Trading Places: Power Distributions In Participatory Research Projects As Exemplified By Security Research

Katharina Miko, Elisabeth Mayr

Discussion Paper Series
Paper 2015/2, November 2015

Center for Empirical Research Methods
http://wu.ac.at/methods

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Miko, Katharina ; Mayr, Elisabeth

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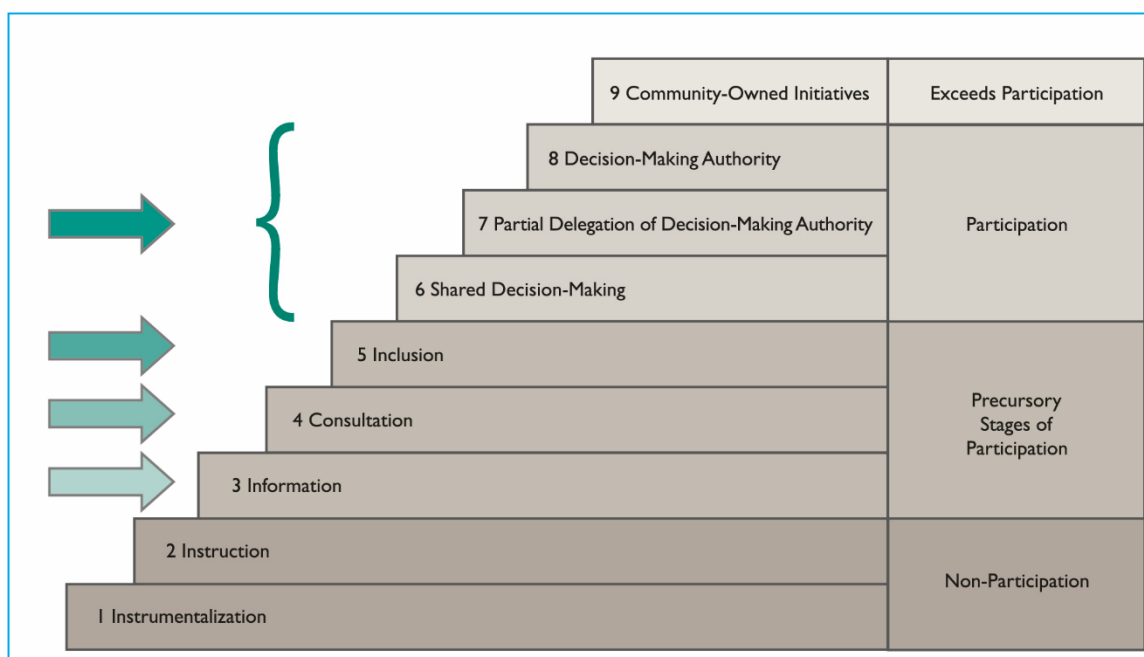

1. Introduction

Participatory research projects are characterized by multiple partnerships: they involve clients, scientists, partner organizations, stakeholders and many others.
The explicit goal of participation is to approach egalitarian decision-making structures, starting from the research application through the survey and analysis stages to the results level, and to somewhat dissolve and performatively reflect on the power structures of conventional research practice. Power structures in this context means that the participants in the research field (such as researchers, research subjects, clients) differ in their knowledge, capacities and expectations and that these differences are mostly not subject to a shared reflection process.
In order to achieve this goal of participatory projects, those responsible for the project must ask themselves throughout the research process who can and should participate in a given process. Helpful in this context is the stage model of participation (Wright et al., 2010; cf. Fig. 1), which let researchers analyze the degree of participation for each involved group. In this article, we want to shed light on different forms of participation in the PARSIFAL project (Participatory Security Research within Academic Education and Training in Austria)[2], raise research ethics questions and suggest an extension of the stage model.

Stage Model of Participation

9 Community-Owned Initiatives	Exceeds Participation
8 Decision-Making Authority	
7 Partial Delegation of Decision-Making Authority	Participation
6 Shared Decision-Making	
5 Inclusion	
4 Consultation	Precursory Stages of Participation
3 Information	
2 Instruction	Non-Participation
1 Instrumentalization	

Source: Wright, von Unger, Block 2010

Fig. 1: Stage model of participation in research projects, Wright et al., 2010, 42. This graphic is originally in German.

Participatory Research has been very popular in recent years (cf. von Unger, 2012). It has its roots "*in action research proposed by Kurt LEWIN (1946) and in the participatory approaches of African, Asian and Latin American authors (WALLERSTEIN & DURAN 2003).*" (von Unger, 2012, chapter 1, paragraph 6).
Contrary to a widespread notion about science, the participatory approach not only serves to generate scientific results, but also to inspire changes among the participating individuals. "*PR [participatory research, authors' note] basically wants to gain knowledge for action, not just knowledge for understanding as in conventional academic research (CORNWALL & JEWKES 1995, p. 1667).*" (ibidem, paragraph 7).

This research note on the PARSIFAL project traces the positions and power balances of those involved and discusses the resulting questions. Security research has a feature that makes an examination of participatory projects from a research ethics angle particularly rewarding: it is research in and with an organization, in this case the police, that is active in a public space characterized by diversity and holds the most powerful position in that space. In this sense it is participation in and with "the powerful".

The PARSIFAL project consisted of two elements. One was dedicated to the examination of seven so-called hot spots[3] in Austria. It explored factors that affect the subjective sense of security in these locations. It focused on "place-relevant actors" [the social groups that make up the majority of the users or otherwise dominate a given public space, translator's note] and their interactions. The other element was the implementation of the results in police training: future senior police officers were trained to be peer researchers in a method course as part of the "Police Leadership" bachelor programme and together with social scientists they developed training materials for basic police training. The research in these public spaces and the development of the training materials required the police officers to undergo a directed role change. They undertook participatory observations (for example by talking to unhoused and homeless persons and actively sharing in their world and experiences) and they tried to take off their "police glasses" and slip into another role (for example by spending work days with social workers).

Moreover, vignette-based focus-group interviews were carried out (see section 3). Place-typical situations were played through with the actors and examined along the following questions, "How might this situation develop and would that be a problem?", "For whom is it a problem?" and "Who is the competent person/organization for handling this problem?". This technique is both an empirical survey method and the product of a participatory approach: passers-by, local politicians, social work services, the Viennese housing and urban renewal services (*Gebietsbetreuung*), representatives of different faiths and many others tackling local problems not only makes the social situation in the location more empirically tangible, it also sheds light on the structures behind the problem situation; they debate who is competent to deal with a given situation and in the best case establish an answer, search for informal solutions and make results available for practical use.
The declared goal is a democratization of police work and research into the question "What can be done to set in motion change processes in the organization police?".

2. Participation in Training Measures – Democratization of Training Processes

Many participatory projects focus on the inclusion of marginalized groups and thus pursue a socio-political direction. PARSIFAL adheres to these principles, but its participatory inclusion of a very powerful player, the police, follows another approach.
The group that – as it were objectively and by virtue of its statutory mandate as the law-enforcing power – must and can ensure security systematically assumed the roles of other groups in order to understand which other security needs are conceivable and how they relate to the system logic of their own organization. The trainees tried adopting and connecting with the views and perceptions of passers-by, social workers, business owners and unhoused/homeless persons. They had to change their roles in a cognitive and emotional sense.
The participation in training measures evolved into participatory organizational research out of the following considerations: For one thing, the organization police does not just speak with one voice; there are also marginalized

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[3]Hot spots are locations that are either unusual because of frequent reactive or proactive police action or perceived as problematic by the population.

voices within the organization. For another, the police has within its organization different positions but is perceived as homogeneous from the outside.

The participatory observations required the police officers to give up their position, however correct and unambiguous from an organizational perspective. The added value was that the future senior officers were "allowed to step out of their role" and that their confidence in their actions was shaken. This loss of certainty showed them that the hot spot appeared differently from an another subject position.

"Changing the subject position" refers to a concept according to which social actors become "*addressees of knowledge stocks and judgments embedded therein*" (Keller, 2011, p. 221) through discourse and, being self-reflexive subjects, are forced to constantly interpret their knowledge stock.

A police officer who as a researcher encountered an inebriated youth, said "Out of my police role, I wanted to act towards the youth, when I looked around and realized that not a single other person felt disturbed. The only person present who was afraid was the police officer." This example demonstrates that the peer researchers from the field integrated different views of a situation into their research work and into their police work. The organization police became thus capable and aware of alternative speaker positions.

3. Participation in Research – Mutual Disclosure of Practices

To implement participation at the research level, the knowledge stocks of scientists and those of police officers concerning the public space where tested against one another. The survey phase consisted not just of participatory observation but also of socio-spatial survey methods, such as site inspections with particular groups or the drawing of subjective maps (on socio-spatial survey methods see for example Deinet, 2009). This mix of methods led to an understanding of the places in their complexity.

The participatory aspect in all this was that the social scientists and the police mutually disclosed the practices of their work. In doing so it is important to accept the respective roles and aims, which are mostly defined differently by the concerned groups, and to stay within set boundaries. This shed light not only on differences in approaches to research fields and target groups, it also revealed similar practices, for example the parallels between undercover investigation and participatory observation.

This leads to a research ethics question that also has power implications: does the police participate in fields because it is looking to obtain access to them anyway and can conversely marginalized groups, too, participate in the police?

To tackle this power imbalance explicitly, the social scientists carried out a "vignette-based focus group interview" in every location and invited not just place-relevant actors but also police officers.

The vignettes describe place-typical scenarios (cf. for example Stiehler et al., 2012)[4] that were obtained locally. They are employed during the interview with the aim to elicit typical reasoning and judgment patterns regarding a concrete situation (cf. Miko et al., 2010, pp. 73 ff.). What makes this technique special is that the interviewees are not confronted with individual questions but with descriptions of concrete situations, objects and/or persons. The questioned individuals give their opinion on real scenarios and not isolated, abstract values. In these focus groups the place-relevant actors obtain access to the police. The participants were chosen to reflect the actual structure of a place. If for example young people have a significant presence in the location, they are also represented in the focus group. These participants then applied themselves to concrete situations and developed new ideas for solutions (see Fig. 2).

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[4]Examples for the versatile uses of vignettes that deserve a mention in the context of the present publication are in particular a study by Nicolas Jenkins et al. on hypothetical situations in health care (cf. Jenkins et al., 2010) and a study by Paul Wainwright et al. on the use of vignettes in Delphi interviews, a structured questioning technique (cf. Wainwright Paul et al., 2010).
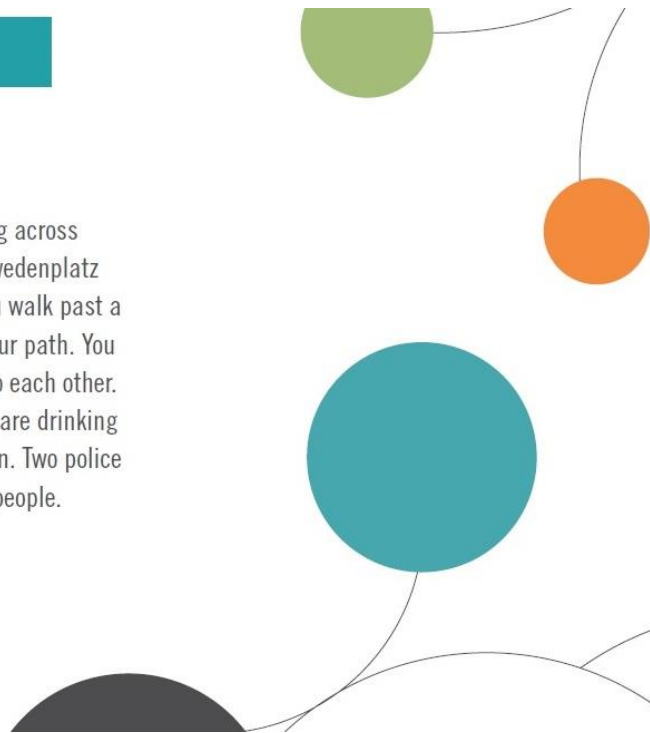
Fig. 2: Sample vignette "Schwedenplatz square"[5]

This approach has the potential to democratize police work, because it demands that the powerful speakers (the police in this case) test the logic that guides their actions against the needs of other users of the public space.

4. Participation of Different Hierarchical Levels – Democratization of Speakers' Positions

The police is often perceived as representing a single point of view and strategy. But its different hierarchical levels include positions of various power and marginalization. PARSIFAL used a participatory approach to take these different hierarchical levels into account. It included senior management at the Directorate General for Public Security as well as police officers at the hot spots. The inclusion of different levels and the implementation in police training facilitated communication among hierarchical levels in the organization police. For example, the Directorate General for Public Security invited future senior police officers to hold presentations on the perspective change they had experienced.

This democratization of speaker positions did not just take place in the organization police; through a participatory approach it was also observed among other place-relevant actors.

In the town of Innsbruck for example representatives of police, social work, the head teacher of an elementary school and young people discussed the police presence in a park that had become known for drug offences. The head teacher welcomed the police presence in the park, the social workers and the young people thought the police presence and the frequent checks of young persons' identities were not appropriate. As a joint solution it was agreed between the young people and the attending police officers that the latter will maintain their presence in the park but that instead of identity checks there will be regular visits to the youth centre where they will establish low-threshold contact with the youths. As obvious as this solution appears at first sight, it was initially far removed from the place users' reality. Only when the actors explained their different approaches to the problem situation did the search for viable solution and competence strategies become feasible. The police officers had previously not been aware of the discourse about the park from the young people's point of view and only when the youths were afforded speaker positions did the police officers reflect on their actions in this concrete situation.

5. Dissemination of Results and Feedback from Participatory Projects

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[5]Taken from the training materials that resulted from the PARSIFAL project.

The participatory approach also rejects a common research ethic: that research is carried out for the benefit of the scientific community and the results stand for themselves. But this maxim, which is a cornerstone of basic research (see for example Froschauer/Lueger, 2009 on scientific process), also harbors a danger: science might just remain in its much-invoked ivory tower and the researched group may obtain little feedback about the acquired knowledge, which can lead to reluctance in the event of subsequent projects. Participatory research has the advantage of a continuous feedback process between the research team and the field. This process focuses on the relevance of the results for everyday knowledge, routines, practices and reflected courses of action.

The decision as to which results from the participatory projects should be made available to the different project partners is linked to the question who has the power to decide to whom these results are made available in the first place. In this context it is of note that generally not all project partners participate in the project to the same degree and that passing on information can become a sensitive (power) issue. PARSIFAL generated knowledge that was relevant for police work and its release was decided within the team. It emerged that the communicative interests of the police, the partner organizations and the research team sometimes diverged, but the parties did not want to oppose their partners' wishes. In this context researchers need to take into account that communication takes place at different levels:

Prior to the issue of dissemination of the (final) project results and hence their publicity (for the scientific community or the partner organizations), participatory research already enhances communication and conciliation between two or more positions with often contrasting interests in the project. The participatory project involvement of the police and place-relevant actors in PARSIFAL was achieved through the elicitation of divergent views on concrete situations in vignette-based focus group interviews. Of empirical interest was that the participants re-told and evaluated the situations differently, which allowed a conclusion as to which matters, conflicts and situations in a given location are important to the different actors. Afterwards, the police and place-relevant actors discussed the place-relevant matters together.

The feedback given was always that this form of communication was important and valuable for the professionals' day-to-day work in the location. The police officers reflected that they received support to introduce other views into their work. The social work representatives equally reported positive effects from the adoption of other views. They also saw added value in the interconnectedness with other on-site experts, because often resources were lacking to pursue such efforts and establish contacts. Moreover, the project did not just open up communication channels among the professionals, but also among marginalized groups and less powerful speakers (for example children, youths, etc.) and between them and the professionals.

The participatory approach created room for constructive debate. The surveys not only generated a wealth of interpretations, the participants also agreed on the "core of the problem" and integrated this consensus into their own work setting.

In all this it is important to note that PARSIFAL was a process-like, cumulative research project without an ambition to disseminate the results at a given final point in time. An important criterion of participatory research is that trust is built over a certain period of time and that the partners engage with each other's' views all the way from the design to the publication stages. PARSIFAL was the second research project of this kind to be funded, and currently the successor project POLIS is underway.

It was rewarding to depict problem scenarios and obtain a clear idea of the positions of marginalized speakers (for example young people) before the next step of tackling individual solution and competence strategies for the different partners. Participatory research means that the research team keeps asking throughout, "Did I understand this correctly and do my conclusions make sense?". This results in a very detailed understanding of the logic of the field and in process-oriented research that does not, for example, generate interview data on a specific date, but rather focuses on the collaborative development of knowledge stocks and interpretations.

To help the project partners to adhere to these agreements, it is important to discuss from the outset how the results will be portrayed. The PARSIFAL results were depicted and edited in a manner that allowed the different project partners to benefit from them. As described at the beginning, this is a key difference between basic research and participatory projects.

6. Who Participates and at Which Level? Working with "the Powerful"

Participatory projects require careful consideration as to who will participate at which level.

The participatory approach taken by the PARSIFAL project was compared with the *stage model of participation* (Wright et al., 2010; cf. Fig. 1)

One motivation for this was a research ethics question: professionals in the public space have different mandates. Social work services and law enforcement authorities largely work with the same target groups, but have different functions

(mandated by law), solution strategies and methods. How can it be ensured that all actors participate in a project given the contradictory goals of those involved? The research team tried to find an answer using the stage model of participation. The aim was to determine the degree of participation achieved. Level 1 represents the lowest degree (instrumentalization) and level 8 stands for the highest degree of participation (decision-making authority). It emerged that the PARSIFAL project was highly participatory as far as the inclusion of the police was concerned. From the participation at the level of the organization as such it followed that different hierarchical levels had to participate, which was also implemented consistently. The inclusion of the police reached a degree of participation between levels 6 and 8 in the stage model of participation.

A different degree of participation was found for non-police actors in the public space. In select locations, social work services had been included. Additionally, the users of a location (e.g. students at a school, restaurant owners, young drug users, parish priests, etc.) were included depending on the characteristics of the location (e.g. transportation hub, park grounds, popular nightlife spot, town where asylum seekers are housed, etc.). They achieved degrees of participation up to level 5 on the stage model. According to the model, these are still precursory stages of participation. We therefore advocate an expansion of the stage model regarding the degree of participation in the overall research design and the degree of participation concerning inclusion in relevant discourses:

One example of the inclusion of a local non-police group is a survey conducted with an elementary school class in the town of Innsbruck. The students use a park that has been labelled as a hot spot by the media. In order to elicit the children's subjective sense of security, they drew "their favorite places" and "places where they are not allowed to go". They made a connection between their world and problem situations and their subjective security. One of their motifs was the difficulty experienced in crossing a bicycle path (see Fig. 3). Thus a position that had previously not been perceived as essential for security in this public space (a so-called non-position, cf. Adele Clarke, 2012) was revealed and the police officers were able to integrate this problem discourse into their own police actions.

As far as the stage model is concerned, the elementary school children were successfully included in the project between levels 4 and 5. The research team took the concerns and perceptions of the children seriously and reflected them with professionals of different disciplines. As far as the prevailing security discourse about this location is concerned, however, their participation weighs more heavily: the discourse in the media and police mainly reported on a Moroccan drug scene, which was not a problem (anymore) for the place-relevant actors (including the police). The children did however have veritable problems crossing the park. The inclusion of their view served to enrich both the police discourse and the actual work done in the location. So despite the fact that the children (and the youths interviewed in the location) did not participate at the highest level, their participation in the overall design of the study and with regard to the inclusion of existing discourses reached a high level, because this previously ignored aspect could now be incorporated in the police work.

Fig. 3: Drawing "problems crossing the bicycle path", on the left side the boy wrote "dangerous".

This expanded concept of participation therefore means providing opportunities to different project partners to share their views and to explain them to others or depict them in a way that others can benefit from. In return, the organizers of participatory projects have a responsibility to state their reasons for not including an individual or a group.

The research team behind the PARSIFAL project openly chose the approach to participate with "the powerful", i.e. the police. Considering the position of power held by the law enforcement authority in the security discourse and considering the meaning of the term community, this raises the question to what extent the inclusion of police officers constituted community-based, participatory research: PARSIFAL did not focus on a particular marginalized group whose participation gave it more of a voice, rather the police and its discourse position are perceived as a voice, and a very powerful one at that. The project team knew this, which was why with PARSIFAL they chose an alternative approach with respect to police participation, which shall here be called "participatory organizational research". Its goal is not just to generate results, but also to inspire changes for the involved project partners.

7. Conclusion: Opportunities and Challenges of Participatory Research

In concluding we must try to identify the opportunities and challenges associated with participatory research.
Its big advantage is the deep and prolonged access to the field. With an organization like the police in particular it is difficult to even get access to the field and meet a candid contact person. The organization is structured hierarchically and a significant amount of knowledge about the organization, sensitivity and also patience are required to obtain access to the field. Rafael Behr, a social scientist and former police officer, describes the challenge, "*For research in the police, it is almost never possible to ask a patrol service, a unit, a police station if they want to take part in a field research project voluntarily. […] It became easier for me to stay loyal towards the respective group in the research field to the extent that they put their trust in me, let me partake in their little secrets, e.g. when making jokes about superiors.*" (Behr, 2008, p. 53).

In summary, it can be seen that participatory research is characterized by power imbalances in the field. Unlike projects that do not adopt the participatory approach, participatory projects seize the opportunity to reflect the participation process, to portray it and to make the added value for the particular field and science at large connectable. This is the great strength of participatory projects, that the trust of the research field yields a wealth of empirical data. The risk of participatory projects arises where decisions for the future research process and the utilization of results are made. In this respect it becomes clear that participatory research has a less strong position than that ascribed to basic research.

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