Chapter 7
Research as Response: Methodological Reflections

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Introduction

The following methodological reflections popped up in the aftermath of a Ph.D. research on the 'activation'[1] of people in poverty. The theoretical framework of this research was (amongst others) inspired by Biesta's notion of 'learning as response' (2006). 'Learning as response' presented a fruitful guidance to describe a more reflexive or responsive stance for practitioners working with people in poverty. The term 'practitioners' refers to coordinators, facilitators, community workers, instructors and neighbourhood support workers – in short, the varied support staff operating in social and cultural practices. The initial question for this contribution was as follows: can the concept of 'learning as response' be a useful and relevant source of inspiration to guide a participatory research methodology?

Before we go deeper into these methodological issues, we clarify our definition of 'poverty', since the practitioners we refer to in this paper work with people in poverty. In the Flemish part of Belgium the academic and policy discussion on poverty is often inspired by Vranken's (2004, p. 50) multi-aspectual definition of poverty. In poverty, 'different types of exclusion interact and reinforce each other'. Poverty not only has a financial aspect but is also connected to inadequate housing, restricted access to health care, educational difficulties, unemployment or limited access to the labour market and last but not least limited participation in society and social isolation. This definition has also given direction to our research.

[1] 'Activation' is a concept used mainly in continental European policy contexts, aimed at increasing the participation of different groups of citizens (the poor, the elderly, the unemployed) in different social contexts. The notion often refers to the increase of the employability of these categories.

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Learning as Response

Learning as response is a central notion in this paper. Before we describe this notion in a theoretical way, we recall an experience during the research process which could be considered 'learning as response'. In the course of this research, the practitioners of six West-Flemish social economy initiatives took action to develop a more reflexive activation strategy to the benefit of people that are considered disadvantaged. The practitioners wanted to initiate a more humane approach to activation, in response to the increased pressure, mainly by policymakers, to organise the activation practices in a more restrictive way. Social economy initiatives are aimed at the activation of specific target groups, such as the low-skilled or the long-term unemployed. People living in poverty and the activation practitioners involved in our study repeatedly pointed out that the new emerging sector of community services sought to provide an alternative for the dominant forms of restrictive activation. The community services in the disadvantaged area under study have the ambition to engage in support activities, starting from the concrete problems faced by people in poverty, from their everyday insecurities and from the experienced complexities and contradictions. From the very beginning, the practitioners and the people in poverty embarked on a joint learning process. At the occasion of round table discussions of the six community services involved, the practitioners repeatedly referred to the difficulty to articulate to outsiders that they wanted to achieve more than just providing employment for vulnerable groups. This inability to demonstrate to policymakers their participatory approach was chosen as the starting point of an intensive reflection day.

The practitioners expressed their concern that, because they were in need of funding from the authorities, they accommodated to the restrictive employability discourse of the policymakers. The community workers agreed that employability is an important concept which they do not want to totally brush aside. However, they do object to the fact that other aspects of their work – such as enhancing justice, solidarity or care for the most vulnerable – are often rejected as 'not relevant' in debates with policymakers. The practitioners stated that this restrictive discourse is offensive to their target group of people living in poverty. The brainstorming undertaken in the context of this research encouraged these six community services to challenge the dominant discourse and to draw attention to their alternative discourse of participation and respect. The community services thereby wished to demonstrate that a one-sided emphasis on employability affects the most vulnerable people in our society.

> 'We need to fight for another discourse highlighting social demarcations, and reveal the tensions and problems within the instruments being used. (…) It shows that the instrumental discourse curtails and restricts us. (…) The projects confront people with societal dividing lines, with certain responsibilities facing them, and offer them opportunities, space and the freedom to take this responsibility' (reflection day 10.07.2006).

Like this, our research started from a condition of uncertainty, ambiguity and contradiction. Again and again, we were surprised by practitioners' eagerness to

learn and by their openness during round table discussions. In addition to maintaining and developing their community services, they also aimed at empowering each other through the round table discussions and to contribute actively to this study. To that end, various activities were set up, such as an information meeting for local policymakers and even the making of a social documentary video. We will further demonstrate in this contribution how the learning of the practitioners can be understood as a form of 'learning as response'.

Maybe this kind of observation is only possible when the practitioners not only trust the researcher but also trust each other. This presupposes that they enter the research process with an attitude of cooperation rather than competition. This certainly is not self-evident. Often organisations that receive government funding are not keen to expose their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, because they fear negative implications for their budget.

Biesta links his concept of 'learning as response' to the notion of 'the community of those who have nothing in common', developed by Lingis (1994). Members of such community live in different worlds that are not connected to each other by tradition, culture or ethnicity. The encounter with others within this 'uncommon community' requires a response to this experience of strangeness. The language of responsibility is driven by an ethical relationship of unlimited responsibility for the other. This community of those who have nothing in common is constituted by 'our response to the stranger, the one who asks, seeks – demands, as Levinas would say – *my* response, who seeks to hear *my* unique voice' (Biesta 2006, p. 65). According to Biesta (1999, pp. 212–213) Levinas' starting point is a critique on the presupposition of Western philosophy that the primary relationship of the 'ego' with the world is a knowledge relationship, as expressed in the Cartesian formula 'je pense, donc je suis'. Biesta (2002, p. 45) stresses with Levinas

> 'that Western philosophy has been unable to recognize the alterity of the other because it understands the relationship between human beings and the world (including other human beings) primarily as an epistemological relationship, a relationship where an isolated, self-present mind or ego attempts to get accurate knowledge of the external world'.

This way of engaging with the world is typical for what Lingis (1994) calls the 'rational community'. This is the community where so-called rational actors interact with each other, driven by knowledge relations and cognition patterns proper to their own community. In order to be a reasonable member of that community, one has to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions. This activity can be described as 'learning as acquisition'. In contrast to this, the learning that takes place when trying to engage with the alterity of the community of strangers could be interpreted as 'learning as response'.

The 'rational community' and the 'community of strangers' are not strictly divided. They are not two options to choose from. 'The community of strangers lives 'inside' the rational community as a constant possibility and comes into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange in relation to the discourse and logic of the rational community' (Biesta 2006, p. 66). As a consequence, 'learning as response' cannot be

instrumentalised on the basis of an instructional process. However, it is possible to create a space where that kind of learning might occur. Such pedagogy creates opportunities for encounters with 'otherness', with unfamiliar and diverse situations, events, contexts and people. The learning taking place in such spaces is a non-linear but cumulative learning process. The distinction between these two types of communities and the different types of learning connected to them is also important for the world of social research. Often, social researchers limit their observations and interpretations to the 'rational community' while putting the 'community of strangers' between brackets.

In contrast to this, we depart from the assertion that an exclusive knowledge relation is, also for a researcher, not necessarily the most fruitful, important or liberating way to relate to the world. When taking responsibility for the other, there is no need for knowledge about the other. 'Responsibility excludes and opposes calculation' (Biesta 2004, p. 322). If our relation to the world and other human beings is not primarily a knowledge relationship, what is it then? Levinas describes how the subject is involved in a relationship that is 'older' than the ego. This relation is an ethical relationship of unlimited responsibility for the other (Biesta 1999). We experience a moral demand preceding all knowledge. Biesta (2006, p. 49) refers to the insight that 'our primordial being-in-the-world is a being-in-the-world-with-others'. This can be summarised in the simple yet worrying phrase that the subject is a hostage, obsessed by his/her responsibilities (Biesta 2006, p. 51). These responsibilities are not products of decisions or choices by this subject. It is not the case that our 'response' is based on knowledge about the other. It is not the case that we first need to know what we will be responsible for and then decide whether to take up this responsibility. 'It is a responsibility without knowledge of what one is responsible for' (Biesta 2006, p. 116).

All human beings – including researchers – are not only engaged in relations, but are constituted by relations. Levinas stresses that the responsibility for the other is not a responsibility we can choose to take up, to ignore or neglect (Biesta 1999, p. 213). We are even responsible for 'that which we do not will or intend' (Chinnery 2003, p. 11). Chinnery (2003, p. 15) describes this ethical responsibility as 'a position of existential debt wherein the other's existence puts obligations on me which I will never be able to fulfil but from which I am also never released'. Responsibility has to do with openness to the other, with saying 'yes' to the otherness of the other, with suffering through painful situations not caused by us, 'but to which we are nonetheless called to respond' (Chinnery 2003, p. 7).

Often this response is ethical or political. In our research we started from an ethical stance that took the concrete form of participatory research, where participants (in our case practitioners) co-constructed the research design, the research aims, the research questions and all the other phases of the research process. We considered it important that not only the researchers would gain knowledge (and power), but that the knowledge development would be democratically shared with the practitioners. Here the ethical translated into the political. This research tried to fight oppressive and restrictive structures in the everyday life of practitioners and the people in poverty they work with. We agree with Lather (1986, p. 67) that once we recognise that

'there is no neutral research, we no longer need to apologize for unabashedly ideological research and its open commitment to using research to criticize and change the status quo'. This critical and democratic stance is not new in the tradition of action research. Action researchers embrace approaches to research 'in which the spurious dichotomy between theory and practice is mediated, in which multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams are central, and in which objectivity is replaced by a public commitment to achieving liberating, sustainable, and democratizing outcomes' (Greenwood 2002, p. 125). Both research as response and action research are not about imposing expert knowledge on stakeholders. Action research is about collaborative environments where researchers and local stakeholders 'can share their very different kinds of knowledge in the process of analyzing their problems, studying them, and collaboratively designing actions that can ameliorate the problems' (Greenwood 2002, p. 127). The kind of ethical relationship that is described in 'research as response' resonates the action research relationship, which is also based on active co-construction. Hilsen (2006, p. 34) makes a strong point about action research that according to us also is valid for 'research as response': 'The ethical demand can never be non-political, as politics is the practical side of the society we construct through our practice.' Researchers have to accept responsibility for the kind of society to which we contribute; here the ethical and the political are closely intertwined.

Research as Response: The Ethical Demand

Before we further elaborate on the methodological issues at hand, we need to explain why we think 'activation' to be an important issue. During this Ph.D., we formulated some fundamental concerns and critiques on the activation for employment of people in poverty. While recognising the positive effect that employment *can* have in a person's life, we tried to contribute to the development of an alternative activation discourse and practice. Since the 1980s and the 1990s, a wide range of activation policies were being developed in Flanders. The central aim is to increase the employability of the unemployed thereby increasing the labour market participation rates. Work is considered to be the best means for inclusion in society and the best protection against poverty. Mobility and flexibility are considered to be necessary and unavoidable. People in poverty are mostly confronted with the dark side of flexibility with flexible jobs, flexible contracts and flexible rules for downsizing. Even social economy initiatives trying to work 'bottom-up' in a participatory manner have to adapt to the 'top-down' employability criteria or are excluded from funding. A rather restrictive activation logic seems to have gained ground through the policy frameworks and through the funding criteria social economy initiatives have to meet (Weil et al. 2005). For policymakers, the first priority is to integrate unemployed groups into the regular economic system. More reflexive activation initiatives are diverted from their original ambitions – the combat of poverty in a participatory way – towards objectives favoured by the policymakers: job creation

and insertion of the unemployed into the labour market. We find it important to reflect on the limitations of the employability discourse, where economic concerns are privileged over social concerns. We fear we may be moving towards a work-first situation with a growing group of 'working poor' if we keep on imposing this individualising restrictive activation discourse on all vulnerable groups, especially on people in generational poverty (Mathijssen 2008).

In our research on the activation of people in poverty, we were explicitly confronted with the issue of ethical responsibility, as an obligation which we were never able to fulfil, but from which we were also never released. In line with Pinchevski (2005, p. 217), responsibility means exceeding rather than following social norms. Responsibility for researchers in this sense means exceeding rather than just following methodological prescriptions or guidelines. Responsibility is not the result of rational calculation. It has nothing to do with a social or legal code.

Hilsen (2006) argues that we need an ethical demand for research, rather than an ethical code. The ethical demand is unconditional. We cannot choose when we find it appropriate to follow. The ethical demand is there, even when it is not in my (research) interest to follow or when it does not favour me or my research. The ethical demand is also a demand to accept responsibility for the kind of society to which we contribute.

> 'The ethical demand is a demand to take responsibility for how your chosen acts and practices affect the lives of your fellow human beings. Research practices can be liberating and increase people's capacity to influence their own environments and implement solutions to their own, experienced problems, or it can confirm stereotypes and constricting images of people, and so render people less able to change their environments.' (Hilsen 2006, p. 28)

Because research *can* make a difference in people's lives, responsibility is an unavoidable issue.

An ethical code is something completely different. Loewenthal (2003) considers an ethical code even as a contradiction in terms, if this code precedes the other for whom it is meant to be intended. Can we stop research 'from reverting to technique-oriented mechanism of professional vested interests and, instead, find a better way for us all to put the other first?' (Loewenthal 2003, p. 367). How can we put the other first? 'Instead of being primarily concerned with systems of power and knowledge, we should be more concerned with justice on a case by case basis' (Loewenthal 2003, p. 374). Also according to Zembylas (2005, p. 149), there are no concrete rules or guidelines to be found in the ethics of Levinas concerning the responsibility to the other. This means that one cannot know for sure whether he/she is responding in the 'correct' way. We have to dare to embrace vulnerability: 'Taking responsibility for the other is a question of attitude, of 'guts', which defies any attempt to plan and control it' (Ortega 2004, p. 279).

Research as response is not about acquiring knowledge or something that already existed, but it is about responding to a question. The relationship between researcher and respondent is a responsibility for someone or somebody that we do not know and that we cannot know. In that case the goal of research is not to describe, copy or reproduce what already exists. The goal of research is to answer to what is unknown and different, what is challenging, irritating and even disturbing. The first step in a research relationship is to accept the respondent in his/her concrete reality of his/her tradition, culture and context. It is about acknowledging that the respondent is

'somebody', who is appreciated for his/her dignity as a person, not just as a source of data. The researcher accepts the respondent as somebody with whom it is necessary to build up a moral relationship. By being present in the lives of our respondents as someone they can trust, the respondents can experience understanding, affection and respect. For the researcher, this is about developing empathy, solidarity, dialogue and the ability to listen and be attentive to the other.

It also implies the ability to analyse one's own research environment. In our research, we engaged in a close collaboration with practitioners of local Flemish community services in the west of Flanders. During that research we were wondering about the issue of access to the research findings. Inspired by Lincoln (1995, 1998), we constructed the knowledge about every single aspect of our research topic in close collaboration with the practitioners. On several occasions we also sought feedback of the people in poverty who are involved in the community services as volunteers or employees. Since the knowledge was jointly constructed, we also found it should be shared democratically. Our aim was to use the research findings to the benefit of those that have the least power and resources: the poor, the excluded, the marginalised and the silenced. In our research the learning of the practitioners was equally important to the learning of the researcher. Both the people in poverty and practitioners were closely involved in the research design, collection, analysis and reporting of data. We created an intense inquiry space in which practitioners could carefully examine their practice and change their actions as a result (Reason 2003). In the first phase of the research we also constructed a think tank together with only people in poverty (no practitioners were involved on this occasion), where the research goals and questions were jointly constructed. We did so, because practitioners and people in poverty in their own way were frustrated by previous experiences of activation policies and practices that had a strong economic bias. In response to this, we tried to acknowledge both practitioners and people in poverty in their dignity and not simply treat them as a source of data. Following Loewenthal (2003) we wanted to avoid a type of research that reduces the respondents to the role of a supporting cast in a drama set-up to preserve the researcher's privilege.

Research as Compassion: Vulnerability and Protest

Considering the above, research as response involves exposure and vulnerability. The relation between researcher and respondents is not limited to a knowledge relationship. It is also a relation of ethical responsibility. In the case of research on poverty (whether it be with practitioners or with people in poverty themselves), research can take the form of protest on behalf of, and together with, those whose dignity is wrongfully lost. This is close to Levinas' description of compassion. Compassion is a feeling of solidarity with the suffering of the other. The starting point of ethics is according to Ortega and Minguez (2001, pp. 162–163) 'the experience of suffering as an affront to dignity, something which *should not be*'. This does not call for understanding. It calls for compassion.

Compassion implies a political engagement to help and liberate. Compassion is about working to transform the unjust structures that cause suffering, dependency and alienation. Compassion is not the same as a passive feeling of sympathy as a non-involved outsider. It is not an empty feeling that leaves us uninterested to the causes of the suffering. In this sense, the challenge for our society today is to acknowledge the dignity of every human being. Research as compassion does not only lead to a better understanding of knowledge about the Other, but more importantly it leads to taking responsibility for the situation of the Other. Research starts from the right to a life in dignity. Research starts from the confrontation with injustice. The only option then is protest. Research can be a political engagement, it can be a criticism of situations and actions which degrade and offend human beings. This asks for research that accepts one's own responsibility for the Other and one's responsibility for repairing his/her dignity. This way research can be ethical and political.

Ethical research is confrontational. It often is an 'interruption' both for the researcher and the respondents. It is a moment of exposure and vulnerability. Both the researcher and the researched are expected to first answer the question: 'where are you?' This question can be understood in a fundamental way as a research question. A second responsibility concerns the question 'What do you think about this?' or 'What is your opinion?' This is a difficult question, which can interrupt and disturb, but it also has the potential 'to call someone into being as a unique, singular individual' (Biesta 2006, p. 150). Seen in this way, research becomes a process of asking difficult questions. Such research is not without risk. Research as a questioning that unsettles the obvious always implies a form of 'violence', because there is no certainty or knowledge about the answer or outcome of this questioning. In this way also research is a form of 'violence' asking difficult questions and creating difficult encounters. Researchers always have an impact on the lives of the respondents and this impact can be transforming and disruptive.

Especially in the context of working with people in poverty, we have to keep in mind that, empirically speaking, the research relationship will always remain an unequal relationship. The researcher most likely has a higher educational degree, a better pay cheque and access to valuable means and is embedded in a more powerful network. However, this 'empirical unequality' does not necessarily have to be problematic in the research relationship. What people in poverty do experience as negative is a distant relation where the researcher stresses this unequality by keeping or making people dependent. There is a need for equivalency, without denying or ignoring the difference in power and position. There is no necessary contradiction between the status difference of the research partners and the point of departure of a respectful and equal relationship. Taking such a democratic stance opens up positive possibilities for change and emancipation for the people in poverty, by broadening their options for action.

Research often encounters many popular prejudices. These prejudices made the presentation of our (preliminary) research results to practitioners, policymakers and people in poverty a challenging activity. Especially policymakers were expecting 'objective' numbers, graphics, representative models and efficient instruments.

Some did not agree with the described conflicting discourses. The researcher was critically questioned and needed to literally defend her chosen interpretative methodology and demonstrate the scientific value of this kind of research to non-methodologists. This not only needed 'translation' of specific terms in understandable language. It also required the courage and skill to engage into a constructive dialogue. In these dialogues a challenge was not to insult or alienate people with the argument that discussing their doubts about the validity of research conclusions is 'too difficult for non-researchers'.

In our research we started from the *commitment* to closely involve the practitioners in every research phase. Everything was systematically discussed during round table discussions in an ongoing process of analysis. As Greenwood (2002, p. 121) stated: 'Social engagement from a campus office or university library study is generally not feasible. And social engagement means having one's time placed at the disposal of extramural stakeholders who are engaged in social processes that do not occur in synchrony with the academic calendar'. We also experienced this tension throughout the whole research process, which asked for a considerate amount of *discipline* to cope with this in comparison with some other researchers who remain within the boundaries of a campus-bound university life. Especially the decision to do manual labour while observing in the phase of data collection proved to be an exercise in self-discipline since the researcher struggled with a painful chronic knee infection and several other health problems.

Ph.D. Research as Response: Data Collection

When looking back to our research, we asked ourselves if we could trace some elements of 'research as response' since it is not self-evident to include the voices of practitioners and especially of people in poverty in research. While the people in poverty were closely involved in a think tank to guide the formulation of research aims and questions; the practitioners were closely involved as co-researchers in every research phase. Inspired by Pols (2005), we chose not to do interviews with people in poverty (both volunteers and employees in the community services). The interview situation presupposes that the interviewee is able and willing to express his/her situation in language. People in poverty often are reluctant to talk about their lives, their relatives and their job or unemployment. This reluctance can be explained by their experiences with 'interviews' with organisations whose declared aim is to offer support, but who may play a surveillance role when people in poverty are concerned. During our research we heard several stories telling about such experiences with employment agencies or with child care institutions. An interview about 'being active' and 'work experiences' might remind them of those feared interviews at VDAB (Flemish Mentoring and Training Agency for Job-seekers) or RVA (Belgian Employment Agency). These agencies check the 'employability and flexibility' of the unemployed. We did not wish to evoke these negative connotations and the associated feelings of distrust.

Another reason for not working with interviews was the normative power of the standard Dutch language, particularly in a region where the local dialect is still very dominant. In such case, some people in poverty would start doubting whether they were expressing things 'correctly' or would be embarrassed to 'use their own words' or colloquial language.

Together with the practitioners we searched for a suitable method to also include people in poverty in the process of data collection. Pols (2005) again inspired us, when observing and describing everyday practices through participatory observation. In this way, people in poverty did not have to adapt to the requirements and presuppositions inherent in an (uncomfortable) interview situation. In addition, this also enabled us to include (to a certain degree) people in poverty who were unable to express themselves 'correctly' in language. 'Everybody has a practice, even though not everyone can make verbal representations of it' (Pols 2005, p. 215).

Unlike Pols, we did not opt for observation, but for participatory observation. This means that the researcher got a hands-on experience of what it is like to work in a community service in everyday activities. The researcher cleaned toilets, helped to renovate a youth centre, maintained green spaces in a disadvantaged neighbourhood…. The researcher spent at least 2 days observing each of the six community services. The frequency, duration and type of activities depended on the community services themselves. The researcher told participants that she wanted to do 'nothing special' but merely wanted to participate in everyday activities, as an ordinary volunteer helping for a few days. An advantage was that the researcher could notice things that might not have been revealed in interviews, because they are 'obvious' to participants, or a matter of routine. This also entailed a learning opportunity for the community services involved. For a researcher, such almost unconscious routines may become visible, because she is not fully 'immersed' in these routines and because she is analysing cases where routines differ.

Perhaps even more importantly, participatory observation allowed the researcher to actually demonstrate people that she considered their activities relevant and interesting. She did not just tell them that she respected and appreciated their work. She could also put her words into practice. Participatory observation allowed her to show that she did not consider their work 'inferior' or 'dirty', for instance, by getting down on her knees to scrub an elderly couple's toilet. Obviously, in this way the researcher's participation affected and changed the situations under investigation. At one occasion, the researcher accompanied a woman, who cleaned a senior citizen's flat every week in 2 h. The researcher actively collaborated in this activity. This changed the researched situation in the sense that there was more time available than necessary for cleaning the flat with two persons. It was interesting to see how the cleaning lady coped with this excess of time. She did not diminish her intensive work rhythm. Instead she took on additional jobs like putting a nail in the wall while telling she was happy with the extra time so she could do extra work because she wanted the senior citizen to live in a clean and comfortable flat.

The participatory observation was accompanied by 'informal conversations', without using neither pen and paper nor a tape recorder. The researcher waited for people in poverty to start talking to her. While connecting to what people

spontaneously told her, she got a better insight in what topics were important to them. 'Dialogue' is a better word for this than 'interrogation'. The researcher also had a few general ice-breaking questions when necessary. These were open, inviting questions such as the following: 'How are things today? What do you do around here? How did you join this community service? What do you think about this community service?' If people made vague or general statements, she asked for a concrete example. According to Ellis and Berger (2003, p. 161), this dialogue can be compared to 'a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope'. Patton (1980) calls this an informal conversation interview, where questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things. Another advantage is that the questions emerged from participatory observations and were therefore directly relevant both for the researcher and for the participants. All conversations can be linked to specific individuals, activities and circumstances.

We decided not to conduct 'formal interviews', avoiding to suggest through the questionnaires what we assumed to be important, while we wanted to give the people in poverty and the practitioners in community services the opportunity to decide what they wished to talk about. Sometimes, it took quite long before a conversation started. For instance, the researcher had to spend a lot of time sanding wood before people made eye contact and started telling what the community service meant to them. Above all, it took commitment, discipline, motivation, effort and patience to collect these data.

Workshops and study days for practitioners and policymakers played a major role throughout the whole research process. However, it proved not so easy to find time for this, given the increasing pressure in the academic world to concentrate on publishing papers in highly ranked international academic journals, preferably in English. Articles in Dutch-language or practice-oriented journals have limited value in the competitive academic environment. Giving lectures and organising workshops for practitioners and local policymakers or contributing to documentaries aimed at a wider audience is not a priority. Thus, the gap between the university and society is widened rather than bridged. We endorse Jaspers et al. (2007) criticism of this evolution. The results of research cannot be measured solely on the basis of citation indexes and remain invisible in a model that wants to measure quality in numbers. The emphasis on the number of publications leaves little time for slow and painstaking knowledge gathering or for reflection about society (Jaspers et al. 2007). Social scientists sometimes have to choose between being 'useful' rather than being intellectually 'important' or academically successful (Greenwood 2002, p. 121).

Finally, *patience* was not just a luxury, but a necessity. Understanding and trust with practitioners and especially with people in poverty unfolds through time. We agree with Henderson (2005, p. 82) on the importance of listening. We needed to learn to listen, to witness suffering, allowing other stakeholders to set the pace of the research process. We recognise the statement of Henderson (2005, p. 88): 'We learned to sit with discomfort, including our own.'

Ph.D. Research as Response: Data Analysis and Reporting

The analysis of the collected data was done in close collaboration with the practitioners. The researcher systematically discussed her descriptions at round table meetings with the practitioners in an ongoing process of analysis. The practitioners were invited to give feedback, not only on the data collected so far but also on the theoretical and methodological frameworks used. Were these recognisable, usable and understandable for them? Together we questioned the meanings and relevance of their daily practices and discourses. In this way the practitioners learned to look at and talk about their practice in new and different ways. Together we searched how to engage their personal and collective capabilities for working on their problems and frustrations.

People in poverty from the six community services were invited at one occasion to give feedback to preliminary analyses. The practitioners and the researcher as a team explained the preliminary conclusions and their impact on the community services. People in poverty were very keen to give their opinion – not only on the results but also on the actions that should be undertaken in the near future on the basis of these results. A returning suggestion was to visualise the results in a sort of documentary 'so that even policymakers could be enabled to understand the complexity of the combat of poverty in community services'. This and all other questions and remarks were thoroughly taken into account in the follow-up analysis and the reporting afterwards. The researchers were careful to honestly represent in their writing the ethical and participatory process of collaborative knowledge creation in which they engaged. Just like action researchers, responsive researchers cannot separate the research process from the findings 'precisely because of the ongoing dialogue between theorization, action, and re-theorization' (Greenwood 2002, pp. 132–133).

During the research process the practitioners engaged in a learning process and took several actions to promote their alternative activation strategy. At one occasion, the research results were translated in the documentary 'Grensland'. To realise this, several partners were brought together: Samenlevingsopbouw West-Vlaanderen and Een Andere Wereld Films. With this documentary, the community services presented a critique on the dominant economic activation discourse. The targets of the practitioners for this documentary were ambitious: They wanted to break prejudices against people in poverty and build understanding and solidarity. As an alternative to the dominant employability-oriented discourse, they decided to foster a discourse of proximity, dialogue and shared responsibility. They also wanted to explain the difference between poverty and unemployment. In line with this, it is important to note that unemployment is only one of many characteristics of poverty. We agree with De Boyser (2004) that a narrow focus on economic activation may miss the mark, certainly when unemployment is only one of the many problems in a tangled web of poverty and exclusion. A job may offer protection against income poverty, but it does not automatically lift people out of poverty. Unless attention is paid to care, emotional well-being and a support network, finding a job does not guarantee progress in life. Economic activation may help combat

unemployment but is insufficient to address the much more complex issue of poverty and exclusion. People in poverty are disproportionally more likely to have jobs involving a higher risk of depression: 'jobs that require little training or experience and that offer little remuneration, job security and control over one's own work' (De Boyser 2004, pp. 69–70).

All these experiences with practitioners, with people in poverty and last but not least with policymakers held a huge learning potential for the researchers, resulting in 'a critical stance regarding the inadequacies of our pet theories and an openness to counter-interpretations' (Lather 1986, p. 76). This dialogue between theory development and practice capable of disconfirming or altering our conclusions asks for an open-ended research, which is difficult – but not impossible – to plan beforehand. We agree with Greenwood (2002, p. 125) that 'the only meaningful way to theorize is through successive cycles of combined reflection and action, the action feeding back to revise the reflection in ongoing cycles'. In 'research as response' we also recognise the importance of counterintuitive thinking, questioning of definitions and premises and the attempt to subject our favourite interpretations to harsh critiques by several stakeholders with different points of view.

At this point it is relevant to call attention to the spectrum of ideas about citizenship described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). They describe three kinds of ideas about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do. We claim these conceptions of citizenship are also embodied by researchers worldwide. These conceptions reflect no arbitrary choices or methodological limitations, but are political choices with political consequences (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). A researcher can take the stance of a *personally responsible citizen* as a citizen who, for example, provides food to a food drive or a soup kitchen. In this restricted conception, citizens and researchers have to be honest, responsible and law abiding. We can relate this to the rational community (Lingis) we mentioned above. Good citizens have to work, pay taxes and obey laws. A researcher could also take the second stance of a *participatory citizen*, or someone who helps to organise a soup kitchen. In this conception a good citizen is an active member of community organisations. This involves organising community efforts to care for those in need. The core assumption is that citizens (and researchers) should actively participate within established systems and community structures. Finally, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe a third conception of citizenship. The *justice-oriented citizen* questions why a soup kitchen is needed. He/she explores why people are hungry and tries to act to tackle root causes. This citizen or researcher critically assesses social, political and economic structures to see beyond surface causes and to address areas of injustice. The assumption here is that good citizens (and researchers) must question and change established systems and structures.

In this Ph.D. research all three kinds of citizenship were enacted. The researcher volunteered during the research in different activities organised by the neighbourhood services, as a personally responsible citizen/researcher. More importantly, the researcher contributed to the exploration and development of new ways of employment and participation for people in poverty. This is in line with a position as a participatory citizen/researcher. But the essence of the reflexive stance for the

researcher was the position as a justice-oriented citizen/researcher. This third position definitely coincides with the concept of 'research as response'. Together with practitioners and people in poverty, the researcher questioned the responsibility of practitioners and policymakers in the context of the economic activation of people in poverty. The third position as *justice-oriented citizen* and the stance of *research as response* both start from responsibility for the other. These practices can both be liberating and increase people's capacity to influence their context. Both are aimed at transforming unjust structures that cause suffering and alienation. Most striking, both forms of questioning can offer no certainty or knowledge about their open-ended outcome.

Further Questions and Responses

We started these methodological reflections with the question whether 'research as response' can inspire a respectful design for research with practitioners and with people in poverty. We now can conclude that 'learning as response' is relevant as an inspiring notion to give direction to the research methodology, especially when the research has democratic ambitions. In this sense, it shares many characteristics with the well-documented tradition of action research. However, some questions remain. How can researchers cope with the ongoing unpredictability of the learning/research process? How can they cope with the discomfort, with the messy character and with the slow and painstaking gathering of knowledge in this type of learning and research?

In order to deal with these questions, the researcher will not only have to follow the methodological guidelines, he/she inevitably will have to exceed them. Special efforts are needed to create a space for 'research as response' to occur, even though it is fairly impossible to instrumentalise this process. Here the responsive researcher has to be prepared to be vulnerable and ask all participants involved whether the frameworks used are recognisable and useful for them. Accepting and even embracing discomfort and ambiguity is an inevitable attitude in this case. This kind of open-ended research is difficult, but not impossible to execute. At first glance, participatory observation seems to be an instrument worth further exploring. Like this, research as response holds the promise of opening possibilities for democratic change and for fighting unjust structures. We do not need to apologise for our democratic and responsive stance; we can defend it as a legitimate way of 'catalytic validity' (Lather 1986).

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