

Re-make Action: Collective Achievement, Social Change and Children

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Abstract: This paper explores how collective achievement can move social change through children in «The Barter of Wonders». This is an action research project which started in 2018 to foster a more attentive and aware community through children, who will be the adults of tomorrow and who carry the message to their families. This is a project designed to raise awareness among children and their families on issues such as reuse, gift, friendship, which become a lifestyle through play. It started as a service within the Lions club «Apulia of Heritage and Citizens» (District 108 Ab – Apulia), and, since it was designed, The Laboratory of Communication and Empowerment of Places of the University of Salento (Department of Human and Social Science), has conceived and coordinated the research. These stakeholders have worked together to build a cyclical event that resembles a bazaar, where children can exchange their “wonders” and learn together, having fun, playing, and exchanging knowledge. The wonders to be exchanged are displayed on sack cloths sewn by the inmates of the Lecce prison with pieces of recycled and donated fabric, symbols of the new life towards which «The Barter of Wonders» wants to direct our path. This project was not simply presented to children: it was created with them through focus groups, social media surveys, semi-structured interviews and other actions that we designed during the project to intercept feedback from real or potential users. The research explores how collective action can affect social change, advocating a new paradigm that involves and affects all of our roles and functions. «The Barter of Wonders» looks at the gift as an element through which men create society by tightening bonds. The gift, here, is a social glue that creates relationships, establishes mutual obligations, and builds connections. The results achieved activate a molar learning mechanism through which people of different social backgrounds, ethnicities, interests are induced to interact and learn more or less consciously from each other.

Keywords: Collective Action Men, Social Change, Children, Communication, Relation, Gift, Barter, Social Capital

1. Introduction

Can collective action achieve social change through children? This is the question which led to the creation of «The Barter of Wonders», an action research project set up in Puglia (Italy) in 2018 and still ongoing.

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(Department of Human and Social Sciences), has conceived and coordinated the research.

The research explores how collective action can affect social change, advocating a new paradigm that involves and affects all of our roles and functions.

The research aims to verify if, and in what way, «The Barter of Wonders» can offer itself as a device capable of activating social capital starting with children and childhood.

«The Barter of Wonders» bridges the gap between applied research and voluntary association on the one hand, and between research and society on the other, using channels of collective involvement to transform places and their inhabitants.

2. Backgrounds Arguments

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives and Actor's Project

Embodying the quintuple helix innovation model of Carayannis, Barth and Campbell [6], which requires a strong interaction between environment, academia, industry, civil society and government, «The Barter of Wonders» is rebuilding the bonds of communities that have degenerated over time.

This is possible through the creation of an event that repeats itself over time and becomes a daily habit and lifestyle. For this reason, since its construction, the project has created a steering committee made up of University of Salento (lab.COM - Laboratory of Communication and Empowerment of Places), Lions International (Lions Club Apulia of Heritage and Citizens), Municipality of Lecce, civic library «The Theatines in the Meantime», Archaeology Heritage Office for the provinces of Lecce Brindisi and Taranto, and Lecce Prison. This institutional network, in continual expansion, has made it possible to activate eight curricular internship projects for students of the University of Salento enrolled in the three-year degree courses in «Sociology» and the master's degree in «Sociology and Social Research». In addition, two Spanish sociologists (a graduate student from the University of Valencia and a sociologist from the University of Cadiz) have worked on this research project through the Erasmus learning agreement.

The success of this initiative is bringing «The Barter of Wonders» to other cities, schools, and squares. Its dynamic format, always ready to change and adapt to the location, together with the social actors involved, the expectations, the target actions, the responses that emerge, enable reticular mechanisms to be created, mechanisms in which there is a continuous and integrated exchange of needs, practices, responses [13]. Sharing this project spreads the cultural message through multiple channels.

My hypothesis is that the «Barter of Wonders» can act as an incubator for "communities of practice", as Etienne Wenger would say [15].

This paper explains how «The Barter of Wonders» networked and built a generative communication strategy capable of transforming an event into a cultural project able to foster a more attentive and aware community through children, who will be the adults of tomorrow and who carry the message to their families, to create a better, more connected, society, according to Caill  [4].

2.2. The Social Action

«The Barter of Wonders» is a cyclical event that resembles a bazaar, where children can exchange their «wonders» (and whatever is in good condition, but they no longer use), and above all it becomes a place where they can be together, learn while having fun, play, exchange knowledge.

They exchange their games, books they have already read, DVDs, puzzles, stickers, clothes, but also an artifact, a story, a nursery rhyme, their artistic, singing, theatrical skills... Space for creativity!



Figure 1. «The Barter of Wonders» is an event that resembles a bazaar.

In «The Barter of Wonders» even a thank you and a smile become a bargaining chip.

The «wonders» to be exchanged are displayed on the sack cloths sewn by the inmates of the Lecce prison with pieces of recycled and donated fabric, symbols of the new life towards which «The Barter of Wonders» wants to direct our path (figure 2 – figure 3).



Figure 2. Little girls on the sack cloths of The Barter of Wonders.

Each appointment is a great party where children, parents and grandparents spend their free time being together and living as «total social fact», as defined by Marcel Mauss [7], where the exchange becomes a relationship. The gift here is not just a practice of exchange, but a social glue that creates relationships, establishes mutual obligations, it is a way to build networks of alliances that put into circulation tangible and intangible assets, creating connections.

Our project starts with children, but it was not simply made and given to them, it was, and continues to be, designed with them: a moment of human regeneration through children. We planned the activities in advance, together, setting ourselves goals and analyzing the results obtained each time.

Before, during and after the closure of the project we carried out three focus groups with children aged four to eleven identified through schools, parishes and social networks, to explore how they wanted to carry out the initiative starting from the proposed project, what they expected, what they proposed to make it become bigger and bigger.

In the focus group setting, children are encouraged and stimulated to explain the frames that regulate their actions in words and images.

This allows us to bring out implicit dynamics, questioning not only some codified and habitual behaviors, but also the project itself.

In the first focus group we presented the project to eight children and asked them what they thought about it.

The second focus group, with ten children, was used to test the results of the social action and transform the event with respect to their ever-changing needs.

The last focus group, with twelve children, was useful for testing the results achieved in relation to their point of view.

In addition, we designed actions in the course of work to intercept feedback from real or potential users (emotion box, suggestion box, creation of social media surveys...). To develop the analysis of the case study, we also used the participant observation technique and held 100 semi-structured interviews.



Figure 3. Little boys on the sack cloths of *The Barter of Wonders*.



Figure 4. A photography workshop starting from a simple cardboard box.

Through the analysis of the results which emerged from it, we think that «The Barter of Wonders» can offer itself as a device capable of activating “bridging” social capital, according to Putnam [8].

“Bridging” social capital, has open arms to welcome people indiscriminately, and welcomes diversity, creating relationships [11]. It is the unifying power of individuals who share the same interests [14].

“Bridging” social capital becomes a glue capable of building, strengthening, and keeping a network of relationships based on trust and reciprocity.



Figure 5. The gift is a social glue that creates relationships.

3. Results and Discussion

Our bold research idea, which aimed to turn a children's market into a space for community empowerment, was reflected in the results that emerged.

«The Barter of Wonders» is not simply a space in which children are personally committed to sharing things, activities, knowledge, recovering forgotten games, avoiding unnecessary waste, and helping to grow a more attentive and aware community [12].

The barter that takes place here, is above all a cultural barter, because it activates a molar learning mechanism against which people of different social backgrounds, ethnicities, interests, are induced to interact and learn more or less consciously from each other.

We have not simply put together already tested practices: we have tried to deconstruct them, thinking in an “open” way, as Richard Sennett would say [10].

This means that we have not limited ourselves to analyzing «The Barter of Wonders» as a social fact, but we have tried to transform reality while creating it, activating medium-long term structural transformation processes (generative communication) [5]. Thus, the research underlying this project becomes a social and political intervention that uses collective channels of involvement to transform the places and the people who inhabit them.

In this way the «The Barter of Wonders» is offered as a time of sharing, hospitality, respect for the environment and personal growth, a real precious habit, a lifestyle that produces social action right away from the children, the adults of tomorrow.

Many ideas and solicitations have emerged from children. The main ones are listed below.

The children proposed not only exchanging things, but also stories, knowledge, and skills. In bartering, it is not just the exchange of objects: I can give a game for a story, a hug, a song, or I can exchange an experience...

Thus, in the different declinations that characterized the various appointments, we hosted a small artist, who painted his own work of art with canvas and tempera; a nursery rhymes workshop to learn to write in rhyme; a moment dedicated to forgotten games, where grandparents, parents and children competed together; the science laboratory told to the “scientific illiterates”, where two researchers from the Contamination Lab of the University of Salento experimented with children an innovative “wow” educational technology based on the research game; a photography workshop starting from a simple cardboard box; “Let's play different” with the Leos of the Lions 108Ab Puglia district, a game that aims to encourage the integration of those who live with a disability, allowing everyone to different experiences and see the reality that surrounds us with new eyes.

The young participants chose not to manage their own exhibition space alone, but in groups at least of two or more children. Furthermore, we found that children want rules: The project initially excluded rules to allow them the

freedom to express themselves, but the protagonists clamoured for them, in order to have a frame of reference.

4. Conclusion

Every research project is the achievement of goals that are new starting points.

«The Barter of Wonders» offers itself as a seed that can germinate, if we cultivate it and if we choose to embody the world made with us, and of us, in a “glocal” [9] process that solicits old new forms of consumption promoting values such as trust, reciprocity, solidarity, sustainability, social inclusion. «The Barter of Wonders» looks at the gift as an element through which men create society by tightening bonds.

For this reason, «The Barter of Wonders» has been re-proposed over time in different contexts and different ways: at school it has become the starting point for looking at culture not as a finished product, but as a supply chain capable of soliciting, activating, cultivating relationships; at the University, during the Researchers' Night, it was the pretext to show how research can become a social and political intervention that uses collective channels of involvement to transform the places and people who live there; in the square, we showed how it is possible to connect the world of research with citizenship education.

The pillar in this project is the “gift”: giving as a gesture that allows us to establish relationships. The gift is never free, because the donor expects a counter-donation. Yet, in the gift there is never a guarantee of return: the recipient is free to choose whether to reciprocate or not. The difference between gift and mercantile exchange lies in the freedom of choice on the part of the recipient. Rereading in a modern key Marcel Mauss's concept of the gift as a “total social fact” [7], Alain Caillé proposes looking at the gift as an element through which men create society by tightening bonds [1-3]. It is on these assumptions that “The barter of wonders” is based, extending the gift paradigm to children.

Starting from children and childhood, we can re-make together the future that we want, but only if we really want it.

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