**Ambiguities of meaning in participatory climate change adaptation**

Research example for Feminist epistemologies and science studies

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I would like to share a research example from participatory workshops on climate change adaptation. Last year, we organized a series of workshops in Czech cities involving various stakeholders. The aim was to support the climate change adaptation process in cities. I would like to introduce an example from city of Ostrava where we organized one of the participatory workshops.

Participatory workshops could be seen as participatory action research, where various actors are involved in knowledge production and deliberative process. Participatory workshops create situations with ambiguous contexts where decision-makers, goals, means, stakes, values and knowledges are diverse and sometimes contending (Bosomworth and Gaillard 2019). Participants has different expectations, level of knowledge and power.

While we initiated whole process of climate change adaptation in cities in the Czech Republic few years ago, cities started their own processes by “copying” our methodology and the memory of the adaptation process was somehow lost, also thanks to fluctuation of people at the administration and other factors. Therefore, we have been perceived as external visitors who came to Ostrava from Prague to give unsolicited advice on the whole adaptation process.

As I was moderating one of the discussion tables, I was challenged to involve into discussion a group of diverse participants. This group included mayors and vice-mayors of Ostrava districts, representatives of government institutions, Ostrava environment department, consultancies, NGOs. There were several aspects generating ambiguities. Definitely, there was a cultural and linguistic barrier which was among me as a researcher “from Prague” and participants native to Ostrava. Despite introductions of the aims of the workshop, it was difficult to access participant´s world of meaning (Gunaratnam 2003).

Discussion was dominated by one of the experts, even though we tried to eliminate this domination. At some stage, I was directly asked by one of the experts preparing Ostrava´s strategical plan whether I am from Prague, even this information wasn´t relevant for the workshop outcomes or the content of discussion:

Question: Are you from Prague?

My answer: I am not from Prague but currently live there.

This question, among others similar interventions, was meant as an invective to exclude me from the “situated knowledge” of the local situation in Ostrava. The expert did not ask about my experience on climate change adaptation and related information. He just used my “strangeness” with regard to Ostrava local settings as an argument to disregard the validity of the whole process and confirm the validity of his arguments within the discussion.

Another invective from elected representative of one of the Ostrava districts came within the same discussion round:

Question: But you are paid for this workshop, don´t you? We are here voluntarily from our own time. (This statement was initiated by a woman from strategic department of one Ostrava districts who expressed the opinion that this workshop is financed from government subvention – this was made transparent in all materials that workshop is supported by Technology agency project and wasn´t aim to discuss the mechanisms of financial support).

My answer: I am not paid for this workshop and also – probably like you – didn´t take a holiday to be at this workshop.

Again, this invective was meant to divide me as an external researcher from the local knowledge generated within the group. We informed participants about the project funded by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic but the information whether particular researchers are paid by this project wasn´t relevant for the workshop arrangement and outcome. Moreover, participants signed informed consent where it was stated that the participation in the study is voluntary and there will be no financial compensation for the participation as well as the right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw your participation at any time without giving any reason.

Local participants were hesitant to be involved in the discussion of adaptation measures in Ostrava because they presented their position as already engaged in adaptation planning (which of course wasn´t a case, at least not completely). They were not open to cooperate on adaptation planning with “researchers from Prague” funded by some – from their perspective – dubious research project. They also wasn´t comfortable (at least at the beginning) with the participatory scenario building workshop format.

The majority of participants were local government/policy representatives. They felt privileged and sufficiently empowered to make their own decisions on adaptation in the face of climate change. Even researchers were perceived as a disturbing factor and they would not seek to diversify involvement of different social groups beyond our workshop. Despite we initiated climate change adaptation process in the Czech Republic, we were perceived as “outsiders” who shouldn´t intervene with local power and interactions.

Subjective as well as social differences constituted ambiguities in dialogue (Gunaratnam 2003). This issue has not been widely addressed in climate change research and could be more integrated within research methodologies. Participants at our workshops were those with higher political privilege: However, climate change will probably impact mainly marginalized groups which were not represented in our workshops. Therefore, standpoint theory would be useful component in climate change adaptation research. Re-contextualizing our approach to workshop could provide useful insights into the background of the adaptation process in Ostrava.

Resources

Bosomworth, K., Gaillard, E. (2019). Engaging with uncertainty and ambiguity through participatory 'Adaptive Pathways' approaches: scoping the literature. Environmental Research Letters 14: 9.

Gunaratnam, Yasmin (2003) “What do you mean?” Insecurities of meaning and difference, In Researching Race and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power, pp. 136 – 156. London: Sage