. Furthermore, the co-researchers concluded that this would also help the people interviewed by facilitating their narration, which could be difficult because the subject matter caused them pain, because of linguistic difficulties or even because of feelings of shame maybe, whilst not breaking anonymity.

Defining the research sample

The steering group then defined the research sample. A discussion started between co-researchers on this topic. First, it was decided to focus on economic poverty, despite the realization that there are different forms of poverty, including relational, spiritual, and cultural. It was finally decided that it would not be possible to establish objective criteria based on income or held assets to determine who should be interviewed. Finally, the group identified the family unit and not the individual as the analysis unit.

It was decided to focus on families that showed signs of economic difficulty by asking for help and support and that had a caregiver burden.

As “caregiver burden”, the co-researchers defined families with a minor, an elderly person or a person with disabilities.

To find contacts, the steering group chose to interview people they knew and asked the services operating in the area to act as an intermediary in contacting families with which they had worked.

The main contacts came from a priest who had been the local parish priest for many years, from the social service providers and from direct acquaintances of the co-researchers. Furthermore, once the interviews were conducted, some family units provided contact information for neighbours or acquaintances. In total, 43 families were contacted for the initial availability request. Of these, 17 were not included in the sample due to their characteristics or because they were not willing to collaborate in the research. Therefore, 26 families were contacted with a second telephone call.

The construction of the research tool

The interview guide was created with the co-researchers who had personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation and could suggest thematic areas and topics that were unknown to or underrated by the researcher.

The steering group’s objective was to draft the interview and begin to identify the significant issues to be explored. Following the indications of the RSW method, the brainstorming methodology was applied. Each member was invited to present, thinking of his/her own knowledge or his/her personal experience, some topics that s/he considered interesting to investigate. The role of the researchers at this stage was to keep the group focused on the goal of the jointly shared research. Once the topics were defined, they were reordered by thematic areas. Thus, five interview sections were created:

- a section dedicated to exploring the current family composition, work and housing situations of the family;
- a second section containing questions on the impoverishment process;
- a section dedicated to surveying the aid requested and the aid received;
- a section dedicated to investigating the children’s needs and experience, when they were present; and
- finally, a section containing questions about their future and expectations.

The co-researchers then identified questions to be included in the interview guide for each section. It is important to note that for the research

in question, this step occurred in a participatory way, specifically with the collaboration of families who had gone through or were going through periods of economic difficulty and with family members of foreign origin. This avoided the risk of the presence of judging or devaluing questions in the interview guide or putting the interviewee in a state of shame or embarrassment. The way in which the question is asked is fundamental because it can convey attitudes of investigation or evaluation instead of acceptance and understanding (Rogers, Kinget, 1965). Additionally, the researcher tends to use words that may not be understood by the interviewed people. In the case presented here, fellow residents or people who frequent the same places and experience the same problems suggested terms and expression that the interviewees would understand better. Additionally, the group decided to include some inputs or stimuli that the interviewer could use to help the interviewee express him/herself.

Conducting interviews, collaborative analysis and data dissemination

The steering group decided that interviews would be conducted by co-researchers who had experienced first-hand moments of economic difficulty. It was thought that this would be more effective because the subjects included in the sample would relate with people who shared similar life experiences and would feel greater closeness and confidence. This sense of being fully heard and understood had the effect of making people open up more easily and share more detailed information. Additionally, the closeness between the subjects led to a reduction in the fear of judgement that can occur between the researcher and the interviewee (Littlechild et al., 2015; Lushey, Munro, 2014).

The steering group met at the end of the collection and transcription phases of the interviews. This meeting was dedicated to reflecting on and sharing the interview collection. The co-researchers shared the difficulties they experienced and the new awareness they reached.

The participatory analysis phase occurred within the steering group. During the group meeting, each co-researcher was asked to report the patterns that had most impressed him/her while reading the interview transcripts.

From this first exchange, four macro patterns emerged that everyone considered to be the areas discussed by all interviewees. For each of these patterns, the group identified sub-patterns by reading and reporting to the group parts of the interviews that they had underlined and “labelled” during the individual reading phase. During this sharing, the co-researchers enriched the codification of texts with descriptive and interpretive comments. In the participatory analysis, it was difficult to keep these levels separate,

as the co-researchers not only enriched the description with comments but often jumped to the next phase of a proposal for concrete actions aimed at change. In this phase, therefore, the descriptive, interpretative and evaluative analyses were superimposed and intertwined (Aldridge, 2015; Ponzoni, 2016; Stevenson, 2014). Furthermore, at the time of the exchange, the co-researchers enriched the comments to the interviews, sharing reflections and insights drawn from their own life experiences. The co-researchers who conducted the interviews were invited to share comments and reflections that emerged during the interviews, the meetings with the families and the visits to their homes.

Four particularly significant patterns emerged from the interviews and were highlighted by the co-researchers: the profound sense of loneliness experienced by families in economic difficulties; precarious work and housing discomfort; the absence of perspectives for the future; and the significant role played by the church in supporting the excluded. In particular, as stated in the conclusions, the idea that families in economic difficulty have of the concept of help was defined. The co-researchers chose to report the same analysed and reported data to all of the social workers and volunteers engaged in the fight against poverty in the city. For everyone, it was an opportunity to discuss and share the policies and services in the poverty field.

Limitations and potentials of PR in researching poverty

This second part of the paper reports the observations made by the researchers and co-researchers following the implementation of the PR approach. The international literature has extensively studied and reflected on the strengths and areas on which attention must be paid in the implementation of participatory research (Healy, 2001; Brock, Mc Gee, 2002; Turner, Beresford, 2005; Braye, McDonnell, 2012; Aldridge, 2014). The researchers, during the implementation of research presented here, have paid attention to several critical aspects to analyse the added value and the limits of a participatory research in the study of poverty in the social work field. It was possible to test its usefulness in acquiring knowledge about the phenomenon of poverty and observe the effects produced with the participation of co-researchers and the interviewed families.

The reflections made within the steering group at the end of the process highlighted some of its limits with respect to a conventional approach.

The chosen research approach required more time, and its implementation placed the researchers in some difficult situations without a simple resolution. The first was represented by the search for funding to

give the co-researchers some economic remuneration. This was followed by the search for people who shared the research purpose and who were available to be part of the steering group. An additional commitment was also required to manage group dynamics, as well as mediate during the phases in which decisions had to be made. Additionally, the data collection phase lasted for several months, from May to September 2016, and the number of interviews collected was lower than what could have been collected if there had not been the need to accompany the co-researchers in the process of contacting and dealing with the sample families.

Despite these limitations in the implementation, this approach led to a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon being investigated and identified directions for change. These objectives were achieved thanks to the implementation of several steps:

- the involvement of the co-researchers made it possible to reach families otherwise difficult to contact: they were not known to the local services because many of them do not ask for help because of shame or distrust;
- the redefinition of the research purpose by the steering group made it possible to investigate issues that would otherwise not be considered priorities by researchers (for example, the patterns about projects for the future or children's suffering);
- the participatory nature of the tool made it possible to insert questions at the core of the addressed patterns and to ask questions that were understood by the families, thus avoiding technical and devaluing language;
- the data collection conducted by co-researchers who had lived life experiences close to those of the sample families made the latter share more and overcame that sense of shame they could have felt if interviewed by professionals;
- the choice of a high level of participation, opting for the involvement of the co-researchers during the analysis and interpretation of the results, made it possible to achieve a deeper understanding of what was collected;
- during the journey, during the exchanges within the steering group, and in the collection and analysis phases of the interviews, it was possible to collect useful data for a deeper understanding of the poverty phenomenon;
- every phase of the project showed the interweaving of the research plan with the action plan: all the members of the steering group, including researchers, acquired new insights and knowledge; and
- empowerment processes and relationships of reciprocity arose due to the contact that occurred between co-researchers and interviewees.

The present research provided interesting food for thought to some of the parties involved in the process of combating poverty, who will be able to question effectively policies and practices in the fight against this phenomenon in the city. Thanks to the involvement of the co-researchers, it was possible to reflect on a different form of aid and support for poor families. What the steering group wanted to highlight was the idea that what is perceived as true support by those on the margins is not material help but the creation of relationships and ties within the society from which they often feel excluded. The interviews gathered and the personal and professional life experiences of the co-researchers have unveiled how important it is to be listened to and welcomed. At this point, however, it is assumed that what the steering group defined as the need to be “considered” was partly answered through research conducted using a participatory approach. This approach made the co-researchers feel like active protagonists of the research project, a reflection on and heightened understanding of the phenomenon of poverty that concerns them closely, thus allowing them to express their needs, desires and opinions on the topic. Additionally, the interviewed families had the opportunity to talk freely and to be listened to and understood, and in some cases, they felt “considered” and were occasionally supported or guided by the interviewers. For these observed effects, PR offers elements of change concerning action, at least in the experiences of those who participate, in this complex and unpredictable process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what the authors have observed throughout the process leads them to affirm that PR can be a suitable approach both to read poverty as seen by those who have direct experience of the phenomenon, and to foster processes of empowerment and change.

PR, in its different fields of application, addresses empowerment as both a goal and a natural consequence of the process of involving the concerned persons (Warren, 2007). By giving part of the power, usually in the hands of the researcher, to the subjects involved in the investigation, the perspective of the research is reversed or expanded.

During the PR process the researchers experimented the concept of empowerment and led to the realization of what Folgheraiter (2011) calls “relational empowerment”, referring to the coping process which is activated in the helping relationship in the social work field. This is defined as the mutual empowerment. It occurs when the professional and the people involved in the situation of interest meet and connect. Both parties

make their own skills available and, in doing so, the empowerment process occurs not only in the subjects, who are defined as weak or vulnerable, but also in those who hold power. In the PR, the researchers knew that they could not know the matter under investigation as well as the people directly involved knew it. In the research process, dialogue and an exchange with the subjects led to true knowledge of the phenomenon. Thus, by including co-researchers in the investigation, the researchers experienced an empowerment process acquiring knowledge and data they previously ignored. During the research process, a reciprocal dynamic has been generated between co-researchers and researchers. What many authors (Kidd, Kral, 2005) underline is that from this union, new knowledge emerges. This occurred in the research planning process presented here. Knowledge was produced before data analysis: from the exchange and the comparison between the parties involved, new elements emerged in every phase of the participation process.

For these reasons, the field of social work could gain many advantages not only in terms of study and research, but to foster processes of change and dynamics of relational empowerment.

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