

Creating Horizontal Spaces for Generative Inquiry in PAR

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Both authors are active action researchers who share an interest in the notion of “horizontal research spaces”, in which existing power relations are punctuated and participants can meet on equal grounds. We see the creation and maintaining of such spaces as a political and structuring activity through which the necessary conditions for meaningful inquiry are enforced and designed. Once action researchers have safeguarded collaborative research space, they need to facilitate a quality of inquiry that enables co-researchers to find their way beyond clarity to the appearance of truly novel insights (Zandee & Montesano Montessori, 2016).

We believe that the creation and facilitation of egalitarian spaces for action research is both necessary and feasible. This belief may well be grounded in our educational experiences in the Montessori and Kees Boeke schools. We have noted, that others see our idea of horizontal spaces as less attractive, necessary or possible. We are somewhat puzzled by this critique and therefore want to further explore and discuss our ideas.

In what follows, we share and elaborate on excerpts of a paper about the importance of horizontal relations in participatory action research (PAR), that we wrote for the 2016 Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) conference. In this paper we talk about reflection, reflexivity and generativity in connection with the kind of research spaces that action researchers nurture. We develop the argument that reflexivity and generativity in inquiry become possible in a horizontal community of knowledge in which mechanisms of power are constructively handled. We propose that reflexivity becomes generative when dislodgment and friction can be inquired into with openness, curiosity and imagination (Montesano Montessori & Zandee, 2016).

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From reflection to reflexivity to generativity: The importance of horizontal relations in Participatory Action Research

Nicolina Montesano Montessori & Danielle Zandee, IPA Conference 2016

Introduction

In this paper, we combine two perspectives as a basis of our developing approach to participatory action research (PAR), namely Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). We are convinced that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Participatory Action Research (PAR), when put to work together, can play an important role in relevant processes for the reconstruction of organizational and societal realities in the 21st Century. CDA is particularly useful for its developed mechanisms to analyze dominant discourses and (a-symmetric) power relations, its layered and abductive methodological approaches to analyze discourses in the contexts in which they emerged. It uses robust theory to address issues such as structure and agency. It also seeks to formulate alternatives in the direction of a more socially just society (see Montesano Montessori, 2009 for further references on CDA). AI invites new stories for the co-creation of wanted futures. It is particularly strong in paving the way from deconstruction to reconstruction through its skillful use of poetic language in inclusive and reflexive dialogues, which create the silence for “generative moments” in which innovative insights appear (Shotter, 2010; Zandee, 2013). PAR is strong in delving into the depth and questioning unconscious norms and beliefs as a condition for genuine change to happen (Argyris & Schön, 1978). We strongly believe that the three disciplines need to be combined to create a research process which allows for a thorough and constructive critical process. CDA is critical by definition and explores power relations and related ideologies. But it has not made explicit any ways of connecting its findings to a transformational process, for which we think PAR is highly significant, due to its analytical and transformative research stages and its participatory structure; it includes agents (and therefore agency) in its research process. AI brings in a strong emphasis on dialogue, words, metaphors, processes of shared meaning making. It provokes and welcomes (critical) curiosity to deconstruct existing structures and ‘the taken for granted’. However, due to its constructive approach, it is open to and supports processes of constructing innovative visions, processes and social relations. Since PAR and AI are inclusive approaches, these research strategies necessarily include different sources of knowledge, such as emotions, intuitions, reflections and reflexivity. Though this paper addresses especially the last two concepts, we consider the former as welcome additions to CDA which tends to ignore emotions. We suggest that the inclusion of these other dimensions of knowing help to analyze and critically assess the status quo, while this array of sources of knowledge also adds color and possibilities to innovative imaginaries, new forms of relating and other paths to change. CDA, meanwhile does help to provide academic rigor to the process. Putting the three disciplines together also helps to address issues of power. It is safe to state that many of the major crises in this world are, in part, the result of power relations (Avelino, 2017).

For instance, major companies may resist projects to do with alternative energy, the weapon industry will need warfare and academic elites resist PAR and AI as research strategies, often claiming that these strategies are not scientific. We assume that true change will not happen if research is done within existing power relations and hierarchies. Therefore, both authors advocate the importance of horizontal relations within research projects to do with PAR and AI. The authors reached their point of inquiry and their interest in PAR through different ways: Zandee through AI (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008; Zandee, 2013, 2015). Montesano Montessori engaged in PAR after being trained in CDA and has worked to put both disciplines to work together in a hermeneutic methodology (Montesano Montessori & Schuman, 2015) and described the concept of horizontal knowledge communities (Montesano Montessori, Schuman & De Lange, 2012). More specifically we draw from our action research experience in healthcare (Zandee, 2015) and education (Montesano Montessori & Ponte, 2012). In this paper, we will present the general characteristics of CDA, PAR and AI, followed by the definition and description of three key concepts: reflection, reflexivity and generativity. We will then reflect on the importance of horizontal research relations in an attempt of dealing productively with power relations within a PAR setting that combines formal researchers and practitioner researchers. We will finish the paper with an evaluation of the experienced potential of and resistance against horizontal relations from inside the group and outside of it.

Critical Discourse Analysis, Participatory Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a discipline which analyses ways in which language (discourse) contributes to maintaining or resisting power relations in society. Its deeper aims are to contribute to a more socially just society. It assumes that social agents construct social reality through language (Montesano Montessori, 2009).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research in communities that emphasizes participation and action. It seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and following reflection. PAR emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience and social history. Within a PAR process, "communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers" (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

PAR practitioners make a concerted effort to integrate three basic aspects of their work: participation (life in society and democracy), action (engagement with experience and history), and research (soundness in thought and the growth of knowledge).

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) conceptualized appreciative inquiry (AI) as action research with generative capacity. They saw the possibility and responsibility of social science to create knowledge that acts as a catalyst in processes of social innovation and societal transformation. They envisioned a form of participatory action research with the capacity of both dislodgment and engagement in a shared search for innovative, new repertoires of thought and action (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008).

Zandee embraces an appreciative, discursive form of action research for its high potential to address the pressing issues of our times (Bradbury, 2015). Precisely when we take action as the site of knowing and work *with* stakeholders in the facilitation and study of strength-based change, we can develop knowledge with the generative capacity that Cooperrider and Srivastva envisioned. An appreciative approach to action research includes a process of generative theorizing (Gergen, 1999) in which practical, situated understandings are inductively translated into conceptualizations with wider repercussions for social innovation. In appreciative inquiry as action research, both first person reflexivity and third person knowledge transferability add depth and scope to the work that is done in second person change initiatives.

Seen from the angle of CDA and PAR, Montesano Montessori has developed these complex research relations by problematizing the relation between formal and participant researchers and by the creation of flexible but well-structured research designs to integrate these three levels of knowledge generation and through the concept of horizontal learning communities (Montesano Montessori & Ponte, 2012; Montesano Montessori, Schuman & De Lange, 2012). In this model, first, second and third person perspectives are combined within multifunctional research instruments that connect first and second person perspectives in a dialectic way. The current paper further dwells on this issue by placing significant concepts of AI on the foreground: reflection, reflexivity and generativity to be developed in the following paragraphs.

Reflection and Reflexivity

Reflexivity acknowledges that we shape and make meaning about our world from within, while *reflection* is about taking ourselves outside of a social world that is external to us to analyze it from an objective stance (Ripamonte et al., 2016, p. 57). In contemporary action research such reflexivity is seen as a “first-person” practice that calls upon the researcher to adapt an “attitude of inquiry” as a learning orientation (Marshall, 2011, p. 246). Reflection is cognitive and dwells on existing situations and existing knowledge structures. Reflexivity, on the contrary, questions the ‘taken for granted’ (ideology in CDA terminology), as is described in full detail in Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith (2004) and Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi (2015).

Hence, reflection is an activity in which we place ourselves outside of the practice or context we are reflecting on. Reflexivity, in turn, is based on a social constructivist ontology, that holds that our social world does not exist independently from us, but is shaped in our interactions, which are dialectically influenced by our sense of what that social reality might be. Reflexivity leads to change –however subtle it may be: it is a process through which agents see their environment and their position in it through different eyes and therefore look differently at routines and the taken for granted. It therefore opens space for generativity (Zandee, 2015). CDA adds the robust concepts of narratives and imaginaries to this process. Unlike dominant disciplines that tend to investigate what is, CDA includes the possibility of researching what is desirable, and might be

new horizons.

Generativity

When reflexivity leads to the “unsettling of conventional practice” (Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi, 2015), such unsettledness can be utilized to generate truly new possibilities. Indeed, in generative processes of relating, “new and enriching potentials are opened through the flow of interchange” (Gergen, 2009, p. 47). In such dialogic interchange interruption evokes renewal through a valuing of the full richness and promise of human experience. Generativity is the guiding value of appreciative action research (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). The generative potential of appreciative inquiry lies in its invitation for adventurous thinking in a conversational space that is nurtured by a deliberate use of a “narrative mode” of knowing (Bruner, 1986). The sharing of heartfelt stories and the use of other forms of poetic language helps participants to create the relational capacity that enables and energizes them to be more daring in envisioning and actualizing future realities (Zandee, 2008, p. 134). CDA adds to this a powerful approach to the transformative power of language (see also Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) and the emphasis on imaginaries as ways to imagine new social practices (Jessop, 2002).

Both authors have worked with forms of PAR or AI in research to do with social justice in the classroom (Montesano Montessori) and with health care (Zandee). Rather than describing these cases in detail, we will now present our developed ways to introduce the concept of horizontal power relations in our work with PAR. The reason is that vertical relations tend to reproduce existing power relations (Avelino, 2017). In our current transitional era in which both researchers, managers and practitioners have to find their way through the unknown where existing theories give little guidance, participatory action research allows for a traveling together towards novel landscapes in which turns out to be a highly promising and rewarding approach.

Horizontal Research Groups

Both authors identify with the idea that innovative research groups require a sense of horizontal organization, in which power relations are constructively managed.

It was during the research on social justice, that Montesano Montessori realized that a horizontal research relation is needed to open up a path that allows for research *with* practitioners. As a research leader, she was aware that she had to be very careful to avoid relations of dependency, while at the other hand, she should be present as a source of support and as the leader of the research in terms of creating a stable but open research design. If the research leader (or for that matter a leading professor or those who finance a project) become dominant, the road is blocked for open inquiry, for new results to emerge and, above all, for the questioning of the status quo, including power relations (see also Avelino, 2017). Rather than focusing on details of this research – which have been published (Montesano Montessori & Ponte, 2012) – we now spell out why horizontality matters, how it can be achieved, what it demands of the project leaders to

create horizontal spaces. We will end with a critical discussion.

Our main reason as to how to work with horizontal research relations is that we believe that problems usually cannot be resolved within the parameters, including social relations and power relations, in which they emerged. It is necessary to undo protocols, question fixed beliefs and practices, open up hierarchical relations (whether bureaucratic or academic). Therefore it is recommended to create heterogeneous groups with representatives of different layers /communities to do with the topic under investigation, with the binding rule that throughout the research, all voices count as equal. There is an obligation to listen to each other, to make sense of the results. For the same token, Montesano Montessori initiated her research on social justice with narrative interviews with all the participants in the research to hear their experience with social justice, their ideas as to which factors were helpful or disruptive to enhance social justice in the classroom. The aim of these interviews was pluriform: on the one hand she genuinely wanted to learn from their experience; secondly, the interviews gave participant researchers an opportunity to collect their knowledge and to be actively involved in the research group, third, it helped to establish a constructive and trustworthy relation between formal and participant researchers in that we wanted to hear their voice on the matter before bringing in our own theories or thoughts. In fact, it was based on their interviews that we created a theoretical frame for the research, which we checked with them. During that particular focus group in which we discussed the outcome of the narrative interviews, we invited all participant researchers to formulate their own research questions which they would then investigate in their classroom. Hence, rather than merely collect data from their experience, we inserted them as researchers in the research group. Focus groups helped to discuss the outcome of each stage and to engage in processes of shared meaning making (Schuman, 2009).

During the process, we followed the abductive research principle of CDA, which involves a continuous moving back and forth between data, theory, context and, in this case, the findings of participant researchers and their ways of making sense of it. This required creating a strong, but flexible research design: strong enough to lead the group through the various research stages, while flexible enough to insert outcomes, new insights or decisions taken throughout the various stages. This way of working helped to disrupt the well-known gap between theory and practice (see also Bakker & Montesano Montessori).

For the research leader it required taking on multiple roles, varying from being the researcher who had the overview, and who took the initiative, to being a critical friend providing feedback and being a co-researcher, to being a partner when discussing educational problems in the classroom. While performing these various roles, she always remained conscious of her role as a researcher, capable of explaining in what research stage the group was operating, the function of each stage, etc. In her experience, there is an ingrained contradiction in playing this role of the leader of a horizontal research group: one needs to be able and willing to take the lead, but to do so in a facilitative and supportive way. One cannot fully ignore the position of a leader: it would

be unethical to do so. Unethical in the sense that one would not provide enough support to practitioners, while inviting them to step out of their comfort zones, to challenge their own values and beliefs and routines. Horizontal leadership involves a responsibility towards the participant researchers to secure their room for participation, which requires accommodating and facilitating them properly. Facilitation means that participants need to get space and time to perform the research, that it is acknowledged and supported by their superiors, that there is clarity in the research aims and methods and the various roles that formal and informal researchers will play. Accommodation has to do with providing them with enough training – if needed -, support to set up their RQ's, organization of focus groups to make sense of the outcome of research, etc. Since PAR involves a stage of experimentation with new practices, it also involves creating space for experimentation, in cooperation with authorities, such as school directors or the municipality or... depending on the case.

All in all, horizontal leadership requires a kind of tight-rope walking and subtle judgement. It requires a healthy doses of empathy with the practitioners.

Experienced Dilemmas

While we are both convinced about the power of PAR, AI and the combination with CDA, we also experienced that it is not easy to get groups together willing to commit themselves to these kind of research processes with unpredictable outcomes. Managers often prefer ready-made solutions; practitioners may feel that they do not have the time to do it or they might feel insecure. Hence, resistance can come from within the group and/or from the context itself. Support depends also on the role of the management. If they take an interest, they play a strong role in facilitating and supporting participants. In one case, when Montesano Montessori investigated democratic citizenship in the school, it worked well for two years until the retirement of the school director. Since the new director was not interested in the project, it fell apart very soon. Zandee experienced the described dilemma of the conflict of having to build trustful relations with both management and employees, while the latter became more independent during the process, or found points of interest in contradiction to the preferred practices of the management (Jonkers & Zandee, 2014). We also experienced resistance during the various academic presentations, which we gave. People commented that 'you cannot deny the hierarchy that you are in; how can you involve managers in heterogeneous research settings? Even if you succeed, power will hit back – and has a myriad of ways in doing so'. We do not pretend to deny the hierarchy that we are in. But we do invite managers and practitioners prior to which we reach an agreement with them that *within the settings of the research* their voices are equal and they are supposed to take each other seriously. CDA helps to look at social reality in a layered way: micro (say the classroom), meso: the institute and macro (secretary of state, society, ...). By integrating representatives of these various levels, they can come to a process of shared meaning making, so that desired change can be tested and accommodated in harmony within these three scales. PAR also helps to create acceptance for change, since the people involved had

a part in formulating and creating the desired innovations. Yes, power has a tendency to hit back. But that is a reason to continue with even more conviction. These processes, when performed well, make a change in the life of the participants, often lead to innovation – if not big and formal change, there may well be an enlargement of so-called niche power or more autonomy for the various agents (Montesano Montessori, 2016). All in all we believe that in times of radical change in which we live, where protocols do not seem to provide the answer, the formula above helps to create powerful communities of knowledge, capable of providing and implementing solutions to so-called wicked problems.

Conclusion

Bringing AI, PAR and CDA together turns out to be a fruitful engagement. AI brings in the powerful concepts of reflectivity, reflexivity and generativity and an almost poetic approach to reach this level of communication in a group or organization. PAR brings in a cyclical structure and, like AI, it inserts agents in the research. CDA helps to both analyze power relations, to add discourse and therefore brings the transformational power of language into the picture and it entails a strong body of theory and methodology. Concerning the latter, we noticed that the abductive approach in CDA which goes back and forth from text to context, theory and methodology, is strengthened in PAR, because of the inclusion of agents in the research. Research is not merely placed in a particular context, but the engaged dialogue and reflection of the participants adjusts theoretical models and creates a common language and lens to look at a particular object of study in that context and with that group of involved practitioners. The process of reflexivity leads to personal and organizational development and is, therefore, a strong element to engage with social change. This paper has brought forward the construction of horizontal research relations as an instrument to constructively deal with power. It has introduced the concepts of ‘reflection’, ‘reflexivity’ and ‘generativity’ as key concepts of critical research in the direction of social innovation.

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