

Reflections on Self-in-Relation (3)

In the project with the Taste Buddies, my learning process about who I am as a person and as a researcher in relation to research participants continued. The large age difference between me (in my early twenties) and the residents (in their eighties/nineties) made me feel like an outsider sometimes, especially in the beginning of my research. I was confronted with some stereotypes I hold concerning long-term care institutions and the older people who lived in residential care homes, and I was sometimes surprised to experience the humor, resilience and militant attitude of these residents. Despite of the age difference with the Taste Buddies, I felt I became more an insider than an outsider. The age difference was never mentioned explicitly, but the women who were in this action group did refer to their own old age regularly. For example, when they wanted to emphasize the importance of good food, they referred to the negative impact of a lack of vitamins and minerals at their old age. The thing that surprised me was that the Taste Buddies consistently addressed me with the formal pronoun 'u'. I found this surprisingly because I was used to people who are older than me addressing me with the informal pronoun 'jij/je'. I always learned it is a good custom to address people who are older of age with the formal pronoun. Therefore I automatically addressed the Taste Buddies with the formal pronoun, and I thought they would address me with the informal pronoun. It turned out that this group of older ladies found it impolite and 'not-done' that people nowadays hardly use the formal pronoun anymore. For them, using the formal pronoun to address someone is an expression of respect. One of the Taste Buddies told me that this is why they kept addressing me with the formal pronoun, despite my young age and the fact that we became acquainted during and after the research. She told me they highly respected me and valued the fact that I helped them set up the project to improve the meals.

Furthermore, it turned out that the age difference actually created a helpful natural dynamic between me and the Taste Buddies. Because of my inherent respect for older people I always let them finish their sentences and respectfully listened to their stories. According to the Taste Buddies, this was essential for their own process of defining what they wanted to change about the meals and in developing a shared vision. When I talked with one of them about how she saw my role in relation to the Taste Buddies, she emphasized that I always gave them room to speak and that this was valuable for them. For her, it was clear that the age difference

did not matter, because we simply clicked and there was mutual sympathy between us. She thought the only way the age difference mattered, was a positive way, because this meant that I let them speak and gave room to their stories. From these reflections I learned that I had to adjust my definition of signs of outsider position (including using the formal pronoun and age difference).

In my relation to the Taste Buddies I learned more about my role as a researchers. An important eye opener in my search process for a balance between feelings of responsibility for a successful outcome of the project (with empowered clients and improvements in their environment) and letting lessons and failures exist. This occurred to me at the stage in the project with the Taste Buddies when they seemed to get stuck in negative stories and complaints. They continually repeated the same stories and sentences and we did not seem to get any further. It made me wonder if participation of older people in residential care homes would turn out to be impossible after all, and I was frustrated because I felt it would be my failure if we would not get further. I spoke about my frustrations with my supervisor but also with my boyfriend and his mother. They helped me to see things in a different light and they made me realize that I was taking up too much responsibility by thinking I had to solve this 'problem' on my own. This corresponded with the issues I encountered in the interactions with Mr. De Graaf in my other research project. They asked me why I did not just share my observations and frustrations with these residents and asked them if they would have any ideas how to solve it. This confronted me with my own tendency to feel too much responsibility and to want to solve things on my own. I realized that, by withholding my frustrations, no equal partnership with these residents could exist and that I kept the opportunity to make a useful contribution to the process away from them.

At the next meeting with the group of residents I put all my cards on the table and shared my observations that I heard them repeat their complaints and disappointments and that it made me fear that the project would get stuck at this point. I asked them if they recognized my description of the current situation, and they did. They told me they did not know how to proceed. Then I asked them bluntly if perhaps we should just quit with this project. This caused quite some tumult and they were very clear and unanimous: this project had to continue! Their persuasiveness made me feel inspired again. I think at this point I started

to really understand the meaning of relational empowerment, because I now experienced it myself. By showing my doubts and vulnerability, this group of residents, who until that moment had been involved in a process of relational empowerment in the group, was able to lift me up, instead of the other way around. My supervisor had advised me to try to use creativity to break through the stagnating process and thus I proposed to the group to try to make a collage together about an ideal dinner time experience. And the process started to flow again.

This episode changed me on the professional as well as personal level. Since then, I am not afraid anymore to show doubts, vulnerability or even frustrations (in a constructive way) and I see the value of this openness with regards to the development of real partnership and relational empowerment. Further, with regards to partnership development, I reckon we may have taken even a step further and friendship developed between me and the 'Taste Buddies'. Half a year after the project, the Taste Buddies treated me to a dinner in town. Even now, more than two years after the project finished, I still have close contact with one of them. We call each other regularly and sometimes we meet for lunch or coffee. Our contact is a source of support for both of us. I feel like this project with the Taste Buddies was a step further in understanding what my role as a researcher and 'me being myself' meant. I learned that by being open about my own doubts (even though it feels very vulnerable), I could create more partnership and a feeling of shared responsibility.

The project with the Taste Buddies was characterized by a research partnership. During this action research, the action and reflection/analysis cycle was a process in which we all took part. However, I had the main responsibility (and affinity) with the 'academic research side' of the project, because the Taste Buddies' main interest and strength was the improvements of the meals.