

The construction of university-community partnerships: entangled perspectives

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Abstract The development of meaningful partnerships with communities is a shared concern of many higher education institutions. However, the building of significant partnerships between universities and communities is still a complex task, which generates multiple tensions. Based on a qualitative study that examined the lived experiences of participants in an innovative university-community partnership in Israel, the article analyzes the concept of partnership from a social constructivist theoretical perspective. The study focused on four research areas: the experience of partnership; the perception of partnership; the barriers to partnership-building, and the impact of participation on participants. Findings challenge essentialist views of partnership and highlight the constructed and discursive nature of the concept. The article found several crucial factors to be acknowledged in the process of partnership management: role perspectives, group affiliation, institutional context, power relations, the organizational culture of the partnership, and the societal perceptions of social problems addressed by the partnership. It concludes with some recommendations for the management of more meaningful university-community partnerships.

Keywords University-community partnership · Poverty · Constructivism

The development of meaningful partnerships has become a common interest of many higher education institutions and communities. However, the building of significant partnerships between universities and communities is still a complex task, which generates multiple tensions. This article is based on a qualitative study that examined the participants' experiences of an innovative partnership aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion in Israel. As many other Academy-Community partnership programs, this shared venture seeks to tackle shared common goals and to serve joint interests. However, the uniqueness of this project is twofold. First, this partnership acknowledged from its inception the existence of huge unequal power relations between the partners, especially

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between academic institutions, public social services and people living in poverty. Therefore, based on the egalitarian desire to overcome these power differences, the partnership designed from the beginning a flexible and participatory organizational structure aimed to include the weakest partners as equal partners in planning and management decision making processes. Second, this partnership exceeds the limits and scope of many University-Community partnership goals such as curriculum or service development by setting a high politicized agenda. The partnership aimed to affect national and local policies by means of social action and policy practice. The article addresses the question of the impact of these endeavors on broad social issues such as the question of social inequality. It discusses the concept of partnership from a social constructivist theoretical perspective. The study focuses on four research areas: the experience of partnership; the perception of partnership; the barriers to partnership-building, and the impact of participation on participants. The article is divided into five sections. The first section provides the literature review. The second describes the project. The third presents the study methodology. The fourth introduces the findings and the discussion, and the fifth section presents the conclusion and implications.

Literature review

Research into university-community partnership covers multiple issues. Studies show that the development of university-community alliances is a vibrant field of interest for higher education institutions (Miller and Hafner 2008). Fisher, Fabricant and Simmons (2005) maintain that the dramatic development of university-community partnerships should be situated in the context of huge social, economic and institutional changes affecting higher education institutions. In addition, this trend is part of the universities' response to the general sense that higher education institutions are socially detached and academically irrelevant to the great social diseases of the age. This trend toward more critical social sciences has given rise to a number of partnership approaches to research and practice (Bok 1982; Boyer 1990; Israel et al. 1998). Studies show that solid partnerships with communities are vital sources for teaching, research and practice (Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2005; Suarez-Balcazar and Kinney 2006). The process of collaboration is interactive and based on common goals; and it allows for the generation of different solutions to problems and concerns (Silka 1999). In addition, by including community residents in research and planning, researchers can create programs that have immediate relevance and policy implications (Farquhar and Dobson 2005).

Studies also show that communities may benefit from partnerships with higher education institutions. Partnerships with universities result in positive community processes and outcomes. These partnerships can help communities to mobilize residents to voice their concerns, document experiences, develop collective strengths and participate in the recovery process (Bolin and Stanford 1998; Farquhar and Dobson 2005). These initiatives bring into the community individuals and organizations with diverse expertise and resources joining together to devise and execute plans for common goals, as well as to generate community solutions and programs for complex problems (Gronksi and Pigg 2000). These partnerships have helped communities to leverage their relationship to achieve social justice (Mulroy 2004).

Successful partnerships are characterized by mutuality, supportive leadership, university immersion and asset building (Taylor et al. 2004). However, one of the main questions of this research area is how and to what degree these partnerships are mutually dependent on

and beneficial to both the university and the community (Miller and Hafner 2008). Mutual gain is the optimum goal because it produces incentives on both sides. These partnerships present many opportunities for both the university and the community. They can develop grounded theories and community interventions and programs embracing both science and local experience (Lo and Bayer 2003; Mays et al. 1998; Minkler et al. 2006; Richardson and Allegrante 2000). Alongside the multiple potential benefits of university-community partnership, the partnership-building process generates a myriad of tensions and conflicts. Studies suggest that various factors inhibit partnership-building processes from evolving as dialogical (Maurrasse 2002).

Some studies have focused on process and structural factors to explain outcomes (Huxham and Vangen 2000; Vangen and Huxham 2003; Wondollock 1985). The main obstacles to forging more egalitarian partnerships are unequal power relations, institutional tensions, conflict of interests, bureaucratic constraints, poor planning, implementation, lack of ongoing evaluation processes, competition over resources and recognition, stakeholders' differential knowledge and experience, value clashes, mistrust and frequent uncertainty about the viability of the proposed outcomes (Gray 2004). In addition, these partnerships generate tensions over control, ownership, funding and lack of sustainability (Altman 2005). These circumstances, combined with inadequate participatory processes, provide a breeding ground for conflict and mistrust between institutional partners and local community interests (Maginn 2007). In addition, studies suggest that institutions of higher education gain more mileage out of community partnerships than the communities. The institutions of higher education tend to have more power than other neighborhood-based entities, allowing them to drive the agenda. Moreover, community change, especially concerning poor and disenfranchised populations, tends to take far longer to demonstrate significant results (Maurrasse 2002). As previously noted, another factor has surfaced as an obstacle to collaboration; often, an uneven power balance exists in relationships between university-based and community-based participants (Gray 2000; Maurrasse 2001). Those who take a critical view of power dynamics would say that there is no such thing as a neutral relationship, because someone always has power or control (Darder 1991; Freire 1970). This is especially the case in all-too-often dichotomous collaborative efforts where the university is almost always in control (Ascher and Schwartz 1989; Miller and Hafner 2008; Perkins et al. 2004). Silka (1999) found major themes that community respondents thought strongly influenced the effectiveness of community-academic partnerships such as trust; respect for a community's knowledge, community-defined and prioritized needs and goals, mutual division of roles and responsibilities, continuous flexibility, compromise, feedback, strengthening of community capacity, joint and equitable allocation of resources, sustainability and community ownership and funding issues.

Other studies concentrate on stakeholders' frames to explain collaborative success or failure (Gray 2004). Participants often come from drastically different backgrounds and possess different ideas and perspectives about which issues need to be addressed (Gray 2000, 2004; Johnson and Oliver 1991; Miller and Hafner 2008). Gray strengthened the different lenses that stakeholders use to make sense of partnership tension as one of the main barriers to successful partnership building (Gray 2003). When stakeholders' frames about the issues, the process of their interaction and about each other are vastly different, collaboration to find an agreeable solution becomes exceedingly difficult (Gray 1997, 2004). From a sociolinguistic perspective, frames portray how stakeholders make sense of a situation (Tannen 1979). Thus, they are social constructions and, as such, can capture shared, as well as individual, sense making about the conflict situation. Frames are used to define whether a problem exists, what action should be taken for it and by whom, how we

define ourselves with respect to the problem (e.g. as victims, champions, protectors), and often convey our ethical stance toward the problem (Benford and Snow 2000; Gray 2003, 2004; Vaughn and Seifert 1992).

Project description

The Haifa Partnership for the Eradication of Poverty (HPEP) was established in 2006. This is a novel initiative of the School of Social Work at the University of Haifa in Israel, in conjunction with the Welfare Department of Haifa Municipality. The project is based on the shared commitment and desire of the faculty, students, researchers, social services and families living in poverty to join together to combat the roots, manifestations and consequences of poverty and social inequalities in the community. The project goals are (1) to improve the life conditions of families living in poverty; (2) to increase the accessibility of social services to families living in poverty; (3) to foster partnership between families living in poverty, the university, and the public social services; (4) to raise public awareness of the detrimental consequences of poverty for the well-being of children and families; (5) to develop new models of intervention and research based on a reflective, critical and anti-oppressive social work methodology. The project draws on a theoretical model especially developed to help excluded groups to counter processes of social exclusion through the systemic and integrated implementation of four basic principles: involvement, partnership, policy advocacy and conscientization. This model was extensively carried out in different organizational settings and implemented with diverse excluded populations.

HPEP's participants include undergraduate social work students, social work field-practice supervisors, social workers from public social services, faculty members and community activists. HPEP's students provide professional help and counseling to families referred by the Welfare Department of Haifa Municipality (micro-practice) as well as assisting in the planning and development of community projects in the areas of social action, community mobilization, policy advocacy and lobbying (macro-practice). Students' participation in the project continues through one academic year. However, some students may extend their participation on a selective basis, as well as graduate students who choose to participate in the project as part of their practicum in advanced community practice. In addition, students from the Clinics of Social Justice at the University of Haifa Law School participate in the project, providing legislative and judicial advocacy counseling to the activists. HPEP students' participation in the project is part of their regular academic and field practice studies in the School. Participants should enroll in a two-semester undergraduate Community Practice Course, especially designed and planned for the project.

HPEP's field practice supervisors who participate in the project hold an MSW degree and a social work student supervision official certificate. They are all part of the professional staff of the Welfare Department of Haifa Municipality. Alongside their paid work as social workers, the university covers their fees as field practice supervisors, as is the common practice of all Israeli Schools of Social Work. Additionally, supervisors are required to participate in an ongoing yearly special training program especially designed for HPEP and based on the theoretical model.

Activists were recruited by social workers and students. Recruitment was according to the following criteria: citizens living in low-income neighborhoods in the city; parents of young children; clients of the Welfare Department; committed to active participation in partnership activities; committed to participation in the activists' yearly training program.

Activities

Since 2006, HPEP has been performing intensive activities in the city, such as gathering and publishing data, developing local community committees around shared problems, and organizing annual conferences, public hearings and round tables. An illustrative example of the activities initiated by the project is the several regional conferences attended by members of the community and social services, aimed at examining ways to create partnerships with families, identifying issues for joint action with and for local residents, and improving communication among services and families. These encounters led to the formation of joint action committees.

A further important activity initiated by the project was data collection to depict an updated picture of the employment, education, health and housing situation in Haifa. Teams of students, social workers and community activists worked to collect lived testimonies from residents living in poverty about their problems and needs. The findings were presented at three public conferences at the City Council with the active participation of the Mayor of the city, Knesset members, and hundreds of people.

The project organizes training activities to increase the civic engagement of the participants. The project conducts an annual reflective study session, attended by participants (activists, students, directors of social service bureaus, counselors, and social workers) and faculty members. The sessions' goals are to create a dynamic of reflective learning (learning through action) that would accompany and guide the project as it continues to develop. The aim of this study is to promote organizational learning from the project: about practical work with and for the benefit of families living in poverty and social exclusion, about how to train social work students for direct practice with clients living in poverty, and about factors that promote or hamper a partnership between academia and people living in poverty.

Method

We chose to base this study on a social constructivist theoretical perspective because it enables us to gain a deeper understanding of complex social situations that take into consideration the multiple perspectives of different stakeholders. It also allows a look at the complexity of social situations, such as university-community partnerships, which are highly affected by structural forces, organizational cultures and local contexts. This theoretical approach may help us avoid essentialist and representationalist conceptions of the phenomenon studied, because it basically draws on participants' everyday experiences as a way to understand the meanings they attach to their lived experience as participants in these dynamic partnerships (Gergen 2002; Schwand 2000). The social constructivist theoretical prism highlights the constructed nature of reality as a negotiated system of understandings, in which human beings make sense of their acts (Potter 1996). This approach affirms that perspectivism is an essential aspect of any attempt to interpret social life (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). In this sense, knowledge is always expressed in social interaction, never free of context or detached from political, ideological and cultural influences.

Data gathering

The article refers to the first three years of the project (2006–2009). Qualitative data were gathered from participants through different methods. One source of data is personal

interviews. The study conducted 35 personal semi-structured interviews (with 10 students, 10 community activists, 10 social workers and five steering committee members). These interviews were carried out during the first and second year by a research assistant. A second source of data comes from records of the three annual reflective sessions. These sessions were conducted with the aim of promoting critical dialogue among participants. The average number of participants in these sessions was 68. They were facilitated by two researchers. Areas of reflection were selected according to emerging themes discussed in different settings (steering committee, training sessions or local committees). A third source includes recorded meetings and written protocols from different settings of the project (steering committee meetings, task groups, training program sessions, student course, annual reports, media coverage). A last source of data comes from reflection papers from 60 students who participated in the project.

The study focused on four areas of research: The perception of poverty, project uniqueness, constructions of partnership, and opportunities for and barriers to partnership-building. Data were analyzed through content analysis techniques. The research team consisted of two members (principal researcher and assistant researcher). They analyzed data independently through open coding. Once emerging themes were selected, researchers defined categories. Later on, they discussed categories and redefined them when disagreements arose. Researchers produced an annual research report, whose findings were presented and discussed through group discussions with participants and other member checking methods.

Findings and discussion

This section is divided into five main themes: the experience of partnership, perceptions of partnership, the construction of social problems, the impact of partnership, and barriers to partnership.

The experience of partnership

Regardless of their group affiliation, participants agreed that the most unique feature of the partnership experience was its egalitarian and participative nature. Participants' testimonies concur with the idea that the project provided participants with a unique opportunity to interchange roles, and to explore relationships of a kind that many had never experienced before. One of the social workers described its uniqueness:

This is unique in many ways. Universities usually come to the social services when they need something, when they want to gather data for research or when they want to test new models of intervention. In this project, the university approach is very different. They come to work together with us. They didn't come with a finished idea of the project. At the beginning, we didn't even believe that they wanted to develop the project with us, but in actual fact, the project was planned and designed with us.

This participant was criticizing the "top-down," self-centered attitude of higher education institutions toward the social services, voicing the social workers' general opinion of academia. She painted a picture of exploitation in the relations between social research and the social services, in which social researchers come with a "finished idea" and the social services provide the field for data. Participants admit that this project was founded on a different paradigm, based on mutuality and reciprocity.

For the faculty members engaged in the project, it represented a singular kind of approach, significantly different from other projects in the field. A faculty member noted the uniqueness of this partnership:

For years, we have developed many initiatives related to the social services. Most of our projects were very structured, limited in time, top-down planned. This project was based on the idea of partnership. We come to the project with more questions than answers.

This account confirms the idea voiced by studies discussed in the literature review whereby many academic-community initiatives are very asymmetrical and based on previous and preconceived models developed without real participation of the community. This project stands in sharp contrast to participants' previous experiences. Its egalitarian and non-hierarchical approach enabled these scholars to come with a "not knowing approach" with "more questions than answers" and to adopt a role of open curiosity.

For many students, the project was remarkably different from their prior learning experiences. One of them described the project's distinctness:

We feel we have to perform a very different role than other second year students. In this project, we are expected to be involved in decision-making processes, in the leadership of the project, in the initiation of activities, in social policy issues. We are astonished that this being our first engagement with clients, we are working without clear boundaries and hierarchies between students, field supervisors and clients.

In general, second year social work students learn the professional foundations of social work interventions with individuals, groups and communities and are supervised in the field practice by certified and experienced supervisors on an individual and group basis. One of the main components of second year social work studies in Israel is related to understanding the nature of the helping relationship, to explore the meaning of professional limits, to discuss the importance of professional distance and to examine the contribution of clear client-social worker working contracts. However, students were surprised to find that the project was based on a different professional paradigm, based on an alternative set of principles, which shortened distances, blurred boundaries and challenged formal hierarchies.

Clients also agreed that the uniqueness of the project lay in its egalitarian approach, which made room for more equal, less hierarchical relationships between clients and social workers, whose regular interactions are characterized by formal boundaries and pre-established power-relations, and it opened an unprecedented opportunity to meet researchers, not as the object of academic research, but this time, as equal partners.

"...we met R,' the professor, in the market. He remembered my name. Imagine! Unheard of! I told him about the problems we have with our children in the schools...Now, we are working together on a project...we have jointly developed a questionnaire to make a study about some of our problems with the Department of Education."

The project, theoretically and organizationally, grounded on a "bottom-up" approach, demanded great investment of time and energy. To develop an egalitarian and participative structure, the program engaged participants in joint planning sessions, shared decision-making processes and periodical open evaluations. Many participants, across group affiliations, experienced the open and democratic nature of the project as too "ambiguous," too "loose" and even "messy." The lack of a preconceived plan of action, the absence of a

clear timetable with specific tasks, the “reflection on action” approach that sometimes intensified the generalized sense of anxiety among students, social workers and clients, were all factors expressed as complaints and as a general longing for a more structured project with a clearer, pre-established course of action.

Perceptions of partnership

The experience of partnership was the central emergent theme in participants’ narratives across group differences. However, despite this broad consensus, the study found significant differences in the ways in which participants perceived the partnership construct. Students’ perception of partnership was defined in *educational terms*: as “*an educational opportunity*,” “*a significant learning experience*,” or as one student stated, “*a living greenhouse of social work*.” This “pedagogical” conception of partnership generates great involvement in the educational process. Students felt that they were given an exceptional opportunity to experience a different model of social work education. They would compare their “*exciting*” learning experiences with those of the other students enrolled in the “*boring*” regular community practice courses. For many students, the project opened new possibilities in social work education, previously unknown to them, and they felt very privileged to have been selected to participate.

However, this “pedagogical” conception of partnership also raised multiple tensions. The reason for this is related to the clinical orientation of social work students in Israel. The great majority of students in social work departments come with a previous interest in clinical work and only a small minority prefers studying community practice. For some students, mostly interested in direct practice at the individual level, the project was experienced as an imposed reality. For them, the project was too demanding in terms of time, energy and involvement, far beyond the time that other students in parallel classes had to invest in community practice classes.

As opposed to the students’ educational conception, social workers defined the meaning of the partnership in “*professional terms*.” The project offered them the opportunity “*to grow as professionals*” or “*to experience a new model of professional intervention*.” In light of the decaying public image of social workers and the public social services, the project was portrayed as a way to “*renew our professional mission*.” One of the participants defined the project as a “*unique opportunity to create a professional model in which social work as a profession returns to its original role: the promotion of social change and justice*.” This professional conception of partnership enables social workers to see the project as part of their professional growth, the realization of their professional vocation and ethical calling. However, the project demanded that social workers leave the boundaries of their professional setting and participate in the public and political arena, far away from their professional domain. In addition, the high demands of the project in terms of time and energy place a heavy burden on the already congested caseloads of the workers. Workers also felt that their participation in the project should be better compensated in terms of salary or felt that their caseload, at least, should be reduced. (Workers received very modest fees from the university as field practice supervisors, but did not receive compensation from the Welfare Bureau for the extra work entailed in the project.) In other words, under the prism of partnership as a professional construct, many social workers felt that their own organization, which had formally engaged them in the project, did not respect them as professionals.

Whereas the distinct meanings ascribed by students and social workers to the partnership were generally defined in *educational* or *professional* terms, clients defined partnership in *instrumental* terms: to put an end to their own poverty. At the beginning, many

clients perceived the project as a tool to improve their relations with social workers and as a means of acquiring better welfare services. These participants would start the project meetings by raising their personal issues. Some other clients held a more “political” view of partnership: to put an end to poverty as a social problem. They came to the project with the idea of having an impact on the political agenda at the city level or even at the national level. These clients found the project to be a possible platform on which to build a future social movement, or even a political party. These different perspectives, the instrumental and the political conceptions of partnership, injected special relevance to the clients’ participation, resulting in a high level of participation in the project. However, it also created much conflict among clients. The clients who held a more instrumental conception were more prone to prefer local activities, mostly centered on improving their local services and the client-worker relations at the agency level. They saw the project’s long-term goals of affecting policy as very remote and utopian, and were therefore less interested in issues of lobbying, social action and awareness-raising activities. Some workers expressed their disapproval with such an approach. They felt that these clients were “using” the project for their personal agenda and were overlooking the broader goals. Clients who held a political conception of partnership were very disappointed with the social workers’ lack of political activism and the students’ lack of commitment. For these clients, the aim of the partnership was to achieve a change at the national level. This change requires a long-term commitment, which students enrolled in the project on an annual basis cannot fulfill. A client even saw the turnover of the students as a main barrier to the success of the project.

Construction of social problems

The central goal of the project was to address the problem of poverty. Despite this common understanding, the study found multiple perceptions of the poverty problem. These differences were found within and across participants’ group affiliation.

At the beginning of the project, the study found significant differences in the level of social awareness related to the magnitude of the problem. Since all clients had experienced poverty in their personal lives, they were more cognizant of the structural nature of the poverty problem, whereas students and social workers held less homogenous views. Some students were aware of the extent of poverty in the city, while others were less informed of its magnitude. A student describes her prior notions regarding the intensity of the poverty problem:

I knew that there are some people in the city looking for food in the garbage, hungry children, families who have difficulty paying the bills, and people consuming unhealthy food.

Other students were less aware of the social difficulties of people living in poverty. These differences in students’ views of poverty were also related to their social class backgrounds:

Listen, I was born here, in this city. However, to be honest, throughout my whole childhood, I never met any poor children. I come from a middle-upper class family. In our neighborhood, we never met with these issues. I first became aware of the problem when meeting clients in the welfare office.

I was surprised to see so much inequality in the city. I was used to seeing my parents’ standard of living and I was shocked that there are people living like that in an affluent society.

Students differed in the way they related to the poverty concept. Some students found the concept stigmatic and were reluctant to define their clients' as "poor." For example, the student in the following quote refused to define her clients as living in poverty and looked for alternative definitions:

I don't think the clients I am working with in my field practice can be defined as poor. They have issues, they have problems and needs, but definitively, they are not poor.

Findings show differences in the level of students' awareness of the increasing social gaps in Israel. One student explained this lack of social awareness as denial: "*We know there is poverty, but we prefer to close our eyes to it.*" Despite these differences, most of the participants, regardless of group affiliation, defined poverty in absolute terms: "*Poverty means lacking basic things, like food, a roof over your children's heads, clothes. This is what poverty is for me.*" For some, poverty was defined as a total lack of basic needs. As one student stated:

When I mean poverty, I mean the lack of vital things, like meat and milk, things necessary for people's health.

The main significant differences were found in the ways in which participants explained the poverty problem. Initially, students and social workers tended to offer individual, behavioral explanations of poverty. For these participants, poverty was associated with factors such as dependency, lack of personal motivation, lack of life skills, lack of personal responsibility or simply with pathological life patterns encouraged by the welfare system. This view of the problem was clearly conveyed by one social worker:

Look at the single mothers. They take advantage of their welfare benefits and prefer to stay home over looking for a decent job. They feel they deserve welfare assistance. I think we need to change this attitude. First, go and get a job, then we'll talk. Most of them come to the welfare offices, but they don't want real help. By real help, I mean therapy. To help them change their way of life, the way they see things. No. They don't have a real interest in taking responsibility for their problems. They simply want their benefits. That's it. They come and cry that they have no means of feeding their children, but you see they have a cell phone. Poverty is basically a problem of values, of life priorities. The goal of this project is to help the clients see that only they can change their odds, that they should take responsibility for their destinies.

These pathological views of poverty are different than the community activists' perception, who viewed poverty in structural terms. In their view, poverty was a clear product of the social system, a lack of opportunities, low salaries, discrimination or governmental social policy.

Living in poverty is a life on hold. You cannot plan anything. When you live in poverty, you feel threatened. Society is closed to us. Our children are victims of the huge differences of this society. There are no rights, no solutions. I live with the sense that I am invisible; that I don't exist for the system. We, the poor, are not part of this society.

The findings presented in this section show how participants differ in their perceptions of poverty. These findings may suggest that differences in participants' societal views may have a strong impact on the way in which they construe the meaning of the partnership and subsequently assess the project impact.

The impact of partnership

Participants considered the project to be very successful. They mentioned a long list of achievements. Participants affirmed that the main impact of the project was related to changes in the way the social services, the university and the municipality prioritized the poverty issue. The partnership organized multiple activities that placed the poverty problem at the top of the public agenda, as well as on the academic agenda of the School of Social Work, which decided to establish a new field practice concentrating on poverty studies and a new course on poverty at the graduate level.

Participants tended to evaluate the impact of the project according to their own frames of references. One social worker framed the impact of the project in *professional* terms. She believed that the project brought professional “expertise and reputation” to the social services and helped to change their professional routine:

The university brought expertise and reputation. They helped us put aside our routine and reach out to the community. Students brought enthusiasm, energy. Clients challenged us to open ourselves up to a more pro-active, committed action that we were not used to getting involved in.

Students assessed the impact of the project according to their own *pedagogical* frame:

The project was a remarkable experience, which changed my own conception of what constitutes a real process of learning. It was the best course I ever had in the School. It was the essence of my studies.

Some clients assessed the impact of the project in more personal and *instrumental* terms. As stated by one client:

I feel the social workers have changed the image they have of me as a client. They discovered new aspects and capabilities they were not aware that I had. For example, my own social worker (case manager) was at the Poverty Conference at which I was one of the main speakers. She came up to me at the end of the conference and said how surprised she was that I was able to speak in front of hundreds of people, especially in front of the Mayor of the City. I feel she learned to know me much better. Now, I am confident that she understands my needs.

Other clients assessed the impact of the project in political terms. The project helped activists, usually isolated from the public sphere, to meet students, university researchers, politicians, journalists, non-governmental organization representatives, municipality department directors, members of Parliament (Knesset), and government ministers. As stated by one client:

We met the Minister of Social Affairs. He invited us to listen to firsthand citizens’ claims. We presented a policy paper we had prepared with students and social workers. He said he would read it carefully and discuss it with the Minister of Housing in the coming week. Suddenly, we started learning live lessons of how things work.

A faculty member stated that “*the Partnership project became the leading project of the School.*” Another faculty member pointed out that the main achievement of the project was changing the attitude of the clients toward the university as an institution:

I was completely thrilled. In a general reflection session the project held at the Senate Hall on campus, participants discussed their views in ways we were not used to

seeing. Ninety participants freely exchanged opinions, opened delicate issues, aired conflicts. Suddenly one of the activists, a community member, and one of the professors of the faculty, who participate in the session, started talking simultaneously. The professor respectfully stopped, gently apologized and encouraged the activist to go on and complete his contribution to the discussion. “Guests first,” he said. The activist smiled and responded: Well, I don’t feel like a guest here any more.

Participants in general defined the project as a rich source of learning. The project exposed participants to multiple learning experiences. As one of the activists defined in one of the annual reflection sessions:

The project provided us with incredible learning experiences. Sometimes society closes its doors on people like us. The project renewed our hopes for education. I came back to study. I completed my high school studies and got my diploma. I have already applied to the university to get my BA.

Social workers defined the change in the organizational and professional orientation of the social services as the main achievement of the project:

We all accepted the principle of partnership with clients [in the past] as a professional paradigm. However, it was just an axiom, far from a shared practice. Today, we see how difficult it is to make decisions together, to build on a more collaborative approach.

For most of the social workers in the project, usually engaged in generalist social work, the project offered a first involvement in policy practice (lobbying, advocacy, social action, coalition-building). Social workers’ involvement in policy practice issues allows them a new sense of self-efficacy. Some workers experienced the project as a professional liberation. Some expressed that the project made their work more independent, more pro-active and less limited by organizational constraints:

We (social workers) are too submissive, too obedient. We are the official “buffers” of the social system. The project taught us to be more pro-active, to initiate changes and not just to adapt ourselves to top-down policies.

Activists stated that the project changed their approach to the social services:

The project helped me to feel less scared of the social services. I always felt somehow intimidated by the social workers. Today, I come to the welfare office and feel more confident.

Participants found the multicultural nature of the project to be its main strength. In fact, the project mirrored the fragmented demographic composition of the poor in the city (Arabs and Jews; Muslims, Christians, and Jews; Israeli born, Ethiopians and FSU Jewish immigrants). It also made a contribution against the background of widespread national tension between Arabs and Jews, bringing together clients, students and social workers from both national backgrounds to a shared participation. As one of the Arab community activists reported:

The main achievement of the project is the way we, Arabs and Jews, work together. One day, I saw a group of small Ethiopian Jewish children looking for food in the garbage can in the street. I couldn’t stand this sight. I invited them to my house to share the food my children had for the weekend. They are all our children. Children of one God.

Barriers to partnership

In addition to these achievements, participants pointed out a list of barriers that obstruct the development of partnership. One of the main obstacles to partnership development is the lack of role symmetry and the impact these differences have in the development of significant partnerships. For example, students periodically raised claims related to what they defined as “*lack of involvement of some field supervisors in the project.*” Students expressed their concerns that most of the organizational work in the project was carried out by them, whereas social workers were much less involved. A student stated that he felt like a “*cheap workforce,*” performing the “*dirty work*” of community organization, whereas social workers continued their routine work with individuals and families. Students tended to identify with the clients’ claims against social workers related to their lack of “*real involvement.*”

From the social workers’ perspective, the project enormously increased their already congested caseload. Social workers were now asked to participate in bi-weekly meetings with activists and students, which were held in the evening, usually after regular work hours. These workers’ voices were challenged by other workers, who maintained that this was not “extra work” but the “real essence” of social work. The Head of the Municipality Welfare Department supported these voices and defined the project as “*the theoretical model to be implemented in all the welfare public services of the city.*” In addition, the partnership included three different welfare divisions from three different neighborhoods. Each of these divisions had diverse organizational cultures, organizational constraints and leadership styles and developed different approaches toward the project. These differences resulted in various levels of staff involvement in the project, as well as an unequal number of staff participation and activist recruitment. The lack of symmetry resulted in a sense of animosity and resentment among the different organizational entities.

The partnership created new, unknown challenges related to the social workers’ multiple roles in the project.

We don’t have any prior experience in partnership building with clients. In the project, clients took a very different role, which is very unusual for us. They don’t see themselves as consumers and we are not in our regular positions of service providers.

These workers simultaneously performed three main roles: Students’ field practice supervisors, clients’ case managers and active partners in the project. The partnership, which stimulated an egalitarian organizational atmosphere, obviously increased the tensions between these roles, which are deeply embedded in unequal power-relations and formal hierarchies (social work-client and field practice supervisor-student).

In addition, the project that is based on a new professional paradigm exposed the supervisors’ lack of knowledge and expertise in community practice. Field practice supervisors are well-trained, experienced workers. All have completed a special one-year academic course in student supervision. However, field practice supervisors are basically trained in clinical and casework social work. The project revealed their lack of experience and training in community practice and created much insecurity in their job as field practice supervisors.

The clients expressed a sense of resentment regarding the lack of symmetry of their respective roles. Whereas social workers and students had a clear organizational affiliation, activists in the project felt the lack of formal organizational support. In addition, whereas social workers’ involvement in the partnership was part of their paid regular job and students received credits and grades for their participation, activists were not materially

recompensed. Moreover, some activists claimed that they were the less consulted side of the coalition. Due to the formal character of their participation, it was much easier to engage social workers and students in the project than community activists, whose participation was voluntary. Due to the dynamic nature of the project, on more than one occasion, social workers and students made ongoing decisions without the activists' participation.

Findings show that the process of partnership building is highly affected by several variables, such as lack of symmetry between partners, different perceptions of partnership, role conflicts, organizational cultures, institutional context, professional views, and unequal access to decision making processes.

Discussion

Based on a qualitative study of a university-community partnership, findings illustrate the complexity of the partnership concept. Participants experienced partnership as relations based on mutuality, reciprocity and respect. The study shows that partnerships enable participants from different social backgrounds to experience egalitarian relationships that were rarely experienced in their daily life. Participants portrayed these relations as a challenge to the formal structure of power and the hierarchical order. However, participants also expressed that these relations were experienced with a sense of duality. The participative, "bottom up," flexible non-hierarchical structure of the partnership was sometimes perceived as confusing and chaotic.

Participants' accounts confirm the constructed nature of the partnership concept. Findings show four different conceptions of the construct: educational, professional, instrumental and political. These conceptions exist side by side within the realm of the partnership. The unique capacity of this partnership to host multiple conceptions, agendas and perspectives under a common umbrella is a vigorous source of strength and stamina, as well as the ground for permanent tensions and conflicts.

The study also revealed multiple views of the poverty problem. These differences were found within and across participants' group affiliation. These conflicting views of the social problem addressed by the project affected the way in which participants defined the goals of the partnership and evaluated its impact.

Participants' accounts demonstrate the multiple contributions of partnerships. The study shows that partnerships may bring alienated and even hostile social groups to coordinate shared actions. They promote mutual cooperation, change stereotypes, and provide a rich platform for social learning. They have a strong impact on the societal views of social problems. University-community partnership may play a positive role in prioritizing denied social issues, voicing silenced social problems. By so doing, they may play a vital role in the promotion of social justice.

Findings also show that the construction of partnership is highly affected by the perceptions of partnership, power relations, institutional contexts, group affiliations, societal views of social problems, role conflicts. Partnership may be seen as a source of social solidarity, as well as the ground for the negotiation of critical social tensions. The key to the development of such an inclusive umbrella is the development of an organizational culture based on reflexivity. Partnership may serve as a space to bring different constituencies to a critical and egalitarian dialogue, in which the conception of partnership is negotiated. The establishment of university-community partnership may be a powerful vehicle for the construction of shared meanings, which are a basic condition for social

action. However, the strength of these partnerships depends on the capacity of the leaders to provide a learning and reflexive organizational culture and a participative organizational structure capable of making room for the supplementing, competing or even conflicting agendas embodied in these partnerships.

On the theoretical level, the study still leaves open some serious questions to be responded by further investigations such as the central question whether University-Community partnership are suited to solve problems or are they endless exercises in relationship building. Our study shows that University-Community partnerships may be powerful means to affect participants' social perceptions of social problems. However, the transformation of social problems requires us to challenge systemic barriers that are deeply embedded in larger economic and political structures. The question of the impact of University-Community's endeavors therefore requires a deeper analysis of the relation between these efforts and broader political agendas on the local and national level.

Implications for partnership development

This study shows that the development of meaningful University-Community partnerships capable to carry out transformative political agendas can be improved by the equal and lived inclusion of excluded social sector sectors. However, this process requires a constant, on-going investment in increasing trust and face to face knowledge between partners. The building of a lasting partnership demands balancing unequal power relations between partners as well as the coordination of contrasting perceptions of partnership. It imposes the need to managing role conflicts and to developing a reflective, flexible, learning organizational culture. It calls for attention to the dictates and limitations related to the institutional contexts in which different partners act and operate as well as to professional and lay views which are present in the process.

Last, it seems that the potential impact of University-Community partnership on the transformation of communities should be understood against the backdrop of the different national contexts in which these endeavors are carried out.

A last word related to the dissemination of knowledge related to University-Community partnerships' building. It seems to us that the transferability of knowledge should take in consideration the specific characteristics of the national scene. The experiences of successful partnership in one particular national context should encourage and inspire international social entrepreneurship but it also should remind us that these experiences are unique and context related. In other words, knowledge is still to be re-discovered and re-invented.

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