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Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) with Homeless Youth as an Example of Community-Based Macro Social Work

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SoSe 2022- International Perspectives on Social Work and Pedagogy - Part 1

A short reminder: What is Social Work?

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (IFSW 2021).

“The social change mandate is based on the premise that social work intervention takes place when the current situation, be this at the level of the person, family, small group, community or society, is deemed to be in need of change and development” (ibid).

In the US: two distinguishable areas of social work practice (Rothman and Mizrahi 2014)

- Level of individuals, families, small groups: **Micro Practice** (Social Case and Group Work)
- Level of communities, organizations, society: **Macro Practice** (‘more’ than Social Community Work)

USA: Three Core Principles Define the Profession (Rank 2020)

1. Values of *Social Justice*

Key principle, but the question is: „what exactly is meant by ‚social justice‘?“ (ibid, 4)

- Basic human rights (access to food, shelter, health care, education, security, ...)
- „the goal of leveling the playing field in order for every individual to be able to reach their fully potential and capacity“ (reducing and eliminating poverty, discrimination, exploitation, ...) (ibid)

2. Understanding Social Problems through a *Person-in-Environment* Lense

(Individual) problems are seen in a context including „economic, social, political, and physical structures within communities“ (ibid, 5)

3. *Evidence Based* Policy and Practice

„informed by well-constructed research designs that result in solid evidence“ (ibid, 7)

Why Macro Practice?

Person-in-**Environment**

Environments: From a global perspective, nationally constituted social work practices face enormous challenges in the face of complex and unmanageable developments (Reisch 2016, 258)

Some (old) grand challenges in the 21st Century ...

- Climate change and increase in natural disasters
- Urbanization and socio-technical changes (digitalization)
- Global poverty, growing social inequalities, homelessness
- Political extremism, warlike and civil conflicts, regulatory violence and arbitrariness
- Flight and migration
- Exploitation, human trafficking and enslavement (also in countries like Germany!)
- Intersectional discriminations, persecution, incarceration, and (death-)sentencing of People of Color and LGBTQIA*

(Pyles 2021; Reisch 2016; Uehara et al. 2014)

Macro Practice is ...

- “a collective and collaborative form of social work that seeks to create purposive change” (Reisch 2016, 260)
- “the practice of helping individuals and groups solve problems and make social change at the community, organizational, societal, and global levels” (Brueggemann 2013, 8)

“Macro practice explicitly embodies social work’s commitment to social justice and social change by promoting *structural* solutions to *systemic* inequalities and various forms of oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience” (Reisch 2016, 261, my emphasis)

Macro Social Workers ...

- turn social problems of individuals (unemployment, domestic violence, homelessness, imprisonment, ...) into concerns of public interest
- develop strategies in order to create public awareness of these problems ...
- ... with the aim to initiate (political) measures that contribute solutions in the interest of affected people
- seek structural and institutional changes that affect problems of individual people and groups but cannot be solved at the individual or group level (Reisch 2016, 260)

Community Based Participatory Research as macro practice

“**Community** as a unit of identity is defined by a sense of identification with and emotional connection to others through common symbol systems, values and norms; shared interests; and commitments to meeting mutual needs” (Israel et al. 2005, in von Unger 2014, 29, my emphasis).

CBPR is a concept for community-orientated action within the framework of macro practice ...

- Collective and collaborative research in the spirit of communities and commons
- Activist understanding of research (emancipatory action research)
- Organized in partnership and solidarity: social work, citizens, science
- Characteristic of CBPR is the equal involvement of all partners in the overall action, not just in the phase of data collection (Garcia et al. 2014, 25)

Community Based Participatory Research as macro practice

- Research process in which academic researchers, social work professionals, and community stakeholders work together in partnership
- begins before a research project and continues until after its completion
- CBPR blends research and activism
- CBPR researchers focus their efforts not only on the research area being studied, but also on the processes of partnership building, open discussion of power and privilege, identification of shared goals, collective action to design and implement research, and community improvement (Gehlert, Kye-Price and Bekteshi 2012, 1)
- Community members take on a key role as stakeholders who strive to improve their individual and collective well-being (Altpeter et al. 1999, 32).
- CBPR as a community-oriented research and intervention practice in social work is understood as a medium for empowerment (ibid)

Community Based Participatory Research

Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) ...

“a form of community-based participatory research (CBPR) that guides young people through an iterative process of collective research and reflection to understand the situations in which they find themselves, and use that knowledge to take action to improve those settings” (Ozer and Douglas 2015, 30)

Three key principles (Rodriguez and Brown 2009)

1. Based on lived experiences and themes of youth
2. Participation: youth are fully involved
3. Transformative: Goal is to intervent and change knowledge and skills to enhance lives of youth and their communities

Community Based Participatory Research

Central YPAR processes

Iterative integration of research and action

Training and practice of research skills

The practice of strategic thinking and discussing strategies for influencing change

Building of supportive networks by reaching out to school and community stakeholders

Teacher's sharing of power with students in the research and action process

Processes that are important—but not unique—to YPAR

Expansion of the social network of the youth

Opportunities and guidance for working in groups to achieve goals

The development of skills to communicate with other youth and adult stakeholders

The teacher's flexibility regarding classroom projects or structure

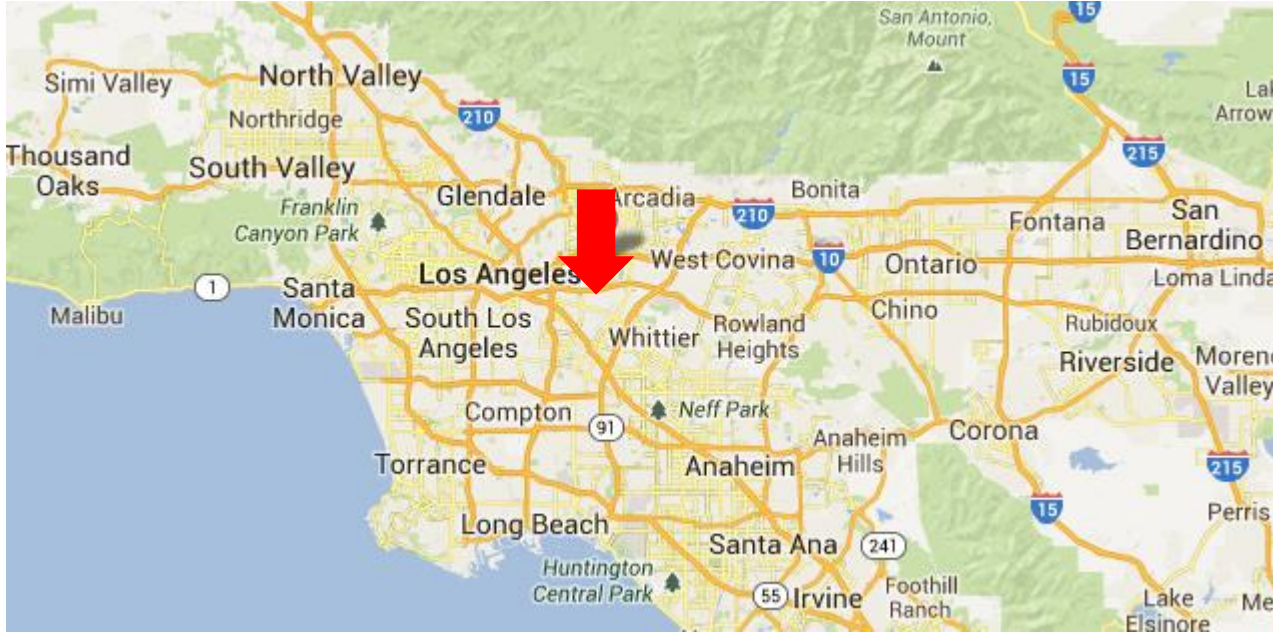
Teacher's emphasis on student perspectives

The engagement of the students in the classroom activities

YPAR as an example of Macro Practice in Los Angeles



District Skid Row, Los Angeles



“Skid Row is the epicenter of L. A.’s addiction crisis. More than 12,000 homeless meth and heroin addicts pass through here each year, with thousands living in the vast network of tent encampments that line the sidewalks. For decades, L.A. has centralized public services in this tiny city-within-a-city. The result: it’s become an iron cage of the social state, with the highest concentration of homelessness, addiction, and overdose deaths in Los Angeles County” (Rufo 2020, 1).

Background of the project (Garcia et al. 2014)

- Beside the main problems of homeless men and addiction there are also families in the district who have often been overlooked
- Despite a dense network of social services, general living conditions significantly damage the well-being of children and adolescents
- Since 1996, there has been a facility (UECPP) in the area that initially addressed alcohol and drug abuse.— Within a social justice framework, UCEPP mobilizes vulnerable populations by engaging them in organizing, research, and civic engagement to achieve changes that promote neighborhood well-being, cohesion, and safety” (Garcia et al. 2014, 19)
- In 2003 local young people dropped by out of curiosity: “They found UECPP themselves” (UECPP 2005)

YPAR as process: first phase of Pre-Engagement ...

- UECPP began working with the youth on their issues
- A small video project that came about by chance led to the production of a television documentary that received national attention - UECPP 'networked' young people and a professional producer for this purpose
- From this, a collaborative research project was started, consisting of ...
 - a group of 15 young people (who called themselves Youth Coalition X),
 - UECPP members,
 - a professor at Loyola Marymount University, LA

... Phase of collaborative participatory research ...

- Mixed methods
- quantitative approach because of the higher persuasiveness of the results
- Almost all research steps were carried out collaboratively
- Exception: quantitative Analysis
- But all results were communicatively validated and collaboratively interpreted
- Participation in Analysis is a challenge (see Schaefer, Bär and Mitwirkende des Forschungsprojektes ElfE 2019)

Some findings ...

Quantitative

- Just over half of youth had problem with school due to inappropriate or dirty clothing or school uniforms
- 43% received a fine from the police, mostly for running a red pedestrian light (66%)
- 49% witnessed death
- 76% have not used illegal substances
- The vast majority lived with parents or a family member
- More than 70% have lived in the area for at least one year, 30% for four or more years.

Publication

- Includes quantitative results as well as those from interviews the youth conducted with other youth

... Phase of Policy Making (Garcia et al. 2014)

1. Based on results of the CBPR/YPAR: Define problems

- Young people defined problem(s) in relation to the research findings
- Among other things: Problems were denied schooling and use of a park for recreation

2. Get public attention

- Presentation to attract interest and public attention
- Public interest was strengthened by scientificity of the research
- Press conferences and reports in various media, for example in the Los Angeles Times

3. Designing political alternatives

- Young people determine what is to be achieved
- Ranking of topics

4. Decision for a strategy to be pursued (Policymaking)

- Decision for an important political issue that seems realistic to achieve
- equal schooling for homeless youth and access to a park

5. Focusing concerns and getting them on the political agenda

- Public hearings before Los Angeles Unified School District policymakers

6. Accompanying advocacy support (Advocacy)

- One academic partner found a little-known provision in the No Child Left Behind Act: Schools are required to remove barriers to the admission, attendance, and academic success of homeless students
- Media campaign and local forums organized by the partners
- Local politicians were consulted

7. Evaluation: Achieved goals and setbacks

- improve schooling for *all* homeless youth throughout the school district, which extends well beyond District Skid Row
- Staff was increased
- Community of young people was strengthened in the long term
- But: use of a park was not achieved

Throughout: Always think about the possibilities of unintended consequences!

- Research results made the problem of the disastrous situation of families in the district visible
- Led to families being 'relocated' from the district, which made the situation worse for some of them

Afterwards: Stay in Touch!

In Germany ...

- Macro Practice as a term is not common
- In concepts: e.g. social management, urban development, social space orientation, political empowerment
- CBPR builds on a broadly 'forgotten' tradition of action research
- Only very few projects – CBPR (Community-basierte partizipative Forschung) is feasible in Germany (von Unger 2014, 33)
- But ...
 - *Community* has to be defined
 - Not suitable for research with groups with no or problematic relations to a community (ibid, 32)

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