

Participatory research in service of emancipation and breaking silence: An experience in Brazil

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present participatory research as a methodological strategy in its theoretical and practical bases, interweaving these bases with those of Sociodrama. For this purpose, this study analyzes and discusses an experience in Brazil, with female embroiderers in the suburb of São Paulo, aiming at developing an entrepreneurial collective. It focuses on the beginning of the field work, in which communicative spaces are opened that allow silences to be overcome and emancipation to be attained. The authors conclude by highlighting that participatory research can work as a critical instrument for breaking silence and initiating mobilization. Participatory research allows to generate knowledge and overcome “states of resignation” in order to transform the practice subjects’ reality.

Keywords: psychodrama, participant research, women, social change, silence.

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INTRODUCTION

Jacob Levy Moreno created the psychodramatic method and elaborated the socioeconomic theory, now known as Psychodrama. Over time, the methods that make up socioeconomy have been separated and called psychodrama and sociodrama, the first focused on the individual and the other on the group. Both were challenged with both social transformation and theoretical proof of the ideas of the method's creator. Moreno called his works at the time experiments, which today are designated as experiences by most psychodramatists. His way of acting has always involved investigating by action themes that interested both himself and the members of a group, in an open manner and adapted to the needs of the group as the work progresses. Research topics were and are always discussed between researchers and research subjects through the actions of the very group they are researching (and not about who). The theorizing of what happened in the meetings occurs later using the appropriate references to the theme. The main objective of sociodramatic research is the transformation of the group and its relationships with other people, groups or structures, but in action. In Kim (2009) and Contro (2009), Moreno's thought is seen as adhering to action research practices (AR), which, according to Reason and Bradbury (2008), aggregates a series of practices, not a methodological strategy, but an epistemology they call a "family of approaches". These authors discuss the convergent and divergent aspects of action research and their interests, which are sometimes for the autonomy and emancipation of groups, sometimes bending to the interests of domination and adaptation to the *status quo*.

For Thiollent (1987), Karl Marx, in a way, launched the idea of participatory research (PR) by conducting the "Worker Poll" with the aim of leading workers' groups to reflect on their daily lives. When the term Participatory Research is used, within this family of practices mentioned above, the objective of emancipation and gain of autonomy of oppressed groups or popular classes is assumed. Gramsci's ideas (Kehoe, 2009) can also be considered to precede PR with this emancipatory aspect.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and discuss the possibilities of PR combined with sociodrama as a methodology to open communicative spaces and support the emancipation of popular groups. These spaces make it possible to overcome historically constructed silences that impede the communication and dialogue necessary for social transformation. It is also intended to present the methodological points of contact between PR and sociodrama in the research, since the intervention reported here was performed by psychodramatists, with strong influences of this way of seeing the world.

This discussion proposed here will take place in the following two subchapters. The first defines what is called participatory research, how it fits into the family of action research practices, and how bridges are built between it and Psychodrama. In the second, a case study of participatory research (PR) is presented, involving a group of women embroiderers who live in a neighborhood in the south of São Paulo, 40 kilometers from the city center. The focus in this second chapter is the question of opening the communicative space and breaking the silence necessary for emancipation.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AS AN EMANCIPATION INSTRUMENT

PR is applied on many fronts, such as teaching, community service, health, popular education, the emancipation of oppressed groups, etc. There are several approaches and applicability of the method without a unique scientific model or methodology common to all PR approaches (Brandão & Borges, 2007). Several authors agree, however, that the dialogue between social actors, the researcher and the subjects of the practice, is established in the formation and maintenance of trusting relationships in a given space of time (Schmidt, 2006).

Even before Kurt Lewin, whom many consider as one of the pioneers of AR, we find in the book *Psychodrama* the statement: “Especially in the human sphere, it is impossible to understand the social present if we do not try to change it” (Moreno, 1997, p. 58). The author opposes Bergson and Peirce, calling them philosophers-expectants for working and claiming the figure of the philosopher-actor. “Where the philosopher perceives the surface to which he gives an aphoristic expression, the therapeutic actor of the great religions, in his vital periods, has penetrated into his essence through action and fulfillment” (Moreno, 1997, p. 59).

PR and AR are two different research modalities, but they have some similarities, especially in relation to the participants’ involvement. Indeed, AR can be defined, according to Thiollent (1987, p. 14), as empirically based research, “carried out in close association with an action or the resolution of a collective problem and in which the participants representative of the situation or of the problem are involved in a cooperative or participatory way”. But the main difference is that while AR encourages the involvement of participants in educational, social, technical or other actions, PR has the function of involving and stimulating emancipatory, individual and collective protagonization, in general, oppressed groups, marginalized or excluded.

Observation and participation are at the heart of Moreno’s (2008) questions and reflections, after all he sees a complexity in observation when conducting a participatory research. He reflects on an existential rather than observational participation in the research process and, throughout his work, seeks an encounter and a balance between subjective and objective views, between perceptions of research subjects and researchers.

The actor system is based on a consensus that exists only within the collectivity of actors. This internal and secret consensus can be “objectified” with the *investigative assistance* of actors and used by observers of the behavior of this collectivity of actors to complement and broaden the system they are developing from behavioral clues (Moreno, 2008, pp. 94-95).

Moreno (2008, p. 95) states that these “observers have to” subjectify themselves “and become members of the collectivity of actors to get the inner clues, that is, of their existential participation in the process”. Affirmation at the time, innovative, radical, unimaginable at that time. And other authors who discuss psychodrama and AR, such as Marra & Costa (2004) and Wechsler (2007), follow in this reflection of how much and how the researcher is involved in the research process, as well as his observation and analysis.

The participatory research (PR) aims to “help the population involved to identify their own problems, perform their critical analysis and seek appropriate solutions” (Le Boterf, 1984, p. 52). Also according to the author, this way of researching the population is not reactive or passive before the researcher’s stimulus, but it interacts with the theme, driving planning and decisions.

According to the formulation of Brandão and Streck (2006, p. 12), PR should be considered as a “multiple and differentiated repertoire of experiences of collective knowledge creation, destined to overcome the subject/object opposition within processes that generate knowledge and the sequence of actions that aspire to generate transformations”. Brandão and Borges (2007) state that the participatory research has the following points as its structure: it must contemplate “the concrete reality of the daily life of the individual and collective participants of the process itself, in its different dimensions and interactions” (p. 54); and it must contextualize in its historical dimension, the structures, processes, organizations and social subjects, converting the subject-object view into a subject-subject type of relationship.

Moreno (2008, p. 79) thus formulates this change of vision and incorporation of the subjects:

Before proposing any experimental project or social program, the experimenter must consider the correct constitution of the group. In order for members to be adequately motivated to participate spontaneously, they need to feel, with regard to the experiment, that “it is your cause, not the cause of the idea — the investigator, the employer, or any other agent of power.”

All political and ideological assumptions must be analyzed so that they do not interfere with the research. Although it is not possible to achieve total neutrality, one cannot go on the field with definite assumptions. Dialogue is not a doctrinal discourse. “A true participatory research creates solidarity, but never in part imposes knowledge and values” (Brandão & Borges, p. 55). The process is directed towards social transformation, the transformation of popular knowledge, feelings and motivations.

As a means to reach the articulation of marginalized groups, PR emerged in Latin America (Brandão & Streck, 1999; Gajardo, 1999; Silva, 1991). In the beginning, PR was applied to rural workers in educational programs. According to Gianotten & Witt (1999), she focused on the formation and expansion of the critical consciousness of the group involved to implement political processes of change.

Therefore, PR has its origins in educational action. Paulo Freire (2005; 1979) was one of his great influencers, with his works related to popular education. Its method of literacy based on the perception of literacy about its own socio-historical context provided the basis for participatory research. Supported by the work of educators such as João Bosco Pinto (1976), Marcela Gajardo (1981) and Carlos Rodrigues Brandão and Danilo Streck (1981), the so-called educational aspect of PR was developed. “A research that is also a pedagogy that interweaves actor-authors and is a learning in which, even when there are essential differences of knowledge, all learn from each other and through each other”, conceptualizes Brandão and Streck (2006, p. 13).

There is also a sociological approach to PR, inaugurated by the Colombian Orlando Fals Borda (1972) in the early 1970s. Committed to popular and peasant struggles, he proposes a division between dominant science and popular science. The first privileging the maintenance of the current system, and the second based on empirical knowledge and common sense. Returning knowledge to the groups that contributed to its generation requires the researcher to be involved as an agent in the process he studies, once he has made a decision in favor of certain options. Thus, the researcher learns through observation and also from his own work with the people with whom he identifies (Fals Borda, 1981).

When considering PR in its Latin American aspect, we highlight six methodological principles proposed by Fals Borda (1981): (1) authenticity and commitment, whereby the researcher shows genuine interest in the proposed social change, respecting the values and beliefs of the group; (2) anti-dummy, by which the group is guaranteed the freedom to present its religious and political thinking on the proposed theme; (3) systematic restitution, whereby the group is guaranteed a return on the analyses collected and research results, in a language that respects the cultural tradition of the group; (4) feedback to other critical researchers interested in emancipating popular groups, assuring the researcher and the group that knowledge can be used in similar situations; (5) the rhythm and balance of action and reflection and communication articulated with one’s own general, local knowledge, and its peculiar mode of production; (6) modest science and dialogical techniques, science performed and communicated simply, even in precarious situations, to achieve achievement and understanding by any level of group knowledge. This does not mean contempt for academic science or lack of ambition, but prioritizes listening and understanding of the different discourses and the

articulation of knowledge in the different relational networks of the group, respecting this form of manifestation of dialogue.

WOMEN EMBROIDERERS, SILENCE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

A PR work always goes through the opening phase of the communicative space in which it is necessary to deal with the initial silence present between the researcher and the group. It is not a cold and mechanical procedure at all, but a reliable establishment and an affective common space. “If I do not love the world, if I do not love life, if I do not love men, I cannot dialogue” (Freire, 2005, p. 92).

Researchers’ familiarity with sociodrama has greatly helped at this point. Following the proposals of Sternberg and Garcia (2000), the moments of warming up of the group were sometimes more cognitive and other affective. They were initially proposed by the researchers and over time by the group members or the director. Cognitive warnings speak more to our mental reasoning, with the choice of actions based on data and facts such as readings, presentations and discussions. Affective warm-ups speak directly to our emotions and even affect our physical bodies, just as they can be interrelational or physically active. The goal of warm-ups is always to prepare the group and bring it to a state where members can feel comfortable or prepared to bring out feelings about the theme to be developed.

In the case of women embroiderers, although the participants were larger than the researchers, the group could not express themselves about their values and feelings, appearing to have difficulty communicating, perhaps due to their socioeconomic status, their personal and group experiences with groups marked as dominant, thus placing themselves in the role of the oppressed.

For this state of impossibility of communication and authorship, the researchers proposed the concept of “state of resignation”, similar to Freire’s (2005) when referring to the oppressed.

It is necessary, as Schön (2000) says, to overcome silence and defensive attitudes, shame, embarrassment and shyness. A sensitization begins that makes the construction of the “we” possible. The researcher must be prepared to initiate a process of symbolic exchange (Barbier, 2004), whereby the selves are allowed to feel welcomed, to express themselves, in a continuous process of growth and co-construction, both mental and emotional.

Santos (2007, p. 30) reminds us that “As solidarity is a form of knowledge that is obtained through the recognition of the other, the other can only be known as a producer of knowledge”. This production of knowledge bumps into the themes of silence and difference. Silence comes from the fact that the ways of seeing and knowing the world of some cultures were drowned out, a symptom of a blockage, of a potential prevented from developing. The big question is “how to make silence speak without necessarily speaking the hegemonic language that intends to make it speak” (Santos, 2007, p. 30).

Beyond the silence itself, there is the question of difference, which goes hand in hand with silence. The emancipatory knowledge requires that researchers build solidarity with groups through research collaboration, despite any social and cultural differences. The degree of these differences can vary widely, but much of what Freire (1979, p. 34) calls the ‘culture of silence’, referring to peasants, can be understood and applied to other groups. This is because at the heart of this culture is the maintenance of groups in a state of dependence and fatalistic perception. The groups that oppress them tend to paternalistic, vertical actions rather than stimulate decision-making by the oppressed. It is for the researcher who interferes in reality to take into account that silence is not being dissolved just to relieve tensions, but to support these groups in developing critical and emancipatory thinking.

Every researcher, when faced with a new reality for him, must be open and need to warm the group and be warmed up, to open new possibilities of vision and realize how the group is in the “here and now”, its facilities and difficulties to deal with everyday life. Slogans and ready-made materials often only serve to calm the “researcher-educator-director” nervousness. The warm-up prepares the researcher and the group, does not reassure them, but rather puts them into action. As stated by Drummond and Souza (2008), it is in front of the group, with the readings, sensitivity and formal techniques, that researchers can deepen the emerging contents.

The women embroiderers with whom they researched live in the region of Parelheiros, south of São Paulo, 40 kilometers from the city center. According to the 2000 Census, household heads have an average income of about \$300.00. The average per capita income was less than US\$100.00 in 27.03% of households. Their guardians had on average five years of schooling, of which 26.8% had completed elementary school only and 12.4% were illiterate. Household women accounted for 21.0% of the population, and 12.1% of the total population were children under five (Bidart-Novaes, 2008).

The origin of the research was the need to support a group of nearly 200 women embroiderers to eliminate middlemen to earn more for their embroidery work (Bidart-Novaes, 2008). These women had no contact with each other, but only with one of them, who received the garments delivered by the intermediaries and coming from the Brás and Bom Retiro neighborhoods. While they got \$0.30 per finished piece, the intermediaries got \$1.20. That is, women, who embroidered a thousand pieces a month and earned \$300.00, could earn \$ 1,500 without intermediaries. With this organization, a number of other gains in terms of social entrepreneurship and capital were envisioned.

In the initial phase of the research, considered to open the communicative space with the group of women embroiderers, activities with warm up function were proposed, such as the game (scene). After the warm-up, sharing always took place, which gradually allowed the silence to break.

These meetings took place without any institutional support or external funding, always in spaces that women proposed, sometimes in an area at the back of one of their homes. They were conducted by psychodramatists, and one of the authors was present at all of the nearly 50 meetings. Slowly the “dramatic project” was being built (Aguar, 2006, p. 141), facing all the difficulties imposed by the time constraint, since the embroiderers had only two hours per week at the beginning of the work.

The interest of the women’s group in cooperative entrepreneurship was the starting point. In the beginning, the expectations of these women were the most diverse: from participating in ready-made courses on different subjects to the free distribution of money and goods, or ensuring the creation of jobs and income. Finally, an understanding of the workings of the embroidery and seams market was enhanced by the leadership of the embroiderers as one of the foundations for the necessary motivation for the elimination of middlemen to occur and thus the work gained a clearer objective.

Through these “generative themes” (Freire, 2005), the group was unveiling, expanding the knowledge of their own reality, so that they could better understand it and critically intervene consciously. The researchers then sought to delve into the generative themes, since, according to Freire (2005, p. 101), what they intended to investigate were not human beings, “but their thought-language referred to reality, the levels of perception of this reality, their worldview, in which their generative themes are involved”.

The research began with the objective of overcoming the “culture of silence” (Freire, 2005, p. 201), generated in the oppressive culture. Overcoming this silence would allow these women to develop criticism from innocence, to move from neutrality to action, to overcome pain and to gain hope, to leave resignation towards utopia, becoming protagonists capable of transforming their reality into communion with others.

The researchers found different intentionalities, perspectives and rhythms in working with women embroiderers. The researchers needed time to organize the knowledge that emerged in the process, while the participating subjects had the urgency to transform their reality. The researchers believed in PR's methodology and objectives, and expected stakeholder participation. These, however, were only willing to participate as they also came to believe in the transformation that work could bring. There was a time for group involvement until they were ready to change state and actually start work.

At each meeting games, experiences and dramatization were used, which at the same time served to dissolve the initial silence typical of such meetings and to unite the group. It is necessary to face silence "as concrete data and as introjected reality" (Freire, 1979, p. 85). This can only be met patiently and giving voice to the group at their own pace, in time and in their language. The activities used in this phase were the most diverse.

For example, since it is not the objective of this paper to detail the intervention, but to analyze and discuss the PR, we report here an activity and the reflection behind it. The proposed activity was to create and dramatize a neighborhood television newspaper in a group setting out what people in that group believed to be embroidery work, from their different perspectives: their children, their husbands, their neighbors, etc. This type of activity hides from the researcher at first what is being dialogued during the construction of ideas by the group. Participants can feel free to dialogue without the interference of the researcher who at that moment represents certain authority and the power established. The group gains confidence that they can engage in dialogue, assume and play roles, bringing out content that is not explicit in a direct conversation. Being able to talk between peers without outside interference gives the group the ability to build the trust, co-participation and unity of group members. The choice of what to present or not to the audience and researchers is a choice made freely and must be respected. Content revealed in presentations represents the group as much as content not presented.

All these field findings generated a substantial material, which fed the group with possibilities for discussion and perceptions. Reports collected by the researchers, face-to face and later notes, photographs, videos, writings of the participants themselves provided many sharing and processing.

The participatory research expects a large group involvement; in addition to breaking the silence, it is necessary to stimulate the creation of healthy bonds between the participants. During the development of the group of women, it was possible to notice the closeness between them and the increased confidence in relation to the researchers. There were moments of greater confidence in the project and times when external situations affected relationships and caused tensions in the group. Such as the entry of a large order from a new client and the consequent overwork and tiredness, which even affected the physical health of one of them and the relationship of women with their husbands in relation to work support or restriction.

Silence is just another form of expression. It may mean resistance and blockage, but it is not always exactly so. Silence also speaks of the group (Schutzenberger & Weil, 1977). The body, the positions taken at work, the place where people sit, where they stand, can all speak in the group. The care of the participating researcher is not to define what the participants are saying without asking, asking, investigating and allowing silence to become words.

This is what the authors followed in this group. With the repetition of the meetings and the development of the research, we noticed the small liberating movements and the increase of group union; and with the repetition of psychodramatic interventions, this perception became stronger. Lectures given by the group members themselves about the products they knew how to make or had made in the past were a constant. Around the twelfth meeting, about 20 women attended more frequently, who showed impatience to "do something" in order to generate income for their families and for themselves, by increasing embroidery income. The research

was extended to 40 more meetings, in which topics such as production and management were approached, always bridging the gap between academic and practical science and the language of the group. It is noteworthy that the women's bond remained after the end of the research.

The breaking of silence and the opening of the communicative space for emancipation were not a linear process but made of comings and goings. It was a continuous process, given the fragility of the bond with the group. In works of this nature, it is difficult to define phases in a watertight manner. Two moments were decisive for the opening of the communicative space and for the consolidation of this opening: (1) as early as the third meeting, the women were able to express their desires, even individually; (2) at the seventh meeting, the community leadership, without the researcher's help, was able to formulate the group's objective, already focused on collective action, as follows: valuing women's work, fair income, working in the neighborhood and developing it. The result of the activity demonstrated improved self-esteem, group integration, building a common identity and a common objective.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As proposed in the theoretical framework, this research arose from the legitimate desire of a marginalized and excluded group to organize and emancipate themselves. At the end of their collective endeavors, the embroiderers managed to break the middleman's barrier and today they can go to Brás and pick up the embroidery pieces (Bidart-Novaes, 2008). Today they receive between R\$1.50 and R\$ 5.00, instead of R\$ 0.30 and R\$ 1.20 that they received when they depended on the intermediaries. According to reports collected by the researcher himself with women, this makes all the difference in terms of family income for them. In many cases, husbands also started embroidering, abandoning activities related to the collection of recyclable material or small expedients. As for the women, in addition to embroidery work, today they are dedicated as an organized group to doing work to be sold in the community, such as patchwork quilts, "fuxico" works and other craft activities.

Based on what was discussed, in this brief report of an investigation by Brazilian researchers with participatory research and the theoretical and technical influences of psychodrama, it was possible to highlight the ethical and epistemological complexity that the participating researcher faces. He or she must consider the cultural differences that permeate the universes of researchers and oppressed groups in a society marked by profound processes of social and intellectual exclusion.

We highlight in the examples cited that the need to establish a climate of partnership, negotiation, transparency and commitment is fundamental to allow the silences to solidify and open spaces for the initiation of dialogues and communicative processes. It was possible to realize that the silences do not exist only on one side, in the subjects of the practice, they also exist in the person of the researcher (or researchers). In fact, if there are silences, they will always be mutual. It is up to the researcher, as a professional, to initiate spaces for its overcoming; it is up to the researcher to imbue itself with its participatory research role and to become a co-training instrument.

Another evidence of the authors' work with women embroiderers is that participatory research and sociology are formative instruments on both sides, subjects of the practice and researchers. PR promotes educational and pedagogical practices that go beyond its purposes. The researcher develops and qualifies himself by learning, incorporating and transforming the local culture, being surprised by group responses and reactions, surpassing himself in new questions. Practice subjects not only solve the problems of everyday practice, but they also engage in collective processes of giving new meanings to their experiences and values; they are

surprised to confront and question assumptions of life and formation, creating courage to undertake change.

The authors were able to realize in their work with embroiderers that the researcher's entry into socially underprivileged groups requires prior work on building a common universe of some cultural meanings. This work is very close to the concept of "minimum vocabulary universe", proposed by Freire (2005) in adult literacy processes.

The construction of this common universe is made by dialogue about the object to be known and about the representation of reality to be transformed and is carried out through questions initially raised by the researcher, deepening the world readings of the subjects involved. The debate that arises from this enables a re-reading of reality, which may result in greater engagement of participants in political practices aimed at transforming reality.

It was also evidenced that the participant research allows the mediation between researchers and subjects of the practice. This qualifies the work of the professional researcher and makes room for the voices of the subjects. The researcher needs these voices to produce knowledge through them; subjects need researchers to find ways to express their voices and, in the process, to hear their own voices. Thus, subjects learn to listen to others and with others. It is a mutual process of qualifying the production of knowledge and qualifying the lives of the subjects. It is above all, the mediation between professional practice and existence.

The construction of a common universe mentioned above and the mediation between researchers and subjects of practice are woven within the scope of the concept of "encounter" elaborated by Moreno (2008), with which he seeks to describe the interpersonal phenomenon as living fact. The word "encounter" means more than a vague interpersonal relationship. It means that "two or more actors meet, not only to face each other, but to live and experience each other as actors, each in their own way." Moreno (2008) continues by stating that when two people truly meet, they do so with all their strengths and weaknesses and only partially aware of their goals. It is this difficulty and the search for the subtleties of encounters that makes one search vulnerable, sensitive and courageous in PR.

Thus, we reaffirm that, above all, participatory research is a pedagogical enterprise that offered, in this case, embroidering women the conditions to perceive themselves as social subjects, endowed with conscience, desire and will, and that request spaces for self-expression and collective coexistence. It is in the collective, in the dialogue with their circumstances, that each subject gives meaning to the collective existence and commits itself. In this process, each one of them involved brings awareness and action, reflection and praxis, allowing us to affirm that participation in a participatory research transcends these symbolic gains, as it allows the subjects to experience and build constructive critical attitudes, which are fundamental for the construction and the production of knowledge beyond those that were the focus of the research.

These behaviors and attitudes generalize to other spheres of life of the subjects. Thus, they become educational processes of formation. Finally, it can be said that participatory research and sociodrama function as a pedagogical instrument for the formation and development of dialogues between the subject and his existence, between knowing and doing, between ethics and method, breaking silences that were historically constructed in these relationships. And finally, allowing the subjects of the practice, including the researcher, to overcome resignation to transform their reality, ending waits and hope starts.

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