# Organisational Participation and Being a Participant: Ships, Pirates and Crocodiles

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ABSTRACT: *This paper draws on the author's current systemic action research in collaboration with a voluntary agency working with participation and children's justice issues. Participation in organisations can be considered 'an especially paradoxical form of change' because it runs counter to practices such as hierarchical decision-making, and selective information exchange. This has implications for those striving for the participation in organisational planning, decision-making and action of the 'service users', children and young people etc., whose interests the 'practice' is primarily designed to promote. Making sense of this involvement in the governance of the organisation of those described as 'at the centre', and acted upon at the margins, requires the emergence of different ways of understanding and talking about the relationships between the organisation and those who are the objects of its concern. The author contends that stories and metaphors as second order methods of inquiry can provide new ways of understanding and acting in the organisation, and can illuminate the part that might be played by the 'participatory' researcher.*

## Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the experience of exploring metaphors and stories in my current research with a children's justice organisation (referred to here as the Organisation) and some of the puzzles in distinguishing the role of the researcher. Before telling the stories of the orange, rain forest, and the ship, and especially the pirates and the crocodile, I will discuss the context of the research and the methodology. There is no conclusion, except the need to listen, question and reflect.

The Organisation is a long established voluntary agency working with children and young people and their families in their communities in the UK. Like many similar organisations it has had to adapt to the considerable changes in demography, social norms and social policy in the last twenty years, and undergone change in its 'business', from the provision of residential care and adoption work to working with children and families in their communities, and internal structural changes, from 'the federation' or 'time of the barons' in the 1980s, to centre and satellites in the 1990s

(and a new 'engine room and bridge' (my metaphor) structure for 2000). There are currently about one hundred community projects funded in the UK, each having a specific objective (for example child protection or social inclusion or 'a good start'). Within the Organisation there is a specific focus on children and young people's participation, not only in individual decision-making procedures concerning them (e.g. in legal proceedings and in education), but in their neighbourhoods and communities, and creation of their environment. The strategies employed in projects to empower young people and enable them to participate include advocacy and representation, involving young people as researchers, large scale environmental community research activities such as Priority Search, and 'direct work' with children and young people using techniques such as High/Scope (see (Udas 1998),(Hohmann and Weickart 1995)). About four years ago practitioners specifically interested in children's participation in their neighbourhood, and concerned about the impact on children of growing up in neglected and unsafe environments, formed the Child in the Neighbourhood Group to share understandings and practice. This group developed the proposal for the collaborative research I am now undertaking. In the two year gap between the formulation of the proposal and the start of the research, shifts in Organisational policy and structure, and the interests, knowledge, understandings and biases I brought with me, have also 'shifted' the research. The focus now includes a wider understanding of participation, including the eventual participation of children and young people in the governance of the Organisation, and an attention to the management of practice as well as innovations in practice itself.

**Participation**

The objective of the research as conceived in dialogue between practitioners and researcher is to generate new ways of talking about children and young people's participation, and increase the choices in their practice for practitioners and managers in the organisation, and for those children and young people with whom, and for whom they work. The research methodology draws on systemic and constructivist epistemologies and the particular qualities of metaphors and stories that enable making sense of experiences and developing shared meanings. This is also action research, involving a collaborative process between researchers and people in the situation, critical inquiry, a focus on social practice, and a deliberate process of reflective learning (Checkland and Holwell 1998, Argyris, Putnam et al. 1982)).

The participation (or at least, consultation) of service users in decisions about services which directly concern them, either as recipients or members of the 'community of interest' is one of the issues that has characterised developments in welfare services and personal social services in the 1990s in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. (Lorenz 1994)) and is established in many social care and voluntary agencies, and in some cases is a legal right. There is a fast growing body of literature on children and young people's participation in the development process and environmental planning in both the North and South, of which Adams 1995, Hart 1997 and Johnson, Ivan-Smith et al. 1998 are perhaps the most comprehensive and relevant. The role of both agencies and practitioners to challenge societal power structures that disadvantage people is often explicit in policy documents and requirements for professional qualification. None of these 'emancipatory practices' are unproblematic or uncontested in implementation; the issues are complex, difficult

and highly politicised. However there are ways of talking about this, publications about how to do it and practice examples that can be shared.

Participation in organisations is equally problematic, and draws on a different body of research, literature, history and terminology (for example "the democratisation of organisational life" (Heller, Pusic et al. 1998), 'stakeholder theory' - although these are used in a general discourse of participation) and with a focus on the participation of employees, productivity and efficiency. Even this can be described as representing "especially paradoxical …working against standard organisational practice such as the withholding of information and imposition of decision-making boundaries" (O'Connor 1995 p. 769) and undermined by more valued structures and attitudes 'embedded in social, economic, and political principles' (McCaffrey, Faerman et al. 1995). The participation of service users, and perhaps particularly that of young people and children, in the governance, the decision-making, the learning and change, in organisations is arguably something about which we have no way of talking.

I propose three illuminatory constructivist understandings, one structural observation, and a metaphor, as examples of the issues to be addressed. Firstly dominant understandings of organisations and employment are that they are 'adult worlds' (and this can be evidenced, for example, in recent UK minimum wage legislation which specifies a lower rate for young people, organisational policies excluding employees' children in the work site, and the wringing of Western hands concerning child employment in the East in the production of sports goods for the Western market); we distinguish between work and home in our adult lives and children clearly belong to the latter. Secondly is the dominant understanding of children and young people as a 'special' type of human being, for example. 'a mixture of expensive nuisance, fragile treasure, slave and super-pet' (Holt 1975 p. 22) or 'alien' (Cunningham 1995), and in current society "shielded in a special youth land" (de Winter 1997), as 'potential' people of lesser competence, and inscribed in a dialogue of 'in their best interests' (Oakley 1994), and for whom 'adult responsibilities' deny their 'right' to childhood. An example of this is an interpretation of the Organisation's duty to protect children and young people that excludes their participation in staff selection and interviewing. Thirdly is the understanding of organisations as emotion-free environments (Fineman 1993, 1997) in which children and young people as 'beasts in the nursery' (Phillips 1999), and bundles of emotional turmoil in the various stages of their emotional and physical development, hardly fit.

A structural observation is that the voices of service users in organisations are usually mediated - by practitioners, by elected representatives, by 'interested parties' and advocates. In discussion about the involvement of children and young people in the Organisation, a frequently raised question is "how can practitioners work to empower and involve clients in decision-making processes if the decision-making in the organisation excludes <u>them</u>". (This question is explored in (Helme July 1999 (pending)) This resonates with Dispenza's exploration of 'the unease I feel in seemingly promoting empowerment in what I personally experience as a disempowering world" (in management learning) (Dispensa 1996 p. 240), and his conclusion that 'we cannot talk empowerment into existence without addressing what it actually means in practice ' (ibid. p.249).

A metaphor and image that I have used to generate discussion about some of these issues is that of a ring doughnut (although *pace* Handy 1995 a British jam doughnut may be substituted). Service users, children and young people are, on one hand, spoken and written about as central (the organisation's 'core business') and on the other hand marginalised as having individual, special and local interests. Without pushing this metaphor too far, it does fit with Ortony's three theses of how metaphors may generate learning (Ortony 1975); compactness (distinguishing between the rhetoric and practice of participation), inexpressibility (enabling children and young people to be seen in two positions vis-à-vis the Organisation simultaneously) and vividness (in a familiar shape of substance and gaps which also has positive interpretations (Armson and Ison 1995)).

**Research methodology**

The understandings informing the methodology are that:
- The world we experience is the world we construct; our understandings of 'reality' both construct and are constitutive of 'reality'.
- Language is central in constructing what we understand as our 'reality'
- We create and make sense of our reality through metaphors and stories and imagery
- Metaphors, as expressed and as embedded in stories are not reducible to 'truth', but they are 'the enemy of the abstract';
- Metaphors invite others to participate in the creation of language
- Metaphors provide ways of talking about 'second order' constructions, e.g. how do we learn about learning? (How can ways of changing change?)

In outline, the planned research activities include three interlinked and overlapping stages, of which the last two form an iterative action learning cycle.
- engaging practitioners, managers, children and young people and others concerned with children's participation in conversations in which the researcher is learner and facilitator, and also 'collector' of stories and metaphors of participation
- inviting practitioners and managers to join an action learning group (in which the researcher will act as facilitator), to consider their own and others' metaphors and stories of participation, learning from the juxtaposition of metaphors and surfacing the meanings for practice and application
- communicating the work of the action research group within the Organisation for feedback and further stories and metaphors

The principles informing this research are firstly recognition of the legitimacy of different perceptions and 'voices' (Fisher 1991); secondly the generation of choices - Bardmann quotes Von Foerster's 'motto', 'Create possibilities' in his creation of a positive outlook on social work 'informed by possibilities, chances and freedom' (Bardmann 1996), and thirdly that 'there are no observations independent of the observer' (Segal 1986, Krippendorff 1996), that research cannot be independent of the researcher/s.

In constructivist ways of thinking, metaphors play an important role, as both constructing and constituting understandings. For this research I am using Lakoff and Johnson's definition of the essence of a metaphor as 'talking of one thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and three different but related aspects:

- Metaphors as linguistic devices (embedded in everyday language - 'unintended metaphors' and as rhetoric -'intended metaphors');  analysable (as consisting of topic (first subject), vehicle (second subject), 'ground' (similarities between the subjects) and 'tension' (difference between the subjects) e.g.(Candy 1994; Goatly 1997), and also be 'a way of seeing the world' (root metaphors).
- Metaphors as exploratory instruments: used in understanding organisations (Morgan 1985, Broussine and Vince 1995, Oswick and Grant 1996, Morgan 1997); in different academic and research contexts (e.g. education (Candy 1994), geography (Cresswell 1997), politics (Mio 1996); and in therapeutic contexts (Riikonen and Madan Smith 1997), (Barker 1985), (Jooste and Cleaver 1992)
- Metaphors as 'second order' methods of inquiry: (Fiumara 1995, also Aristotle, whose ideas of the political power of metaphorical discourse are echoed in Mio 1996), in constructivist theories (Spivey 1997, Gergen 1990), and in second order cybernetics (Krippendorff 1993,1995, Glanville 1998); metaphors as generative and creative, offering new ways of seeing (Schön 1979), as the expression of emotion (Vince and Broussine 1996, Averill 1990), implying a narrative story and prescriptions for action (Stone 1988) and arguably as a linguistic form of Barthes' 'punctum' (Barthes 1993), the 'sting, the speck, the cut (that) makes a photograph significant' (Hagedorn 1994), that sparks enthusiasm and 'fires you off into orbit' (Cook 1998).

The consideration of current or dominant metaphors and stories and the emergence of new ones leads to new ways of thinking and acting and relating with others (Krippendorff 1995).  The active emerging, recognising (or 'enunciation' (Palmer and Dunford 1996)) and juxtaposing of different metaphors and stories – 'consulting from a multiple narrative perspective' (Boje 1994) is a learning activity.  Although a plurality of metaphors produces liberation and emancipation because it avoids privileging one dominant perspective (Palmer and Dunford 1996),(Morgan 1985), (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), Alvesson and Wilmott indicate the superficiality of a 'supermarket' approach to organisational metaphors (Alvesson and Wilmott 1996) and the importance of attending to the way in which they are "selectively adopted and mobilised in the politics of management theory and practice" and inquiring into the political and historical significance of the use and popularity of particular metaphors. (ibid. p. 93). They also note the particular effect of 'taken for granted' metaphors, and that "when a metaphor is deemed to mirror reality, the credibility of alternatives is effectively displaced and diminished" (Alvesson and Wilmott 1996 p. 92, also Schön 1979).

Stories and narrative play some similar roles to metaphors as embedding cause and effect relations, as ways of organising and attributing meaning to experiences (Polkinghorne 1988). Stories organise through plotting, and have an explicit temporal dimension; metaphors are embedded in stories. "Metaphors condense stories and stories examine metaphors" (Czarniawski 1998). "Narratives exhibit an explanation instead of demonstrating it"(Polkinghorne 1988).  Stories make sense of lived experience (White 1998), and position and contain understanding of both author and audience. I have recounted the 'story' of the research many different ways, as it has unfolded to me and become familiar, and according to my understanding of how to engage the listener and invite their involvement. On reflection on the telling of the story in this paper I have omitted the part played by the Open University, supervisors

and precursors in the development of the research, which perhaps reflects the shift from planning to action. Storytelling is perhaps particularly appropriate in research with social work and community workers. . Story-telling enables other voices to be heard (Boje 1994). In teaching social work I have always found that the processes of narration, collaboration and social construction described by Brown and Duguid (Brown and Duguid 1994) resonate with practitioners for whom storying their practice with others is how they learn.

The initial research proposals were drawn up with practitioners, who have also been consulted in drawing up the methodology, will act as co-researchers during the later stages of the research, and it is their understandings and those of children and young people, rather than those of the researcher, which will inform future practice. The research design perhaps does not meet all McTaggart's principles for 'authentic' participatory action research – this is research towards a PhD thesis so must be 'my own work', and the further cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect (Carr, Kemmis et al. 1986) for second-order reflection suggested by Perry and Zuber-Skerritt (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt 1992) may not be feasible within the time scales.

Checkland and Holwell propose the criterion of 'recoverability' as an alternative to replicability as a criterion in action research (Checkland and Holwell 1998). Metaphors and stories encountered on the way can act as landmarks in mapping the territory of research, and recovering the content and methodology, and judgements made along the way. Indeed, sharing metaphors can trigger that process for others. For example, my metaphors for how it has felt doing the research – being in a fog (the literature survey), jumping off a precipice (starting the fieldwork), hacking through the jungle (making sense of the data) not only can be located in a reassuring root metaphor of a journey (with a destination (Lakoff 1993)), but banal as they are, also trigger off a return to their own experiences of researching, often very different.

**Making sense in and within metaphors and stories**

In illustration, conclusion, and partial 'recovery', I recount how two metaphors triggered my enthusiasm and understanding at the beginning of finding out about the Organisation, how a narrative and its metaphors provided space for practitioners to learn about their own learning in workshops, and reflect on a metaphor for a researcher, collaboratively researching participation.

**"The Organisation is an orange"**

In the early days, before I started fieldwork and was reading about metaphors and talking to people I already knew about the research, I had a conversation with someone familiar with the Organisation, but not employed by it. He recounted his admiration for many aspects of the Organisation, including its support of innovative practice and research, but also his encounter with a 'brick wall' in attempting to discuss differences related to issues in the Christian Church with which the Organisation is associated. At the end of the discussion, I invited him to propose a metaphor for the Organisation. He said it was an orange, because it had a thick skin, was segmented and "spits out the pips". This metaphor was extraordinarily vivid, almost tangible, a living example of Ortony's thesis that metaphors can incorporate complex or confused information into an organised whole (Ortony 1979), a summary

of our conversation.  It is a metaphor I have continued to turn to, to make sense of my experiences and getting to know the Organisation, and in conversation with others. It was corroboration of my own perception of the Organisation as segmented, chunked by geographical distance, affiliation to different objectives, and local connections, to the extent that I have been an occasional conduit of information. I have understood the 'thick skin' as a shared value system (although patchy in parts), as containing and retaining staff, as insulation, and as the way in which the Organisation might wish to see itself presenting coherence and clarity to funders and service users. 'Spitting out the pips' remains a reflection-provoking puzzle.

## "The Organisation is a rain forest"

The first meeting I had with practitioners from the Organisation focussed on strategic and structural changes in the Organisation, including the appointment of a marketing director, an orientation towards corporate funding, a new logo, changes in practice focus. For the second meeting I visited projects in another part of the country to find out from practitioners what they did and how it was organised. The image that came to mind in my reflection on these conversations was the Organisation as rain forest. This included again an understanding of the Organisation as 'ecological', layered, but also an appreciation of local interdependency, and top-bottom distance, reflecting the shared understanding of practitioners from different projects in the same region, which I had experienced, and also concern expressed about the lack of consultation and uncertainty about the impact of the changes. The other similarity was the vulnerability to colonisation or invasion.  Critical reflection on this connection surfaced the 'frames' through which I was making sense of the research.  What I had brought to it was over twenty years work as a social work practitioner and manager, and five years teaching social work in a new university, under increasing pressure to do more with less, and observing and absorbing practitioners' stories of working under pressure and unappreciated. However this is only one perspective, and from recognising this emerged the possibility of taking other positions and trying out other metaphors that, for example, might positively represent the changes.

## Ships, pirates and participation

Towards the end of the first year of research, I was invited to an annual conference for practitioners in the Organisation, who were working in projects with a focus on children and young people's participation. During the conference (and in parallel with other sessions sharing different aspects of practice), I invited practitioners to workshops to explore 'how metaphors can be used as a way of creating understanding from different perspectives, including neighbourhood' through working together, sharing ideas and having some fun. The conference occurred at a time of great uncertainty and the announcement of changes in key organisational roles. In the workshops I wanted to create a safe and comfortable space, 'outside' the immediate organisational context. To do this I adapted a familiar story (J. M. Barry's 'Peter Pan') (making sense of metaphors also depending on familiarity with the 'domain of knowledge' (Winner and Gardner 1993)), which also draws on the dominant metaphor in Western culture (Dunn 1990) of 'change as journey' (Lakoff 1993). (Kay also noted the prevalence of the metaphor of 'organisation as journey' in voluntary organisations (Kay 1991, see also Inns 1996), and indeed the metaphor of 'practice as

journeys' was used in another presentation during the conference). People were invited to consider the 'story':

*"Things are changing. The whole pirate ship is talking about becoming a participating (and learning) organisation. "We must give the crocodile a voice; he is a stakeholder in this ship as much as Wendy, Peter and the Lost Boys", argues Smee, "and is walking the plan consistent with our mission statement?"*

and share understandings about "*the sort of things that the 'pirate ship' could do to be fully participative*", and "*the sorts of things that people (and animals?) could do to fully participate in the 'pirate ship'*".

It was perhaps inevitable that the Chief Executive would be identified with Captain Hook, and that how the detail of the story was used depended on people's recall. (What did Tinkerbell do? Where did the Indians fit in?). The second question proved much more difficult, but revealed my own assumptions about how people 'look' when they are 'participating' (animated, with eye contact). The richness of roles and events generated a very wide range of discussion, for example for some, the ship never left the dock and participation was about working out relationships, trust, sharing previous experience, an 'inner journey', 'training' for participation. For others the context was important, the possibilities of agendas from 'outside', why were people there, how autonomous was this ship. Time (travelling) raised question about at whose pace participatory action should be, that participation was about freedom – where to go and whether to go at all, and that it can be too slow.

People were able to share experiences through the story, and generate new metaphors. In the workshops we (researcher and practitioners) developed a shared language and way of talking about participation that we have used and developed in subsequent conversations.

**"The Researcher as crocodile"**

At the end of each workshop I asked participants for 'rapid feedback', using a technique developed by myself and a colleague in our teaching. Participants or students are asked for anonymous written answers to three questions which vary according to the context. In this case I asked "what did you learn in this workshop?" and, "what should **I** do next to find out about participation" and for any other 'comments or burning issues'. The response to the second question included invitations to projects (with telephone numbers), several recommendations to talk to children and young people, and two particular replies which 'struck home' and which I discuss here. The first was "think about ways that you participate – or not", and the second "be a crocodile".

In the workshops I was experimenting taking photographs with a Polaroid camera, with the consent of those involved. This was in order to have an additional record, to produce 'images of participation' as data, but mainly as an aide memoire for myself. I chose to use a Polaroid camera because people could immediately see the pictures in the context in which they were taken, and have shared control over what happened to them (they could be taken away or torn up etc.). What I had not realised was the obtrusiveness of the process of taking pictures. I had to position myself and the large camera near to the 'subject', there was a loud noise (snap!), and a flash. What I also

had not appreciated was the ambiguity of the photographer in relation to the photograph – who is not 'in the picture', but whose gaze the picture represents. The photographer is always 'behind' the picture. There was also a question of ownership – to whom did the picture 'belong'? Can there be a plurality of ways of belonging ? At what point should this be negotiated ?

Considering the crocodile also surfaced questions about the researcher's position in relation to the research and co-researchers in the field.  In my recollection, J. M. Barry's 'Peter Pan', the crocodile is the only creature of which wicked Captain Hook is afraid, after an encounter in which the crocodile ate his hand and also swallowed a clock. The crocodile appears at times in the story, either in fact or as a ticking noise, to turn the battle between Hook and Peter Pan and his friends in the latter's favour, and eventually eats Captain Hook. The crocodile may seen as a reminder that things may be different, as 'outside the main story' but catalytic in the outcome, and as having a very different view on events.  In the workshop discussion, the crocodile was seen by some as needing special consideration ("going at the crocodile's pace"), by others as "needing feeding", and also as "management", which poses a "dilemma" for participating, resolved by "inviting the crocodile on board".

"Researcher as crocodile" surfaces additional choices of action for the researcher, in addition to hunting, gathering, inviting, questioning, joining, listening, facilitating, communicating, recording, presenting, particularly 'perturbing' - asking difficult questions, 'bringing non-official stories and story-tellers to the round table of dialogue" (which Boje considers is "a political and rebellious invasion, and will be viewed in some enterprises as an act of terrorism"(Boje 1994 p. 457); and is important because "listening to someone's story is not just to capture knowledge, it confirms that their experience has value to the people involved in the situation" (Brown and Packham 1999 p. 27).

The idea of being a crocodile was also illuminatory in considering some of drawbacks in using metaphors and stories in research.  A 'crocodile gaze' is required firstly because metaphors are ubiquitous – everyday, unintended metaphors attribute values to characteristics in ways that can marginalise, for example  'up' and 'big' are positive, 'down' and 'small' are negative (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The unexamined metaphor may have entailments which are potentially dangerous (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Packwood 1994), particularly here in the way that others are positioned (e.g. as marginal). Secondly, metaphors and stories are culturally specific, and depend on the story-teller or metaphor-maker 'taking-as-shared' a vocabulary, a set of beliefs and values 'which must be presupposed if the use of metaphor is to be attempted'(Fiumara 1995 p. 105). One of the implications of this is that metaphors may be very differently interpreted, and may be exclusive. Finally the otherness of the crocodile gaze recognises that no single metaphor can capture the whole, but the purposiveness of the gaze can see that too many metaphors confuse (Packwood 1994), (Palmer and Dunford 1996).

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