

'The Long and Winding Road' — Collective action among people experiencing homelessness.

Håvard Aaslund and Sissel Seim

Abstract

What possibilities exist for collective action among marginalised people? Through participatory action research (PAR), we study possibilities for collective action among people affected by homelessness and substance use. We describe the process of collective action in a single case, the X-street project, and scrutinise how collective identity can contribute to understandings of collective action. Findings of collective identity in boundary work, consciousness-raising and negotiations suggest that identity work and collective action are closely linked in processes of empowerment and created in mutually reinforcing processes. The case shows that the group succeeded in building a collective action project by simultaneously challenging its members' public identity and providing them with home and work. More research is needed about the processes of collective action, and the relationship between material change and identity work.

Key words: Participatory action research, self-organisation, collective identity, collective action, homelessness, substance use

El camino largo y sinuoso: Acción colectiva entre personas que viven sin hogar

Resumen

¿Qué posibilidades existen para la acción colectiva entre personas marginalizadas? A través de la Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP), estudiamos las posibilidades para de acción colectiva entre las personas afectadas por la falta de vivienda y el uso de sustancias. Describimos el proceso de acción colectiva en un solo caso, el proyecto de la calle-X, y examinamos cómo la identidad colectiva puede contribuir para comprensiones de la acción colectiva. Los hallazgos de identidad colectiva en el trabajo de frontera, en la concientización y en las negociaciones, sugieren que el trabajo de identidad y la acción colectiva están estrechamente vinculados en procesos de empoderamiento y creados en procesos que se refuerzan mutuamente. El caso muestra que el grupo consiguió construir un proyecto de acción colectiva desafiando simultáneamente la identidad pública de sus miembros y proporcionándoles una vivienda y trabajo. Se necesita más investigación sobre los procesos de acción colectiva y la relación entre el cambio material y el trabajo de identidad.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción Participativa, auto-organización, identidad colectiva, acción colectiva, falta de vivienda, uso de sustancias

Introduction

This article aims to explore the possibilities and challenges of collective action for marginalised people through the lens of collective identity. We discuss findings from a Norwegian participatory action research project, the “X-street project”, that emerged amongst people with problematic relations to substances and marginalisation in the housing market. The homeless population in Norway is small compared to other countries, but the group is more marginalised and problem-ridden than in many other countries. Norwegian housing policy is largely based on home ownership and free market policy. Shelters are widely available, but run in a way that resembles institutions rather than homes (Dyb, 2016, 2017). In contrast with multiple examples from USA (Cress & Snow, 2000; Snow, Soule & Cress, 2005), Norway has not seen any organised protest from homeless people, but there have been collective actions related to poverty and substance use, sometimes also addressing housing problems (Seim, 2014).

The collective action X-street took place in Oslo, the capital of Norway, and started at a shelter for women without a stable housing situation. The shelter was managed in partnership between employees and the women using the shelter. Together with an NGO, the women and the employees initiated a project aimed at mobilising people who were homeless after substance treatment or prison, with the intention of creating a self-managed housing facility with attached social enterprises. They named the project “X-street”: a collective action project attempting to establish their own affordable self-governed solution to homelessness and unemployment. By carrying out the project they also wanted to challenge the public image of ‘people like us’ by showing that they were capable of running their own housing facility and related enterprises.

In this article we will discuss possibilities and challenges for collective action among marginalised people, using the X-street project as a case study. We ask:

- How can collective identity contribute to understandings of collective action among people experiencing problems relating to housing and substance use?
- How was collective identity negotiated and developed in the X-street project, and how did the action researchers contribute in this process?

Collective identity has been suggested as a prerequisite for collective action and the pluralities and tensions constituting it, especially regarding new social movements (Calhoun, 1995; Melucci, 1995).¹ This study aims to expand earlier knowledge on action research with homeless populations, by using theories from the social movement literature and describing the process of mobilisation for action through collective identity. Our study links earlier findings related to shifts away from the homeless identity (Clover, 2011; Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000), with findings related to empowerment, service delivery and grass-root organisation (Paradis, 2009; Walters & East, 2001; Yeich, 1996). We thereby show how action research processes can simultaneously lead to actual housing and identity development for the homeless.

1 Resource mobilisation theory (Cress & Snow 1996) may also shed light on the support and possibilities necessary for such an action, and this will be discussed elsewhere.

In the following pages, we present our theoretical framework, previous research on collective action and action research related to substance use and homelessness, and describe the subject of our study, the X-Street project. After that, we present the methodology for this study, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings.

Theoretical framework

Collective action may take several forms, and it is difficult to find an analytical definition that distinguishes collective action from similar phenomena, such as interest groups, political parties, social movements or forms of political protest (Diani & Eyerman, 1992). Collective action must be understood as complicated processes where the actors participate in constructing their action (Melucci, 1996).

Collective identity can be described as the way a group experiences and defines themselves as a group: the 'we, that distinguishes from 'the others' who do not belong to the group (Calhoun, 1995). Collective identity must be understood as a process, an agreed definition of common traits in a group, a definition that is open to negotiation and change regarding ends, means and relationship with the environment (Melucci, 1995). The social construction of a "we" is continually at work when collective action occurs and may with Giddens (1991:54) be understood "in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going", in this case to keep a narrative about 'we', going.

Collective identity may have a more comprehensive meaning, including that "[the actors] also share (a) ideas and beliefs which allow them to frame such issues into broader and more meaningful perspective; (b) solidarity and sense of belongingness." (Diani, 1992:111).

Collective identity also touches upon *public identity and politics of identity* (Calhoun, 1995; Johnston, Laraña & Gusfield 1994). The concept *public identity* refers to the dominant or prevailing perceptions of the group in wider society, as "the influences that the external public have on the way social movement adherents think about themselves." (Johnston et al., 1994:18). The *politics of identity* may involve consciousness raising, a group's engagement to change their own understanding of their situation, their experience of self-respect and recognition; as well as changing the public identity of a group that is marginal or excluded (Calhoun, 1995; Johnston et al., 1994). Another important aspect of the politics of identity is fighting for recognition of the group's material interests and rights to representation and participation.

We understand the processes of collective identity, public identity and the politics of identity as ongoing negotiations about relations and status, which also include structures of power. Taylor and Whittier (1992) suggest three analytical elements to study collective action and collective identity: boundaries, consciousness and negotiation.

Boundaries mark the social territories of the group by highlighting differences between the group and others. However, a dilemma often overlooked by collective identity scholars is that identity categories are the basis both for oppression *and* for resistance. For example, the queer movement specifically aims at deconstructing such identities, seeking liberation through a demolition of collective identity (Gamson, 1995). This dilemma is even more