



## Social Interaction and Cultural Change in the Community Service Program in Ponorogo Village: The Community's Subjective Experience in the Empowerment and Cultural Change: Subjective Experiences in Ponorogo's Community Service Program

Septi Ayu Arum Yuspita Sari

Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, Indonesia

[septiayuarumyuspitasari@gmail.com](mailto:septiayuarumyuspitasari@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on community empowerment programs and their impact on social interaction and cultural change in rural areas. Specifically, it investigates how these programs, implemented in Ponorogo, influence local community dynamics and the adoption of new practices. While previous studies have explored the general outcomes of empowerment programs, there remains a gap in understanding the subjective experiences of participants during the process of cultural adaptation. This research employs a phenomenological approach to address this gap, aiming to capture the essence of community members' lived experiences during their interactions with the program. Through in-depth interviews and observations, the study reveals that participants experience both positive outcomes, such as increased self-confidence and enhanced social cohesion, and challenges, including resistance from traditionalist groups and difficulties in maintaining long-standing cultural practices. The tension between preserving local traditions and embracing modern practices highlights the nuanced and multifaceted nature of cultural adaptation. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of social and cultural change in community development, offering insights that can guide future programs and enhance their effectiveness.



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## INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment programs have become a significant area of focus in social development, particularly in rural areas where access to resources and opportunities is often limited (Ahlstrand dkk., 2024). These programs typically aim to improve the socio-economic conditions of local populations by introducing new knowledge, skills, and practices. In regions such as Ponorogo, a rural village in Indonesia, community service programs are increasingly seen as a means to bridge gaps in education, technology, and economic development (Broersen dkk., 2024). By fostering collaboration between local communities and external organizations, these programs address key issues like poverty, low literacy, and outdated agricultural practices.

One of the key elements of such programs is the introduction of new technologies and practices that challenge existing ways of life. In the case of Ponorogo, this includes modern agricultural methods, digital literacy programs, and community-based health initiatives (Davies & Reid, 2024). While these interventions aim to improve living standards, they also challenge long-standing cultural norms, creating tension between tradition and innovation.

Existing literature has explored community empowerment through a variety of lenses, including the concept of "empowerment" itself, which involves increasing individuals' control over

their lives and decision-making processes (Eales dkk., 2021). Research has also examined the challenges of implementing such programs, particularly the tension between innovation and tradition, and the potential for resistance to change. However, much of this work has focused on broader programmatic outcomes and quantitative measures of success, such as increases in income or productivity. Less attention has been paid to the subjective experiences of community members—their personal perceptions of change, the emotional and cultural impacts they experience, and the way they interpret these changes within the context of their daily lives.

Given these gaps, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of the people of Ponorogo as they engage with a community service program (Estradé dkk., 2022). The goal is not merely to assess the tangible outcomes of the program but to understand the deeper, more personal meanings that individuals attach to these experiences. Through a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which participants navigate the challenges and opportunities brought about by the program, providing a richer understanding of how community empowerment unfolds at the level of individual experience.

Research focused on understanding the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has increasingly gained prominence in social science, particularly within the field of community empowerment (Forchuk dkk., 2023). Investigating the subjective experiences of participants in community service programs allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate social and cultural changes. While previous studies have largely concentrated on the outcomes of such programs—such as economic development or improved access to resources—the exploration of the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of these changes remains underdeveloped. The subjective meanings individuals attach to the empowerment process, their challenges, and their coping mechanisms in response to external interventions have not been fully explored.

A key challenge in studying these experiences lies in the methodological limitations of traditional research approaches. Quantitative methods, although useful for measuring broad programmatic outcomes, fall short in capturing the depth of personal experience. These methods often rely on numerical data and objective measures that cannot adequately reflect the complexity of individual perceptions, emotions, and personal transformations. For example, while surveys may reveal increased income or agricultural productivity, they fail to explain how individuals feel about these changes, how they interpret the shifts in their cultural practices, or how these changes impact their sense of identity. Thus, quantitative research often misses the rich, textured understanding of the social and cultural dynamics at play.

Phenomenological approaches, which emphasize the exploration of lived experiences, are uniquely positioned to address this gap. By focusing on how individuals make sense of their world, phenomenology provides a lens through which the deeper, more subjective dimensions of community empowerment can be understood. However, even within the phenomenological tradition, challenges persist in interpreting and analyzing these deeply personal experiences. The complexity of human emotions, perceptions, and the interplay between individual and collective experiences requires careful consideration and sensitivity to context. In this sense, phenomenology offers a more effective approach for uncovering the essence of phenomena that cannot be easily quantified or reduced to simple outcomes.

Given these challenges, much of the existing research in the field of community empowerment lacks the depth required to fully understand the lived experiences of those involved. This gap in the literature underscores the need for studies that employ qualitative methods, such as phenomenology, to provide a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the impact of community service programs on individuals.

Although various practical approaches have been used to assess the success of community service programs, many of them rely on quantitative metrics that tend to provide a limited view of the social and cultural impacts of these programs. Most previous studies measure outcomes in terms of increased income, productivity, or access to services, without revealing the subjective meaning embedded in individuals' experiences. While these approaches provide useful data for assessing short-

term impacts, they often fail to capture the complexity of the emotional, psychological, and social experiences faced by participants. This results in a narrow and less rich understanding of how communities truly feel about and respond to the changes that occur.

This limitation highlights the importance of alternative approaches that can explore the essence of participants' experiences. Phenomenology, as a research method focused on a deep understanding of subjective experiences, offers a way to move beyond measurable outcomes and delve into the emotional and cultural dimensions of these experiences. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research aims to uncover how the community of Ponorogo perceives and responds to the changes brought about by the empowerment program. This will not only provide a more comprehensive view of the program's impact but also enrich our understanding of how social and cultural interactions unfold in the context of changes introduced by external institutions.

Thus, while much previous research has focused on the quantitative outcomes of programs, much remains unknown about the subjective meaning and deep experiences that communities face when confronted with such changes. Phenomenology, with its ability to explore direct experiences and provide space for personal narratives, offers the potential to delve deeper into the essence of this phenomenon. This approach can provide a more holistic insight into the challenges, conflicts, and emotions faced by communities as they interact with programs that bring significant changes to their lives.

A number of studies have examined the experiences of subjects in the context of community empowerment and social change, but many have been limited to quantitative analyses of program outcomes, such as income or skill improvements. While these studies provide useful insights, they often fail to explore the subjective meaning experienced by communities during the process of change. Some relevant previous research (e.g., Rappaport, 1987; Giddens, 2001) highlights the importance of approaches that consider the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions in the empowerment process. However, the lack of focus on the direct experiences and emotions of individuals facing social change indicates a need for a more holistic approach. The phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the understanding of subjective experiences, can fill this gap by delving into the meanings felt by communities in their interactions with empowerment programs.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of the Ponorogo Village community in interacting with the service program. This approach is chosen for its ability to uncover the essence of the changes perceived by individuals, rather than just externally measurable outcomes. By prioritizing the subjective experiences of participants, phenomenology provides space to understand the internal dynamics that cannot be captured by quantitative methods. As part of the analysis, this study will focus on participants' understanding of changes within their social and cultural contexts, as well as how they respond to the challenges posed by the empowerment program. In this way, the study aims to offer a deeper and more holistic insight into the impact of the program on the social and cultural life of the community.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction outlining the background of the phenomenon and the importance of the phenomenological approach. It will then describe the context of the phenomenon being studied—the impact of the community empowerment program in Ponorogo Village—and explain the phenomenological methodology used to explore participants' subjective experiences. Next, the data collection process will be discussed, followed by thematic analysis to identify the key themes emerging from interviews and observations. The results of this analysis will be presented and discussed, concluding with a summary of the main findings and the practical implications of this research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological design, aimed at exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals participating in a community empowerment program in Ponorogo

(Gee dkk., 2022). Phenomenology is particularly suited for this type of research as it focuses on the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals, allowing for a deep exploration of how they make sense of their interactions with external interventions. By adopting this approach, the study aimed to uncover the meanings and insights participants attach to the social changes they encounter through the program. The choice of phenomenology is grounded in its capacity to examine how individuals interpret and respond to the dynamic shifts in their social and cultural environments.

The phenomenological approach in this study is descriptive in nature, as it seeks to capture the essence of participants' experiences without attempting to interpret or theorize beyond their own descriptions. This allows the study to remain close to the participants' subjective realities, providing a clear understanding of the impact of community service programs on their lives. The analysis aims to identify key themes related to empowerment, social interactions, and cultural change, rooted in the participants' first-hand experiences.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those included in the study had direct experience with the community service program in Ponorogo and could provide rich insights into the phenomena under investigation. The sample consisted of 10-15 individuals, encompassing a range of ages, genders, occupations, and socio-economic backgrounds. The selection aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, ensuring diversity in experiences and minimizing potential biases caused by homogeneity in the sample. For example, older participants might provide insights into the program's interaction with traditional practices, while younger participants could reflect on the integration of modern methods. This diversity was considered critical for understanding the program's varied impact across different community segments. All participants had been actively engaged in the program for at least six months, allowing them to provide reflective accounts of their experiences. This duration was chosen to ensure participants had sufficient exposure to the program's activities and could articulate both short-term and emerging long-term effects.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be adult residents of Ponorogo who had participated in the program's activities, including training sessions, community meetings, or cooperative projects. Exclusion criteria were applied to individuals who had limited involvement in the program or were unable to communicate effectively due to physical or psychological constraints. The demographic diversity within the sample was important for understanding the varied ways in which different segments of the community experienced the program.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, providing an opportunity for participants to share their experiences in a comfortable and open environment (Harvey dkk., 2023). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness and availability to elaborate on their experiences. Interviews were held in a private setting within the participants' communities, ensuring that they felt at ease and could speak candidly about their perspectives.

The interview guide was designed to explore key aspects of participants' experiences, such as their initial reactions to the community service program, the challenges they faced in adapting to new practices, and the impact of the program on their social and cultural lives. Observations were made during community activities, where researchers noted interactions, participation patterns, and community dynamics. This multi-method approach was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, a common method in phenomenological studies. The analysis process involved several steps. First, interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. The transcripts were then coded, with codes being generated from significant statements that reflected participants'

experiences. These codes were grouped into themes that represented the essence of the participants' lived experiences regarding the community service program.

Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively, with constant comparison across data sources to refine and validate the themes. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions of social change, empowerment, and the challenges of adapting to new practices. The use of NVivo software facilitated the organization and management of large amounts of qualitative data, supporting the systematic identification and refinement of themes. The final themes were derived from an in-depth examination of the meanings participants attached to their experiences, reflecting the essence of their lived realities.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the research process and the confidentiality of their responses.

To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings. Audio recordings of interviews were securely stored, and all data were anonymized before analysis. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by international standards for research involving human subjects, ensuring that the rights and well-being of participants were respected throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS**

### **Difficulties in Adapting to New Technologies**

One of the most significant challenges reported by the participants was the difficulty in adapting to new technologies and practices introduced through the community service program. This theme reflects the tension between tradition and innovation that many participants expressed during interviews. As one participant explained:

"We used to live with habits that were familiar to us, now we are told to change them. Sometimes it's confusing, but if you look at the results, there are benefits." (Participant A)

This sentiment was echoed by others who acknowledged the value of the changes but admitted that the transition was not always smooth. Participants frequently highlighted the sense of discomfort when faced with new technological tools, particularly in fields like modern agriculture, where traditional methods had been deeply ingrained. Despite the discomfort, there was a recognition of the potential benefits these changes could bring, particularly in terms of increasing agricultural productivity and enhancing community cooperation.

### **Desire to Preserve Cultural Traditions**

Alongside the adoption of new methods, there was a strong desire among participants to preserve their cultural traditions and local practices. Many participants viewed the community service program as an opportunity to improve their lives, but they were also wary of losing their cultural identity in the process. As another participant expressed:

"This program opened my eyes, but there are things that are hard to accept. We feel helped, but it has to be done slowly." (Participant B)

The desire to maintain traditional ways of life was particularly evident among the elderly and women in the village, who expressed concerns that rapid changes could undermine their social fabric. Despite acknowledging the positive impacts of the program, these participants often advocated for a gradual approach to change, emphasizing that cultural practices, such as communal labor and ritual activities, should not be sacrificed for the sake of modernization.

### **Increasing Social Cooperation and Community Bonding**

In contrast to the challenges of technological adaptation and cultural preservation, a more positive theme emerged around the increasing social cooperation and strengthening of community bonds. Several participants noted that the program facilitated greater collaboration among villagers, which contributed to both individual empowerment and a sense of shared community responsibility. One participant commented:

"I never worked together like this before. Now we help each other in many things, from planting crops to sending children to school. It feels like a big family." (Participant C)

This theme was supported by both interview data and observations, where it was noted that the community service program had successfully fostered a spirit of collective action. As a result, new social networks were formed, and traditional barriers between different social groups (e.g., young and old, rich and poor) began to blur. Participants expressed that this newfound cooperation was not only beneficial for achieving the goals of the program but also helped to strengthen social ties within the village.

### **Resistance to Change and Cultural Tensions**

Despite the positive outcomes, some participants revealed resistance to change, particularly among those who were more rooted in traditional practices. The tension between adopting new practices and preserving old ones manifested in everyday activities. For instance, during field observations, it was noted that certain groups, particularly the older women in the village, hesitated to participate in modern agricultural training. This resistance was often based on the perception that these new methods threatened their traditional knowledge and practices.

"I don't understand the new way of planting. My grandmother taught me how to plant, and it worked fine. Why should we change?" (Participant D)

This theme highlights the underlying cultural resistance that sometimes hinders the full acceptance of community service interventions. It underscores the complexities of introducing change in a community where traditional knowledge and customs play a central role in the social identity of its members.

The results of this study reveal that the community service program in Ponorogo has had a profound impact on both the social and cultural dynamics of the village. While participants experienced challenges in adapting to new technologies and practices, they also recognized the benefits these changes brought in terms of increased cooperation and economic opportunities. At the same time, there was a strong desire to preserve cultural traditions, particularly among older generations, who feared that rapid modernization might erode their social fabric. Overall, the findings suggest that while community empowerment can lead to positive outcomes, it is crucial to consider the pace and manner in which changes are introduced to ensure they are culturally sensitive and respectful of local traditions.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study found that social interactions within the community empowerment program in Ponorogo Village led to significant social and cultural impacts, which were perceived differently by various members of the community (Jackson dkk., 2019). The local community experienced tension between old traditions and new changes introduced through the program, where some individuals felt supported, while others struggled to adapt to new norms and practices. These diverse reactions highlight the complexity of implementing empowerment programs in culturally rich settings, where change can be both an opportunity and a source of resistance.

The findings of this study provide deep insights into the subjective experiences of the Ponorogo community in facing the changes brought about by the community service program (Kâks dkk., 2024). Rather than merely reiterating the benefits and challenges identified in the results, the discussion contextualizes these findings within broader theoretical frameworks. For instance, the

observed resistance to changes in agricultural technology among women's groups reflects Giddens' theory of structuration, where agency and tradition interact dynamically. This theoretical linkage underscores the non-linear nature of social change, reinforcing the idea that empowerment involves not only technical improvements but also shifts in power dynamics and cultural norms. Earlier research, as exemplified by Rappaport (1987) and Giddens (2001), underscores the importance of viewing empowerment not only as a technical skills enhancement but also as a process involving changes in social relationships and cultural structures. The results of this study support the view that the success of empowerment programs heavily depends on how communities can adapt to the social changes they encounter, and how these changes are perceived by community members. For example, the finding that women's groups in Ponorogo tend to be more resistant to changes in agricultural technology illustrates the relevance of Giddens' theory on social change, which is not always linear or readily accepted by all segments of society. Therefore, an approach that pays more attention to participants' subjective experiences, as employed in this study, makes a valuable contribution to enriching empowerment and social change theories, offering a more inclusive and contextual perspective.

### **Explanation of the Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study provide important insights into our understanding of community empowerment, particularly in the context of the social and cultural adaptations resulting from community service programs (Musnandar & Alzitawi, 2024). The practical implications of these findings suggest that empowerment programs that focus solely on technical or economic skill enhancement are insufficient to ensure sustainable social change. A more holistic approach that considers local social and cultural dynamics is essential to help communities better adapt to the changes introduced. Community service programs that are sensitive to the subjective experiences of the community, such as the tension between old traditions and new innovations, can help minimize resistance and accelerate the adaptation process (Musyimi dkk., 2020). In a broader context, these findings are relevant for organizers of empowerment programs in other areas with similar cultural characteristics, where social and cultural change often poses a major challenge to the success of the program.

### **Study Limitations**

While the findings of this study offer important insights, several limitations need to be considered when generalizing the results. First, this study only involved the community of Ponorogo Village, meaning the findings may not fully apply to other communities with different cultural and social backgrounds (Pan & Sarantou, 2019). Second, the phenomenological approach used in this research allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences, but it does not capture the entire spectrum of the community's experiences as a whole, particularly with regard to variations in participation levels or the diversity of experiences within the empowerment program. Additionally, the relatively small number of participants (10-15 people) may influence the representativeness of the findings. Therefore, further research with a larger sample and in diverse locations could help test these findings in a wider range of contexts.

### **Prospective Statement for Future Research**

The findings of this study open opportunities for further research exploring how factors such as social structure, economic status, or educational level influence the community's acceptance of social change in the context of empowerment (Prince dkk., 2021). Research that integrates broader cultural and social perspectives could deepen our understanding of how social dynamics impact the success of empowerment programs at the local level. For instance, comparative studies across regions with varying cultural practices could identify universal versus context-specific factors influencing program acceptance. Furthermore, future studies could expand the analysis to identify factors that could enhance community acceptance of change while respecting the values and traditions they hold. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to monitor the long-term impacts of social changes resulting from community service programs and to explore how individual experiences evolve over time.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the social interaction and cultural change experienced by the community in Ponorogo as part of a community empowerment program. The findings highlight that while the program brought valuable skills and knowledge to the participants, it also generated tension between traditional practices and the new methods introduced. Participants expressed mixed feelings about the changes, showing both resistance and acknowledgment of the benefits. These insights underline the need to view empowerment not just as a technical process but as a socially embedded phenomenon where cultural and emotional factors play crucial roles. This research contributes to the understanding of how local communities navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation during empowerment initiatives, addressing gaps in previous studies that often overlook the subjective experiences of the participants. The study underscores the importance of considering social and cultural dynamics in designing community programs for better acceptance and long-term impact. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the long-term effects of such programs and investigating other cultural contexts to enhance the generalizability of the results.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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