

Bergen Exchanges on Law and Social Transformations 2021

« Young People as Experts by Experience: Participatory Research, Policy – and Service Development »

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Participatory Research

<https://youtu.be/XCarkUsyNPU>

<https://www.lawtransform.no/2021-bergen-exchanges/>



Participatory Research

- Is not a research method, but a *research style* (Bergold & Thomas 2012, §2); or an “*orientation to inquiry*” (Reason & Bradbury 2008, 1)
- An umbrella term for a spectrum of varying research-designs
- Distinctive feature is in the composition of the research team
 - Scholars/scientists with a formal role in the science system and persons who have no formal role in the science system and typically no specific qualification in research cooperate in a research process
- Variety of terms to signify the latter: “experts by experience”, “co-researchers”, “external researchers”

Two areas of involvement and/or participation of «external researchers»

- Operative activities in a research process, such as data collection, data evaluation, communication of findings etc.
- Decisions on research design and research practice

Research as a sequence of decisions (c.f. Flick 1995)

Decisions on

- Topics, research questions
- Research methods, access to the field, selection of research sites
- Production, collection, organisation, evaluation of data
- Communication of findings (where, how, to what audiences etc.)

PLUS

- Contextualisation, rhetoric of relevance, drawing of consequences, translation into the political system etc.

Participatory Research – Justifications and potentials

(Eßer, Schär, Schnurr & Schröer 2020)

- Decisions on research: reserved for scholars/scientists, governments, public research funding institutions (e.g. Research Councils), foundations
- Influenced by political agendas of governments / foundations; disciplinary discourses; strategies of universities and other researching institutions
- Exclusive: the great majority of citizens is excluded – and so are views, concerns, interests beyond the attention of research experts
- Contributes to the de-coupling of the society from the scientific system
- Reproduces and extends social inequalities to the sphere of knowledge production
- Fair? Coherent with basic normative principles of democracy?

Participatory Research – Justifications and potentials

(Eßer, Schär, Schnurr & Schröer 2020)

- Counter-strategy to the de-coupling of science system from large parts of the society
- Better account for the political dimensions of (social) research
- Opening of research to a wider range of “lived experiences”, e.g. of marginalized groups, groups with structurally limited power like children; issues beyond attention
- Enrichment in terms of the topics, perspectives of research; types of data
- Recognition and empowerment of those persons / groups
- Democratisation of knowledge production – Extension of democratic principles to research and the research process

An example «Care Leavers researching Leaving Care»

(Ahmed, Rein & Schaffner 2020)

- 15 Care Leavers, 3 Scholars, 3 years
- Research questions: How do Care Leavers experience the process of leaving care? Main challenges? How do they experience the given range of social services in this phase? Relevance of informal networks? Needs for optimisation of social services from the perspective of care leavers?
- Care Leavers participated in designing as well as conducting interviews and data evaluation (< 34 project workshops)
- Care Leavers participated in writing of research report including recommendations for optimisation of services; communication of findings
- Impact: Research report, «Guidebook for Care Leavers», Building of a regional network of care leavers; Raised attention for and recognition of the challenges of leaving care with relevant actors in social administration and social services

Challenges of participatory research

(Bergold & Thomas 2012; Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012; Eßer & Sitter 2018; Ahmed, Rein & Schaffner 2020, Sitter 2020, Rein & Mangold 2020)

- Access to marginalized groups, winning trust and willingness to cooperate and participate in unfamiliar activities for an extended period
- Developing research skills; explication of methods and the underlying rationales; deliberation under the condition of asymmetric distribution of knowledge
- Advanced social skills:
 - handling of increased complexity in a research team;
 - extra demands in terms of project management;
 - capacities to cope with emotional involvement of «external researchers» with respect to the topic under research
 - Extra sensitivity for vulnerabilities and power relations
- Advanced competencies to reflect on ethical dilemmas
- Considerable amount of flexibility for all participants

Concluding remarks

- Should all research be participatory research? No.
- Is participatory research the new *one-best-way* of social research? No.
- Should participatory research as a style of research with specific potentials be taken into account more often? Yes.
- Should it be practised and further developed? Yes.
- Should experiences with participatory research be shared and debated? Yes!

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