Defying Gravity? Raising Consciousness Through Collective Research

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Introduction
I never thought of research as a tool to talk back to the community. I always thought of it as analyzing (sometimes over-analyzing) history (Tiffany Threatts, Fed-Up-Honeys research team member) (Cahill et al., 2004). We are looking to plant a seed in the minds of society. We wanted our stickers to upset you to the point of inspiration. We want our beautiful, young, urban womyn of color to realize what it is we have against us and we hope it will give you all the motivation to go against the grain; to prove everyone wrong (Erica Arenas, Fed-Up-Honeys research team member) (www.fed-up-honeys.org, 2004). What are the methodological and theoretical issues of doing collective research? While raising questions that speak to the process and point to the high and low lights of a collaborative research approach, my paper addresses issues of representation and shifting power that are central to feminist inquiry, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and research concerned with social (in)justice and inclusion. Specifically this paper grapples with the possibility of research as a vehicle for social change (Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999; Fine and Barreras, 2001; Torre, 2001; Clarke, 2003; Pain, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003; Ruddick, 2004). Consideration is given to the potential of the research process to provide a space for questioning exclusionary practices and social inequities. The discussion focuses on a participatory action research project in which a group of young women researchers critically examine their home community—the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City—making often painful connections between economic restructuring and their own lives. I report on the project that this research team developed, ‘MAKES ME MAD: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color’, which deals with how the lack of resources in their community is related to the ways in which these young women are perceived (Rios-Moore, 2004).

The outline of the project that follows offers a broad overview of what was a very complex, intense, and rich experience. My discussion of the project will center on three critical turning points: emotional motivation; the politicization of personal experience; and the power of speaking back with research. These are critical moments where the research team (including myself) learned something new; they are collective landmarks.
saturated with emotion, and they pushed the research forward. The turning points are in
effect rest stops along the way where you can take in a view of this project.

The Project

This participatory action research project was developed as part of my dissertation
research which focused on the everyday lives of young women in the city and,
specifically, on the experiences of young women growing up in the Lower East Side
neighborhood of New York City. I grew up on the edge of this neighborhood, and, as
I watched it change over the last 25 years, I became increasingly interested in the
relationship between neighborhood change and the experiences of the young women who
live in it. The neighborhood’s complex overlapping histories of waves of immigration,
of massive abandonment, of reinvestment and new development, are reflected in its
various place-identities as the Lower East Side, Alphabet City, Loisaida, and the East
Village. Once one of the poorest communities in Manhattan, today the Lower East Side
might be best characterized as a neighborhood in transition even if what will become of
it is very much contested and still unclear (Mele, 2000). There is little research looking
at what these changes mean for young people and young women in particular (cf.
Scharff, 1998). The stated purpose of my dissertation research was to study and
understand young urban women’s experiences and interpretations of the urban environ-
ment as there is not a lot of scholarship concerning young urban women’s everyday
lives. While young men (especially poor young men of color) are closely surveilled in
urban public spaces and social research (Kelley, 1997; Payne, 2001; Fine et al., 2003;
Way et al., 2004), the diversity and range of young women’s experiences in the city have
not been taken seriously, despite the attention young women’s bodies receive in popular
media, social research and on the street. There is little known about the everyday lives
of urban young women and even less about their experiences in their neighborhood
public spaces.2

The emphasis of my dissertation research is upon a contextualized understanding of
young urban women. The term ‘context’ is used here to describe the multiple and
contradictory scales of the environment and the local, global, personal, cultural, social,
physical, economic and political dimensions of young women’s everyday lives. In order
to provide a fuller understanding of the broad spectrum of young women’s experiences
living, working, and going to school in the city, this study took a deliberately open
theoretical and methodological approach. Situating young urban women’s perceptions of
their own lives at the center of this research project was a conscious political and
theoretical undertaking. I developed this project ‘digging where I stand’ (Maguire, 2000),
with a particular standpoint informed by my own experiences as a young white woman
growing up in the city. As a researcher I identify with the concerns of my co-researchers,
while paying attention to the differences between us (McDowell, 1992; Bhavani, 1994;
Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2002).3

I played various roles in the project which included the initiation of the project and
ongoing facilitation of it. To begin with I recruited six young women to participate as
youth researchers through neighborhood schools and community centers. Specifically, I
was looking for young women between the ages of 16 and 22 who lived on the Lower
East Side. Prospective researchers had to fill out an application which included a short
essay about their interest in participating. A diverse group of young women were
selected.4

We are Chinese, Puerto Rican, African-American, Dominican, and Black-Latina, As
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Diverse as we are, personalities included, we seemed to click instantly and our conversations flowed. We fed off each others’ ideas and we built on them as well. We spoke of personal experiences, shared our writings and discussed world issues we felt were impacting us. Erica Arenas, researcher (www.fed-up-honeys.org, 2004).

Youth researchers were paid a stipend for their participation in the participatory action research project which involved a 4-week commitment of 20 hours each week. We met at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and at sites throughout the Lower East Side. Towards the end of the first month, we received funding which allowed us to keep working together throughout the summer of 2002 to finish our project. Since then, we have continued to meet and to work together. To date, we have designed a sticker campaign (discussed more fully later), published our research report (Rios-Moore et al., 2004), and developed a website (www.fed-up-honeys.org). In addition, we have written a book chapter reflecting on our participation in this research process (Cahill et al., 2004). Some of the researchers and I also had the opportunity to present our work for the first time at the Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania (2003). In addition, one of the researchers took the initiative to further expand our project by involving two more Chinese young women to address issues specifically having to do with Chinese immigrant young women.

From the beginning, the young women researchers/participants were introduced to the broad outlines of the research process. They knew they would be involved in every aspect of developing and creating a research project. They knew they were going to go through each of the steps—problem identification, research design, data collection and analysis. Part of the research process involved training the researchers in doing research, what Fine et al. call ‘creating the conditions for collaboration’ or ‘building a community of researchers’ (Fine et al., 2001). Some researchers had more research experience than others; we helped each other and learned from each other.

The research process followed a feminist Freirian model which started with the concerns of young women and their critical investigation of their social contexts (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). The theories and practice of participatory action research (PAR) are particularly relevant to the study of young urban women’s interpretations of their everyday experiences. PAR is a collective approach to research in which the participants look critically at their social and/or environmental contexts and develop proposals to address the problems raised by the research. PAR takes lived experience as the starting point for investigation, places emphasis upon the research process, and reconsiders the value of research as a vehicle for social change (Hart, 1997; Fine and Barreras, 2001; Fine et al., 2001; Torre at al., 2001). Through the process of investigating their own everyday lives and then sharing these experiences, the young women came to understand their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political (Fine et al., 2001; hooks, 1995).

The project, as mentioned earlier, was broadly defined in order to keep the project open and follow the lead of the young women involved. It was not known who would apply and what they would bring to the table. In fact, many issues were raised by the research team, but what the group mobilized around, and what they decided to focus their project on, was the upsetting discovery of misrepresentations of young women of color in academic and social research literature.
Critical Turning Point # 1: Emotional Motivation

In the course of doing research on their neighborhood context, the research team read a report produced by a local non-profit organization which features a hypothetical profile of a young working class woman of color living on the Lower East Side; let’s call her Taniesha. The report goes into detail about the particular challenges Taniesha might face growing up in her neighborhood and how this particular organization will protect Taniesha from harm. Instead of the ‘worst case scenario’ described in the report—a bleak future for a high school drop out, a single mother with no job prospects and poor health who places a burden on society, the organization promises to deliver a productive member of society. This all-too-common fundraising ploy and programming strategy of certain non-profit organizations depends upon well-rehearsed ‘culture of poverty’ arguments to justify their existence (Rios-Moore et al., 2004). As one of the researchers put it: ‘They are saying basically that we are all these things unless we had their help—their good will to save us’. This approach is not dissimilar from missionary work or from ‘saving the rainforest’, a comparison made by a director of an urban youth organization (Richardson, 2003)

The researchers were enraged by the report; perhaps not shocked, but oh-so angry. Here emotion served to galvanize the group. We now began working together as a united front. The research team tapped into their collective anger as a way to move forward, in a way that hooks would characterize as ‘the political process of decolonization’ as ‘a way for us to learn to see clearly … and gather that rage and use it towards constructive social change’ (hooks, 1995, p. 18). The research team decided to focus their research project as a way to speak back, as a response to the misguided authors and others who misunderstand and misrepresent young women of color.

As the researchers start to conceptualize their research project they talk about ways of reaching their intended audiences.

R: How about we write like something like that. Just like an article thing?

K: Yeah that’s what I was thinking—an article.

R: And then we just hand it out …

K: In the street …

R: And it just happens to fall on her doorstep!

K: I think we should do something and put it on the web.

The researchers wrote in their journals about what they want to focus on for the collective research project and then read it aloud to each other.

T: This first page, really, I was just getting my anger out. I wanted to say a lot more about that report. Um … I just didn’t want to, didn’t want to spend too much time on it; cause it’s not really worth it. Stereotypes are never true. It is a crime for a woman to identify other young ladies with only … excuse me … other young ladies only coming from projects, impoverished areas, getting pregnant, using drugs and pertaining to crime. … Um … This makes me mad. How is it that a white, a rich,
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white woman, can explain why colored poor people do what they do? She can never comprehend.

K: I think, like, that women ... oh fuck it. I'm just going to read: I think that we should like focus a little bit on women and their relationship to the neighborhood and the challenges that they face because of the report that you read. It seemed that society, well like the neighborhood, puts out an image about how women should act cause they in a certain neighborhood—and I think that's a crime—to me. So like that's what I was reading. So I think that then we should focus on that.

J: Yeah because like to me it seems that just somebody comes that doesn't know anything about the neighborhood, and never lived here for like quite as long like we have, and get to know everyone in the neighborhood. That they come, and they say it seems like women in this neighborhood act like this and that, and when people see that people be like 'oh it's true—look' and they do it, and like you know, and that doesn't seem like it's right.

Their project title MAKES ME MAD: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color conveys their fury. At the same time the researchers were careful not to seem too angry; they didn't want to alienate anyone. Which is why they adopted their group title 'fed-up-honeys;' a softer appellation that underscores their frustration.

The project is concerned with two related issues:

1. What is the relationship between the lack of resources (for example, education) and the stereotypes of young urban women of color? In what ways does stereotyping affect young women's well-being?
2. How do stereotypes inform the way you explain/characterize/understand yourself and others? How does this then negatively affect the community?

The researchers developed what might be called a collaborative autoethnography, as defined by Mary Louise Pratt, in which they re-present 'themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms', as opposed to an ethnography where the dominant group 'represents to themselves their (usually subjugated) others' (Pratt, 1992, p. 7) (cf. Ellis and Bocher, 2001; Moss, 2001). The Makes Me Mad project reflects the desire of young women to self-define and to have control over their identifications (Hall, 1997). It is at once a critique from below and a conscious shifting of the terms of engagement intent on making visible the processes of erasure that represent young women in dominant discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Fine et al., 2001).

As part of the research and ongoing analysis process the researchers moved between the conscious construction (and deconstruction) of their own subjectivities, their own individual experiences, and the social and material conditions of their everyday lives (Domash, 2003). Through their group discussions and their own writings on this subject, the researchers identified many stereotypes of young urban women of color. As part of the research process, group members kept journals which they used on a regular basis for reflective writing and taking field notes. Sometimes we would begin our day by writing and then sharing journal entries with each other.

The research team categorized the stereotypes into the following groups: 'Stereotypes related to our sexuality and body type'; 'Stereotypes related to our perceived intelligence'; 'Stereotypes related to our supposed class level'; 'Stereotypes related to our behavior'; and 'Stereotypes related to our relationships' (cf. Rios-Moore et al., 2004). They listed the stereotypes on our 'wall' (a huge piece of yellow paper that covered one of the walls in our project space) in big
letters along with another list, ‘What the stereotypes leave out’, which reads as follows
(www.fed-up-honeys.org/stereotypes.htm):

It’s clear that these stereotypes are very limited in their scope and unable to fully
encompass the complexities of individual lives. Through our self-descriptions and
conversations with other young women, we identified some of the specific aspects
that stereotypes are insensitive to.

- Background Struggle
- Lack of support
- The abuse that some women face
- The inherent diversity of every woman
- The challenges young women face that sometimes leave them in compromised
  stereotypical situations
- The individuals
- The aspects of life that makes things more complicated
- The true stories of why/how stuff happens
- The identity of the person—we are so much more complex
- The ability for people to think for themselves
- If you go against the crowd you are an outsider—which is a bad thing
- The person’s story
- All that makes each life special and unique
- Everything!

To face stereotypes as a collective is to come to terms with how these stereotypes have
affected you individually and collectively, and the impact they have on your everyday
lives. This is hard work. It hits too close to home. This involves taking off the blinders
we wear to protect ourselves. It is painful.

In their research project, the researchers took this a step further, collectively teasing
out the ways in which they themselves have internalized racist and sexist stereotypes and
how they have then applied these same representations to others. It was at once
satisfying, infuriating, and demoralizing to make the connections between, say, the poor
quality of public education in their community and stereotypes about perceived intelli-
gence. It was upsetting to draw connections between economic development, unequal
distribution of resources and misrepresentations of themselves.

The Makes Me Mad project uses what Fallis and Opotow (2003) have described as
a ‘layered’ collaborative qualitative research approach; a cyclical research process in
which each turn of the process pushed the researchers to ask new questions, to re-think
their interpretations, and to engage the differences between their diverse perspectives
(Fallis and Opotow, 2003, p. 107). The ‘layers’ in this project involved the development
of research questions, regular focused discussions between the researchers, ongoing
individual reflective writing and collaborative sharing, informal conversations with peers
and research colleagues about research findings, the analysis of their own writings, the
development and refinement of research products, the presentation of their work, and the
ongoing discussion and reflection upon interpretations. This cyclical process did not
move in only one direction, but moved back and forth between steps, spiraling out for
a wide-angle view on the data and then zooming up close to an analysis of their own
writing.

Some parts of the research process were more engaging than others. Discussing
together the persuasive and dangerous characterizations they face in their everyday lives
but don’t often have the space to speak seriously about was cathartic or even ‘thera-
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peutic’ as one researcher put it. It was powerful for the researchers to move from personal to shared experiences and to engage in social theorizing together, building theory from the ground up. Sharing their research findings with other young women, peers, and research colleagues was an exciting experience for the researchers who felt powerful when raising the dangerous subject of stereotyping with others and speaking back to these mischaracterizations and, in doing so, raising the consciousness of others.

Without doubt, the most difficult part of the process was doing the data analysis. This involved days of wading through stereotypes, of sorting through distorted mischaracterizations, and untangling the violence of these stereotypes on their lives. The process was especially complex because the researchers were analyzing what they themselves had written throughout the project. Data analysis involved reading through the writings again and again for themes (Way, 1998), coding individually the researchers’ writing, discussing the codes as a group, and then re-coding collaboratively and paying attention to our differences and the contradictions within our writings. There was no distance. It was quite intense to read through each other’s writings while sitting next to each other and to consider how various group members’ writings betrayed the ways in which these stereotypes had become accommodated and even accepted. Thick air. No oxygen.

But before diving in deeper, let us come up for a deep breath. A pause. A moment of reflection (before more action). Is the distress necessary? Is this moment of awakening of the critical consciousness, what Freire calls the act of conscientização (1970), also an act of defying gravity? Is it a balancing act to keep oneself motivated while feeling demoralized after identifying the power of oppressive structural forces on one’s everyday life? To feel a sense of agency while engaged in what my former colleague would call ‘another fucking learning experience’ (Jones, 1993) seems a dialectical dilemma. It is this seeming contradiction that Freire grapples with so eloquently—the struggle for humanization—while acknowledging that a major obstacle is ‘that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness’ (Freire, 1970, p. 33). How do we stay afloat? This is what we, the research team, together struggled with. I will return to this in a moment.

Critical Turning Point # 2: the Politicization of Personal Experience

I thought of this turning point as ‘learning about gentrification’, but this leaves out a lot and misrepresents the intimate ways in which gentrification is understood up close by all involved. Perhaps ‘the politicization of personal experience’ is a more accurate way to title this turning point.

If you are familiar with the Lower East Side of New York City, you know that it is virtually impossible to study this area without touching upon the subject of gentrification. In fact, this neighborhood has been written about as an example of hyper-gentrification (Smith, 1996; Mele, 2000). Some of the researchers involved, however, had lived in the neighborhood their whole lives without knowing this word. And this, the learning of the new word, the naming of their experience, was very significant. One researcher wrote about this while reflecting on her participation in the research process and what she learned from it:

while engaged in a deep discussion about what has become of the Lower East Side of our childhood we spoke of how little boutiques and trendy bars were popping up all over the place of the small businesses that used to be owned by locals. I shared that since this had been happening, the building where I lived had come under new management and every few months my mother was forced to pay a higher rent.
Suddenly I hear one of girls say the word gentrification. I had never heard the word before in my life, so naturally I asked ‘what’s that mean?’ She explains to me that these yuppy ass, money having, culture seeking, white people are buying us poor people out of our neighborhood in part because they want a taste of our culture rich environment and the more of them who came in, the more of us are forced to leave because we can longer afford to live here. Oh! My! God! That’s what was happening to me! ...

Certainly several of the researchers were very familiar with this term already, but to re-visit the multiple ways in which gentrification has informed their well-being collectively and individually is another thing entirely. And to place gentrification in a larger context and cycle of economic restructuring is to understand this issue on a whole other level. Our discussions of gentrification spoke to what is not talked about in most research on gentrification. Here we filled in the abstractness of the cycles of planned shrinkage and gentrification with intimate details the research team knew all too well. The tiny overcrowded apartments where it is impossible not to argue; the impact on time and space use; and the pressures from landlords that keep you on your toes. We colored in the outlines of economic restructuring with the violence of displacement which some research team members had experienced themselves or witnessed next door.

The coldness of capitalism is melted by the heat of anger. As consciousness rises, so does the temperature.

Emotion is not only a side effect of our process, not only fuel for our fire, but also central to our inquiry. The challenge for researchers becomes to capture this as ‘data’, to raise up the quivering or loud or very quiet voice as we move between local and global scales, and try to capture this quivering, the loudness, and document the silences. The challenge is to recoup emotion at the local level and resist the too smooth processes of globalization, the silent cycles of dis- and re-investment and the concomitant dehumanization.

A consideration of the emotional engagement in doing research and of what it feels like to do research and to be intimately involved, represents a feminist, post-positivist flipside to the distance mantle of the scientific method (Bhavani, 1994; Tulwani-Smith, 1999; Einagel, 2002). Freire, as mentioned before, speaks to the labor of consciênciação, the pain of coming to terms with the roots of your oppression as you come into your subjecthood. It hurts, as Freire remarks ‘liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one’ (Freire, 1970, p. 31). It is this pain, this rage, that is so essential, hooks reminds us (1995), to confront and move beyond the pain towards what she describes as self-recovery and clarity. In her discussion of black rage, she suggests that in order for black folks to claim subjectivity ‘we need to claim our rage’ (hooks, 1995, p. 16). But in order for rage not to consume us it must be engaged and used constructively; and it is this engagement that leads towards social transformation (hooks, 1995). Or, as Freire would put it, it is through the praxis of the struggle—through reflection and action upon the world that we are able to transform it.

**Critical Turning Point # 3: Speaking Back**

This is how the research team decided to share their findings. This is what they did with their anger. This is a moment of catharsis. It is a release. It is our favorite part. It is filled with pride and energy. An exhale. And a critical and crucial part of a participatory action research project. Action.

The researchers developed a few different ways of ‘speaking back’ with their research
including a sticker campaign, a website, and a research report. Addressing the audiences and purposes of doing research was an ongoing conversation throughout the research process. While earlier on in the research process the discussion centered around speaking back to problematic research and misguided outsiders, it quickly became clear that the researchers wanted to address a primary audience—other young women of color like them. Others are invited to listen in.

Presumably, the main audience for our research would be people outside of our community because it would be simple to assume that these are the people that are misunderstanding us and are the main consumers of stereotypes of young urban wonyn of color. But over the course of our discussions we came to the very difficult realization that we too were consumers of these negative stereotypes, so we decided that our primary audience should be our peers. If we only communicated with outsiders that presumes that our peers (and ourselves) don’t have the level of agency needed to make change to the predominant perceptions of us and we strongly disagree with that belief (Rios-Moore et al., 2004, p. 3).

The research team developed various research products to engage audiences in different ways. After reading the report which first inspired their research focus, the researchers decided they wanted to ‘speak back’ and write a report refuting the stereotypes about young women. The researchers were, as you recall, quite upset that this report was accessible to anyone on the internet, and so they decided to create a website in order to engage a wider audience. But because they know many people will not go on the internet, the researchers also decided to create a ‘user-friendly’ print version of their report that they would distribute in their neighborhood (cf. Rios-Moore, 2004).

When the researchers had developed and finished their ‘Stereotype Stickers’, the research team turned the corner on despair. This was the first research ‘product’ they finished. The stickers were developed by a few of the researchers as a way of reaching a larger audience. Each sticker includes the website address (www.fed-up-honeys.org) and features a stereotype about young urban women of color based on their research. The stereotypes selected include: ‘ Likely to become teen moms’, ‘ In abusive relationships’, ‘Promiscuous’; ‘Uneducated’; ‘Lazy and on welfare’; and ‘Burden to society’.

Here’s how researcher Erica Arenas describes the stickers:

Most advertisements seen on public transportation and around the city are discriminatory and sexist, so what we created is something mocking those ads but instead of selling you sex, we’re making you think. Those of you who have spotted them must be wondering exactly what our motive is with these ‘Stereotype Stickers’. That’s simple. We are looking to plant a seed in the minds of society. We wanted our stickers to upset you to the point of inspiration. We want our beautiful, young, urban wonyn of color to realize what it is we have against us and we hope it will give you all the motivation to go against the grain; to prove everyone wrong (www.fed-up-honeys.org, 2004).

In effect the research team sought to reproduce their own consciousness-raising in their sticker campaign: to make people mad; to deal with it; and to upset their audience to the point of inspiration. Inspiration = visiting the website.

The website is a showcase for multiple facets of the research team’s work. It includes a page introducing each of the researchers in all of their complexity; a page explaining the stereotype stickers; a page of resources on the Lower East Side including links to community organizations and businesses that connect to their interests; a page of resources for young women (links to other websites with information about health,
sexuality, financial resources); a ‘rant’ page where you can post your frustration, where you can vent; a poetry page for personal creative expression; a page with their report; and of course an acknowledgment to all those who have helped us throughout the project.

In creating the website, the research team addressed issues they identified in their research. One of their findings was that there were no safe and comfortable places in their neighborhood where they could express themselves. So the research team created a website, in effect a virtual space, where they could express themselves freely and effectively and participate in the public sphere. It says a lot, I think, that in order to find a safe space for expression, we have to substitute virtual for actual spaces. But here is a space where they have control and have addressed through an action research project what is missing for them and what upsets them in their everyday lives.

The research team also wrote a report MAKES ME MAD: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color (Rios-Moore et al., 2004) which analyzes the connections between the lack of resources in their community such as education, health, and housing resources and stereotypes of young women. The research report is currently being sent out to local community service agencies, distributed in communities and schools, and sent to policy makers.

Conclusion

In this project the research team and I raise not new questions: What is the purpose of research? Who is the audience? Knowing full well that these questions are not asked often enough. We take seriously when Laurel Richardson (1994) raises the serious problem that academic research is under-read, and also Alcoff’s (1995) and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (1989) related problem of academic research being an exclusive conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’. I share these questions with you, fully aware that they are not new questions, but because they are serious concerns. This approach to doing research which is built upon feminist, post-and de-colonial research (Bhavani, 1994; hooks, 1995; Fine and Weis, 1996; Katz; 1996; Kelly, 1997; Smith, 1999), community research (Lewin, 1951), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), points to new directions.

Let me sketch out the contours of this approach with help from my colleagues engaged in similar work and thinking about these issues (Fine et al., 2001; Torre, 2003a,b) These ideas may be especially useful for social researchers who wish to use a participatory action research (PAR) approach with young people (cf. Hart, 1997; Chawla, 2002; Driskell, 2002).

- PAR approach offers multiple research products which are not only different ways of speaking back or different ways of speaking to different audiences (to academics/to young people/to educators, etc.), but also are a way of addressing the thickness of research whose data are stratified like layers of fine pastry, like baklava. The different research products (the website, stickers, report) share different findings of the research process itself (Torre, 2003a).
- PAR recognizes and draws from situated knowledge and from lived experiences. It assumes that the subjects and agents of knowledge are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory. There is not an assumed consensus or a royal ‘we’ that erases differences. In this case the research team moved between social constructions and lived and embodied experiences. And in this way this approach builds on and/or meets
feminist, critical race, and post-structuralist theoretical concerns (Crenshaw, 1995; Hall, 1997; Butler, 1999).

- PAR is an approach that could be understood to be more rigorous, more involved, that gets to ‘inside knowledge’, that gets ‘better’ data because insiders ‘simply know things that outsiders don’t’ (Fine et al., 2001) and because young women are less likely to pathologize themselves, more likely to understand the ways in which different parts of their lifeworlds are connected (Ibid.). This is certainly very relevant to researchers working with young people of all ages.

- PAR is a social justice and feminist project that is concerned with shifting power and about bringing new voices into the academy. It is also about challenging the voices within the academy and exclusionary practices that reproduce and maintain structural inequities (Pain, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003).

- The power of PAR lays in its collective ‘knowledge produced in collaboration and in action’ (Fine et al., 2001). A research process that is collaborative has to take into account difference, this means different perspectives, and then it has to grapple with the spaces between the different standpoints; or, as Maria Torre argues, a diverse research group would produce research so ‘implicitly optically and ethically layered, that it will have to address issues that otherwise might be left uninterrogated’ (Torre, 2003b, p. 2). This goes beyond the thick descriptions of ethnographic tradition, to actually interrogating the spaces between. Here is where you start to get at the nexus between social construction and lived experiences, between micro- and macro-levels of the environment (Ibid.).

This process is neither smooth nor easy. As researcher Indra Rios-Moore eloquently articulates:

> By the end of our time together during the summer we came to the agreement that we wanted to provoke others into rethinking the standard negative stereotypes of young urban women of color that they encountered. But before we could even realize that that was what we wanted to do we had to (through angry eruptions, upset, and discussions) realize that we were living under the veil of those stereotypes ourselves. We had to touch upon some of those emotions that those oppressively heavy misconceptions had laid on us, and that was a difficult and sometimes painful process. (Cahill et al., 2004)

It is prickly. It is to defy gravity as you raise your consciousness, while you raise others’ consciousness, while you interrogate the spaces in between, those dark corners you would rather avoid. It is, as Arundhati Roy states so well (Seth, 2002), the job of a writer, or in our case a researcher, to illuminate what is left in the darkness, to increase the light because things are happening in the darkness. What we found out was that we could together, collectively, go to the dark places and hold each others’ hands and support each other in action. The action was paramount. Doing something. Putting something out in the world that is yours that you can be proud of and that YOU did. It is, as one researcher said, about following through—something she didn’t have the opportunity to do often enough. And it was very different from other experiences of knowledge production (school) that young people are involved in which too often exclude their perspectives.

Probably the most important thing, as articulated by the researchers, was the experience of working collaboratively (Monk et al., 2003). The support and the relationships which we developed through doing this together were what the researchers kept returning to again and again in their reflections on this experience. It was undoubtedly
one of the most important aspects of our collective work. Researcher Erica Arenas speaks to this:

As gentrification became a larger part of our research, it became a larger part of my life and if it hadn’t been for the girls this may have affected me negatively. But I had them to hold my hand and to teach me. Our research not only resulted in our research products but in a shared bond between 7 young womyn with 7 very different personalities. (Cahill et al., 2004)

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Notes

1. ‘The reason we spell womyn with a “Y” is because the “correct” spelling of woman and women have the words man and men in them’ (www.fed-up-honeys.org, 2004).
3. Differences between us (all) include race, age, socio-economic, and educational background, among many other differences which defy easy categorization or explication.
4. Only one white woman applied, and she didn’t show up to the interview (I was the only white woman participating in the project).
5. We are indebted to ActKnowledge Inc. for their support of our research and development of research products. Thank you! Check out their website www.acknowledge.org
6. While embracing Freire’s work, hooks (1994) also offers a critique of the sexism of Freire’s language and of his patriarchal model of liberation which equates liberation with manhood (p. 49).

References

(www.fed-up-honeys.org, 2004)
Defying gravity?


