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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

SPHERES OF PARTICIPATION AND ASPECTS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN FIELDS OF SOCIAL WORK

Whereas the discussion in the past was mainly related to political participation and volunteering (Walther, 2010), the recent discussion links participation to a general shaping of the society (Heimgartner, 2009). To gain an overview, different collections of fields of society are in use, e.g. Guggisberg (2004) differentiates between economic, social, cultural and political dimensions. Also a similarity to the capital forms in sociological tradition is evident (Lederer, 2005). In social work we can find this high variety of participatory and change-related themes as well.

Credo of a Common Producer-Cooperation

Practical social work is enlarging the possibilities of implementation of participation. For instance, the orientation to the principles of the United Nations convention on children's rights leads to a screening of all steps during the case procedure in children and youth welfare, on which basis decisions are made for which a consensual cooperation of professionals and clients is necessary. Accordingly, different standards of institutional care arrange at different transitions the inclusion of the children and youth in the decision processes (e.g. Quality4Children, 2002). This requirement is moreover often accompanied by an educational task. The competences of children and youth should be increased, so that they are able to play a serious part in appropriate methodological involvement. Similar perceptions can be made in social work with different target groups. Frequently, a common co-production is established, which means that according to an orientation to "a draft into the open" (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2004, p. 31) processes are negotiated, options are made visible, and agreements are made on the basis of aims and action steps. As a further example, the community workers ensure that community members articulate their interests. After this, common attempts are launched to shape the community and society on individual, social, and political levels and in different contexts (Sing & Heimgartner, 2009). The transfer of such a cooperative thinking seems to be an obvious, ethical demand for congruency in the empirical research of social work.

Also, in the research area it is valid that social research serves the interests of the research group not only primarily, but it should broadly achieve the knowledge and action needs of the population with regard to their perspectives and aims. A lot of research details, such as the research question, methodological instruments, research design, and the interpretation constitute empirical research. The need for participatory research is thus necessitated by the difference between the client and the professional perspective.

Characteristics of Participatory Research

Participatory research is not a research method – it is a strategy or a specific style of research which has roots in the very beginnings of action research in the 1960s (Berghold & Thomas, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Empirical research in the context of social work deals generally with methods how the demand of a subject status and the relevance of an individual construction can be fulfilled (e.g. narrative or half-standardized interviews). However, the democratic view has been strongly related to qualitative methods up to now, in which the answers are open to a large extent. That the research process itself is at least partly shaped (e.g. through the selection of an issue, the construction of instruments, decisions regarding design, the interpretation process) as a possibility of self-representation of specific target groups has nevertheless only quite recently been developed.

Regarding the broad spectrum of contexts, approaches and forms of participatory research in general, some common core principles can be identified:

– Not research on or about people but with people, the research process is influenced by participants;
– To link theory closer to practice and to perceive actors as experts of their everyday life;
– Research is seen as a trigger for social change and development and it is led by specific interests of various interest groups, esp. to empower marginalised persons;
– Research opens public spheres, which allow an open communication between various actors with a view to innovation.

These principles accept the subjectivity of the participants as co-researchers (Vogel & Truninger, 2012). Participatory research is when the research process itself or important parts of the research process are co-determined by persons who are involved as clients or professionals. Due to these different roles, we suggest to distinguish between participatory client research and participatory professional research. In contrast to this, client-related research is defined as research which uses a prepared method to contact or ask clients using prepared questions. In the case of professional-related research, the methods are directed to professionals. To point out the differences of participatory research, the elements of participation have to be specified.

Specification of Participation

Participation is a sophisticated construct. As a classical form of differentiation, the steps of participation due to the ladder of participation of Arnstein (1969) can be characterized. Following the modification of Wright, Block and Unger (2007) exploitation, command, information, hearing, inclusion, co-determination, transfer of decision, decision, and self-organization are ordered. If one looks at the scientific literature, it is noticeable that until now the labeling of the research access is simply done by "participatory research", although different forms and levels of participatory research are present, which should be shown in the following margin description. The categories have been developed jointly between the authors and are based on results from a round table discussion with experts at the CARN conference in Vienna 2011.

• Full vs. partly participatory research

A complete participatory research means that the whole research process is determined by clients or professionals. As an example for this method, the research workshop can be mentioned (Heimgartner & Pilch Ortega Hernandez, 2012). It is important in such a study that the thematic orientation, methodological design, and the definition of the sample, etc., are developed throughout by the democratic research team. A consequence of this form is that the initiating researchers cannot plan the research process in detail in advance. On the other hand, research projects exist in which single parts of the research are released. In an outreach project of Heimgartner (2001), juveniles performed the quantitative interviews. The concept and other methods of the project were left to the guiding researchers.

• Expertise of everyday life or professionalization

A further distinction is related to the acceptance of the existing research competences. On the one hand, researchers of participatory studies trust people's expertise of everyday life. Curiosity and a general comprehension of systematizing and interpretation are regarded as sufficient. Sometimes a process of a lingual and analytic adaptation happens that is not only seen as sufficient, but also judged as a sign of participatory research which adopts the results of research to the applied contexts. On the other hand, it is seen as necessary to impart competences. In such studies, phases of learning and acculturation are put in front to the research study to achieve a certain quality of research.

• Payment vs. privately volunteering or educational / employment frame

The role creation is also influenced by the question of payment. It makes a difference if the inclusion means volunteering from the client side or if an equal payment of all participating persons is guaranteed. On the side of the professionals, the distinction is often between an additional effort during the work time or a regular payment and a release for the research involvement. Although research projects are often confronted

with narrow financial limits, a payment signalizes appreciation and authentication on this level. Research is marked and honored through payment as an accepted work type of economic society. Identification with the research role can be more easily established in paid settings.

• Local vs. political intention of change

Not specifically, but especially relevant for participatory research is the goal dimension of the research. The question is if the dissemination concept is limited to the local, social environment of the participants or if it hunts a political intention for a broad social development. Political participatory research is an achievement which abandons the development terrain of single institutions and works towards corporate knowledge and restructuring. The participation achieves then a double perspective: the participation in the research project is combined with participation in the transition of society.

The following three research projects are examples of different participatory research settings, which refer to the above discussed principles and specific elements of participation. They show the methodological refinement as well as the intention of social change and they are based on different forms of collaboration and involvement trying to empower and emancipate different stakeholders.

YOUTH RESEARCH ON THE PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE

In this research project, it was attempted to implement participatory research strategies in order to explore the social realities of the perception of violence from a youth-perspective. One of the central aims of this project was to involve the young people in the entire research process (Kittl-Satran, 2011). Participatory elements are the following: Pupils could select between different offered research methods. They partly conducted the different methods and they could determine the duration of the research phases as well as the dissemination activities. Therefore this study can be understood as partly participatory research, in which the pupil's expertise of everyday life has been accepted. The process was initiated in an educational frame, but it had important parts of voluntary activities, as they also worked in their leisure time. The project indented to sensitize the young pupils in their perception of violence in order to change their behavior.

Goal of the Project

The project sought to answer the questions of what understanding youth have about the concept of violence and how they perceive violence in their own environments. The specification of the concept of violence was important because youth are often assumed to have the same understanding of "violence" as researchers. The goal of the project was to gain new knowledge about the perception of violence from the

point of view of youth by means of a task-based approach and various methods of analysis.

It was not the intention of this research project to intervene or to make suggestions for violence reduction at this school. Rather, the goal of this project was to consider the pupils as experts on their own living environments, and to include them in all aspects and phases of the research project, with the intended result that they become sensitized to violence as a theme as well as introduced to the process of reflection.

In participatory research, the researchers give up their position of power as far as possible, and the participants are actively involved in the research process. The participants are seen as experts on their own living environment, and thus the distinction between the roles of researcher and participant is eliminated. This means that there are many decisions to be made over the course of the entire research process. Questions must be raised as to how far and in what form the participants are able to participate as collaborative co-researchers.

Sample

This project was carried out in a secondary school in Austria, where pupils come from various social backgrounds. More than one-third of the pupils come from unstable family situations. In the past few years, there has been a noticeable rise in the readiness of pupils to resort to violence, most often in non-school settings, such as on the way to and from school, or during break periods.

Phases

The project was divided into four phases – preparation, data collection, data analysis and the presentation of results.

The *preparation phase* was used to inform pupils about the project, as well as to get their consent to take part in the study. It was also particularly important to convey to them their new roles as researchers, to accustom them to what this meant, and to help them understand the participatory style of their parts in the research project. This phase also saw the formation of our research team, and after a democratic vote, the Project Leader was elected. The pupils took on the role of Project Co-researchers. Next, a so-called "Code of Honor" was developed. The pupils established rules with which it would be possible to work together. In order to strengthen the pupils' identification with the project, they split into groups to brainstorm project names and logos, and the final decision for both was made according to a group vote.

In the *data collection phase,* various methods were used which put special emphasis on the subjective experience and points of view of the participants. Often, acquired knowledge is considered less important than the process of reflection, which requires various interactions between researcher and participant (Wrentschur, 2009). The fun of working together is part of the participatory research approach.

That individuals are recognized as equal partners, are taken seriously, and that they are included in the decision-making process are essential dimensions of life-experience.

To answer the first research question "What is violence?" three different exercises were used in order to grasp the pupils' understanding of violence. In the exercise, "Power, Powerlessness and the Abuse of Power", the pupils divided themselves into teams of two, and then acted out a role-play scenario which looked at the relationship between power and powerlessness. Through this simulation, the pupils were able to experience both the feeling of having power, as well as the feeling of being powerless, and they were also sensitized to the potential for the abuse of power in their own behavior. In the exercise "Faces of Violence", we discussed the fact that there are many kinds of violence, including verbal abuse. One part of this exercise included group work — with the boys and girls separated — to write an ABCs of bad words. This means that the pupils wrote an ABC-list of all the insults and bad words they could think of. In the following period of reflection we discussed the meaning of the words they used, which words were especially hurtful, and why those words in particular were so offensive. The third way in which we looked at youth definitions of violence was simply to ask the pupils to write their own definitions. They were each asked to finish the sentence "Violence is...".

To answer the second research question about "youth's perception of violence", a variety of approaches were used. Over a few weeks pupils kept "research diaries", in which they described what kind of behavior they found violent, where they observed violence, and how they felt at the time. Another approach to this question was to conduct interviews. These interviews, however, were not conducted by the project leader, but rather by the pupils themselves. We worked on the questions together, first brainstorming questions in small groups, and then voting on the final selection. The interviews were tape-recorded by the pupils. The pupils also conducted an "analysis of their own experiences with violence". On a scale of one to ten, the pupils anonymously rated the extent to which they were personally affected by violence, and how violent they would consider themselves to be. The next exercise was the "role-playing of violent situations". Groups of three or four pupils rehearsed violent situations that they had either observed or experienced. These scenes were performed and finally discussed.

The young co-researchers were also involved in the *process of analysis*. For example, pupils made a so-called Hit List of swear words by choosing the most common words from the previous list of insults. Using this list, pupils discussed which expressions were the most hurtful. In analyzing the definitions of violence, we tried to categorize the responses, which were divided by gender.

To disseminate our work together, the *project was presented* and its results were shared at the Social Pedagogical Symposium in Graz as a workshop run by ten of my co-researchers, who volunteered to present it. Summing up, the young pupils gained new perspectives on violence and they learned via reflections as researchers different competencies, which are useful in their everyday life.

FORUM THEATRE AS AN EMANCIPATORY AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHOD IN SOCIAL WORK

With the help of Forum Theatre – a creative and participatory theatre *and* research method – people directly affected by different social problems receive support in their own active (re)search on how to recognise, reflect on, and (if possible) change, their real social lives as a basis for possible suggestions and demands addressed to the relevant institutions and politicians. In this way, the drama-based, participatory research process offers and activates different levels of personal, social and political change and participation.

What is Forum Theatre?

Forum Theatre as a method of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1996; Wrentschur, 2003, 2008), can be described (in one reading) as an interactive form of theatrical performance in which the public is invited to take part in what happens on stage, to try out ideas for solutions or changes in a social or political conflict or a problem shown on stage. By watching Forum Theatre on stage, the spectators witness how social reality impacts on individuals. They also experience the unsuccessful struggle of people who fight for their concerns or rights. The forum phase presents the audience with an opportunity to become actively involved in the performance and to try and change the outcome of the story. They can assume the roles of those characters on stage that appear powerless in the presented conflict or fail to reach their desired goals. The new player can explore alternative pathways and behaviours to change the course of the story. The other actors stay in their roles and react to the change while maintaining the authenticity of their characters – the same as in real life. The theatrical space opens towards a "sociological experimentation", this interactive performance process can be understood as a collective brainstorming and researching process shared and made by many people, the audience, the spectators, that become *spect-actors* within this process. Results of this process may serve as impulses for many different forms of action, outside the 'aesthetic space'.

In another reading, Forum Theatre denotes a group dynamic triggered off by drama performance methods: A dynamic that is characterised by a collective search for ways of acting and changing stressful, oppressive situations or structures. Turning individual, subjective experiences into theatre and reflecting on them with the help of theatrical methods of learning and research leads to condensations in the shape of scenes and images that can be worked up creatively in many different ways. Forum Theatre claims to be an emancipatory method of research that combines processes such as gaining understanding and awareness raising with the search for change in one's individual, social and political real life. In those ways, Forum Theatre is in the tradition of emancipatory theories of education along the lines proposed by Freire (1982). It focuses first and foremost on (re)presenting, analysing and changing power relations, from the point of view of people who are 'powerless'. With reference to

the theory of habitus and capitalia by Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 2001) Forum Theatre on the one hand examines spaces for action within habitual constraints, and on the other hand, it puts the question about what capital resources can be activated to open up more opportunities for social participation and for socially disadvantaged groups. Forum Theatre can be also connected with the perspective of systemic theory, which opens perception to small impulses and changes and their sometimes big effects in complex social systems.

Forum Theatre as a Method of Participatory Research

Forum Theatre follows a participatory research paradigm, which may be understood as a reflective process of problem-solving undertaken by individuals and groups working with others in teams, or as part of a 'community of practice'. In this sense Forum Theatre is understood as an emancipatory process of research and of consciousness raising based on a tie-up of research and action. Understanding and insight are led by practical and political interests of personal, social and political change, and are intimately connected with people's practical lives. From a similar position based on similar interests, participants intervene in social reality to change it or to change their own attitude to it. In relation to research methodologies, Forum Theatre is connected to *Biographical Self-Reflection* (Gipser, 1996), *Sociological Experimentation* (Koch, 1988, p. 45), the concept of *Performance Ethnography* (Winter, 2009) and *Participatory Action Research* (Hale, 2007) that effectively intervene in social and political space.

As a method of participatory social research Forum Theatre enlarges and rounds off the range of research possibilities, bringing perspectives and viewpoints of participating stakeholders into the picture. It is the people directly concerned that create or shape a collective process that leaves no-one cold. Such research methods take their inspiration from everyday situations, from the everyday lives of stakeholders, theatrical performance and relevant reflection including the idea of finding new ideas and solution for actions on different levels. These processes of research, being both aesthetic and social, oscillate between real life social relations, and those of the theatre. The process itself follows phases and steps which can be summarized in the development of a Forum Theatre Play as a) a process of emancipation, creation, research and increasing awareness, b) the interactive performances as a collective (field) research with the public and c) evaluation, transfer and implementation of results in different contexts of practice and life contexts on personal, social and political levels. In all these steps and phases, the participants are actively involved. The project leaders/ facilitators put scenic/theatrical tools and research methods at participants' disposal, accompany them while they try out and make practical use of these, reflect results together that have accrued in the process, and carry out the task of making and keeping records. This means again and again structuring the process along the lines of the group's wishes and interests, fine-tuning decisions with the people concerned, asking new questions, and developing and applying relevant

settings in which everyone can participate, or in which as many people as possible can be actively involved.

Forum Theatre has been proved to be a method of research which supports emancipatory moves and promotes awareness and insight. Participants in this process have available the perceptions and knowledge generated in this way in a large measure and which may be used directly in the process of coming to terms with real life struggles – which are on-going. In this process, the body is an important tool for research procedures and for the incorporation of action-oriented insights based on those. Over and above these elements, participants have a strong voice in deciding about whether, and (if yes) how, results will reach the public domain, in the shape of acted-out scenes and texts, thereby creating loops that refer back to real life and social spaces (Wrentschur, 2008). Normally, participants are not involved in the organizational or financial framework of the projects, which is mostly done by the project executing organization itself. It was the rule that participants got paid for their research activities.

Forum Theatre in Fields of Social Work: Reflection and Results

In the last ten years, a series of Forum Theatres in the form of participatory research projects was made in fields of social work. In these projects, the participants who were concerned by certain issues or problems worked together over a longer period. These projects also had a political agenda: *Legislative Theatre with Homeless People* (2002 – 2004) in the city of Graz, Austria, looked at how Graz might improve its assistance to the homeless, and its homelessness policy. *ZusammenSpiel* (2008) took its stories out of conflict situations between users of a small park, who had different cultural, ethnical and age backgrounds. *The Human Right to Work* (since 2009) with migrants' experiences in Austria when searching for employment. *"No dosh to get round: Taking action against poverty"* (since 2007) is a project which contributes to improving the situation of people living in precarious financial situations and suggests ideas and propositions for political action. More than 100 different proposals and solution approaches of how to counteract (new) poverty were submitted in 2010. Some of them were discussed with politicians, stakeholders and lobbyists after a performance at the Austrian Parliament on 29.11.2010.

As a result of these projects it can be summarized, that Forum Theatre can be a powerful tool of empowerment and participation of people who are affected by a social problem. It helps them to build up a community and stimulates them to communicate their experience and to express their views on an issue which they all share. Each and everyone in a group need to collaborate intensively with all the others. This is not only a precondition for theatre work; it also creates new social contacts and relationships both within the group and outside it, thus increasing the group members' 'social capital'. Artistic-aesthetic practice may give leads and stimulate a successful coming-to-terms with one's life. It may suggest ways of designing or creating lives and lifestyles, through facilitating

distance to situations that are difficult, by encouraging the will to live, and by experiencing joy in life and creativity. Described through qualitative empiric research processes (Wrentschur, 2009), participants in the Forum Theatre projects were able to experience themselves not as victims, but rather as masters of their lives. Their powers of expression were enlarged, their individual reasoning and reflective skills were enhanced, and their feelings of self-worth were strengthened. The project became an experimental space for rehearsing alternative action in difficult, stressful situations. Participants' potential for action (in the sense of empowerment) increased, including their knowledge and skills in demanding and getting their rights – e.g. when approaching authorities or institutions for social support.

Forum Theatre encourages people to raise their own voice to look after their interests and wishes. Participants do their best and apply themselves to realize their individual and political objectives: Through Forum Theatre, they participate in various different social and political processes. In the course of all this, it becomes evident that Forum Theatre can be a medium for focusing on social problems, social inequality and social exclusion. Moreover, awareness, and a better knowledge of social institutions and the relevant political framework and conditions, will strengthen and increase the participants' cultural capital. Approaches such as those were applied in the mentioned projects. They can close the gap between the realities of people affected by poverty or other social problems and the strategies and programs of social policy. In this way, research is tied up with social development that raises 'social awareness': such consciousness activates social competences and stimulates processes of individual as well as political empowerment. The use of research procedures and processes that avail themselves of Forum Theatre methods is motivated by an interest in participants' insights, understanding, concerns, and in questions put by participants – rather than academic questions. In this way, stakeholders in a problematic social situation become participants who are themselves experts in, and of, their situation. By way of a play-back (as it were), through dramatic presentation that projects results back into participants' lives and into political structures, manifold social forces may be launched that might well be examined further. While individual experiences of the process may have been particular, one-sided and subjective, results do allow a certain degree of generalization. Their validity was seen in the relevant feedbacks and opportunities for transfer, with performances playing an important role (Wrentschur, 2008, 2010).

Beside the fact, that participatory research processes using Forum Theatre have to face different challenges like emotional, personal and/or group barriers which are sometimes related to difficult situations in the life of the participants, there remains one important structural problem: Forum Theatre opens a door to political stakeholders and creates a temporary dialogue between them and the participants of the projects. But sometime, it is hard to keep these doors open if there are no formally or legally institutionalized forms of political participation or if there is no general interest or attitude for this participatory approach.

THE DELPHI METHOD AS A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH TOOL

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 563) "participatory research offers an opportunity to create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practice in which they interact". Here, one main characteristic of participatory research is emphasized which tends to establish opinion-forming public spheres as conceptualized by Habermas (1998, p. 435) which allow an open communication between various actors with a view to social innovation. In the following, I will give an example as to how such a public sphere can be created in the area of social work by adapting the Delphi Method as a participatory research tool (Anastasiadis, 2012).

The research process itself was mainly initiated by professionals. They are involved as a consulting team throughout the whole research process (e.g. in developing the research design and instruments). Therefore the setting can be defined as partly participatory. Further a broader group of professionals is involved which bring in their everyday life expertise during their regular employment in several organizations. The combined research phases intend to create solutions on complex, social, economic and ecological questions on a strategic and regional-political level.

Background

The example refers to an on-going cyclic research project which aspires to invent future strategies for and with ecologically oriented work integration social enterprises – shortened ECO-WISE – in order to strengthen their strategic position and decision-making abilities as local actors of the global concept of sustainable development[1].

Briefly ECO-WISEs can be described as not-for-private-profit organizations aiming to improve the inclusion of poorly qualified people or persons with special needs and other societal problems into society by providing temporary jobs with on the job training and social support especially in ecological business areas like repairing or recycling services, waste management, organic food production etc. Previous field exploration activities[2] which were initiated by representatives of ECO-WISEs in Austria sought to make their contribution to sustainable development visible. The results of this reflecting phase indicate that they are important partners in handling current societal problems, like joblessness, ecological exploitation and economic exclusion. But the findings also show that their strength as local contributors to sustainable development is not yet tangible neither for internal nor external stakeholders (Anastasiadis & Mayr, 2010). With a view to their strategic position, the results signalize that they can play a decisive role in realizing national political concepts on a local level, like e.g. the promotion of green jobs or local agenda 21 projects and the improvement of placement options for basic income receivers. Moreover, ECO-WISEs can build bridges between those concepts which remain in different policy areas. Regarding their decision-making abilities,

the findings signify that they reside in a very dynamical environment between the market, the state and the community. Their existence and performance is closely linked with the development of Labour Market Policy as well as with the needs of the community and their ability to break into new markets where they can sell their services and products in their typical socio-economic way. The immediate challenge is to find ways of balancing these different demands. All in all the results indicate that concrete decisions and future strategies are needed to preserve and encourage their role as sustainable actors. To develop such future prospects an opinion-forming public sphere at a regional level[3] should be created in which all important stakeholders are to be involved. This goal which was defined jointly between the researchers and the consulting team of professionals marks the starting point of the participatory research phase which is divided into four steps – methodological setting, invitation of participants, loop of data generation and analysis, presentation of the developed decisions and strategies for further realization.

Creating a Public Sphere

In order to create such an opinion-forming public sphere, we decided to adopt the Delphi Method as the core approach of our *methodological setting*. As the name indicates, it draws its inspiration from the Greek oracle which was a source of central knowledge in the ancient world. It can be described briefly as a foresight research tool which uses the knowledge of experts on a specific topic to invent strategies on how to deal with it in the future (Häder, 2002). According to one of the first definitions, Delphi is not a genuine participatory research method. It is more "a method for structuring a group communication process which allows a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem and to come to a common decision" (Linstone and Turoff, 1975, p. 5). A classical Delphi project typically goes through several stages – starting with an exploration of the topic, followed by reaching an understanding on how a chosen group of experts views specific issues within the topic, leading to a loop of evaluative feedbacks of the group on their mentioned opinions and their estimations, till a common group decision emerges. In such classical Delphi settings, face to face meetings of the group are avoided. The data generation and evaluation is usually based on anonymous questionnaires. As to our intention of creating a forum where different stakeholders can discuss their views and develop common opinions, we have adapted the classical Delphi model for our purpose. It is divided into four stages and each is linked with a specific research question and methodological technique of data generation and interpretation.

Prior to a description of the methodological design, the *participants invited* are to be characterised. Steps towards a balanced selection of participants were set with the help of a stakeholder-analysis. We chose two groups of experts: Group 1 consists of chief executives officers of ECO-WISEs in Styria (23 persons). Group 2 represents a Think Tank which consists of decision makers in and outside of ECO-WISEs, such as representatives of the Labour Market Service, the local government from all three

policy areas (social, economic and environmental politics), the commercial market sector, ECO-WISEs (4 CEOs of the CEO-Group), interest groups like chambers and long-term job seekers, political program coordinators like regional-management services, and territorial-employment pacts, etc. (in sum 30 persons).

The *loop of data generation and interpretation* started with an identification of current and future issues ECO-WISEs are and will be confronted with in the next 10 to 15 years. The goal was to gain estimations from the inside. Therefore an anonymous questionnaire with open questions was sent to the CEO-Group. The content was analytically evaluated alongside social, economic and ecological issues and summarized as current and future scenarios by a research team with a further communicative validation through the CEOs being part of the Think Tank Group. The identified scenarios formed the basis for the following group-discussion with the Think-Tank Group. The goal was to clarify the understanding of ECO-WISEs out of several perspectives and to generate opinions on how the role of these organizations as sustainable actors can be improved. The data were evaluated through the research team with a reconstructive, discourse-analytical and comparative method in order to develop a typology on possible strategies alongside the different perspectives the representatives have provided. The next step is to achieve a feedback from the Think-Tank Group on how they perceive and estimate the developed strategy-typology in terms of a co-data-analysis. For this, a second group discussion will be arranged aiming to evaluate or modify the possible strategies. Further measures should be identified which will support their achievement. The last step includes a final feedback through the CEO-Group and the Think-Tank Group. With the help of an anonymous questionnaire they should select the most important strategies and measures alongside the criteria importance, chances of realization, and degree of innovation, etc.

After summarizing the results in terms of common decisions, final recommendations are prepared for experts and actors by the research team, which will be *presented* to a broader stakeholder group in order to enhance further realizations. Similar to an initiation ceremony, this presentation should mark the starting point of an upcoming action phase or new planning cycle – depending on the results.

Reflection and Introspection

The example reflects how an opinion-forming public sphere can be created through participatory research, how open communication can be initiated by adopting the Delphi technique and simply how "reality is made" in a democratic way, as Rauch pointed out (1979, p. 163). In this multi-level process decisions are jointly prepared, evaluated and modified by several internal and external stakeholders of ECO-WISEs in order to strengthen their strategic position and their abilities as actors of sustainable development.

A lesson we have learned during the on-going adventurous journey should be highlighted. The questions regarding research goals, who is going to be involved,

the degree of involvement, and how the data material is generated and analysed as well as how to deal with this often highly sensitive data are essential and critical aspects. The answers should ideally result from a dialogue between researchers and participants which marks the starting point and lasts throughout the whole process.

As previously mentioned, the research project was initiated by practitioners, which gives it a specific touch. From the very beginning, internal stakeholders are involved and they are highly interested in participating and bringing to bear their know-how, time and other resources, which in turn leads to fruitful exchanges especially when defining the goal in which direction and mode the future development should go. The following discussion on the prepared methodological design showed that it was too ambitious in the beginning. Regarding the time resources of the stakeholders, it will not be possible to involve them in the data analysis to the intended degree. The consulting team of professionals expected that the process would be more effective if the data analysis were done mainly by researchers with further evaluation and validation phases. Another crucial point was the first group discussion, where the CEOs already involved met the invited external stakeholders. As expected, a main section was to clarify the roles and expectations concerning the data analysis, validation and outcome and mode of publication. This was essential for the forthcoming steps, and it led to a re-design of the methodological setting. For example, the second group discussion was reframed for validation purposes instead of benchmarking the developed strategies. The benchmarking should happen in an anonymous way afterwards.

These experiences show that the methodological frames of participatory research are highly fragile and likely to be changed during the process. Transparency and awareness corresponding to the openness of the process and results are important rules of the game. From the researchers' point of view the preliminary conclusion is: although it is a process without a railing, it provides fascinating insights and encouraging prospects.

CONCLUSION

The examination of these examples shows the high variety of participatory research in fields of social work. Different forms, levels and intentions of participation can be found in the research designs. Despite this diversity all projects represent a democratic and emancipatory understanding of research which is based on self-representation and self-reflection in order to improve society. The manifold ways indicate that participatory research is a growing trend in this particular field, which goes hand in hand with the implementation of the "credo of a common producer-cooperation" in practical social work. Insofar this article can be understood as a preliminary collection of participatory research practice in social work, that should trigger discourse that further reveal the experience and potential of this particular research-style in this action field.

NOTES

1   According to the definition of the World Commission (1987) sustainable development should focus upon the improvement of social participation, economic equality and ecological awareness to the same extend.

2   Hereby 15 expert-interviews were made with persons from the inside and outside of the research field prior to a quantitative survey where 150 identified organizations and projects were questioned on their structural conditions whereof 60 answered. The questionnaire was developed in cooperation with the consulting team of professionals.

3   The outcome of an Austrian wide setting would have been too generic due to different regional conditions. The focus in this project is set on the region Styria, because we can find here a high degree of innovative co-operations between different stakeholders, which seems to be essential for a common decision making.

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