

# How does the collaboration work?

## An Analysis of Power in the Disabled in Politics Cooperative Project and its Implication for Action Research

Claudia Spiess, Suna Kircali

**Abstract:** The article addresses the problem of power relations in cooperative and action research projects. The Disabled in Politics project, a cooperative research project, was conducted in Switzerland by three institutions: 1) the Tatkraft Association, an association of disabled people; 2) the Centre for Social Law at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW); and 3) the Chair of Special Education: Society, Participation, and Disability at the University of Zurich. However, the different resources of the cooperation partners led to practical problems with power. Therefore, we analyze the collaboration within the project through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and reveal power relations and shifts based on critical project decisions. This article examines the influence of the partners' institutional backgrounds on the collaboration and how their positions changed throughout the project. Finally, Bourdieu's template is proposed to better understand power relations in action research projects.

**Keywords:** collaboration, cooperative projects, power analysis, political participation, disability, Pierre Bourdieu, theory of capital

### ¿Cómo funciona la colaboración?

#### Un Análisis del Poder en el Proyecto Cooperativo *Disabled in Politics* (Discapacitados en la Política) y sus Implicaciones para la Investigación-Acción

**Resumen:** El artículo aborda el problema de las relaciones de poder en proyectos cooperativos y de investigación-acción. El proyecto *Disabled in Politics*, un proyecto de investigación cooperativa, fue llevado a cabo en Suiza por tres instituciones: 1) la Asociación Tatkraft, una asociación de personas discapacitadas; 2) el Centro de Derecho Social de la Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas de Zúrich (ZHAW en sus siglas en inglés); y 3) la Cátedra de Educación Especial: Sociedad, Participación y Discapacidad de la Universidad de Zurich. Sin embargo, los diferentes recursos de los socios cooperantes provocaron problemas prácticos vinculados al poder. Por lo tanto, analizamos la colaboración dentro del proyecto a través de la teoría del capital de Pierre Bourdieu y revelamos relaciones de poder y cambios basados en decisiones críticas del proyecto. Este artículo examina la influencia de los antecedentes institucionales de los socios en la colaboración y cómo sus posiciones cambiaron a lo largo del proyecto. Finalmente, se propone la plantilla de Bourdieu para comprender mejor las relaciones de poder en proyectos de investigación-acción.

**Palabras clave:** colaboración, proyectos cooperativos, análisis del poder, participación política, discapacidad, Pierre Bourdieu, teoría del capital

## 1 Introduction

This article analyzes the project *Disabled in Politics* conducted in Switzerland from 2019 to 2022. It aims to portray and critically reflect on the cooperation between the three project partners. The article was initially intended as a field report on practical cooperation issues; however, an important insight regarding the partners' diversity was obtained. From the beginning, the partners considered their diversity one of the project's strengths; nevertheless, it also created an uneven distribution of resources and power.

The power distribution issue motivated us to examine Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, which is fundamentally a theory of power (Swartz, 2013), and consider the project partners' collaboration within this theoretical framework. Interestingly, Suna had already proposed Bourdieu's theory of capital in the project and discussed it with the team to better understand power structures between people and institutions in the research field and to find a more conscious way of handling unequal resources as a working team. For various reasons, however, the idea was shelved at the time.

The sensitive issue of the distribution and exercise of power in research related to disabled people has been discussed for participatory research (e.g., Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Kubanski & Goeke, 2018; Reisel, Egloff & Hedderich, 2022). In contrast, this analysis examines the distribution and exercise of power in a collaborative project with participatory elements. Although not initially labeled as an action research project, this project has some commonalities with action research. Therefore, we believe that our considerations could be relevant to researchers in the field of action research.

Claudia was the operational manager of the qualitative interview study (one element of the project) and the cooperation coordinator for the overall project. At the same time, Suna was responsible for *Tatkraft's* project management. Although this adds a second perspective to this analysis, Suna could not be equally involved in analyzing power and capital relations due to limited resources. To frame the article's perspective precisely, Claudia is a non-disabled woman with a degree in special education, and Suna is a disabled non-binary person with a degree in political science and sociology.

We first examine how power relations can manifest in action research projects, then briefly explain the concept of disability applied in the project. The article then introduces the *Disabled in Politics* project and presents seminal events and decisions that reveal the practical problems with power that arose. Subsequently, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and power is outlined, followed by a discussion of relevant power fields, the field shares of the project partners, and relevant forms of capital within the project. Moreover, we discuss the shifting balance of power and consider how Bourdieu's capital theory might contribute to a better understanding of power relations in action research projects.

Struggles for power or a better position in capital distribution often occur unconsciously and without dishonest intentions (Bourdieu, 1986). This article aims to highlight these power struggles.