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Difficulties Faced by Researchers in Participatory Practices: An Example of Research with Roma People

Abstract

The number of socially excluded localities and persons residing in them has significantly increased in the Czech Republic over the last ten years. Socially excluded localities have their specific characteristics and environment that very often concern exclusively the Roma localities. The participatory research aims to gain access to the locality followed by the establishment of communication and cooperation with local residents. These relationships, however, show a number of difficulties that in this contribution are reconstructed based on the ethnographic research conducted in a socially excluded locality inhabited by the Roma community. Some partial recommendations have been formulated for accessing the field. These are recommendations relating to the individual characteristics of the researcher, the specific characteristics of the environment and the characteristics of the target group (the Roma community).

Introduction

Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain, Mike Kesby (2010) state that the participatory paradigm becomes one of the leading paradigms in the social and environmental sciences. From a practical point of view, it is possible to say that participatory research is based on the collaboration of a researcher and “a non-academic participant” such as communities, informal groups

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of patients, interest groups, non-governmental organizations, etc. So, it is not the methods but the researchers' attitude that can be considered a key element of participatory research (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995).

In such understood participatory approach we can encounter a number of difficulties. Within participatory approaches, we can distinguish four categories of limitations (Aldridge, 2015). The first category is represented by the limits resulting from the fact that the researcher enters the research environment as a specialist from the outer environment (Minker, 2000). The second limit is the lack of academic standardization (Walker, Schratz, Egg, 2008), which would be linked to participatory research. The third limit is the high dependency of research findings on the researcher's abilities (Aldridge, Dearden, 2013; Barton, Papen, 2010). And the fourth and last category of limits is the limits concerning the distribution of power in participatory research (see also: Goodson, 2013).

These difficulties can also be in a dynamic interaction with the target group to which the participatory approach is applied (in the case of the presented research on the Romany living in a socially excluded locality). Renata Weinerová (2014) describes that there are manifestations of a lack of concern, cultural superiority, distance, underestimation, or supremacy towards the Roma people by the majority population. In fact, a choice of participatory approach with the Roma people seems to be the best possible solution, since the participatory approach deals with issues of domination, oppression, or alienation (Creswell et al., 2007).

The chapter aims to identify and interpret the difficulties that arise within the dynamic interaction of the participatory approach and the selected target group, the Roma people. In the contribution, we will first address the social exclusion of the Romany in the Czech Republic, then the methodology of the presented research and then directly the difficulties identified in the research. In the framework of discussion and conclusions we will propose recommendations related to the implementation of participatory research in a socially excluded area with the Roma community.

Social exclusion¹ of Roma citizens in the Czech Republic

The contemporary discourse of social exclusion focuses on the social conditions from which exclusion arises, on the processes through which exclusion occurs, and on the situation of such excluded persons. The second level of the contemporary debate on social exclusion is the weakening of social cohesion, and social disintegration, which are conceived as the consequences of social exclusion from society (Mareš,

¹ We refer to general social exclusion; however, the paper focuses on the Roma people, therefore specification of their number is also provided.

Sirovátka, 2008). Thus the concept of social exclusion does not emphasize the individual “failure” of social participants, but also works with structural factors (Růžička, Toušek, 2014).

Social exclusion is strongly associated with ethnicity in the Czech Republic; according to estimates, there are approximately 150–300 thousand (SIRK, 2015) Roma people living in the Czech Republic.² At the same time, one third to half of them live in an unfavourable situation, or are socially excluded (i.e. living in socially excluded localities, GCARM/RVZRM, 2017; SIRK, 2015), which is a very high figure, especially provided that social exclusion tends to be passed down from one generation to another, thus deepening the inadequate situation of a household (Skupnik, 2007).

In the Czech Republic, between 2006 (GAC, 2006) and 2015 (GAC, 2015), there has been a large increase in the number of socially excluded localities and the number of people living in them.³ There has also been a rise in the number of persons living in substandard housing.⁴ In 2006, there were 310 socially excluded localities with a population of 60–80 thousand people, especially the Roma people. The data from 2015 indicate an increase in the number of localities to 606 (an increase of 95%) with the number of persons living in them to be 95–115 thousand (an increase of 44%). Social exclusion changes its predominantly urban character, and the localities disintegrate into a larger number of smaller units (the average population of such localities dropped from 271 to 188 persons).

In the case of applying a participatory approach with the Roma people in socially excluded localities, it is necessary to take into account that social exclusion is an element limiting the possibility of participation.⁵ The Roma communities are closed to non-Roma/ “strangers” (e.g. Sutherland, 2014), so establishing relationships and cooperation is fairly difficult – there is a distrust of system players (authorities, political sphere – lack of participation in elections); the primary role is focused on securing basic living needs. Precisely for this reason a participatory research was conducted to give a “voice” to those, whose possibility of participation is limited. In accordance with Jo Aldridge (2015), we believe that a participatory approach is a highly desirable in case of disadvantaged, discriminated, excluded, and marginalized groups.

² Government Council for the Affairs of the Roma Minority reports 245 thousand Roma people (GCARM/RVZRM, 2017).

³ The Roma people are not the only residents of socially excluded localities.

⁴ Substandard housing can take different forms – it concerns the technical condition of the building/flat, the size of the floor area per person, short-term contractual relationships, the no housing situation – e.g. temporary stay with relatives.

⁵ Social exclusion is understood in this contribution as the exclusion of an individual from the mainstream society, that is, an insufficient participation in different areas of social life (Mareš, 2004).

Research methodology

Research territory

The research territory is one of the socially excluded localities in a city in the Czech Republic. The locality was chosen for its spatial exclusion. The local population formed a closed group and among other localities has a reputation as one of the hardest to live in, due to its location and the technical condition of the properties (GAC, 2006; Kvasnička, 2010).

There are 7 buildings in the locality, each contains 4 housing units. At the time of the researcher's (Marek Mikulec) stay (9/2012 – 10/2014) in the locality, only two properties were not inhabited, one serving as a community centre, and the other in a state of disrepair and walled up for many years. If the researcher doesn't count himself, the lowest amount of people living in one flat was 2, the highest number was 14; altogether approximately 120 people lived in the locality.

Research design

As this socially excluded locality was characterized by specific features distinguishing it from the majority of society the ethnographic approach to research was chosen. Ethnography is a holistic study of socio-cultural contexts, processes and meanings within the cultural system; it is also a flexible and creative process of discovering, making conclusions, and continuing research to obtain empiric validity (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography can also be called the interaction process of "learning episodes", which has an open end (as opposed to the experiment). An ethnographer enters the field in a position of a learning child, getting to know things through all the levels of his/her being, whether it is through thinking, feeling, or acting. His/her insight is gained by gradual growing into the research environment; a describing observer is turning into a participating observer (DeWalt, DeWalt, 2002; Kawulich, 2005).

All these key characteristics of this approach seemed to be adequate to explore a distinct subculture; the researcher's task is to get to know one of the elements/features of this subculture, specifically the life situation of its residents, in the terms used by the members of the researched community (Loučková, 2010: 239). Typically for ethnographic study only a general research topic was defined and it was expressed in the question on "How do people in a socially excluded locality perceive and interpret their life situation?"

Data collection and analysis

The research data came from participant observations (and written records of the researcher's activities, etc. in the researcher's logbook) during a long-term stay in the locality (September 2012 – September 2014) and then using in-depth interviews with 26 communication partners⁶, the residents of a socially excluded site.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The thematic narrative analysis is focused on content and its categorization, but at the same time allows for the discovery of the “new” in the data (Riessman, 2008). The narrative is defined as specific, separate stories that are arranged around the personality who constructs the plot. In these stories, I was able to identify four basic themes (housing, social relationships, employment, finances) that relate to the research questions and encapsulate other themes. The significance of these themes was subsequently validated by participant observations. The identified themes were later saturated with other research data, i.e. participant observations and in-depth interviews. The theory, which must precede the thematic narrative analysis, I gained through my stay in the locality and growing into its structure, in particular through the knowledge of the life stories of my “primary” communication partners (Riessman, 2008).

Research results

As a part of the research, the environment of a socially excluded locality has proved to be very specific and closed (to the outside world). It was an environment that faced oppression from the part of the majority society, but also an environment where certain cultural habits related to the Roma ethnics, such as celebration of holidays, funerals, christenings, etc., persisted. Within the results of the research, it can be accentuated that the oppression due to ethnicity, i.e. belonging to the Roma ethnic group, is the strongest factor of their social exclusion, which could serve as an argument supporting the anti-discrimination approach in social work (Mikulec, 2016).

⁶ Out of a total of 26 communication partners, 24 were in the age category from 16 to 50 years old, and 2 were over 50 years old. Minors younger than 15 are also mentioned in the notes of the field log, but no semi-structured interview was completed with them; they were informal or unstructured interviews, on which I subsequently took notes.

Difficulties of participatory practices with Roma people

In order to identify the difficulties described in this contribution its authors used the data that had been collected by one of them in the above described ethnographic research. This time they approached the data with the same method- a thematic narrative analysis; however the focus of the secondary analysis was different. We understood difficulty as a certain annoyance or inconvenience that happened during the research.

We identified the following categories of difficulties: conflict of roles, difficulties concerning a researcher's interventions into everyday activities of community members and difficulties in defining boundaries of a researcher's participation in the community daily routines. The data presented comes from his experience in a socially excluded locality, which was recorded in a logbook. The data are supplemented by direct quotes from the research diary that the researcher kept during his stay in the locality.

Conflict of roles

The role of a researcher in participatory ethnographic research is a dual one: the role of a researcher in the given environment, but also the role outside this research environment, such as the role of a family member or a student. These roles may be in a particular conflict and there is a need of balance between them.

Conflict of roles between a family member and a researcher

The role of a researcher in a socially excluded locality may be linked to concerns from his family.

The role of a researcher has undergone great changes and I am aware that my stay in the locality was not easy for my parents, nor for my extended family... I had to talk to my parents about the fact that my spending of more time in the locality would become a bit more complex. When I was just about to say that I rented a flat in the area and was going to move there, the evening TV news had just at that moment started to report that two Roma men had attacked someone somewhere ... – so I made a decision to leave the news for the next day. My parents' reaction was fearful and they started discouraging me and pushing to stop the research (A quote from the researcher diary). In meeting of the roles of a family member and a researcher, we can illustrate the meeting of a discourse of the researcher and a discourse of the majority society. This creates a certain tension between the researcher's positionality in the Roma community and in his family, which at this point represents the opinion of majority society about the danger of staying in a socially excluded area (Mikulec, 2016: 67–68).

The environment of socially excluded localities is in fact a priori perceived by people from outside as dangerous and risky.

And this was also the way my family members perceived it and started acting "on my own good". However, over time, when I was still doing all right there, and after they met Láďa, a friend of mine, and a key person for my research, the tensions gradually decreased (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 68).

There are many references in scientific literature that ethnographic research places high demands on a researcher (see: HajdÁková, 2013; Pollard, 2009; Soukup, 2014) but the claims made on his family are not mentioned much in the literature. The researcher also describes how he dealt with the demands that the research placed on him. It is a sophisticated management of information handling.

Apart from that the management of information was implemented too, which wasn't psychologically easy for me. The management of information by the participatory researcher is a tactic implemented in the relationship between him and his family or people who care of him to keep them distanced from the unexpected events in the research process. As I really wanted to have the same authentic conditions in the locality, even those miserable situations, there were a lot of precarious moments, financial problems, hunger, and so on during my stay onsite. I was strongly filtering what I was sharing, telling them only positive news which wasn't easy... For instance, when I was experiencing these situations when I had not eaten for a few days because there was no money – neither my neighbours nor me had enough money to buy food. There was nothing left to bring to a pawnshop. When I phoned my family, I did not share this with them. When I was asked what I had eaten that day, I made something up, even though at that moment my stomach was really growling (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 68).

Conflict of roles between a researcher and a PhD student during the research

The role of a researcher in an ethnographic research is associated with everyday presence in the research environment. If the researcher is a student at the same time, the necessity of daily presence comes into a certain conflict with the necessity to be present at the workplace or at school, i.e. in the environment outside the research environment, both spatially and culturally... The role of a student may have two possible impacts, the first is to keep a certain distance from the research environment.

The role of PhD student helped me a lot in the research; all the discussions with my consultant and my supervisor, discussions with my colleagues in the office, talks with other colleagues helped me to reflect on the processes in the field and to maintain some detached view and distance. It meant not only expert advice, but also a certain form of mental hygiene and supervision to me (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 69).

Certain operational conflicts associated with the interaction of the role of a student and the inhabitant of the locality represent the second impact.

The example of a conflictual situation was when I had to leave a lecture earlier, because we (in the community) managed to get some coal, and people in the locality managed to arrange for a car. What was more frequent was that some parties took longer than expected and I needed to be at the faculty the next day (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 69).

Difficulties concerning the researcher intervention into everyday activities of community members

As a part of an ethnographic research, a researcher must cope with a series of difficulties, especially in situations where he/she was deciding whether to intervene in given situations, and how or whether not to interfere with them. The researcher often comes into conflict with the need to choose between his normative expectations and their possibilities in the research environment. An example of decision-making on ethnographic research interventions in a socially excluded locality may be the acceptance of teenagers' smoking.

Everyday difficulties, for example, included how to approach smoking teenagers. Their parents seemed to know that they were smoking but the teenagers would not smoke in front of them. Was I supposed to let them smoke in my flat when they managed to sneak a cigarette from their parents? Although I disagreed with them smoking at their age (in this case, 13 and 14 years old) (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 81).

The second example may be the researcher's opinion on skipping classes.

I kept meeting children in the area who were supposed to be at school. But the longer I stayed in the locality; I learned that this issue had its explanation, whether legitimate or rational. In the case of the girls absences, the reason was that they had to babysit their younger siblings, for example, when the father needed to leave to work in a slag heap and the mother ran errands at the authorities, or when there was no money, school children were rather kept at home, or the parents did not have enough money to purchase school supplies required by the school, etc. In case of some boys from the locality, it was also common that they were taken to a heap to help make some extra money (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 81).

The difficulties that have arisen appear to be the most burning at the time of entering the research environment (Mikulec, 2016).

This difficulty was felt at the initial stage of the research. The deeper I got immersed into the community the more I understood. Finally it was clear for me I was not there to tell children to go to school, but to understand why they did not go there; or perhaps I could try to get them a little more excited about school by tutoring (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 74).

Another category of difficulties was associated with the poverty that the locals had to cope with every day. Under this situation, the researcher had to choose between his own comfort and the fulfilment of basic living needs of his neighbours.

A situation when I had my last 200 CZK (approx. 7.3 EUR⁷), knowing I had to make ends meet for several (3–4) days. But when my neighbours knocked on my door telling me that their children were starving, I gave them the money. They asked for a bigger sum when they lacked several thousand crowns to pay for the rent and if they failed to

⁷ Based on an exchange rate in Q2 2015: 27.38 CZK = 1 EUR

do so in full, their lease would be terminated, resulting in eviction. If I had decided not to interfere with the events in the locality, and this was significant intervention, they would most likely not have managed to put the rest of money together, failing to pay the rent and thus faced the termination of their lease. They would have to move out...a family with seven children (A quote from the research diary, Mikulec, 2016: 81–82).

Difficulties in defining boundaries of a researcher participation in the community daily routines

In the context of a research environment a researcher's task is to establish relationships with the locals. They have certain expectations from her/him as from their neighbour. This positionality creates difficulties in defining boundaries between him/her and locals. An example of the above mentioned can be a contact with the police, a situation into which a researcher in a socially excluded location can easily get (Ryška, 2010; Stockölová, Ghosh, 2013). Matoušek (2004: 70) states that: the objective that leads a researcher into a dangerous area sooner or later also leads to contact with the police. Legislation in the Czech Republic, however, does not specify any special modalities for conducting research.

An example of the above mentioned can be the following situation described by the researcher in his researcher's diary (Mikulec, 2016: 82).

I was asked by some local boys who acquired an old Škoda Felicia car but did not have a driver's license, whether I would take them to a slag yard with this car. The rear seats were removed and more than 1.5 tons of slag was loaded in the car. Besides me as a driver, there were three other persons in the car, one sitting in the passenger seat, and the other two sitting on the slag. We were so overloaded that we were scratching the road with the back of the car all the way there. I drove carefully, so we did not expose other road users to any danger. But if we were pulled over by the police, it would probably not have been okay.

Even in an environment seemingly more prone to contact with the police, however, safety and ordinariness prevails. As stated by Matoušek (2004: 74), "in a dangerous area life is still dominated by ordinariness, and safe and common situations prevail."

Discussion and conclusion

Participatory approaches are becoming one of the leading research paradigms, bringing a number of positive aspects to the research, such as "giving voice", increasing trust among research participants and researchers, and empowering of research participants (see e.g. Aldridge, 2015). Within the participatory approach, there are several categories of limitations. The

first one is that a researcher enters the research environment as an expert coming from an external environment (Minker, 2000), the second is the lack of academic standardisation (Walker, Schratz, Egg, 2008), the third is the dependence of research findings on the researcher's abilities (Aldridge, Dearden, 2013; Barton, Papen, 2010) and the fourth is the distribution of power in participatory research (see also: Goodson, 2013).

Within the research, three thematic categories of difficulties were identified, based on the experience of researchers in ethnographic research with Roma people in a socially excluded locality mostly populated by the Roma minority, thus we have fulfilled the defined goal of this chapter. As part of the thematic categorisation of difficulties the following categories emerged: conflict of roles, difficulties concerning the researcher intervention into everyday activities of community members, and difficulties in defining boundaries of researcher participation in the community daily routines.

The difficulties described by us correspond with those described in the literature. The role conflicts described by us are the direct consequence of the role of the expert coming from the external environment; difficulties concerning the researcher intervention into everyday activities of community members and difficulties in defining boundaries of researcher participation in the community's daily routines are a direct consequence of a lack of academic standardization and distribution of power in (relationships in) participatory research. How a researcher copes and deals with the described difficulties is always based on his or her abilities.

All the above mentioned difficulties interact with a specific target research group (the Roma community) and the specific environment of a socially excluded locality (see above). We conclude with implications for the realization of ethnographic research in socially excluded localities. They result from the analysis of the researcher's experience presented in this chapter and are defined with the reference to individual characteristics of a researcher, the characteristics of a research environment as well as the characteristics of a target group (the Roma community).

The individual characteristics of a researcher

A research environment must be entered with reflection upon bias, fears, and an ethnocentric perspective. The Roma people are good observers of non-verbal communication and have a very developed sense of "reading" the personality/mood of their communication partner (Sutherland, 2014). Reflecting upon a researcher's own position in the world under research and insightful reading communication partners' interpretations of the researcher help to make communication between both parties fluent and a research possible.

The specific characteristics of the environment

Every environment in which socialization takes place has its own specifics, which may differ from the researcher's frame of reference. These includes, for example, social relationships (family, community, informal help networks; customs, traditions, and their transformations), the perception of system players (authorities, police), and the concept of time, housing, work, and finances. The choice of the gatekeeper with high position in such unique and extremely complex community seems to be a good solution in the entering phase of a research.

The characteristics of the target group

It is necessary to reflect that the marginalized status of the Roma people in Czech society has also been paired up with changes related to the system level, which have real impacts on households. These include, for example, changes in family relationships and the formerly traditionally defined roles of men and women. The current Roma household/family is now less cohesive (e.g., the number of single mothers increases); in the context of reducing the number of residents living in a given flat, often stipulated by the lease contracts with local landlords, the Roma family can no longer fulfil the role of a rescue network for its members. The changes also concern traditionally structured and divided male and female roles that, despite their transformation, show persistence in certain rules. The division of male and female roles in the Roma family also has an impact on their cooperation with a researcher. If the researcher is a woman, her primary communication partner in a Roma family is also a woman, and dealing with a man has a clearly defined framework. For example, if a man is at home alone, there should be no "strange" woman present; the same applies to a male researcher, he should not be left alone with a woman in the household.

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