Approaches to participation: some neglected issues

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Abstract

Nowadays, participation has become a common subject in many organizational settings, despite of the fact that there is a huge variety of approaches and practices attached to the label. This variety results problematic mainly because it exposes the different and often contradictory meanings, aims and procedures the word ‘participation’ seems to stand for, depending on the kind of context in which the phenomenon is located and on the social position of actors involved.

By means of an exhaustive literature review, including reports, working papers, conference procedures and journal articles published during the last twenty years in fields such as industrial relations and organizational psychology, the purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of existing approaches to participation and, in doing so, identify and analyse the roles these approaches play when used as managerial tools in public, private and third sector organizations.

Results include some neglected issues such as the major role tacit assumptions play when trying to put participation into practice and the effects of any systematic attempt in terms of regulation and control. A case is made for the inclusion of power relations as a key analytical dimension in further research on participation.

Introduction

What is participation? This work is an attempt to offer a way of dealing with that question. Dachler and Wilpert stated that “literature includes a plethora of undefined terms and characteristically lacks explicitly stated theoretical frameworks. [Moreover,] different value systems imply different definitions of participation, so that the term participation has a variety of meanings across investigators” (1978, p. 1). Despite of being one of the oldest areas of research in disciplines devoted to the study of
organizations (Glew, O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Van Fleet, 1995), after almost 30 years, there are not reasons to think that things are different. But recognizing this does not necessary lead us to propose yet another definition, at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. On the contrary, our assumption is that the question cannot be answered by simply taking explicit definitions, comparing it and then offer a new one. There are many problems with dealing exclusively with definitions, but one that we consider important is that you can find identical statements linked to different practices.

It is true that most of the definitions of participation, either conceptual or operative, are somehow close to the idea of sharing: Being consulted by your supervisor (Vroom, 1960); having some degree of influence in decisions (Ascigil y Ryan, 2001); making decisions jointly (Baloff & Doherty, 1989); feeling that ‘we are all in the same boat’ (Anderson & West, 1998); involving stakeholders in the most important phases of a process (Rebien, 1996); taking responsibility over our own situation in a collective manner (Montero, 1996); etcetera. But even if we admit that sharing is at the core of the phenomena, what it means to share and how this sharing is actually accomplished is by no means neither deductible nor univocal. In fact, some studies on the subject that are designed with an ethnomedological background are conducted without a prior definition in the idea that it is not “something that is simply switched on” (Potter & Hepburn, in press) but an ongoing accomplishment.

Consequently, our aim is to deal with the different ways in which participation has been understood and the variety of practices that falls under that label. In the process, emphasis has been made in the idea that neglected issues in theoretical and empirical research are a key to a better understand of the subject. Because of this, our strategy consisted mainly in exploring how participation is treated by different disciplines and in different contexts. On the basis of this exploration, we offer an approximation to the notion of participation that conceives it as a process in which social objects are moved from private to public zones. Based on this notion, we built a set of elements and dimensions that help to understand variations in participation and study specific cases in a comprehensive manner. As the process of building this map of participation lead us to find some voids, we describe them and draw their implications for research and practice. Such voids or neglected issues are a) the idea that participation is part of a matrix, b) the need to elaborate the relation between participation and organization, c) the importance of power relations and regulation in every participatory process – successful ones included – and d) the need to reconsider the role of tacit, local knowledge.

This work is not assuming that a unified concept of participation should – or even could – be developed. Instead, we want to offer a problematizing look of participation, one which allows us to break down limits imposed over different domains and make new questions. Our purpose is to reconnect in a productive dialogue what is separated, fragmented and disperse in the world of academic disciplines and local practices, these multiple, incomplete forms, that range from community development to quality circles.

**Versions of participation: three examples**

Back in the days of the Greater London Council, as Peter Spink’s (1989) vivid account shows, inhabitants of the suburbs near to Red Lion Lane were concerned with a raise in traffic. Drivers trying to avoid traffic jams were starting to use minor streets as if they
were substitutes of high speed ways. As the situation got more intense, people started talking about it. Then, a local councillor suggested that those concerned with the problem should gather their signatures and ask the borough to solve the problem. Encounters in the neighbourhood pub worked as a catalyser for the proposal, and soon the signatures were handed over the competent commission. As no answer was received, people repeated the operation, and this time they got a reply: since the problem depended on organs of higher level – the Greater London Council –, nothing could be done.

After a while, neighbours restarted the conversation, being retail stores, the pub, and the front of the school the places in which another idea finally appeared: they needed to get the attention of the Greater London Council and suddenly, without any specific decision-taking process or committee, a small street which was one of the most affected by traffic during the morning was blocked. This action, which would be repeated latter, was also accompanied by a literally “never ending” mailing to the Engineer-in-chief, which, as the first sender happily discovered, was forced by law to answer every single letter. There were different moments and different people. They had neither a committee nor a plan.

When the Greater London Council finally reacted, attempts were made to convince neighbours to constitute a formal association so they could be represented in the Council Chamber. People declined the offer several times; an offer they thought was time-consuming and conflict-generating. They preferred to keep doing things their way: different actions, different people and different fronts. Finally, after some inhabitants received formal invitations to discuss the problem in the Council Chamber, people decided that one of them should go. The chosen one was finally presented as one of the residents of the neighbourhood and expressed his personal opinions on the subject emphasizing that he was not representing the others. Almost two years latter, the street was closed.

In his article, Spink stresses the need for questioning some basic distinctions that are widely used in organizational research. Why the author considers this an outstanding example? Because it challenges traditional assumptions on the ways people should get together and solve their problems, which is what participations deals with. Neither the canonical size of a group nor the supposedly technical need for formal arrangements seems to be essential.

In a somewhat similar domain, but from a different perspective, Rebollo (2002), whose work in citizen participation is well known in Spain, offers some advice on how to avoid unintended negative effects or misguided uses of participation. The author sustains that poor or negative results are obtained and problems arise when participation is based on improvisations or techniques and procedures applied are not adequate. Against improvisation, Rebollo says, a political project is needed. A project of this kind has to define which spaces of power are going to be handled by people and at what extent. As can be advanced, if a careful planning is conducted and if techniques are selected according to objectives and conditions, then the success of the participative process should be assured. Thus the nature of Rebollo’s work is procedural: he is offering a set of guidelines that lead to an effective participatory process.
First thing to note is that the nature of the political project is not included in the spaces handled by people, although those spaces are intended to allow an adjustment of the political agenda, among others. Besides, there is a strong confidence in methodology as the domain in which participation can get what it needs to succeed. Whether or not a technically informed, well planned approach defines good participatory practices is of course an important question. Nevertheless, such a question can hardly be answered in the absence of a clear image of what ‘good participatory practices’ are. And since check box approaches to evaluate participatory practices include among its criteria strong doses of technical and procedural features, we are likely to enter in a circle.

But if having doubts on the claims made by methodologist is not an unreasonable thing to do, one has to ask why the niche market for receipts is a well established one. The answer should include many factors and its complex interrelation, but some of them are strongly related to mechanisms of social reproduction. In fact, despite its technical claims, guidelines-as-requisites on how to deal with neighbourhood situations usually work as standardizing devices. Neighbours of Red Lion Street were asked to form an association, so they could be attended by authorities. If you want to talk with the administration, you have to dress your self like the administration, and behave like it either. The organizational form is then copied. Only that, in this case, the administration had to listen to the neighbours in their own terms. This is why we find the example so interesting.

Another perspective, which is located in a very different field, conceives participation as a mean for the achievement of ‘greater connectivity’ in the organization (Ashmos, Duchon, McDaniel, & Huonker, 2002). The authors’ theses is that traditional attempts to deal with complexity are misguided because they rely on procedures and rules that are intended to make organizational life simpler but finally limit the capability of organization to deal with changes in the environment. In order to reverse the effect of decades of organizational processes designed according to a machine model, managers can use participation while dealing with decisions. Participative decision making is thus presented as a simple rule that leads to complex effects. And the rule is that managers have to increase the numbers of decision makers, informants, interpretations and types of information, in order to facilitate collective sensemaking processes. While

such a meaning creation effort will seem somewhat ‘messy’ and disorganized when viewed through the lens of the machine model; it in fact allows the organization to consider and experiment with a much larger pool of adaptative behaviours than would be possible if only a few agents (e.g. the top of the hierarchy) where involved (Ashmos et al, 2002, p. 193)

Of course, there is always the possibility that conflict arise. Moreover, a greater connectivity among internal agents makes conflict more probable than in ‘traditional’ conditions. It is one of the managerial functions, Ashmos et al (2002) say, to make conflict visible and constructive, and this can be done by taking care of interpersonal relations and dealing with controversy through dialogue and arguments. The thing is

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1 The very use of the word ‘people’ is somewhat confusing: Are policy makers – those who design participative spaces – something other than people? Of course, this could only be a subtlety of language in use, but, as we discuss latter, it underlines the centrality of role systems when trying to understand if and how participation works in specific contexts.
that this way of solving conflicts is not just magically invoked and, even more problematic, is not applicable when the object of the conflict is out of the range of issues that those involved are authorized to treat with.

Comparing approaches

Several issues emerge if we compare the three approaches briefly described above. The goals of participatory processes are quite different. Ashmos and collaborators think of participation as way of increasing and improving decision making, which in turn will lead to adaptive behaviors. Rebollo’s presents participation as a method for improving old representative democracy and, eventually, constructing a brand new participative democracy. Spink does not offer an explicit objective for participation; instead, he stresses the fact that those involved around a common concern find a way to cope with it in a satisfactory manner. There is something else: the idea that participation has something paradoxical in it: participation is the goal and the way to achieve that goal.

In terms of procedures, there are also differences: While Ashmos and cols. offer advice on how to deal with complexities generated by participative decision making, Rebollo describes a set of guidelines that are intended to raise, sustain and respond to people’s interest in having a say on public matter. Spink clearly breaks with this approach and argues in favor of what at first sight could be considered as an anti-procedural position but, after a deeper review, can be

Finally, but most important, we have the nature of participation. In Rebollo’s work, as in many others, participation is presented as requisite for democratic life which consists mainly of spaces in which people can exert power. For Ashmos and collaborators, participation is a managerial tool in which hierarchical division are ignored in order to let those involved take part in the process of mapping situations and making decisions. While keeping some similarities with Rebollo’s proposal, Peter Spink’s idea of participation points towards a different direction, one in which participatory ‘spaces’ can have different shapes and are mainly about the local, non planned, encounters that happen in specific times and places, at least as much as they are about power.

The three examples should not be considered as representative of something. They are just an effective way of illustrating the kind of issues that are at stake when dealing with participation. They also helped us in underlying those features of participatory process (aims, procedures and nature) that can function as an axis in our attempt of making sense of the nature of participation.

Towards an open notion of participation

Research on participation, as said above, is far away from a unified concept of its object. Indeed, despite several warnings, the way this object of study is defined is still problematic, even in specific areas. In fact, definitions of participation in specific areas – those that always include the preposition ‘in’ right after noun ‘participation’ – easily outnumber those that deal with the notion of participation in its wider sense, or, in other words as a matter of social life in general. The word participation seems to stand for
different things and variations in its meaning include the aspects on which we made the comparison of the aforementioned examples. Variations of participation include:

a) Its nature. Participation is treated as a social process, as a value held by some people, as a dimension of organizational climate, as an instrument of management, as a right that stems from the law, and as a form of government.

b) Its aims. Participations is intended to be the way of embodying democracy in everyday life, a source of legitimacy for authority, a space for rendering high level decision making accountable, a technique for improving performance and rising efficiency, and a requisite for human development.

c) Its procedures. Participation processes take forms which range from the spontaneous and so-called “informal” encounters to more standardized and mediated forms.

This diversity in conceptions, has been said, implies some dangers in as much as conclusions drawn from any particular research programme is likely to be applied in some setting or compare to other studies without a critical review. Such a review should include a careful look at the assumptions that inform the research process.

Ledford and Lawler (1994) offer a good example of this danger. Given the conclusion, based on rigorous measures, that employee participation has insignificant effects on satisfaction and performance, once can expect managers to stop trying to apply participative programs. The problem arises when a careful review of the studies on which that conclusion is based reveals that participatory processes considered are very restrictive in its nature, excluding those aspects that are more controversial and receive more attention in public life. So if there is reduced participation, effects are likely to be reduced as well. This is a good reason for trying to identify what research and practices as well exclude or obscure.

In other words, epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues need to be taken into account. But there is more to consider, specially the way research is linked to wider social debates. As Gregory (2000) noted, participation is a term that is applied to a wide and sometimes contradictory variety of practices. Unlike her, we think that these differences do not necessary have to be solved. Instead, we consider another way, one which consists in getting in touch with different kinds of productions, with different looks and practices around the notion of participation.

A schematic overview

Despite of the risk of producing a “cartoon” version of participation, as a result of a ‘constant comparison’ process of literature on the subject, we first underlined some

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2 Literature search was widely conducted through data bases such as PsychINFO, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Redalyc, Psicodoc, Dialnet and TDX (Doctoral Dissertations Online). Working with a single descriptor – the word ‘participation’, in English or Spanish depending on the kind of resource –, returned many publications, so we carried out a selection process in order to assure that participation was a central theme of selected publications. A list of reviewed publications is available in Annex A.
major differences among disciplines, traditions and contexts. Then, we built an open
definition that includes a schema of elements and dimensions that should be explored in
every particular case.

This schema is an attempt to offer a view that helps to reconnect this diversity and,
particularly, its contradictions in a way that help us to understand no only what
participations means, but how it is related to social life, academic institutions included.
Needless to say this has to be considered work in progress and, at least in the sense of
the kind of answer we are looking for, it has to remain as such.

First of all, we have to deal with the ways every disciplined has focused on the
phenomenon. It is not hard to recognize that participation has gained a major role in
several fields as education, politics and law (Flores, 2004). There are, in fact, a wide
range of practices and proposals intended to deal with participation in public, private
and third sector organizations, and, despite some similarities or transversal features,
every sector has its own priorities, and even in the same sector, these priorities vary
according to the role or position of those implied in the process.

The world of companies and corporations has popularized terms as work groups or
quality circles. Those terms are related to managerial practices intended to involve
employees in decisions regarded the quality or costs of goods or services that the
company offers. Public administration, in turn, has some tradition in promoting
practices such as forums, deliberative workshops, local councils, and other spaces aimed
to give voice to citizens. Finally, third sector organizations also show interest in getting
their projects achieved on the basis of internal participative practices.

There are several things to emphasize about participation in the corporate world. Most
managers of private, lucrative, organizations, for instance, conceive participation
basically as another tool than can be used to increase efficiency or generate innovation.
Nevertheless, a tradition that is linked to the idea that democracy should gain spaces in
every sphere of society, participation is about employees’ influence in organization’s
decision. Managerial perspectives on participation, which are close to the human
resource management approach, mostly rely on procedures such as quality circles, job-
enrichment, employee empowerment and team work. While workers are expected to
offer ideas and share enthusiasm on improving performance, their power of decision
does not reach fundamental issues like the direction of the company.

Worker perspectives, which now consists of certain rights, sanctioned by public
institutions, and intended to offer the labour force the opportunity of being represented
in some decision organs, might have seen its greatest moment when industrial
democracy reached its peak, back in the 1970’s, but nowadays, it is a term
with little currency in contemporary market-driven economies where any worker
or activist concern for industrial control has been fragmented and displaced by
defensive struggles to retain individual employment and to protect employment
rights. Unions [...] are in numerical membership decline and along with other
pressure groups are facing new, highly complex agendas [...] The ignominious
collapse of so many Eastern European 'worker democratic states' has exacerbated
the lack of definitional and operational clarity to industrial democracy" (Hyman &
Mason, 1995, p. 8).
What seems more relevant to us is that different ways of defining participation are not just an academic area of debate, but confronted positions that are closely related to wider social issues such as public policies and legislation. Beyond this, from a psychosocial point of view, there is a link among these perspectives and fluctuations in the social imaginary. This is an example of how some degree of mobility among analytic levels is always needed, and, moreover of the inevitable ideological backgrounds that any supposedly ‘neutral’ definition has (Acuña, Núñez y Radrigán, 2003). In fact, the “value bases underlying topic labels like industrial democracy and power equalization are not usually made explicit and are therefore rarely systematically questioned” (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978, p. 1).

Before describing central features of participation in public administration and third sector organizations, we should say that market approaches are becoming common: this approaches look to find ways of involving customer in organizational processes, as sources of ideas for quality and innovation.

Public administrations’ relation with participation is quite different to that of enterprises⁴. Participation is intended to foster citizens’ involvement in policy making and decision making processes, especially those of local base. Although participation is though to be a space for political transformation towards a more egalitarian and co-responsible society, it is not always clear the extent to which procedures can be conducted in ways that make it just a way of legitimating decisions already taken behind closed doors. Citizen participation has evolve in many specific projects such as youth participation as a value acquiring activity (Camino & Shepherd, 2002; Kerr, 1999) or participation in the government of schools (Farrell, 2000; Gittell, 1977; MacKinnon, 2000; Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin & Smith, 2005) to mention a few.

Third sector, as another context for participation, maintains a close – and sometimes tense – relation to public administration. First of all, a mention on the character of its name should be made. The term “third sector” is used for those areas of activity and organizational forms that can be classified neither as capitalist enterprise nor as public administration. Anything but a satisfactory term, since it is applied to a complex and world in which different purposes and philosophies are at stake. Furthermore, we would like to advance the idea that third sector, or at least some part of it, emerges as participative process that grows and acquire some features of its interlocutors. Third sector may had been used to acquire public administration features, but, recently, as managerial approaches of a technocratic nature are widely recommended, there is a strong tendency towards the so call professionalization of non-governmental organizations.

Third sector participative processes are mostly related to activism (Hemment, 2004; Kurczewski & Kurczewska, 2001), understood as collective activities intended to change social conditions or its effects, being them something as giant as regime or

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⁴ Nonetheless, from a wider point of view, one which takes care of macro levels of analysis, there as important relation among government policies and enterprises’ participative forms. Since employee participation as a democratic requirement relies mostly on laws, changes in governments orientations are likely to favour or discredit attempts of giving workers greater influence on what usually is referred as top management decision.
global warming, or as apparently delimited as father’s conquering maternity leave rights or a group of people that periodically visit old people just to talk to them. It is this context in which the most exiting examples of participatory processes are likely to be found: outside the boundaries of the private and the government organizations, and still connected in ideological, territorial and economical ways; with ambitious projects intended to built horizontal, anti-hierarchical, spaces for action, and yet facing oligarchic practices and double agendas. There are, as can be seen, many reasons to think that it is the third sector in its traditional and new forms, and including its close links with public and private sector, a good place to start a research journey.

**Participation as a shift: the private goes public**

Compared to the variety of activities that are regarded as participative, the idea that participation is about sharing power seems to be rash. First of all, the undefined nature of power, a complex theme in social sciences especially since Foucault advanced a whole new approach (Ibáñez, 1983), raises some questions on whether power is something that can be shared. Indeed, power issues are central to participation, but, in order to avoid naïveté in which seem to require a major conceptual work, we will offer a prior and general notion of participation that is related to the idea of space.

A typical image associated to participation is that of an assembly, in which everybody can have a say. This can be, in fact, a form of participation. But problems appeared when our only way of thinking on participative processes is that of the assembly. The same happens when we think of it only as having some influence in decision making, when, in fact, the idea of decision making is far from being clear.

Participation is better understood as a form of relation with social objects, as a process in which one gets involved in things, and this can happen in many, many ways, because there are many forms in which people can be part of something. That is why, paraphrasing the view of Pablo Fernández (2004) on politics, participation is a process in which aspects of life that have been privatized, are turned back to the public sphere. It is also the way of rendering the process intelligible, of making sense of it, and this search for intelligibility is also a way of making the return to the public happen.

Public and private, Fernández says, are opposed as categories and as features of social life. Public things do not need boundaries; private things exist for them. Public things include all those things – ideas, sensations, colours, clothes, rules, etcetera – that can be understand in a given moment and placed, but not latter. Private things are those that are not located, that are out-placed and obscure. Private things are shadows.

This idea of participation is better understood in a fractal manner; it is a movement from nowhere and silence to places and voices, and it can be traced at different scales. As a matter of fact, a nation-wide decentralization process gives entity to objects in places in which they were nothing but a shadow. But this can also happen when a group of students decide to get involved in a home-made film, an idea which once was just a silent wish of one of them.
At first sight, this view of participation can seem hopelessly romantic. And maybe it is so. But we believe that it should be judged from the point of view of the aspects of participative processes that helps to visualize.

This vision of participation can easily be expanded when considered as matrix, in the sense that Hacking (1999) gives to the term. If we think of participation as an idea, then we can not expect that idea to exist out of social life. On the contrary, participation as a notion is produced, reproduced and eventually transformed as a part of a social network in which institutions, architecture, laws, technology and practices take place. There are different components of this matrix, located at different levels and shared with other aspects of social life. It is worth to think of participation through the idea of a matrix because it makes possible to locate participative phenomena in those social spaces in which they are being produced. Furthermore, participation in a matrix implies a complex socio-technical approach (Spink, 2003) in which the social and material sides of life are shown as different views of the same process, one in which, far from any technological determinism, the relation between technical and social aspects remains open and can take different forms, but is always embodied in a given place and time.

An important consequence of this is that scientific activity around participatory processes is not external to the matrix. Advancing an idea that will be discussed latter, when dealing with participation, scholars get inside

the polyphony of multiple conversations, that are continuously forming and reforming the theme-field happen in places, in spaces and at times. Some can be more central than others, more accessible than others or more widely known that others. Some conversations happen in bus queues, others in the bakery, in university corridors, in bars and other are mediated by journals, magazines, newspapers, radio and television. Others are present in artifacts and objects, parts of previous conversations that happened a long time ago. The social, to use the arguments of the actor network theorists is neither independent nor dependent on materials; on the contrary, materiality and sociality are two sides of the same coin (Spink, 2005, p. 4)

Once we recognize that we are part of the network in which the phenomenon is produced, we cannot expect to conduct our activity as if this was not relevant. In fact, this leads us to explicitly think about our own work in a reflective manner.

**A frame for connecting different versions of participation**

Once that our proposed notion of participation has been exposed, we can briefly describe a very basic schema that can be useful to situate, explore and compare different participatory approaches and practices. This schema consists of two groups. The first one include the components of participation we consider more relevant (Figure 1). The second includes different dimensions that are intended to capture the variations of participatory processes (Figure 2).

Components of participation include contexts, actors, objects, senses and processes. These components are by no means closed in its meaning; on the contrary, if applied as analytic resources, they require the researcher to pose questions in every particular case.
• Contexts include the spaces in which participation takes places. These spaces are not limited to the physical places; they also include the ways they are socially defined and issues of time.

• Actors are another important component which can be addressed at least in two ways. First, we can describe the system of roles that is working in each phase of the participatory process, the way this system changes or is maintained, and its effects in terms of exclusion. Second, we can deal with how individuals change during participatory process in terms of the things they learn and abilities the acquire, but also in terms of the relations between participation and identity.

• Objects are another necessary component of participation, because participation is always about something. Acknowledging that objects of participation are not given, but constructed through encounters in which people make sense of them (Weick, 1995), we consider that is necessary to study how this happen and its effects on the whole process.

• Senses include the cloud of meanings that actors use in their participatory activities. They can be thought as the discursive background from which meaning is achieved in everyday practices.

• Processes include the arrangements and day-to-day activities through which participation is achieved. How patterned or spontaneous the processes are and how they affect people involvement are some of the question that require a careful look at practices.

Figure 1.
Components of participation

Note that components of participation cannot be described without establishing explicit links among them. Establishing relations of this kind requires dense descriptions and more subtle categories. This is why dimensions are necessary. The key dimensions that
are shown below are presented as extreme points of continuums that can lead to a fine
description of participatory practices. As their properties are related to more than one of
the components of participation, we did not try to make explicit connections among
dimensions and components. Being this an open framework, it is a task of the researcher
to make sense of the schema in front of accounts and events related to participatory
processes.

![Dimensions of participation](image)

**Figure 2.**
*Dimensions of participation*

**Concluding remarks: social orders and participation, neglected issues**

This work was intended to identify some neglected issues on participation. Some of
them have already been underlined above, but we have saved the most important for this
section.

First of all, as a result of technocratic claims, little attention has been put on interpretive
tasks. Even in the most procedurized participative processes, rules and guidelines
cannot deal with every possible situation. Moreover, since social situations are hardly
predictable, actions taken are rarely of a technical nature. They always imply, whether
actors recognize it or not, ethical issues. That is why it is crucial for research on
participation, to carefully address day-to-day action, application of guidelines and the
ways dilemmas are faced. There no justification for ignoring what Gadamer calls ‘the
moment of application’.

In line with the role of guidelines, there are some issues about knowledge production on
participation that requires a critical analysis. An important part of academic activity is
devoted to create guidelines for practice (e.g. features of adequate participative
processes identified through benchmarking and then described as “good practices). This
is a good reason for paying attention to the ways academic activity is related with the
phenomenon. In other words, we, as scholars, are not merely describing and explaining participation; we are in fact contributing to the process of configuring its limits and characteristics.

Local knowledge, as opposed to that of the authorized sources has barely considered by mainstream research. Common sense, which is tacit, plural and embedded, has a major role in participatory processes, for it is the basis from which people make sense of their life. This normally hidden knowledge, which at first sight can seem to be apparently obvious, is “a socio-technical rather than social phenomenon, in that it is rooted in products, artifacts, traces, instruments and events. Once recovered, it provided a basis for exploring new patterns” (Spink, 2001, p. 224). Instead of arguing that people cannot participate in some decisions because they lack of some specialized knowledge, better to try to understand the role of tacit knowledge in participatory processes.

A final comment on issues of power should be made. Even in participation experiences that are considered successful, issues of power are likely to exist. This has to be said because it seems to be a tacit assumption that successful participatory practices always manage to create some horizontal spaces in which domination relations are put aside. As criteria for determining whether a participative process has been successful or not are established by those in a position of dominance, the idea of success does not necessary lead to that of dominance free relations. As a matter of fact, even in spaces in which explicit rules are posed to assure that everyone can exert some doses of power, strategic use of these rules, ways of thinking about one’s self, and difference in terms of social position, knowledge and skills, are sources of asymmetries that can have important effects in the processes.

It is our position that issues like this can be better understood by systematic research informed by structural-constructivist approaches such as those of Giddens and Bourdieu. This line of research can be important in order to gain a deeper comprehension of what participation excludes.

Finally, there is something to say about issues of power and knowledge that is relevant for academic work. Being able to recognize issues of power while entering the field is an important task because, historically,

the differences between knowledges, especially between those that were institutionally legitimate and those emerging in the day to day of practice and dispute, were largely held at bay. Working-class movements had developed their own independent schools and various forms of alternative self-instructed collectivization had attempted to challenge the conventional institutions. But these were ignored; usually by the simple mechanism of not recognizing their diplomas (if they had them) or their teachers (Spink, 2001, p. 220)

How we manage to create participatory spaces from our daily activities? How can we avoid assuming a position like that described above? Only an open view, that is capable of objectifying its own practices is capable of advancing an answer.

References


