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EDITORIAL

Participatory research in social work between aspiration and reality

Hemma Mayrhofer · Natalia Waechter · Johannes Pflegerl

Participatory research is defined by a value-based research attitude and research objective. It aims to foster the participation of actors, whose life or work practice is being researched, in two ways: regarding their participation in the research project itself and regarding the goal to contribute to the social participation and empowerment of less powerful social groups. This "research style" (Bergold and Thomas 2012) is currently experiencing increased interest and enjoys great recognition in social work in particular. This is not surprising, since the normative orientations of this occupational field of activity are particularly close to the basic values of participatory research, which already indicates that participative research projects set high goals. The contributions of this special issue will discuss in which way and quality as well as to what extent these goals could be and are being achieved in research practice.

This special issue is based on the panels of the Austrian Association for Sociology (ÖGS) section "Social Work" organized at the ÖGS Congress in December 2017. In the following, we do not aim to present a comprehensive discussion of participatory research strategies in social work, as this is being done by the single contributions in this special issue. In particular, Anastasiadis and Wrentschur

H. Mayrhofer (✉)
Institut für Rechts- und Kriminalsoziologie, Museumstraße 5/12, 1070 Vienna, Austria
E-Mail: hemma.mayrhofer@irks.at

N. Waechter
Institute for Educational Science, University of Graz, Merangasse 70, 8010 Graz, Austria
E-Mail: natalia.waechter@uni-graz.at

J. Pflegerl
Ilse Arlt Institut für Soziale Inklusionsforschung, Fachhochschule St. Pölten,
Matthias-Corvinus-Straße 15, 3100 St. Pölten, Austria
E-Mail: johannes.pflegerl@fhstp.ac.at

give a broad overview of the developmental lines and the design of participatory research. Instead, referring to the disciplinary framework of this journal, we provide some sociological considerations regarding the use of the participative approach in research projects and processes.

First of all, it is remarkable that in the scientific debate of participatory research strategies there is little theoretical discussion of the concept of participation. Often scholars only provide the plain reference that their research concerns and aims at involvement, and relate to empirical concepts and normative positions rather than to theoretical concepts in the proper sense. In general, the concept of participation in research assumes that the persons being "researched" in the frame of the research project must also be involved in research-related decision making and that they should be in control of the research process together with the research scientists. This is done, for example, by labelling them "co-researchers", even though they typically lack corresponding academic education and training, and by seeing them "... as partners with decision-making power in all stages of the research process: from the objective and the design of the study, its implementation, data collection and evaluation to its final exploitation" (Unger 2014, p. 41; translation by authors).

These considerations already identify two characteristics of the desired participation: *(co-)decision-making power* and *(co-)control* of the content, the implementation and the use of results by the co-researchers. Decisions can be understood, on the one hand, as selection of an alternative action ("Selektion einer Handlungsalternative") (Schimank 2005, p. 42) or as "an action considering alternative ways" ("Alternativen bedenkendes Handeln") (ibid., p. 48). In order for something to be considered a decision at all, decision alternatives need to be not only available, but actors also have to be aware of them. Control, on the other hand, requires having sufficient insight into the events taking place, and the authorization to enforce one's own ideas. Being able to act as a supervisory body to impose sanctions, if necessary, is crucial for exercising control. Of course, more control and decision-making power of the "co-researchers" means less control and decision-making power of the original researchers. From the standpoint of participatory research, the goal is a balance of the power relations between researchers and "co-researchers".

Related to the concept of "co-researcher" is the understanding of research persons and groups as actors in three ways. They are considered being actors as active participants in the research process, they are understood as actors in their life worlds instead of just perceiving them as victims of social structures and heteronomous clients in institutions of social work, and due to their participation in research they are also expected to be actors in the changes that research, based on the results, wants to foster. Such changes may concern institutions of social work but also changes in politics and society. In sociological discussions on the theoretical concept of agency, it is still an open question, however, whether agency is something that individuals simply possess or whether it is something they have to acquire (Coffey and Farrugia 2014). The use of the concept of agency in participatory research seems to imply both: On the on hand, the "researched co-researchers" are already actors in their particular life world. On the other, participatory research aims at enabling and supporting their agency in the research process as well as beyond research regarding desired changes.

In the perspective of differentiation theory and organizational sociology, referring to Bora (2005, p. 22), participation can be understood as a specific form of inclusion. In this understanding the term "inclusion" does not constitute a normative requirement, but rather describes the way in which persons are taken into account and included in social communication on a social-theoretical level.[1] According to Bora (2005), participation means inclusion in the form of membership in organizations, taking part in processes and, as one may add with regard to participative research, taking part in projects as temporary forms of organization (see Wimmer 2004, p. 144). Such inclusion occurs in the form of performance roles ("Leistungsrollen"). Burzan et al. (2008) distinguish not only performance and audience roles ("Publikumsrollen") as differing modes of inclusion, but also secondary performance roles and occupational performance roles. In secondary performance roles one's own performance reception (audience role) results primarily from one's own performance production (performance role). This is how participation as a co-researcher can be understood.

What is the use of a theoretical linkage of the concept of participation for the understanding of participatory research? It sharpens the eye for the paradoxes and challenges of the project. These are, however, not only based on the intention to include the persons and groups "researched" as researchers, but also result from the bundle of objectives that go beyond traditional research goals: participation in research is meant to enable and support further social participation in societal fields where the researched groups are not yet fully included. More often than not, however, this decision lies beyond the influence of research. Even if research may have some impact, reaching the goal of more social participation depends to a large extent on the social environment, which usually cannot be directly influenced by research.

The contributions submitted to the ÖGS congress 2017 indicate that participatory projects are becoming more frequent among certain groups of clients ("addressees"), whereas such a research strategy appears to be less used in other fields of social work. Specifically, the projects focus on the participatory inclusion into research of people with disabilities, people with migration experience, children and youth as well as of the elderly. These are increasingly also community or neighborhood research projects. This raises the question based on which criteria researchers who initiate a participative project make such fundamental preliminary decisions and which reasons contribute to the restrained inclusion of other addressees of social work in research. This can be illustrated by reflecting upon what a participative research project could look like in the context of social work with criminal offenders, so far neglected by participatory research. Which issues are considered too risky? Do researchers assume restrictions beyond their influence? What ethical challenges does it entail? The following questions, as raised in the Call for Papers for the ÖGS Congress 2017, may also contribute to reflecting on the implementation experiences of participatory research projects:

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[1] This sociological concept of inclusion is thus not congruent with the conceptual understanding of inclusive research as used by Kremsner and Proyer in this special issue.

- What are the primary objectives of participatory research? Who defines the goals of participatory research and in which ways? How do different goals, such as gaining knowledge, participation and empowerment, relate to each other?
- Which actors participate for what reasons, in which stages of research, in which ways and to what extent? Who can contribute which knowledge and experiences to the research? To what extent do people involved in research bring with them various external social resources (including, but not limited to, power resources) which could also lead to different possibilities of implementing and enforcing their perspectives in the research context? How can unequal resources be compensated, how should required knowledge and skills be taught and acquired?
- Which roles do scientists/professional researchers play in participatory research? How can they deal with potential tension and divergences between different roles?
- How do decision-making processes take place in the research process and who participates in which roles? Which rules and mechanisms of weighing alternatives and decision-making are applied for which decision-making purposes and content? How are the necessary decisions actually made?
- How can a "safe space" be created in the course of research that provides all participants with sufficient openness without having to fear any risks or disadvantages?
- How can the results be presented and communicated? Who benefits from these results in which way? What opportunities do participating actors derive from the results for their social positioning and way of life outside the research context? To what extent can research achieve the desired goals (for example gaining knowledge, participation, empowerment) after completing the project? Which framework conditions prove to be conducive so that the projects and their results can have lasting effects, in particular with regard to participation and empowerment?

For a comprehensive understanding of the increased use of participatory research strategies in social work, Alfons Bora's (2005) observations can give additional stimuli, even if they were formulated not in terms of research but on participation in the political system. According to Bora's analyses, a central function of participatory involvement of citizens in political decision-making processes is their political mobilization. It may be advantageous for those in power to include citizens in political decision-making processes if their non-participation threatens to lose legitimacy in political institutions and decisions (e.g. very low voter turnout) or if risky decisions have to be made in politically disputed fields: "In the ideal case presented, this will take away pressure from the political decision-makers and at the same time it promotes acceptance by the addressees through their involvement in the process" (ibid., p. 29; translation by authors). Accordingly, participation in these decision-making contexts should solve the acceptance problems of political decisions and/or institutions by collectivizing decision-making and by spreading the responsibility for possibly undesirable decision-making sequences (diffusion of responsibility). However, Bora argues, this does not reduce the risk of the decision itself, insofar as such intended participation may also provoke strong resistance in the citizens.

If one looks at participatory research projects—for example in social work—from this perspective, then the question becomes decisive, which concrete added value can actually be expected from actors in the field of research by means of directly involv-

ing them as co-researchers. Furthermore, researchers have to weigh up what they expect from them in return, which workload and which decision-making to impose on them in the research process. One of the key questions here is whether and how the co-*research* of actors from the field of research is actually the most appropriate means to bring about or support social change and to increase participation beyond the research process. Conversely, the question must be examined to what extent participation and empowerment could be achieved more sufficiently through education and participation projects. If one reads the present scientific literature on participatory research, it is striking that the potential outcome of participatory research is mostly described rather vaguely: participatory research *may* enhance participation, *may* lead to higher practical utility, *may* lead to more support of empowerment, etc. This, however, is not necessarily the case and the same could be said about any kind of research (especially application-oriented research), which is not conceived and implemented in a participative approach in a narrower sense. Furthermore, as in any empirical research, there should also be methodological control for the co-researchers' location sensitive aspects ("location bonding", "Standortgebundenheit" in German, see Wagner-Willi 2016, p. 228), which influences the results. Participatory research, too, by no means aims at enforcing subjectivity in an uncontrolled way, but rather promotes systematically reflected subjectivity.

These critical questions are not meant to undermine the significance and usefulness of participatory research in social work in general. The articles in this issue suggest, for example, that such a research strategy in the context of social work would be particularly rewarding if a broader involvement of the addressees in the research process succeeds in producing relevant aspects that enable public discussion and make them negotiable. Ultimately, the described projects are not so much about generating basic knowledge, but rather about using different methods to reach specific findings that strengthen the position of the addressees and have a changing effect on the shaping of their social environment. This can be achieved, as the contributions in this special issue suggest, by involving the participants in the research process as actors who experience themselves as capable and powerful to act—some of them for the first time. Another benefit of the participatory approach is the possible visualization of divergences in interpretation between scientists and addressees resp. co-researchers, which may stimulate new processes of understanding and learning and contribute essentially to the scientific discussion and an increase of knowledge.

1 About the contributions

The contributions in this issue highlight topics and research contexts in which such a participatory research strategy can be worthwhile, but they also point out associated challenges and limitations.

The article by Maria Anastasiadis and Michael Wrentschur *"Opening research-spaces for social change"* addresses the question how social work uses participatory research for societal changes by connecting research and practice. According to their presentation, a significant aspect of participatory research is not only to generate "knowledge for understanding" in the usual understanding of science, but

beyond that, "knowledge for action". Referring to Ranciere's metaphor of research as "police" and "politics," the authors clarify the formative content of participatory research and its relevance to contemporary challenges in social work. In particular, the article deals with the question of how the voices and perspectives of otherwise excluded people can be made audible. Thus, the authors conclude, participatory research in social work can make a decisive contribution to shaping the social.

In his article *"On the further development of Paulo Freire's principle of coding/decoding in participatory social space research: The example of the analysis of space-appropriation by young people in a community center",* Michael May brings together and reflects three theoretical strands of (social) pedagogy: participatory research, social space research ("Sozialraumforschung") and the concept of coding and decoding by Paulo Freire. His considerations are concerned with young people in extra-curricular ("open") youth work and the core question how they make the available space their own ("Raumaneignung"). He presents research with young people who were asked to take pictures of different space segments in a community center and of ways of using them. This allows the young people to develop new ideas how to use the rooms in the community center for representing their own life situation and experience, and it allows the researchers to reconstruct the young people's specific, space-related interests. The results are also meant to be used by the social workers for the young people's benefit but May admits that the practical implementation of the results depends on the social workers' willingness to actually use them.

Anne Van Rießen and Christian Bleck also address a socio-spatial perspective in their contribution *"Participatory social space research with refugees and immigrants: Methodical considerations and experiences of factors promoting and inhibiting social work"*. First, they argue that socio-spatial action research on people with a refugee or migration experience is specifically relevant: The integration of refugees and migrants into society depends on the particular social-spatial situation such as the local labor market, the housing situation and neighborly relationships. Participative social space research pursues the strategy of creating space that allows involvement and participation. The authors illustrate supportive and preventive factors for realizing participatory goals by presenting two of their own research projects: the first research project is about participative neighborhood development with older migrants and the second one deals with the perception, appropriation and use of urban spaces by young refugees on the one hand and young people without refugee history on the other.

The approach of inclusive research presented by Gertraud Kremsner and Michelle Proyer *"Doing inclusive research: Possibilities and limitations of joint research practice"* was developed in research cooperation with people with learning difficulties. Referring to Walmsley and Johnson (2003), the authors propose to understand inclusive research as an umbrella term for different research approaches that involve the "researched" persons and groups as subjects in research. There are, however, obvious parallels with participatory research, which leads to assume that participatory and inclusive research differ primarily by varying traditions of labelling in different fields of research. The paper discusses the opportunities and challenges associated with inclusive research based on research with people with learning difficulties and on

another research project with refugees. It shows, for example, how some conflicts of roles and conflicts of interest arises in the first place through the inclusive research process itself. The authors claim that the limits of participation have to be made transparent in order to prevent disappointment, for example regarding expectations of participation outside the research context.

In his article *"Forum Theatre as a tool of drama based, participatory research in social work. Methods, examples, and methodological reflexions",* Michael Wrentschur addresses and reflects upon the specific method of "Forum Theatre" and its use in participatory research in social work. The article is strongly theoretically based but also uses research of its own to illustrate the potential of the specific method. Forum Theatre aims at empowering participants who belong to socially marginalized and excluded groups. Referring to his empirical work, he describes that applying Forum Theatre in settings of social work allows participants (clients) to experience agency and to express their own needs. The drama-based participatory approach seeks not only to empower the participants during the performances but also in the process of interpretation. Consequently, the results are not only meant to be crucial for the scientific state-of-the-art but also for the practical work with the clients and for the whole social groups the clients belong to. Therefore, with the inclusion of many actors, the overall goal is to develop suggestions and solutions to social inequalities and to political problems.

The article by Miriam Sitter *"Participative research with children—a reflected balancing act between generational asymmetry and intergenerational forbearance"* reflects the participatory approach used in research with children by referring to the ideas of the international "Childhood Studies". Following their approach, the goal of participatory research with children is to consider the unequal power relation in two ways (children/adults and researcher/the "researched") and to find a possible balance between the researched children and the adult researcher. Sitter argues that children have to be understood as co-researchers and collaborators that should not only have equal rights but should also be treated with "intergenerational forbearance" ("intergenerationale Nachsicht"). Based on her research, however, she also describes challenges and unsolved problems regarding the application of participative research with children, for example if and how children should already get involved as co-researchers in an early stage of research (proposal writing) or how to deal with the children's complete lack of understanding of social science research and how to overcome the children's focus on natural sciences.

In their article *"'One has to be content at some point'—reconstructing the needs of older adults in rural areas by using participation methods",* Yvonne Rubin, Monika Alisch, and Martina Ritter put forward an approach of transdisciplinary participative research for discussion on the basis of a research project on the problems of elderly people in rural areas. In this project, researchers, activists and addresses in citizens' aid associations were jointly involved. An essential task of this project was to examine the needs of the elderly in rural areas. An interpretation phase of the scientists was followed by a reflection of the interpreted results with the project partners in so-called feedback events. In these, the same needs that were understood as publicly relevant by the researchers were often classified as private needs by the elderly. By repeatedly addressing this ambivalence of interpretations, it was possible

to stimulate a learning process in the participating citizen's aid associations and to enhance the awareness of the diversity of interpretations in politics.

The contributions of this ÖZS special issue reflect the heterogeneous research and thematic fields of social work in which participatory research is applied. It remains to be seen whether and in which forms of implementation this research approach will become even more important in the context of social work. In the end, one decisive factor will be to what extent, in the long term, it will be possible to translate the high expectations of the approach into research projects, which then lead to significant societal changes in favor of the addressees of social work.

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Hemma Mayrhofer Scientific managing director (member of executive team) of the IRKS—Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology, Vienna; lecturer at the University of Vienna, Department of Sociology; main research interests: social inclusion and exclusion, social work and youth work, disability rights & disability studies, conflict research, evaluation research in the social sector.

Natalia Waechter Professor in Social Pedagogy at the University of Graz, Austria, Institute for Educational Science (tenure track), and project coordinator at the Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich, Germany, Institute for Education and Socialization Research. From 2010-2018 she was VP for Europe and the Russian Federation of the Research Committee 34 (Sociology of Youth) of the International Sociological Association (ISA); main research interests: youth and generations, identities, social inequalities, research of migration and ethnic minorities, education and digital media, international comparative empirical research.

Johannes Pflegerl Head of the Ilse Arlt Institute for Social Inclusion Research and Deputy Academic Director Social Work (MA) at St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, Department of Social Sciences; main research interests: social work with elderly people and their relatives, gerontology, Ambient Assisted Living (AAL), social inclusion and exclusion, family sociology.