Reflections on Self-in-Relation (2)

This action research project, in which I emerged myself in the care improvement team, was a true learning experience for me. Not only because of the useful insights concerning collaboration between clients and professionals, but also about the process and especially my own role in it. In this project it was a challenge for me to establish my role of having ‘multiple partiality’. This means that a researcher is not a neutral of one-sided party in the collaboration, but equally open and approachable to all participants. At a certain point during the research project, some of the team members said to me that they sometimes had the impression that I was the client’s advocate, supporting him in the team meetings. This was very confronting to me, because I had been struggling indeed with the question how to relate to the client who was involved in this project. By taking seriously these comments of some of the team members, reflecting on my own role and discussing this in the team, the trust and multiple partiality gained strength again. Here I reflect on my struggle in finding a balanced role in this team.

From the start of the project, it was clear to everyone in this residential care home (the project team members included) that the transformative goal of my research was to develop client participation and to enhance the client perspective in the context of the residential care home. In the project team, I was very conscious of the interactions between the professionals and the client, ‘Mr. de Graaf’. If subjects he would bring to the table were not being discussed properly, I would carefully but plainly point at this so that the discussion would become more balanced. Besides participating in the team meetings, I also had contact with the team members, for example by interviewing them and having informal, personal conversations when I saw them. Mr. De Graaf was interviewed several times, in order to fully understand his perspective on client participation. After the first interview at the beginning of the project, he would call me regularly at my phone number at the university. He called me when he wanted to add something about an issue that he brought forward in the team meetings, when he wanted to ask my opinion about developments in the residential care home (especially concerning situations that concerned him), and, later in the project, he called me to utter his feelings of distress and frustration because he felt not being taken into account in the project team.
His strong appeals to my support challenged my natural feeling of responsibility as well as my transformative research goal to support the empowerment of residents. At first, I was very open to him, listened unconditionally, and offered comfort and support as much as I could. However, over time, I became more critically towards him. The project proceeded, I saw the interactions and tensions in the team, learned more about the professional perspectives. Moreover, I experienced a personal struggle concerning the need for balancing my feelings of responsibility (providing support wherever it was needed) and not wanting to become an advocate for just one party. In my personal reflections of that time, relating to another telephone call from Mr. De Graaf, I wrote: ‘I am a researcher, not a policymaker or a psychologist!’

I felt the need to demarcate my role, to secure myself in order not to get ‘dragged along’. For me, this process clearly reflected issues in my personal life at that time. Also in my personal relations I felt challenged to find a balance between connection and autonomy. This added to my feeling that it was important not to avoid this challenge in my work. Conversations about these issues with my role in this research project with people close to me (colleagues, friends, partner) helped me to put my struggles into perspective. I learned from these conversations that this could be part of my personal learning process and started to ‘experiment’ with different forms of reactions to the appeals of Mr. De Graaf. Once, we were having a conversation and Mr. De Graaf continuously pointed at the failed interactions between the project team members, as he experienced this. I felt very sad and frustrated, because I really wanted to look at what we learned from these interactions. First, I tried to show him a different perspective: ‘But because of that, we learned this and that...’. But he did not respond to that and kept uttering his frustrations. Ultimately I started to cry because I felt frustration and sadness, and that made me feel even more vulnerable and powerless. Mr. De Graaf responded by emphasizing that I had done a good job and that without me, things would have been much worse. However, I did not feel that he understood why I was crying and I felt unable to explain it more clearly. There was no communicative space.

Reflecting on my role in the project team and my relationship with Mr. De Graaf, I felt like I had become too much involved in the transformative goal of the research project, wanting to help create an equal partnership between the client and professionals. I realized
that I had made the transformative goal of the research an ultimate purpose, inseparable from my own success or failure. I had the feeling that if the client participation and partnership development in this project team would not be successful, I would have failed. Not only as a researcher, but also personally. Allowing ‘me being myself’ in my role as a researcher became a potentially problematic stance, because I now had experienced that bringing my personal issues with me in the research process (although inevitable) could lead to confrontations and challenges. Conversations with my academic supervisor helped me to rethink my perspective on this issue and to find new directions. I learned that also when client participation does not work out the way you envision it, it can still be a very useful case to learn about barriers for client participation. Also, by this project I learned more about the challenges concerning the multiple partiality of the transformative researcher’s role.

Research partnership in this project took the form of sharing my analysis of the observations, interviews and evaluation meetings with the members of this project team. I brought into the learning process of the project team an external perspective (inspired by Habermas’ theory). The members of the project team contributed to that analysis by reflecting on this perspective and confirming its use for better understanding their interactions and issues in the team.