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Dealing with Background Inequality in Post-Disaster Participatory Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on mechanisms to handle inequality among participants in claimed participatory spaces. An ethnographic study of the Occupy Sandy network after Hurricane Sandy in New York City shows how activists worked with socio-economically marginalised communities with the aim of empowering them. Yet, the compensatory mechanisms put in place to counteract inequality brought about three problems of differentiation. These were: variation in individual agency, the difficulty of intersectional positions and situated marginalisation beyond commonly acknowledged identity markers.

KEYWORDS

Participatory democracy; social inequality; post-disaster processes; Occupy Sandy; hurricane Sandy

Introduction

In *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*, Benhabib (1996) asks: ‘Does democracy rest upon the homogenizing models of identity? What does the body of the body politic look like? Can the ideal of the universal citizenship accommodate difference?’ (p. 5). This paper explores these questions in one instance of a claimed participatory space: Rockaway Wildfire, a local Occupy Sandy (OS) hub that emerged in Rockaway, Queens, New York City (NYC), in response to Hurricane Sandy 2012. Hurricane Sandy shone a relentless light on issues of unequal vulnerability tied closely to on-going class and race-based inequalities. Rockaway was heavily struck (Bondesson, 2017). In response, OS, a branch of the wider Occupy Wall Street (OWS) network, mobilised grass roots relief. As the immediate needs of the acute situation subsided, OS activists continued to organise in the long-term recovery process, with the aim of empowering residents from socio-economically marginalised communities politically. Rockaway Wildfire spanned different social identities and hierarchies as participants had different educational, economic and racial backgrounds. The initiating OS activists were non-affected by the storm, were mostly white, mostly educated, and possessed organisational skills and economic funds that they controlled. Rockaway residents were mostly low-income people of colour, already marginalised socially and economically. Residents struggled to get back on their feet after the storm and had little experience of the type of social justice work in which they were invited to take part.

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This paper looks at how differences were accommodated in this claimed participatory space and discusses what we may learn from different types of mechanisms for dealing with background inequality among participants in post-disaster settings. The paper thus grounds democratic theorising in an empirical investigation (Cornwall, 2008; Dacombe, 2018) of a particular type of setting, namely post-disaster processes.

In response to disasters, self-organised emergent groups often arise as formal authorities' pre-planned operational structures are seen to be failing (Dynes, 1994; Stallings & Quarantelli, 1985). Emergent groups lack hierarchical leadership and written rules and have transient membership structures (Bondeesson, 2017). Emergent groups arose after the NYC 9/11 attack (Voorhes, 2008), after earthquakes in New Zealand and bushfires in Australia (Whittaker, McLennan, & Handmer, 2015), after Hurricane Katrina (Gardner, 2013; Rodríguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli, 2006) and after Hurricane Maria in 2017 (Klein, 2018; Lloréns, 2018; Weiss, Lebrón, & Chase, 2018). Emergent groups often arise and disperse, but a few transition into long-term interventions. After Hurricane Maria, JuntaGente (the People Together) was formed, a network that challenged the neoliberal capitalism believed to create conditions of vulnerability in Puerto Rico (JuntaGente, n.d.; Klein, 2018). JuntaGente, as well as Rockaway Wildfire may be conceptualised as claimed participatory spaces (Cornwall, 2003). These spaces are mobilised outside formal political structures by less powerful actors, often within autonomous social movements. They are organic and tend to be characterised by non-hierarchical and counter-bureaucratic forms of self-organisation (see Cornwall & Schatten Coelho, 2007; Fisher, 2006; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2010; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 2011; Young, 2000).

Claimed participatory spaces in post-disaster processes have not yet been theorised in literature that deals with participation. This article raises three problems that may arise in this type of setting. Two problems largely build upon previous knowledge on participation (variation in individual agency and the difficulty of intersectional positions) and a third problem reflects the somewhat different dynamic of post-disaster participation (situated marginalisation beyond commonly acknowledged identity markers).

The Problem of Background Inequality

Challenges and dilemmas with participation have been discussed in different academic literatures, including democratic theory (particularly participatory theory, radical democracy and deliberative democratic theory) (e.g. Dovi, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003; Hayward, 2004; Karpowitz, Raphael, & Hammond, 2009; Mansbridge et al., 2010), development studies (e.g. Chambers, 1983, 1997; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall & Brock, 2005), urban planning (e.g. Arnstein, 1969), social movement studies (e.g. Baiocchi, Bennett, Corder, Klein, & Savell, 2014; della Porta, 2005; Youngs, 2019) and feminist and gender studies (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; hooks, 2010; Mahrouse, 2014; Pateman, 1970; Young, 2001). This research points to how participation may result in empowerment, yet also raises several hindrances to the promise of empowerment.

Participation may engage participants in meaningful interactions that increase their control over decisions that affect them (Chambers, 1983, 1997; Dacombe, 2018; Fung & Wright, 2003; Hilmer, 2010; Pateman, 1970). Development studies scholars postulated the 'participatory turn' in development practice (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), where western-biased top-down approaches were countered by radical empowerment discourses

rooted in Freirean pedagogy (2005). The participatory turn, advocated by Chambers (1983, 1997) built on ideas of marginalised groups partaking in decision-making, from the bottom up, thus being empowered. This is similar to what Eliosoph (2011) refers to as ‘empowerment talk’: rhetoric that stresses open, egalitarian and voluntary membership, and transparent, un-bureaucratic practices.

Yet Eliosoph (2011) and others are sceptical about whether participatory democracy in fact delivers on the promises of empowerment (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2005). Arnstein’s (1969) paradigmatic work on citizen participation and her ‘ladder of participation’, ranging from non-participation, such as pure manipulation, to some degree of tokenism, to partnership, delegation of power and finally citizen control, reflects this scepticism.

A particular problem with participation is background inequality which may pose a problem for equal political participation, as discussed by democratic theorists, feminist theorists and social movement scholars (Fung, 2005; Karpowitz et al., 2009; Mansbridge et al., 2010; Pateman, 1970; Young, 2001). In societies structured by structural inequalities, privileged individuals may use their social, political and educational capital to shape agendas and outcomes of participatory spaces (Baiocchi, 2003; Fung & Wright, 2003; Young, 2001). Claimed participatory spaces in social movements are often initiated by socially, economically and politically privileged people rather than by marginalised communities (Baiocchi et al., 2014; Campbell, 2014; Cornwall, 2003; Juris, Ronayne, Shokooh-Valle, & Wengronowitz, 2012; Mahrouse, 2014; Pilisuk, McAllister, & Rothman, 1996; Snow et al., 2004). Social movement activists often work with marginalised communities to develop their collective agency to transform unequal social relations (Baiocchi et al., 2014; Campbell, 2014). Thus, the problem of background inequality may surface in claimed participatory spaces, even if they are explicitly intended to overcome issues of power and privilege (Baiocchi et al., 2014; Cornwall & Schatten Coelho, 2007; Davis, 2016; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Holvino, 2008; Pilisuk et al., 1996). Many activists cannot help ‘but re-enact a colonizing role’ (Mahrouse, 2014, p. 96), such as when solidarity activists travelling to Palestine, albeit much aware of their privileged position in relation to the Palestinians they had set out to engage with, assumed paternalistic attitudes.

Feminist scholars of democracy have discussed how participatory spaces are constituted by participants’ positions in societal hierarchies outside the space (Mansbridge, 1976; Mansbridge et al., 2010; Pateman, 1970; Young, 2001). Although they may seem egalitarian, norms underlying how interests are put forth, which type of voice is perceived to be knowledgeable and how conflicting interests should be worked out are biased (Cornwall & Schatten Coelho, 2007; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Mansbridge (1976) explored class differences that resulted in uneven capacities to communicate in a style that generated respect and recognition. Furthermore, marginalised people may struggle with self-doubt. The self-confidence to make claims, articulate criticisms, and challenge rules may be linked to a person’s position in social hierarchies (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Correll, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hayward, 2004; Holm, 2019; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013; Young, 2001). Feminist and postcolonial thinkers have theorised this internalised self-doubt. Kruks (2001), in reading Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir describes how marginalised persons ‘experience shame as a relation to oneself constituted through the objectifying look of the other’ (p. 99).

In summary, claimed participatory spaces where participants span social, economic and educational differences might boil down to nothing more than venues in which only

privileged people are heard, thus reproducing the same inequality that was the problem to start with. This purports to a troublesome difference between rhetoric and actual practice, where grand-sounding promises of empowerment of the marginalised mask participatory spaces which simply enlist people in pre-determined ventures and already set agendas. Whether similar tendencies can be found in claimed participatory spaces in post-disaster processes is however still largely unexplored.

Mechanisms to Overcome Background Inequality

Considering the problem of background inequality, democratic theorists have been concerned about achieving communicative equality among participants. Deliberative theorists suggest that well-designed and well-moderated forums can diminish inequality (Asenbaum, 2016; Baioicchi, 2003; Blackmore, 2006; Himmelroos, Rapeli, & Grönlund, 2017; Karpowitz et al., 2009; Mansbridge et al., 2010; Smith & Glidden, 2012). Baioicchi, in studying the Brazilian Porto Alegre meetings, demonstrated that facilitators, inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, aimed to develop 'norms of dialogue that were respectful of different types of speech' (Baioicchi, 2003, p. 56). These norms helped off-set inequalities between participants (Baioicchi, 2003).

Feminist thinkers point to the need for more radical suggestions for counteracting inequality. Some degree of differentiation among participants may in fact be necessary, often based on commonly acknowledged identity-markers such as gender, race, able-bodiedness, class or sexual orientation. Phillips (1995) coined the term 'the politics of presence' in opposition to liberal democratic theories' focus on the politics of ideas. In line with this, compensatory mechanisms (often termed affirmative action) have been prescribed to explicitly acknowledge difference and thus overcome the problem of background inequality (Bacchi, 1996). Examples of macro-level compensatory mechanisms are quota systems to achieve gender parity in parliamentary systems or re-writing the boundaries around constituencies to raise the number of elected minority representatives (Phillips, 1996). Micro-level examples in claimed participatory spaces might be 'progressive stacks' in which marginalised people are allowed longer time in speaking rounds, or demographic restrictions on trainers, facilitators or leaders to limit the number of privileged people from positions of power. Common is also sensitisation mechanisms to make privileged people take note of their own privileges, for example by activists explicitly referring to their own race-, ethnic-, or gender-based privileges as a way of acknowledging and countering their importance (Ahmed, 2004; Baioicchi et al., 2014; Mahrouse, 2014). Compensatory mechanisms are deemed necessary in order to counteract domination by privileged people (Campbell, 2014; della Porta, 2005; Dixon, 2012; Dovi, 2009; Fraser, 1990; hooks, 2010; Smith & Glidden, 2012; Young, 2001).

Methods and Materials

This article is based on an ethnographic study of Rockaway Wildfire: a local OS hub that arose in response to Hurricane Sandy in NYC. Ethnography lends itself well to undertaking studies of local politics and exploring previously understudied or complex micro-practices. It also enables exploration of how social movement actors understand and navigate their contexts (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014; Gustafsson & Johannesson, 2016; Wolford,

2006). This paper is based on 11 months of fieldwork, 44 semi-structured interviews and 8 participatory observations, which together captured both the dynamic inner processes of Rockaway Wildfire, and the political, social and economic context of Rockaway that played into what took place within the space.

Fieldwork consisted of volunteer work in a local organisation in Rockaway, study visits, and participation in workshops, public seminars and demonstrations, in order to gather secondary data that helped in understanding Rockaway and the storm recovery process. The fieldwork shed light on the at times complicated relations between residents and OS activists. Tension partly stemmed from Rockaway's social and political marginalisation from the rest of the city, and the level of suspicion toward outsiders that marked the peninsula prior to the storm. The 11 months long field work also served to develop trust between the author and residents and OS activists, and lent the author some insider status, which was needed in order to gain access to Rockaway Wildfire.

Out of the 44 interviews, 32 were respondent interviews and 12 were informant interviews. Informant interviews familiarised the author with Rockaway, the storm and its effects on vulnerable groups, the plethora of different community organisations active in the area and their respective relations with each other. The 32 respondent interviews were selected through a theoretical sampling intended to shed particular light on Rockaway Wildfire. Core coordinators, both OS activists and residents, were interviewed. Regular Rockaway Wildfire participants were also interviewed. Among the resident interviewees were also those who had previously been engaged but left Rockaway Wildfire and a few interviewees who were ideologically aligned with Rockaway Wildfire but had chosen not to engage.¹ The respondent interviews were semi-structured. Themes explored were interviewees' social, economic and educational backgrounds, self-ascribed identity, whether and how they were affected by the storm, political outlook and understanding of the internal dynamics, meeting techniques, potential conflict, and identity-based power relations within Rockaway Wildfire. The questionnaire developed over time to include questions about specific situations of tension, as these were revealed in other interviews and participatory observations. Experiences and perceptions varied among interviewees in complex ways. The analysis is qualitative and as such aims to demonstrate variability among interviewees rather than particular frequencies of certain perceptions. The occurrence of particular problem perceptions was deemed interesting in itself as long as it spoke to existing research on participation.

In participatory observations of Rockaway public meetings, analytical attention was focused on the general environment of collaboration and conflict. Observations were made of communicative styles, the ins and outs of meeting techniques, the facilitation of exercises and how emerging leaders were supported and encouraged. A particular focus was placed on the compensatory mechanisms in place to overcome inequality. The participatory observations also made interviews run more smoothly because they helped the author get to know the residents and activists before the interviews. This made interviewees more comfortable in sharing their perceptions, frustrations and experiences. Observations also functioned as impetus into the interview questions. The author could ask about observations of particular moments of tensions and conflicts in the interviews and get more information on how these moments were experienced. When strained interactions had been observed it was easier to identify silent frustrations among interviewees and discretely probe them on these issues. In this way, both interviews and

participatory observations were central to the analysis and, moreover, dependent on each other. The interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the processes that were studied in the observations, and the observations allowed for a better rapport between the author and the interviewees.

A Claimed Participatory Space After Hurricane Sandy

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, former OWS activists turned to disaster relief under the name of Occupy Sandy. This was in response to what they saw as faltering institutional responses from city agencies in providing relief to NYC's marginalised communities. OWS activists had refused to make explicit political demands (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012). Instead they wanted to build 'in miniature, the kind of society they wanted to live in' (Schein, 2012, p. 336), creating explicit linkages between visionary campaigning and practical solidarity work. The OS network too combined practical solidarity work with an ideological orientation toward mutual support.

OS received private donations up to approximately \$1.3 million USD and assembled roughly 60,000 volunteers who distributed direct aid, provided medical and legal aid and helped with repairs (Homeland Security Studies, 2013). In the recovery phase, when the acute needs of the relief phase had diminished, OS activists mobilised residents in city outskirts to participate in emancipatory projects aimed at transforming inequalities, both in relation to and beyond the immediate disaster effects. One example was Rockaway Wildfire, primarily mobilising racially and socio-economically marginalised residents of Rockaway. Rockaway, an outskirt of Queens, is an area marked by decades of race and class-based gentrification, soaring unemployment, many people enrolled in social welfare programmes and poorly maintained public housing (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003). When Hurricane Sandy hit the Rockaway peninsula in October 2012 – and did so with tremendous force – these problems intertwined with the acute predicaments of an area that was rattled to its core.

Rockaway Wildfire

Rockaway Wildfire meetings, held in run-down churches or in warehouse-like buildings in Eastern Rockaway, were creative and fluid in style. Food was often served at the beginning and participants mingled over plates of chicken or vegetarian meals. An OS activist would usually set up a table with crayons and papers and help residents with childcare, if needed. A few children would gather around the table but more often they just run around the meeting room playing. At some point a core coordinator (often an OS activist) would ask everyone to take a seat in a circle and present the ground rules for the meeting, acknowledging potential differences between participants in terms of background, conversational style and opinions, and ask everybody to show respect to each other. Role-playing was common, often facilitated by OS activists and residents working in pairs. As meetings went on, exact timeframes were rarely kept, people came and went, and exercises shifted into discussions.

The OS activists aimed to let residents set the agenda and applied a shared leadership structure in which residents were encouraged to become part of the core coordination group. Core coordinators of Rockaway Wildfire – 10 people out of which half were residents – received stipends sourced from the pool of money that had been donated to OS.

During the first few months the group devoted time to constructing ideas around the kind of change residents wanted to see in their community. A few smaller working groups gradually emerged: focusing on community gardens, campaigns against the New York Police Department's stop and frisk tactics, creating a worker's cooperative or zooming in on land use and housing development in the aftermath of the storm. The latter eventually became Rockaway Wildfire's main campaign.

Difference Accommodated; New Problems Arising

The OS activists, deeply aware of background inequality, aimed to challenge existing social hierarchies in their internal working orders and employed compensatory mechanisms to alter inequalities between themselves and the residents. They had demographic restrictions in place regarding who could become a facilitator, they made use of progressive stacks, (whereby marginalised people were granted extra times in speaking rounds), and they engaged in on-going policing of each other, meaning that they called each other out publicly when they thought that a privileged person dominated the conversations or said something that was offensive. Policing was primarily directed towards white males in the group. One OS activist and woman of colour, was asked to become a trainer as a result of the demographic restrictions and said:

The other reason for them to bring me on board was that they were a group of mostly white folks who came together to organize black and Latino people in a community that they didn't know. And it's a little complicated because although it felt a little tokenizing, I also realized that there's value in me coming in doing this process. I'm a person of color with a working-class background. (OS Activist 13)

Race, class and gender-based inequalities were the main focus of the compensatory mechanisms. As expressed in interviews, many of the OS activists shared the view that aggressive capitalism creates persistent socioeconomic inequality, and that this is often intertwined with race-based inequalities. A few of the female OS activists were also concerned with gender inequality. One OS activist said in an interview that since racism is structural it is also pervasive, because it is impossible to 'get out of your racist brain':

There's a hierarchy, you can't completely erase the world we live in, there's a hierarchy within our organization. We have different skills, we have different privileges, and we come from different backgrounds. (OS Activist 3).

He talked about how he, as a white male, tried to sensitise himself to how his own privilege might come into play when he interacted with others, for example when co-facilitating with a female facilitator of colour:

I can be, like, ok, now I know, I'm going to think about my body language a little bit more, and I'm going to think about the fact that she's got a good bit more experience so I'm going to just play off her a bunch, think about who's talking. (OS Activist 3)

As OS activists tried to deal with the problem of background inequality by employing compensatory mechanisms, three problems emerged: variation in individual agency, the difficulty of intersectional positions and situated marginalisation beyond commonly acknowledged identity markers. The problems are discussed below.

Individual Variations in Agency

Residents responded in different ways to the OS activists' attempts at empowering them: some were positive, and some were sceptical. Positive residents welcomed the OS activists, experienced the work they did as an act of solidarity, used their participation as a vehicle for collective and individual capacity building and experienced group cohesion. The residents who experienced empowerment were also the same ones who were encouraged by the OS activists to become part of the core coordination group. As part of this group, they took active part in shaping the agenda of the organisation, participated in the implementation of set strategies and had a say in how the organisation ought to structure its work. They stated in interviews that they learned new organising skills, such as how to facilitate workshops, or plan political campaigns and that they got a better understanding of issues they deemed important, such as how urban planning processes are structured and how pressure can be put on developers and politicians.

However, other residents were more sceptical towards the OS activists. The type of critique that sceptical residents raised was two-fold: they identified a difference between rhetoric and practice, and they experienced attempts at empowerment as denigrating. Some residents voiced the suspicion that despite the OS activists stating that the agenda of Rockaway Wildfire ought to be decided by residents, the only residents who were added to the core coordination group were the ones who had aligned their views with the OS activists:

If you didn't see things in the same way as they did that was a problem. And people from Rockaway don't see things the same way as some of them and they are pushing certain issues. They have their agenda that is different from what the residents here want to see. (Resident 16)

Some of the sceptical residents felt that they were subtly excluded from the organisation, because of their critique. One resident explained it thus:

The process sometimes felt like in school, where the teachers had their favourite pets among the students and some of the students were just seen as troublemakers – I felt like that's how they saw me, as a troublemaker. (Resident 9)

One of the OS activists alluded to the fact that the agenda may not have been as open as was officially stated:

I think all of us had a sense that land use should really be the thing. But we were like, 'So what do *you* want to work on?' But I knew it was going to happen. I was thinking, 'We'll just say it's working groups and land use will eventually become the thing, the land use will come out of it'. (OS Activist 1)

Some residents decoded attempts at empowering them as belittling, explaining that they felt patronised by the attempts of OS activists to educate them politically and to encourage them to become leaders:

These mostly white kids put on a documentary about the Black Panthers in an effort to give us a 'political education'. This was done, mind you, in the middle of a predominantly black neighbourhood. ... I think that the Occupy organizers erred in this respect, assuming people needed their 'training'. It was really condescending. (Resident 17)

One resident figured that the OS activists had good intentions but expressed a rather dry disbelief in their competencies:

I think that these folks come in with good intentions, but they have this idea of, 'I've just came out of college and I just finished reading this book, and I'm gonna implement these things, and I'm gonna you know, empower these people!' And then they come and the folks are like, 'We're feeling pretty empowered already, you know'. (Resident 9)

Some critical residents stayed on and kept their criticisms to themselves because they needed the stipends provided or because they wanted to stand guard for their community. Others left without ever voicing their concerns. A few critical residents engaged in resistance.

One strategy was to intentionally sabotage open meetings. At one conflict-ridden meeting, an OS activist (a white woman in her mid-20s), initiated an exercise to identify allies in the wider community. She was questioned and interrupted by a few black, male residents. After a while, other OS activists asked the residents to back down. This only served to fuel the heated discussions further. The meeting dragged on for roughly four hours and consisted mostly of people shouting at each other across the room. The dissidents kept asking questions such as 'Who decides here', 'Who is the leader?' and 'Who signs off on the checks?', while the OS activists tried to steer the discussion away by saying things like 'This is a non-hierarchical space, so there are no strict answers to that'. When the residents kept repeating their questions one OS activist said, 'Now you have to step down and let the meeting happen'. Another OS activist stated, 'Your question is not genuine so it does not need a genuine answer' and a third OS activist shouted (while some of the female OS activists discreetly rolled their eyes) 'We are not about authority!' (Participatory observation Rockaway Wildfire meeting, 2013).

Apart from sabotaging meetings, critical residents spread rumours about Rockaway Wildfire in the wider community, which led to more public displays of disloyalty and large numbers of dropouts among residents, and eventually a crumbling organisation.

The Problem of Intersectional Positions

Besides variation in individual agency among residents, the second problem was that of intersectional positions. Some residents were uncomfortable when people of colour and/or women were encouraged to speak for longer times in speaking rounds, or when white people and/or men either self-regulated or were explicitly being policed or asked to step back by the OS activists. One woman, a resident and woman of colour, expressed the following:

I never much cared about the differences. As much as other people have. I know a couple of people in our team that are very aware of economic difference and racial difference and they're very conscious about, like, in-adverted sexism, they're really aware of it. Way more aware than I have ever planned or intended to be. For me it's never been much of a concern. (Resident 1).

One interviewee, a white man and Rockaway resident, expressed that the compensatory mechanisms triggered unwanted distances between residents and organisers. Well-intentioned as they were, he figured they hindered equality among members of the group and pinned participants into social categories. In his view the mechanisms only breed 'the kind of classism and racism and inter-hatred that was the disaster before the disaster occurred' (Resident 8). The residents challenged the OS activists, asking them why they wanted to differentiate themselves by employing different rules for different people in the group.

Here it seems that the OS activists' ideas around power and difference went full circle. In trying to accommodate differences in privileges among participants by employing compensatory mechanisms, the OS activists made residents uncomfortable by singling them out and in a sense homogenising them. Translated into actual compensatory mechanisms, structural understandings of difference locked participants into social groups and created unwarranted homogenisation.

Situated Marginalisation Beyond Commonly Acknowledged Identity Markers

In the particular setting of Rockaway Wildfire, with a storm that had shattered homes, neighbourhoods and employment opportunities, race, class and gender were not the only differentiations at play. Rockaway was severely hit by Hurricane Sandy (Bondesson, 2017). People were displaced to shelters and schools closed down. Many homes were severely flooded or destroyed. Gas stations were closed, cell phone service fluctuated, major transportation issues emerged since the storm demolished parts of the subway track, businesses shut down, making it difficult to access goods and services, local companies laid off staff, and public housing residents were left without electricity and heat for months (American planning association, 2013; Bondesson, 2017; Colangelo, 2014; Furman Center, 2013; Joseph, 2013; Rockaway waterfront alliance report, 2013; The Wave, 2013). Some of the residents were thus tired, cold and stressed due to the shattering effects that the hurricane had had on their lives. This compromised their ability to participate on equal terms. A number of residents complained that the meetings were too long, especially for residents who were also dealing with getting their personal lives back on track after the storm (Resident 1; Resident 17; Resident 9). However, although this situated differentiation had a strong bearing on the issue of influence within the group, it was not explicitly acknowledged as a ground for compensatory mechanisms. One resident talked about this lack of attention:

I don't think they could understand what it is to be able to go home to a nice place, and then they have this here and it's this work that they do. If I'm going anywhere, it's because I'm working on finding relief to the disaster. I haven't taken a vacation from the situation, not once. ... I have not left the situation. I've had no break. (Resident 8)

Discussion

This article explored how difference was accommodated in a claimed participatory space in a post-disaster setting. The results speak to earlier research on participation but also bring some new insights. Post-disaster settings have not yet been theorised in literature that deals with participation. Compensatory mechanisms to counter background inequality among participants, needed as they may be, may bring about unintended problems. Three problems were found: variation in individual agency, the difficulty of intersectional positions and situated marginalisation beyond commonly acknowledged identity markers. The findings contribute to the discussion around the pros and cons of different organisational models within claimed participatory spaces (della Porta, 2005). The problems of variation in individual agency and intersectional positions are themes that have been explored before, whereas the problem of situated marginalisation adds some new insights.

The problem of individual agency provides some food for thought regarding the problem of background inequality in claimed participatory spaces. Yes, structural inequalities were at play in Rockaway Wildfire. However, residents decoded OS activists' attempts at empowering them as belittling. Speaking with Cooke and Kothari (2001), there may be certain problems embedded in the whole endeavour of participation, problems that are inherent in the discourse as such. Trying to solve these problems through improved participatory techniques – as in this case, with compensatory mechanisms – may thus be fruitless. If the whole premise of participation is empowerment of the marginalised, and the marginalised claim that they are in fact empowered already, then what becomes of the claimed participatory space other than a futile project, which will lead to nothing more than feelings of being patronised among those subject to empowerment? Moreover, some residents saw through and vividly challenged what they regarded as discrepancies between rhetoric and practice among the OS activists, and resisted and sabotaged meetings, whereas others felt genuinely empowered. This is an important reminder that background inequality does not always play out in similar ways. People tend to negotiate and relate in various ways to social hierarchies. A social position does not fully determine individual identity or actions. Although as individuals we have little control over the conditions imposed on us by virtue of our social position, we have a degree of freedom in terms of how we relate to the structural position we are in (Young, 2000).

Regarding the second problem of intersectional positions, Phillips discusses it in relation to social movements formed around the politics of race, gender, sexuality or ethnicity (Phillips, 1996). She notes that social movements harbour – in fact, they may even be fuelled by – a critique of essentialist notions. Yet, as we see in the case of Rockaway Wildfire, this critique translated into practice generates its own essentialism. Focusing too much on social differentiations at micro level settings may risk placing human beings in locked social identities. As Phillips notes, antiracist activists take issues with stereotypical descriptions of black and white people, yet as they struggle for this problem to be acknowledged, and do so through strategies that centralise power differences between the two groups, they end up obscuring the cultural and religious pluralism among people of colour (Phillips, 1996). Introducing compensatory mechanisms based on structural understandings of difference, may risk essentialising social identities (Gould, 1996). The focus by black feminist researchers on intersectional analysis raises the complexity inherent in issues of community and identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Groups are not mutually exclusive since various social positions intersect (Young, 2000). In Rockaway Wildfire, participants' identities cut across race, class, gender, educational levels and religious affiliations. Compensatory mechanisms may thus be misguided practically. If a woman is under-privileged based on her gender but privileged based on her race – a compensatory method is both applicable and non-applicable at the same time. Perhaps there is no simple mechanism to be found, since in the words of Phillips, 'diversity is too great to be captured in any categorical list' (Phillips, 1996, p. 146).

The third problem: situated marginalisation beyond commonly acknowledged identity markers, touches on the meaning of the post-disaster context in which the studied processes took place. Because participation is 'acted out in an environment which varies dramatically depending on the particular setting' (Dacombe, 2018, p. 22), this warrants further discussion. Some of the resident's lives had been broken by the storm. Their capacity for influence was hence challenged. Yet this was not acknowledged as a

ground for compensation. This goes to show that the inequalities that are challenged through compensatory mechanisms may not be the only ones at play. If attention is predominantly given to class, race and gender differentiations, some participants may still find themselves lacking the capacity to make their voices heard effectively, based on situated marginalisation.

Yes, gender, race and class differentiation, as well as age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation or gender identity are important to bear in mind when devising compensatory mechanisms, as they can be particularly salient with regards to disasters (Arora-Jonson, 2011; Bondesson, 2017; Enarson & Pearson, 2016; Fothergill & Peek, 2004; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray, & Fordham, 2017; Tierney, 2013; Wisner, 2003). However, situational imbalances may also have a bearing on whose voice is heard. Kruks (2001) argues for greater focus on the lived experiences of certain situations. Experiences of bodily pain and fear can come to constitute cognition, judgement and speech. Although Kruks focuses on bodily experiences of motherhood, and experiences of domestic violence, personal experiences of disasters could be seen through a similar lens. In line with this reasoning, exposure to the damning effects of a storm that has shattered a person's home, their work opportunities, and perhaps separated them from their family may be relevant lived experiences, in terms of a person's capacity to act or speak.

Situated marginalisation is relevant given that post-disaster contexts may become the new normal, especially considering climate change and the increasing variability and frequency of disasters that it may result in. The issue of structurally differentiated vulnerability to disasters is increasingly coming to the fore of social movements aiming to empower the powerless, and OS is one example of such. This reflects ongoing developments in the climate change movement. Mobilisation around climate change is happening as communities are experiencing the effects of climate change through more frequent, less predictable and sometimes harsher weather and climate-related disasters (Field, Barros, Stocker, & Dahe, 2012; Van Aalst, 2006). Political mobilisation from below is brewing. Resistance to inequalities that produce climate change-related risks is growing. Specific attention both to underlying background inequality and to situational marginalisation is warranted; both within these movements and for democratic theory around participation.

Note

1. In the empirical analysis the terms 'OS activist' and 'resident' is used. Important to note is that some of the residents also identified as activists too, albeit not specifically as OS activists. The term 'participant' is used to refer to all members of Rockaway Wildfire as a whole.

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