Participatory Action Research for Urban Connectivity: Bridging Inequality in Metropolitan Monterrey

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The central proposition of this paper is that participatory action research as a form of human-centric design thinking can offer a more potent approach to addressing urban connectivity than government- or expert-led design. To this end the paper offers two innovations: 1. Methodologically the paper integrates systems awareness, collaborative learning, presencing, design thinking, and rapid prototyping in an action research context, and 2. Substantively the paper offers a multi-dimensional approach to connectivity that integrates social, economic, physical, and cultural axes.

Keywords: Deep Dive; Ecosystem map; informal settlement.

Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to add knowledge to the action research literature about the entry phase of initiating action research in a vulnerable community. We want to stress the awareness of one’s own biases, such as preconceptions, assumptions and positionality in the process of establishing relationships of understanding, mutuality, parity, equality. The importance of reflexivity on the fieldwork can be traced in Case (2017), Owen and Westoby (2012) and Wilson (2016). The ultimate goal is to mediate a new conversation among internal community actors and external actors, such as government and scholars around different dimensions of connectivity.

In this paper we report the first stage of creating an issue ecosystem map through dialogic stakeholder interviews. The main contribution of this paper is to illuminate the action researcher’s own process of self-awareness in conducting the interviews and building relationships of mutual understanding with multiple stakeholders. Using first person action research, the paper documents the experience of UT doctoral student, Leon Staines. This is a journey of the process, but also of the researcher who starts a community work and the challenges that can be encountered along the way.

In the present investigation, our task was to understand how an approach with an informal community in Monterrey, Mexico, can be done in a successful way. Fortunately, there is an increasing interest in working in these communities, however, even with the theoretical

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information and the extensive practical experience that exists on the subject, interventions in northern Mexico are top-down approaches and therefore the success that have had the latter is null or limited. It is the interest of this paper, on the other hand, considers that for an intervention to be successful, it must come fundamentally from the society that will benefit or be affected by any project. The challenge is to generate bonds of trust and an adequate process so that these relationships are given in the best way.

This is an iterative and non-linear process, in which the information will be continuously tested and where there will not be preconceived answers. Although this work will engage differing stances and points of view, we hope to find the common ground from which to initiate processes with the community, with the strength and structure that gives the involvement of other actors with voice and decision-making power in the process.

The main finding from the eco-system mapping and stakeholder interviews was the clear feasibility of including scholars as a point of equilibrium between the government and the community. This research offers the opportunity to bridge the efforts that public officials, as well as scholars, are doing in the field of social inequality and urban connectivity in informal settlements. Scholars bring two things into the equation: trust and legitimization in the process. As Scharmer (2016) says “Conversations are the living embodiment of social fields and an important starting point for improving social interaction”. It is considered that scholars also bring the right platform for conversation to happen.

It is important to point out that it will be the actors themselves who guide the direction of the research at this point. From the information gathered, actors are added to the Ecosystem Map, shared concepts but also points of conflict between them are generated, and then will be further probed for validity in the field.

The starting point is from very different points of view and approaches. However, through the dialogic interviews the process begins to be humanized. That in turn will affect the fluidity of community work. The humanization of the process gives us a broad spectrum to address the problem but also gives it a special complexity. The work in the field is not to guide the conversation, but to observe at this stage what the pre-existing conditions are so that in the future work it can be seen what the initial platform is and where the different actors can generate agreements. The condition of the researchers will never be to formulate methodologies, but to see what the existing processes are and how they work today.

**Stakeholder mapping**

The stakeholder mapping was formed from three spheres; the first one was shaped by scholars and researchers who have worked on the issue of informality and could be willing to participate in the formulation of new processes; the second one is the advocates/NGO’s, who work together
with the community and currently serve as a bridge with the authorities; and the third is the government in the three levels, Municipal, State and Federal.

The intention is to generate a fluid process that starts from common ground, and not from the conflicts that may exist. It is necessary to emphasize that in this part of the process, the research is done with some prior knowledge and experience on the part of Leon Staines, hoping and encouraging that it can be strengthened and enriched during the investigation, as it was.

It is intended to maintain the stakeholder map not as a static structure but as something that must be growing constantly as a consequence of the interactions with the object of study.

**Selecting the interviewees**

_Academic._ Three academic researchers were selected, in addition to co-author Dr. Carlos Aparicio. Arq. Gabriel Díaz Montemayor, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who from his perspective of landscape, has worked on the integration of landscape and city. Much of his work has been done with local governments in Mexico. Dr. Carlos Aparicio, Diana Maldonado and José Manuel Prieto, UANL researchers, research socio-spatial inequality from different perspectives. José Manuel Prieto has also worked closely with this informal settlement in the city of Monterrey, which gives him a different vision and stance than the other academics interviewed.
NGO’s. Celina Fernández and her organization "Barrio Esperanza" have built a strong rapport with the local community.

Government. At the Federal level in Monterrey, Enrique Adame was interviewed. He works in the National Agency for Urban Development (SEDATU). At the State level in Monterrey, José Armando Salvador, who works in the project development area, was interviewed. At the Municipal level Eugenio Fernández, who works in the Urban Development area of the San Pedro Municipality, was interviewed.

As the interviews unfolded, Leon generated an evolving Ecosystem Map, in which a variety of topics related to informality and community work could be seen from differing perspectives, both institutional and personal.

It is important to mention that the interviewees were either known by León Staines or were people referred to him by acquaintances. Thanks to this, it was easy to make the contact and schedule the conversations over the phone from Austin, Texas.

Leon’s Experience of Conducting the Interviews

The dialogue interviews were carried out in a fluid way. One of the interesting things that happened during the interviews was the openness and sincerity, which can be attributed to the prior contact I had with the interviewees. It was visible the way in which certain language was avoided and at the same time the search to respond in ways that fit their thinking.

My research process was guided by a graduate action research seminar called “Deep Dive: Exploring Issue Ecosystems,” co-taught by Dr. Patricia Wilson, UT Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning, and Dr. Jenny Knowles Morrison, LBJ School of Public Affairs at UT. There we learned how to initiate contact with interviewees and start the process of an Ecosystem Map, among other things. Within the methodology it was very clear that dialogic interviews are not simply instrumental means to obtain information from the interviewees, but to explore topics, listen to their stories, experiences, hopes, and concerns, and to establish mutual respect and rapport. Also we were advised to share our issue ecosystem maps with the interviewees and engage them in making it richer and more complete. To be fully present with my interviewees required me to be aware of my own judgments, opinions, and goals and to suspend them when necessary to be able to really hear and understand the other. I had to pay attention to my own communication and listening skills.

The dialogic interviews with ecosystem stakeholders helped me first to learn different perspectives about the same issue, and then to understand how, from those perspectives, that people have different ways to attack the same problem. The scholars were definitely the most open to considering the population of the informal settlements in an unrestricted way. On the other hand, the public officials were also concerned, but focused on the established procedures available to them.
Thanks to the researchers who contributed to the class providing their processes from different areas of expertise, I was able to explore in a better way the situations that we identified as issues or problems to solve. One of these areas was the perspective of Culture Solutions given by Dr. Deidre Mendez, in which she expressed how important is to understand cultural and behavioral background to be able to work with people in a proactive way. Having that in mind the whole time of the interviews, the idea was not to convince people of something or make them change their mind but to understand where their ideas came from, and from there to find the common ground or shared principles with those people. The goal is to have allies to solve concrete problems with and not philosophical adversaries (Mendez, 2017).

The interviews were focused on understanding the context of informal settlements from the perspectives of the various interviewees. They talked about the origins, growth, and consolidation of these settlements, their own efforts to make improvements, and their attitudes about the relationships between the authorities and the communities. It was interesting to note that neither among government officials nor academics were their views homogeneous, which gave richness and complexity to the research topic. The academics, for example, each had their own theories and philosophies that drive them.

Supporting the idea of scholars being a third party in the community process, we have the comment of one of the interviewees, Diana Maldonado, a UANL (Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon) scholar. She said that the public university has the moral responsibility to work in public projects bringing the views of the traditional oppressed population to the table. While some scholars are working in these kinds of topics, there is a huge disconnection between what the scholars are researching and the public policies on informality that are being implemented in Monterrey.

The posture of the Public Officials on the other hand is that they want to make things happen but in a reasonable amount of time. So the interesting thing about it is that once you know the various perspectives, it is easier to set common objectives and address the constraints of each group. For one group (the government) time and cost are constraints. Those can be worked with.

On the other hand –and this is why it is difficult to reach common goals, some of the public officials detected that one of the limitations of the government to invest in improvements in the informal communities is the fact that they think they are going to incentivize more informal settlements. So I think it is fair to say that the most threatened group in this research is the people working in the government.

I have learned that one way to communicate with significant policy actors in the ecosystem is the following: While some people of the Government are afraid to fully engage with informality, one of my stakeholders who is working in a local congressional campaign told me that the candidate was concerned about the conditions of informal settlements. Candidates are always looking for votes in informal settlements, because of how dense populated are these places, candidates are always making promises to them that almost never meet. So something that emerged from the interviews is that there can be an integration of the candidates to this process.
I have to say that during my interviews process I tested my endurance about this topic. I was able to not interrupt, not judge, nor trying to give my opinion. I just listened carefully to what they have to offer and I made an effort to fully understand their position. That helped me so much, that in almost all interviews, I was invited to continue the conversation in the future which was my intention in the first place like Dr. Wilson said, some interviews are just to get to know someone and establish a lasting relationship.

According to the interview made to Diana Maldonado, a very important relationship that needs to be build is with the government and the scholars, she mentioned that it is especially important to transform scholars into the moral compass in politics. If we achieve doing that I genuinely believe that public policies can be addressed in a better way. And I am conscious that scholars make mistakes too, but in theory the academic environment is more open to critics, so problems and vices can be attended quickly.

Something important to notice is that scholars are not a homogeneous group, and neither are the other spheres that were interviewed. The interesting thing about the scholars is that in order to be the moral compass we talked above, it is necessary to work very hard in the methodology as well as any other group to make a real change.

If we strengthen the relationship between scholars and government things can be better to have a path that does not change each administration but that continue having common priorities. Something I can relate with this about Scharmer (2016) theory is what he says about “the form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem”, so that is where I can find calm with what is coming as I proceed with my action research in the community.

Assessment

This first person action research about issue ecosystem mapping with dialogic stakeholder interviews shows how the researcher became more aware of the complexity of the ecosystem surrounding the issue of informality in Monterrey, Mexico, and the opportunities it offered. It also shows how dialogic interviewing can build understanding and relationship with the ‘other’, thus setting the stage for collaborating across political, cultural, and philosophical differences to focus on practical solutions.

But more than that, this first person action research reveals the transformational impact on the researcher in becoming comfortable with uncertainty and not knowing, and instead trusting the unfolding of process. Here is how Leon Staines put it:

Having as a background being a teacher of architecture and urbanism, my solutions and approaches were -and perhaps keep being-, represented in the modification of the physical space and always as an "educated" response, through projects, to community problems. This process taught me how to get rid of these structural limitations, (Case,
be okay with not knowing what could or has to happen.

The process has been like this, from the beginning of the interviews: My critical “I” gave way to my curious “I”, from the “I” that has the solution, to the “I” that has the genuine interest of listening and only listening to understand the whole panorama. At first, this seemed difficult for me to understand. I put up resistance to it because my own training forced me to see something that must be seen, and something tangible that could be measured. Knowing now that what is required to discover is the study itself, the most important thing is the process, even more than to knowing where the project is going to end. But this process and the methodologies learned taught me a panorama that shows how the success of a project has to do with how well the problem is diagnosed and who diagnoses it.

Conclusions

The action researcher must be able not only to ‘see’ the problem, but to ‘sense’ it (Scharmer, 2016)—i.e. to perceive an issue from the perspective of the whole social field, and at the same time from the different perspectives within the social field. Also, for the action researcher, the social field, or issue eco-system, is not ‘out there’. The action researcher is part and parcel of it. As Leon Staines began to sense the eco-system, he saw that he himself—as a privileged resident of Monterrey and now an international academic-in-training—was part of that ecosystem. The role that he could play began to crystallize: bringing together the polarized players into a new conversational field, a generative field that can perceive the city, its neighborhoods, its apparent dichotomies, as part of a connected living organism in need of healing.

References


