

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

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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

complicated when fighting for acceptance of identities linked to poverty, homelessness or substance use. Here identity is specifically linked to problems that most people want to overcome, and may thereby undermine the basis for the collective identity if they succeed (Seim, 2006).

Group consciousness relates to the significance of the collective and the interpretive framework of common interest, experiences and opportunities (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Consciousness work and the need to reconsider language have been emphasised in participatory action research and empowerment (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Ledwith, 2011). By challenging the public expectations of how they should be treated, marginalised people challenge discriminatory labels and public identities.

Negotiation highlights the process by which a collective action works to change symbolic meanings. Interactions between groups tend to reinforce established public identities (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). For example, social services are constructed differently to different target populations based on the sympathy and degree of power attributed to the group. These characteristics reinforce both the individual's self-identity and their public identity (McLaughlin, 2009; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). The concept of negotiations points to the myriad of ways people work to resist negative social definitions embedded in everyday life, normally not considered tactics or strategies. These negotiations can be private or public, informal or formal (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

The expression of collective identity is an emerging social transformation (Furst & Balletto, 2012; Neil 2002), but also a powerful motivation for individual action (Friedman & McAdam, 1992) and linked to narratives and mobilisation of feelings (Ganz 2011; Jasper 2010). We will use theories of collective identity, public identity and the politics of identity as a basis for discussing the emerging collective action in X-street, focusing on boundaries, consciousness and negotiations (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Central questions when analysing collective action in the case of X-street are: Through which processes is the practice of collective action constructed? How are the different elements negotiated or produced? In which processes are the actors involved or not involved in the collective action? How do the actors make "sense of what they are doing"?

Previous research

Protest and collective action are not always available to all groups: such possibilities are also determined by structural conditions. Large numbers of marginalised people are fatalistic and consider themselves helpless; they accept the authority and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Public opinion about people affected by homelessness is strongly influenced by the idea that a person's circumstances are determined by their will, character and choices (Schwan, 2016; Scullion, Somerville, Brown & Morris, 2015; Teixeira 2017). Topics of social inequality are often individualised and naturalised by professionals (Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019), and professional narratives are fatalistic and construct substance use as a personal problem, obstructing the process of creating 'new identities' not linked to substance use (Alexander, 2008; Järvinen, 2002; Selseng, 2017; Teixeira 2017). Research on 'homeless identities' has also been argued to construct

homelessness as an identity problem, depersonalising people and making what they *lack* their defining characteristic (Parsell, 2010), as well as opening for dehumanising policy and 'care' (Herring, Yarbrough & Alatorre, 2019). The homeless identity has been characterised as 'atomistic' and lacking any sense of temporality, being present-centred and ego-centred. Such a characterisation is rooted in psychological or cultural explanations (Elias & Inui, 1993; Lemke, 2016; Loehwing, 2010; Van Doorn, 2010), but could also be explained by the situation for the homeless people on the street (Flåto & Johannessen, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Critical researchers have argued that decontextualised analyses, psychiatric focus and a language of disability in the research industry about homeless people, have distorted homeless people to a highly dysfunctional population (Snow, Anderson, & Koegel, 1994), which are reproduced by professionals to fit clients for housing or shepherd them into rehabilitative programmes (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Stuart, 2014, 2016). On the other hand action research projects and ethnographic research has shown that homeless people comprise a range of different groups and engage in collective actions, research, sharing of modest resources, advocacy entrepreneurship and services, while also having chronic distrust and fragile social bonds (Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stuart, 2016; Wagner, 2018 [1993]).

The call for research contextualising homelessness and lifting their voices would make a good argument for participatory action research, which has been called for in the field of homelessness (Power et al., 1999). Several action research projects have been conducted with homeless populations. Action research with homeless women and men have shown that arts-based participatory research and photovoice can challenge stigma and allow for new identity formation instead of the homeless identity (Clover, 2011; Wang, et al., 2000). Also, action research can facilitate political empowerment and effective advocacy (Paradis, 2009), and lead to examinations of needs and models for non-professional service delivery (Walters & East, 2001). Other studies have shown the potential of participatory action research as a tool for grassroots organisation and creation of a union (Yeich, 1996), for building strengths and resources (Razpotnik & Dekleva, 2012) and facilitate dynamic interactions between different stakeholders related to an "open-air drug scene" (Arantes do Amaral & Hess, 2018). Although many of these touches upon relevant issues, few projects seem to have focused on establishing a material solution to the problem of homelessness in relation to identity.

Interaction with institutions and professionals may increase attributions of personal responsibility while negating structural inequalities (Farrugia, 2011), thus reinforcing identities of being needy and incapable (Takahashi, McElroy & Rowe, 2002). Beck (1997) calls this the "individualisation of structural risk". Negative experiences with helping services can have oppressive and harmful consequences that may lead to further exclusion or material deprivation, but could also serve as a platform for resistance and negotiations over exclusion, knowledge and power (Lavee, 2017). The inclusion of housed allies in collective actions can make opportunities for collective action not otherwise available for the homeless population, but could also reproduce structural violence (Norman, 2015).

The emergence of collective action and social movements entails a transformation of consciousness: the system loses legitimacy, and people begin to assert their rights and believe in their own capacities (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Challenging the public identity of a

'typical' homeless person is a suggested collective path for reframing homelessness, in a way that restores the possibility of change for people affected by homelessness (Teixeira, 2017). Earlier research has demonstrated collective action to be an effective strategy for mutual support and voice for stigmatised groups (Slettebø, 2013). People experiencing homelessness in USA who have a feeling of collective identity are far more likely than others to participate in protest, and to believe that participation will affect their own situation (Corrigan-Brown, Snow, Smith & Quist, 2009). Lemke (2016) identified collective identity as a key component of the successful "homeless movement" in USA, and collective identity is seen as a central element in recovering from substance use (Matto & Cleaveland, 2016; Weinberg 2001).

Although a solid body of research is written on homeless collective action and identity many of the studies regard collective identity as a fixed variable, rather than having a process-oriented and dynamic character, including time and material changes (Corrigan-Brown et al., 2009; Lemke, 2016; Snow et al., 2005). The few studies using a process perspective to study collective action related to housing highlight the importance of framing the group, and a clear identity (Bradley, 2012; Croteau & Hicks 2003). People inhabit more than one identity, and a literature review found a striking paucity of research on women's economic justice organisations in social movement journals, which usually centres on white masculinity as the ideal typical subject of political activism (Ernst & Luft, 2017). In this article, we throw light on the dynamics between action and collective identity, material and symbolic change, in the case of collective action: X-street, carried out by a group of people with intersecting marginal identities but all with experience of homelessness.

The case of our study: X-street

We have anonymised the case of investigation as X-street. The project, initiated by guests and employees at a women's night shelter, attempted to create a resident-managed housing accommodation for the women and people in the same situation, also including men. They wanted the house to include a stable housing facility and be a base for their newly started washing firm, as well as constituting a 'think-tank' for other social enterprises.

X-street was born out of a crisis when the night shelter was experiencing cuts in public funding. To avoid closing, the women chose to help run the shelter in partnership with the remaining employees. This proved to be a success: for guests as well as employees, and spurred further ideas: For example, the women said: "If we can wash for ourselves, we can wash for others!", and so they formed a washing company. After a year, most of the women had improved their life situations; they had work, used drugs less, re-engaged with their families and gained self-confidence. However, they still lacked a permanent place to live, as the shelter was closed during the day.

With their improved sense of capability and self-confidence, some of the women decided that since they were practically running one house, why not run another? They initiated a process to establish a self-governed house for themselves and other people in the same situation, and for both genders. Together with employees at the shelter and representatives from an advocacy group for people with a problematic relation to substances, they worked

out plans for the project and lobbied to convince the NGO running the shelter to support the project with a house and funding. The original plan was a completely self-governed house, but the project was reframed as a development project and the NGO funded three project staff to plan and start up the project, two of whom had experienced substance use or homelessness themselves. The staff, interested future residents, and the researcher started the planning process in autumn 2015. The X-street project opened in March 2016, and the first residents moved in. By summer 2017, the house had 20 residents and X-street was organised with a board of directors and written statutes. The project was recruiting new participants, and ran a courier company, a cleaning company and a maintenance company.

X-street aimed to include people who wanted to participate in the project by living there or working in the social enterprises. The project consisted of actors with positions and roles transgressing the orthodox dichotomies of paid staff and service user, or of helper and help-seeker. Most of the residents had problematic relations to substances, but not everyone. The participants working in the companies were employed by the NGO, since the companies were not separate businesses. The NGO organised X-street as a separate project, funded it and made the property available. The project co-operated with interested businesses, social service offices and institutions offering treatment for substance-related problems.

As a case study, X-street is hard to categorise. We could categorise it as rehabilitation, activation, self-help, social housing, community work, or as a home or entrepreneurial cluster, but it is neither social work nor an organisation as commonly understood. In this study, we rather interpret it as a *collective action undertaken in partnership by people in marginal positions, employees in an NGO and researchers*. Drawing on existing knowledge, we turned to theories of collective action and empowerment to analyse the case. One central topic during the project was negotiations about *identity*, and it became evident that this was a crucial element in the proceeding action. This lay the ground for an analysis informed by the theoretical concept of collective identity.

Methodology

This research project adopted a participatory action research approach (PAR) to get as close as possible to X-street and the process of collective identity by participating in the project with people working and living in the project (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013). We have chosen to study one emerging collective action on a micro-level, rather than from grand theories (Jasper, 2010).

Studying evolving collective actions and periods of tension can be especially helpful when looking at the dynamics of collective identity (Croteau & Hicks, 2003). Action research is particularly apt when studying constructive research questions: to examine the possibilities for new or alternative actions or practice forms. By choosing a participatory and interventionist research approach (PAR), we acknowledge the constructive features of collective action, and redefine the relationship between the observer and the observed (Melucci, 1995). Rather than being a mirror to reality, our research reflects the circular process of modelling and self-modelling identity and action with the outside context. Intentions of change and action are parts of the research.

Applying PAR, we have maintained a democratic understanding that not only the action and change processes, but also *knowledge production*, should be developed in cooperation with all participants, because neither researchers nor other people have exclusive claims to understand reality (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2013; Reason, 1988; Whyte, 1991). Melucci (1995) stresses that practice focusing on process should recognise that actors understand the meaning of their actions, and that the researcher-actor relationship is itself subject to observation. Collective identity consists of contradictory systems of meaning which should not be reduced to behaviours and opinion (Melucci, 1995). By attaining knowledge about action and change through participation in action and change, and through analysis and dialogue between the participants in the change process, we have tried to produce actor-oriented, process-aware and reflective data. To avoid the problem of action research assuming a kind of missionary task on the part of the researcher: providing the actors with a consciousness they are presumably not able to produce for themselves, we have taken a dialogical approach to PAR, attempting to be a mirror, rather than an emancipator (Melucci, 1995). The researcher took part in dialogues and negotiations about planning and establishing the project. From the early planning stages until moving into the house, one of the researchers (the first author) participated in conversations and meetings, work, daily chores and social happenings. The participants wanted the researcher to help initiate and take part in reflection work about roles and responsibilities in the ongoing work establishing the project. This took place in an array of different arenas, from all meetings discussing research problems and big topics like stigma, 'who are we?', 'what is this project?', to informal conversations discussing strategies to engage the participants more or to deal with conflicts.

Data production

The project yielded a rich body of data, consisting of field notes, reflective notes, minutes, pictures, sound files, questionnaires, documents and web pages. Data was produced through participatory observation, interviews, focus groups, meetings and informal conversations over four years. For this article, we used the following data sources: 1. Field notes and documents from summer 2015 until spring 2016: collaborative meetings, residents' meetings, planning meetings, informal conversations, social gatherings and practical work. Field notes were done by hand or written on a computer right after the participation. 2. Documents: minutes, reports, web pages, project descriptions and case reports written by the participants. 3. 13 qualitative interviews with the first participants, conducted as semi-structured individual interviews in autumn and winter 2015/2016. The interviews lasted about one hour, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. 4. Transcriptions from two focus groups with nine participants conducted in autumn 2017 were used to validate the findings.

Participants

Through the period, 55 individuals have been engaged in the project in different ways and for different lengths of time. They comprised 22 women and 33 men, although the first participants were all women. 1/5th considered themselves an ethnic minority. All participants

bar one were over 35 years old, and most had experienced long-term homelessness and lived below the poverty line. Although all participants were part of the process in some way or another, some participated more in action and research than others.

Research ethics

The research was granted ethical clearance by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The women initiating the project agreed early on to collaborate in research, but each participant determined their level of participation. The researchers and participants wrote a written agreement about the aims and methods of the research that we discussed at a general meeting, and the elected board and the researcher signed. In addition, the participants gave written consent in interviews and focus groups where a tape recorder was used. In informal settings, consent was given orally, and at meetings the researcher asked everyone's consent before attending.

Analysis

The experiences from the project were analysed continuously in conversation between the participants and the researcher, by creating meaning out of the ongoing action and discussing new strategies along the way, focusing on the work process, categorisation and concepts. These were revealed by what caught the participants' attention and were therefore underlined as important.

For this article, the first author and the second author, as co-researcher, re-analysed the documents, minutes from meetings and field notes and interviews. We firstly identified themes of identity, possibilities and aims. Themes of interest emerged from answers to questions like "who are we?", "what do we want?" and "what are we capable of?" Themes were both the actual words used, but also reflections on identity, ideas, capability and strategy. However, as the analysis progressed, themes related to identity, language and negotiations appeared, resulting in a more adaptive strategy in the later stages. Focusing on collective identity and looking more specifically for expressions of collective identity, lead to a more theory-informed strategy. We asked what was negotiated as the collective identity, analysing the process based on the analytical concepts of boundaries, consciousness and negotiations (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). The empirical material also included storytelling and emotions, leading to us also including the concept of narrative as an aspect of collective identity (Ganz, 2011).

Although we have analytically distinguished between boundaries, consciousness and negotiation in the presentation, several of the examples could fit into more than one analytical category. There is overlap, but also dynamics between them. For example, negotiations occurred about boundaries, but also about consciousness, and boundary work set off the process of consciousness work. And negotiations with the researcher were also a part of boundary-making. Together this formed what Melucci calls "autonomisation: the process of becoming autonomous (Melucci, 1995). This process is linked to Giddens' view on identity as a way of keeping the narrative going (1991).

Our preliminary analyses were discussed with the participants in the focus groups in fall 2017, where nine participants and one researcher mulled over findings and perspectives

on previous understandings of the material. In the focus groups, new data emerged which supplemented and refined the other data. The focus groups served as validation by testing the assumptions and understandings with the project employees, but they also provided analytical data, since the participants presented their interpretations and new perspectives. Most notably, the respondent validation highlighted the need for more diversity and dynamics in the understanding of the respondents' collective identities. The participants expressed different understandings of identity at different stages in time, and they could say contrasting things in public and in private. New participants also added their views. This again directed us to theories with dynamic concepts of collective identity and collective action. By returning to the data and making new analyses and reflections, the data production reflects the shift between reflection and action in PAR. To understand how collective identity developed, we will present our analysis in terms of boundaries, consciousness and negotiations (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Findings

As a process involving constructions of ends and means, networks of relationships and emotional investment in a common unity (Melucci, 1995), the collective identity was not as clearly expressed as the literature suggests. The first participants described X-street as a *service user* led temporary housing project, and a social entrepreneurship project providing work and activity. However, the later participants had different opinions about what they wanted the project to become. Several questions arose when trying to describe the initiative; should it be understood as a social work initiative, a research project, or a philanthropic venture? What was the common denominator or common identity for the people using the initiative: client, service user or substance abuser? This led to work on boundary-making.

Boundary-making—who are we?

Boundary-making was there from the very beginning. Initially, on March 25, 2015, an outline of the project, made by the initiators and the NGO, had been accepted as a basis for planning the initiative. In this document, the participants in the project were described as *users*, *homeless people*, and *drug-addicts (rusavhengige)* but also as people with experience of substance-dependence. The project was described as a *social work* or *community work project*, a *user-led (user-controlled)* project, with a strong emphasis on *user-participation*.

In the fall of 2015 the future residents, representatives from the NGO and the researcher engaged in concrete plans to design the X-street project. Early on, the future residents expressed the desire to change the language in the outline of the project (Minutes from planning meetings, 2015). This sparked an intense debate about the words used to describe them as a group: service-user, user and drug addict, which they found repressive. The ambiguity of the word 'user' in this context is also connected to the term 'drug-user'. They felt that these terms defined them only in relation to their problems, and thus reduced them as human beings, subjects and agents. As one said: "All persons are more than the problems they have with substance use." (Minutes, 25.11.15). In the discussion, they discarded words

like narcotics, and decided that the words or terms 'drug career', 'drug scene', 'misuse' and 'relapse' should never be used. When discussing the term 'drug scene', they argued that drugs are not the most important phenomenon characterising these scenes.

After the discussion, they settled on "people with a problematic relation to substances", because this would better express that the relation to substances was one of many facets in a person's identity. The other stakeholders in the planning group agreed to this, and the description was accepted as a definition for the target group for the project, describing how the people involved perceived their common denominator, or the common trait that can be understood as the *collective identity* for the group of people they wanted to include in the project.

The actors also discarded words they had used initially to describe the content of the project. After discussions, they did not want to describe it as a housing shelter, an institution or a residential facility, they wanted a home. To be an innovative place for creating job opportunities, they wanted to use the word 'job' or 'work' instead of 'activation'. In line with this they agreed to use words that described their situation in the new project, as *residents* in their home at X-street, and as *co-workers* in the X-street project, and as *workers or employees* in the firms that started or were about to start. Instead of user-participation or user-management, they decided to use words and terms like 'active influence', co-operation, co-determination and democracy.

How the participants constructed boundaries also had practical aspects. The residents chose who could move in when there was an available room. Initially, the aim was that the house was to be inhabited by half by students, and half by people who had experienced drug problems. When administrating the scarce resource, the participants had trouble accepting students as residents when there were homeless people in need, and this aim was abandoned. At times some of the participants wished for more 'normal people' to move in, especially when there were situations with drug use or aggression among the participants. The solidary criteria however tended to be most important. The participants stated that they wanted to reach people who were willing to be part of the project and wanted to help run it and work in the enterprises. Sometimes these were not the people in most urgent need of a place to live, and the project tended to offer rooms to people who could be relied upon to contribute to the project. As the project developed, they included people who had experienced homelessness even if they had not experienced drug problems but had other experiences of exclusion like trafficking, poverty or mental health problems. The common experience of being excluded from housing and labour opened for including them in the collective identity of a 'we', with the possibilities to run the project.

In time the collective identity became less related to the problems experienced, and more to being people in the process of changing their life. One said: "We are all people on our way to getting better from something, whether it is substance use, poverty, health problems, homelessness or other things". Although the first naming of the collective identity focused on substance use, inclusivity was a part of the project from the early stages.

Boundary-making and discussions about the language used to describe aims, content and organization were critical parts of creating a collective identity. An important part of this work was also defining *who we are not*, constructing multiple roles related to function instead of all-encompassing traits of members, and the importance of making a 'home'.

Later, when the group encompassed people without experiences of using drugs, some used the terms “people who have experienced exclusion” or “people who have experienced precarity”. Others were less interested in a common name. One woman said to me when asked about participating in the focus group validation: “Ask someone else about that language stuff. I am more concerned with action”. The relation between action and language became a topic when recruiting new participants: mostly men from prisons or institutional treatment, and became linked to the development of consciousness.

Consciousness

The consciousness work in X-street consisted of examining the participants’ experiences, their common interests and their agency. In the ‘new’ language, they defined X-street as a *home*, referred to the *residents* in the house, and described the project as a job-creating entrepreneurial initiative. A central element of this construction of an identity was that the project was something new; it was not something that could be incorporated in existing social work theory, or designated by other existing models for participation. A central theme in planning the project was how to organise and handle co-determination and democratic participation. This was discussed in the project meetings in which the future residents, representatives from the NGO and the researcher participated.

A strong motivation for X-street was that the first women saw possibilities for collective action. They had mostly managed their rehabilitation on their own, and had worked hard to advocate for a resident-managed house. One of them expressed it thus:

I was taking part from the beginning of the beginning. We decided maybe we could get this place to a new project. At the start it was... we didn’t think it was actually gonna happen, because we had to make people believe in what we wanted to do, to permit us to do it. It’s fun to think about that just from a little idea: “Yeah, maybe we can do it”. Now it is actually happening. I never thought we would get permission. So, it is strange when I’m thinking back. But it has been very stressful. So many meetings. A lot of work. But the result... a little hard to say right now. It has been open for a short time. I think it will be good. (...) I think and hope that I have influenced how this house has become, but I don’t know. (female participant)

This narrative, the results of thinking they could do it, and then seeing it happen, affected the perception of what was possible. As we see, the female participant attributed the outcomes to the collective action. However, there were also doubts and discord. Several of the male participants recruited later felt that it was impossible to create engagement and participation with the kind of people living in the project, and questioned whether it was even desirable. At one meeting the leader of the residents said: “This is supposed to be a ‘user-managed’ house. If we are not able to do that, if people do not show up at meetings, maybe the project gets shut down. Then none of us will have a place to live”. The bottom line was that the people were there to get a place to live, and sometimes the aim of running the place themselves seemed like a burden they had to carry, something imposed on them from above.

Several participants reported that being part of the project had given them hope for the future and that they felt a sense of dignity. During a break in one of the big planning meetings held at a conference centre paid for by the NGO, one of the participants told me that he could not imagine that it was *him* sitting there in the conference room with the nice lunch. Enthusiasm was also a big part of this mobilization period. Many were also grateful for get-

ting the chance to participate. Taking part in the narrative contributed to agency for the participants: especially on an emotional level, through hope, courage and motivation. In the narrative the participants could position themselves as protagonists, they had agency. In this way, being part of the action also became a way of changing or confirming another identity. One of the male participants expressed how he felt before joining the project:

What he [the project manager] first presented was this lofty idea. I was a bit reserved in the beginning, but I see the possibility to realize some dreams I have been having for a long time (...) I got a feeling that I could master it, or succeed, the same feeling I got when I was admitted at the writing academy years ago.

The project offered him a possibility to take part in the narrative of the women activists/protagonists in the story. At the same time, it also allowed for the agency to spill over onto other parts of his identity, as he saw the possibility to realise the role of an artist within. A part of this came also from the "lofty ideas". Presenting the project as something that had never been done before, and the participants as people who could do anything were important aspects.

The *idea of the project* was another central motivation for the participants:

It was work, housing and the idea. Those three things. Work and housing first and foremost. But the idea that John [project manager] came with, as an entrepreneur, that's what made me feel this might be a bit bigger. Here, then, all possibilities are open. That sounded real. (male participant)

This "idea of the project" was a common phrase often brought up in resident meetings, especially when certain aspects of it seemed to run toward more conventional shelter rules or ways of doing things. The "idea of the project" became a counterstrategy against what has been termed *mimicry*, the tendency of service user-led projects to mimic the relations of conventional social work.

Central in this counterstrategy was to challenge what the participants described as the *institutional mindset* [institusjonstankegangen]. Many of those joining the project had received institutional rehabilitation, and they felt that this experience had reduced their self-agency, made them expect that others should do things for them, and nullified any sense of agency and control of their own life. One of the participants explained it like this when interviewed in residential treatment before moving into X-street:

So, already first meeting, I got that I have to put away a lot of the institutional mindset. Take a couple of years here, and you'll find out. It sits in the body. It's this sticky pulp. (...) I have asked if we could get a calendar book to write appointments and stuff like that to get some more... like now we get to know our appointments the day before. But it hasn't been accepted yet. So, I kind of get to know what I'm gonna do the same day as I'm gonna do it.

The experience of "the institutional mindset", also referred to as "treatment injuries", was a recurrent theme through the processes of negotiating responsibility, power and participation in the project. The tension between "the institutional mindset" and the idea of the project also spurred some paradoxes. Some participants were unhappy with having to do the work in the housing co-operative: one resident said: "If we had known that we had to do everything ourselves one year ago, it would have been nice". Others expressed that the point was to prove that it was possible to change this mindset both in the individual participants and in the surroundings, to challenge stigma and the public identity, and raise consciousness and agency.

Consciousness work was an ongoing process that constantly needed reaffirmation. The narrative of the history of the women, the idea of the project, and institutional mindset were central themes in processes of ‘regaining consciousness’. Another theme linked with consciousness was negotiating with their surroundings.

Negotiations—changing symbolic meanings

Throughout the collective action, collective identity was constructed in relation to other actors as negotiations. Some negotiations took place in various relations with the NGO, with the outside world and within the group. To make the project less risky for the NGO’s board, X-street was negotiated as a development project. When the project was established, the active initiators and a representative from an organisation for substance users were employed as staff members.

What we really wanted was a self-governed house with just one part-time social worker to help with applications and stuff. But the [NGO] did not dare support that. So, we had to re-phrase it as a developing project [fagutviklingsprosjekt] and add three project workers to the application. Then it was ok. (female participant)

In this way, the project stuck to their plan of a *mostly* self-led project, since some participants were included as employees. This was part of the ambition to create real jobs:

People [like us] are not supposed to go into the work force and get a real job. Funding goes to street magazines and ‘activation’ programs that the employers don’t want to hire people from. It is social dumping. We want real jobs and real wages. (...) Well, we have started a cleaning company without any knowledge. We just did it. (female participant)

Negotiating for real jobs was closely connected to opposition towards symbolic repression; the experience of being an object for activation techniques as described by a male participant: “You feel forced to be active. It was supposed to do me good: ‘It will make the thoughts go away’. Instead of because it is normal, it is because you have a drug problem.”

A parallel to this was the negotiations needed to realize the concept of a home. This had to be negotiated first with the NGO that owned the house. The property had to be re-regulated as a residence, rather than an institution, so the residents could register as living there. The NGO agreed to invest time and money in this, and the property was re-regulated. The local social welfare office, however, did not accept the residents as registered in their district, claiming that they should seek help at their former social security offices because it was not “normal housing”. The residents had to negotiate with the City Department, before reaching a settlement.

Negotiations also occurred within the group about what was possible. Some participants had high expectations for the project: “...here I feel that we are going to have real responsibility and real involvement. I really have faith in the project manager. He will give us the wheel as soon as it works” one of the residents asserted before moving in. At the same time, some residents stated that things were moving too fast, especially when they had to handle conflicts and the limitations of in-house drug use. One of the participants commented: “Is resident management to start at once letting go of everything? I imagine standing in that situation I would experience it a little traumatic if I came from a rigid system”. She also lamented that participants got insufficient attention at the meetings: “I am used to that it’s the users talking at the meetings, but here the staff is talking, and the users are for show.”

Negotiations were an important part of the collective identity and took place with the NGO, the outside world and within the group. Central themes for the negotiations were real influence, real jobs and real housing, changing the symbolic meaning from *other* to *normal*.

Discussion

In the case of X-street, building collective identity through collective action was part of a participatory action research context, aiming to construct local knowledge and new practice (Pålshaugen, 2014). The project was not initiated by a researcher to mobilise or emancipate marginalised people. It was a joint process of dialogue, with the action researcher as a mirror for reflections on collective identity (Melucci, 1995; Kildedal & Laursen, 2012). These reflections encompassed practical challenges like mobilisation or how to get a voice, or advocate for funding, as well as knowledge production, language and collective identity. Working with these topics with an action research approach, in real-time and in the specific context, meant that both the action researcher and the participants had to adjust their primary assumptions to meet the aims of the project, establishing a self-governed house for marginalised people. Participating in attempts to change a phenomenon generates different knowledge than just observing (Lewin, 1951). This study adds to earlier research based on interviews, focus groups or ethnography. It also adds to the body of identity-based action research with homeless people, since aiming to create a material solution to housing produces different challenges to meet.

As Melucci (1995) stressed, studying collective identity means redefining the relationship between the observers and the observed. In our view, the theoretical perspective of collective identity is both well-suited with and an expansion of PAR theories about dialogue and being a mirror for organisations (Kildedal & Laursen, 2012; Pålshaugen 2014). Although research, in this case, was a collaborative effort, the process of collective identity involved different roles. The researcher was not part of the collective identity but was (often) seen as an outsider inside the process. When co-operating in collective action, the researcher became part of a “we”. One of the actions taken in the project was to write a collaborative book chapter about stigmatisation and language. Writing this, the other participants saw the researcher as part of the “we”, working together on an action to change the public identity of the group.

This article aims to describe the research knowledge our work revealed. This is the responsibility of the action researchers, and needs to be related to the research field as constructive supplements and critical perspectives to existing research (Pålshaugen, 2014).

Our analysis shows that collective action is possible among marginalised people affected by homelessness or substance use. The development of collective identity through boundary-making, consciousness-raising and negotiations was crucial for success. On the other hand, there were also substantial barriers on the cultural and structural levels. Heterogeneity seems to have contributed to more potent mobilisation: which is in line with earlier research (Granovetter, 1973; Marwell & Oliver, 1993), but this also made it hard to formulate a clear identity, which has been argued to be a necessary precondition for action (Croteau & Hicks, 2003; Taylor, 2013). Institutionalisation of social problems and fatalism were

challenges to the collective identity. However, these challenges also include possibilities for consciousness-raising, collective identity, and subsequently, collective action.

Their new collective identity as people who were capable of ‘doing it’ opened for new possibilities (Melucci, 1995), and empowerment. This included visions of what to create, as well as narratives of what was achieved, and what the collective was capable of. The collective identity is not just a change of mindset, it must be recognised and negotiated with the surroundings and materialised in social change. It is therefore dependent on action. Anti-stigma campaigns which do not attempt to address broader issues of poverty and discrimination risk solidifying hegemonic accounts (Tyler & Slater, 2018). The participants needed a place to live. The surrounding actors’ evaluation and recognition affected the material outcomes for the group: for example through lobbying for a house, and making strategic changes to the concepts for action. Without the material outcomes of the action, the foundations of the collective identity would probably have withered.

Strategies of changing public identity are about how people want to be represented. In looking at success in homeless mobilisation, Lemke stresses identity and a clear vision as criteria for success, especially emphasising the forging of collective identity through a name when changing the public identity (2016). Our findings show that a collective identity is not necessarily about a name, but about creating a ‘we’ and a horizon of possibilities and limits. In X-street mass communication was not the aim. Rather the aim was to illustrate: also for researchers, social workers and the fellow excluded, what was possible. In that sense, the action, the project and the house were just as important as the name.

Our action research project challenges the previous research position that homeless people are present- and ego-centred. This could rather be understood as a symbolic burden stemming from the public identity imposed on the participants (Farrugia, 2010), but one that is subject to change. Our findings of the creation of collective identity: understood as keeping a collective narrative going, long-term planning, investment in long-term ends, fixed-time meetings and attribution of outcomes to collective action and collective identity, are proof of solidarity and a sense of temporality among the participants. In fact, our material suggests that present-centredness could be something enforced upon people in rehabilitation, for example through refusal of proper planning tools like a daily planner. The notion of the present-centred homeless people legitimises exclusion and fatalism, and implicitly indicts the sufferers as unable to become democratic citizens (Loehwing 2010), thus creating another facet of the stigma of ‘the homeless person’ or ‘drug addict’. By attributing egotism and present centeredness to people in precarious situations, or upholding such a picture, symbolic barriers to collective identity and social movements can persist, causing further individualisation. Being present- and ego-centred and fatalistic, might also be a natural or common reaction to the homeless situation (Flåto & Johannessen, 2010), however an orientation that: as the action research project showed, can be changed under certain conditions. In this case these conditions included a somewhat stable housing and community, a purpose and ideological and social support from a change agent. These factors might prevent the condition of homelessness to generate personal outcomes like fatalism.

The collective identity in X-street did not appear without work and negotiations. There were differences between the early activist women who had struggled hard to be recognised

as capable of undertaking such a project, and the later participants (mostly men), who came straight from prison or rehab, and were accustomed to an institutional mindset. The latter expressed far less confidence in the project's aim and their own abilities in the beginning. The process of negotiating and reconciling these views was an ongoing process, intertwined with the collective action: the efforts and the achievements. The understanding of the situation was heavily influenced by this discrepancy. Without both the experiences of the "sticky pulp", and the experiences of "doing it", the understanding of the institutional mindset as a barrier would not be possible. This was a crucial element in the process of consciousness work, and in triggering the work on changing the public identity.

The collective identity, the 'we' in the X-street project encompassed contradictory meanings. There were differences between negotiations in private and in public, creating an identity for the group as well as a public identity. The collective identity was local, but flexible. When new people joined who did not have the same experiences as the first initiators, the collective identity proved flexible enough to integrate other people who struggled with having a home and work. However, it was not an all-encompassing solidarity project, including groups far away from each other. This suggests that solidarity and collective identity among different marginalised groups is possible, but the common feature of being stigmatised or precarious is not sufficient for such an identity. In X-street, intersectional identities of class, gender and ethnicity influenced the process of collective identity and enhanced the definition of who the project was for: moving from mobilising on behalf of *collective identity* to focusing on mobilising for an *issue* (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Conclusion

In this article we have shown how collective action and negotiations about collective identity can operate dynamically in an action research project, mobilising people who have experienced substance use and homelessness. X-street had both material aims of housing and work, and existential aims which were dependent on each other. Gains in one aspect enabled breakthroughs in the other. This process consisted of boundary work, consciousness work and negotiations. Consciousness work and negotiations seemed to be equally important for empowering this marginalised group to challenge the institutional mindset and the public identity of the present- and ego-centred homeless. There is a need for more process-oriented microstudies of collective action, to throw light on the possibilities for empowerment among marginalised groups.

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The article is based on the PAR project «Challenges of participation when service users autonomy is challenged 2018-2022» (CHAPAR) funded by The Research Council of Norway.