



OVERVIEW

Emancipation: process and conditions



CAPEJ

Research and Action
for Emancipatory Policies
for Youth

Emancipation: process and conditions

Emancipation through action-research

Through analysis of French and Belgian reports, we tried to determine how action-research projects help emancipate young people, professionals working with them, and elected officials. Under what conditions is the process triggered? Can action-research projects turn around the stigma some citizens have to live with (whether they are young people, professionals or elected representatives) and under what conditions can they gain political agency through liberation from guardianship, restraint, or social conventions?

The reports we collected varied in terms of what processes were undertaken, what methodologies were developed, and whether the emphasis was on research or on action. Not all of them addressed emancipation directly either, except those committed to action. So we do not pretend to have attained a global view of the question, nor will we draw any hasty conclusions about the role of research and emancipation, or even about participation, from those reports. Our own work will provide additional insights on the topic.





What do we mean by emancipation?

An in-depth analysis is superfluous here, and widely documented elsewhere, but it is useful to cite the definition of emancipation in French used in this project¹: “l’action d’affranchir, de s’affranchir d’une domination ou d’une servitude, d’une contrainte” (the action of freeing or being set free from domination, subjection or restraint). Its goal is a more or less radical transformation of the present situation toward a society unshackled from inequalitarian social relations². The concept itself is therefore related to social criticism, and seen as a capacity to question society, liberate the self from it, and transform it.

There is another element in our project’s title that bridges the gap between the individual dimension of emancipation and its collective, social, or in this case institutional, dimension: the mention of emancipatory policies. From a utopian standpoint, we’re talking about criticising social realities and imagining other possibilities. The social policies implemented for many years have not made lasting changes in the situations of young people and do not help all of them to attain and maintain their autonomy. If the paradigms used to set policy, and the actions taken in consequence, could durably impact the situation of young people, we would know about it.

A paradigm change toward emancipation is an opportunity to enlarge the debate beyond the individual dimension and include the possibility of a societal transformation as an alternative to replicating the same situations, inequalities and social injustice. So, the documents we analysed could be viewed through two prisms of emancipation, two paradigms that in some cases can be permeable to each other and that both, in their own way, address the question of how to empower young people. This could lead, on the one hand, to a more tailored approach to public policy (especially on the local level), with an emphasis on intersectionality, that could benefit the young person’s trajectory and integration, and, on the other hand, to what could be related to consideration of participation and the role of young people in the construction of public policy.

The analysis hereafter proposes a reading of the reports from those two standpoints: individual and collective/institutional. We propose to roll out the emancipation process and show which set-ups, in the action-research we analysed, engage that process or exclude it. We will also discern the emergence of what needs to be developed in the future. Depending on the situation we will take the viewpoint of youth, professionals and elected representatives.

1 The Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL) is a set of computerized linguistic resources and language processing tools created by the French national research centre CNRS. This definition appears in the dictionary of the Académie française, 9th edition <https://academie.atilf.fr/9/consulter/%C3%89MANCIPATION?options=motExact>

2 Cukier Alexis, Delmotte Fabien, Lavergne Cécile, Introduction, Émancipation, les métamorphoses de la critique sociale (Emancipation, Metamorphoses in Social Criticism), Ed. du Croquant, 2013, p.8.

The emancipation process

• DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM

Self-confidence and self-esteem are essential to the act of “daring to” (take a position, have an idea and say it out loud, etc.). Often, young people (and not-so-young people) feel they lack legitimacy to express their thoughts and suggestions. Supporting the development of self-esteem is therefore vital to help them take their role in society. From the literature:

Self-esteem is also based on the feeling of safety you have when you know you can rely on your own free will, abilities, and learning capacity to face life’s events and challenges responsibly and effectively³... The key to self-esteem lies in the process of conscientization: it is the clear consciousness one has of oneself, in terms of qualities and skills, as well as the capacity to preserve representations in one’s memory, to adapt them to new circumstances, and so to overcome difficulties, rise to challenges, and live in hope⁴.

All the reports showed that their approaches helped develop participants’ self-esteem, for both young people and professionals. Notably, the dynamics of participating were motivational in themselves: young people need and want to give their opinion and/or talk about their experiences (as life experts), to create change/improve things, and to participate in a collective movement to carry projects (rather than remain a “solitary dreamer”).

Valuing the competence and expertise of young people (which can sometimes mean compensating them, see the Samarcande project) is often mentioned in all the documents: just repeating how much has been accomplished, reporting on past work, making it visible and comprehensible for others, is a way of acknowledging participation. Sometimes, however, the contribution of the young people to the work is not acknowledged and they receive little feedback on what they have contributed (in the case of survey-based research projects). Yet that feedback is important.



3 de Saint Paul, *Estime de soi, confiance en soi (Self-esteem, Self-confidence)*, Paris, Inter-éditions, 1999, p 20

4 Germaine Duclos, *L'estime de soi, un passeport pour la vie (Self-esteem, a Passport for Life)*, 2004.

See Eric Le Grand, *L'estime de soi, un enjeu éducatif et social (Self-esteem, an educational and social lever)*, 2008



• CONSCIENTIZATION AND FEELING YOU BELONG

Conscientization is “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality”⁵. Several elements are needed to do that and they constitute social power (defined as all the representations – of oneself and of others – and the skills that make it possible to transcend social situations and take action on one’s environment⁶).

Supporting conscientization requires work, and that work was done in several of these projects. It may take the form of workshops to reflect on and analyse situations (community mapping workshops, reflective thinking practice, immersions, etc.). Such workshops can at first be a source of anxiety for professionals: so many of the methods for reflection and conscientization are too strict, too serious, and they terrify young people. But the reports show that these practices help young people, professionals, and elected representatives alike to work as a team and to review and revise what’s at stake for the group. In addition, taking time to reflect is an act of acknowledgement: the young people come back because they feel “this is serious” and that their concerns are being taken seriously. One researcher said “It makes it easier when they know that other people are in the same boat, then they realise that other people are going through similar things. The research framework helps them to talk about themselves with no expectation that they have to get it right.” (IWEPS report).

In a workshop, the situation may flip as people gain awareness: their lived experiences can be different. This is a sign that participants are shifting from a feeling of helplessness to conscience of their social power and ability to take action.

In the course of a workshop, young people realise that other people are having the same problems, which also helps them to express themselves more freely: “Yes, there was an impact because it helped them to understand that they were not alone in dealing with certain things, that those things were not their fault, that there were political and social responsibilities involved as well... seeing what other young people’s reality was like had an impact on them.” (Samarcande report), and furthermore: “they realise that we don’t all have the same chances, we don’t all come from the same place, and while some people have good luck in certain things, others don’t” (Report on the Student revolt).

5 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Bloomsbury Academic, 4th edition, 2018

6 Virginie Poujol, *L’accès à la puissance sociale, une étape primordiale de l’émancipation* (Access to social power, an essential step in emancipation), in *L’émancipation comme condition du politique, l’Agir social réinterrogé*, Ed. Edilivre, 2018



• POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Let us just recall that this is the process of inculcating standards and values organising how political power is perceived by social agents (vertical manifestation of power) and by social groups (horizontal manifestation)⁷. Experiencing action-research in real life – joining the dots between a research group's work and broader issues and on to the issues being addressed by public authorities – helps young people realise how democracy works, its mechanisms and deficiencies. This aspect of the emancipation process is only addressed implicitly in many projects and yet it takes work to accomplish it: theory must be compared to reality, with the assistance of professionals who can decode and decipher real-life situations, through meetings with elected representatives for instance. This helps to understand why there are limits on what can be done, that there are frameworks organising society, frameworks that may be surpassed (but never circumvented), which brings us to our next point.

• DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING AND THE EXISTENCE OF CONFLICT

Some research projects use the social sciences, i.e. outside resources to help develop critical thinking, at certain stages in their work when the time seems right within the process. Whether for young people or for the professionals working with them, this is an opportunity to understand what's behind the situation they're going through, to take a step back, and to nourish their thought process with more general considerations. This may require a researcher to participate in a discussion, or the young people may need to reach out to professionals or resource persons to understand how a public service works. But it is not often highly developed in the work we have reviewed, although it is essential to an emancipation process: understanding is the basis for action. Another element, recognizing the existence of conflict and expressing disagreement, is even more rarely addressed in the reports, and yet it is essential in learning to take a stand. A few tools are presented in the report on the PEER project, such as the walking debate⁸, that help to work on this.

7 Braud P., 2006 [8th edition; 1st edition: 1992], Sociologie politique (Political Sociology), Paris, LGDJ, Manuel.

8 The resource sheets in the toolbox provide some tools for this.



This attempt to detect elements that will nourish this stage in the process is not intended to propose a pedagogy of resistance but simply to outline the frameworks that make room for experimentation: to paraphrase Cingolani⁹ to create the conditions to experiment new social relations without obscuring power dynamics but with the aim of encouraging egalitarian relations between participants: What we need to fight tooth and nail for is not power, it is the space for free public discussion that gives people the courage to search their own minds and confront their own thoughts¹⁰.

Moreover, the lack of tangible progress toward social transformation in these reports (as the impact of action-research can be slow to unfold, and therefore difficult to detect directly) could also be a sign of this lack of work on conflict. As Boltanski points out, adjusting rules and norms is actually an endless series of tweaks: A world where emancipation is possible is not a world without rules. But it is a world where a rule is always open to interpretation and discussion¹¹.

• OPENING UP TO A LARGER PROCESS

This means re-appropriating public affairs¹², and shifting from individual reasoning to collective reasoning. We can see this happening when several groups working in parallel on the same subject come together to discuss and share their analyses (e.g. in the PEER and OEJAJ reports). Ways and means may vary but the process is always the same: showing participants that the topic they are working on is part of a larger process that concerns other groups helps them to weigh how the questions they are asking are in fact social issues and public affairs. This is also true for professionals: this kind of encounter – which should be scheduled from the very outset of a project – reminds them of what's at stake and how their action is part of something more global (as expressed for example by a researcher in the PIA action-research project).

• PRODUCING POLITICAL CONTENT AND TRANSFORMING THE ORIGINAL SITUATION: TAKING ACTION

Action is the stage in a project that promises to change the original situation. It is an opportunity to retake the power to change the environment (power to and not power over, which simply replicates domination patterns). The reports often mention empowerment, which explicitly refers to the question of power, or the power to take action, which implies a capacity to voluntarily act and set things in motion. These elements are an integral part of emancipation (individual and collective).

9 Patrick Cingolani, *Révolutions précaires, Essai sur l'avenir de l'émancipation*

(*Unsteady Revolutions, an essay on the future of emancipation*), La Découverte, 2014, p. 7.

10 François Galichet, *L'émancipation. Se libérer des dominations (Emancipation. Shaking off dominations)*. Lyon, *Chronique sociale*, 2014, p.58

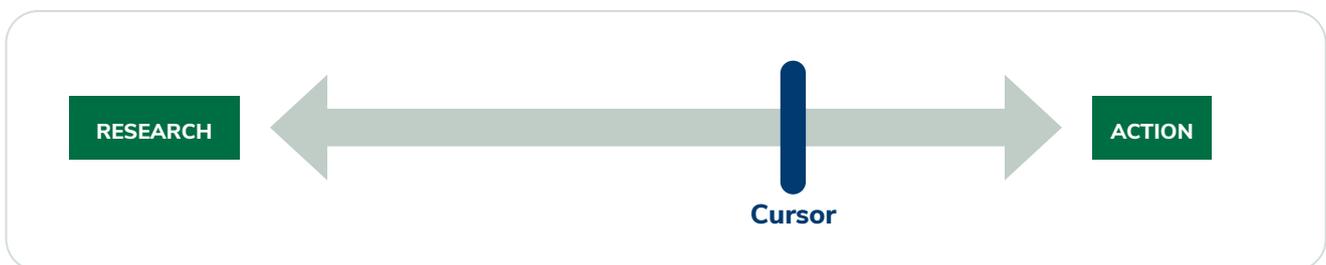
11 Luc Boltanski, *On Critique, A Sociology of Emancipation*, quoted from the French edition, Gallimard, 2009, p. 50

12 Pascal Nicolas Le Strat, *Le travail du commun (Work on the Commons)*, Ed. du Commun, 2016, p.28

This part also needs to be accompanied: the project's dynamics will create momentum but what comes next must be carefully constructed so that the success of the transformation process, at least what is visible of it, is not limited to a political engagement, to an affirmative answer to what the young people are asking for. Developing critical thinking skills and working on conflict also means understanding that some things are not possible, and why that is, always with the option of returning to the issue and acting on it at some later date. These are aspects that acknowledge young people and professionals as political agents, and making the result of a process visible through action helps secure that acknowledgement and strengthens the competencies developed by the young people.

Modalities supporting production of political content and emancipation

We note that approaches that explicitly emphasise action are the ones that will propose new political content. Approaches that are more research-oriented have more difficulties in finding spaces to experiment the results of their work.



This is the case with the “PIA” action-research projects, where tangible effects toward transformation of the initial situation are not yet visible in public policy. Still, to transform the action of public authorities, the reports insist on a need for a change in posture: a need to get out of the box, instead of following a project management approach (which can be very foreign to institutional culture). In these two projects each participant, within his/her institution, was able to become a mediator and transformer of public action. Implementation of the posture shift and effects towards transformation were mainly the result of an organisational change in project governance, which over time surpassed the basic steering committee model and evolved into a learning collective (or even in some cases adopted the sociocracy model).

For the young people specifically, in action-research projects that are more research-oriented, it is noteworthy that despite a stated, sincere intention to co-construct with those young people and have “them” participate in writing the public policy that will impact them, their “role is still a subject of debate and remains limited (are the young people who come to forums where discussions are held really the ones in need, are they representative? etc.). Similarly, some young people can – given current suspicions of the political class in general – be difficult to include in these dynamics. Obviously traditional ways of doing things may not be suitable for today’s youth, but other elements can help in co-construction. For instance, within the Youth in TTT project, progress was made on the idea of “going where the young people are” . In fact, developing and driving actions and reflection on how to “go out and find them” have been useful in empowering and emancipating young people in more than one way: first, by forging or restoring trust between professionals, elected representatives, and young people, and second, by helping to develop young people’s own initiatives once in contact with the political world. However, this “outreach to elected representatives” implies preparation on both sides, young people and elected representatives, to enable them to “hear” each other. In the Y-Nove project in Grenoble, one idea was to create a number of “agoras”, i.e. public spaces to encourage that dialogue.

More action-oriented action-research produces actual changes at the scale of the territory where the young people live: these may range from relations in places of learning (Student revolt), to development of an economic activity (Mulundi), mobility or discriminations (PEER), etc. They are an opportunity for young people to self-identify as actors in their territory’s future, to invent and claim a new role, and to break free from the place they have always been assigned.

In terms of effects on public policy, the processes that do not directly mobilise young people, or in any case that do not associate them in every stage, seem more likely to produce structural effects. The research confers legitimacy, validating the transformations suggested by the teams supporting the action-research.

Even when results are not directly visible, the approaches observed through the reports still seem to kick-start change in institutional practice, especially when action-research with young people is accompanied by those very institutions.



Good conditions for emancipation: some thoughts on posture

• FOR PROFESSIONALS

When a professional commits to work on a project, he or she has an intimate belief that the topic being researched with the young people is of real interest, and not just an opportunity to develop the young people's competence. Working with young people is not simply to empower them: the professional also finds an interest in it. "At first we were afraid of instrumentalizing the young people, but most of all we really wanted to enlarge our understanding of how they experience coming of age." For professionals, the subject of the research must never become an alibi while actually pursuing a professional objective. This kind of egalitarian posture helps build trust, bring young people into the group, and embolden them to speak freely in a safe space: "the guarantee of confidentiality and that no names appear in the transcripts, the right to delete their words from the transcripts, the assurance that what happens in the group stays in the group, the insistence the young people treat each other with respect as they testify, etc." The first step is to determine what the young people really want: How can a project bring an institution's attention to what a young person is asking for, even if it will not provide direct access to the job market? How can I accompany young people in their research process, even if it upsets and contradicts the policy of the institution financing my structure, when I know the topic is of real importance to the young people?

All the reports show that having a professional to accompany the process is essential to its success. It is a role akin to transmission of a methodology, or to mentoring. The professional provides his/her competence and knowledge to the young people's project. That then allows him/her to take a new stance and confirm his/her role as a social intermediary, contributing in this way to social transformation.

Finally, and obviously, the professional sets up an empowering framework to allow the young people to share a lived collective experience, enjoy some positive experiences, experiment new social relations, get to know other young people, and explore a different horizon outside their usual assigned place.



Use I-statements



**Respect for
self, others and
property**



**Right to a joker.
Participation not
mandatory**

- FOR RESEARCHERS

The action-research projects questioned what role knowledge should play and how to use it, as it can introduce domination in relationships. To support an emancipation process, existing knowledge on a given topic should aid the group in their reflection, meaning it should be provided at the appropriate time. This doesn't mean that existing research can't be used, but that it must be appropriated (there are ways of appropriating information like surveying, or arpentage in French, to help make texts more accessible) and always used toward action.

- FOR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES AND ASSOCIATION POLICYMAKERS

The key is to consider that questioning is not criticising, and therefore not to panic if a conflict arises (around the elements mentioned above). When young people arrive with questions about public policy, bear in mind that their contribution can really help improve that policy's effectiveness and relevance. It is the role of social intermediaries to implicate elected representatives and association policymakers from the very outset of a project, so that they are equal partners, all working together. Recognition of every participant, each in their own role, helps to emancipate not only the young people but everyone taking part in the process.





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