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Participatory action research from an intercultural and critical perspective

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ABSTRACT

The critical community psychology approach to intercultural issues constitutes the theoretical framework for this research. The work has been carried out in the Campania region, in the South of Italy, by a group of University researchers in collaboration with representatives of associations, members of the local community, and Maghrebi immigrants who reside in the local area of San Marcellino (Caserta). This participatory action research (PAR) was aimed at acquiring knowledge about the mutual interactions between migrants and inhabitants who share the same local context. The results show the participants' and researchers' reflexivity as a main investigation tool that enriched the quality of research. The role of power profile in community analysis, the thorough definition of the trustworthiness of the researchers within the local context—as well as the use of nonasymmetrical power-based interactions between researchers and participants (think-tank sessions)—and focused interviews are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Critical community psychology; immigration; intercultural psychology; participatory action research; qualitative research; reflexivity

Introduction

This article deals with some methodological issues related to action research from a participatory perspective. We highlight the basic elements underlying equal and respectful interaction between researchers and the actors involved in the research itself. Trust-based reciprocity is the bedrock of the liberation psychology approach (Montero & Sonn, 2009) as well as critical community psychology (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011). Based on these assumptions, the article describes research conducted with a community of Maghrebi migrants and local habitants of a specific geographic context (Caserta district). The research was aimed at analyzing the reciprocal representations and power-based relationships between these two cultures, also taking into account the influence of the presence and actions of the researchers.

Following the critical perspective our study has considered the variables related to the history of communities in terms of fairness and social

justice (García-Ramírez, Balcázar, & de Freitas, 2014; Fox & Prilleltensky, 2007; Kagan et al., 2011; Natale, Arcidiacono, & Di Martino, 2013). In particular, as liberation psychology (Montero & Sonn, 2009) and critical community psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 2007; Kagan et al., 2011) suggest, our research takes into serious consideration the effects of social and legislative factors on psycho-social well-being (Fryer, 2008; Kral et al., 2011).

The standpoint of critical research is explicitly anti-racist and focuses on oppression and power imbalances between people of different backgrounds. This kind of approach, which is founded on the value of reflexivity, provides opportunities for stakeholders to co-present and co-author research reports, including personal experience and perspectives (Kagan et al., 2011). In this light, the “Others” are viewed as carriers of different historical and cultural backgrounds as well as unique life experiences. These are the results of a combination of personal features with organizational, legislative, and cultural factors encountered in the host country. The characteristics of the local context also affect the social relations and mutual interactions that shape the researcher’s competence and the research process (Navas, Rojas, García, & Pumares, 2007). In this light, participatory research allows participants to actively identify the core elements of citizenship and togetherness in their specific local cultures that are rooted in specific locations, and that contribute to their problem-solving and decision-making processes.

Having assumed that reciprocal acceptance and trust are part of a group process in which both immigrants, stakeholders, and researchers act as interdependent participants, in this research we decided to examine the way some research tools and strategies have contributed to building a trust-based relationship while giving voice to the suffering of the emigrated community.

The research

Until the first half of the 20th century, Italy was a target country for emigration. Yet, only in recent years has it had to cope with an increasing number of people coming from Africa, Asia, and Eastern European countries. Italy and its citizens have been unprepared to deal with the exponential number of immigrants, which has grown from about 350,000 in the 1970s to over 4 million today (Caritas, 2016). As a consequence of this, disinformation, negative stereotyping, and prejudices have been the norm; in our research we focused in particular on the immigration to Southern Italy from Maghreb. We adopted a methodology that enabled us to identify the relational reciprocity between a group of Maghrebi immigrants and the local population in their relationship with the area they live

in. A reflexive perspective was adopted to include the peculiarities of the context as well as to identify entry-points to the relational code of each specific cultural group and their possible failure. Subsequently, the data collected have been contextualized to describe the elements that led to the research and its development taking into account context-specific and historical features.

The research group and the context

Our interest in immigration stemmed from the recognition of the importance of this phenomenon for social policy. In that regard, our aim was to study the local state of affairs in a location where immigration is highly visible to the local population. We were interested in the way our participants could talk about a phenomenon that they directly experience on a daily basis, rather than being informed through the mediation of media and hearsay images.

It took us some time to identify the most suitable context for our research. One of our PhD students in psychology, Alfredo Natale, who at the time was involved in voluntary work in a district of Caserta, in the Campania region, steered the research toward this particular context by bringing to bear his local contacts, connections and interactions with key people of the area, associations, schools, and the Mosque of the village of San Marcellino. As we have described elsewhere:

San Marcellino is a municipality of about 11,000 inhabitants located in an area that was in the past used mainly for agricultural activities (strawberry, peach, and tomato crops). Today, the place is undergoing a process of expansion in its service industries and the development of small businesses. Yet this is still a very harsh place to live due to the widespread presence over its territory of the organized crime,^[1] which is in control of the labour market and employment system, as the local newspaper often report. On the other hand, this is an area with low cost of living: rents and prices of consumer goods are, in fact, lower than the neighbouring towns (Errichiello, 2007) (Arcidiacono, Procentese, & Di Napoli, 2012, p.24).

The phenomenon of immigration has become part of the local environment by developing some peculiar characteristics that are frequently observed in contexts, such as the one under study. This area has been for decades the destination of several immigration inflows, mainly from Africa, as well as the setting of migration-related dramatic events, such as the murder of non-EU immigrants (Di Luzio, 2006). The area constitutes, therefore, an interesting setting for observing and investigating the relational and social dynamics between dominant and oppressed groups characterizing immigration flows both at a global and local level.

Methodology

Tools, Data Analysis and Research Activities—Preliminary Actions

Building relationships

The first phase of the participatory research project involved the setting of co-constructed formal and informal contacts between the researchers, locals and immigrant workers.

To this end, a series of preliminary meetings were organized with the help of trusted local authorities of the host community who acted as intermediary people (e.g., local Imam). The literature (e.g., Hanlin et al., 2008) stresses the need for prolonged preliminary contacts with the local community. Yet, when a strong bond already exists with the key people of the territory, -like in our case being one of the students from our university research team a recognized member of the local association network fighting for migrants' rights - it may not be necessary to spend long periods of time establishing such contacts in the research context. In our experience, thanks to our student, the presence of bridging and gathering figures between the group of researchers, local associations and migrants of different groups was a great opportunity for the quality of the research.

Our understanding of the importance of building relationships based on mutual trust and respect has gradually increased, confirming our initial choice on how to enter and contact the community. This understanding also fostered a process of knowledge building void of reciprocal prejudices. In this regard, great care was taken in setting up the first meeting with the group of Maghrebi people.

The Mosque of San Marcellino is a central hub, for various services (e.g., emergency reception at night, hairdresser/barber, sale of foodstuffs, labor consultant), entertainment (hall with tables and a refrigerator for cold drinks; speaker systems for parties) and study (classes with desks and blackboard). Therefore, it constitutes not only a place of high visibility, but also a place for the host community too, which has received the Mosque without any particular reservation.

For us, entering a mosque as guests was a completely new experience – it provided us with an opportunity to face and question our prejudices and stereotypes (Arcidiacono, 2010; Arcidiacono, Procentese, & Carbone, 2011).

Participant observation and field notes

To shed light on the relationship between researchers and participants, this study relied heavily on the use of field notes (memo). To keep record of the activities carried out in the context, minutes were written for each of the meetings in the area under study. Each interview was complemented by a brief description of the place, every sort of observed interaction, and any other useful comment.

Each participant in the research group took notes and recorded with comments and remarks on every occasion he or she visited the research context, and for each event and meeting they took part in. We then discussed all the materials collected, the profiles drawn, the interviews undertaken and the results of the analysis within the group of researchers and the constituted joint research core committee (Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2010b).

The power profile

The community profiles method proposed by Francescato, Gelli, Mannarini, and Taurino (2004) informed the preliminary analysis of the socioenvironmental and relational conditions of the local area. The original element introduced in our research design was the *power profile* (Arcidiacono, 2012), which refers to data collected to describe the features of the location, with reference to local decision-making processes and to the analysis of factors defining social justice and fairness of citizenship within the population. We also gathered information concerning power dynamics in the local community, including the roles and functions of local and institutional leaders. Thanks to the material collected, it was possible to identify those dysfunctional modalities of intervention for the promotion of psychosocial well-being.

The aim was to increase our understanding of the actual forces at play within and between the communities and of the management of decision-making processes. Power actually mediates and defines psycho-social dynamics, becoming its crucial element (Fryer, 2008), and therefore it must be taken into account in the reflections around and within the community work we propose.

Getting to know the context and its inhabitants

The combined use of multiple instruments for data collection as well as different analysis methodologies and procedures characterized this complex approach to research-action while promoting the close relation between the epistemic and transformative dimensions of our actions. It also integrated the various phases of the research into a complex system of psycho-social knowledge and transformation aimed at well-being. Multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation, increasing the integrity and relevance of data interpretation.

a) Focused interviews and focus groups. We started by interviewing 17 key local people –9 Italian residents and 8 migrants with and without residence permits (Arcidiacono, Procentese, Natale, Carbone, & Cerasuolo, 2010). The interviews outlined the Maghrebi immigrants' stories and their experiences with the local population and migrants from other countries. The descriptions reported focused on: Expectations about Italy and the opportunity to work; the attitudes of the local people toward Maghrebi migrants; life conditions

and relationships and specifically reciprocal exclusion as well as relational asymmetry. In fact, during the first encounters with the migrants we managed to gather information on the in-group relationship of migrants who come from different countries and their social power.

The interviews followed a predetermined schedule, which narrowed the areas to be investigated, without preventing the interviewee from bringing up new topics or personal interpretations of the topic discussed (Arcidiacono, 2012). Following the guidelines provided by Krüger's (1994) method, we also set up a focus group aimed at exploring the perceptions and the interventions that the local school staff put into place to overcome the challenges that the immigrants faced in that territory.

The interview and focus group data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006), which aims to define new theoretical concepts starting from data, identify core concepts and to detect the base sociopsychological process. In our case, the grounded theory approach appeared to be the most suitable research method to understand relationships and interactions within the local contexts. We also employed a group work methodology aimed at building "shared knowledge" throughout the research process. As regard the procedures adopted, we decided to focus on the team coding of the gathered material and discuss the interviews, the memos and their processing.

b) Narrative interviews. At a later stage, we further delved into the topic of migration by gathering and analyzing some emblematic stories of successful integration and critical accounts of the impact and integration with Italian community.

These narratives were produced through comprehensive interviews aimed at exploring the life experiences of Jean Bilongo and Nasser Hidouri, two individuals who played a guiding role for the groups of immigrants, and with a powerful awareness of the migrant condition in Italy in the present time. The interviews were designed to investigate the relationships between life experiences, social roles, and power in the experience of migration. They also focused on the meanings the participants attributed to their own experiences and their condition as migrants, including being subjected to power and oppression.

These extensive interviews were conducted according to the narrative-biographical method (Freda & De Luca Picione, 2013) and subsequently analyzed by means of the IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) methodology, a qualitative analysis in which a crucial role is played by "giving meaning to experience" and by its link with the context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Its contribution in community and clinical psychology appears to be consistent with the critical approach of participatory action research. The interviews showed the effect of individual and familiar experiences over national, economic, and political events that had been affecting the migrants' life-condition.

This research material was discussed in some informal meetings that became an opportunity to explore some private aspects that the migrants would have not brought to the researcher's attention otherwise.

c) *Shared reflection*. *Think tank* is the name we gave to these series of meetings that were designed to develop the reflexivity of participants, researchers and immigrants who shared the aims of the research and its implementation. This was, in fact, a participatory research intervention aimed at overcoming the power asymmetry in the researcher-respondent relationship and the dialogical gap between the interviewer and the interviewee (Arcidiacono, Natale, & Carbone, 2012).

Our aim was to deconstruct these asymmetries while co-constructing, in turn, new systems of relationships and organizational management based on differing roles and functions (focused on the acknowledgement of competencies and peculiarities), rather than on the reiterated, self-referential models of power as a generator of oppression and inequalities.

The think tank acted as an experience between peers in which the conversational order is not established by the researcher, but by each of the participants as a consequence of their sensitivity, positioning and orientation. It successfully overcame the interviewee-interviewer gap and brought together the participants into the shared search for sense, meanings and strategies. The meetings were arranged based on the availability of the participants. For this reason, we did not adopt any set schedule. Each meeting was characterized by the presence of all the participants around a table with food spontaneously brought by the participants themselves. In our case, the think tank functioned as a way to get to know each other and share mutual knowledge. The meetings acted as a space where we socialized in ways that allowed expression of ideas and sentiments that were not easily spoken while also allowing us to comprehend the rationale behind the migrant's behaviours and strategies. It let us also understand the sense of insecurity the migrants felt whenever they step outside their working setting and out of their usual relationships with fellow countrymen, or in other words what we defined the 'circle of separation', that is a way of living where migrants and local people although dwell on the same territory do not engage in any reciprocal form of interaction (Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2010a).

Moreover, think tank meetings helped better unveil some hidden actions, either empowering and or exploiting, undertaken put into play by officers of Italian institutions. The whole procedure represented a stimulus to a more advanced context-specific research process and interactions.

One narration out of many, was the 'let's set someone on fire,' or in other words, 'let's beat someone up.' In this sort of 'twisted game,' groups of Italian youngsters have their evening fun in seeking out a poor devil to beat up. One person told us the story of a young migrant who was asked by his Italian companions to take part in this activity. His refusal to do so negatively

affected his relationship with the group. Therefore, this event acted as obstacle to integration between the ingroup and outgroup. At the same time, the narration of the event itself during the discussion group opened the way to a mutual understanding of the criminal context of the area as well as the need to tackle the issue.

Still with regard to ‘breaking the mould’, surprisingly enough, we also came across some stories of local indirect solidarity. For instance, some catholic clergymen supported the families of some Arabs by sending the remains abroad of those who had died prematurely while living in the area.

The textual material obtained from the meetings was re-discussed within the research group, as well as with local community members in various meetings. A catalogue of the topics dealt with was produced and the researchers’ comments reported in the memos of the meetings were collected (Kral et al., 2011). The minutes of the meetings and the discussion of the notes produced by the various participants were the tools that made it possible to achieve a knowledge of the context that, far from being a mere collection of information, acted as a stimulus for action.

By creating a shared space, the *us-them* dichotomy was broken and the construction of an “us” as ‘citizens-inhabitants’ was constructed with reference to all the events that affect the life of communities creating a new critical and shared perspective.

Within this setting, our approach made it possible to deconstruct the ideologies and discourses that conceal the action of power, demystifying the stories proposed by the media, and identifying the elements needed to understand local processes. In this respect, in line with Reyez Cruz and Sonn (2011), we see that the tool used made it possible to read “*collective distress as a product of social dynamics of inequality taking into account the multiple dimensions of diversity*” (p. 211).

Results

Participant observation in the life of the community²

The *Italian Republic Day*, (2nd of June 2009) was promoted by the Municipality, with a celebration in the streets organized in collaboration with the local parish, the mosque and other local associations. For the first time, the researchers were present locally ‘in public,’ considering the recreation-leisure contexts as important components of the local culture and of the social life of the community. On this occasion, we carried out a detailed observation of the interactions between the members of the Muslim community and the local population while actively participating to the organization of some local events. Based on the considerations advanced by Case, Todd, and Kral (2014), the university research team, along with the local actors, took part

in the events of the community as facilitators (for example, they helped prepare couscous for the Republic Day) and in 2011, one of them helped as presenter of the music for the celebration of civicness in the central town square.

The research group was also involved in the setting up of a solidarity and advocacy activity named Village of Solidarity in Parete in 2010. This initiative, which was organized by a network of associations and groups to promote the protection of migrants' rights, was aimed at giving greater visibility to the phenomenon of migration, to encourage new ways of participating in the life of the community, and to enhance the acquisition of linguistic and social competencies through shared recreational and intercultural experiences. The interviews with the voluntary workers who organized the event gave us a feedback about the social work done in the territory. The main activity of the research team, in fact, came down to partaking in all the events promoted in the area where both the migrants and local people were interacting with each other.

Political action and social mediation

The critical approach and the community action based on participation and immersion in the context were also highlighted by a series of interventions of social mediation carried out by the researchers. The process of mediation was particularly evident during a particular event involving a young Maghrebi boy who was subjected to a racist attack in the area of San Marcellino d'Aversa. In this case, the university research group along with the members of associations involved in migrants issues provided assistance and support to the young victim, and acted together with institutions, as mediators between them and the offenders of the local community and their families. It is worth noting that the mediation did not have a preventive purpose, rather a reparative one acting at a socioinstitutional level.

From a social justice perspective, the mediation was aimed towards reparation, by supporting an individual who was claiming his rights. At the same time, it also contributed to bring the matter to the direct attention of the local municipality and urge the authorities to deal with it. In other words, this represented a kind of informal "political action" (Arcidiacono, 2012; Arcidiacono, Natale, et al., 2012). This type of mediation can function to bridge acknowledgement of rights at the individual level with the assertion – through mutual negotiation – of justice and respect for shared rules at the community level. From this perspective, our intervention, starting from conflict, promoted the regeneration of social bonds, by putting in place strategies favouring the people working together across clashing interests to support peaceful living together.

Living and acting in the context in a critical perspective

From our perspective, academic knowledge became integrated with shared local community knowledge to become part of the social capital of the territory. The numerous initiatives carried out locally in collaboration with the university research group over the years have placed the group of migrants, both in real and symbolic terms, in a new light within a universe of shared meanings.

Once a group identity and other higher-level identities linked to a geographic, but also cultural and value-based context, were established, it was possible for the researchers to acknowledge themselves and be acknowledged not only as professionals with competencies, but also as social actors in the community, as well as co-protagonists of the social life of the territory and bearer of a possible change. As a consequence of this acknowledgement and relationship of mutual trust, numerous exchanges could take place between the participants. Moreover, we got actively involved in some events that promoted inclusion and dialogue, even if not directly related to the objectives of the research. The process of building a solid relationship with the local institutions—the local schools above all—was also present throughout the participatory action-research. In fact, alongside providing opportunities for investigating and acquiring knowledge about local dynamics, institutional relations are also important for developing a process of acknowledgement of mutual identities and professional competencies. As a matter of fact, this lies at the heart of community clinical work and the very possibility of taking action in the context.

Research acknowledgments and conclusions

Participatory research is based on the assumption that oppressed people must be fully engaged in the process of research, education, and change. The method we have used in the local context was based on those principles by pursuing an epistemic and transformative truth (Prilleltensky, 2008; Prilleltensky & Arcidiacono, 2010).

In line with Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin (2009) we make the case that critical research involves a longer-term commitment and immersion of the researcher in the issues, needs and contexts of disadvantaged people. The complexity of the interactions we put into place required the organization of a wide, interconnected research group while stressing the necessity for a specific competence aimed to reflexivity, observation, and interaction in the context of investigation.

The strength of the whole process was in the outlining of the power profile, the constant reflexive dimension that informed the whole process, as well as the efforts to overcome asymmetries and pursue participation. The actions we have

undertaken did not have a mere investigative or descriptive purpose as in the ethnographic-anthropologic approach. The research methodology adopted has allowed a better understanding of the migrants' state of affairs along with their inner conflicts, shared dimensions within the local community.

With specific regard to our results, it is important to make clear how the dimension of separateness and invisibility, as an assimilation process, is for the participants as a coping instrument to deal with an unwelcoming context. We managed to develop processes of identification, categorization, and social confrontation between personal, cultural, and ethnic identities by capitalizing on the very differences between them. In this light, the research has represented a space for sharing mutual knowledge.

Notes

1. On this topic see Saviano (2006), Gomorra, Mondadori. Bestseller translated into several languages.
2. Italian Republic Day, 2nd June 2009, in the main square of San Marcellino d'Aversa. – *Festa del Pane* (the Bread Festival), 2009, Primary School of San Marcellino d'Aversa. – Festival of Civil Commitment, 2011, a festival hosted in sites seized from Camorra. *Campo della solidarietà* (Solidarity Camp) July 2010 and 2011; conference in Parete, September 2010; Award 8 marzo, 2010. Social mediation, promotion and support of local social actors.

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