Policy reform instead of policy transformation?

Experiences of participatory action research (PAR) on desegregation policy in Szeged, Hungary

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Abstract: To move towards more just and ecologically sustainable societies, we must structurally transform our current socio-economic system at a deep level. Participatory Action Research makes much of this term 'transformation', yet on closer examination, the concept is not only conceptually but also practically vague. What exactly is required for socio-environmental spatial policies to be 'transformational'? Our aims in this paper are twofold. First, we want to suggest that there are different definitions of 'transformation'. We work through three sets of concepts: autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity, showing that there are hegemonic and counterhegemonic versions of each. Secondly, we use these different framings to reflect on a case study exploring the desegregation of a Roma community in Szeged, Hungary. We explore the ways in which the empowerment of Roma community leaders within a PAR project worked both to challenge and to reinforce existing power asymmetries: while Roma representatives were increasingly accepted and influential, they were unable to shift the powerful city council away from an underlying commitment both to desegregation, and to a logic of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Ultimately, this led to a situation where the neoliberal hegemonic logic of the policy went unchallenged, with the practical consequence that, while some community members benefitted from desegregation, the poorest were rendered more precarious and vulnerable. This points to a need for further reflection on the intractability of oppressive structures, and honesty about the potential limitations in achieving short-term structural transformation using PAR.

Keywords: Participatory action research; (de)segregation; transformation; autonomy; empowerment; solidarity

¿Reforma de políticas en lugar de transformación de políticas? Experiencias de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP) sobre políticas de desegregación en Szeged, Hungría

Resumen: Para avanzar hacia sociedades más justas y ecológicamente sustentables, debemos transformar estructuralmente nuestro sistema socioeconómico actual a un nivel profundo. La investigación-acción participativa le da mucha importancia a este término "transformación", sin embargo, en un examen más detallado, el concepto no solo es conceptual, sino también prácticamente vago. ¿Qué se requiere exactamente para que las políticas espaciales socioambientales sean "transformadoras"? Nuestros objetivos en este artículo son dobles. Primero, queremos sugerir que existen diferentes definiciones de "transformación". Trabajamos a través de tres conjuntos de conceptos: autonomía, empoderamiento y solidaridad, mostrando que existen versiones hegemónicas y contrahegemónicas de cada uno. En segundo lugar, utilizamos estos diferentes marcos para reflexionar sobre un estudio de caso que explora la desegregación de una comunidad romaní en Szeged, Hungría. Exploramos las formas en que

el empoderamiento de los líderes de la comunidad romaní, dentro de un proyecto IAP, funcionó tanto para desafiar como para reforzar las asimetrías de poder existentes: Si bien los representantes romaníes fueron cada vez más aceptados e influyentes, no pudieron desviar al poderoso consejo municipal de un compromiso subyacente tanto con la desegregación como con una lógica de pobres "merecedores" e "indignos". Finalmente, esto condujo a una situación en la que la lógica hegemónica neoliberal de la política no fue cuestionada, con la consecuencia práctica de que, si bien algunos miembros de la comunidad se beneficiaron de la desegregación, los más pobres se volvieron más precarios y vulnerables. Esto apunta a la necesidad de una mayor reflexión sobre la intratabilidad de las estructuras opresivas y la honestidad sobre las limitaciones potenciales para lograr una transformación estructural a corto plazo utilizando IAP.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción participativa; (desegregación; transformación; autonomía; empoderamiento; solidaridad

Introduction

The Roma population in Europe faces historical stigmatisation, segregation, and extreme poverty (Powell & van Baar, 2019). In Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) more generally, spatial segregation is common, creating ethnically homogenous Roma neighbourhoods in urban environments (Steger, 2007).

Roma segregation and social marginalisation is reinforced by discriminatory policies related to work (van Baar, 2012; Szőke, 2015), housing (Maestri, 2017), and schooling (Paniagua-Rodríguez & Beremenyi, 2017). As action-researchers, we believe this situation calls for policy intervention "to change oppressive social conditions and to create a more egalitarian society" (Zhao, 2015, pp. 178). To achieve this, however, means more than ameliorating the situation of oppressed and marginalised Roma residents. It requires systemic social and environmental change, including the transformation of existing socio-economic structures, in order to move toward a more just and ecologically sustainable society (Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien, 2005; Avelino, Wittmayer, Pel, Weaver, Dimitru, Haxeltine, Kemp, Jörgensen, Bauler, Ruijsink & O'Riordan, 2019; Bradbury, Waddell, O' Brien, Apgar, Teehankee, & Fazey, 2019). However, the extent of the social shift that is required means that it is difficult to know precisely how to operationalise transformation (Feola, 2015; Avelino et al., 2019).

Transformation is a core concept in Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2015; Bradbury et al., 2019): its literature is "*full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation"* (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen & Romero, 2010, pp. 409). However, it is often unclear exactly what is meant by "transformation", since scholars use the term to refer to both gradual social reform, and more radical, or even revolutionary, transformation. Part of the problem is that a universal conceptualisation and operationalisation of transformation is epistemologically impossible to achieve, since the concept is value-laden. Not only do participants with different views and lived experience disagree on its meaning, but views vary within different contexts of human interaction (Panu, 2015; Greenwood, 2015). Within the present paper, we seek to contribute to this gap in the

literature, exploring whether we can produce a workable conceptualisation of policy transformation that is in line with conceptualisation of transformation within PAR literature. Our **first research question** emerges here: How can we operationalise 'transformation' in a way that points towards deep-seated structural change, rather than superficial change that reinforces existing power imbalances –in a way that is in line with conceptualisation of transformation within PAR?

A further problem is that actual PAR processes frequently fall short of the research ideal (Smith et al., 2010). Our **second research question** considers this, asking how the intractability of multiple power asymmetries and community divisions over policy issues affects the realisation of PAR's transformative intentions in practice.

As our research questions show, we focus on the consequences of PAR: whether the impact of PAR on policies can be considered transformative (or not), and certain challenges of PAR related to reaching transformative policy changes.

We aim to answer these questions by analysing the impact of a PAR process on desegregation (social mixing) policy in a segregated urban Roma neighbourhood in Hungary. Desegregation policy aims to achieve more socially mixed neighbourhoods by removing and relocating poor, stigmatised Roma residents from ethnically homogenous areas to settlements that are more heterogeneous. Social mixing is a mandatory and official goal within all Hungarian city development, something that is reflected in the policy context in Hungary (NFGM, 2009). However, desegregation has been criticized as a contradictory and neoliberal approach to poverty and housing policy, since it often supports market-based urban processes without tackling the deeper structural causes of oppression, poverty, and stigmatisation. Slater describes it as a form of *"collective irresponsibility"* (Slater, 2006, pp. 753), since it displaces marginalised people without doing anything to ameliorate the enormous socio-economic disadvantages that they face. In practice, its economic benefits accrue to middle-class gentrifiers at the expense of poorer social groups (Lees, 2008), while at a socio-cultural level it reifies middle-income lifestyles as a natural category, pushing *"the idea that we all should somehow be/become middle class and that we all want to be middle class"* (Lees, 2008, pp. 2463). As a consequence, it not only *"treats the middle classes as the exclusive agents of urban restructuring"* (Slater, 2009, pp. 296) but constructs the poor as abnormal, even deviant.

This paper critically reflects on desegregation policy, and draws on PAR to explore possible alternatives. Our analysis focuses on three concepts that are linked to different ideas of change, distinguishing between hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives of **autonomy** (libertarian vs. relational), **empowerment** (neoliberal vs. participatory democratic), and **solidarity** (philanthropic vs. democratic). We begin by discussing the concept of transformation in PAR (section 2), before discussing these three framings (section 3). We introduce the context and method of our PAR study (section 4), and its empirical failure to achieve transformative structural change (section five), which we then discuss in depth (section six).

For the sake of analytical clarity, it is important to emphasise that we **distinguish between framings of empowerment** (section 3) and **actual processes of political empowerment** (sections 2 and 5). On one hand, **framings of empowerment** refer to theoretical approaches to conceptualise the notion of empowerment and are used in the text to operationalise the concept of transformation (see section 3). On the other hand, **political empowerment**, being a core concept in PAR, having (beside its intrinsic value) an instrumental value concerning transformative changes (see sections 2 and 5), refers to actual processes of change, understood as

"the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (Narayan, 2002, pp. 14). In this paper, we will link processes of practical political empowerment to framings of empowerment (theoretical or rhetorical conceptualisations of power relations: see section 3), showing the complex interrelationships between the two, and the ways in which neoliberal framings can reduce the transformative potential of a given situation.

1. Transformation

So great are the structural social challenges we face today that they are often characterised as wicked or persistent problems (Avelino et al., 2019). If we are to intervene meaningfully, numerous scholars and social actors emphasise the need for deep social transformation, a view that sees *"mounting problems in the environment and/or society as rooted in fundamental features of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, pp. 45). From this perspective, the superficial reform of social institutions is inadequate to meet the extent of the challenge, which is *"located within the very economic and power structures of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, pp. 45). Instead, political and social action is needed, with researchers emphasising grassroots actions outside centres of power (e. g. with and for indigenous groups, the poor, or women).

Transformation is also a central concept in PAR (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2015; Bradbury et al., 2019). This research methodology aims not only to change power relations among academic and non-academic participants during knowledge production, but also to effect changes to *"structural forces that inhibit thriving"* and *"power dynamics that hold us on this unsustainable path"* in order to achieve *"a more beautiful world, for all."* (Bradbury et al. 2019, pp. 9). Transformation in PAR is a normative and structural concept: it is associated with social justice; challenges to unequal systems, policies, cultures, and values; and changes to the assumptions, systems, policies, culture, and values of both everyday organisations and major institutions (Seifer & Gottlieb, 2010).[1] According to Freire's triangle of transformation (Schugurensky, 2015), a major pillar of transformative action involves politics, recognising the power dynamics and ideological struggles that work against progressive change. Yet despite this counterhegemonic emphasis on a challenge to types of structural inequality, the concept of transformation lacks clarity when it comes to its operationalisation, especially with regard to evaluation of actual social processes. Part of the problem is that conceptual commitments in the literature are rarely tested in empirical research (Feola, 2015). When it comes to application to real world processes of change, the concept is rather used as a metaphor for fundamental, systemic, or radical change.

Transformation might also be operationalised via examples. Avelino et al. (2019), in a descriptive manner, lists the development of collective social security systems; the modernisation of agriculture and the generalisation of a food industry; the development of multimodal mobility and adaptive water management as examples of transformative system innovations. Bradbury et al. (2019) describe a large-scale participatory and action-oriented health service research and development process that radically enhanced access to certain

1 Beside normative conceptualisations, transformation might also be operationalised via examples with a descriptive function, see Avelino et al. (2019).

health care services and power relations within the health care system as a *"living example of action-oriented research for transformations*" (pp. 4). The varied nature of these examples indicates the extent to which a vaguely defined concept of transformation pervades PAR: as Smith notes, the *"literature is full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation"* (Smith et al. 2010, pp. 409). Yet this broad usage fails to distinguish between more superficial types of reformist change and deeper types of socio-economic transformation.

The concept of transformation is closely related to that of empowerment within PAR, because achieving social and economic change inevitably also involves changes to power relations (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2015). Thus, PAR theorists have tended to assume that political empowerment has an instrumental value in achieving transformative social change, and that it is an unequivocal 'good'. To give someone authority, or enable them to gain power (Aziz, Shams & Khan, 2011) *"fosters capacities in individuals, groups and communities to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions… [it] is about understanding existing power relations and taking practical actions that challenge oppressive power structures. It involves the exercise of power by the powerless, such that they become more able participants in decision-making processes and gain control over the resources in their environment."* (Pant, 2015, pp. 290–291). In terms of policymaking, empowerment can also be conceptualised as *"the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives."* (Narayan, 2011, pp. 14).

In the next section, we discuss the ways in which framings of empowerment, autonomy, and solidarity affect the transformative potential of PAR to produce changes to policymaking. We compare and contrast reformist/hegemonic framings with more radical and counter-hegemonic forms of structural questioning, showing the ways in which different conceptualisations of these core concepts can lead to very different types of challenge.

3. Operationalising transformation for PAR – framings of autonomy, empowerment and solidarity in the context of power asymmetries

In order to mount a serious challenge to structural disadvantage, it is necessary to distinguish between structural transformation and more superficial types of mildly reformist change. In order to build a framework to do this, we explore different variants of three key concepts: autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity.

Autonomy can be framed in ways that emphasise individual choice, or in a manner that places emphasis on the structural. Ideas of individual choice are often inflected with a libertarianism that focuses on individual capacities, ignoring the social contexts and structural determinants of individual choices. By contrast, structural framings of autonomy are more attentive to the role of the social environment and social, political, and legal institutions in enabling or constraining individual freedoms (Mackenzie, 2014a). From a relational and feminist perspective, autonomy is a matter of social positionality: some relationships and environments are disproportionately hostile to certain groups as they endeavour to make decisions. Environments characterised by corrosive disadvantage (social, political, economic, educational) or social relationships characterised by abuse, coercion, violence, or disrespect

may seriously thwart the development of many of the skills and competences required for self-determination, or may constrain their exercise (Mackenzie, 2014a). To lead a self-determining life therefore requires not just capacity and opportunity, but the ability to regard oneself, and to be recognised by others, as an autonomous agent (Mackenzie, 2014a). Such failures of recognition are quite typical in social relations involving domination, coercion, or inequalities of power, especially when these are inflected by gender, race, ethnicity, or disability. A more critical view of autonomy therefore places collective action against unequally distributed opportunity structures at the centre of empowerment (Avelino et al. 2019).

Similarly, neoliberal framings of empowerment promote the responsibilities of both communities and individuals, to the neglect of racialised and gendered structural oppression. They thus stand in sharp contrast with those of participatory democracy, which recognises the limitations of representative models of democracy that tend to construct state-society relations in a manner that favours the already privileged (Maya & Boada, 2019; Dagnino, 2011). Framings of empowerment that draw on the ideals of participatory democracy emphasise the right of the structurally marginalised to participate in public spaces and political decision-making, and the need to engage with them in new and different ways to encourage this. In such a view, public spaces can be seen as spaces in which conflict is both legitimised and managed (Dagnino, 2011).

Any project that aims to transform oppressive structures must also move beyond philanthropic framings of solidarity, which promote relations of personal dependence in which recipients are trapped in a permanent position of inferiority. Philanthropic solidarity thus supports social hierarchies and existing inequalities (Laville, 2014) as well as justifying paternalistic forms of intervention, which express or perpetuate relationships of domination and inequality among members of a community or between the state and its citizens (Mackenzie 2014a). Democratic solidarity, by contrast, is a nonpaternalistic form of protection. It recognises vulnerable persons or social groups as equal citizens who may need targeted forms of assistance. This is provided as a basic right, enabling them to reach the threshold level of capability to realise equal citizenship. In contrast with philanthropic solidarity, democratic solidarity promotes autonomy by assuming the legal and social equality of those who receive assistance (Laville, 2014).

In each of these cases, one framing enables deep structural change and confronts hegemonic ideology, while the other short circuits intervention and limits ideological challenge. This suggests that deep-seated systemic transformation will only be possible from a perspective that pursues participatory democratic empowerment, democratic solidarity, and a relational approach to autonomy. In the empirical discussion that follows, we will analyse this insight from the perspective of a specific PAR process, to better understand the relationship between these framings and the use of PAR methodologies to challenge the oppressive gendered and racialised structures in which local housing policies and politics are embedded.

4. Context and methodology: segregation, desegregation, participatory action research

4.1. Roma segregation in Szeged

Our research focused on a segregated Roma community in Szeged. Szeged is the fourth largest city in Hungary, located approximately 15 kilometres from the Serbian border and 30 kilometres from the Romanian border. It functions as the administrative, cultural, and economic centre of the Southern Great Plain region of Hungary. The city is currently home to some 167,000 people, of whom between 4,000 and 5,000 are Roma people. Out if the estimated 4–5,000 Roma residents, approximately 400 lived among segregated circumstances in two local segregated areas until 2017.

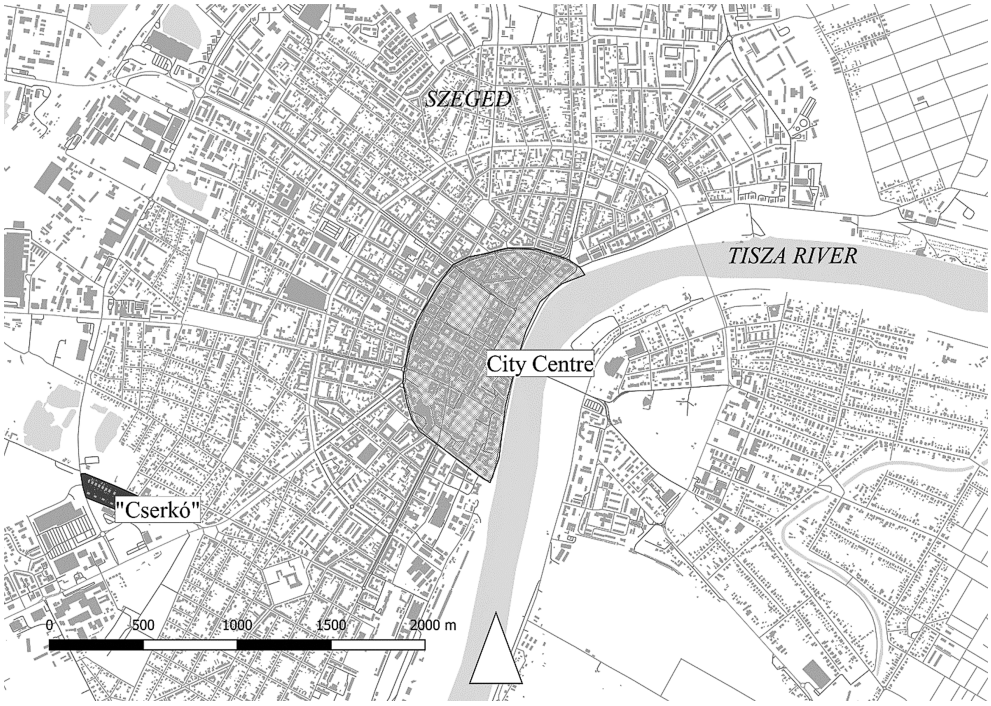
As in the wider European context, Roma in Szeged have been subjected to a long history of stigmatisation (Málovics, Cretan, Méreiné Berki & Tóth 2019a, 2019b). Segregated Roma neighbourhoods existed from the late nineteenth century, though the majority of local Roma residents today live in socially mixed areas. Though the last openly segregated school in the city was closed in 2007, the practical reality is that school segregation remains a problem in both Szeged and Hungary as a whole. In line with national tendencies (Kertesi & Köllő, 2010), Roma people were the first to lose their jobs in Szeged after the collapse of state socialism in 1989, and they continue to suffer labour market discrimination due to a combination of lack of access to a good quality education and stigmatisation (anti-Roma racism).

At the moment, Szeged city has two spatially segregated areas. One of them is "Cserepes sor", known to its inhabitants as "Cserkó". The city council is currently desegregating the area, but it was formerly home to approximately 250 inhabitants, many of whom had a low level of formal education and official employment. Cserkó is located within walking distance of the city centre (Figure 1) yet is considered "beyond the pale" by local authorities (Harper, Steger & Filcak, 2009), like many other segregated Roma neighbourhoods in the CEE Region (Steger et al. 2007). Spatially, Cserkó has extremely poor housing conditions and scanty provision of public services (Málovics et al., 2019a).

4.2. PAR: process, activities, political empowerment of Roma leaders

Our PAR project encouraged co-operation amongst a diverse range of actors, with the aim of promoting the social inclusion and mobility of poor, stigmatised, often segregated local Roma residents. Begun in 2010, it brings together local Roma residents, Roma leaders, and middle-class actors, including representatives of institutions and researcher-activists. The research comprised several elements, all of which were informed by the approach and basic ethical and practical features of PAR: promoting equality and justice, fighting oppression, empowering the marginalised, and pursuing structured inquiry, continuous reflection, and action. The project started by organising co-operative actions to establish and run community and educational centres next to local segregated neighbourhoods, which paved the way for more extended forms of co-operation around educational activities (e.g. running an afternoon school for Roma children); community building (establishing community centres, organising programmes for the socially excluded and materially poor); welfare-oriented activities (collecting and distributing donations; organising a local supportive network of individuals and

Figure 1. The position of the "Cserkó" segregated area within the city of Szeged
Source: own illustration



CSOs); and political activism (representing the interests of Roma towards the municipality). For a detailed account, see Málovics, Méreiné Berki, Pataki, Juhász, Pálné Mihók B, Szentistványi, Nagy & Tóth, 2018.

Local Roma leaders led the project's policy-oriented and political work, representing the wider community. This is a common situation in local decision-making processes (see Hickey & Mohan, 2004), and wider participation was facilitated by the close day-to-day relationships between these community leaders, researcher-activists (two of the authors) and the residents of the segregated areas. Scholar–activists served as partners and consultants on political issues. As a result of committed political work, Roma leaders have gradually gained local influence and institutional position. In 2010, they had no institutional wealth or stable income; now, however, the Local Roma Minority Self-Government (LRMSG)[2] and a closely connected Roma NGO have a relatively stable annual income from city and state sources, with numerous institutional possessions (including furniture, tools, instruments etc.). In 2013, the municipality offered city-owned buildings and contributions to Roma leaders to establish community centres and afternoon schools. From 2014 onwards, the municipality started to spend an increasing amount of funds on Roma issues, following the suggestions of community leaders. By 2017 (the beginning of the desegregation process that is the subject of this paper), the municipality had begun to work in "partnership" with Roma leaders, a long way from their original position as "voiceless" stakeholders.

2 For an analysis of the LRMSG system in Hungary see Schafft & Ferkovics (2018).

Such partnership increased material support; a consultancy role on the spending of the city's desegregation budget (approximately 30,000 EUR annually); allies within the city council who advocate openly and covertly for better Roma representation; and established communications channels to increasingly cooperative and responsive city leaders. Local Roma leaders have also become part of local middle class networks beyond the city council, partnering with local CSOs; educational institutions and educators; media workers; university actors; local public and private firms (including public service providers), and other institutions (e.g. police). Because of these shifts, the socio-economic challenges of segregated urban Roma in Szeged have gained increased and new visibility on the local political agenda. Whereas formerly their concerns had the status of "claims to be heard", they now have an established space in local policymaking processes (Málovics et al., 2019b).

As this institutional landscape suggests, power dynamics play a large role in the PAR process. Power asymmetries characterise the relationships between (1) the municipality and PAR participants (researcher-activists, middle class Roma representatives, marginalised residents of slums); (2) middle class researcher activists and marginalised residents of slums; and (3) middle class Roma representatives and marginalised residents of slums.[3] Political empowerment is therefore unevenly distributed within the PAR process. Prominent Roma community leaders, being middle class local residents, are sufficiently empowered to have established a less uneven relationship with the municipality, while poorer, stigmatised, and segregated inhabitants remain comparatively voiceless (a frequent phenomenon in PAR, see Jewkes & Murcott, 1998). This is perhaps a feature of empowerment as a drawn-out temporal process "shaped by social and political context" (Pant, 2015). The different capabilities of participants interrelate in complex ways: there is a degree of interdependence between being physically and mentally healthy, educated, safe, well nourished, happy, respected, and a participant in the social and political life of the community (Mackenzie, 2014b). Our experiences show that different perspectives, intentions, capabilities, levels of marginalisation, etc. all play a role here: the more marginalised someone is, the more structural factors limit their power to influence policymaking. Everyday existential hardships can also work against political activism, as other PAR projects in similar settings have discovered (Harper et al., 2009). Furthermore, the comparative economic and social advantages of Roma leaders also play a role here: these individuals are often more able to conform with hegemonic "white" standards of behaviour, from clothing to use of language, which conduces to political influence.

The PAR process seems to have played a significant role in this process of differential political empowerment. Our co-operation as researcher-activists with local Roma leaders works across several areas, including (1) provision of consultation over political issues; (2) networking support (university, pedagogic experts, firms, CSOs, media etc.); (3) help with writing submissions towards the city council; and (4) supporting and advising on media appearances. However, beside these actual outputs (submissions, projects, relationships, media appearances etc.), Roma leaders also gained legitimacy in front of local policymakers

3 As researcher-activists, it is important to reflect on our own position of power. The concept of "white privilege" (McIntosh, 1992; Oprea & Silverman 2019) helps to structure this understanding of our positionality. It seldom occurs to scholars, policy-makers, and activists that racialised and gendered oppression is happening amongst their own ranks, as though academia, government, and NGOs were somehow exempt from discrimination (Oprea & Silverman, 2019). Departing from this practice, giving up the myth of meritocracy (McIntosh 1992), and conducting self-reflection on white or male privilege is of crucial importance to our research practice. For a general reflection on power differences and their impact on the PAR process among participants, see Málovics et al. (2018).

through the cultural capital conferred by the PAR collaboration. As one explained: "It is totally different if they see that we are not alone, and that university people carried out research and it proved this and that. Then they cannot say that these are only our dumb and unrealistic ideas… Like a crutch for a lame person, this is what you mean to us." (Quote from a Roma leader.) All this contributes to an enhanced and empowered local social and political position.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The city council has been planning the desegregation of Cserkó since 2007, so it was a hot topic among community members for a decade before the process actually began. It has been the subject of frequent group discussions among Roma leaders and researcher-activists, especially when it comes to decision points where serious practical and moral dilemmas emerge. As researcher-activists, we had to switch between a more responsive or reactive role and a more proactive one: as local stakeholders who felt responsible for our segregated peers (and friends), we raised our own concerns about the process with local Roma representatives, besides being mere political advisors. This enabled us to be conduits between ordinary residents, with whom we had discussed desegregation on numerous occasions, and Roma leaders. We have also supported individual families in their negotiations with the city council, facilitating applications, negotiating with municipal representatives, and even moving personal belongings when requested to do so.

As part of the PAR process, we kept reflexive research diaries, wrote memos of our small group discussions, and conducted extensive interviews with residents of segregated areas and Roma representatives. Data were analysed in an open way, to reconstruct those processes and phenomena that are central to the present article: (1) the political empowerment of local Roma residents and representatives within the PAR project (and the transformation of the local political context towards an openness to Roma representation); and (2) the (in)ability of the PAR project to transform local desegregation policy, due to framings of autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity.

5. Results: local desegregation policy and its relation with PAR

5.1. Local desegregation policy – former desegregation efforts

The desegregation process at hand is not the first in the history of the city. During the state socialist regime, Roma people were resettled several times in Szeged. On some occasions they were displaced from segregated area to segregated area; on others, they were moved to more heterogeneous parts of the city (Málovics et al., 2019b). In rhetorical and constitutional terms, since the 1989 regime change, Hungary has been a democratic state that is committed to respecting the human rights of its residents. Yet the desegregation process under discussion in this paper is the second to which Roma have been consigned during this period. In 2015, another segregated Roma neighbourhood known as the "Reptér" ("Airport", since the flight terminals are close by) was "desegregated". It was home to 17 families, approximately 70

people, who lived in extreme poverty in 11 apartments measuring 28–30 m^2 each. To clear the area, the city council persuaded community members to accept houses outside of Szeged, often farmsteads 60–70 kilometres away, offering them the incentive of a cash payment for moving. However, most families could not adapt to the new environment and returned to Szeged, some after a few weeks, others after several years (Málovics et al., 2019b). Many became squatters in Cserkó, with even fewer housing rights than they formerly possessed.

The council's elimination of Reptér is clearly a process of displacement, where this term is understood as a type of enforced mobility (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard & Lees, 2020). Even though the authorities did not violently force people to leave their homes behind, they coerced them with unrealistic promises and misinformation about their new living environments. Policymakers did not care about their needs, or whether they were going to be able to adapt to the change, although it was completely predictable that lack of access to the local labour-market, the destruction of social ties, and stigmatisation stemming from anti-Roma racism would hinder their ability to adapt and hinder the process of adaptation to the new environment. Small wonder that people displaced from one segregated area (Reptér) to farmsteads far away from the city moved back to Szeged to another segregated area (Cserkó), but now as squatters with less rights for housing in the city.

The present desegregation process of the Cserkó segregated area is the second one after 1989. According to official planning documents, the municipality aimed to move two families to an "integrated" social environment every year between 2009 and 2029 in order to encourage social mixing. In practice, however, nothing happened until spring 2017, when desegregation started to proceed at a far more rapid pace. Once families had been moved, their former flats were demolished: to date, nine blocks have been destroyed. The city council offered no further support after they had moved these families to a new area.

5.2. PAR and local desegregation policy at the present (the desegregation of Cserkó)

Because desegregation is an issue that divides the Roma community (see below), goals relating to it were not included in the PAR project. However, because it is a major concern for community members, researcher-activists have faced increasing demands to "step in" as supporters and consultants, to shape responses to the policy, from both the wider community and Roma leaders. These demands were intensified by the fact that the research team had developed close working relationships with the community, through seven years of intense, action-oriented co-operation. Our contributions on the desegregation issue took different forms, including (1) co-operating on official petitions and policy recommendations issued by Roma leaders to the municipality; (2) discussing issues related to the desegregation process within the community; and (3) facilitating action in individual desegregation cases between families and local officers.

It is important to clarify the diverse housing status of Cserkó residents, since it heavily influences desegregation's impacts, including the ability of individuals to advocate for their personal and communal interests. Families who own their flats or who rent them from the city council as tenants are legally entitled to compensation for leaving. Tenants receive new, higher standard social housing for a slightly increased rent; owners either receive the value of the property or an alternative flat/house in exchange. However, the municipality displaces

squatters, and those who have lost their official occupancy status due to unpaid rent/overheads without any compensation. As a result of representations from Roma leaders, the city council recently started to offer "crisis flats" for some of these families, but the allocation process lacks transparency, and puts the most vulnerable in a dependent position. The major criterion for eligibility is the ability to assimilate into a mixed community, an "assimilation promise" (Kovai 2018) that places expectations on the structurally oppressed, without dealing with the causes of their oppression. Only those families who are able to "integrate in the majority society" can obtain a crisis flat, something that is arbitrarily measured by middle class standards: having a "well ordered" house, a regular income, and a good record of school/kindergarten attendance for children. Roma leaders have a significant degree of influence on the assessment of eligibility, but this framing means that their ability to influence the municipality on behalf of the most vulnerable is limited.

Picture 2: Home of a squatter family in the Cserkó segregate
Photo taken by Boglárka Méreiné Berki

The desegregation policy divides the local Roma community along the lines of "deserving" (tenants and owners) and "non-deserving" poor (squatters and families without legal status). Furthermore, the community itself is divided on the issue. Owners and tenants often perceive desegregation as an opportunity for a better life, while more vulnerable residents, who lack legal tenure over housing, experience it as a type of top-down displacement that endangers them at an existential level, violating their right to shelter. This conflict is so deep that "those who have property or legally rent here would literally kill squatters" (Quote from a Roma

woman, squatting in Cserkó). These differences of option have hindered marginalised Roma residents from uniting and advocating for their interests.[4] Resolving the disagreement is beyond the capacity of the PAR process, especially since the arguments relate not only to divergent economic interests but also to a perceived division between "old residents" (families who have lived in the segregated area since it was established in the 1970s, mostly owners or tenants) and "newcomers" (families who moved into the area later on, especially former residents of the "Reptér" segregated neighbourhood who came to Cserkó as "illegal" residents or squatters). The "old residents" tend to associate the "newcomers" with a deviance and a deterioration in their living circumstances, such as a more disordered environment full of waste and rats, and social problems such as extensive drug use and prostitution. Consequently, some believe that it is "impossible to raise children in a normal way here" (Roma mother living in Cserkó), creating a hostile attitude between the two groups, which has been exacerbated by the city council's way of negotiating with residents.

5.3. PAR's impact on desegregation policy via the political empowerment of Roma leaders

Even though the desegregation process is independent of the PAR process, the latter has clearly had an impact on the former through the political empowerment of Roma leaders between 2010 and the present (section 4.2). However, these impacts are double edged. On one hand, Roma leaders have been able to represent the community, contributing to create solutions that were absent from earlier desegregation initiatives. These are based on the personalised situation, needs, and interests of segregated families (the unit for desegregation interventions), and include measure like the introduction of "crisis flats" discussed above.

On the other hand, the empowered political position of Roma leaders is not without its challenges (Málovics et al., 2019b). Influential local political actors expect certain compromises in exchange for their support. In particular, they expect "silence" from the community, meaning that its members should not raise their voices about ongoing problems, including the situation of those who are displaced, and not entitled to compensation. Roma leaders fear that raising such issues may result in the withdrawal of public funding, and the cessation of the whole desegregation process. "We will not get even the support for running community centres if I make too much noise about this problem," explained one. The logic here is one of taking the victories that are available within the logic of the existing process: *"This (public claims on behalf of the most vulnerable) would mean that they (the city council) would stop the whole process. Should I harm those Roma that want to integrate for the interest of those few who are not able and do not want to cooperate and integrate?"* In such a situation, Roma leaders fail to represent the interests of all Roma living in Cserkó, and become

4 To date, no squatters or families without legal status (those that are clearly displaced) have been physically forced to leave their homes; all families have left "voluntarily" a few days before demolition. On the other hand, even though most owners and tenants are eager to leave the segregated area because of living conditions, they emphasise that the place "was not like this before" and that "it used to be a nice place to live". The changes to which they point are the result of earlier local policies, including previous desegregation/displacement practices (families from the Reptér eventually moving to Cserkó) and attitudes in the public services (e. g. treating the area as beyond-the pale) (Málovics et al., 2019a) This also highlights the elastic nature of displacement: it involves way more than physically forced moving. What may at first sight appear to be a voluntary act of resettlement can be the result of a number of historical processes of territorial discrimination, a kind of "slow violence" (see also Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019).

complicit with the division of the community into "deserving" and "non-deserving" poor, a divisive and neoliberal framing of autonomy. They thus miss an opportunity to challenge the wider desegregation policies of the municipality at a deeper level, for violating the rights of Roma residents to housing.

6. Discussion – PAR and policymaking: transformational intentions, reformist consequences?

How should we evaluate our PAR's transformative capacity, in light of the different framings of autonomy, empowerment and solidarity introduced earlier in the paper? And how do multiple power asymmetries and community divisions over policy issues influence the practical realisation of the transformative intentions of PAR concerning policymaking?

On one hand, there have been clear changes in local desegregation policy during the past 15 years, and the present desegregation process is superficially more humane than previous incarnations. Around half of the residents of Cserkó support desegregation because of a wish to improve their socio-economic situation by leaving the area and moving to a better-organised, more comfortable environment. It is partly due to the PAR process that this group has better representation in the political process, with local Roma leaders participating more fully in decision-making processes.

However, **this effect is not 'transformative' according to our definition above, since it lacks a counterhegemonic thrust.** Its impetus is one of philanthropic solidarity, since support for those who do not have official housing tenure is conditional on their ability to assimilate and "to adapt to mainstream society". Instead of developing a counterhegemonic concept of autonomy that could grant dignity to the most vulnerable residents of Cserkó, the council has thrown into question residents' basic human right to housing. The logic of autonomy here is neoliberal, racialising poverty and dividing the community along the lines of "deserving" and "non-deserving poor". The acceptance of this division by local leaders empowered by the PAR process meant that our research ultimately reinforced the individualising logic of desegregation, rather than challenging its oppressive tendencies, power asymmetries, and imbrication in a racialised series of expectations that elevated middle-class behaviours at the expense of the most vulnerable (McIntosh, 1992; Oprea & Silverman, 2019).

The empowerment of local Roma representatives did not strengthen participatory democracy within the Roma community, but instead further marginalised the most vulnerable. This uneven political situation created new dependencies on two levels. First, while Roma representatives have better access to resources and decision-making, they became financially dependent on the city council, and fearful of losing this source of revenue.[5] Secondly, the community became more dependent on its representatives to voice their concerns during the desegregation process, but the perceived need to present a united front led to a silencing of the

5 Even though PAR supports addressing "*undiscussables*" (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, pp. 165), there are aspects of financial dependency that may be hidden from us as researchers. For example, according to a tender application, the city council pays a certain amount of money to an individual who is embedded in the segregated community to facilitate the desegregation process. Based on the description it seems possible that one of our PAR partners, a local Roma leader, played this role but never mentioned such a contract/relationship to us. We felt that the subject was too sensitive to ask about, but we are therefore uncertain whether he has a contract with the city council or not. If he does, this might have an influence on his interests and dependencies in the process.

most marginalised for the sake of the better-off residents. **Parallel processes of political empowerment and disempowerment** were therefore in play, and the dominance of representative leaders limited the transformative impact of the PAR process. Instead of a democratic form of solidarity, the desegregation policy built a series of paternalistic relations.

However, even if the Roma leaders and activist-researchers had agreed to follow a relational perspective on autonomy, to pursue a more participatory type of democratic empowerment, and to place their faith in democratic solidarity, their empowerment would have remained relative, and limited by the **highly uneven power relations at play in the political arena. Political empowerment within PAR remains relative.** It is still the local state (city council) who functions as the main policymaker, and possesses a decisive power over the desegregation process. The alternatives that they presented to the community were either (1) caring for the "deserving poor", those members of the stigmatised group that were capable and willing to move towards a white standard of "normality" by assimilating into wider society (2) stopping the whole desegregation process, to the detriment of better-off Roma residents. This meant that leaders faced a trade-off between pursuing short-term, certain benefits for one fraction of the community, and promoting longer-term and more uncertain rights for all. Even though the political power position and resource base of Roma representatives has grown during the past 10 years, they ultimately felt unable to challenge the overweening dominance of the city council, or to influence the municipality's agenda towards something more inclusive.[6] To some extent, therefore, it is possible to argue that the city council "uses" Roma leaders to pacify the community and to legitimate their decision to displace the most marginalised residents without compensation. They were able to do so because of already-existing **community divide, divergences of interest and opinion on desegregation** within the Cserkó community.

The city council thus has full agency in framing desegregation, defining how the interests of local residents are represented in the whole process. Therefore, on the level of actions and material consequences, **even philanthropic solidarity is absent when it comes to those without legal housing status.** The PAR process was not able to challenge the fundamental "rules of the game", leaving Roma representatives and their researcher-activist advisors with a set of moral and practical dilemmas. Arguably, the **power asymmetry in the wider context** means that the city council effectively forces Roma leaders to legitimate desegregation via consultation, thus creating the appearance of cooperative/participatory decision-making. The Roma representatives are well aware of the morally problematic nature of desegregation and its negative impacts on the poorest, but they feel helpless in the face of the city's commitment towards it. This pushes them towards a reformist approach: they choose to stay publicly silent on the dispossession of the most vulnerable, in the hope of winning gains for the relatively better off, perhaps also with a view to persuading the council to deal more justly with the poorest. While reflection helps to identify these moral dilemmas, it does not help to resolve them.

The power asymmetry also caused us to feel helpless, as researcher-activists. We were morally uncertain whether we should advise commitment to a more inclusive future, since this

6 The attitude of the city council concerning the interest of residents without legal property might have several justifications. One is the connection between stigmatised minorities and the utilitarian calculus of politics: it simply does not 'pay' for policymakers to take care of stigmatised, marginalised residents (Gans, 1994). On the other hand, providing meaningful support to the most vulnerable, who often suffer from multiple problems/disadvantages (stigmatisation, poverty, lack of access to schooling, addictions, mental health issues, etc.) is a way more complex process than providing new homes to only those who are able to adapt/assimilate.

would potentially endanger the opportunity for numerous families to achieve a better life in improved housing conditions. We were also unsure what legitimacy we had when it came to representing the most vulnerable. Inertia was a consequence of these hesitations: we did not intervene and left it to our community partners (including Roma representatives and residents) to decide.

In the case of desegregation, the **PAR process did not fundamentally transform policy decision-making.** It fostered not a radical challenge, but a circumscribed and neoliberal picture of autonomy, solidarity, and empowerment which made the very limited and paternalistic assistance for the most marginalised residents of Cserkó dependent on their ability to assimilate to (white) mainstream society. It short circuited any attempt to focus on the structural nature of Roma oppression, silenced the voices of the most vulnerable, and reinforced a situation where the rights of property ownership and official tenure were given moral and practical precedence. In short, the relationship between the PAR project and desegregation failed to question the underlying "rules of the game" in any potentially transformative way.

7. Concluding remarks

What do our experiences with local desegregation policymaking mean for PAR's impact on policy transformation?

First, the ability of PAR to achieve structural transformation depends on wider framings of the social problem at hand. We found that divergent conceptualisations of autonomy (libertarian vs. relational), empowerment (neoliberal vs. participatory democratic), and solidarity (philanthropic vs. democratic) helped to explain the (in)ability of PAR research to achieve transformative policy change in the case under scrutiny.

Second, political empowerment depends on an intricate network of power relations, oppressive structures, and dependencies, and cannot be reduced to any straightforwardly positive idea of "giving a marginalised community a voice". In our case, the increasing power and influence possessed by a number of prominent representative community leaders militated against the interests of the most marginalised and vulnerable within the marginalized community. The relative and uneven nature of the process created new forms of power differential and dependency, to the point that discussions with Roma representatives tended to conceal a fundamental power asymmetry between the city council and the Roma community, and to legitimate a situation in which the underlying logic of desegregation could not be questioned. Community divisions (moral and practical) over desegregation policy led leaders to picture negotiations as an insoluble moral dilemma, in which they should endeavour to achieve a trade-off: the risk of losing benefits for some in pursuit of a more just situation for all outweighed the plight of the most vulnerable, who paradoxically became less visible as a result of a louder community voice.

Third, political empowerment did not necessarily lead to a challenge in hegemonic social and moral values. Desegregation policy promotes a white, middle class model of citizenship, in which those who are willing to assimilate to hegemonic cultures of work, household, family, and property are welcomed as partners and rewarded in policy. The price of this,

however, is that those outside of hegemony are labelled deviants, or "non-deserving poor", in a way that intensifies their marginalisation and disempowerment.

Fourthly, the divisions within the community placed activist-researchers on the horns of a dilemma: whether to support Roma leaders in advocating for the "wins" that were available within prevailing framings and power relations, or to encourage a more radical challenge that would benefit the community as a whole. Part of the problem here concerned the democratic legitimacy of the activist-researcher's position in a situation of community conflict.

Our experiences show some of the difficulties inherent in using PAR to achieve deep-seated, transformational structural change. Challenging prevailing power relations, values, and social structures in order to reduce oppression and build social justice can be practically and morally tricky, particularly where power relations are extremely asymmetrical. Empowering community representatives is not straightforward, and may not ensure the protection of the most vulnerable in cases where the community is divided. Indeed, our research hints that PAR can end up reinforcing oppressive framings and power relations in some contexts, by silencing dissent and legitimating the status quo. We therefore agree with Smith et al. (2010) that there is a chasm between the idealism of PAR and the realities of its use on the ground. If these problems are to be resolved, it is essential to confront them openly and honestly, critically reflecting on the realities of uneven power relationships in divisive situations, and the dangers and challenges of cooperation with powerful policymakers.

Finally, structural transformation and political empowerment are long term processes, unwinding over decades. Our study focuses on a shorter time frame, and may therefore underestimate the trajectory between existing minor policy reform and more major processes of transformation. On the other hand, it may reflect the ability of hegemonic institutions to absorb and redirect radical challenges, and to insist on their dominant framing of the problem. In either case, further reflexive work is needed to consider the weight and intractability of oppressive structures (including patriarchy, institutional racism, capitalism, neoliberalism) and to adapt or develop PAR methodologies to sustain a more radical structural challenge.

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