

DESIGNING A PROCESS TO ENABLE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY - PLAYBACK THEATRE METHOD SUPPORTING SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses participatory methods, especially playback theatre, in the use of urban development. Participatory methods are understood as a way to enable socially sustainable development. The method is examined through a case of starting a new community house in a suburb in Finland. Practical notions to support collaboration and participatory innovation activities are described as essential building blocks to form a dialogical process for cross-sectorial users and citizens. The possibilities of playback theatre method and the prerequisites needed to create such a process are studied. Playback theatre as a participatory method uses storytelling and dialogue in order to bring humanity on attention: hopes, needs, wishes and fears get expressed. Playback theatre helps making them, and with them, human beings visible to each other. The paper discusses playbacks' possibility as a research

method as well as a practical tool to enable a sense of community and create social sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of socially sustainable innovativeness stresses user's viewpoint as important knowledge in development. In the urban development context the citizens' opinion is considered as valuable insight that should not only get heard but also utilized properly in the implementation of change. Hence the emphasis in development projects should be on citizens and users, not only on governance. The success of socially sustainable innovativeness lies however in the use of methods for hearing the users. The paper aims to recognize the opportunities of participatory methods, especially playback theatre, for user participation. The paper also examines playback theatre in designing a process that enables sense of community and discusses the influence of participatory methods in creating social sustainability in urban development. Also the concept of social sustainability and socially sustainable innovativeness are examined.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Social sustainability is broadly defined by Chiu (2003, p. 245) as 'maintenance and improvement of well-being of current and future generations'. Others, such as Littig and Griessler (2005) suggest social sustainability means the satisfaction of basic human needs, the continual reproduction of humans and the subsequent continuation of culture. These definitions are limited in capturing the complexities of social sustainability. Social

sustainability might extend further than the consideration of basic needs, culture, well-being and the reproduction of humanity.

Since the late 1990's, sustainability has come to be the pervasive goal of urban planning (Yung, Chan & Xu, 2011) and due to the growing urban population, cities play imperative roles in sustainable development (Dempsey et al., 2009). Human is the main focus in the definition of sustainability concept, but still less attention has been given to the definition of social sustainability in built environment disciplines (Dempsey et al., 2009; Ghahramanpouri et al. 2013.) According to the literature review of Sharifi and Murayama (2013) social equity, engaged governance, social interaction, interpersonal relations, social cohesion, attachment to place, community stability, health and well-being, inclusion, and security are the major relevant criteria for social sustainability in urban context. Many scholars also highlight the role of participation as an important criteria for social sustainability (Spangenberg, 2004; Choguill. 2008; Dempsey et al., 2011). For example, according to Dempsey et al. (2011) sustainability of community involves social interaction between community members; the relative stability of the community, both in terms of overall maintenance of numbers/ balance (net migration) and of the turnover of individual members; the existence of, and participation in, local collective institutions, formal and informal; levels of trust across the community, including issues of security from threats; and a positive sense of identification with, and pride in, the community.

Bramley and Power (2009) propose a conceptual framework for urban social sustainability. It incorporates two over-arching typologies: social equity; and sustainability of communities. The latter refers to social interaction through social networks in the community and pride, sense of place; safety and security. The sustainability of the community is defined as 'the ability of society itself, or its manifestation as local community, to sustain and reproduce itself at an acceptable level of functioning' (p. 421). Bramley & Power (2009) argue that these typologies of social sustainability are reflective of two recognizable, overarching concepts situated within the literature. Social equity issues are described as 'powerful political and policy concerns, and centre upon a distributive notion of social justice. Issues of sustaining the community are seen as more nebulous. Social capital and cohesion are contested concepts, 'in terms of their value loadings and also in terms of how important these phenomena are for the achievement of wider social goals, but there is quite wide agreement that at least some aspects are potentially important' (Bramley & Power 2009, p. 33). However, it is difficult to understand why equity is segregated from other key attributes of 'sustainability of community'.

Bramley and Power (2009) appear to be offering a functionalist understanding of social sustainability as a process of social cohesion. This model positions the

achievement of social sustainability as being about attaining harmony and eliminating discord. This position has synergies with the Brundtland 'we can have it all' definition that underplays social, environmental and economic tensions in processes associated with sustainability.

Sustainable innovation processes often differ from conventional innovation mainly in purpose and direction. Whereas innovation often is intended to improve business performance and stimulate economic growth, sustainable innovation wants to achieve this improvement by the integration of economic, environmental and social concerns. (Fortkamp & Staffas, 2012.) The socially sustainable innovativeness could be defined as the ability of a community to innovate processes and structures which not only meet the needs of its current members but also support the ability of future generations to maintain a healthy community.

DATA AND METHODS

The paper reflects the impact of participatory methods as a source of social sustainability. The paper reflects on notions that should be taken into account when designing an applicable model in participating the users in a socially sustainable way. The aim is to understand the elements of participation that create space for common understanding through community based storytelling and dialogue. Paper discusses notions of using playback theatre as a method in participatory urban development. Playback theatre is an improvisational form of theatre and the stories told by the audience supply the content (Jurasek 2012). Typically audience's stories are performed by a group of actors, a director and a musician. Community members participate by supplying the content of the theatrical pieces, i.e. the stories. A case of starting a new community house in a suburb of Lahti, Finland, will function as material for the paper. Paper discusses the elements of a participatory process the facilitator of the workshops should be aware of in order to create social sustainability and a sense of community via dialogue. Also the possibilities playback theatre as a method has to enhance a dialogical process are considered.

The authors planned to organize two workshops for the future users of the community house-to-be. The community house will be used in the future by the local school, nursery, health care services and library. There are also plans that the house would work as an open space for citizen use. The workshop plans unfortunately didn't come true in time to function as data for this article. Since the plans didn't work out, the authors decided to use interviews conducted in the project as the empirical data to reflect on how the workshops would serve their participants in an ideal way.

3.1 The data

The empirical data of this study consists of semi-structured interviews. Material was gathered from

interviews conducted in a project that studies socially sustainable innovativeness in urban development (Socially sustainable innovativeness in renewing urban areas 2013 – 2015). The main themes in the interviews were urban area development generally in different Finnish cities and municipalities; citizens' role in the development; communications; and the future of development of the residential areas. Applicable sections of two interviews were chosen as data for this article. Interviewees were involved in the development of the future community house in suburb of Liipola in Lahti, Finland. One interviewee works as a hostess in the current project that provides space for citizen use, the other works as an architect for the city. The data was analysed for this paper to understand it as functional material for the workshops.

3.2 Playback theatre as a participatory method for case study

Playback was chosen as a method for workshops since it holds a significant potential in participating the people involved in an equal dialogue. Playback theatre emerges storytelling and dialogue that help forming a communicative practices and culture. In order to create social sustainability there are benefits to using storytelling as a tool. Sole and Wilson (2002) line out how storytelling can be a mechanism for sharing knowledge within organizations and communities. Storytelling has potential to share norms and values, develop trust and commitment, facilitate unlearning and generate emotional connection (ibid.) – all of the previous can be seen as essential elements for creating socially sustainable cross-sectorial operations models and furthermore as elements of experiencing a sense of community.

Playback will function as a part of case study when the research is widened to the question of socially sustainable innovativeness. This however calls for the workshops to come true so they can function as the case. In this study the type of research question, the fact that the investigators have only little control over actual events and the focus of the study as a contemporary phenomenon favoured the decision to use case study as a research strategy. According to Yin (2009), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. A case study strategy is also preferred when the researcher seeks answers to how and why questions.

Case study is also known as a triangulated research strategy, which means using different types of material, theories, methods and investigators in the same study. Triangulation of data and investigators will be utilized in the study in order to understand the complex phenomenon and to increase the quality of the study. The case study is also suitable for this study as social sustainability or socially sustainable innovativeness as a concept have been studied only little and the purpose is

to add understanding, especially in practice, of the selected case.

EVALUATION OF DATA

4.1 Hopes and concerns from the data as material for the playback method

The empirical data was processed by the authors to recognize future challenges and opportunities concerning the operation in the community house. The following statements of the public employees involved in the community house project shed light on what should be made visible in the playback workshops. The facilitator and the playback theatre group would benefit from utilizing the data gathered and interpreting it as theatrical inputs and basis for dialogue for the audience. The elements mentioned in the interviews have a role in creating a sense of community. These themes and topics playback theatre should make visible are:

The importance of citizen participation / the spirit of belonging in a community

“I hope models that would benefit the people are created [...] for example social aspects; that we could achieve the “village spirit” and people would participate... In general that people could find each other and something to do.”

“The real question [concerning the community house] is will the people get to act there and how much. We are nervous about that. It would qualify some resources. Time will tell but it [people participating] defines the contents. The community house would be a concrete place in which a sense of community could be put into practice.”

Reservation/development of services

“[I hope] the community house could become such that people got help there and it would work on a one-stop-shop principle.”

“The community house enables reservation of near-by-services in the area, and smaller group sizes in the school...”

The maintenance of the area

“We could get the people do it themselves and have for example a bee to plant trees and maintain the areas even after the project...”

Functional collaboration between different sectors and the citizen

“We have crossed many sectors previously [in the current citizen space]. It gets tested there and new ways [of doing things] are learned... And I hope that the community house would form as an activating home in that sense.”

”There is only one person who stands up for it becoming an open space, the headmaster of the school. But she doesn't really have back up forces. A citizen

engagement should rise that would state that we want some spaces to use [...] but if there isn't such a citizen opinion, then it is a sign that these kind of activities aren't really needed. [...] But I know they are. People should get on the barricades."

Providing open spaces for citizen use

"It would be really sad if the community house concept would go wrong. If in a year and a half we would state that it doesn't open chances for free citizen activities, sorry [...] [I hope] that it really could function as an open space for use. But there are many threats."

RESULTS

5.1 Designing a process for a sense of community: notions of applying playback theatre

As mentioned earlier the workshop plans didn't come true despite the enthusiasm of the planned participants. It seemed that the obstacle for the workshops materializing was in decision making. This probably could be interpreted as a sign of the complexity of cross-sectorial decision making: processes are slow and they consist of many different kinds of actors and cultures. Creating an open, dialogical culture among such variety of actors is a challenging, yet a very necessary task. Also in designing a process the participation of the citizens – whom the community house at last mostly concerns – would be especially important.

This unfortunate flop however gave the authors a chance to stop the process in a phase of designing the substance of the workshops. It also created a possibility to become aware of some important practical notions that should be considered in applying such method. If the aim is to make some data visible and to encourage dialogue among participants, next notions can come in useful.

5.2 Utilize the data to interpret significances

Jurasek (2012) states the usefulness of playback as a dialogical research method: it offers a possibility to distill, synthesize and represent data almost immediately back to the audience: the "subjects of study" (p.180). Playback theatre enables asking meaningful questions of the case, giving new insights or even presenting provocations. As Salas (1999, 2003) outlines playback allows participants tell and share their experiences, wishes or visions about their lives. The data described in the chapter 4.1 would get into most effective use if it would be rehearsed as theatrical provocations and performed to the people involved with the community house project. This would call for an applied playback method, in which the stories of actors (by which the playback performance usually gets started) would be switched into stories dramatized from the collected data. These stories would function as the base for dialogue and for the emerging stories, visions, hopes and fears of the people involved. The facilitator of such workshops has to be aware of her/his power to design and shape the

process all the way through it with the questions asked from the audience. Good questions to ask the participants in ideation of new practices concern hopes and fears, visions and experiences of the phenomenon. Themes and topics analysed from the interviews (see 4.1) are thus valuable knowledge when designing the questions for the workshops.

The risks of using storytelling or playback usually have to do with how experienced the playback theatre group and especially their director, i.e. the facilitator of the workshop, are in applying their art form to development work. The group and especially the facilitator benefits from getting to know the case as well as possible and understanding the extensive significances the data presents. In other words, the elements mentioned in the data need extensive interpretation. For example cross-sectorial collaboration has to do not only with public employees of different areas offering their services in the same building, but also with their sense of belonging to a new forming community or their understanding of themselves as resources for the whole community. Usually an experienced playback group can hear these significances from audiences' stories and make them visible - the group can use their know-how and artistic sensitivity also to show multi-dimensional layers that the collected data entails.

5.3 Remember the importance of "The Switch" to create dialogue

Though storytelling is an effective tool in creating social sustainability, the facilitator of storytelling workshop has to be aware that a switch between narrative and reflexive level (Schreyögg & Geiger 2005) is needed to utilize the method in the best possible way. Because playback theatre consists of both real-life narratives and their interpretations performed by the actors, it makes two levels of functioning possible for the participants. Discussion is therefore constructed of a narrative and of a dialogical level. The narrative level in playback theatre consists of the real-life experience of one participant. Playback theatre has the ability to transform an individual narrative into a collective experience. It does so by the theatrical interpretations the playback actors make of the story told. Facilitator's responsibility is to utilize the discursive potential of the theatrical sections. This calls for an active approach in engaging to the discussion with the participants. Facilitators' first and most important task is to ask and listen.

5.3 Apply the method boldly

Applying the playback method is essential in making it work as a tool for development. Playback – as any form of applied theatre – has its' own rules and rituals, but the person in charge of facilitating shouldn't be too precise about them. The process should be designed on the preconditions of the case: what is the goal in the big picture? In this aspect this paper suggests that valuable knowledge can be gained of the design of participatory workshops by stopping and analysing them in the planning process. It is possible that this phase gets

carried out quite practically without analysing the goal to which the participatory or arts-based methods are meant to aim and by which means.

In a genuinely open development work a tolerance for uncertainty and incompleteness has an important role. Contents or processes of development can't be defined fully in advance, when the aim is participation. The facilitator can sketch some important questions to ask the participants, but the most important thing is to stay open to the discussion and the process that emerges from the participants. The facilitator needs to stay alert to take the process where the participants are leading it and change the ready-made direction if needed - or if the participants seem to get lost from the topic, the facilitator is the one to put them back on the track. The skill of listening is one of the most important skills for playback workshops facilitator – as it is for the actors too. Both of them should be “trained in [...] listening deeply with their hearts and intuitive faculties” (Jurasek 2012, 180).

DISCUSSION

Playback theatre at its best has a big potential in building a sense of community and interconnectedness between the participants (Jurasek 2012). By understanding the risks and taking advantage of the benefits of storytelling and playback theatre the method can function as a useful research method in addition that it for sure is an effective method for participation. It enhances dialogue in its' rich and polyphonic sense. Organizing playback among the people involved when starting new operations culture can thus help to build a dialogical way to operate, a culture that supports social sustainability by bringing the different voices of different users in focus and showing appreciation towards them. According to Snowden (2005), in the context of complexity, diverse methods have the opportunity to reduce costs and foster rapid responses in development processes. To achieve emergence or innovations in the activities of urban development context and various forms of collaboration, enabling and supporting continuous interaction and integrated knowledge flows is of crucial importance. Furthermore, according to Bessant & Tidd (2007), complex interaction is all about knowledge and the ways it flows and is linked and exploited to make innovation happen. On the other hand, interaction and knowledge co-creation with different types of knowing among diverse individuals requires patience and time for reflection (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Hyypiä, 2013).

Nonaka and Konno (1998) suggest a concept of *ba* to define spaces and platforms of common sharing that are relevant for creating and advancing individual and/or collective knowledge. *Bas* can be physical, virtual or mental spaces or places (ibid.). This article suggests that workshops organized provide a physical *ba* for knowledge to emerge and the playback theatre method encourages a mental *ba* to arise. Nonaka and Konno state that participating in a *ba* means transcending one's

own limited perspective. A concept of polyphony (e.g. Bakhtin 1984) is important to understand that a space for transcending above one's own thoughts could form. Polyphony here is understood as a dialogical state that values different opinions emerging in the process as equal. Polyphony needs to be cherished since it helps to form an atmosphere in which a diversity of viewpoints and multiple voices are heard and appreciated.

The main contribution of this study relates to applying the rather conceptual approach in practice. Empirical evidence on the relevance of socially sustainable innovativeness in the urban development context is another valuable contribution. Finally, the study sheds light on the significance of combining social sustainability with playback theatre, applied theatre methods and innovation theories in research.

The concept of socially sustainable innovativeness and of the socially sustainable development of urban areas call for further studies. So does the question what kind of role and impact arts-based methods and storytelling could have in building social sustainability. Also the comparison between the plans articulated in this paper and the possibly executed workshops will be an interesting topic for future research.

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