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>> Version of Record - Dec 15, 2010

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 30, 2010

What is This?

Between idealism and reality: Meeting the challenges of participatory action research

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) is a methodological stance that researchers can find both inspiring and daunting. Community-based PAR offers a platform by which social scientists can contribute to the democratization of knowledge and its production, but also requires that they go beyond conventional roles and procedures to interact with community co-researchers in ways that may leave university-based researchers feeling exposed and rudderless. In this article, the authors present episodes from three different PAR projects that illustrate some of the challenges that PAR presents for university-based researchers, as well as what can be learned from them.

Emerging from the confluence of Paulo Freire's revolutionary pedagogy (Freire, 1970), the liberation sociology of Orlando Fals-Borda (Fals-Borda, 1991), and feminist critiques and reconceptualizations of sociocultural power (Maguire, 1996), community-based participatory action research (PAR) stands conventional research methodology on its head. In PAR, professional researchers do not enter communities to conduct studies on community members. Rather, they form partnerships *with* community members to identify issues of local importance, develop

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ways of studying them, collect and interpret data, and take action on the resulting knowledge. The action phase of PAR is an essential element of its process, and can take many forms that parallel the myriad methodologies that PAR teams create. For example, a PAR team of shelter residents created a photographic essay to explore and counteract stereotypes of the homeless, and then held public forums for display and discussions (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Another PAR team convened inside a women's maximum security prison to investigate the impact of offering access to higher education to inmates, ultimately documenting that education for prisoners can change communities, reduce crime, and save taxpayer dollars (Torre & Fine, 2005). Alaska Natives were members of a PAR team that used qualitative and quantitative methods to study sobriety and alcohol use from within a Native Alaskan cultural paradigm (Mohatt et al., 2004).

Spanning the diverse communities, issues of concern, and methodological approaches of PAR teams around the world, results such as these stand as proof of PAR's potential to live up to the idealistic spirit of its philosophical underpinnings. Certain key commitments and values are considered foundational to the PAR endeavor, which Fals Borda (1991) described as beginning with *the ontological possibility of a real popular science* (p. 151), or the potential to create knowledge that does not simply reproduce the worldviews, values, and interests of dominant groups. The second distinguishing characteristic of PAR, according to Fals-Borda, is *the transformation of the researcher/researched, subject/object liaison*, which presents a power-sharing challenge to oppressive relationships premised on submission and dependence between individuals and groups. The final element, *autonomy and identity in collective research*, refers to the privileging of local voices, local culture and local wisdom throughout the PAR process (p. 153). This delineation of the foundational elements of PAR dovetails with formulations by Brydon-Miller (1997), Maguire (1987), Lykes (1997) and others who have connected the participatory research movement with emancipatory social change at broader levels, and thereby, with goals to which all social research should aspire (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). The commitments of researchers like these are summed up by Fine and Barreras (2007) in their call to social scientists to 'be of use', that phrase having been inspired by Marge Piercy's (1973) poem of the same name:

> We work toward an understanding of social research as a resource for social change... We recognize that social justice and movements for social change require explicit 'work' conducted in many discourses – a discourse of anger and outrage, morality and ethics, science and expertise, community organizing and public opinion. None of these discourses has a monopoly on social change. Each is limited. (p. 179)

As a members of a university research team that participates in several PAR partnerships in different communities, we have been inspired and guided by the words of scholars like these, and have found our collaborative research undertakings to be the most rewarding work of our professional lives. They have also been the most personally challenging, pushing us outside the comfort zone of the circumscribed

roles for which graduate school prepared us, and requiring us to step outside the protected clinical detachment of our conventional training. Entering into work that addresses itself to the reality of racism, poverty, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression in our co-researchers' lives, we are often left wondering if we are doing the right things, or doing them well enough, to truly be of use. Maguire (1987) wrote of these experiences with PAR:

> The literature is full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation, and outlines an extensive agenda for the novice. I paralyzed myself with doubts about my ability to meet that agenda. Only when I gave case studies the same attention that I'd given theory did I begin to recognize the gap between idealism and the realities of participatory research projects. (p. 127)

In this article, our intention is to enter that gap – the space between idealism and reality – in order to share some of the challenges, questions, and confusion that we have encountered there. In particular, we join researchers like Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2000) and Schensul (1999) in highlighting challenges that derive from our identities as university-based researchers. PAR research collaborations can emerge from partnerships between community members and outside researchers representing many different kinds of entities, including non-governmental agencies, federal or state civic agencies, and local organizations or businesses. All PAR partnerships present challenges as the space between community insiders and outsiders is navigated; we have wrestled in particular with the unique tensions that have arisen from our affiliation with an elite university and our own socialization within that setting. We explore this space so that we can continue to grow as researchers and as people, and also so that we can offer our experiences as case studies for the consideration of other researchers.

To illustrate the challenges and lessons learned at different stages and phases of PAR, this article contains snapshots from three different PAR projects. First, how do university researchers enter a community to create respectful, collaborative relationships in the first place? We present some of the pitfalls inherent in this process through the example of a partnership with members of a community-based organization (CBO) that offered outreach and referral services for homeless and at-risk queer youth. Next, we consider the challenges of power-sharing during the unpredictable twists and turns that characterize PAR, a process that Herr and Anderson (2005, p. 69) called 'designing the plane while flying it' – not a familiar experience for university-trained researchers who are accustomed to planning and managing every aspect of their work. Finally, Lykes (1997) has written of the personal transformation that is part and parcel of the PAR experience:

> The process reflects a willingness to risk entering another's life and allowing him or her to enter one's own. Understanding and one's possibilities for continuing engagement are thus shaped by an experience of shared subjectivity. As importantly, one's self-understanding as researcher is reframed. (p. 729)

What are the parameters of this reframing of self-understanding, and how do considerations of power and identity interact with that process for university-based researchers? A member of our team describes challenges and breakthroughs as she negotiated aspects of identity that she shared, as well as others that she did not share, with her teenaged community co-researchers.

These snapshots, then, are substantially different from each other. In one, we have barely met our co-researchers; in another, we tell a story that spans years of work with an established team; in another, the focus lies inside one of us, where the inner journey that PAR inspired took place. In each of them, however, our university-based statuses were brought to the fore as we struggled within the gap between our PAR ideals and our real-life PAR experiences. As we relate our experiences through each of these examples, we will acknowledge the mentors (most of whom we have never met) who helped us navigate the gaps between idealism and reality. Together with the scholars already cited in this introduction, the work of three additional mentors – Isaac Prilleltensky, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde – provided compasses for our journey.

First steps (and missteps) in a PAR collaboration

PAR depends upon the establishment of an environment of trust (Greene-Moton, Palermo, Flicker, & Travers, 2006). As obvious as this may sound, it is not a straightforward process, as university-based PAR researchers can expect to be greeted with a variety of responses, including some that are explicitly unfavorable. Reardon (2000), for example, reported that neighborhood stakeholders viewed outreaching campus researchers from the University of Illinois as 'little more than highly-credentialed, self-serving carpetbagggers and ambulance-chasers' (p. 62). In so doing, university-based researchers must also understand and navigate the micropolitics of their settings – that is, the hierarchy, resources, and behind-the-scenes interests of the community or institutions in which they work (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

In this account, we offer our experience with the initial phase of a PAR project. The three of us, Laura, Debbie, and Russell, include a professor of psychology and two graduate students, and we struggled with these issues as we worked to join with a community agency whose mission was to reach out to queer youth in a poor urban community of color just blocks away from the university. We have been guided by the work of Isaac Prilleltensky (1997, 2003) in framing our approach to this work. Prilleltensky's emancipatory communitarian (EC) approach to psychological practice emphasizes mutually acceptable goals, caring for marginalized people, the importance of collaboration and democratic participation, and respect for diverse social identities.

From talking about them to talking with them

After university colleagues told us about the work of this agency, we approached the staff and expressed our interest in working with them. Staff members believed

that the young people who used their services would enjoy a PAR involvement, but we began our relationship-building work even before we were invited by staff to enter the agency. Prior to our first community meeting, we had several discussions within our university PAR team of our reasons for engaging in the research, as well as how we thought our own social identities with respect to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation would influence it.

Not only is this process of self-reflection consistent with the value that EC places upon the respecting of diverse social identities, it is an essential part of the process for university PAR teams who set out to work in underserved areas (McIntyre, 2000). Reflection can bring to light the preconceptions, biases, and misgivings of university students who often come from relatively privileged social class backgrounds, and also help illuminate the unintentionally patronizing attitudes that can lie beneath the charitable intentions of academics (or other would-be helpers from dominant social locations). Our tacit expectation was that our training in counseling psychology would have prepared us well for these self-reflective aspects of the work. All of us had participated in training experiences with regard to our racial-cultural identities, and as counselors, all of us were accustomed to shifting from content-related dialogue to the level of process and self-reflection.

Without a doubt, these pre-visit explorations were helpful; they did not take the place, however, of encountering ourselves vis-à-vis our potential co-researchers and being accountable for what we saw. Once at the agency, our blind spots and missteps were revealing. For example, Russell, a graduate student and a White gay male, wrote in his field notes:

> At the first PAR meeting that included our new participants, one of the team members asked if I would share with everyone who I was and why I was there. It was a question I had asked myself and answered in my journal entries and within the university PAR team many times over. However, in the moment that I was asked to participate in that same discussion with participants, I was struck with an anxiety-provoking realization. It was easy to say to my colleagues at school that I wanted to help and advocate for queer youth in our city. However, to say 'I want to help you' to a group of people who were actually more comfortable with their sexuality than I was seemed incredibly presumptuous. Immediately I realized that I was still not viewing the organization's members as equal partners in the project.

Such fumbles and the deepened self-reflection that they inspired humbled us, and illustrated Prilleltensky's (1997) point that 'psychologists are often more prepared to *talk about* the values and criticisms necessary to create an emancipatory relationship with populations they work with than [they] are prepared to *apply* these concepts in action' (p. 517; italics added).

Adjusting our expectations, acknowledging our biases

We looked forward to our first meetings with community members as an opportunity for potential participants to get to know something about us and about PAR

before we began discussing the possible development of a research team. We valued the opportunity to spend time on this part of the process, given our awareness that university researchers have a notorious history of entering communities, implementing their research agendas, and leaving – having thereby contributed lines to their own curricula vitae but having made little, if any, contribution to the community (e.g. Smith, 1999). As such, we wanted to be open to community members' questions and ideas and to make clear our hope to do research *with* them, not *on* them.

We were invited by administrators to meet the teens by attending a weekly Friday night dinner held at the organization. We expected this to be a great time for all of us to sit around the table and get to know each other, and as the date approached, we compared our ideas and hopes about how the evening might proceed. Almost immediately, however, we discovered that our expectations did not serve us well. We had all pictured a dinner gathering in which we all sat around the same table, the kind that we were accustomed to our own families. Instead, the food was set out on a buffet table and community members took their plates and spread out to different corners of a fairly large room, some listening to their music, some browsing webpages on computers. The large, communal conversation that we hoped to join, in other words, was not part of the group's rituals. Looking back, the organization's members had already had a comfortable routine; the plans and expectations that we had brought with us would have only allowed *us* to feel more comfortable.

We now continued our work toward a meaningful, participative relationship by taking the time to learn what the rituals and routines of community members were, and then joining in. We went to more community dinners along with dances and jewelry-making nights as a way of incorporating informal community-based interactions within the PAR experience – what Greene-Moton et al. (2006) have called the 'keeping it real' aspect of participatory research. We not only had, therefore, the opportunity to learn about community experiences and rituals from community members themselves, but also participate in those rituals as people who danced and laughed.

As we reached the one-month mark in our relationship with the organization, members continued to become acquainted with us through dinners and activities. At this point, we also began talking about research and PAR to determine whether or not there was any interest in such a project – for all we knew, we would have no takers. Our hope at this stage was not only to convey how different PAR is from traditional research, but also to get a sense of the perspectives, interests, and concerns of community members. These discussions of 'hot topics' were both exciting and troubling. The excitement was associated with being with young people as they spoke insightfully and passionately about the issues that shook their community, issues such as homelessness, school drop-out rates, and the discrimination and outright violence faced by transgendered youth, the latter ultimately emerging as the group's research interest. It was troubling, however, to so frequently hear the

suffering of the community attributed to its own inferiority and laziness – by community members themselves.

Participating in these discussions in a way that valued the knowledge of everyone in the room was challenging. The ideals that we embraced in PAR corresponded to a valuing of participants' views, yet we had (naively) not expected that participants' understanding of their own community would have been so thoroughly shaped by dominant culture ideologies. We worked, therefore, to strike a balance between honoring these perspectives but also facilitating a questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions behind them – to question who profits from locating blame within people who are marginalized by larger societal systems.

The micropolitics of PAR

Herr and Anderson (2005) noted that, at the outset of their projects, PAR researchers are often ill-prepared for the institutional micropolitics that enter into their collaborations. Entering a community means entering it at a particular level, or via a particular agency, and in many ways, this is a political process. Neglecting to enlist the cooperation of gatekeepers, who may include directors of the community agency, on-site staff such as social workers, or respected community members, will undermine the project. These gatekeepers may, in obvious ways, have the influence to persuade other community members to attend an initial meeting and to allocate time and space for it; however, they may also have independent motivations for inviting or allowing university-based PAR researchers into a community.

These motivations do not always surface in the initial discussions about starting a PAR project, and underscore Prilleltensky's (1997) notion of creating mutually acceptable goals for community collaborations. In this project, we found that, during a time of organizational budget-tightening, we needed to be supportive of the agency's funding agenda by making it possible for them to leverage the political value of a collaboration with our university. We agreed, therefore, to be interviewed as part of a documentary created by an administrator. The documentary, which profiled the agency and its work, was to be shown to grant-making organizations that funded the agency's work. Even when we cooperated with gatekeepers in these ways, we nevertheless made it clear when administrative agendas clashed with PAR values such as participation, sharing of power, and the subversion of traditional expert roles. For example, one of the administrators referred to Laura as the 'head of psychology' at the university despite her consistent denial of this; the administrator also initially called the PAR team a 'therapy group' in the context of organizational fundraising efforts, which we emphatically corrected. We wondered if the administrator believed that magnifying Laura's importance at the university and creating a clinical atmosphere around our work might create a more compelling scenario for funders, but we could not (of course) let these misrepresentations stand, as much as we wanted the agency's work to be funded.

'Designing the plane while flying it': Leadership and letting go

Moving now to our second snapshot, we profile the surprising turns that one of our longest-running projects has taken as we highlight the roles of university researchers as partners rather than leaders in the PAR process. This collaboration was undertaken with a grassroots outreach-and-referral organization serving women with HIV/AIDS and/or addiction histories in a poor community within a large metropolitan area. Members of our university PAR team met the executive director of the organization through professional contacts, and we were subsequently invited to facilitate a general support group along with what the organization called 'empowerment groups', which focused on wellness and skill development among the agency's peer educators. The peers are a group of women from the community, several of whom are former clients of the organization, and they were also our co-researchers for the project. As we got to know the peers and the agency administrators, we introduced the concept of PAR. The directions that this collaboration subsequently took were unforeseen by us at its outset, and illustrate the conceptual and procedural flexibility that are a *sine qua non* of PAR (Smith & Romero, 2010).

Feminist scholar and author bell hooks has been an important intellectual mentor for us on this journey, especially with regard to her spotlighting of the neglect of class in race-related discourse (hooks, 2000). According to hooks, although contemporary society has become more accustomed to discussions of race and gender, there is still significant discomfort regarding questions of social class. Throughout our PAR project, the implications of social class membership and the impact of poverty have been prominent as our community co-researchers recounted stories that illustrate hooks's contention that 'we live in a society where the poor have no public voice' (hooks, 2000, p. 5).

From the beginning of these conversations, issues of power and voice were front and center. Laura and LeLaina entered the community as a White psychology professor who leads the PAR research team and a Latina/White doctoral student in psychology, and there were stark differences in access to social, cultural, and material resources between ourselves as university researchers (who in this case have advanced degrees) and our community collaborators (who for the most part had high school educations or less). These discrepancies were further compounded by the status and prestige of the Ivy League institution in which our program is housed. Understandably, the peer educators and staff of the agency approached our relationships with a blend of respect and distrust. The implications of our university affiliations played out throughout our work, particularly in questions of power as we attempted to create a collaborative process.

'Who's in charge?'

One example of these questions of power concerned leadership and authority within the team's evolving interactional style. As the university-based researchers, we attempted to participate in group discussions in an open, democratic way, with the process shifting according to the interests of participants. Our community co-researchers frequently let us know that this was an aspect of the team's work that they valued, yet at the same time, there were explicit questions about 'who's in charge'. At one point, a group member became angry with us for not 'calling on her' more often during team meetings. This prompted an open discussion of power in the group and what it meant for the team to consider that we, the university-based PAR researchers, certainly wanted to be forthcoming with any ideas that we had, but we were not there to be 'leaders' in the traditional sense. Over time, the team took more and more ownership of the process, but similar tensions continued to surface from time to time.

Another challenge that we faced related to power dynamics within the CBO. As university PAR researchers, we were committed to trying to work outside the ivory-tower mindset that privileges certain kinds of knowledge and experiences, yet we confronted the tendency of even community-based agencies to 'form elitist leadership structures and to engage in exclusionary decision making' (Reardon, 1998, p. 330). Agency staff often tacitly expected that the university co-researchers would take charge and move the peers along, and we frequently reminded them that this was a collaborative project where the community members' voices should be prominent. In addition, salaried administrative CBO staff members were accustomed to making decisions that impacted the peers, and often had different ideas about what actions should take place, even after the team had worked toward a plan together. Finally, because the peer educators were a group of women of color who were unemployed or on disability, the CBO staff sometimes related to them in ways that positioned them as clients and/or in need of guidance and management, which, as we explained to them, contradicted the most foundational principles of what we hoped to do as PAR researchers.

Unexpected directions and connections

As ownership and direction of the PAR project became more egalitarian, some of the twists and turns of its process inspired surprising moments of connection that are not typically part of conventional university-based research. One of these moments occurred when one of us, LeLaina, decided to bring music into the group, thinking that it might be a good way to close team meetings. This idea had been sparked by the peer educators' request that the team incorporate attention to self-care within meetings. LeLaina brought in a CD by the African American acapella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, whose music integrates

spirituality and social justice. LeLaina wanted to share 'Ella's Song' with them, a tribute to civil rights activist Ella Baker. The words of the chorus are 'We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes'.

When LeLaina suggested her idea, the other team members expressed interest in hearing the music right away. The team listened to 'Ella's Song', and what LeLaina had expected would be a small closing activity became the center of the team's meeting. The team talked about the power of music, and how the words of the songs connected to women's lives and to the work of the team. LeLaina made copies of the lyrics, and the team all sang along several times. One line near the end of the song particularly moved everyone: 'I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard. At times I can be quite difficult – I'll bow to no man's word.' Everyone in attendance that day was a woman of color. There were shouts of agreement during this line. LeLaina wrote in her field notes:

> I brought myself more fully and authentically into the group by sharing music, as song is an integral part of my own life and spirituality. I had no idea how powerful it would be, and how much it would energize our work. One team member suggested that we use the song as the theme of our documentary. In that moment, I was connecting to other team members as a woman of color, and the music represented that connection. Working in a PAR framework requires this willingness to follow unexpected paths as they emerge.

Taking action

As community team members grew more confident in their ownership of the project, something else was happening as well. As university participants, we were learning that, unpredictably, action projects can grow from different seeds than the ones that we were familiar with. Along these lines, we have realized that we unintentionally held the team back from action early on. As committed as we were to the PAR vision, this was our first community collaboration, and without being aware of it, we reproduced our academic approach to project development within our PAR team (Smith & Romero, 2010). Accordingly, lengthy abstract conversations ensued, interspersed with invited speakers and the debating of various plans – all of which the two of us thoroughly enjoyed. Only recently have our co-researchers told us that they, on the other hand, found these initial meetings with us to be boring. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with talking before acting; rather, the issue is one of balancing these elements of the process. As the community researchers developed confidence in their ability to chart the team's course, we benefited from the opportunity to learn from them the value of 'knowing through doing' (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. xxv) and eventually were able to give up our pre-conceived prerequisites for the establishment of action.

In fact, the subsequent movement from dialogue to collaborative action was catalyzed not by abstractions, but by the lived experience of the community co-researchers. From the beginning, these participants saw and articulated the

unjust conditions in their community and public institutions, but were not yet thinking in terms of translating these powerful, sometimes overwhelming emotions to action. One woman spoke with conviction and anger as she questioned the motivation of real estate developers and the local government, who had been negotiating 'revitalization' plans for this area for years. She said 'changes are coming, and they're going to be good – they're just not for us'. Powerfully, she said of poor people in her community, 'we are Katrina', speaking of the fear that they would be swept away by the tides of gentrification as the neighborhood changed to become a playground for privileged classes. The other peer educators echoed her concerns, speaking of the mistreatment and humiliation that they endured in welfare agencies and the other institutions that are supposed to support them.

As the team began brainstorming more openly about community experiences that they might want to address, we seemed less stuck at the point of choosing a point of action. The team's commitments seemed to coalesce around rallying community awareness and support for an idea that the agency director had had for years – a transitional facility for recently incarcerated women with HIV/substance abuse issues. We decided to create a documentary that will capture community members' feelings about the state of their neighborhood and the impending economic changes, with the intention of showing the film to local politicians. Along the way, new peers have entered the group and have expressed the same hesitations around ownership and leadership that earlier team members had voiced. However, it is now the other community researchers who explain the process to them. There is an emerging understanding that they, as members of the community directly impacted by the team's work, are primary actors and decision-makers. Schensul (1999) captured the power of such collaborations in her description of research partnerships, stating that 'the best community partnership research occurs when community and scientific needs coincide' (p. 267).

Shifting relationships

When university co-researchers are graduate students, yet another element is added to the array of special considerations that arise in university–community PAR collaborations: these students typically move on to professional life, sometimes far away from the city or state where a PAR project has taken place. This creates challenges with regard to the continuity of the process and the cohesiveness of the research team. It also raises difficult emotions and conflicts around saying goodbye. This challenge has been discussed in other PAR reporting, including Reardon's (1998) work in east St Louis, in which he described the negative impact of graduate student turnover and their unavailability during school breaks. With regard to this project, LeLaina recently moved to another state to complete her internship and doctoral degree, and though she has a commitment to eventually returning to the community in some capacity to continue the work, community researchers expressed the sentiment that she is moving on to 'something better' and leaving them behind. This was not expressed with animosity – it was expressed with pride

in her accomplishments as a young woman of color with whom they have worked for three years. Yet it provides another example of how the gulf of access and opportunity that separates university and community research collaborators continues to exist despite the bridges of mutuality and affection that co-researchers may build across it.

Sister insider/outsider: Negotiating PAR positionalities

With the presentation of our third and final PAR snapshot, we move to a first-person narrative as Luci, a member of our PAR team and the second author of this article describes her journey as a university-based researcher back to the community of her own childhood. This process involved one of the central challenges of PAR, what Lykes (1997) called the reframing of one's own self-understanding.

The quality of light

> The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. (Lorde, 1984, p. 36)

I introduce the story of my journey as a PAR researcher with the words of Black feminist lesbian mother warrior poet (as she called herself), Audre Lorde, because they express what I hope to convey: the unfolding process of self-analysis that PAR initiated (and required), and the impact that it has had on my pursuit of someday realizing my 'magic'. I present myself as a student of PAR as I reflect on the lessons most visible to me in my collaboration with teenaged members of a poor urban community in a large northeastern city. The mission of the collaborating agency is to support incarcerated individuals and their families through an alternative-to-prison residential program along with family and after-school services. This project began when our university PAR team invited the CBO to join in the establishment of a PAR project. PAR as a concept was quickly embraced by the organization's administrators, with the hope that it would be of particular benefit to the adolescents attending the after-school program.

From the moment that I first stepped into this community setting, I was faced with inner struggles and contradictions as my co-researchers and I encountered our different, multiple identities with respect to power, privilege and oppression (Smith, Chambers, & Bratini, 2009). During this process, Lorde's work has provided me with guidance, affirmation, and clarity as she explored the intersections of being a sister, yet also an outsider in a number of ways. I am a Black queer Latina, the daughter of an immigrant working-class mother from the Dominican Republic, working in a community just blocks away from my own Bronx neighborhood – I am an insider. This identification with the community and with the struggles faced by my young PAR co-researchers made entering the space somewhat organic and

comfortable. At the same time, as the PAR project progressed, it became evident that there was a part of me that the community could *not* connect to. I am a graduate student pursuing a doctorate in psychology, entering the community as a representative of an Ivy League university – I am an outsider.

Bringing to light my privileged university-affiliated location was a tremendous challenge. It was the elephant in the room, and giving voice to it caused fear and anxiety for me – fear, Lorde (1984) says, is always a part of the act of self-revelation. This anxiety was exacerbated by the knowledge that I was now 'different' from my own community, and was intensified by the realization that I was being indoctrinated into an upper middle-class world that felt foreign to me and in which I still felt inferior as a result of internalized classism. Owning my newly acquired social-class privilege was complex, since I still lived in the Bronx neighborhood where I had grown-up, still walked past the same manifestations of oppression (drug dealing, homelessness, etc.) on my way to and from this Ivy League institution, and still held on to working-class values and family expectations.

The CBO, however, had introduced me to the teens as a representative of the university, and I recognized a process of mutual silencing and fear as we began to meet. My most vivid image of the breaking of this silence took place on a day that I enthusiastically expressed my utopian vision for our collaborative work as a project in which we could speak openly about ourselves, share our thoughts, express our talents, and question our surroundings. I was met with silent faces and discomfort. 'We don't know what we're supposed to say', one teen responded. Unsure of what to do, I followed my intuitions as a counselor in attempting to explore the meaning of the silence – but these teens had shared their experiences with too many educators and university researchers who came and went from their lives. The loudness of their silence, combined with my gradual realization that *I* would not know what to say if given the freedom to speak about myself and create my heart's desire, led to my understanding that I was asking my co-researchers to break a silence that I still maintained.

In the spirit of learning the meaning of transparency, I nervously shared my own journey – who I was and how I had reached this moment with them. This decision was not in keeping with the neutral, distant stance that university researchers are taught to assume. In retrospect, I believe that this unveiling helped equalize the power in the room, since I was engaging in the kind of disclosure that I was asking of them. In this emotion-filled meeting, I began to openly give voice to who I am, and also to examine with them the institution and profession that I represent. I now think of PAR as a process of self-naming, self-defining, and self-creation and re-creation. It is action on the world while reflection continues – in other words, praxis.

PAR, silence, and self-reflection

Within my own journey through these 'borderlands' of identity, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has called them, I have often found myself a part of groups

who, through systems of oppression, have been made to feel surplus, who have been defined as 'other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong' (Lorde, 1984, pp. 113–114). Lorde pointed out that members of these groups have had to become familiar with the language, manners, and customs of the dominant group, even adopting them in service of their own survival. My self-exploration revealed that I had deeply internalized these lessons, instilled not only by way of formal education and media portrays of oppressed peoples, but more powerfully, within my family by an immigrant mother who enforced only 'proper' behavior. I learned very early, therefore, to stay in my place, to speak only when spoken to, and to never question authority. I also grew up in a roach-infested fourth floor walk-up within an extended family of women who discouraged my curiosity when I inquired why it was that our situation was so different from those of the White families I saw on TV. I grew up confused by our circumstances and filled with conflicting feelings, afraid to voice that confusion.

Still searching for breath within this drowning silence, I eventually discovered PAR, and entered into a relationship with a poor immigrant Latino/a community blocks away from my own and a group of adolescent co-researchers upon whom silence had also been imposed. As we met weekly and interacted in the intimate space of PAR dialogue, it became apparent that, although our silences were necessary survival mechanisms, they did not protect us – they merely kept us separate from each other. The initial joining with each other across the silence, initiated when we talked about the silence and the fear at its heart, was only the beginning. As a PAR team, the more we faced our sameness, the closer our differences came to the surface. Lorde (1984) challenged us to see that, as a culture, 'we have no pattern for relating across our human difference as equals' (p. 115), and that our refusal to examine difference and the distortions surrounding it are what separate us, not the differences themselves.

Our PAR team continued its creation of a different relational pattern during a meeting in which I was finally able to challenge a team member's homophobic remarks. This episode was followed by my coming out as a queer woman to the group. The discussion that ensued has been a catalyst for creative social change within our work ever since. As a member of a PAR team connected by our Latinoness, our histories of immigration, of poverty in urban ghettos – and with fear which made my hands tremble – I attempted to model and facilitate recognition of our *differences*. After our initial plunge into this dialogue, the PAR team brought differences and distortions into the room without any need for facilitation.

PAR positionalities

My first-person account can be framed within the theorizing of social scientists who have written about insider-outsider positionality from various perspectives. One typology for understanding researcher positionalities can be found in the work of Herr and Anderson (2005). These authors locate PAR along a six-point continuum of action research positionalities which describe the social location of researchers

relative to the communities in which they work and which range from *insider* to *outsider*. According to Herr and Anderson (2005), the degree of insider/outsider positionality determines how researchers will frame epistemology, decide on methodology, and address ethical dilemmas that may arise. Patricia Hill Collins's (1986) work also sheds light on the multiple positions that result from intersections of conflicting identities and/or alliances. Collins coined the term *outsider within* to describe social location relative to specific social identities such as race, class, and gender. Collins explained that these situational identities are connected to specific histories of social injustice, which in turn helped to create these identities in the first place.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) theorizing addressed the decolonization of traditional university research methodology. Problematizing the insider position, Smith discussed the notion that because have insiders lived in the community, they *know*. This assumption – that one's own experience suffices to explain the experiences of all others that occupy a similar position – serves to invalidate the lived experiences of other community members. Smith also critiqued the supposedly neutral, distant, scrutinizing stance of the traditional scientist-practitioner model – the model to which I have been socialized as a graduate student. Nevertheless, I am an outsider to it as a developing PAR researcher. I struggle with the devaluation of PAR research by faculty and colleagues, whom seem to perceive it as community service or volunteer work. I recall hearing suggestions that we need not apply for institutional review board approval to conduct our research, since the perception was that we were not conducting 'real' research (Nevertheless, we did so, and received IRB approval). To deal with these tensions, I continue to turn to the scholars to whom I now refer to as my PAR ancestors for strength and validation, as well as rely on my university-based PAR team colleagues for encouragement and support.

Moving forward

As a group, we have been increasingly able to recognize and critique the distortions through which we defined our differences. As Freire (1970) explained in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the real focus of social change is never only the 'oppressive situations we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us' (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). As a PAR team – community-based, university-based, Mexican, Dominican, Black, White, girl, boy, women, queer, straight, questioning, middle-class, working-class, poor, and multicolored – we have learned how much we need each other to continue to grow, survive, and be truly creative.

'To be of use'

As they work to create partnerships with community members, university researchers can never fully extricate themselves from the system of socially conferred status that accompanies their university affiliations. As we work to heighten our own

awareness of and accountability for this privileged status, we offer the following lessons learned from the snapshots presented here:

a. Pre-visit and/or off-site self-reflexivity is helpful and necessary, but it is only one part of the self-awareness work that PAR requires of university-based researchers. Researchers should expect to *continue* processing the traditional 'expert' role along with other sociocultural identities in concert with community co-researchers. This processing entails an openness and an interpersonal vulnerability to which university researchers may be unaccustomed vis-à-vis other research participants; moreover, this is an ongoing part of the work, and researchers should not let idealized conceptualizations of mutuality and trust tempt them to become complacent.

b. The same oppressive ideologies that characterize mainstream stereotypes of poor communities and/or communities of color will at times be perpetuated by CBO administrators whose agencies make it their mission to serve those communities. Moreover, they will be heard from the mouths of community members themselves. As much as we want to support these agencies, and as much as we want to privilege community members' voices, university researchers should be prepared to respectfully push back when oppressive status quo narratives begin to establish themselves within the PAR process.

c. Many of us have succeeded as graduate students and faculty members because we learned to approach tasks in an intellectualized manner, to be goal-oriented, and to assiduously move our projects forward to completion. These same tendencies can be the downfall of a PAR collaboration (Smith & Romero, 2010). University-based researchers must interrogate and resist their impulses to hasten, manage, or otherwise control the always evolving, frequently surprising process of PAR. They must also examine their assumptions about what constitutes an appropriate research protocol: we learned that we needed to be open to taking action sooner rather than later, and to understanding that impetus for action may emerge from something as ephemeral as a song.

These 'lessons learned' point toward the limitations that university researchers bring to their PAR collaborations – although they certainly bring value to those partnerships as well. Their contributions can include knowledge of research methodology, expertise with regard to particular content areas, and a socially sanctioned platform by which to draw broad attention to the community, the research, and the associated actions. Their limitations as PAR participants, even when they are consciously committed to PAR principles, are in some ways the other side of the same coin: a reflexive privileging of conventional research procedures, parameters, and roles that can obstruct the full participation of community co-researchers and dampen the creative potential of the partnership. Negotiating the tensions between the two requires that university researchers relinquish the reassuring certainty that comes with the following of familiar procedures to establish a new professional stance, one for which there are few models outside Freirean

pedagogical theory. Specifically, university researchers are *not* called to abandon or discredit the knowledge that they have acquired; rather, they must approach the PAR endeavor as people with knowledge to share who are also sincere learners, and whose knowledge is not automatically privileged over that of others.

Much of the learning that is required of university researchers will take place at a deeply personal level. As community co-researchers grapple with local issues and analyze their sociohistorical implications, university researchers do not have license to stand by as observers or commentators or even supporters – their own individual social identities and statuses, and the impact of these within the work of the PAR team, must be open to exploration. In our experience, the negotiation of these creative tensions has broadened and enriched our perspective not just with regard to our PAR involvements but in all of our professional endeavors, including teaching, training, counseling practice, and non-PAR-related scholarship.

In conclusion, we return to the words of Fine and Barreras (2007): 'We write on the responsibility of social scientists to study critically "what is," to imagine "what could be," and to contribute responsibly to a mobilization toward "what must be"' (p. 175). Participatory action research offers social scientists unusual potential as a method by which to be of use in this mobilization. It promises at once to be a catalyst and a medium for the decolonization of research methodology (Smith, 1999), the democratization of knowledge and its production (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991) and the collaborative development of socially just mental health innovations (Smith, Chambers, & Bratini, 2009), all while offering a growthful, emancipatory experience for all participants (Smith & Romero, 2010). This promise and the idealism that surrounds it can be both inspiring and daunting for university researchers as they go forward to establish PAR partnerships, knowing that the roles and procedures to which they are accustomed will not serve them well in their new undertaking. Our hope is that by sharing our encounters with the gap between idealism and PAR practice, we can contribute to the preparation of other university-based researchers to work through their own moments of confusion and discomfort as they strive to align their careers with 'what must be' (Fine & Barreras, 2007).

Acknowledgment

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