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Musings on the use of chapati diagrams

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• Introduction

The account that follows represents my understanding of what happened, and what was discussed, during a PRA exercise using chapati (Venn) diagrams at a Community Centre in Norwich, UK. I explain the 'Reasoning' behind the use of chapati diagrams and then detail 'What Happened' in three parts: (1) the chapati diagram, (2) the discussion and (3) group dynamics. In the second part: 'Thinking About What Happened' I use the same three headings to discuss my main observations.

Reasoning

My colleague, Faisa Loyon and I worked with the Community Centre for several weeks. We decided to use chapati diagrams at a mid-point in our research project with two groups at the Community Centre. The first was the 'Parents and Toddlers Group'. This group meets one morning a week. Parents chat with one another, children play together and a health visitor is usually available for queries from parents regarding their own, or their children's, well being. The second group, the 'Management Committee', is responsible for running the Community Centre. It is composed of local volunteers. Both of these groups have been in existence for several years.

The timing of the activity resulted from our sense that a degree of rapport was needed with both groups before doing the exercise. We hoped this would ensure co-operation and complex, 'honest' (as opposed to normative) answers.

The choice of activity arose from our rather organic (theoretically non-top-down) research approach which attempted to allow issues to 'emerge' from our informal discussions with groups and individuals. It became clear that *access to decision-making processes* in the Community Centre was, for differing reasons, a central concern to both groups. We also noticed that the parents were accustomed to carrying out a group activity upon arrival at the Community Centre and thought they would be open to carrying out such an activity.

Our aim was to ascertain how each group *perceived* their own degree of access (vis-à-vis that of other groups) to decision-making processes. Based on our observations of the Management Committee and the Parents and Toddlers Group, we anticipated that major differences in perception would emerge.

We thought the activity - by identifying present institutional shortcomings, blockages and boundaries - could provoke discussion between the groups, leading to a mutually better understanding. The use of chapati diagrams therefore tied in neatly with our original objective: to identify ways in which the Community Centre can better serve the community.

• Part one: what happened

The chapati diagram

I facilitated the Chapati diagramming with the Parents and Toddlers Group whilst Faisa facilitated the work with the Management Committee.

Parents and toddlers group

Six women gathered. I explained we wanted to find out different perceptions of the

Community Centre and that we would feed back information to them in a couple of weeks. I described the procedure for chapati diagramming. The women understood immediately what to do and one woman in the group took the pens. The participants listed the decision-making bodies collectively. Much of the diagram was completed by the woman 'holding the pen' in conjunction with the group organiser, but a heated discussion took place amongst all present about the Community Centre, the Management Committee and their own decision-making powers.

Management committee

Five Management Committee members were present, as well as the Area Community Worker (all women). The Area Community Worker took the pens. The participants listed the decision-making bodies collectively. They came up with a much greater range of actors than the Parents and Toddlers Group (e.g. Norwich City Council, various legal bodies). The actual diagram was completed by the woman who had the pens but she carefully cross-checked and sought compromises regarding the size and positioning of circles.

The discussion

Parents and toddlers group

The participants felt they had little input into the running of the Community Centre and so did not draw a circle for themselves. They personalised the circles by allocating individuals' names to them, rather than seeing these people as representatives of particular institutions/posts. They did not link any of the circles with each other as they thought there was no communication between each individual/post.

Management committee

The participants discussed the impact of 'external actors' (e.g. legal constraints) upon their work. They were unsure as to how community centre users could get involved, but linked them to group leaders. They deliberated carefully on the size of circles and the interactions between each actor. They did

not personalise any of the discussion or allocate the names of individuals to circles. They saw the Community Centre as bounded by legal requirements.

Group dynamics

Parents and toddlers group

Six out of eight adults took part. The only man said he was too busy and hence excluded himself. Another woman did not join the group. I asked why this was so. The woman holding the pens said this individual never spoke to anyone else, though she came each week. All those who participated in the diagramming contributed verbally to the activity.

Management committee

No place was made for the only man present, who sat at his own desk. The woman with the pens controlled the discussion by eliciting opinions from the other women.

- **Part two: Thinking about what happened**

The chapati diagram

A chapati diagram can be thought of as a collective mental map in which a particular group/institution locates itself in relation to other groups/institutions with regard to a particular entity - in this case the Community Centre. A chapati diagram presents - and represents - knowledge in a very specific way. Although it is a visual product, a chapati diagram is the outcome of a verbal social process. A chapati diagram is orientated towards output. This places constraints as well as openings upon a group.

Openings

A chapati diagram can be a powerful way to indicate *exclusion.* This was quickly recognised by the Parents and Toddlers Group who resolutely refused to place themselves on the diagram.

The process of *negotiation* over 'reality' may be expressed in the form of corrections to the

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diagram. This happened with the Management Committee as they discussed the precise place of the users.

Since people are asked to represent what they know and not what they *see* (Robinson-Pant 1995) there is no correct way to draw the map (though there are guidelines). The lack of rules regarding perspective that might constrain a drawing of the exterior world (e.g. roads, shops, boxes) theoretically allows participants more control over the process. The visual representation of a group's 'reality' can provide a trigger for later discussion. This is particularly the case when a group's self-perception seems quite at odds with how they have been represented by another.

Constraints

The two-dimensional visual format demands consensus - particularly because it is impossible for it to be altered later without leaving tracks of the changes. Unequal power relations therefore determine what does and does not get represented. Such relations are particularly acute because of the public nature of this activity: both the *process of making it* and *the knowledge that it can be displayed to others.* The tendency is to suppress the multiple realities of individual actors in the group in favour of a single view. Mosse (1995) notes that active participants are socially prominent and articulate. This was true for both groups. The implications are:

- highly individual opinions - by virtue of being represented on the diagram - can become identified as a collective representation of a particular group's 'reality' by people who did not observe the discussion process. In the long-term this could result in sustained inter-group misconceptions.

- the realities of weaker actors are likely to be submerged. The effect of 'mutedness' (Ardener 1975, in Mosse 1993) can mean that women (typically) are unable to contribute at all - or in the way required - to an activity. Since perceptions of reality are gendered, the implications for policy-makers are significant. At the Community Centre men were excluded - as a minority gender (in both groups), for thematic

reasons (Parents and Toddlers Group) and personality reasons (Management Committee).

The discussion

A chapati diagram is silent on the discussion that created it. It is a snap shot of a group without including all the actors. As researchers, our presence was highly significant. Discussion was undoubtedly skewed by our presence: we were the audience to which the groups played. On one occasion someone was searching for a word. I supplied one. This was entered on the diagram. In many ways we had only technically 'handed over the stick'.

At the same time there is no doubt that each group - and individuals within them - used the activity to draw us into their own projects. For instance, one woman spoke bitterly about the Management Committee. It was extremely hard not to get drawn into her account and her demonising of the other group, particularly because she seemed to hold the sympathy of the group and because our agenda was to find out *'what people really thought'*. It was easier to distrust the 'normative' approach of the Management Committee - since their discussion had the appearance of being less 'real' and 'gutsy'. Upon reflection it is clear that both 'sides' expressed an equally narrow range of views and were aligned towards the needs of the strongest people in the group. Now I appreciate that we were probably used as messengers between groups, able to cross boundaries that participants could or would not cross. We were given the role of change agents, particularly by the less powerful group: the Parents and Toddlers Group.

Group dynamics

A chapati diagram is predicated upon the existence of boundaries, whether pre-set or specially created. This has implications for inclusion and exclusion at several levels. We set up the activity on the basis of an externally imposed boundary: that between the Parents and Toddlers Group and the Management Committee. I assumed that their shared experiences, parenthood and management, (the groups' raison d'être) would be unifying and that opinions would be relatively

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homogeneous. However, each group created inner boundaries by excluding certain people from group 'membership'. Thus internal power relations set the conditions for participation. Once boundaries had been set, I believe that an unconscious group dynamic was set into operation, which helped suppress alternative views in the interests of maintaining group cohesion. Furthermore, since an oppositional framework was established from the outset, the discussions were steered and contained by this dichotomy. The 'us' and 'them' result we achieved was almost inevitable.

In reality, of course, multiple levels of interaction and alliances exist. For example, one member of the Parents and Toddlers Group had run a weekly activity and the group co-ordinator was a member of the Management Committee. These are the simplest and crudest interactions to identify - relationship webs would undoubtedly be extraordinarily complex to construct.

• **Endnotes**

Certain moments spent watching the groups create chapati diagrams provided me with windows into group dynamics and power relations. This was exhilarating. Most of the time, however, the process was a confusing and complex experience, requiring considerable post-facilitation 'disentanglement' and reflection. I believe it was also a semi-understood and complex activity for the groups taking part. To take each group through a reflective process on how they created the diagrams might be the best use of such diagrams. For people who did not witness the process, the chapati diagrams appear as provocative statements. They graphically portray different understandings, however imperfect, and can thus focus discussion.

We presented the Chapati Diagram made by the Parents and Toddlers Group to the Management Committee within a week of completing the research. The way the Parents and Toddlers Group had omitted themselves shocked the Management Committee deeply. I think everyone was quite hurt. Much discussion followed on how to include the Parents and Toddlers Group more effectively

in decision-making processes. Sadly, and inexcusably, we failed to present the Chapati Diagram made by the Management Committee to the Parents and Toddlers Group, even though this had been planned. Somehow we got caught up in other events and time swept us on.

On reflection, I would recommend that other practitioners wishing to present chapati diagrams from one group to another consider how to channel reactions positively, so that the new understanding results in a concrete action plan for change. Practitioners would also need to consider carefully how, and at what point, the different groups should be brought into direct contact.

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