THEORY FROM THE PERIPHERY: EXPLORING THE USE OF PAR IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The youth of Conjunto Palmeiras are poor, disempowered and lack the skills to become active problem solvers.

-“Problem statement” from report produced by students from a top US graduate program in international affairs and development

We’re the closest to the problems. We understand better than anyone what’s happening here. We’re capable of best identifying the problem; we’re capable of communicating best with our community because we’re a part of it.

-Luiz Hernandez, youth from Conjunto Palmeiras
There is a growing number of approaches, tools, theories and frameworks that a range of actors use to generate knowledge about people and places within community development processes. The first statement above resulted from the application of one of these—a problem mapping analysis carried out in the community of Conjunto Palmeiras by a group of graduate students from one of the world’s top programs in international affairs and development. The stated purpose of this analysis was to “develop a common understanding about life in Conjunto Palmeiras” through observation and discussions with community members. The resulting information was used to identify the “problem statement” above.

In a separate process, a group of said youth, (the “poor, disempowered, skill-less ones”), came together to pursue a similar goal of developing a collective understanding about community life in order to take action. Within this process, the group discussed problems and opportunities in the community based on their own experiences. Building upon these discussions, which evolved through a participatory action research (PAR) process, they constructed a unique conceptual framework for understanding development in their community—at once similar and radically different from the one that had been previously used to diagnose their disempowerment.

I present these two statements to illustrate how the nature of knowledge creation in community development processes can lead to drastically divergent results. The problem mapping approach of the graduate students provides an obvious (and all too common) case of how practitioners can “get it wrong” by failing to engage local knowledge in meaningful ways. While their approach was not explicitly participatory, even approaches that specifically aim to foster knowledge co-creation for community development can fall into similar traps. In this paper I review an existing approach to participatory community development practice and contrast this with a PAR approach to address the question: Can the use of pre-existing frameworks to facilitate knowledge generation within community development processes actually limit the potential of community groups to develop their own theoretical tools for making sense of the places they live?

First, I highlight asset-based community development (ABCD) and it’s associated framework as an existing approach, and juxtapose this with the framework that emerged from a PAR process with a group of youth from Conjunto Palmeiras between June and August 2015. Subsequently, I analyze some of the key differences between these to highlight insights and reflections that emerged through the
PAR process that do not fit into the ABCD framework. I argue that new generative spaces can be created when community groups take the lead in designing the frameworks used for measuring, understanding or visioning their own development. I suggest a PAR approach could provide one way of facilitating this process.

Mainstream Approaches to Knowledge Creation in Community Development Practice: Asset-based Community Development

While the heterogeneity of actors, approaches and objectives of community development work complicates any attempt to generalize about the practice, it can broadly be understood as involving groups or individuals, acting upon knowledge about an issue or issues within a local space to create change. In many fields of practice, including planning and international development, the knowledge being acted upon has traditionally belonged to the “expert outsider.” Specifically, in the modernist tradition that dominated much of 20th century planning and development, communities were seen as the site of deficiency and needs requiring outside intervention (Rydin, 55). “Development” was largely understood in economic terms and interventions were designed without community participation. The ABCD approach emerged in the 1990’s as a reaction to this top-down, deficiency-based tradition of practice (Lightfoot, McCleary and Lum, 59).

The ABCD approach is oriented towards leveraging pre-existing strengths, talents and social capital to address community challenges (Lightfoot, McCleary and Lum, 59). The starting point for the ABCD approach is the collective creation of an inventory of material and immaterial community assets, or an asset map. Communities identify and classify assets into a set of pre-determined categories—individual, associational, institutional and physical assets (Lightfoot, McCleary and Lum, 59). Using the resulting map (which can be either physical or conceptual), participants draw connections between different assets and identify relationships among actors as a way to strategize and formulate interventions that build upon existing community strengths and capacities (Lightfoot, McCleary and Lum, 59).

1 This is a description of asset mapping in its traditional conceptualization. The original categories described here can and have been altered by community groups to better reflect local conditions or needs.
Fig. 1: Example of an asset map framework

In addition to providing a useful tool, it is argued that participation in the process of asset mapping can build trust among participants and foster a sense of pride and ownership over resulting community development strategies (Lightfoot, McCleary and Lum, 59). Since it emerged in the 1990’s the ABCD approach has had a significant influence on mainstream community development discourse, and asset-mapping as a framework for participation and capacity building has been incorporated into diverse fields of practice.

**Participatory Action Research (PAR) for Community Development Practice**

In her book, “Community Development: a Critical Approach,” Margaret Ledwith argues that an increasing emphasis on participation and self-help within mainstream community development discourse and practice has tempered the transformative potential of knowledge generation within community development praxis (24). She argues that this is linked to an increasing tension between “doing and thinking”—specifically that practitioners’ concern with action has subjugated critical reflection and thought (Ledwith, 24). She suggests that fundamental to effective community

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development practice is participatory action research\(^3\) that keeps practice “relevant to the changing social and political context (Ledwith, 32).”

Ledwith’s notion of the importance of integrating critical thought, reflection and action in community development practice is influenced by the teachings of Paulo Freire. According to Freire, for knowledge to have transformative potential, it must be co-created rather than imposed on students by professors. Freire argues that a “problem-posing” approach to education is critical to create a context for dialogue about the structural forces that shape individual lives and communities (Freire, 52). Freire describes the process of critical thinking and reflecting on reality to effectively intervene in it as conscientização (159).

This type of awareness takes on new meaning in a world where every “local” community is increasingly affected and shaped by global structures of power and knowledge production. The interconnectedness of globalization has made information at once more (in terms of volume and digital access), and less (in terms of the difficulty of differentiating fact from fiction), accessible than ever before (Appadurai, 176). In this context, the ability to strategically make sense of and engage in dialogue about local conditions and the way they are shaped by external forces is critical for taking informed action at both the individual and community level (Appadurai, 176). Arjun Appadurai argues that strategic knowledge is fundamental to achieving full citizenship, and thus constitutes a human right (168). The right to research, refers to the right for any citizen to “increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens” (Appadurai, 168).

An application of these ideas, (critical reflection on practice, problem-posing for conscientização and research as a way of strategic survival in a globalized world), to community development practice would imply greater attention to co-generative knowledge, over undiscerning “in the trenches” action within communities. It would also involve a balance between an emphasis on assets and a critical questioning of how deficits result from structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power. This kind of approach, as Gary Craig argues, would be oriented towards shaping the policy and political context rather than being dominated by it (Ledwith, 3).

\(^3\) Ledwith describes the terms participatory, collaborative and emancipatory research as being “closely allied but with subtle differences of emphasis.” Throughout her book she uses the term “emancipatory action research”
I present the following case as one that does not necessarily exemplify all of the previous principles, but that illustrates how a PAR approach can open new doors for reflection, co-construction and action that a more prescribed, structured approach might obscure.

Participatory Action Research at PalmasLab

A research concept emerges: novas riquezas, novas pobrezas

PalmasLab is a center for IT learning and social innovation within Instituto Banco Palmas, an organization best known for being the first community bank in Brazil that today houses several social programs. The institute is located in Conjunto Palmeiras, a neighborhood located on the geographic and imagined periferia (periphery) of Fortaleza, Brazil. In the spring of 2015, PalmasLab director Asier, reached out to the MIT Community Innovators Lab (CoLab), to express interest in receiving CoLab student affiliates to help build research capacity among a team of student interns at the lab. During June of the same year, Alison and I traveled to Conjunto Palmeiras to begin work with the PalmasLab team: Luiz, Mateus, Erberson, Luana and Heitor. Throughout subsequent phases of our work that summer, other staff and affiliated members of the organization provided input and support as well, creating a uniquely collaborative environment.

To ground a discussion of research methods, we began a review of “production and consumption mapping”—an existing methodology used by the organization to collect information from residents and business owners about local supply and demand for products and services. After Elias, a staff member with experience carrying out production and consumption mapping described the exercise, the PalmasLab team began to discuss the changing context of the neighborhood since the survey was first developed in the 1990’s. What I expected would be a straightforward workshop leading to the modification of the existing method, ended with the team declaring the survey less relevant today due to the existence of novas riquezas and novas pobrezas (new wealths and poverties) in Conjunto Palmeiras. We wrote novas riquezas and novas pobrezas on a piece of poster board and stuck it to the wall in front of the group. With that a month-long process of collaborative inquiry began, which ultimately resulted in the articulation of a research question, and the creation of a unique, contextualized framework for understanding holistic development in the community.
Articulating a research question: “Vivemos na pobreza mas não refletimos nela”

In the process of developing a research question, we engaged in a series of discussions and working sessions to build out the group’s idea of wealths and poverties. Underlying these initial discussions was the reflection that “we live in poverty but we don’t reflect on it,” which led to the question—what does poverty mean to us? In exploring this question, the group was adamant about wanting to move away from income or consumption-based measures of poverty to embrace a more holistic conceptualization. They discussed an expanded vision of production and consumption in the neighborhood that involved *immaterial* forms of poverty and wealth.

As the group considered examples of these—such as the production of knowledge, cultural production, and the “consumption” of leisure, or public space, for example—they reasoned that wealth and poverty should be understood in a multidimensional way. The absence of, or lack of access to, each wealth they identified could also represent a form of poverty. The team balanced this set of wealths and poverties with the concept of individual desires and aspirations. They reasoned that individual desires and aspirations of community members shape and are shaped by the set of wealths and poverties, and the ways in which these either enable, inhibit, unite or constrain the population. As Luana explained,

*Today the needs here go beyond addressing hunger, which was important in the past. Today the types of poverty we experience are also intellectual, cultural. And these can also be wealths—they can represent both poverties and wealths, right? It’s important for us to map these, because in many cases, wealths like intellectual and cultural wealths don’t necessarily rely on money to develop. And desires and aspirations are important too because we’re often limited in doing what we hope to achieve because of some type of barrier—income, the place that you live—and if we can change these variables, we can move closer to achieving those.*

The group’s ideas evolved through the structure of a participatory research process, where we prompted them in certain moments to step back, organize their thoughts, zoom in, qualify their concepts, elaborate in more detail, and ultimately to articulate a research question. This involved facilitating brainstorming sessions where, for example, we would ask the group to name anything they considered to be wealths and poverties in the neighborhood. We recorded any and all ideas in front of
the group, and afterwards discussed trends that we could see emerging, or groups that their ideas seemed to fall into. We would take notes during group discussions, meet in smaller groups to organize the ideas that had been discussed and then present these back to the larger group. In some cases this involved providing the group with concrete material to react to.

For example, after the group’s initial discussion of new wealths and poverties, Elias, Alison and I met to draft a research question based on what we had heard from the group. We presented the question back to the group, asking them to add to it, critique it or propose a new question entirely. The exercise was successful in catalyzing discussion among the group, and provoked us all to consider how to qualify the concepts we were grappling with. We ultimately arrived at the research question: What are the wealths, poverties, desires, and life goals in the community and how do they affect the ecosystem of production and consumption? To begin to address our research question, we first wanted to test our ideas about what could be considered wealths and poverties in the community, and to gather information about the desires and aspirations of individual community members. To do this, we carried out two focus groups—one with staff members from the bank and one with a group of individuals representing different aspects of community life. We decided to ask three questions that would allow us to learn about the kinds of

Fig. 2: PalmasLab team at work

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4 “Ecosystem of production and consumption” refers to the group’s expanded understanding of the term to include immaterial wealth.
desires and aspirations community members have, compare our ideas about wealths and poverties, and gain insight into how people were experiencing these in their everyday lives:

- What do you identify as wealths and poverties in the community?
- How do these wealths and poverties affect your day-to-day?
- What are your desires and aspirations?

Fig. 3: Focus group discussion with community members

The resulting information from the focus groups supported our initial ideas about wealths and poverties and allowed us to create a more final list of these, including: knowledge, health, infrastructure, mobilization, identity, leisure, economy, culture, and security. In addition, we identified three “cross-cutting” themes we felt were linked to how individuals experience each wealth or poverty: public policies, agency and solidarity.

The first phase of the research project was oriented towards developing the research question and framework to guide subsequent phases of the research process. Subsequently, we developed a community survey based on this framework aimed at providing a picture of how residents access, engage, or are limited by the wealths and poverties we identified. We hope that the resulting information can be used to mobilize the community around shared goals, change negative perceptions of the community and the city’s “periphery” (both within and outside the community), and to engage policy-makers in dialogue about community demands.
Reflections on Frameworks

While here I am limited to providing a brief summary of a process that was iterative, complex and currently ongoing, I venture to provide some initial insights of how the framework that the group created would likely not have emerged from a process that involved using a pre-existing framework to structure knowledge co-creation. While I use asset-mapping as an example of a pre-existing framework for the purposes of comparison, it is important to note that the ABCD approach is a generalized orientation to community-development that involves highlighting assets over deficiencies. It does not always involve asset-mapping and when it does, the categories used to create the inventory are not always chosen by the facilitators. I provide a simplified explanation of the ABCD approach here in the interest of drawing out key insights about the nature of knowledge co-creation in community development processes. However, this is not to say that the ABCD approach cannot have elements of a PAR approach and vice versa. In fact, our PAR process began with an ABCD orientation; we initiated our
discussion of research methodology using an existing organizational asset—the production and consumption mapping exercise.

Wealths as an expanded conceptualization of assets

The categories that the PalmasLab team selected for wealths could be used to create an inventory much in the same way that the “buckets” of individuals, associations, institutions and physical assets are used in asset-mapping. However, instead of establishing categories and creating an inventory for each one, the group pursued a more iterative, reflective process. They started with unstructured brainstorming and discussion about what they considered to be wealths and poverties in the community, generated several lists of these, and then grouped these ideas into categories. It was only when the framework was complete, after these categories were validated through focus group discussions with community members, that they were used to create an “inventory.” The resulting inventory reflected an understanding of community wealths as an expanded notion of assets—at once conceptual and concrete, material and immaterial. For example, for the category of culture, the wealths listed were both tangible, (local cultural groups and institutions), and intangible, (shared history, worldview).
Wealths as Poverties

Through reflective dialogue about what constitutes wealths and poverties, the group concluded that each wealth could also represent a form of poverty and vice versa—not only in the direct sense that the lack of a wealth, such as knowledge, represents a need for it, but also in a more nuanced sense. For example, security was considered to be a poverty not only because violence in the neighborhood represents a lack of security, but also in the sense that it causes public spaces to be under-utilized, and that it provokes fear in residents.

In addition, in considering the multi-dimensionality of wealths as poverties, the group engaged in critical reflection about for whom some wealths are indeed wealths and for whom they represent poverties. They discussed internal divisions within the community that divide and define how different groups of residents access, engage or experience different wealths and poverties. This topic also emerged in the focus group discussions, as participants characterized these divisions as being caused by both economic disparities and varying degrees of social inclusion within the neighborhood. Specifically, while shared history and identity is a wealth for some within the neighborhood, for others who are unfamiliar with the rich history of Conjunto Palmeiras, or for recent arrivals who have fewer social networks, identity can represent a poverty at an individual level which in turn, affects development at a communal level. As Luiz, explained,

*Identity is one of the greatest riches, when everyone feels the same pains, indignations and sense of pride, we are able to be united in the development of the neighborhood.*

These kind of nuanced reflections would likely not have emerged from an approach that solely emphasizes community assets. While an asset-based approach is important for emphasizing existing capacity, it could in some cases obscure divisions and internal conflict within communities that are important to address and consider in formulating responses and actions. In addition, a reflection on wealths as poverties does not necessarily translate to a singular emphasis on deficits. The group’s discussion of wealths as poverties revealed the complex ways in which deficits can have far-reaching and unexpected impacts in the neighborhood. For example, lack of security affecting the use of public space, lack of knowledge about community history affecting youth leadership, or lack of shared identity affecting mobilization and collective action.
“A Magical Thought”

Since the research planning phase was completed in August of 2015, members of the PalmasLab team have assumed leadership roles in a long-standing youth development course taught at the organization called consultores comunitarios (community consultants). Through the course, they have shared their research concept with other youth from the neighborhood, taking them through the process of identifying riquezas and pobrezas and engaging in dialogue about these. In January of 2016, with guidance from the PalmasLab team, the forty youth from the course will carry out the survey that we developed in the community.

Fig. 5: PalmasLab team taking consultores comunitarios students through the exercise of identifying wealths and poverties

The participatory action research process we engaged in resulted in the creation of a unique conceptual frame through which the youth of PalmasLab hope to catalyze dialogue about the diverse factors affecting community development, and to take action to begin to address these. While we are still in the process of working to achieve our research objectives, so far the conceptual framework has proven to be engaging and relevant for the community members who have taken part in different components the process. This experience demonstrates that when the participants of community development processes construct and employ their own conceptual frameworks as a guide for research, planning and action, the resulting map has a greater chance to make a difference in shaping the future topography of the community. In the words of Luiz,

What we could attain in an effective way, the community, society, influence public policy, if we could teach histories, we could make people value leaders, make people
know their wealths, make people know their poverties, and like that, knowing their problems, they could fight to resolve their problems. It is a magical thought no?


