

## Guest Editorial of thematic series

### YouCount: Action Research and Citizen Social Science

Patricia Canto-Farachala, Reidun Norvoll

How can citizen social science contribute to addressing one of the three edges of action research (AR) identified by Larrea (2022) as the stagnation of global democratisation? And how can action research's long tradition creating spaces where researchers and practitioners work together in a shared commitment to democratic social change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003) inform the nascent citizen social sciences field?

These questions are important in the context of a democratisation turn in science policy that illustrates a heightened interest in engaging society. For instance, the European Union's Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme embraces ideal high-level aims of participatory democracy, while recognizing the need to assess the societal, democratic and economic costs and benefits of engagement (EU, 2016). Through the SwafS programme, funding has been granted to projects that explore stakeholder engagement in research and innovation in socially contested fields like artificial intelligence or the bio and nano sciences (Burget et al., 2017). Funding is also being granted to projects that explore citizen engagement in scientific projects. This approach has rapidly expanded in the natural sciences (Hecker et al., 2018), and has gradually found its way into the social sciences, where it is still an emerging approach (Albert et al., 2021).

The democratisation turn in science policy has brought to the forefront the long-standing participatory tradition in social sciences research. Indeed, action research is an umbrella term for research based on democratic and inclusive values, where democratically developed knowledge contributes to collective action. The ideal of the action research approach is the co-production of knowledge between social actors and action researchers who contribute actively to democratic change within the field where the research is conducted. Thereby, action research gives the social actors a role as "subjects" in the research process and challenges at the same time research methods, which separate the researchers and their research "object" (Clausen & Hansen, 2007). Ontologically, action research differs from objectivist inquiry that aims to examine social reality unobstructed by researchers, because the aim of action research is not to examine reality but to change it (Nicholas & Hathcoat, 2014). Action research is also defined as a strategy for change, in which quantitative or qualitative research methods may be used (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

So how different are citizen science and citizen social science from that? In the action research literature we find an early definition of citizen science by Boyd (2014), as engaging the public as co-researchers or citizen scientists in collecting and disseminating data and results, democratising the processes of knowledge production by accepting the skills of non-specialists to research. Moreover, the opportunities that emerge from combining action research and citizen science have been analysed in a case that shows that citizen scientists transformed themselves from data collectors into builders of community knowledge using action research methods (Evans-Agnew & Eberhardt, 2019).

However, citizen social science is a novelty for social sciences, and there is not much research on the topic. A recent definition of citizen social science describes it as a form of

citizen science in the social sciences, or one that has a specific focus on the social aspects of citizen science (Albert et al., 2021). One of the first projects funded by the SwafS programme to explore citizen social science, describes it as participatory research co-designed and directly driven by citizen groups sharing a social concern and recognizes its close connection with the rich participatory tradition in social sciences and humanities (Scheller et al., 2020).

The YouCount project (hereinafter YouCount) from which the three papers included in this thematic series emerge, is another such project. It was granted funding by the Horizon 2020 SwafS programme, to explore citizen social science in practice, namely, its potential for addressing social inclusion for young people, with young people as citizen scientists. To that end, YouCount is developing 10 local case studies in 9 different European countries. The case studies are guided by the following research questions: (i) What are young people's own views on what the critical issues are for social inclusion? (ii) what are young people's experiences with opportunities for social inclusion in their daily life (social participation, social belonging and citizenship?) What new means and policies for social inclusion are needed? The project will also provide evidence of the costs and benefits of citizen social science based on open data of its scientific, social, democratic, economic and individual outcomes.

The cases develop with youths and stakeholders in living labs that involve a broad repertoire of qualitative and co-creative methods like ethnography, interviews, dialogue forums, world cafes and others. A set of co-creation principles that draw from the literature on action research for territorial development (Canto-Farachala, 2021; Karlsen & Larrea, 2014) are used to inspire communication practices during the research and dissemination stages of the research process (Butkevičienė et al., 2021). Moreover, drawing from citizen science, that uses information technologies to widen the participation scope, YouCount uses an app, where young people contribute data about their social inclusion experiences in daily life (Ridley, et al. 2022).

YouCount's overall scientific ambition is to develop citizen social science, by combining citizen science with the rich traditions from the social sciences, and their long history doing participatory action research, including the emancipatory tradition. The project's stated vision is that of strengthening the transformative and participatory aspects of citizen science and social sciences, by enabling citizen participation in all stages of the research process, aiming for a more egalitarian way of conducting science<sup>1</sup>.

The three articles included in the thematic series on the YouCount project in this journal offer a glimpse of our progress in the way of the aforementioned objectives. They show how action research and citizen social science can be combined in different social contexts with different purposes, and can strengthen democratic social change. Moreover, by directly involving citizens, particularly young people that find themselves at risk of exclusion, they offer clues on the challenges of creating inclusive environments as a prerequisite for democratic social change.

The first article in the series, by Barbara Mihók, Judit Juhász and Judit Gébert is available to readers in this issue. The authors, who define themselves as “senior hearing academics” are developing a case in Szeged, Hungary, with hard of hearing youth as citizen scientists. Departing from a phenomenological approach to research (Papineau, 1996; McTaggart, 1994) the authors identified significant aspects where their academic functions led to inner trans-

1 See: <https://www.youcountproject.eu/about-the-project/about-the-youcount-project/concept-and-methodology>

formations, helping them to recognize the overwhelming importance of relational aspects and caring and the perceived and fostered “slowness” of the research. Body communication, posture, and safety acquired an embodied knowledge on how social inclusion manifests in the physical space. This led them to reframe the notion of inclusion as a joint and interdependent transformation of all actors involved, where connections are (re-)established and the community is being defragmented.

A forthcoming article by Catherine Marie Skovbo Winther presents an actionable field-based framework to inspire high school teachers to incorporate field studies in their planning of educational material, and enable hands-on activities and a broader understanding of the local environment to inspire youth civic engagement. The framework emerges from her research case in South Harbour, Copenhagen, where students were involved as co-researchers in developing a more sustainable youth friendly district. By combining participatory action research methods with the framework of youth citizen social science, tangible field study methods for the youth to work with were developed, which sparked a do-it-yourself mentality among them to suggest sustainable changes in their local environment.

The third article in the YouCount thematic series is written by Aina Landsverk Hagen, Sara Berge Lorenzen, Frederick Reiersen, Ingar Brattbakk and Sara N. Plassnig, a research team working with young citizen scientists of diverse cultural backgrounds in Oslo, Norway. The authors explore how their diverse backgrounds in social sciences, comprised of social anthropology, human geography, social work, gender studies, aesthetic didactics, and organizational studies among others (a “cacophony of voices”) have influenced how they collectively approached the concept of citizen social science as practice and process. They argue that while the mix opens the field of research for a diverse group of youth with multicultural backgrounds to be actual contributors to social science, it is also a resource intensive and demanding process of exploration and testing of methods, approaches, and trust building tactics. They suggest that this manner of making social sciences approachable and available can also bridge the divide between academia and the general population.

We hope that these articles contribute to the reflection around the stagnation of global democratisation raised by this journal. We specially hope that they show how action research and citizen social science can combine and complement each other to address that trend in practice. We still have so much to explore and to learn and, in that process, organizing this thematic series has been very important. We wish to thank the authors and the blind peer reviewers, who kindly shared their time to make it possible. Our deep gratitude to Miren Larrea, IJAR’s Editor-in Chief for trusting and supporting us throughout the whole process.

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