




The Role of Researcher in Participatory Inquiry: Modeling Intra-Active Reflexivity in Conversational Reflections

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
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DOI: 10.1177/1532708617750677
journals.sagepub.com/home/csc


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Abstract

This article presents intimate conversations among three colleagues around ethical considerations of ethnographic inter-racial qualitative inquiry. It draws on an ethnographic research project conducted at a high school in rural Idaho, USA. Focusing on the question, “Why are our teachers racist?” the collective worked together to challenge subtle inequity at this particular school. The authors come together in a dialogue to reflect on the role of the researcher within this specific project, but end up illustrating reflexivity, an often hidden aspect of the research process, opening an entangled, unresolved, and yet meaningful set of interpellations around practical methodological concepts.

Keywords

reflexivity, participatory research, ethnography, ethics, role of the researcher

This article is constituted of a serious email dialogue of three colleagues doing reflexive work on methodological encounters. The conversation springboards from Call-Cummings’ dissertation experience—as we look both backward and forward. Dennis and Martinez were faculty advisors on the project. The conversation around this particular study became an exploration of the entangled methodological concepts of validity, ethics, and participation in the context of a school-based participatory ethnography. Through our email exchange, we engaged in a communicatively structured reflexivity. The dialogue explicitly renders the intra-active nature of reflexivity. While the topic of the conversation revolves around the entanglements and productive tensions of research ethics, participation, ethnography, and validity, the purposes of the article are to illustrate reflexivity, lay bare an often hidden aspect of the research process, and open an entangled, unresolved, and yet meaningful set of interpellations around practical methodological concepts.

The word “reflection” is used throughout the article to suggest both a process and product. There is a tension between the singular version of “reflect” where it seems that separate distinct perspectives are put into conversation with one another and a collective “our,” which emerges as an entanglement of perspectives that are not easily claimed by any one person. The collective “reflection” betrays that already intra- and inter-subjective moment of

any individualistic reflection without denying a distinctive movement between the two.

This article’s first author, Call-Cummings, conducted an 18-month, participatory ethnographic study with Latino/a high school students in rural Idaho. The research collective focused on the question “Why are our teachers racist?” Call-Cummings defended her dissertation in 2015 and our email exchange began in 2016. She desired something of the reflecting she had been doing on her own positionality in the study. Our email exchange grew out of that desire. The format of the article is purposefully disjointed to not resolve the tensions of reflection, but rather to engage those tensions. Although we could synthesize the results of that reflection, the messy process would be made invisible if we did so. We expect there is something to be gained from including both.

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September 6, 2016

Sylvia and Barbara,

Now that we have a little space between us and the work I did for my dissertation with the Spanish Speakers Serving group, I wonder if we could engage in a bit of a reflective conversation about what happened there from a positionality and methodology point of view. As you were aware—and maybe remember—even before I decided to pursue the project our collective decided on—racism at this school and in this community—I felt drawn to participatory action research because of its insistence on foregrounding methodological issues like positionality, power, challenging hierarchies within research groups, and overall turning the traditional research process a bit on its head. I feel like I was so into making sure that the project was completely owned by the students in the research group that I kind of forgot, or significantly minimized, my role and the role of Mrs. James, the students' teacher who was part of the collective.

Participatory action research (PAR) has at its core the goal of acquiring "serious and reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes" (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 3). While this building up of power is a central aspect of PAR, it also foregrounds tensions around power asymmetries inherent in the fact that two types of agents of change come together to participate in PAR—those agents of change who are internal to a particular context or problem, and those who are external to it. Although PAR theoretically seeks to unify these two groups in one purpose, in practice this often does not happen, and power-knowledge hierarchies are reproduced, often unconsciously (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

I've kind of dealt with how I minimized my role, what I could have or should have done differently, and how the project might have played out had I acted differently—all of this from a validity standpoint. But now I'm turning to trying to grapple with the role Mrs. James played. What opportunities she had to be actively engaged in the project and also in the kind of transformation I was hoping would occur through PAR. I mean, it's pretty clear that there were some issues of power and positionality that weren't dealt with transparently. She is white and I am white. The two older, "professional" members of the

collective were different than the younger, student, Latino/a, undocumented, student members of the collective. Right off the bat there were these underlying (or perhaps overarching?) I wonder what the difference is there . . .) issues of power that should have been resolved. Or maybe questioned. Or confronted. At least discussed openly, right?

But I didn't. And I feel like it's my fault that these kinds of conversations didn't happen. But then that seems super self-centered and seems to fly in the face of the roots of PAR. It wasn't MY project, it was ours. But I was the methodological expert, if you will, while they played the roles of kind of "local" experts. Experts of racism. Or how racism felt in that school, community, context. So I should have been the one to at least identify, or maybe just introduce, these potential issues of unequal power structures. But again, I didn't.

William Corsaro (with Molinari, 2008) spent his career engaging in participatory ethnography with children. He positioned himself as an "incompetent adult." Such positioning made it possible for children to act anew with him, to act outside of the typical adult-child established role sets. Corsaro did not become child-like, he just enacted uncertainty and incompetence in a way that allowed the children to relate with him from positions of power. By participating in this way and allowing the children to direct their own activities, even with respect to the research, Corsaro engaged in a more egalitarian way across a normatively structured status differential. The more we can equalize our relationships in the research process the less likely we are to do harm (Carspecken, 1996).

So what might that have meant for the validity of our project, if we didn't even take the time to transparently, openly identify and question these things? My first thought was to Mrs. James' opportunities for transformation. But then there's also the opportunities students may have had—or not—for transformation. Or what about Mrs. James' white colleagues at the school? Could she have had some sort of experience or eye-opening "aha" moment that she could have then shared or passed on to her colleagues, often perpetrators of the microaggressions we've talked about in other contexts? Did I totally miss the boat?

Spanish Speakers Serving (SSS) is a pseudonym chosen by one of the participants in the group with which I, Meagan, engaged in participatory research for my dissertation. SSS is a nonprofit organization, headquartered in Utah, USA, but working throughout the western United States in schools to increase access to and persistence in institutions of higher education for Latino/a students. SSS has classroom teachers in primary and secondary schools create clubs to support the empowerment of these students. In some schools, administrators allow SSS teachers to create an elective course that students can take for credit.

In 2012, Mrs. James, a SSS classroom teacher in rural Idaho, invited me to come meet her SSS students. After meeting, we formed a research collective and decided to conduct participatory research around the question, "Why are our teachers racist?" We worked together for 18 months, collecting data and analyzing that data in an effort to better understand and also confront what the student co-researchers saw as racist relationships between themselves and their white teachers.

Lately I (Meagan I) have been reflecting on the goal of "transformation" that seems to play an integral part of most PAR work. I am more ambivalent now than I think I was previously about this. To a certain extent I have judged the validity of my research engagements to this point around an idea that transformation either occurs or does not. I have conceptualized transformation as dichotomous, which, of course, it is not. Now it seems more like a spectrum. We can allow ourselves—and others—to move back and forth, here a little and there a little, along this spectrum as we gain new experiences, encounter different challenges, and enjoy certain opportunities.

Meagan

<p>September 12, 2016 Meagan,</p> <p>First of all, I must admit that participating in this exercise (reflective conversation) is completely out of my comfort zone as you can imagine. However, it is not the first time that supporting your work has pushed my intellectual and/or methodological boundaries. And for that reason, I welcome this opportunity.</p> <p>I can see that when reflecting on issues of validity you feel that issues of power and positionality were not dealt with adequately. And now that you mention it, I do not think we ever talked about Mrs. James' potential for transformation. So in some ways, it does feel like a missed opportunity to engage Ms. James with conversations about unequal power structures and/or her own feeling as the research collective progressed. But I'm inclined to say that you should not beat yourself up about this because your primary concern was always about creating an authentic and transformative experience for the students who felt quite marginalized in their schools and communities.</p> <p>And now I feel like maybe I failed you by not pointing out that you should have been engaging in more conversations with Ms. James but honestly, while I wholeheartedly supported the work, my brain was trying to understand the primary goals and intentions of PAR. And now I'm making this about me . . . which is what I am trying to avoid.</p> <p>The question that comes to mind now is whether you talked about how PAR works with Ms. James before the research began? If so, did you get a sense of how she interpreted in her role in the collective?</p> <p>Sylvia</p>	<p>My (Sylvia) sentiments about transformation mirror Meagan's above. In my limited understanding of PAR, I too first conceptualized transformation as dichotomous. So, Meagan, I embrace thinking of transformation as being on a spectrum. What also came to mind recently is the idea of time. On top of thinking that a transformation among students and Ms. James would or would not happen (dichotomy), I also presumed the transformation would occur after the research collective completed its work. Now I am thinking that transformation could occur well after the research has taken place. And in many ways, you or I may never know how that transformation among students and/or Ms. James takes place (or how it manifests itself).</p>
<p>September 27, 2016 Hi Meagan and Sylvia,</p> <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>Anthony Giddens (1979) wrote about the way in which structure resources and constrains agency as they co-emerge. Let's use Giddens to think of structure and agency as co-constitutive. Next, let's take up the possibility that Mrs. James <i>wanted</i> to be able to act differently. We can examine the structure/agency configuration for both the ideal version of action and what Mrs. James tells us she actually did. For Giddens, our sense of agency can be articulated as an awareness that we could have always acted otherwise. By reconstructing the structural elements of the action, it becomes possible to see what supported and what bounded Mrs. James's sense of agency. Such structures might include the material organization of adult-child interactions.</p> </div> <p>Perhaps there are things that could have been better in terms of conversations that could have happened, but I have two thoughts. One is that this isn't personal—we need to figure out through reflection what the barriers were, what the structures were, that limited the likelihood that such transparency could have happened. I would love to hear what might have been ideal in your mind and perhaps for Mrs. James as well. Then, let's look at the systematization of the interactions and opportunities that could have been better. Those same constraints might also have been at work in the way Sylvia and I worked with you and did not catch this problem. So I would advocate for de-personalizing and doing more of a structural analysis by articulating an ideal and perhaps also getting that from your aunt. And then analyzing moments in the data where you acted otherwise . . . where you all (not just you, this is an interactive context and you are not so much in control as it might seem) could have been more transparent or inclusive of Mrs. James. I think, in this situation, blame is not so useful a concept as "constraints" "affordances" "problematics" and so forth. Do you see where I am going with this? Let's get at the structures which implicitly resourced and constrained the interactions such that this was the unintended outcome. What do you think about that?</p> <p>Secondly, I want to think more deeply about participatory inclusion and what it means for us as actors in an intra-action (using Barad, 2008 idea). How much control do we have and how much responsibility and how is that tethered to the ongoing flowing of activity which draws inevitably on roles, norms, power relations, deep-seeded racism, sexism, etc.?</p> <p>Barbara</p>	<p>Karen Barad's work in physics finds some synergy in social science (see Barad, 2008, for example). One of the concepts she writes about is "intra-action." This concept is meant to counter an atomistic and individualistic orientation toward the nature of things by arguing that the nature of all matter and being is intra-action. Objects/subjects do not precede their action, but rather emerge through specific intra-actions. Aaron Kuntz (2016) moves this idea forward in his book on being a responsible methodologist. Because we are inevitably entangled intra-actively with others, we have an ethical responsibility to be mindful of the rich set of entanglements to which we are accountable. If we think of this in terms of research ethics, it means that we must think of our ethics as intra-activity and intra-relational—we do ethics together. We participate together in ethical research practices. Participatory research provides us an opportunity to realize ethical potentials in everything we do (Dennis, forthcoming).</p>

<p>September 27, 2016 Barbara and Sylvia, I really, really like the idea of including Mrs. James (my aunt) in this conversation. If it's okay with both of you, I will reach out to her to gauge her interest. I know she is very busy, so we will see.</p> <p>Also, I really appreciate both of your comments. I'm glad Barbara came back with something like, "It's not personal," because I feel like turning it personal is so tempting as critical reflection occurs. I agree, the concept of "blame" is not so useful as is considering constraints on an articulated ideal.</p> <p>So, the ideal. I think first of all, there would have been an ideal awareness and consciousness on my part of the subtleties of power at play throughout the lifetime of the project. Not only that awareness, though, but an ideal ability or opportunity to dialogue critically about that—and about how to navigate those—with Mrs. James and the student co-researchers. Another ideal relates to time and logistical constraints. If I would have been living there, in Atkinville, or nearer-by, the full collective could have been in better, more consistent contact. Perhaps the simple fact of being in more consistent, physical contact, would have led to greater opportunity, and, by extension, ability, to reach toward the ideal. Then again, I discuss elsewhere that this separation led, I believe, the student co-researchers to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility over the project in a way that would not have happened, I don't believe, had I been in their classroom once or twice a week. Perhaps Mrs. James can comment on that.</p> <p>But I digress. Ideals. There would have been ideal acceptance on the part of the entire school community of the exploration of racism. That discomfort was always palpable.</p> <p>An ideal sense of power or lack of risk or vulnerability on the part of the student co-researchers. But again, just as the constraint of time in the field and physical location was somewhat of a double-edged sword, so might this have been. Being vulnerable. Could that have potentially increased the students' sense of achievement, or doing something worthwhile, or important? If it was a bit risky or edgy? Maybe, maybe not. But I felt like it was so risky in this school/community environment, for the students as well as for Mrs. James, and there are clear indications that that risk significantly constrained not only our final accomplishments but the paths we took along the way. Again, something for Mrs. James, perhaps.</p> <p>And you bring up the questions of control and responsibility and their links to roles, norms, power relations, etc. It seems like a lot of these ideals I mention above are constrained by normative expectations—perhaps—related to the roles people take up and the assumptions made about who has control and responsibility, especially in a classroom/school environment, and especially when there has been systematic/institutional marginalization or silencing (?) of a particular group. So, then, isn't the idea(l) of PAR to disrupt these normatively-situated expectations and assumptions that seem to constrain and undermine its participatory ideals? I'll stop there.</p> <p>Meagan</p>	<p>While I did invite her and she did indicate interest in participating in this reflective opportunity, Mrs. James was ultimately unable to participate because the day-to-day work of being a teacher took most of her time.</p> <p>I am still uncomfortable with the fact that we were not able to include Mrs. James' voice here, and that brings up questions of ownership to me. It is fairly clear in PAR literature that, as external agents of change (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), we have an obligation—and, I would argue, the validity or trustworthiness of our work hinges, to a certain extent, on our fulfillment of this obligation—to return the knowledge that is built or gleaned through the work in which we engage to the communities and people with whom we engage because they are its owners (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 9). As internal agents of change they have retained the authority to "determine the priorities concerning its use . . . and establish the conditions for its publication" (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 9). So, while Mrs. James and the students with whom I worked did give permission for me to move forward with various forms of publication and dissemination, I wish I could have more fully included them in this dissemination.</p>
<p>October 17, 2016 Meagan and Barbara, Barbara, thank you for bringing our focus back to structural barriers and constraints! My immediate response was to reflect on Meagan's time and logistical constraints, which she has noted above. The other major constraint as I see it also appears to be implicitly stated in Meagan's response above. As social institutions, I think K-12 schools seek to appear neutral (i.e., working for all students) but as we know, they cannot be truly characterized as such. Schools as institutions reflect our power, political, racial, or gender (to name a few) constructions, which results in predominantly White, heteronormative, and patriarchal curriculum. Again, the three of us know this—I'm preaching to the choir here. I simply make it explicit here because I wonder whether Mrs. James in some way wanted to protect her students. Noting their vulnerability (as Latina/o students, as undocumented students) perhaps she wanted to protect them from further attacks, verbal or otherwise, as a result of their PAR project?</p> <p>Again, I support including Mrs. James in this piece. It would be great to hear her thoughts.</p> <p>But going back to the role of researcher—as a PAR novice—are there outlined or generally accepted prescriptions about the role of a researcher in the discipline? If there are, do you feel like you followed them Author 1? This could take us in a direction not intended in this piece—my apologies.</p> <p>Another thought which I do not know whether it takes us into another tangent but Author 1 discussed the ideals for PAR at the end of her response. She noted the goals or ideal is to, "disrupt these normatively-situated expectations and assumptions that seem to constrain and undermine its participatory ideals." If PAR is usually (and I don't know if it is) conducted with traditionally marginalized groups, doesn't it seem like the burden to transform the system lies heavily on this group? Seems like another injustice. I'm not sure if I'm adding anything new to the conversation here, somehow I feel as if I am muddying the waters.</p> <p>Sylvia</p>	<p>I (Barbara) really think we need to untangle the idea of "neutrality" from the idea of "objectivity." I think objectivity has been set on a pedestal and, also, that neutrality has been the conceptual conversion and application of objectivity. In other words, I think objectivity has been "translated" so to speak, into the concept of neutrality and this is a big problem. However, as long as people think that neutrality is a form of objectivity it will be difficult to persuade people that it is actually harmful rather than helpful. Sylvia's argument is that things are not really neutral . . . and I want to push that further to say, neutrality is not really what we should focus on or aim for.</p> <p>I (Meagan) wonder if disruption should be the goal of PAR work, instead of transformation? There is so much pressure in transformation, and it can be condescending and, ultimately unethical. Disruption allows for more . . . creativity . . . possibility . . . less reproduction of structures of inequality and hierarchies of power and ownership?</p>

<p>October 18, 2016 Sylvia and Barbara,</p> <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>In light of the Belmont Report, scholars suggest that institutional ethics boards have magnified the concept of vulnerability while failing to closely examine it. There is a fundamental ethical and legal assumption that some people are more vulnerable than others to abuse, mistreatment, misleading, and being taken advantage of in a research process. Laws require researchers to identify risks and to take special precautions with respect to "vulnerable" populations. Ethnographers must be more vigilant about vulnerability and risk than is required by standard review boards, because ongoing relational forms of research invite vulnerability and risk into the work.</p> </div> <p>What a great conversation! First, Mrs. James has indicated she will get in on the conversation in a few weeks—when things at school calm down for her. Meanwhile we'll just have to contemplate among ourselves. I will say, and she can comment on this later if she wants, that yes, Mrs. James explicitly and on more than one occasion (like, several) voiced concern over her students' vulnerability in general and in particular as they conducted this research. And that was definitely a consideration for me as well as I grappled with dilemmas about whether to push a conversation with the core group of co-researchers or with others outside of the group; whether or how to encourage co-researchers to share their findings in particular ways or settings; and whether to advocate for specific students or the group as they engaged in the research, invoking an outsider or expert role that would allow me to ask questions that the co-researchers might not feel they could. My concern, though, is that this desire to protect, while rooted, I believe, in "good" intentions and a certain ethical orientation, may also be founded—unknowingly—on a desire to protect those in power. I am reminded of what happened to Juan when he wanted to put a picture up in the photovoice exhibit that hearkened back to names he was called (Faggot, Mistake, Sin, etc.) when he came out as gay to his family and community. The picture was deemed inappropriate for the school context and not allowed to appear as part of the exhibit. The principal of the school said that his main concern was first to protect Juan from further abuse. But his second stated concern was to protect the majority, heteronormative population, from feelings of discomfort. To me this is indicative of a structural barrier that I'm not sure how to break down.</p> <p>I am struck by your question, Sylvia, related to the reification of disempowerment of traditionally marginalized groups by PAR approaches—that the burden to transform the system lies heavily with those individuals and I fully agree that this seems like another injustice and a structural constraint, but the structural constraint I see here lies with how PAR is often enacted. It's definitely how I felt at the beginning of the work I did in Atkinville—and I've talked a lot about this. That our group was going to change the world! We were going to end racism—at least in Atkinville! There would be some huge monumental shift in the discourse there. And then that didn't really happen and I felt totally let down. I took a lot of this on myself, thinking I made wrong methodological decisions. And we also talk about it in terms of institutional constraints related to typical K-12 contexts that don't allow for critical conversations to take place because of the risk of those in power falling out of power. And structural constraints. But what if the constraint lies instead (or also?) with PAR itself? Or with the usual enactment of PAR? Is it just too idealized? Or is the underlying methodology sound and does it have great transformational potential but those of us who seek to enact its methodological commitments in fact simply do it incorrectly because we are constrained by the very structures we seek to expose and change? This relates to your question about the role of the researcher—even if there were some accepted set of roles a PAR researcher would ideally play, would she not still be constrained by those structural barriers, whether or not she was aware of them—but probably especially if she were not?</p> <p>Too many questions. Meagan</p>	<p>I (Barbara 2) think that a critical analysis of caring acts reveal vulnerabilities in the culture and also that the manner of caring reveals power relationships. Thinking here that this isn't just about Mrs. James, but is about cultural structures of inequity. To articulate the manner in which she was taking care of students/intending to take care of students is to identify and leverage a critical consciousness. Maybe?</p> <p>Perhaps protecting those in power is an unintended consequence or an awareness of a potential consequence, but that one must accept in order to mediate potential harm. In other words, perhaps the vulnerabilities we aim to care through are tethered to power relations in a way that necessarily tethers our care to those power relations as well. Within institutional settings this may be a tension that one must wrestle with. (Barbara)</p> <p>At the Oxford ethnography conference this year, a German colleague and I presented a paper critiquing "participatory" approaches with children as the panacea for equity and power differentials in social science research. It's just a sort of first draft of an idea we are working through, but it relates to this point Sylvia raised. (Barbara)</p> <p>Lately I have been thinking of these forms of inquiry as opportunities to take up emancipatory and empowering interests and engagements . . . on the level of WE. So not between or not by transforming something outside ourselves, but by becoming a WE community through the research. (Barbara)</p>
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<p>October 19, 2016 Hi Meagan and Sylvia, What a fun conversation. I started to color code a little bit. What do you think of that? Also I wrote comments in the last two notes (one from Sylvia and one from Meagan) so you will need to turn on the comment function to see these. I think a lot about the points that have been raised. One thing I am wondering lately is whether or not, or the extent to which, we can think more communally about these questions. This would mean that what structures the researcher's action is not free from what structures the internal perspectives. When a researcher comes to PARTICIPATE with research participants, what does that mean . . . What is the we of US TOGETHER PARTICIPATING? In ethnography there has been a long emphasis on the researcher becoming a PARTICIPANT observer . . . this means having the researcher learn and acculturate with the community to the level that the researcher is able to participate WITH members of the community in the life the community leads. Doing this will always make the researcher somewhat complicit in the structures which might be odds with the community's own best interests. Can we conceptualize the researcher's PARTICIPATION as one side of the research activity (and I think this is linked also to the possibility of being wounded in the field to use McLaren, 1992 term) and being relative outsider as the other side of that activity simultaneous with conceptualizing the Participant's ordinary engagement as one side of the research activity and their critical engagement as the other side? This critical engagement can involve both insider and outside perspectives. Just thinking aloud. Cheers, Barbara</p>	<p>Compelling. This would be something I would really like to hear from Mrs. James about. Did she feel like there was a WE? I felt like that to a certain extent, but I also always felt outside. Then again, I felt like the relationships I built with student co-researchers allowed me to approach a WE at certain points. But again, always feeling pulled outside, or perhaps I always returned outside because of my Researcher Role. Can there be a full WE in any research? Or are there structures in place that will always prevent that? Is a full WE desirable? (Meagan) Yeah! So this is what I was hearkening to in the previous comment. I guess I'm just not sold on this. I'm totally attracted to this, and a part of me wants to say, YES YES YES! But then, as I discuss below, I am troubled by its potential to give a Researcher a way out of or permission to not stretch for full and transparent, authentic engagement WITH a community. (Meagan)</p>
<p>October 20, 2016 Barbara, This idea of becoming complicit (or recognizing or articulating or making explicit our complicity) in the "structures that might be at odds with the community's own best interests" . . . I'm having trouble with it. And I'm having trouble with the idea that we could be actors with two sides, although I think we are anyway. Perhaps it just depends on how reflexive we are about those sides of our engagement with communities? I know I'm just going around in circles here and not really answering anything, just posing a lot of questions—mostly to myself—but . . . I don't know. These ideas are tempting. And sound really smart. Perhaps I have to digest them a bit more. But there's this nagging concern that if we conceptualize engagement at two-sided the Researcher will be given tacit permission to act that way, instead of consistently and continuously reaching for the opposite—reaching away from ambiguity rather than towards it. Or did I miss your whole point? *Scrunched brow* Meagan</p>	<p>I (Barbara) would like to draw on Barad's (2008) concept of agential cut to say more about this. In this idea, the concept agency has to do with an interpretive orientation we take up. As we take up an interpretive perspective we also activate interpretive cuts or boundaries of understanding that are in play precisely linked to the interpretive perspective we engaged. These agential cuts will have active subjective orientations and structural aspects. Let's say the youth take the interpretation that they are just not understanding their teachers' actions properly—that teachers are not racist, there is just a misunderstanding. This agential cut might ultimately be at odds with what will serve the emancipatory desires of the youth. The dialogue and intra-active engagement doing research with, together, one another, suggests that our activities should be thought of in more collective terms, as community acting together. Then part of the process involves making explicit, reconstructing the structures and meanings that are entailed in our work together. Spivak (1999) claimed that "What I cannot imagine stands guard over everything I must/can do, think, live" (p. 22). In terms of ambiguity, it seems to me that as researchers we need to be willing to let go of our certainty about some claims (enter the dialogue with an open-mind) and push toward more explicit shared understandings and articulations.</p>
<p>October 31, 2016 Dear Meagan and Barbara, This exercise and the point at which we currently find ourselves—asking more questions rather than providing answers—reminds me of a recent conversation with a Philosophy of Education student. Our conversation focused on understanding humanism (my own understanding since I'm ignorant in this matter) and the scholarly critique of humanism (I have a point . . . stay with me). What came out of the conversation was that there are scholars who note that it is ok, and perhaps productive to be in an uncomfortable, messy place (or a place without answers). My student tells me that this line of thinking is common in Foucault's (1977) work but also amongst critical queer of color scholars (Ahmed, 2006; Ferguson, 2004). I guess these scholars engage in scholarship that challenges hegemonic processes but they don't always provide answers and strategies to break down hegemonic processes because the point is to engage in the intellectual critique. I say all this because, I see our piece here as doing just that. Maybe our goal really is not to "figure out" what the role of researcher is during PAR but simply to note that it is a messy methodology wrought with tensions but that's what makes it cool and unique!! And again, I am nowhere near being an expert on PAR (probably not even a novice) but for me, Meagan, the fact that you are self-reflective about the role of the researcher in the process tells me that you are approaching with care for community . . . which appears to be of utmost importance. These are my humble thoughts. Enjoy. Sylvia</p>	<p>I still don't fully grasp humanism. (Sylvia) Join the club! (Meagan)</p>

<p>November 1, 2016 Dear Sylvia and Barbara,</p> <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>Guillemin and Gillman (2004) frame reflexivity in a way that has been very helpful to me as I strive to engage ethically as a researcher. They discuss expanding the definition of reflexivity beyond its role in examining epistemological aspects of research to include an “ethics in practice” (p. 262) that allows us to build the skill and awareness to identify and respond to ethical issues that arise during the research process. By developing this skill, we can be better equipped to not only respond to these important moments, but also prevent them.</p> </div> <p>I appreciate Sylvia’s comments above. In fact, my first thoughts went to a conversation I was having with a student research group yesterday. The group has been focusing on engaging in reflexive practice, what that means, how can that be taught and/or learned. Toward the end of our conversation we turned to remind ourselves of the idea that reflexivity is much more than just reflection—what my students lovingly call naval-gazing. That reflexivity, at its core, should help us as researchers be more conscious, more aware, of ethical issues that can be raised in the field, and should help us build the skills and awareness to appropriately react to those ethical issues. In a nutshell. Anyway, as we were thinking this through, we talked of how our role as researchers—and we were speaking as qualitative researchers, but I really think this applies across the board—is more than just NOT doing harm. One of the ways we thought through this is as we discussed vulnerability. That we as researchers will be/should be/ might be vulnerable in our fieldwork, but we will also be asking our participants to be vulnerable. Even a simple action like asking an interview question that asks a participant to tell us a story about their life, their experience, potentially opens them up to being vulnerable. How are we vulnerable in return? And then our group thought, well, so if our role is more than simply not doing harm to our participants, could it be that our role as researchers is to care for subjects/ participants/co-researchers? We all kind of agreed that it is. And if it is to care for our participants, how do we go about doing that, in a non-condescending, paternalistic, us/them, White Savior way? How do we engage in research and make methodological decisions and use methods that help us care for our participants in an authentic way? Again, just my immediate thoughts based on what Sylvia said . . .</p> <p>Meagan</p>	<p>I (Sylvia) have nothing new to add to these sentiments but I feel compelled to share a quote from a recent conference workshop I attended. The conference was the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) and I attended a workshop on intersectionality. The workshop leaders argued that intersectionality is useful only when we are willing to engage in reflection about our privileged identities. The quote is the following: “Unless we are willing to do this kind of thorough (sometimes painful) and constant examination, it is impossible to better understand how we participate in and benefit from these systems of harm” (Beighley, Simmons, & West, 2014, p. 271).</p>
<p>March 1, 2017 Dear Barbara and Sylvia,</p> <p>First, thanks to Sylvia for attending the TQR conference for us and presenting our thoughts there. I wanted to copy what you, Sylvia, sent me after that: The presentation went really well! Positive feedback all around. Here are some comments/ thoughts before I forget.</p> <p>In many ways the frustrations with the power dynamics you encountered were unavoidable because you were working in a school setting (we acknowledged this in our reflective dialogue). So one person suggested working with students outside schools settings in the future.</p> <p>Someone noted that even though its PAR and you are to form a research collective—you should not be shy or fearful about guiding the collective in particular directions. For example, questioning students about their new language about “misunderstandings rather than racism” does not have to be coercive—it can be a conversation much like the one we (you, me and Barbara just had). FYI—people loved that!!!</p> <p>Lastly—and I think we talked about this in our racism paper—someone noted that the shift from racism to misunderstandings does not necessarily mean students changed their perspectives about racism but the shift in language reflects a survival mechanism—to protect relationships with teachers (Mrs. James).</p> <p>But overall, people validated your feelings—this is the messiness of PAR and that’s OK. What do you both think of these comments? I honed in on the first two comments. First, the idea that power dynamics were unavoidable. While I agree that perhaps the dynamics themselves might have been unavoidable, I don’t think their effects were unavoidable, and I don’t think that wrestling with them and striving and struggling to foreground and transparently and explicitly challenge them would have been time wasted. It seems to me that the suggestion that, “Well, why don’t you work outside of schools” is a bit of a methodological cop-out. Don’t get me wrong, I have had the same thought many times before (remember, Barbara, when Michelle Fine suggested you write a break up letter with schools?). But I’ve lately become more of an advocate for engaging in the struggle rather than avoiding it.</p> <p>I guess that leads to my thoughts on the second comment about guidance not having to be coercive and accepting our roles as researchers within a larger research collective. I still think work needs to be done on this. I feel like we (researchers) too easily or too quickly accept the status quo. “That’s just the way it is.” Or “There’s no escaping that dynamic.” I think we can and should always push a bit. This hearkens back to Barbara’s thoughts on the US of PARTICIPATION. I’m still intrigued by this thought. And I think it represents a bit of a push against those, including myself, at times, who feel like we (researchers, methodologists) have to accept PAR or critical ethnography or whatever for what it is, not imagine what it could be, if . . .</p> <p>That’s all for now, Meagan</p>	<p>This is interesting in so many ways. I know people who move entirely outside of school contexts, which I can appreciate. However, I think that Roles that are unequally structured, and unequal cultural structures do not have to result in interactive power being used. That is, it might be helpful to think about the specific aspects of power that worked to thwart the open and equal communicative potential of the students. Then linking this with a conversation about ethics would have to do with examining how power distorts an ideal speech situation (to use Habermas’s language) and the manner in which the ideal speech situation and its distortion reflects an ethical problem. (Barbara)</p> <p>I think the idea of using words like “misunderstanding” instead of “racism” reflect an implicit orientation toward being more inclusive which would be more ethical in one way . . . the problem is if it covers up an experiential insight on the part of the students about actual racist effects resulting from the misunderstanding. What do you think about this interpretation? (Barbara)</p> <p>So this is partly what needs to be examined too. So if by using the concept of misunderstanding, aspects of students marginalization are dropped in the conversation, then it is a problem. The idea that one must choose how to frame it is also important to take up in terms of its communicative ramifications. (Barbara)</p>

Conclusion

We came together in this intimate, informal, and vulnerable conversation to explore ethical tensions that seem inherent in participatory and ethnographic qualitative inquiry. Call-Cummings wondered what is the role of the researcher in participatory ethnography? Is it one thing, something that can be defined or made clearer? How can I know that I have “gotten it right?” Do I just have to learn from repeated mistakes and get a little bit closer to some ideal every time I engage in participatory ethnographic inquiry?

In beginning these conversations with Dennis and Martinez, Call-Cummings was in search of answers. Call-Cummings wanted clarity. She wanted to know what was right and what was wrong. And what she should do differently “next time” to be or feel “right” or “ethical.” Yet, in reading through our conversations, we have noticed numerous points at which we end our reflections with ellipses (. . .) or with unanswered questions that seem placed, dropped, seemingly without needing an answer. These moments speak to what became our implicit goal during this process: to lay bare the intra-active nature of reflexivity. These moments of entangled, unresolved, even stilted conversation and questioning lay bare this often hidden aspect of the research process. We offer no simply presented lessons or conclusive statements about what the role of the researcher in fact is. We have created no clean table or linear visual aid that delineates right from wrong. Rather, we have grappled with important and messy questions and argue that the grappling of reflexive practice has allowed us to feel more comfortable in the complexity of our discomfort.

Ultimately, we hope that these unresolved questions and this entangled complexity will ignite useful conversations among others. We think these questions are worthy of continued dialogue that accepts and reflects the messiness of ethical tensions in participatory ethnography. Some of the areas around which we would appreciate more methodological discussion include the following:

1. How qualitative methodologists conceptualize and present failure and mistakes in academic and scholarly settings and outlets.
2. How research collectives can collaboratively and explicitly equalize and act outside of taken-for-granted power hierarchies in the researcher-researched relationship.
3. The ethical role of reflexivity in participatory ethnography.
4. How ethics is conceptualized and enacted as intra-activity and intra-relational.

These discussions should of course take place at conferences and in journal publications, but we feel strongly that they should also happen in qualitative methodology and

other research courses with students. Rather than accepting (and teaching novice researchers) that tensions are unavoidable and, therefore, acceptable, we hope they can be excavated through what we have modeled here as the intra-active process of reflexivity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Indiana University Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society (CRRES) Research Grant and the Indiana University Graduate School Grant-in-Aid of Dissertation Research.

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