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BRIEF REPORTS

Professional Power Struggles in Participatory Research

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Journal of Participatory Research Methods

A hallmark of participatory research is its ability to overcome power imbalances and empower its participants through a sharing of power and decision making from design to dissemination. However, that is not to say that such sharing of power and decision making is unproblematic. This brief reports on one such experience of problematic power dynamics set within the legal profession and reflexively considers the positionality of participants on the power balance continuum.

Introduction

Issues of power are an intrinsic element of participatory research (PR) due to its collaborative nature and diverse motivations, which may differ between researcher and participants. PR is strengthened by jointly-negotiated agreements that ensure a sharing of power and decision making from design to dissemination. That is not to say that such sharing of power and decision making is unproblematic. Collaborative discourse should identify and ameliorate any power struggles, reflecting professional culture and desired outcomes as well as serving to maximize collaborative relationships. Consideration must be given to the effect of compromise within a collaborative approach as well as how reflexivity in the research process can rectify any potential problems or disadvantages that may result from such compromise. This paper is an account of practice in which I undertook participatory action research within a legal practice and in which I was insider-outsider, a known professional peer within the legal community. My positionality was found in the space between insider-outsider, neither one nor the other, but sometimes both (Ryan, 2015). In my role as researcher, this dynamic positionality brought underlying issues of power and control to the forefront. This paper considers the role of the researcher and researcher assumptions in PR and how a reflexive, respectful, and open dialogue can develop collaboration.

Background to this study

This paper is set within a participatory action research (PAR) project that took place within a law firm. I am a lawyer with a research interest in reflective practice. The PAR followed an earlier qualitative interview pilot in which I considered qualified lawyers' attitudes to lifelong learning and their understanding of, and engagement in, reflective practice. Following the pilot,

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one participant asked that I deliver a training course on reflection for their own law firm. The training transitioned into PAR as I was interested to explore an action learning methodology to afford those attending an opportunity to engage in a self-learning approach to reflective practice. I felt that the experimental nature of the approach to reflection training lent itself well to PAR. This project had two aims. First, to facilitate collective reflective discourse using an adapted action learning. Second, to consider whether engaging in a structured collective approach enabled a deeper reflective practice. The use of a PAR was chosen to facilitate collaborative (technical legal) knowledge production through socially constructed interaction that would bring (legal and reflective) practice insight to both the participants and myself.

(Self-)Selection of Participants

Within the participating law firm, the potential pool of participants included any qualified lawyer, irrespective of discipline or period of qualification. All members of the firm were invited to attend an information evening. While many were interested in the aims of the research, when tasked with the mantle of participation in design and analysis, they opted out. The participants effectively self-selected. Fifty interested solicitors attended the information evening, with eight solicitors opting to participate.

Having elected to engage in PAR, I envisaged a research process in which the participants themselves were active co-researchers, experts in their own communities (Ross, 2017) with a shared ownership and control of the research process. The engagement in the design process was initially considered to be restricted to the methods surrounding data collection. However, it is generally accepted that participants, as co-researchers, should be involved at every stage of the research process (Call-Cummings et al., 2019). This would involve making collective decisions about the aims of the research, the collection and analysis of data, and the use of findings.

Participatory Decision Making

Prior to the first PAR cycle, the participants were invited to an orientation meeting which discussed PAR methodology and engaged in participative decision-making and project design. The key feature of the design was that there would be three group meetings with intervening one-on-one meetings. The group meetings were comprised of the action learning sessions. I designed the format of the sessions (McDonald, 2021) while the participants designed the timing, location, duration, and frequency of the sessions. It was decided by the participants that the group meetings would not be recorded, either visually or audibly, but I was permitted to take notes for later conversion into narrative field notes. The one-on-one meetings, in which progress and format of the group meetings were reflexively discussed, could be recorded by any means I chose. This apparent contradiction can be explained with reference to the participant group and their concerns. The nature of the group discussions was to be such that lawyers were to verbalize their professional mistakes and missteps. Following an open reflective discussion, it was evident

that the participants had a high degree of trepidation as to how their contributions could be perceived and a natural discomfort being recorded. Separate and individualized one-on-one meetings allowed an objectivity that they felt comfortable having recorded. Reflexivity and trust in the group's decision making was a key factor in my gaining their trust. While the refusal to allow recording of the group sessions initially appeared to be the flexing of their participant power against my own data collection needs, it was instead evidence of their feelings of vulnerability within this unfamiliar process. PR enabled them to determine the research parameters according to their own comfort levels. This exercise of power is a tension of PR. As an outsider, I may not have been able to identify the apparent assertion of power as anything other than one of assertive control. However, as an insider-outsider I was able to be reflexive and engage in discussions to gain an understanding of the participants and their needs.

The theoretical approach taken during the project was based on Communities of Practice (CoP) theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A CoP is defined as a group of professionals with a commonality of purpose and problems. While the participants came from within the same law firm, they belonged to different departments coming together as part of this research as a new CoP. As a new community, the community rules were to be co-created. Given that community membership was new to all participants, I had assumed that the issue of group power would not be a factor; each member was a newcomer to this form of engagement, thus leaving their external status behind. The initial orientation meeting fostered the development of a sense of mutual trust between the participants. The development of trust is key to CoPs. Within the group design stages there were no overt issues of power disparity between the participants themselves. This is interesting for two reasons. CoP theory presents a conceptualization of a group whereby the peripheral members, that is the newcomers and less experienced "novices," are on the periphery of the group. Furthermore, the legal profession is somewhat hierarchical (Maister, 1982) and so again it was anticipated that the senior members of the group would have more power in the decision process. It is suggested that there may be several explanations for this apparent power parity. First, in this community all members were newcomers; it was a newly, explicitly-formed CoP in which all members had equal status, each taking a novice role and within the safe space of the PAR, leaving behind the "baggage" of status (Stoudt, 2007). Second, the purpose of the community itself was the engagement in reflective practice. In this regard, the junior members of the group had a greater theoretical knowledge of reflection having studied the same as part of an undergraduate degrees. Further, the power dynamic of me-vs.-them as outsider appeared to bind the group together as a cohesive, equal whole.

The navigation of power and positionality between the participants and myself as researcher had not been anticipated. My position within the newly-formed community was that of an insider-outsider; insider in that I was well

known to the participants and outsider in that I was not member of their firm. However, in structuring this new community and its rules of engagement, I was firmly seen as an outsider. Although there are several examples to support this proposition, I put forward two. First, in the open decision making about the methods to be used, it was agreed that while I could be present during the sessions, I would be unable to record the same. This was potentially problematic in that one of the purposes of the sessions was to obtain data for the research. However, the “problem” created was personal to me and my desire for data. For the participants, the purpose of the project was to facilitate collective reflective discourse and to develop their collective reflective practice. This is a typical action research “action aim.” The “theory aim” was to consider whether engaging in this action learning structured sessions enabled a deeper reflective practice. This duality in aims created a perceived potential dichotomy between “their” action aim and “my” theory aim. This exacerbated the potential me-vs.-them positionality. Taking a reflexive approach, and through open dialogue between the group and I, we were able to move towards each other’s position. Removing my pressure to obtain data and the participants’ obligation to be/provide data enabled the participants themselves to become more understanding of the theory development aspect of the PAR process and, as such, they permitted recording and data collection.

A second aspect of my outsider status was that of my role as facilitator. The group decided that while my presence was to some degree welcomed as a form of training, my role was to be in part a guide from the side rather than a member of the group. My initial “power” as researcher and “expert” was lost and my input in the decision-making process was to provide options and explanation. My prior assumptions had been that I would guide the design, offering insight and reasoning for each element. The participants would thus be able to discuss the various facets of the elements and agree on how the elements would come together. When reflecting upon the reality, my “disappointment” and feeling of “disconcertment” was essentially that I had lost control. My envisioned project was not the same project as understood by the participants. I essentially grieved for the research project I had imagined. Each aspect of the design of the project was considered and decided by the CoP. The power dynamics explicitly shaped the research design. It is common for research design to be an iterative process with the design subject to change as matters progress. Here, however, I saw a substantive change prior to the action element of the research process. However, this “substantive change” was the change to my own pre-existing vision of the project. In having such a firm vision, I, perhaps, had not entered PR with an open mind and in full acceptance of true collaboration. The exercise of participant power in a negotiated design is perhaps not to be unexpected when the participants are professional negotiators. Stoecker (1999) discusses the various roles of the researcher: Consultant, Collaborator, Initiator. Each often presupposes that the PR is research first, rather than a community development project. Here I had erroneously assumed I had initiated the project, when in fact I had

been asked to “train.” I had further assumed that I would be consulted as a knowledgeable expert, whereas it was the participants who, with their rich experiences and insider knowledge, were expert. Therefore, I must have been a collaborator—yet I was not part of the decision-making process. My initial feeling that my researcher power had been “lost” failed to consider that my “power” was in allowing the participants to exercise *their* power and shape *their* project and *their* development. The researcher’s power in PR is perhaps to be found in facilitating research that brings a positive change. In this sense, the researcher’s role is akin to an orchestral conductor.

Implications for practice

Overall, the participants, in interview, suggested that they felt the co-creation of the research design was equal. As researcher, I put forward action research cycles based on an adaptive form of action learning (McDonald, 2021) and intervening interview schedule. This broad structure remained. The details of locus, times, dates, and how information was recorded were all determined by the participants. The process was not as I had envisaged, but like any iterative process what is produced is generally improved by revision and critical reflexivity. While opening one’s research plans to participant scrutiny and change feels disconcerting, it facilitates a fresh take on methodology. Participants hold a wealth of knowledge-in-practice and are not bound by research methodology and paradigmatic considerations. Their freedom from assumption and rules enables a bespoke crafted research design that offers a perfect fit for their lived experiences and a window into their understanding of the same. Furthermore, it provides us with an insight into participant positionality and how full engagement, irrespective of the impact on the researcher’s plans, brings about a mentality of buy-in and collective ownership.

Limitations

This was a small qualitative study consisting of eight participants and myself. Furthermore, the relationships between the participants with each other, and as a group with me, may have impacted both their power in terms of a familiar collective whole and their ability to exercise such power with a known researcher. The explicit power struggles may not otherwise have been evident in a participant group not known to each other and to me.

Conclusion

Researchers can often forget that the research process is a relationship, and, like any relationship, there is a power dynamic. As researchers we want to know something about of research subjects and in that sense, we need them. Power [im]balance is a continuum, along which the parties move at different stages of the research process. As ethical researchers engaged in participatory methodologies, we should strive to ensure an equilibrium in power. My positionality was an insider-outsider. As a qualified lawyer I am an insider of the legal profession. I was known to the participant group, both personally and professionally. In the context of this research, I was treated very much as an outsider. Yet, here I wonder if the power struggles would have been as evident

if I were a true outsider, that was both not known to the participants and not a peer. Notwithstanding, the participants' assertion of power changed my role within this research process, both philosophically and practically. I can only hope that my future participants will similarly change me. In this paper I have discussed the impact of a participant group that is not only powerful but fully exercised that power. In so doing they helped craft a participative methodology that encouraged researcher reflexivity and critical reflection.

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