

Towards getting it right: Participatory action research (PAR) with an advocacy organisation

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In this investigation, a participatory action research approach was employed to study and develop practices within an advocacy organisation. Participants' experiences were explored to assess the impact and value of this type of research approach in community settings for people with high support needs. Results of the study make an important contribution towards understanding the complexities surrounding the implementation of the rhetoric of empowerment and participation, and highlight implications of these complexities for community psychology research and intervention processes.

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) provides exciting opportunities to conduct research in new and different ways. While it is characterised as research that involves participants in setting the agenda, in gathering and analysing data and controlling the use of outcomes, PAR is significant not so much for its methodologies, but rather for its ability to develop an alternative system of knowledge production (Reason, 1994). PAR has the potential to produce knowledge and action that is of direct use to a community, as well as raising consciousness amongst those involved (Freire, 1970). Such methodologies are advocated because they have the potential to be transformative. As well as opening up possibilities, however, PAR can be difficult for a whole host of reasons.

In this paper, the authors explore the values that underpin PAR, and particularly its ability to lead to empowerment and social change. The concept of empowerment resonates at the core of the community psychology discipline, however, the term has been used to such an extent that it has almost lost any substantive meaning (Ife, 1995). This has many implications for researchers seeking to work in empowering ways, and demands that we critically reflect upon our actions to explore how they may also be experienced as disempowering.

Integral to this paper are the experiences of the first author (HR) of conducting a PAR project with an advocacy organisation (Radermacher, 2006). Illustrative examples

taken from that project are used to provide some insight into the tensions and challenges that emerged in the process of translating principles of PAR into practice. In so doing, the authors attempt to demystify the research process and pave the way for more effective and empowering research practices. Whilst this paper predominantly draws on Harriet's field work experiences, both authors' were intimately involved in the study's conceptual interrogation and interpretation.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to document details of the study in depth, suffice to say that in accordance with a PAR approach, and in collaboration with Harriet, the organisation identified the need for a strategic plan. The subsequent planning activity became the vehicle for examining the value of PAR as an empowering research tool, which was also the focus of the study.

Participatory Action Research: Values and Principles

Four key values of PAR are empowerment, support and relationships, learning and social change (Bostock & Freeman, 2003; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998; Whyte, 1991). These correspond closely to the ten values guiding community research and action that were identified by Fawcett (1991). These include the importance of building collaborative and anti-colonial relationships with participants, and Fawcett's (1991) assertion that research should contribute to change and that participants should be supported throughout the process. In

having such a strong value base, it is perhaps not surprising that community psychologists have been attracted by participatory approaches to community research (Bostock & Freeman, 2003; Duckett & Fryer, 1998).

The trend towards increasing the participation of disabled people in research can be linked with the development of user-involvement, citizenship and consumer participation (Zarb, 1995; cited in French & Swain, 2004). Conducting participatory research encourages participants to share the research process, and presents a way to overcome and address the exclusion that disabled people have faced in the past. Balcazar, Keys, Kaplan and Suarez-Balcazar (1998) outlined four principles of PAR when conducted in collaboration with disabled people: firstly, the active role of disabled people themselves in articulating, defining, analysing and solving an identified problem; secondly, disabled peoples' direct involvement in the research process which facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of their social reality; thirdly, the role of the research towards increasing disabled peoples' awareness of their own strengths and resources; and finally, the opportunities for improving the quality of life for disabled people. In summary, a participatory approach has been described as one where "the process is owned and shared by all participants, generates much more than just data; it brings about positive changes amongst individuals and groups as a whole" (Dockery, 2000, p. 109).

Others have also highlighted the benefits of a PAR philosophy. For example, it has been argued that PAR researchers and practitioners solve problems using local resources and participants (White, 2005), and it offers the flexibility necessary to adapt to particular situations and the different people involved (French, 1994). As well as the knowledge gained in the form of outcomes and findings, there are additional benefits gained from the process of the research, such as the relationships formed. These may be over and above what is learned from the research itself (Archer & Whitaker, 1994). Similarly, Speer, Jackson and Peterson (2001), noted how focusing "on participation within organisational and community contexts allows not only for opportunities to enhance

empowerment but to support a sense of community or the connections between individuals so that a collective sense of trust, investment, and action can be developed" (p. 279).

Beyond the role of PAR in fostering learning and creating change is its ability to empower participants through building relationships and supportive structures. The appeal of PAR is that in claiming to 'empower' it has the potential to address the profound inequalities in power between the participants and the researcher. White (2005) noted how PAR changes the traditional research dynamics whereby the researcher becomes the learner, and the participants are experts due to their experience. Participatory research, then, attempts to change the social relations of the research process (French & Swain, 2004).

Power, and empowerment, are core concepts of community psychology (Serrano-Garcia, 1994) and the challenges that they pose in practice are innumerable. Reason (1994) wrote:

As soon as we touch upon the question of participation we have to entertain and work with issues of power, of oppression, of gender; we are confronted with the limitations of our skill, with the rigidities of our own and others' behaviour patterns, with the other pressing demands on our limited time, with the hostility or indifference of our organizational contexts. We live out our contradictions, struggling to bridge the gap between our dreams and reality, to realize the values we espouse.... 'How do you actually do it?' It is as if many people feel intuitively that a participatory approach is right for their work and are hungry for stories and accounts that will provide models and exemplars. (p. 2)

In this account, Reason (1994) manages to convey the appeal of a participatory process as well as highlighting the many challenges of actually making it a reality. PAR and the notion

of participation carry strong positive connotations for many people, and yet while it is very easy to espouse participation, it can be incredibly difficult to practice ‘genuinely.’ However, while it is certainly hard, it is not impossible (Reason, 1994) and the challenge lies in doing it well. There is a need to be courageous enough to openly acknowledge the limitations and dangers of our research practices (Lennie, Hatcher, & Morgan, 2003). And by noting and addressing barriers along the way, in collaboration with participants, temporary obstacles can become vehicles to create new learning and strengthen partnerships (Reason, 1994).

It appears, therefore, that a participatory process is insufficient alone to ensure positive outcomes. Rather, a “thorough analysis of the dynamics of oppression” is the key to the process if one is to ‘somehow get it right’ (Whitmore, 1994, p. 98). Successful PAR is more than simply collaboration between researchers and participants. Central to its success is the ability of researchers to interrogate the dynamics of empowerment. “Empowerment is not a stable or global state of affairs. Some people feel empowered in some settings but not in others, whereas some people work to empower one group while oppressing others along the way” (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005, p. 98). This relates to Riger’s (1993) discussion about ‘what’s wrong with empowerment’, where she suggests that with psychology’s traditional focus on the individual, empowerment has often been regarded in terms of personal control. Having such an individual agenda may therefore compromise and conflict with more community orientated goals, such as collaboration and connections with others (Riger, 1993). While participation is integral to the empowerment process, Riger has emphasised the problem of equating empowerment with participation, cautioning against assuming that changing procedures will lead to changes in the distribution of resources. Importantly, Riger also highlights that a sense of empowerment at an individual level may have little effect on the actual distribution of power, particularly within organisational and political contexts.

Clearly, our goals for empowerment, and the ways we try to seek to empower, are shaped

by what we understand empowerment to be, and the intersection between empowerment at both an individual and broader macro level. The next section explores some of the complexities involved in trying to promote an empowerment agenda in the context of PAR. The implications for researchers who have tried to promote empowerment by minimising the barriers created on account of their ‘professional’ status are explored. On closer inspection, our good intentions may not be quite as empowering as we anticipated and hoped for. Such revelations may demand that we search for ways to interweave critical reflexivity into our participatory research approaches.

Empowerment or Disempowerment

PAR can break down the power of professionalism, which helps to explain why some researchers feel that it is ‘intuitively’ right for their work (Reason, 1994). A fundamental aspect of PAR is its potential for empowering participants (Stone & Priestley, 1996). It is a tool for empowerment, and an empowering research practice (Duckett & Fryer, 1998). Indeed, Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) asserted that PAR promotes group empowerment and self-reliance among disabled people, shifting the balance of power and control over resources and decision-making. The aim of such a collaborative research practice is to demystify the research process to participants (Kerruish, 1995; Stewart & Bhagwanjee, 1999) and break down barriers created by expertise and professionalism. Whitmore (1994) recognised how her self-disclosure helped break down the barriers between herself and her participants. The underlying goal of this was to make the relationship between researcher and participants more equal and non-hierarchical (Reinhartz, 1992; cited in Lennie et al., 2003).

Despite these seemingly positive outcomes, however, involving community members in research, in particular disabled people, poses many challenges for community psychologists. Our values and issues around power remain critical factors to be continually aware of and reflect upon (Bostock & Freeman, 2003). Most importantly, it appears that using a participatory framework to alleviate historically entrenched power differentials caused by our professional status may not be working quite as we desired

(Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). As practitioners we need to recognise that our so-called ‘empowering’ practices may be somewhat paradoxical. For in attempting to be empowering to clients/participants, it might only serve to empower ourselves, and be central to the continued legitimacy of professionals and their interventions (French & Swain, 2004). Thus, empowering practices may also be disempowering.

In undertaking PAR, the researcher can assume that participants want or need to be empowered, and that the process is empowering (LeCompte, 1995; cited in Lennie et al., 2003). One of the reasons cited for developing relationships with participants (prior to and during research) is for its ability to empower them. However, developing relationships may have unintended negative consequences (Lennie et al., 2003). For example, it might make participants feel obligated to take part (Duckett & Fryer, 1998; Kerruish, 1995). Furthermore, initial negotiations with community leaders, or managers of organisations, may mean that participation by individuals becomes obligatory rather than voluntary (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). This can occur, for example, when a manager of an organisation thinks that the participation of her employees is so important that she makes it compulsory. Thus, in attempting to be empowering to participants, it may have the opposite effect.

Lennie et al. (2003) argued that empowerment and disempowerment can be viewed as intersecting discourses, which means that with empowering research it may also inevitably be disempowering. This multiplicity of discourses may relate to what Rappaport (1981) noted as the paradoxical nature of empowerment. It has been suggested that the relationship between researcher and participant may never be equal (Archer & Whitaker, 1994; Lennie et al., 2003) and that the drive to make the process participatory, equal and empowering is fraught with obstacles and contradictions (Lennie et al., 2003). To examine these contradictions in more detail, Lennie et al. (2003) looked at the different discourses used by researchers and the participants. These included the

‘egalitarian’, the ‘academic expert’ and the ‘care and connection’ discourses. They noted that while each discourse had both empowering and disempowering impacts, that certain empowering aspects of some discourses served to conflict with the empowering aspects of others. For example, an ‘egalitarian’ discourse was one where inclusive language and strategies were used to position researchers as non-experts and as ‘equals’ in the research relationship. This clearly conflicted with the ‘academic expert’ discourse that was used, for example, during the introductions and to describe the nature of the project. While the expert discourse was noted to have some disempowering effects (such that it emphasised the differences in power, knowledge and expertise between the researchers and the researched), it was also seen to be empowering in the way that it gave the project greater credibility and validity. The ‘care and connection’ discourse was illustrated by the desire to foster friendships, trust, mutual care and support, and this clearly became problematic when researchers had to assert their authority as facilitators.

Community psychologists, with a focus on the notion of empowerment, have been keen to emphasise the role of communities themselves in determining their own future (Webster, 1986; cited in Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). In their attempts to address oppression, community psychologists have employed a number of strategies to attempt to shift the balance in power. One such strategy was to ‘give psychology away’ (Miller, 1969) by disowning their expert status (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002) and essentially belittling their own knowledge and skills. Claims to ‘know nothing’ and enter a community with a ‘blank slate’ can lead to confusion for clients and the community, and create the illusion that they have no agenda (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). However, in reality community psychologists enter with a lot of assumptions, and while they try not to impose their own ideas on the communities within which they work, to some extent it is unavoidable. A researcher has a locus of expertise that they bring with them, and even if they contest to having no agenda, it is still an agenda.

There are numerous instances where authors have referred to the unavoidable inequities in power between workers, or ‘professionals’, and their clients (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Healy, 2000; Rees, 1991). Hart, Jones and Bains (1997) provide an example of attempts to promote positive social change in a particularly disadvantaged community by way of a community consultation process. They noted the ‘paradox’ whereby service providers appeared to employ methods of empowerment that actually disempowered their consumers, resulting in paying ‘lip service to the notion of empowerment’. Thus, “organisations are effectively creating a myth of empowerment by ignoring consumer demands; making closed decisions; not providing alternative choices; breaking promises; withholding information; not providing adequate support” (Hart et al., 1997, p. 197). Therefore, despite the desire of service providers to have local participation, the community’s interest and belief in the process waned as they failed to see that their contribution was acknowledged or valued.

This discussion highlights that in pursuing the goal of equity it has become somewhat problematic, and may actually, unintentionally or otherwise, lead to disempowerment as opposed to empowerment. Emphasising the skills of the community and making assumptions that their knowledge is useful, for example, may put undue pressure on the community to perform and to solve their own problems (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). It seems that community psychologists may be unaware of the responsibility of professional knowledge (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002), and in relinquishing themselves of any responsibility, the community then has no avenue to criticise researcher involvement, rendering them more powerless. In this context, therefore, power is being equated with responsibility. In developing joint ownership of the research process, it can have the effect of reducing professional responsibilities of the researcher if it were to fail.

Through attempting to fix what seems, on the surface, to be quite explicit and transparent imbalances in power, community psychologists may have failed to ignore the subtle and complex dynamics at work. This may have served to conceal the power dynamics, making them even

harder to address. Assumptions have been made that there is power in knowledge and that community psychologists have it to give away. In assuming there is power in knowledge certain strategies have been used to attempt to ‘rearrange’ knowledge, such as facilitation and raising awareness that a community’s own knowledge can be powerful (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). Foucault (1997) argued, on the contrary, that power is dynamic and relational. Moreover, that it cannot be localised or held in one place, but rather that it is constantly being negotiated, and exists between people and between groups. Hence, such strategies to ‘rearrange’ knowledge may prove to be redundant. This has many implications for community psychologists who seek to work with a transformative agenda.

The body of literature to which we have referred draws upon some very important issues for community psychologists to consider in their work with communities, particularly relating to the complexities of power. These may have many implications for the ways in which community psychologists negotiate entry and develop relationships with a community. In the next section, Harriet’s experiences of a research study are used to illustrate some of the tensions that emerged. In order to honour this, the following section is written from a first person perspective.

Background to the Study

With a desire to undertake some research with disabled people, I emailed an advocacy organisation in Melbourne, having found their details in a local library directory. The executive officer responded immediately with a warm welcome and encouragement to get involved. In anticipation that it would take several months alone to build up a relationship with the organisation and develop a research topic, this contact was made two years prior to the expected due date of the final research report.

To learn more about the organisation and discuss the logistics of working together, I initially met with the executive officer. Having established that it was my intention that disabled people themselves identify the focus of the research, I was invited to the next board meeting. The board of the organisation (all of whom were people with high support needs), the executive officer, and the administrative assistant all

attended this meeting. A space in the agenda was set aside for me to introduce myself, explain why I had contacted the organisation, and to gauge their interest in becoming involved.

The general consensus was that I was welcome, and that they were interested in getting involved. From this point forward, I became a regular fixture on the monthly board meeting agendas. There were two aims of this regular contact: 1) to establish and build a relationship and make myself known around the organisation; and 2) to inform them about the research process and to develop a research topic together. In addition to monthly board meetings, I met with a few of the board and staff members individually to discuss topics, ideas and areas of interest. Both members and I initiated this contact.

Based on my ongoing discussions with the organisation, I developed a list of potential research topics. This list was based on my own understanding of what some feasible research topics might look like. I presented these to the board at a board meeting six months after my initial contact. ‘Strategic planning’ was one of the six options for the research topic, as it was clear that staff and board members thought the organisation required more focus, and that there was a desire for change. While the organisation and I decided to embark on a strategic planning process, the six-hour planning activity that ensued as a result, over two days, may not have necessarily constituted ‘strategic planning’ as defined in the literature (as it is often a much more comprehensive and long-term activity). However, it was deemed appropriate to continue referring to it as ‘strategic planning’ as that was the preferred term as identified by the organisation.

Whilst assisting the organisation to develop a strategic plan had the potential to ensure that my involvement led to some tangible and useful outcomes for the organisation, it also served to compromise the participants’ actual involvement in the research itself. Figure 1 provides a pictorial representation of how the strategic planning was placed in relation to the wider research process. The fact that strategic planning was an organisational activity meant that participants did not necessarily perceive it as a research process. Furthermore, whilst participants may have identified a focus for my involvement with the

organisation, Chris and I actually developed the research question. In this way, the strategic planning process was used as a vehicle to explore the research question, which aimed to examine the value of participatory action research as a research tool for ‘empowering’ disabled people. I explored the experiences of participation (both of the participants and myself as the researcher) – in particular, the barriers to participation. This was based on the assumption that exploring the barriers to participation would reveal something about the empowering (or disempowering) nature of the research process.

I employed a purposive sampling technique whereby all 12 people actively involved in the organisation (five male and seven female) were invited and agreed to participate in the research. Six of the participants were active board members all with high support needs associated with physical impairments. The remaining six were current staff working full and part-time at the organisation (one executive officer, three advocates, one project worker, and one administrative officer). Participants’ ages ranged between about 24–50 years.

Participants were individually interviewed both prior to and after the strategic planning activities. All participants gave written and informed consent to be interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured which gave participants the opportunity to raise issues that were of importance to them. The initial interview broadly addressed two areas: firstly, the participants’ understandings of strategic planning, and their views on the current and future direction of the organisation; secondly, how they perceived their roles, and the existing barriers to participation within the organisation. The follow-up interview focused on the participants’ experiences of being involved in the strategic planning activities and the research process more broadly, and also their views regarding the strategic planning document (which was produced as a result of the planning process).

As part of the process, I also organised two sessions (one with staff and one with the board) for participants to respond to and make changes to the strategic planning document. Two years later, having submitted my thesis for examination, I also returned to the organisation to present the key findings of the research.

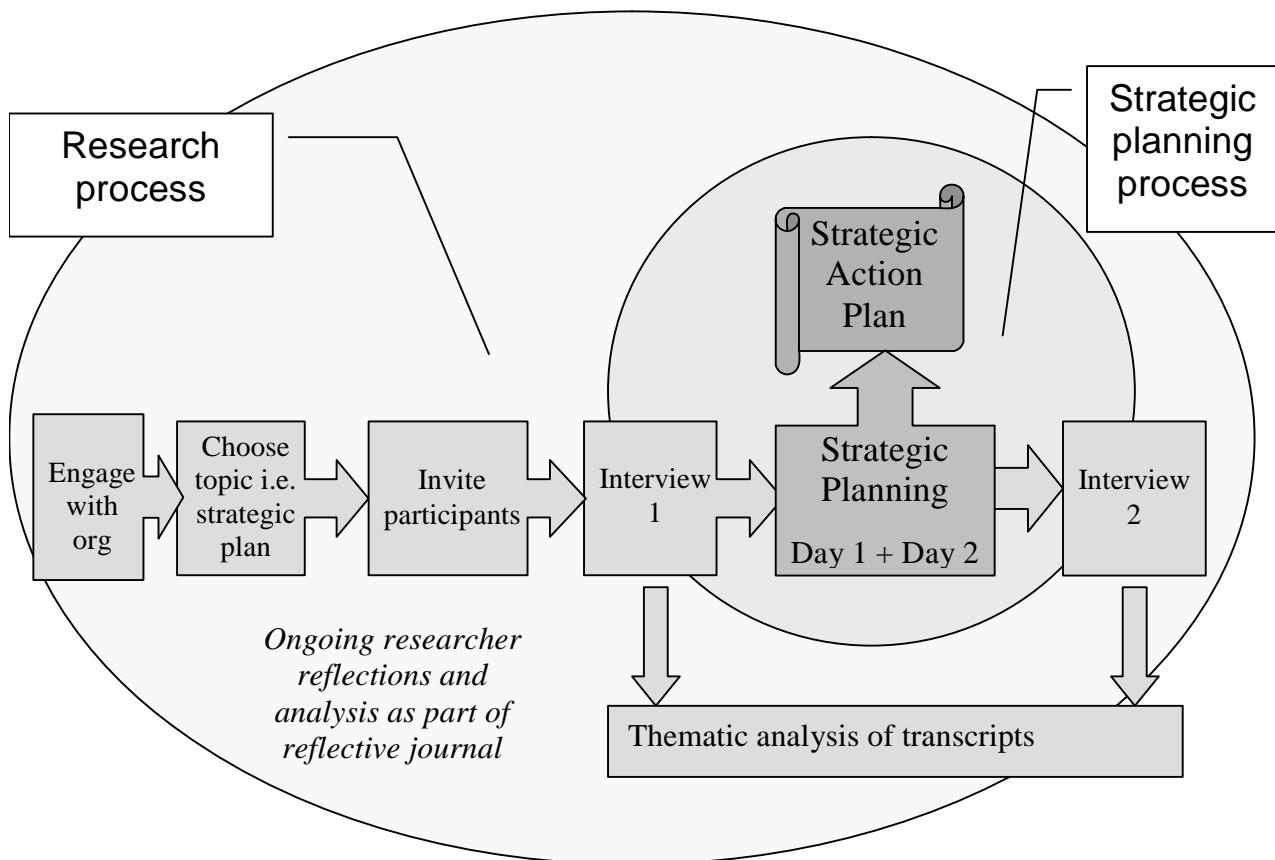


Figure 1. Strategic planning as part of the wider research process

Issues and Tensions: Illustrative Examples

Many aspects of the research process may have served to disempower as opposed to empower participants; three of which are illustrated here, as well as the broader role of decision-making. The first relates to my initial contact with the board of the organisation. In nearly all my initial addresses to the board, I emphasised my aims for the research, and what I wanted my role to be. I highlighted that in having a flexible agenda, my aim was for the board to identify what was of interest to them. I explained that in this way the research might be more meaningful than if I was to have come in and dictated what I, myself, wanted to research. In this way, the research issues would generate out of the lived experiences of disabled people themselves and address their own concerns (Balcazar et al., 1998).

My approach encouraged some people to raise their own topics of interest, and everyone

present expressed at least one issue that they were interested in or, at the very least, they supported someone else's contribution. In some ways I felt that this was a very positive process. It allowed everyone to speak and to be heard, and it enabled everyone involved to establish a working relationship. However, while I could claim that the idea to develop a strategic plan for the organisation was generated through a lengthy participatory process, I was not convinced that the process was an entirely positive and empowering experience for participants.

In retrospect, I felt that a different approach may have led to more empowering outcomes. The following is an extract from my reflective journal:

If I was to do it again [the research], I would try and steer it from the beginning – give something for people to play with instead of an open slate. But it has taken this long to

realise that they [the board] don't work in that way [i.e. without a set agenda].

Reflective Journal (08-09-03)

My reflection illustrates two important points. The first relates to participants' expectations as to my role, and their level of knowledge, comfort and familiarity with the way in which I proposed to work. The second is that I believed that there was a certain culture within the organisation that determined how decisions were made, and this actually presented a barrier towards working in the way that I had envisaged. These two points are inter-related.

This first point relates to what Tomlinson and Swartz (2002) described as psychologists' need to be aware of the responsibility that their professional knowledge brings, and the problematic nature of claiming to have no agenda. On entering the organisation, and attempting to work with a 'blank' slate, I was also assuming that participants had a level of knowledge, comfort and familiarity about working in this particular way. However, I felt that participants were not prepared for, or given enough support to, work in such a way. This approach might well have served to overwhelm and disempower them, as Tomlinson and Swartz (2002) cautioned. Furthermore, I doubted my skills in facilitating and managing participants' responses. For example, when participants did proffer ideas and topics of interest, I felt that if I were better able to encapsulate those ideas and feed them back in a way in which everyone present could understand and work with, it might have been a more productive and empowering process for everyone. PAR assumes a certain level of skill in facilitation and coordination, and for this reason I believe that facilitation emerged as one of the most critical aspects for promoting meaningful and equitable participation, and the potential for empowerment.

This issue relates to the second point, that of organisational culture. Due to historical reasons, practices and procedures are done in certain ways at the organisation, and as an outsider it can be very difficult to introduce new ways of working and doing things. Participants identified historical organisational practices as presenting barriers to participation, and my own experience at the organisation concurred with this view. However, despite acknowledging that there may be inefficient procedures in effect (e.g. lack of clarity about procedures, ad hoc decision-making etc),

they remain extremely difficult to change. Furthermore, in some cases, it is not clear in whose interests it is that they should change. For instance, at many points in my attempts to address the board and make a decision about which topic to choose, people got up to make coffee or leave the room for a cigarette. While I respected that this was the way things were done at the organisation, it did not make group decision-making easy, as not everybody was aware of the whole content of discussion. In this instance, it would probably have been inappropriate and destructive to enforce a situation whereby people had to remain in the room at all times. The tension that arose between wanting to respect the ways of the organisation (because they were probably there for good reason) and yet also recognising the inefficiency of certain procedures emerged continuously throughout the process. We highlighted this as a key issue for researchers who are attempting to work towards social change and yet who also value building partnerships.

Another point at which I tried to make the process more empowering for participants occurred, for example, in my attempts to keep participants informed. While the interviews may have provided a good opportunity to relate to participants, on a one-to-one basis, and directly address their concerns, outside of this space it proved to be more challenging. Throughout the process, I distributed information 'updates' to participants. Early on, this information consisted of preliminary ideas about the strategic planning structure, and planning dates. Towards the middle and end, this information was about the content of the strategic planning discussions, the strategic plan itself, and general information about the research process. However, I found that the delivery and format of the information that they received depended on each participant's role in the organisation, and their preferred methods of communication. For example, staff members usually received hard copies on their desks at work, while board members with email accounts received information electronically. I felt that board members without access to email could not participate and be kept informed in the same way. While I made an effort to fax one board member, and made specific arrangements to meet with another, I felt that in particular, these two

participants were the least engaged with the process, and consequently may have felt disempowered. Moreover, one board member had a visual impairment, which meant that he relied on verbally transmitted information.

The final illustration of a potential disruption to the empowerment process related to my preliminary contact with the executive officer. While this was an important and key relationship in the study, which enabled access to the organisation and ongoing support from them, it also may have served to undermine my relationships with other participants, and impact on what they were willing to share and contribute. And, as Tomlinson and Swartz (2002) alluded to, having the executive officers' approval may have meant that participants' involvement was motivated more out of an obligation than a voluntary desire. Furthermore, becoming a part-time employee within the organisation during the lifetime of the research may have also had a significant impact. It was interesting to hear from one participant that my status as an employee had impacted on how people responded to me. He noted that as an employee, I was now considered more of an insider, and with that, I was now perceived to be at the 'mercy' of the organisation's hierarchical forces. Specifically, this meant that my integrity and loyalty to other participants might have been compromised due to becoming answerable to the executive officer as were all the other staff participants.

The role of decision-making

Decision-making processes were clearly an integral and challenging part of this PAR study. If participants are given the opportunity to choose in which way they want to participate and how much decision-making power and responsibility they take on, then this may be when it has the most potential to be empowering. However, individual decisions were not necessarily supported at the collective level. Thus, the empowering experience of having the opportunity to make individual decisions may have been transformed into a disempowering experience when one's decisions were rejected at a group level. This relates to the tension that Riger (1993) noted whereby empowerment at an individual level

does not necessarily lead to empowerment as a group or organisation.

Providing opportunities for people to participate and make decisions in this study raised many challenges for me, and certainly, there were several ways in which I may have maximised the possibility for more empowering outcomes. For example, establishing some guidelines with the organisation at the beginning of the process may have served to build a framework for the research process. These guidelines in turn may have identified what kind of information would be useful for participants to receive, how they would have liked to receive it and have their feedback managed, and what types of decisions needed to be made and by whom.

Balcazar et al. (1998) noted that one of the positive consequences of PAR is that all participants (researchers included) develop a more critical view of the world. This may lead to participants criticising their relationships with the researchers, and the research process itself. One potential target for critical reflection could have been in relation to people's roles and positions within the organisation and the research process itself, and the impact this has on decision-making. For example, being a researcher in this study, I was presented with many opportunities to make decisions about the shape of the research. Likewise, the executive officer, by account of her position was also afforded certain opportunities, as well as constraints. This is best illustrated by highlighting the conflict of interest through having an executive officer that was required to support the board, to fulfil their duties as board members, whilst at the same time having a board that was dependent on the executive officer for setting the agenda.

In reflecting upon the disproportionate influence that certain people had over decision-making, it may have enabled us to minimise the experience of exclusion and disempowerment. Two staff participants certainly acknowledged these dynamics, but it could have been useful to involve and engage others in such a discussion.

Our experiences are intricately related to the roles and positions we assume; what, how, and why we do the things that we do are shaped by the social, cultural, ideological spheres that we occupy. If this form of critical thinking can be integrated into the research process, then the

values of PAR as described by Nelson et al. (1998) may be realised.

Towards Getting it Right

In this study, I set out to undertake research in more empowering ways than has occurred in more traditional disability research. In accordance with PAR principles, strategies included encouraging participants to identify and define the focus of the research themselves, keeping them continually informed about developments, and involving them in decision-making. In this way, I hoped that participants would feel valued and respected and that it would be a more meaningful and useful experience for participants. It may even lead to other positive outcomes such as strengthening existing relationships amongst the team, developing a greater sense of ownership within the organisation, and eventually lead to action and social change (Archer & Whitaker, 1994; Speer et al., 2001).

Employing a participatory research approach, however, was not the panacea that I had imagined it would be at the outset. Rather, I discovered that at the same time as opening up the potential for empowerment, I created other avenues for disempowerment. I utilised a combination of academic, egalitarian and care and connection discourses to facilitate a participatory and empowering experience. However, as Lennie et al. (2003) cautioned, implementing all three discourses simultaneously does not necessarily lead to empowering outcomes. Claiming that the participants and I were all 'equals' in the research relationship when I clearly had more decision-making authority and an academic report to write provides just one example of how an attempt to be empowering may have been compromised. Ultimately, of course, it is not for researchers and practitioners to say whether a process is empowering. Instead, that is a role for participants. And even then, given the multi-faceted and complex nature of the phenomenon of 'empowerment', we might find that there are many different and contradictory accounts.

Despite the challenges that researchers face in attempting PAR, the potential benefits for involving disabled people appear to

outweigh the limitations (Balcazar et al., 1998). Therefore, as Reason (1994) inferred, we have a responsibility to persist, with ongoing commitment and integrity, no matter what obstacles emerge. If participation is an ideal to which researchers aspire, then it may be imperative for researchers to critically reflect on the realisation of participatory principles (French & Swain, 2004). French and Swain (2004, p. 24) suggest that, in developing processes of critical reflection, two key questions need to be addressed: "The first question is: does the research address the concerns of disabled people themselves? Second, does the research promote disabled people's control over the decision making processes which shape their lives?" Reflecting upon these questions can perhaps address why I felt that the research failed to live up to my expectations for, despite my efforts, in many respects the answers to these questions are 'no'.

Ultimately, I felt that I struggled to make a difference and achieve my goal to enact the principles and values of PAR into practice. I approached the organisation with certain expectations about how the process would unfold. I implemented several strategies in order to facilitate participation, made the process as transparent as possible, and attempted to equalise research and organisational relationships to bridge the gap between myself, as the researcher, and the participants. Certain practices and deeper cultural patterns, however, appeared to interfere; patterns and practices that were resilient, and resistant to change, such as decision-making hierarchies, and attitudes to academic status. This served to compromise the transformative capacity of this PAR approach. Thus, based on this experience, it seems that while a commitment to the values of participatory research is important, it may be insufficient to transform entrenched and oppressive power relationships and structures.

This study indicates that the ability and capacity to be critically reflective may assist researchers to enhance the potential of PAR to bring about transformative change. Specific resources that may be required to foster this capacity include: (1) an openness to be challenged and to critique our own practices; (2) an awareness of critical theoretical and

conceptual frameworks (e.g. social model of disability, participation, organisational change, ways on understanding power); and (3) having critical reflective partner/s to continually challenge our ideas and actions.

In this study, critical reflection enabled the demystification of some aspects of the research, and to support important observations that while certain research approaches can be empowering, they can also be disempowering (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2002). The practice of critical reflection is much more than simply incorporating personal subjectivity into the research process (Parker, 2005). In addition, it demands that researchers interrogate their ideologies, assumptions and values and acknowledge that they are dynamic beings, intricately interconnected with their social environment. Being embedded in social, political, cultural contexts with different group memberships (e.g. gender, race, sexual orientation, ability and education) afford researchers different levels of power and privilege. Researchers cannot assume that simply by conducting PAR it will lead to empowering outcomes and experiences. Rather ongoing examination of the dynamics of the research process is required before we are going to get it just right.

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