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Facing Resignation and Silence: A Transforming Action-Research Experience in Brazil

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This article aims to discuss how the action research process can allow socially and historically constructed silences to be overcome. These kinds of silences prevent the emergence of dialogues necessary to the investigation mode. The necessary dialogues are built through the creation of a common participatory universe, and the construction of a consensual space between researchers and subjects of the practice, between those who are different and those who are the same. The article analyzes an action research project with women embroiderers in the suburbs of a large Brazilian city, directed at the formation of a working collective. Focusing on this experience, the authors discuss the strategies used to break the silence between the researcher and the group, considering the differences between researcher and group that could reinforce silences that already existed for participants. In a joint conclusion, the authors point out that action research can work as a critical instrument for breaking silence, allowing subjects to produce communicative processes that make it possible to overcome “resigned states” in order to transform their reality.

Key words: action research, dialogue, emancipation, Brazil

Introduction

One of the essential aims of action research (AR) in the Latin American tradition, as we see in authors such as Paulo Freire and Orlando Falls Borda, is the collective production of social transformation in an emancipatory and not a manipulative way.

We are a group of Brazilian researchers who try to work towards an emancipatory perspective. According to this perspective, we believe that in the AR process researchers and practitioners should develop a critical-reflective understanding of the contexts and configuration of practice, in order to dialectically understand and overcome the oppression imposed on their existence.

Reaching emancipatory objectives means that researchers and practitioners need to become partners and producers of self-transformation, seeking to solve the problems of the practice, and building spaces and contexts for collective reflection.

In our experiences in Brazil (Franco 2004, 2006; Bidart Novaes 2008; Pontes 2007), we found that the subjects involved in the AR projects found it very difficult to express themselves and communicate. We also found that researchers and practitioners had different rhythms/perspectives and intentionalities. Researchers needed time to organize the knowledge that emerged from the process. Participating subjects, on the other hand, had an urgent need for transforming action. Researchers expected all of those involved to participate; however, practitioners only begun to participate when they developed critical processes of awareness of their social role. Researchers needed a collective to start their work, however they realized that, faced with great social and cultural inequalities, collective organization would only take place after critical social learning work.

These conflicts indicated to us that for each difference there was a corresponding space of non-communication, non-dialogue, which we began to call "silences" in communication. We also realized that the practitioners, despite being in a greater number, were unable to express their feelings and values, shutting themselves off in the condition of oppression, silenced by their personal and social histories. For this state of impossibility of communication

we coined the term “state of resignation”, a concept close to the one used by Paulo Freire (2005) when he refers to the oppressed.

The “state of resignation” is a feeling of impotence, incapability of reaction, apathy and conformity. The subjects believe that they are unable to promote deep changes in their lives. Freire (2005) considers it a condition of “being less”, victims of a dehumanization provoked by an unfair social order, by the violence of oppressors who exploit less fortunate people. For the Brazilian author, only a pedagogy of liberation will be able to transform the oppressed into critical and free men, a pedagogy that cannot be prescribed, imposed or elaborated by the oppressor, but should be forged “with” the oppressed and not “for” him, the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”.

Into this emancipatory perspective, we believe AR can really promote social transformation, replacing silence by dialogue. These conditions essentially imply the use of non-arrogant attitudes; hearing and understanding discourses elaborated in different cultural syntaxes; breaking the asymmetry of relationships and incorporating all involved as active and thinking individuals (Freire 2005; Fals Borda 1981). It implies mainly recognizing and helping to develop the education of oppressed people properly, as Freire (2005) says.

The purpose of this article will be to discuss how to overcome the state of resignation and silence of participants, guided by the presupposition that AR can be also an emancipatory form of education, in a cyclical process that opens spaces for awareness of oneself and the world. In the article, we chose to analyze the women embroiderers’ case, a participatory AR experience developed by Bidart Novaes (2008) in the organizational studies area.

Focusing on this practical experience, we discuss: i) the state of resignation and silence of the women embroiderers; ii) the strategies used to break the silence and open the communicative space; iii) participatory action research and transformation of reality.

About the state of resignation and silence of the women embroiderers

In March 2007, the main researcher worked as a volunteer professor teaching social entrepreneurship actions for people who intended to open small busi-

nesses. In one of those courses, he met a woman who asked him for help about the basics of starting a specific business. She was the representative of a group of women embroiderers, and they wanted to learn how to start a work cooperative, eliminating middlemen and earning more for the product of their work.

Bidart Novaes decided to visit the group in order to know their history and understand their real intentions. The researcher was also interested in developing an AR project in his management studies and writing a master dissertation. He believed that the interests of the women and his own could have a lot of synergy.

In the first meeting, the researcher confirmed his expectations. It would be a big challenge to work with a group who lived in oppressive social conditions, and he was eager to change their reality. He realized that, to help them, some initial barriers needed to be crossed.

The women embroiderers lived in a neighbourhood 40 kilometres from downtown São Paulo where, according to data from a 2000 census, the household heads earned approximately US\$ 300.00 and, in 27.03% of the households, the average per capita monthly income was lower than US\$ 100.00. These household heads had on average 5.0 years of schooling, 26.8% of them had only finished primary school and 12.4% were illiterate. The women household heads made up 21%, and the portion of children under five years of age corresponded to 12.1% of the total population.

The situation of the neighbourhood was extremely precarious. Many people lived in shacks or in very poor houses, there were few asphalted streets and no sewage service. There was only a small health centre, and the two schools in the neighbourhood were not enough for the huge number of children and young people who lived there. Beyond the effort of some local social entrepreneurs, it was not possible to find educative or associative proposals for young people. Those were left on their own, and very soon they had contact with violence, delinquency and drugs.

The AR project included a group of about 200 women, who had in common the fact of embroidering items of clothing and doing business through a middlewoman. This person used to pay only US\$ 0.50 a piece for the

women's product, while she could earn US\$ 1.50 for the same piece of embroidery from the stores of the textile region in São Paulo.

The researcher's first impressions of the social context of the women's way of life were strong enough to make him realize the importance of the work for those oppressed women and the size of his responsibility. It was also possible to realize that working with participatory AR, based on Paulo Freire and Falls Borda, would be the best choice. Within this perspective, particular groups in society can see themselves as entrepreneurs, in a social meaning of the concept.

In order to get to know the participants and make the recognition of the problematic situation, the AR project started with an *identification and diagnosis* phase. It took twelve meetings and was helpful to identify barriers and ensure the success of the project.

According to the *identification and diagnosis* phase, we categorized the reasons for the state of resignation and, consequently, silence of the participants into three main aspects.

Firstly, the feeling of "being less", resulting in lack of self-confidence. This feeling was erected by their oppressive social conditions and the system of exploitation their work was subject to. The women embroiderers were a low-income, culturally and socially excluded community, where the type of silence reported by Freire (2005) was installed. The silence of people who have come to believe they are made only to perform tasks, while others are made to think (Colin 2003). As Freire (2005: 56) reports about his experiences with peasants, people who say "Sorry, we should shut up and listen to you, we don't know anything, you are the one who knows".

In this way, the biggest barrier to starting the project was the silence of participants. The first challenge, undoubtedly, was breaking the "culture of silence" (Freire 2005: 201). According to Freire (2005), this silence is generated in the oppressing culture. Overcoming their silence, the participants could transform themselves and transform their reality in communion with their partners, rising out of naiveté into the sphere of critical thinking, from passivity to action, from resignation to hope. "The union of the oppressed demands from this process that it be, from the start, what it must be: cultural action." (Freire 2005: 202).

The silence of the women embroiderers was clearly noticed in the *identification and diagnosis* phase. In the first meetings, silence was heavy and the researcher had to find strategies to make the communication easier. Women showed embarrassment in talking to him, as they felt inferior, or simply ashamed. They used to communicate with short phrases and answer questions only when the researcher interrogated them. The women avoided looking straight into the researcher's eyes and an uncomfortable feeling used to be part of the meetings. Those silent moments and the women's ashamed behaviour made the researcher understand that no matter how much he spoke, the silence would be greater. "The more words, the more silence" says Kristiansen (2007).

As Schön (1997) says, it was about overcoming the game of silence and the attachment to defensive attitudes, embarrassment and shame. For this purpose, it was necessary to touch the group, weaving the "us" and really seeing the individuals as feeling and thinking people, able to transform their reality (Streck 2009). It meant that the researcher had to be prepared to initiate a sharing process, allowing the individuals to talk and to express themselves, feeling welcome in a continuous process of emotional and cognitive co-formation.

The silence made it difficult for the group to start expressing their longings, needs and their themes of interest. Freire (2005: 115) explains that what can seem like the absence of themes suggests, conversely, "the existence of a dramatic theme: *the theme of silence*. It suggests a constituting structure of mutism before a crushing strength of limiting situations, and in the face of them the obvious is adaptation." In this way, we coined the term "state of resignation". The embroiderers' group expressed with silence their impotence to overcome the oppressing conditions they felt subjugated to.

In the "state of resignation", the women embroiderers demonstrated they did not feel able to implement the changes on their own. Because of their lack of self-confidence, they always waited for their leader or for the researcher to decide, and did not have autonomy to take any kind of initiative. They showed apathy and impotence before difficulties. However, the strength of their motivation and hope of changing were the link the researcher needed to approach them and start a communicative action.

In order to break the silence and overcome the state of resignation, some aspects needed to be considered. Firstly, it was necessary to build a confidence relationship based on mutual respect and honesty (Fals Borda, 1981). For this purpose, the researcher sought to calm the group, showing availability to hear them, and trying to be totally honest and clear about his intentions. Adopting this open attitude encouraged the women to start talking, revealing their female and oppressive social conditions.

Despite demonstrating they could not properly express their ideas, the women knew clearly how much they used to earn as result of a day of work and, as they recognized in the first meeting of the group, it was not enough to pay for a bus ticket downtown, or even to feed their family decently. According to their short speeches, they felt dependent upon their husbands and families and they wanted to change that. Then, the second aspect to consider was their female condition of dependency in society.

Their husbands had rarely come to see the work; however, they had always been present in the women's dialogues and imaginary. The women also showed concern for their husbands' opinions, and if they would allow their wives to participate in the meetings, or if they would give them permission to work away from home. The women embroiderers always showed submission to their husbands, performing the social role culturally and historically imposed on them and which they totally accepted. The leading woman once said that a woman is raised to be a homemaker and responsible for children. The researcher decided to respect these characteristics of the group, trying not to interfere in their personal lives.

Children were always present physically or in their speech. Some women had to take them to the meetings, because they did not have another place to leave them. Others had to leave the meetings earlier in order to take or bring their children from school. It was clear during the meetings that when the women said they used to embroider a determined number of pieces a day, it meant they had only three or four hours available, because they had to conciliate work and house tasks.

A third aspect was the marked cultural distance between participants and researcher. This distance was in terms of gender, he was the only man in the group, as well as in terms of socio-economic and cultural origin. The re-

searcher himself reports a feeling of foreignness and sometimes impotence, when encountering another cultural logic, regarding times of meetings, rhythm of work and priorities. Women would find it natural to be late to meetings due to their obligations with their children. During meetings they would sometimes prefer, right under the eyes of the researcher, to talk about their husbands and problems of the communities than about issues related to the co-operative. All this can be understood as social capital building (Al-bagli; Maciel 2003), but it was stressful when compared to the goals the group has determined.

Breaking the silence through action research

Night has absorbed time. Serenely, it collects the silence from which words emerge and return. However, silence can sometimes break, unexpectedly. Where it was least expected, on the surface of consciousness, bursts the bubble of a memory, of a vanity, of a desire, of a humiliation that rises from the greatest depth and brings a disappeared world back to life.

François Jacob (1987)

In this topic, we present the strategies used by the main researcher with the women embroiderers that helped to break the silence of the group, and approach the distant cultural universes of both researcher and participants. The work with the embroiderers can be divided into four main phases. The first one was the *identification and diagnosis* phase; the second was considered as *touching the group*; the third was the *organization for production* and the fourth *effective production*. Out of a total of 32 meetings, the initial 12 meetings were part of the *identification/diagnosis* and *touching* phases, which we are focusing on in this article because we associate them with the communicative space opening.

The strategies used during the work had as a presupposition the problematization of reality, aiming to help the participants to develop processes of

awareness about their social role, looking for collective solutions for their problems.

Regarding technical aspects, based on his experience as a sociodramatist, Bidart Novaes (2008) chose to work with sociodramatic diagnosis and warm-ups and with conversation circles. Based on Moreno (1997), Sternberg and Garcia (2000) and Paulo Freire (2005), the author attempted to promote pleasant and reflexive meetings for the group. After the warm-up with sociodramatic games (Yozo 1996), everyone would sit in a circle and talk freely about their intentions, dreams and wishes of changing their lives. This was always followed by action plans for the next meetings.

It is important to highlight here that in the sociodramatic context diagnosis means the understanding and the adaptation of the co-ordinator to the group's manifestation and needs at that moment, without the goal of a characterization of the group. In the socio-dramatic process, diagnosis and intervention goes hand in hand the whole time (Drummond 2008), in the same way it occurs in action research processes and in Paulo Freire's educational method. It is not possible or desirable to make long and elaborated diagnosis processes. Sometimes we are dealing with a population used to diagnosis without treatments and consequences, and quantitative research that does not result in actions (Le Boterf 1999).

Participants would bring to the meetings issues of their daily lives and still express themselves with great difficulty, finding it hard to organize their ideas and aims, and regarding the researcher with distrust. Despite the silence of the group, from these first meetings on the researcher started collecting themes that would direct possible discussions for the next phases, and studying strategies to overcome the silent barrier.

In the games and conversation circles of the initial meetings, the researcher collected themes related to participants' interests, based on Sternberg and Garcia's concept (2000) of "shared central issue". Those authors suggest that the co-ordinator should listen to the various issues of concern to group members. Out of the group's interactions and statements, one major issue seemed to excite the group's interest the most.

In each meeting, games and experiences were used (Yozo 1996; Brown 2004) which served at the same time to break the initial silence typical of

such meetings and to unite the group. Bidart Novaes believed that it was necessary to confront the silence “as a concrete fact and as introjected reality” (Freire, 1979: 85). Silence could only be confronted with patience and by giving the group a voice, at their own pace, in their own time and with their own language.

The breaking of the silence and the opening of the communicative space was not a linear process, but rather one of comings and goings. When the women felt discouraged, repeating negative ideas like “it won’t work out” or “we can’t do it”, it was more necessary than ever for the researcher to avoid any type of manipulation of the group. According to Freire (2005: 168), the manipulation provokes an inauthentic type of “organization” and prevents the lower social classes from finding truly emancipatory ways of structuring themselves.

Aiming to integrate the group, improve their self-confidence, and raise their initial expectations, the following strategy was used in the first meeting: as a warm-up, there was a “cocktail” in which all the women were asked to talk in pairs and change partners every five minutes, when he clapped hands. The topic of conversation was always what they were doing there and what they expected from that meeting. Then, sitting in a circle, each participant retold the conversation.

Sociodramatic games encouraged each participant to develop self-confidence and self-expression, working as icebreakers. In those kinds of activities, it was possible to know more about the women and identify their themes of interest.

In that meeting, the central issue was how to increase the profit from the embroidery work they made at home. Related to this central issue, other issues arose from the conversation, such as how their husbands would react to their initiative to work in a co-operative away from home, where the women would leave their children or if working in a co-operative would be the best choice for them.

As Drumond (2008) states, it is before the group that we can go deep into the planning and learn to look at them in a different way. When the researcher comes across an unknown reality, he also needs to warm himself up in order to open new possibilities of noticing how the participants are, and

what facilities and difficulties they face everyday, without using slogans or ready materials that only serve to calm the researcher.

In that phase of opening the communicative space, the activities and techniques for warming them up were little by little helping to break the silence. In one meeting, for example, the embroiderers' leader recounted her story. She also reminded them about the number of pieces they used to embroider in the beginning, and how it had increased at that moment. After her lecture, the group was invited to sit in a circle and talk about the facts that had been remarkable in the story and how, together, they could develop their work much more.

The second meeting happened in the leading woman's backyard. It was a rainy day. The researcher had made an appointment with her for an interview before the meeting, but she was too busy making coffee and lunch for her daughter. Then, five minutes before starting the meeting, she drew a picture on a board prepared for the meeting and said that it represented the group story: "first one woman, then others arrived and thirty embroidery pieces a month turned into 10,000". The researcher felt surprised at the simplicity with which she expressed her ideas. As the women were not able to use an academic and more elaborate language, working with them meant accepting and respecting a speech elaborated in a different syntax, a different way of collecting data, and a different way of doing reports.

When the meeting started, the first woman to arrive was about twenty years old. She said that she embroidered blouses and dresses but it was complicated. She would bring the clothes from a nearby neighbourhood and earn US\$ 1.00 per blouse, which took her a day of working, and US\$ 4.00 per dress, which could take her a week of working. Then she said that at that time she had also to work in a restaurant three times a week and earned US\$ 8.00 a day.

Another participant reported that she and her husband were paying US\$ 300.00 for the rent of the house where they lived. They had a small grocery store, but that business was not doing well. She said that her husband wanted to close down the store and move to a small house they had in another neighbourhood. However, she was not sure if she wanted to move, because she wanted to open an organic products store. She recognized that the prob-

lem with their grocery store was bad administration. When the researcher asked her if she understood when a business is profitable, she answered yes, because her husband came from a family of traders. On the other hand, she said that they did not even maintain a cash flow book properly.

This intersection between women's autonomy, what they were learning in the business practice and their personal relationships was a constant problem during the research. The researcher needed guidance to keep the objectives proposed: generation of employment and income in a work co-operative. However, at the same time, he needed to help each woman individually to build up the network of emotional support which would be necessary to form the structure of a successful collective venture. This network needed to be built among the group and in the community.

Another noteworthy meeting was the one when they watched and debated some news on TV about exploitation of Bolivian immigrants who were working illegally in the textile market of São Paulo city. It was easy for the women to understand and compare themselves to those Bolivians. As the Bolivian workers, the embroiderers worked in an informal way and were exploited by middlepeople. The Bolivians earned US\$ 100.00 per month to make at least 12 trousers per day. They worked in groups of six, subordinated to a middleman who sold the trousers to Korean dealers in the textile zone of São Paulo for US\$ 2.00 to US\$ 3.00. These dealers sold the same trousers in their stores for US\$ 15.00 to US\$ 25.00. It was clear to the women that if each Bolivian earned US\$ 100.00, the middleman would earn about US\$ 2.000 per month and the Korean owners of shops would have a profit of US\$ 20.000 with these goods.

These discussions had the finality of problematizing their reality in order to make them aware of their social conditions, and together find possibilities to become stronger and overcome their problems. Sharing their points of view was a dialectical way of replacing silence with dialogue and, as Freire (2005) says, it is important to offer the group conditions for debate, seeking to clarify the situation or perform real actions.

For each meeting, Bidart Novaes (2008) would ask the group to tell the newcomers (and there always were some of them) what they were doing, and what had happened in the last meeting. Using the strategy of retelling the

story orally, it was a way of making the meeting less formal and making it easier for them to understand the AR process. Forcing subjects who were not used to writing or reading minutes and reports to do that could disperse the participants or reinforce the silence of the group.

New warm-up games were constantly created in order to affect the participants and make them express themselves. For example, the game of continuing stories. The participants were invited to continue a story which one of them had started reading in a book. These games were also strategies used to stimulate a subsequent sharing of thinking, emotions and wishes connected to the project. According to organizational sociodramatic theory, these are important moments, when most of what it is said and brought to light can be used to make concrete action plans for transforming the group's reality.

In this action research, it was difficult to delimitate phases in a strict way. We understand that there were three key moments in order to settle the communicative space necessary to form the collective entrepreneurial.

In the third meeting, the researcher in asked for a volunteer during the warm-up activity. After some embarrassment, and as no volunteer appeared, the group indicated the most extroverted woman to represent them. The researcher gave her a piece of embroidery and provoked a conversation about what the meaning of that piece was, and what relation it had to their collective work. Next, each woman received a piece of their embroidery and the group started talking about their project. In the end, the women concluded they had learnt that, in order to improve their life conditions, they should take a step forward, take risks and face the unknown. The pieces of embroidery they got during the game symbolized their individual work and, when they joined the pieces, they related them to the idea of creating a cooperative. They understood that, with the co-operative, they could earn more, but each one was responsible for the result of their individual work. This experience had a strong impact on the group. It made them aware of the necessity of individual effort for achieving collective gain. It was remarkable for the women, and they always talked about the experience when someone new arrived in the group.

The leading woman was instructed to once again share her experiences with embroidery and explain how the earnings were divided. The researcher asked the group if they would like to understand the production chain and the value chain. The concepts were quickly explained, and only one of them reported she had already been to a shop to see the final prices and ask how much the traders paid for the embroidery. Others only knew the final price of the product. A part of the group, with a greater practical sense, wanted immediately to know what they would do, and what kind of guidance the researcher would give them. Some women showed impatience, and insisted on knowing immediately what they had to do and when the production would start. Then the group agreed to gain more understanding of the world of embroidery and accessories first, and afterwards to begin production in May.

The second key moment was when the group brought to a meeting, as a summary of a discussion they had during the week without the participation of the researcher, their objectives formulated in an individual way: they wanted to leave their homes to work together, learn new things and earn their own money. The fact that the group had taken the initiative to meet without interference from the researcher demonstrated their interests and own voice, meaning that the initial silence had started to be broken. These independent meetings before the researcher's visits took place regularly. The leader of the women helped the group, without interference from the researcher, to reformulate their objectives as collective actions, in the following way: (1) valuing women's work; (2) fair income; (3) working in the neighbourhood and for its development.

Valuing women's work and having fair income had a very practical and measurable aspect for them at that moment. It meant tripling the value of the embroidery and overcoming the poverty barrier. In that way, they could live with dignity, without depending on husbands, families or government. However, the first aspects were also related to appearing, leaving their homes, showing their work, eliminating intermediaries and starting to negotiate directly with the stores. They would tell the researcher they wanted to have power over what they did, and feel happy for seeing their work in a store window. Working in their neighbourhood was very pragmatic, because they

would not have to take a two-hour bus trip to downtown in order to sell their embroidery.

The third key moment was when the researcher proposed, as a warm-up activity, composing song parodies of popular melodies. The group, divided into three teams, composed song parodies expressing how they felt about the formation of the co-operative. The lyrics showed the group spirit, as in the following:

It's time, it's time
It's time to co-operate
Take scissors and thread
Let's go to work

Let's jump up and go ahead
Anyone who doesn't know will learn
Here in the co-operative
Nobody stays without knowing

Co-operate and co-operate, oh, oh, oh
Co-operate and co-operate, oh, oh, oh
With our co-operative
Let's get there

Trust, humility and understanding
With more help and trust
We build the union (togetherness)

Another song:

Believe, it's time to win
This strength comes from inside you
You can, just believe and win

Believe that none of us was born with a super hero's outfit
Let's together, through union become Women in Action!!!

The result of the activity revealed an improvement in self-esteem, group integration, the construction of a common identity and a common objective. According to Drummond (2008), the songs were a means of expression that allowed the group to evade the difficulty of communicating what they felt and noticed concerning the organizational work. Drummond (2008) also states that humour is the simplest and many times the only way of making participants realize the serious content they are dealing with, through unusual creation.

There was a slow building of trust between the researcher and the group. In the beginning, the researcher did not realize that his presence at the women's houses for individual interviews would never be allowed. Only six months after starting the work, when he took his wife with him, was he able to break some moral barriers. Then he and his wife were invited to have lunch at some of the women's houses and he could finally approach them for interviews. Even the leading woman showed embarrassment and told him that, when he visited her and her husband was absent, the neighbours would make suspicious comments. To overcome this moral resistance, the researcher and the group made an intense advertising campaign about the cooperative work, inviting all women in the neighbourhood to participate. From that moment on, many other women came to see the embroidery workshop.

The opening of the communicative space was a slow process and sometimes the researcher had the impression he would "lose the group". The researcher always needed to remember that he should accept the results that came from the group, and that he was engaged, not only with the transformation of the system he was researching, but also with his own transformation (Coghlan/Brannick 2005; Barbier 2004). The researcher had to be careful and avoid raising false hopes. Many women asked him for jobs for their husbands and children, idealizing his importance or influence. In the women's opinion (so expressed by them), the researcher was a very important person because he belonged to a higher social class. The simple fact of having a car made him different from the people who lived in the neighbourhood, providing him with a lot more mobility and giving him the same status of the former middlewoman regarding access to markets. The researcher tried to deal with this

inequality, never presenting himself as somebody he was not, or making promises he could not keep (Fals Borda 1981).

Another important element that helped the researcher to open the communicative space was the leading woman. As a leader of the group, she had their trust and could help him to gain the same trust. Thus, he started sharing with her the co-ordination of the group. The leader would act spontaneously, motivating the others to participate in the meetings and, many times, explaining what the embroiderers wanted to express. Obviously, she also had power over the group, because she was the one who had contacts in the embroidery market and with middlemen. She would decide how many pieces of embroidery each woman would produce per month. Having a friendship with that woman helped the researcher to approach the group. On the other hand, he had to learn how to balance her influence over the group in order to avoid all kinds of manipulation.

We believe that (Pontes 2007) identifying natural leaders in action research groups is an important step to start the work. Accepting their collaboration is a way to break the silence and keep the union of the group, and they are often better able to understand the group's ideas, but the researcher should be careful. These leaders act in the action field and the researcher has to be aware of the whole action-research process. Sometimes these leaders have personal interests and, in participatory processes, the researcher needs to privilege collective interests. All kinds of power relationships in the group must be investigated in order to keep harmony and ensure the success of the AR project.

These power struggles end up generating conflicts and provoking the group defense mechanisms described by Morgan (2002), based on the studies of the Tavistock Institute. In times of great anxiety, groups defend themselves by means of: (i) dependence, projecting the group's attention on a figure able to solve the problems, idealizing the characteristics of the leader; (ii) pairing, the fantasy that a messianic figure capable of solving the problems will appear; and (iii) fight-flight, with the problems projected onto some type of enemy, internal or external. The leader of the group and the researcher shared these three kinds of roles during the whole process.

Participatory Action Research and transformation of reality

Santos (2007: 30) reminds us “as solidarity is a form of recognition obtained by recognizing the other, the other can only be known as a producer of knowledge”. He also states that the construction of this knowledge with multicultural characteristics collides exactly with the matter of silence and difference. Silence is, in the author’s vision, a symptom of a block, a potentiality that cannot be developed. The great question raised is “how to make silence speak without it necessarily speaking the hegemonic language that intends to make it speak” (Santos 2007: 30).

The transformation of reality that these women wanted was much greater and more extensive than the one the author of the research could provide. One important aspect for the academic progress of the research was its supervision and maintenance in the scope of the Business Administration area, more specifically organizational theory. The women wanted to transform their relationships with their husbands, children and families, their female condition in society, their lack of job opportunity, their level of study, their digital illiteracy, their access to culture and entertainment and many other things. Despite listening to all these complaints and intentions, the researcher needed to keep the focus on training collective enterprising.

The objective was building an “entrepreneurial collective”, a space for mutual learning and partnership where researcher and participants would be integrating themselves in a cyclical process of transformation of their realities and overcoming “resigned states” within oppressing conditions. The researcher used the expression “entrepreneurial collective” to avoid *a priori* defining which kind of organization would be ideal for the work with the women embroiderers. That was because co-operatives in the legal form in Brazil need a minimum number of people to be constituted.

Keeping this focus was one of the difficulties faced by the researcher with the embroiderers. As he was developing the work in the scope of a dissertation for a master programme in the management area, the researcher himself needed to recognize that, in some moments, he was trying to force the participants to find solutions using pre-existent academic business models, instead of an original model created by the group.

Franco (2005) proposes as a pedagogical strategy the process of constructing a “collective dynamic”. The author means that there is a need of getting, in the group, a space of permission to research with the group, in their rhythm and authorized way. The desire to arrive and immediately start researching with predetermined models can lead to insuperable silences. Franco (2003) defends that the action research gains a formative-emancipatory dimension for the participants as well as for the researcher. The author has used this perspective in her investigative projects with professors. It is about a long, slow and continuous work, once it presupposes a transformation of the subjects’ convictions.

The professors by themselves do not have the means to unfreeze (Lewin 1958) their practices, nor do they desire, at first, to abandon the safe haven of their usual procedures and try the new, even if they have received prescriptive orientations in some of the many qualification courses they attended. For this reason, the beginning of the work requires the silence to be thawed, and this is not always easy. To start this process, Franco (2005) has been proposing the construction/reconstruction of a collective dynamic, which is initiated by warming up the collective and is fundamentally guided by the construction of communicative action (Habermas 1982).

The differences are overcome because the communicative action is highly interactive, born out of the collective, the team. This action does not intend to guarantee efficiency at any cost, it is not individualistic, it does not pursue success, but rather, it is a dialogic action, a vital action, emerging from the world experienced. This action is born out of the situation and it offers ways of escaping from it. It is communitarian; it seeks understanding; it pursues negotiation, agreement; it seeks consensus; it is axiological because it believes in the validity of the norms discussed. It is “gentle in listening and tough in taking decisions” (Rojo 1997: 32-33). “It is basically about certain ways of being present, characterized by sharing, daring, and caring” (Kristiansen 2007).

In the embroiderers’ case, it was not about unfreezing only their convictions. Maybe the biggest convictions to be reviewed belonged to the researcher. Why so much planning? Was it the group that was in a hurry, or it

was his own deadline to finish his dissertation? Why try a formal business if the embroiderers' reality was from an informal economy?

Bidart Novaes tried to follow what Fals Borda (1981) suggests. According to the Colombian author, overcoming the differences must be done with authenticity and without disguises. Overcoming the differences will be mainly achieved by the researcher's honest commitment with the popular cause, by the absence of intellectual arrogance and by the incorporation of "people from social bases as active and thinking individual in the efforts of research" (Fals Borda 1981: 55).

This was done by asking the women themselves to act as researchers. At that moment, there were about 30 participants in the group. The initial research steps were carried out in the wholesale textile zone of Sao Paulo, in order to get to know the market. Women had decided they would start by quoting prices of sewing machines, thread and fabrics. Then, the next step would be to bring back this information to the group so that they could estimate earnings from working directly with the market, without middlemen.

In the next meeting, participants reported enthusiastically the results of their market research, pointing out how much they had learned, what they had liked best and sharing with the group the notes they had made.

Mrs. A. said they had seen prices of fabrics, thread, sewing equipments and scissors and she had been surprised at the prices of thread in specialized stores, because it was much cheaper than in the local neighbourhood. The researcher asked her if she understood the reasons for the difference in prices and she answered metaphorically: "There (the market) is the fountain, where everybody comes to drink".

Mrs. J. reported that in her opinion the most interesting fact was the difference in prices in general. In particular, she saw that a simple blouse cost US\$ 4.00 and after being embroidered, its price was US\$ 12.00. Another woman realized that it was the price in that popular market, but in other stores of the city it could reach US\$ 30.00 and, in a sophisticated mall, more than US\$ 50.00.

For Mrs. E., the most interesting fact was that the fabric which that blouse was made of cost US\$ 4.00 a meter and they had paid US\$ 10.00 for it. When

the researcher asked her how long it would take to make that blouse, Mrs. E. answered that a good dressmaker would need less than an hour for that.

The group also talked about the fashion cycle and the textile industry. Then they returned to their central issue: it was urgent to start their production. Without interference from the researcher, a woman said that she had already started. She had bought 12 blouses for US\$ 1.50 each, had embroidered them and sold each blouse for US\$ 8.00. With the money, she had bought another eight blouses and done the same, and she wanted to continue doing that.

During the meeting, the value issue and matters related to differences in prices and earnings with volume and specialization were emphasized. The terms used were not these technical ones, but terms from the women's own language, such as "more expensive, cheaper and who earns more". In that meeting the women agreed that, in the following week, they would meet without the researcher to decide what to do next.

In the action research with the embroiderers, we believe (Franco 2005) the agreements resulted from negotiation, based on communicative rationality. The agreements were intersubjective, negotiated critically and with dialogue, differently from agreements resulting from strategic rationality, which are cold, imposed, induced through gratifications, threats, suggestions, where what matters is the success of the action's proponent. In communicative action, the participants can arrive at a shared knowledge, which weaves an interactive structure of trust and commitment. On the other hand, strategic action is guided by presupposition of induction of values and convictions coming into play. Although reciprocal influence may happen, a true intersubjective agreement is not possible since this induction mechanism undermines the interaction and does not allow an atmosphere of complicity and true participation to be created.

Another of the researcher's convictions that was defrosted in contact with the group was the idea of "community", as warned by Le Boterf (1999). This concept disguises opposite interests inside social groups, which need to be understood. Even inside of what, for a middle class researcher, seems to be a "poor community", there were differences such as segments of classes and religious beliefs, with different desires and orientations. The neighbourhood

described here, and the embroiderers' social consensus, did not contain a system of common values that gave them a common identity to protect them against external cultural and economic aggressions.

In the embroiderers' case, there were very many aspects to consider concerning the differences in the group, such as social and cultural differences between the researcher and the participants; power relations in the group, as mentioned before, related to the influence of the leading woman over the group; different expectations; different religious beliefs. In order to integrate the group for reaching common objectives and for participative work, it was very important to study the complexity involved in the participants' reality.

As we said before, the process of overcoming the silence was built by comings and goings and the emphasis, in this article, has been on the initial stages. However, we can identify some important transformations in the women's reality which had occurred by the six first months of work. For instance, the group felt proud of themselves when they saw, for the first time, the product of their work in a store window. This fact had a very positive influence on their motivation. The day that the leading woman managed to negotiate directly with the owner of a store and became responsible for taking and selling the embroidery pieces, many things changed. She asked the researcher to help her take, by car, more than 700 pieces to be embroidered. For a piece that used to bring them US\$ 0.50, they started earning US\$ 2.00. They also hired a young boy to transport their embroidery and paid him US\$ 20.00 every 15 days. With the knowledge about costs they had acquired in the participatory AR process, they started making costs spreadsheets on their own.

There were, however, setbacks that caused conflicts and the reconstruction of silence, for instance, the decision to accept a larger order of needlework. At that stage of work, in the eighth month, the group already had six sewing machines, donated by an entrepreneur, but the machines turned from a solution to a problem. In fact, those machines were not suitable for a heavy industrial scheme, so it was difficult to maintain them and replace broken pieces. This dialogue with the reality of tangible assets, such as energy consumption and maintenance programs, was useful to develop the administrative maturity of the group, which learned how to do this kind of reflection

in subsequent situations. In this case, the group faced a setback and had to give up the order.

The group became, for the local people, not only a reference for employment and income generation, but also a space for debating personal problems. Problems such as alcoholism of husbands, violence and fear were discussed in the meetings. The most experienced women became counselors and the group assumed the function of emotional support for the participants. Being open to all kinds of human needs helped the group to break the silence and overcome their state of resignation.

Specifically in the scope of employment and income generation, an important transformation could be noticed. Some women reported that, with the elimination of intermediaries in the chain of embroidery, and the consequent increase in earnings, their husbands had stopped collecting garbage or living from odd jobs and had started embroidering at home with them. Some men became even more skilled and productive than their wives were. A woman reported that her husband used to earn on average US\$ 100.00 per month recycling garbage and, in the previous month, they had embroidered 300 pieces and earned US\$ 500.00. She estimated that her husband had done 70% of the work, because he could dedicate more time to that, while she also had to care of their children.

The women started relating differently to the product of their work. In the beginning, they used to see their embroidery as individual elements with no importance, as something they did only for a living. After the meetings, when they were encouraged to bring in their work and talk about the process, they started valuing their work much more. They expected the outside world to start valuing their work more, however, it also happened inside the group and this increased mutual trust, weaving the social web among them.

A big step toward the construction of a collective occurred through the dialogue about what and for whom they would produce. This choice of target markets and consumer analysis included the formulation and explanation of their own values and needs. The women realized by themselves that specific clothes for women affiliated to Evangelical churches were missing in the market, since they sometimes needed to make their own clothes. This kind of perception was an important demonstration of the development of their

capacity to discuss and analyze markets, consumers and themselves as active participants in those contexts.

Participatory AR is dialogical in its essence, as Freire (2005: 120) states about the initiation of a process of adult learning: "... researchers must stimulate the participants so that the ones who want to participate directly in the process of researching as auxiliaries will come forward. In that way, participatory AR starts with an open and frank dialogue involving everyone." The Brazilian educator also recalls that there is true dialogue only if there is critical and solidary thought. Freire's ideas about adult education became a solid guidance for working with the women embroiderers and dealing with the challenges of teaching them cooperativism and associativism. The researcher could help a group with minimum instruction to overcome the barriers of building a work co-operative, even informally. The consequence was also a more conscious group that started to understand how certain administrative concepts were important for their business activities.

According to Freire (2005: 97), "for the dialogical educator-learner the programmatic content is not a donation or an imposition" but a form of giving back, in an organized and systematic way, to the communities those elements which were not structured in the beginning.

Reflecting on what we have learned, shortcomings and contributions

In this summary of the action research with the women embroiderers, it was possible to witness the ethical and epistemological complexity facing the researcher, in relation to the cultural differences that permeate the universes of researchers and oppressed groups, within a society marked by profound processes of social and intellectual exclusion. As in every human process, the researcher prefers to highlight the correct answers, so we must consider and admit the limitations and possible errors of the research. Firstly, there was the short duration of the project. The group had some successful changes, but in a deeper work, the researcher would be able to involve professionals in the areas of social psychology, education and health. This would certainly bring more benefits for the group.

We believe we should close this article with three kinds of reflections: what we have learned as researchers; what our contributions are to the group; and what we can contribute to the AR community.

The most important thing we learned, both in the cognitive and in the affective field, was the experience of working with popular groups. We cannot achieve this only theoretically, we need to learn it through practice. Ladkin (2005) reminds us that a hammer can only be known when we use it to hammer. In the beginning of the research, there was what we can now identify as a huge paradigmatic distance between the researcher and the group. On one hand, the main researcher was worried about his own diagnosis of the situation, on the other hand the group showed insecurity to express their voices, locked in silence and resignation. The rush of the group to start producing was also misunderstood by the main researcher. He thought they wanted to organize themselves formally. After a year of action research, the fact was that working informally was the chosen reality by those women. That was the way they wanted their collective at that point, without formal and contractual relationships, with the government or among themselves. In some cases in the literature in Brazil, we see people coming from outside and convincing community leaders or poor people of the importance of launching formal co-operatives, which in Brazil legally need to have 21 members, have a formal constitution, a social contract, pay taxes and so on. In our view, those projects do not promote the autonomy of popular groups.

Our evaluation is that it was an organization option generated by the group. In that way, they took a political position and did not accept strict previously established rules, searching for freer and autonomous action. Can we consider that it was an important step into the direction of the group's emancipation? Helping the group to find alternative ways to overcome their silence and resignation in the face of oppressive social and economic conditions was one of the objectives of the AR. The open question here is whether this emancipation really happened. We believe that for them emancipation meant to search for collective action. Reunited, they found strength, space to learn, discern other possibilities for their work, discuss their ideals and common problems. In the group, they could develop a higher level of consciousness about their reality. When they formed a work co-operative, even

informally, without the legal demands imposed by the government, the women found a way to emancipation on their own. The AR, therefore, provided the group with conditions for greater autonomy and, in a relative way, we could use the concept of emancipation with the women embroiderers.

Another aspect to consider was that the researcher took some time to notice his paradigmatic prisons, and avoid leading the women in directions they did not want to go. As the AR process is cyclical and full of emotions, what was expressed as a wish could not always easily be fulfilled; conflicts were constants in the action field. For instance, the wishes of forming a collective way to enterprise with greater autonomy and contribute to the local community collided with tough reality. The bureaucracy, the power their husbands had over them, according to the social tradition, as well as not having enough organization to influence the local community and convince other women to take part in the group, were huge obstacles to be faced. The researcher had to learn to listen to them and understand their wishes, in order to help those women find rational solutions to fulfill their wishes.

The researcher also learned through the recognition of an obvious mistake. Muhammad Yunus (2000) in his book *"The Banker of the poor"* reports the same difficulty when dealing with the strict Muslim tradition. The researcher overlooked the traditions that the women, most of them Penthecostal, followed and started the work on his own. Only when he started working with a female researcher as a partner could problems related to gender be solved, such as difficulties visiting women's houses for interviews or talking to them individually.

In the area of popular co-operative organization, we believe we have brought to light the importance of these kinds of experiences, and of enterprising collectively in order to generate learning and income. One year after the research had finished, the collective enterprise still existed, even with different people taking part in it. We saw how the women learned to organize themselves and to take initiatives, such as renting a car to take goods to the textile wholesale business region, and dividing the work equally among themselves, generating gains, and allowing the group to improve their lives and live above the poverty line. However, without the participation of the researcher, it was not possible to observe if the critical discussions about the

conditions of their lives still happened. Unfortunately, we realized that for the critical and educational process, the group depended on the professional researchers who worked with them during the formation of the collective enterprise.

We looked for some women who had left the group for a final evaluation of the process they had just experienced. All of them confirmed that what they had learned during the AR process they would keep for the rest of their lives. They were able to report to us what they had learned about business administration, practical aspects such as planning and concepts of fixed and variable costs, as well as the importance of working with a group.

This evaluation was very important to make us understand that, despite the limitations identified in this final reflection, action research is a formative instrument on both sides, subjects of the practice and researchers. Action research generates educational and research practices that transcend its initial objectives. As we have seen in this case, the researcher changed himself by incorporating the local culture, working with it, overcoming his questions and surprising himself with the group's answers. The researcher learned to work with new rhythms and new perspectives. The subjects of the practice, for their part, aside from solving the problems of daily practice, became involved in collective processes of reassigning meaning to their experience and values; they surprised themselves when they confronted the presuppositions of their lives and background and gained courage to effect changes.

We believe it is necessary to take organizational and administrative knowledge to populations with low income. Organizations exist in capitalist, socialist, feudal or democratic regimes and need to be learned and taught. What paradigm, and which technique, to use will depend on educators and researchers. In the same way that we speak about participatory research in the educational area, in the sociological area and even in the anthropological area, with prominent researchers such as Freire, Fals Borda and Brandão (Streck 2009), it is important to build an identity for participatory research in the organizational area. It should be directed toward popular interests, because many projects are already carried out with a sociotechnical methodological base directed toward increasing profits and solving problems of

companies and corporations, which definitely are not the only forms of organization on the planet.

As for what we have learned about methodology in this specific AR project, we realized that techniques, which involve creativity, pictures, paintings, music, handcraft and roleplay games, are very helpful to work with popular groups. Sociodrama was the methodology used in most of the meetings with the group. The group members were able to benefit from sociodramatic techniques by becoming more relaxed and closer to each other, and this methodology also helped them to overcome their silence. The playful and involving structure of sociodrama accelerated the group's learning process and the elaboration of action plans.

What is important for us, at this moment, is to show that with the women embroiderers we are talking about education for the construction of organizations. For that purpose, it was necessary to make a prior effort of constructing a common universe of some cultural meanings, which is quite close to the "minimum lexical universe" proposed by Freire (2005) in the process of adult literacy. This was done in a participative way, in the identification and diagnosis phase, when the researcher used sociodramatic games and tried to identify the "shared central issues" and words and terms used by the group. The construction of this common universe was done through dialogue about the object to be known, and about the representation of the reality to be transformed, and it was carried out through questions provoked by the main researcher, deepening the way the subjects interpreted the world. As Brandão (2006) states, when we are talking about solidary creation of social knowledge, the key-word is not knowledge but, before it, dialogue. The debate that arose from this allowed a new reading of reality, which could lead the participants to become more involved in political practices, with a view to transforming reality.

This way, we reaffirm that AR is an educational and research venture that offers people (researchers and subjects of practice) the conditions to perceive themselves as social beings, gifted with a consciousness, desire and will, who ask for spaces for self-expression and collective living. It is in the collective, in dialogue with his circumstances, that each subject attributes meaning to his collective existence and commits himself. In this process, each person ap-

proaches consciousness and action; reflection and praxis; allowing us to state that participation in action-research transcends these symbolic gains – it allows subjects to live and build critical attitudes which are fundamental for the construction and production of knowledge beyond what the research was focused on.

These behaviours and attitudes extend to other spheres of the subjects' lives. Thus, they become educational formation processes. It can be said that action research works as an educational and research 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 relations. Finally, the action research processes allow the subjects of the practice, including the researcher, to overcome resignation in order to transform their reality.

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