Reflections on Self-in-Relation (1)

The responsive evaluation project concerning the resident councils was my first job as a researcher. I was 22 years old when I started this project, and I just graduated from my studies Arts and Social Sciences. I felt very lucky to have this job. If people asked me what it was that I was doing, I told them: ‘It is a project in residential care homes where I try to bring resident council members and managers closer together.’ For me personally, this transformative goal of the responsive evaluation was even more important than the scientific goal of gaining more insight in how influence of residents is arranged in the institutional context and how the tensions between these parties could be explained. Before I started working, I never imagined myself to become a researcher. I thought a researcher’s life would merely exist of reading and writing books, high up in your ‘ivory tower’. Not my piece of cake. But then I was asked to do this project, and I started to learn about responsive evaluation. A new world! So as a responsive researcher you would immerse yourself in the ‘real world’, speaking to people, getting to know their perspectives and values, and ultimately organize dialogues between them to create mutual understanding and joint action? This was really what I wanted to do.

However, I did not know the context of elderly care at all. Even health care, and health care sciences, was new to me. I was very conscious of the resistance I felt concerning residential care homes and health care in general. These environments never attracted me, and I saw them as uninspiring, boring and also a bit scary places. To me, these contexts seemed to leave little room for human values, flourishing and inspiration. I was aware of the fact that this resistance had to do with ‘not knowing’ in the first place. For this research project I had to deal constructively with these prejudices and investigate them by getting to know the world of institutional elderly care by experience. The curious part of myself took charge and this helped me to be open to learn about the care for older people, resident councils, managers, organization structures and the like.

Talking with managers and resident council members was the nicest part. It was a new experience for me to be ‘a professional’ and being approached like that. However, during this project, I also continuously experienced a tension between wanting to be a professional researcher (and presenting myself like that) and my inner-felt insecurity as a novice researcher
and as a young woman in relation to all these professional people with so much more years of experience and status. I did not share this insecurity with the research participants. Actually, I think this helped me to be open to the participants and inviting them to become part of the process. For example, at the start of the project, some resident council members uttered their concern with the (draft) research proposal, because it seemed to them that I was going to be very critical on their work, calculating a report mark for the way the resident councils were functioning. This reflects a power issue, concerning the way I was being seen an external researcher before the start of the project. I felt concerned, because I really wanted the participants in the research to feel respected and to become partners in the evaluation. I wrote a letter to all resident councils and managers in which I explained that the research design was open to be co-created by all stakeholders. I confirmed that I was not going to calculate a report mark, but that the research really was about giving voice to all stakeholders. The research proposal stemmed from the critical call of the central resident council ‘will we go on like this or can it be different?’. There was a clear sense of dissatisfaction of resident councils that had led to the development of the research proposal. In my response to the concerns of some council members that I would come to judge them, I wrote: ‘I don’t have any ready-made solutions: we (the resident councils, managers, residents, other stakeholders and I) will look for solutions together during this research. Thus, the stakeholders will assess their functioning themselves, not the researcher. All stakeholders will get the opportunity to express their opinions about the functioning of the resident councils.’ Also personally, in meetings with the resident councils, I addressed the critical remarks of some resident council members and I explained again that the research was about giving voice to all perspectives. This was received very well, and I felt that I was already building rapport with the stakeholders by addressing these power issues.

A transformative moment for the way I looked at myself as a researcher happened just before the start of the ‘heterogeneous dialogue meeting’ with managers and resident councils, at the end of the research project. I was welcoming everyone into the room, serving coffee and tea and having informal talks with individuals. When I came to one of the managers, he said to me that seeing me was cheering him up every time, because to him I seemed to be so ‘authentic’. Especially this word made an impression to me, because it made me realize
that the research project as well as my own professional role as a researcher, a facilitator of responsive dialogue between stakeholders, could actually benefit from ‘me being myself’.

Research partnership existed in the sense that I made sure that the participants of this research could relate to my analysis of data. I sent member check reports to respondents, and I used the focus groups as a way to present my (draft) analysis and to open up the dialogue about what this analysis meant to the resident councils and managers. They confirmed my findings and analysis.