

# Problems of Research Partnerships: Who Learns from Whom in Conflict Transformation Processes?

by Nora Schröder und Michaela Zöhrer

We are increasingly confronted with the imperatives of partnership and relationships at eye level. Such normative claims are needed precisely because equality and symmetrical relationships are *not* a fact but rather a promise. We need them as a moral compass which indicates variations from the norm in order to fight for more equality and justice alike. However, **in collective processes of knowledge production like research or teaching differences and asymmetries are key**. We state that they are not only constitutive but can also be turned into learning potentials.

Participatory research is a promising approach which seeks to understand as well as transform society by opening up opportunities for emancipation. One central aim is to enable otherwise marginalized people to take part in society by their involvement in research processes as equal partners. In a research team from the interdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies, we are currently preparing a long-term project on the topic of conflict transformation. By bringing together both scientists and workers from the field of conflict transformation, we aim to develop an approach for a *reflexive* conflict transformation methodology and practice. In this setting **conflicts are important in a twofold manner**: First, they are the topic which is discussed by conflict studies scholars and conflict transformation workers making use of their respective professional experiences. Second, conflicts may arise within this setting of participatory research partly due to asymmetries of knowledge and power. We want to unlock the potential this holds: Not only do we aim to make these conflicts a productive element of the project; the same applies for the question of epistemic and power asymmetries which are understood as constitutive elements of participative research projects.

One way to address such asymmetries in scientific research projects is the **concept of epistemic violence** which points to the violent character of science and knowledge structures in their genesis, formation, organization and effectiveness. Epistemic violence carries not only theoretical and conceptual meaning but also refers to concrete political, institutional and other powerful practices. Following that, we problematize in our project the marginalization or even systematic extinction of “alternative” knowledge: While non-scientific practice is the “object” of research, it is seldom valued as a knowledgeable position in its own right. On the other hand, the expertise of scientists is still predominantly unquestioned. This hierarchization gave birth to the exclusive character of knowledge production, distribution and evaluation by enforcing and universalizing scientific epistemology while oppressing other forms of knowledge.

In the past few years, postcolonial and feminist scholars in particular have raised awareness among researchers for facing questions of power and representation in society, in the academic system as well as in concrete research practice. Because of the unequal distribution of power, researchers are considered having a specific responsibility, understood as an empowering as well as harm-preventing one. Following this, we find it indispensable to reflect on our own (privileged) position in fields of power. In placing reflexivity much more central in conflict transformation work, we want to understand the epistemic power structures at work. We agree that it is our responsibility to uncover and name, to problematize and potentially change these structures.

However, we see our research project as a space to open up opportunities to turn asymmetries into productive elements of conflict transformation processes. We assume that asymmetries, especially those concerning knowledge and power, are inevitable and as such constitutive for research processes. Therefore, we are not concerned with the question how to eradicate differences but rather we are keen on discussing: Which (in-/visible) asymmetries are at work? Which differences are reproduced in practice and to which norms of equality do they refer? Which structural asymmetries remain unquestioned due to processes of normalization? Which asymmetries are productive or can at least be used in a productive way in participatory research settings? Which are by contrast destructive or even counterproductive?

Thereby, we understand asymmetries as contextual, situational and relational in the sense that they are depending on the context and the situational awareness of the people involved. Following this line of thought, the binary construction of scientists in opposition to practitioners is untenable. Instead, we prefer to think of relational differences between experts and lay people or teachers and learners, whereas the respective situation determines which role applies to whom. In the concrete situation of knowledge production, we think of both as learners, while the exchange of know-how is the “material” out of which new knowledge can emerge.

Since we are inevitably interwoven in structures of asymmetry we have to face the constant challenge to somehow deal with differences in a productive way. We strive to use different professional backgrounds and experiences in a constructive way, first of all by creating, even actively designing settings of interaction which enable mutual learning processes. **Mutual learning, we believe, is possible not despite of but thanks to asymmetries between the people involved.** This perspective enables us neither to be blind to existing power relations nor to be content with simply proclaiming partnership. Equal relations ultimately remain an empty promise – one worth striving for.

The crucial question remains: How *exactly* can a collective, participatory research setting be constructed or purposefully designed to enable a mutual learning experience

and processes of co-creation of knowledge? We are looking forward to learning from the experiences of others.

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