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Dilemmas in Participatory Approaches to Social Work

Abstract

Both the community work and the participatory research can be understood as approaches used in social work that increase participants' capacity to improve their lives and facilitate social change for the benefit of disadvantaged groups. In participatory approaches, dilemmas can arise, which are defined as a situation where a social worker faces two mutually exclusive choices, which he/she has to choose from. We also perceive dilemmas in both approaches as emerging in the interaction with the systems of values. The paper presents the findings from two research projects whose objectives included the identification of dilemmas from two areas, namely from community work and from a participatory approach to homeless mothers. The dilemmas are divided into two categories; from the perspectives of community workers and from a researcher's point of view. To interpret data we used the theory of empowerment and the typology of power by the authors John French and Bertram Raven (1960). As part of the discussion, the paper provides an overview of dilemmas in participatory approaches to social work research, on the example of the above-mentioned projects.

Introduction: social work, social justice and participation

Social work is a field based on values. The emergence of dilemmas is directly related to conflicts of interests and interactions with the systems of values – personal, social, legislative, professional, organization values and other levels of values (Mátel, 2012). Sarah Banks (2006: 6) defines values as “particular types of belief that people hold about what is regarded

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as worthy or valuable". Social workers are assumed to embrace a core set of values, most uniquely for social work for commitment to social justice (Banks, 2006). Social justice has, according to Derek Clifford and Beverley Burke (2008: 123–124) these components: fair distribution based on equal opportunity, limitation of institutional discrimination and oppression, equality of people to use opportunities without discrimination and equality as the end position, with goods and services shared fairly between individuals and groups.

The participatory approaches aim to introduce, based on a social justice value, formulas that allow participation to the groups with which unequal distribution crosses with insufficient recognition. The actual term participation means sharing something, participation or involvement in something (Albridge, 2015). S. Kindon, R. Pain and M. Kesby (2010) understand participatory approaches as the support of the "voice" of participants and the increase of their "power". Participatory approaches to social work are generally based on collaboration between a worker and "a non-academic player" (communities, interest groups etc.) (Taylor et al., 2004). Therefore, it is not a method that can be considered a key element of the participatory approach, but the approach of workers/researchers (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995). The above themes do raise ethical requirements. Social workers can thus experience dilemmas that, according to David Hardcastle et al. (2004: 22), occur when "two ethical dilemmas require equal but opposite behaviour and the ethical guidelines do not give clear directions or indicate clearly which ethical imperative to follow".

Description of implemented participatory research projects

The aim of this contribution is to identify, analyze and interpret dilemmas that emerge from two participatory research projects; the first is an action research of a community work¹ by community workers in so-called socially excluded localities of the Moravian-Silesian Region, and the second one is participatory research carried out within the framework of the dissertation project entitled: *Reintegration² of Single Mothers from Shelters into Permanent Forms of Housing*.

Action research within community work was carried out with assistance of six community workers who worked in three localities labelled in the

¹ Hauteur and Henderson (2008) define community work as a "participatory approach to collective problems".

² Reintegration in terms of housing means finding a permanent home with a tenancy relationship with the homeowner outside socially excluded localities and unstable housing (such as housing in shelters or hostels) or overcrowded flats.

large-scale research financed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs as socially excluded (Čada, 2015). For the purpose of this ministerial research, locations with more than 20% concentration of persons living in inadequate conditions were considered excluded (indicated by the number of recipients of the State provided living allowance) and inhabiting a physically or symbolically delimited space (indicated by external identification). The action research was understood as a systematic collection of information and its reflection in order to achieve social change (Smith, 2007) and to implement reflexive practice and/or reflective decision-making (Winter, Munn-Giddings, 2011).

During 2014–2017, researchers regularly were meeting with community workers, reflecting on their work in localities, and providing support for planning of the social workers' next steps. In addition to this activity, six focus groups of community workers were organized to concentrate on the topics that were more commonly brought up during meetings. One of the topics was the dilemmas of community workers. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and open coding was co-created by academics and community workers. Based on the analysis, categories of dilemmas were defined.

The research question of *Reintegration of Single Mothers from Shelters into Permanent Forms of Housing* was to find out: "How is the intersectionality of oppression manifested in narratives of single mothers with experience of living in a homeless shelter, and how do these manifestations affect the process of reintegration into permanent housing?" A qualitative research strategy, in particular a participatory approach, was used in the research to implement the research. The research project was carried out during years 2014–2016 in collaboration with two peer researchers. Peer researchers participated in all stages of research. The selection of communication partners was carried out according to the rules of the snowball sampling. The research was attended by 5 mothers reintegrated into permanent housing, 18 mothers alternating stays in homeless shelters and 8 mothers leaving the homeless shelter. As part of the research, six focus groups were organized. The data was analyzed using Kathy Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory. The data related to research dilemmas was obtained from the researcher's logbook, which was maintained by the researcher throughout the time of the research and where she recorded both the course of the research and the experienced dilemmas.

Using the partial data from two different projects, we consider it important to highlight certain differences (different target groups, etc.); however we consider the identified dilemmas as comparable in the context of the participatory nature of both projects.

Dilemmas in participatory research

Based on data comparison obtained from both studies, we found out that the central part of most of the identified dilemmas was interpretation and understanding of the concept of power. We see power as always based on mutual relationships, when a powerful individual or group influences over the views, attitudes and behaviour of others (Lukas, Smolík, 2008). That is why we were looking for an interpretive tool that would allow us to categorize and interpret the results of our research in a new way. In designating the categories of dilemmas (the summary of these are presented in tab. 1) and their interpretation, we worked with the types of social power and different processes of social influence according to J. French and B. Raven (1960). They defined these five types of power:

- reward power based on ability to mediate rewards;
- coercive power based on ability to punish;
- legitimate power based on legitimate right to prescribe behaviour for him/her;
- referent power based on identification;
- expert power based on perception that the person has some special knowledge or expertness.

In compliance with the typology by J. French and B. Raven (1960), the authors Deborah Tolman, Mary Brydon-Miller (2001) and Bill Cooke, Uma Kotharti (2001) consider the social worker to be the bearer of power and they explain it by their ability to influence the research participants (e.g. by promising results, the ability to direct them to meet a particular goal, the ability to get certain knowledge from them and also the possibility of them exercising their authority). The above shows that there is a risk of a potential abuse of power; therefore there is a strong need for self-reflection in participatory approaches to social work. The objective of participatory approaches is empowerment, however, the social worker is still the one who drives the process (Kane, Poweller, 2008).

Table 1. Dilemmas in Participatory Approaches

Category	Dilemma
Reward power	Dilemma of demonstrating authenticity in participatory research vs. its masking to reach acceptance among research participants
	Dilemma of financial reward vs. no reward
Expert power	Dilemma of intellectual property in participatory approaches – participants or social workers
	Dilemma of setting goals of collaboration – participants or social workers
	Dilemma of termination of collaboration – participants or social workers
Legitimate power	Dilemma of whom to empower – who wants to cooperate vs. the most disadvantaged
Referent power	Dilemma of setting the boundary between participants and social workers
Coercive power	Dilemma of the social worker's liability for the sanctions imposed as a result of collaboration with him/her
Empowerment	Dilemma of the consequences of empowerment
	Dilemma of the boundaries/limits of empowerment – how much to encourage residents in negotiating with the bearers of power
	Dilemma to encourage or not to encourage criticism of authorities and institutions

Source: own construction.

Dilemmas related to reward power

The first group of dilemmas was related to the use of reward power when both the community workers and the researchers from the *Reintegration* research were perceived as individuals who could be the source of some profit, or else “reward”. In this context, the researcher identified the dilemma of demonstrating authenticity in participatory research versus its masking to reach acceptance among research participants; that is, it is a dilemma whether to utilize the power of reward. Bella Mody (2003) notes that the researcher in participatory research needs to collaborate with research participants, and in some way “blend” with the research environment so that his/her presence in it is not disturbing. As part of a reflection on the role of the researcher,

She noted that in some stories/narratives there were tendencies to “please” or “provoke pity” in a “powerful” listener and to guess what he/she would want to hear in order to derive some profit from it. Some things, on the contrary, were “concealed” to me as “the powerful”.

Another dilemma in this group was whether participants in participatory approaches should be financially rewarded for their participation. Researchers from the *Reintegration* research reported in their logbook:

Peer researchers have been financially rewarded for their participation in the research. I considered the reward appropriate because the communication partners devoted a lot of time to the research. Also, the research has laid down a number of requirements in terms of sharing (of often unpleasant) information on the communication partners. Using a financial reward in the research also allowed me to set up a more equal relationship in terms of power.

Another situation was in the community work project. Residents participated in activities with community workers without being entitled to any reward. Workers considered it one of the basic principles of the work and feared “deformation of relationships and motivation” (FG4³). Still, some workers had some doubts about “how much load to put on these people and how much activity they should ask from them” (FG4). In their views, participation is time-consuming and resource-intensive for the residents and poses certain risks for them. The workers asked questions such as: “Should I require them to invest in activities, the outcome of which is uncertain? A community worker is paid for it” (FG5) and:

to what degree should I do things for them? ... Because I have my research connected with overloading them and I felt that these people already did so much in their free time while I was getting paid for it, and so it is a dilemma for me. So I feel like I am supposed to do something...so I'm sort of sorting out many things, organizing meetings, writing letters, even though the people could do it themselves (FG4)

This dilemma came up when workers had difficulty in distinguishing the task of responsibility between them and the residents: “What is my work and what is the work of the residents? I'm getting a salary, while they invest their free time – sometimes even several hours a week...” (FG5)

Dilemmas related to expert power

Another category of dilemmas was related to the expert power that results from a social worker being or not being under the impression of having more knowledge and access to information than other members of the group, and also having the ability to present them appropriately. A researcher from the *Reintegration* research had similar thoughts about it in her logbook:

I was entering into the research environment from a certain position of “power” – I had knowledge of the environment of shelters, a university education, came from the middle class and had knowledge of how the research should be conducted. This position

³ The abbreviation FG means a participant in the focus group. The abbreviation is followed by the identification number of particular participant.

of "power" needed to be constantly reflected in the research. As part of a reflection of the above mentioned, I finally chose the role of a "harmless student" in the research.

L. Kane and M. Poweller (2008) write about this dilemma in the sense that in the participatory research the researcher is the "owner of knowledge", through which he/she actually says:

You are a narrator, however, the knowledge is ours. Peer researchers worked for many hours upon the research... Despite their investment, this was research for my dissertation; in other words, the result of their efforts was left to me as a researcher.

Another dilemma emerging from expert power is dilemmas related to the setting of the goals of the cooperation. The research objective in participatory research was determined by a researcher. In the community project, the goals of cooperation were determined by people from the localities. Despite the declaration of an approach that perceives a participant as an expert on his/her own life difficulties and their choice of the way to address them, workers went through a dilemma about whether or not to bring up the topics in the project that had not been raised by participants. Those, in particular, concerned situations where, in the opinion of community workers, the interests of children were being damaged.

They consistently insisted on working on the themes, but they did not introduce any theme involving children at all...so we did it a little from our own initiative. The dilemma is, if it is right, when we did not cooperate with them on their themes, but we put a little bit of our own perspective in them. In our view, there was a clear gap – no interest in the subject of the children. They were just tackling adult topics... (FG5).

This dilemma was also experienced when identifying general problems. The community workers questioned whether to work on problems defined by the residents when, according to their assessment, the problems were somewhere else. "...whether or not to bring in something of our own... when we see it there." "Residents articulate some needs, but we see that they also need something else that they do not explicitly ask for" (FG4).

Residents wished to implement activities to improve conditions in a socially deprived area. The critical question is whether strong attachment to place, which is one of the effects of community work, is a help or a hindrance in tackling the problems of exclusion within deprived areas. Although the residents had a strong relationship to the locality and wanted to make it more beautiful, workers were asking themselves the following question: "To support or not to support the relationship of the residents to a locality that is labelled as socially excluded?" (FG4). On the one hand, they concluded "there is nothing else to offer them anyway ... no one will accept them in market housing" (FG4). On the other hand, in their opinion, "young families with children should leave the locality. The children need to attend clubs and association outside a socially excluded locality. ... The tendency to improve the locality will stop this process and isolate people

therefore making the gap even bigger” (FG4). On the other hand, they realize that “they would be facing the same problems at another place too; a strong sense of belonging can improve the management of the situation, but also prevent inclusion in society” (FG5).

Expert power is also connected with who gets to decide about the termination of the cooperation; a dilemma related to whether to terminate research even when research participants want to continue. Participatory research requires engagement that tends to increase in the course of research (Albridge, 2015).

At the end of my research, my peer researchers asked me to continue in some form. In the course of the research, we have established a relationship; peer researchers also stated that the research has been a source of inspiration for them and that it has led to their own change. They conveyed that the research really gave them a “voice” and did not want to lose it, which I understood. On the other hand the data was saturated and I felt like it was time to end the research.

Dilemmas related to legitimate power

Community workers aimed at the clients’ empowerment, but at the same time voiced their concerns over strengthening the distribution of power in society. They formulated dilemma as a question of whom to empower in order not to encourage the unfair distribution of power in society. From their point of view, “people who are disadvantaged are primarily in need of support”, but they have learned from their own experience that “individuals with no disadvantages who are interested in doing something for a locality are the ones who can be activated first”, that is “people who have solved their own fundamental issues” (FG4). Their concern was that working with this group could contribute to “duplicating the distribution of influence similar to society and demotivating the socially disadvantaged” or to support “further separation inside the group” (FG5).

The Roma in that council should not be ruled over by the non-Roma, who are better off, more communicative, and we experienced, for example, that a city deputy told us that he would only like to negotiate with non-Roma people and that we are not even expected to be there (FG4).

The certain base was a choice of the aims of the work , meaning “they set three goals and it was not just for the Roma or for just one part of the locality, but we worked on the topics and emphasized that it was about the whole community.” (FG5) As part of the *Reintegration* research, the researcher did not identify this dilemma; she entered an environment with an already predetermined research objective. If the research reached a higher level of participation when participants chose a goal on their own while collaborating with a researcher, we could expect a similar dilemma to occur.

Dilemmas related to referent power

In the context of referent power, workers asked the question of where the boundary between a worker and “users” lies in participatory approaches. The topic of the boundaries was significantly reflected by the researcher both within the framework of *Reintegration* participatory research and the community workers. The researcher within the *Reintegration* research entered it with an idea that she would need to set some boundaries in the sense of protecting her privacy (researcher privacy) before the very beginning of the research. I was willing to offer as much openness as possible to maintain authenticity. “At a certain (limited) rate, I shared stories and themes from my own life with my communication partners. However, I made an effort not to go into matters that I have not been able to process and which personally touch me somehow”.

Community workers discussed the issue of boundaries in both focus groups (FG4, FG5). Primarily, they asked themselves how to optimally set boundaries in cooperation with the residents who they perceive as their partners. Establishing personal relationships is crucial for their work.

If those people became part of my heart, where actually is professionalism of a community worker and where is it not anymore, because those people have not been clients for me for a long time; they are my partners and friends, who I care about very much, but I was in the position of the social worker, so I pondered if I had it under control or didn't from this aspect (FG5).

Community workers reflected the risk that an overly close relationship may lead to identification with the problems of residents, which may limit their self-support capacity.

We became awfully close to those people. I sometimes think whether or not it's professional, but on the other hand, I say let everyone say what he/she wants. I'm afraid now that somebody, for example, some officials or politicians, will treat them with such disdain (FG4).

Similarly, the implementer of participatory research reflected on her own experience. As part of the implementation of research, she entered the environment of the homeless shelter, which, especially at the beginning, made her feel rather confused.

I saw the homeless shelter as a bounded environment (fence, bars in the windows, etc.), from where it is difficult to escape to the world outside. During story sharing, strong emotions were coming from communication partners, such as the inability to buy birthday presents for their children or their memories of domestic violence. I also met with communication partners (mothers living in shelters) who showed me bruises and injuries, not only on their own bodies, but also on their children's bodies. To maintain objectivity in such an environment was difficult.

Despite the declaration of a “friendly relationship” (FG4), community workers maintain a certain distance and do not carry out activities typical for friendly relationships.

[...] But I think we behave professionally, what's wrong about a closer relationship, treating them like partners ... If I took them home and lent them some money, then I would say it was unprofessional, but the fact that I'm glad we have become so close to them, does not seem to me as so unprofessional (FG5).

As a consequence of the partnership, they perceived the risk of a community worker being threatened as a result of activities in the interest of the residents. "I feel like I'm physically threatened, so I do not know how to deal with that, if it's honest to tell people that I can no longer continue, to tell them that I've empowered them, but I cannot do it anymore... I do not know" (FG4). One of the community workers, on the other hand, perceives as a consequence of a partnership an opportunity to communicate openly with these people. "I see it quite differently. Personally, I would try to become closer to those people because I'm part of the community... I would tell them, so they could help me not to feel it" (FG5).

Similarly, the researcher in the *Reintegration* research considered one of the most challenging research situations her own exposure to danger. "It was a situation when a friend of one of my communication partners tried to rob me. He found out when I was coming to and leaving the shelter and waited for me in a distant section of the road leading to the public transport stop".

Dilemmas related to coercive power

The use of coercive power as a result of participation in research was reflected by the researcher.

A peer researcher had to look for housing during research, or more precisely she had to move to another shelter. However, an unnamed shelter, where she wanted to move, rejected her application. The reason supposedly was that she was involved in research, and that the shelter did not "support these activities" and that they "did not want to be slandered". Entering this situation, I was very much aware that participatory research had direct impacts on its participants, for whom I was somewhat responsible as a researcher.

Community workers also faced the use of coercive power as a result of a joint action with shelter residents. In order to achieve the common goal, they used the strategy of petition submission by the residents to point out poor housing conditions, and based on which an expert assessment of the dampness of the flat and its causes was carried out in a total of three flats. The result was "exemplary non-renewal of one of the tenants and the threatening of another" (FG4). After this experience, workers questioned themselves as "to what extent their role is to point out all the potential risks" (FG5) and experienced "responsibility for a lease non-renewal" (FG4).

Dilemmas related to power over one's life (empowerment)

Empowerment causes people to behave in a certain way. However, there is an issue of responsibility for this behaviour on the part of the researcher or community worker. The workers applying participatory approaches should therefore reflect on the “voice-granting” process and consider potential negative consequences, for example, in relation to a facility that expects its client to abide by certain rules (Albridge, 2015). Mike Kesby (2005) points out that participatory approaches often lead to a change in personality, namely, that “the one who entered in does not come out as the same person”. In this context, both the researcher and community workers asked: What are the implications of empowerment?

The implications of empowerment are reflected by researchers in the “*Reintegration*” research in their logbook as follows:

Peer researchers had a rather complicated role in research. All of a sudden, they became researchers out of the “normal” users of the shelter. They were somehow elevated/superior to others. They were granted the right to ask, thus becoming the insiders of research, which gave them power. This situation also needed to be reflected and not to cast peer researchers into the role of those who know the solutions to problems that they can suggest to others.

Another question community workers asked themselves was – where the boundaries of self-confidence and empowerment of people were. Similar to the researcher, they reflected on a certain “extraction” of the shelter residents from their natural social relationships and structures. “[...] then they often hear that they are “mayors”, they get to decide about everything and that they manage everything” (FG5). There was a concern about “a pseudo-help to resident representatives, since they could act in a directive manner with other residents later” (FG5), expressed by representatives of one municipal authority in one of the evaluation meetings.

Participatory research may also result in internal change. The researcher in the “*Reintegration*” research notes the following:

Research has had a certain “therapeutic effect” on peer researchers, which they often mentioned in their reflections and feedback. This effect was very similar to the effect of narrative therapy. Their own stories and insights had changed during the research, thus changing the view of their own identity.

As a result of the empowerment process, research participants have become more critical of authorities and institutions. In this context, a dilemma arises as to whether or not to support such criticism towards authorities and institutions. As part of the interviews with the communication partners (mothers living in shelters), the researcher strived to maintain a neutral stance towards these attitudes.

In the case of social workers or accommodation facilities being perceived in a negative manner, the communication partners expected me to be “on their side” and

“advocate” for them. To clarify my position, I often had to reflect my attitudes so that my subjectivity in research was related to the subject of the life situation of these mothers in the shelter as well as to the process of their reintegration, and not to the subject of a particular shelter facility or a particular social worker. However, the above-described role was not easy to play at all, and within the framework of research reflexivity, I must admit the tendency to adopt the perspective of peer researchers.

Other community workers’ doubts concerned the limits of empowerment. They questioned to what extent they should support residents in negotiating with the bearers of power.

The resolution of their problems is not possible otherwise, but are we able to predict all the risks? Do the residents actually have sufficient capacity and influence to affect these matters? Could it be effective, and under what conditions? ... They constantly complained they could not change anything ... We found out that we would not be able to change it...that there are some matters that we cannot affect and it does not make sense to deal with them and try to solve them...but it took us a long time to realize this. (FG5)

Discussion and conclusions

In achieving empowerment as a goal of participatory approaches and a means of strengthening social justice, the workers have to deal with dilemmas based on other aspects of the phenomenon of power.

The topic of power in participatory approaches can be summed up by the fact that even though the position of a community worker both in the participatory research and the community work is defined as being as equal as possible to their participants and that all participants are granted the right to their own knowledge and expertise, the community worker enters an environment with a certain “handicap” of expertise (Mody, 2003). He/she enters an environment where people have a completely different identity from him/her, comes from a different cultural background, has a different education, speaks in a “different” language, is dressed and behaves differently (Walmsley, Johnson, 2003). In participatory approaches there is a “paradox in the redistribution of power”. A social worker enters the research environment as a person with “high educational quality” and with a lot of information, which plays a major role in influencing the “local” population. The social worker as a person with a strong knowledge base influences the “mind of the weaker participants” (Kane, Poweller, 2008).

The participatory approach goes beyond not only the boundaries between the researcher and the participant of the research, between the community worker and the client (Kendon, Pain, Kesby, 2010). A specific feature of this approach is also the reduced ability to plan and “to expect in relation to it”, due to its social dynamism, i.e. due to the ever-changing relationship with peer collaborators. A participatory approach should therefore be seen as a process that increases participants’ capacity

to improve their lives and facilitates social change for the benefit of disadvantaged groups (Cleaver, 1999) and reinforces the achievement of social justice. Ethics is therefore directly (and completely) associated with practice (Reason, Bradbury, 2013), and that is why it brings greater challenges for the worker. Due to the above-mentioned reason, participatory approaches have their typical dilemmas, amongst which are the dilemma of control sharing, the dilemma of anonymity, the dilemma of giving a voice to the oppressed, but also the dilemma of the possible controversy of social events (Kindon, Pain, Kesby, 2010) and/or tensions between individual fortunes and collective ones (Kenny, 2002).

A worker (community work or social work researcher) using participatory approaches must therefore “make a dialogue about core values”, “multiplicity of interests, some clear and some not”, because “conflicts over underlying goals and values can’t all remain easily explored” (Briggs, 2007: 2). The tool of social work that can help the social worker is reflexivity. This reflexivity can be defined in accordance with M. Payne (2005) as a cyclical process in which we study what kind of impact the thing or matter that we observe has upon our thinking, and how our thinking process further influences our actions. In both applied participatory approaches, all of the above mentioned levels appear to be tools for recognition and further work with dilemmas.

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