Doing research with young people: Participatory research and the rituals of collective work

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July 2006

Please check with author before citation as it is “in press”:
Cahill, C. (forthcoming 2007) Doing research with young people: Participatory research and the rituals of collective work Children’s Geographies (special issue on research methods)
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We know little about the “spaces that youths engage with a kind of deliberate agency, sometimes an urgency… where voices can be heard, and differences can be articulated; deficit models are left at the door” (Weis & Fine, 2000, xii). While youth research is a burgeoning field, there is still not enough research on young people’s everyday lives in context from a youth perspective (cf. Torre & Fine, 2006 a; Rios-Moore et al., 2004; Fine et al.; 2004 ; Chawla, 2002). What can we learn from young people about our communities? A youth perspective is necessary because quite literally ‘the youth are our future,’ as the cliché goes, and young people are under increasing pressure to adapt to the requirements of the new economy in our brave new world. As young people attempt to negotiate this neoliberal context, society’s anxieties about political and economic changes are projected onto their bodies and youths are too often blamed for emergent social problems (Harris, 2004; Lipman, 2002 & 2003; Aitken, 2001; Hall & Jefferson, 1976). This is especially true of poor, working class, young people of color, whose challenges in achieving “success” implicitly expose the failures of our society. If young people are seen as analogous to the canary, whose malaise alerted miners to the presence of poison in the air, then their distress should be seen as “the first sign of a danger that threatens us all” (Guinier & Torres, 2002, 12). Listening to youths’ concerns is therefore critical to both understanding and participating in social change.

This is an exciting juncture at which to bear witness to the growing, multidisciplinary support for youth participation and more inclusive collaborative research practices in geography and the social sciences. Prying open a space for youth agency, participatory action research approaches position young people’s perspectives front and center as “subjects, architects, of research... [and] as researchers rather than the “researched” (Torre & Fine, 2006 a). In this paper, I offer a broad overview of the principles of participatory research as it applies to young people and then I will reflect on my own experience of doing a participatory action research project with young people (elsewhere I report on the shared concerns and research questions identified by the youth researchers which focus upon the relationship between race, representation, and urban development-- see Cahill, 2006; Cahill, forthcoming/2007; Cahill, under review a). Specifically, I will discuss a “collective praxis approach”—a set of rituals and practices for sharing power within the research process, the role of facilitator, and the process of collective data analysis. While most collaborative research approaches for working with children and young people draw upon visual methodologies, which are engaging and accessible to all ages and transcend barriers of language and literacy (Driskell, 2002; McIntyre, 2000a, Hart, 1997; cf PLA Notes www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/index.html), the methods I discuss in this paper privilege written and verbal expression. These techniques may be especially useful for those researchers who work with teenagers, however the principles of the PAR approach are relevant to all doing research with children and young people.

Principles of Participatory Action Research

At the center of a participatory action research program is a commitment to break away from traditional research conventions by involving the “researched” in some or all stages
of the research process. PAR starts with “the understanding that people – especially those who have experienced historic oppression -- hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations” of research (Torre & Fine, 2006 a). In a PAR project there is respect for the knowledge created through collaboration and in action, an emphasis upon social concerns and personal experience, a prominence given to the process of doing research, and attention is given to the value of research as a vehicle for social change (Kesby, Kindon & Pain, 2005; Kindon, 2005; Breitbart, 2003; Pain, 2004; Pratt, 2000; Fine et al., 2003; Hart, 1997). Including young people as partners in research reveals an understanding of young people as not only assets (Sabo, 2003), but as “agents of change (Ginwright & James, 2002), reflecting contemporary conceptualizations of youth (Skelton, forthcoming; James et al., 2001; Aitken, 2001; Holloway & Valentine, 2000).

Rooted in the pioneering work of Latin American activist researchers and educators Orlando Fals-Borda (1979) and Paolo Freire ([1970] 1997), participatory practices are already widely used by child rights advocates, critical educators, youth workers, and community organizers who work with young people to evaluate social issues/programs that are of concern such as problems of educational inequities, media portrayals of youth, violence in the community, police brutality, and discrimination based on sex/race/class (Youth Together (www.youthtogether.net); Kids as Self Advocates (www.fvkasa.org/); CAAA/ Youth Leadership Project (http://www.caaav.org/projects/ylp); ESPINO (http://www.espinocoalition.net ); Youth Organizing Communities (http://www.innercitystruggle.org); Youth & the World Urban Forum (http://eya.ca/wuf/for_research.html); RedWire (http://www.redwiremag.com ); Torre & Fine, 2006 a; Ginwright et al., 2006) There is also a small, but growing, group of researchers who are using PAR with young people to study issues that matter to them (for example see: special journal issue Pushing the Boundaries: Critical Perspectives on Child and Youth Participation (2006); Leadbeater et al., 2006; Delgado, 2006; Torre & Fine, 2006 b; Fraser et al., 2004; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Fine et al., 2004; McIntyre, 2000b; Cameron & Grant-Smith, 2005; Cahill, 2004; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Wridt, forthcoming; Kirshner et al, 2003; Pain & Francis, 2003; Chawla, 2002; Driskell, 2002; Breitbart, 1998; Hart, 1997). The current interest in youth participatory research work builds upon important precedents within geography and the related social sciences, where scholars have worked closely with young people to investigate their everyday lives (Williams & Kornblum, 1985; Hart, 1978; Lynch, 1977; Bunge & Bordessa, 1975).

PAR offers a promising new framework for researchers committed to social justice and change. The multiple benefits of engaging the perspectives of young people in research have served to challenge social exclusion, redistribute power within the research process and build the capacity of young people to analyze and transform their own lives and become partners in the building of more sound, democratic, communities (Cahill & Hart, forthcoming; Bartlett, 2005; Chawla, 2002; Driskell, 2002; Matthews et al., 1999; Hart, 1997). Nevertheless, not enough consideration has been given to evaluating the practice of doing collective research with young people. One critical concern is that the term participation is too often used indiscriminately to refer to a variety of practices which need to be differentiated in terms of young peoples’ roles in the research process and their involvement in decision-making (see for example Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Participation,” 1992; Driskell, 2002; London, 2006).
We need to be wary of broad applications of the term ‘participation’ because it often masks tokenism and the illusion of consultation that may, in fact, advance dominant interests (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 2001; Hart, 1997). The danger of such illusion is heightened where participation is presented as a set of techniques rather than as a commitment to the values of participation. Used in this way ‘participatory methods’ can result in the reproduction, not the challenging of unequal power relations (Kesby, 2000 & 2005; Kothari, 2001; Maguire, 2000). Thus, it is important to articulate more clearly what we mean by youth participation in collaborative research and to specify the degrees of participation in our practice. While research methods may be used in more or less participatory ways with children, my focus in this paper is on participation as an approach (as opposed to a method) which takes seriously young people’s agency and capacity. There is a qualitative difference, for example, between a project in which young people are intimately involved in framing the problems to be investigated and one in which young people assist in just the collection of data. It is crucial to ask the questions: What are the different domains of research and action that young people are involved in or excluded from? What is the purpose of their involvement?

If we are to advance the field of youth participatory research, there needs to be more critical evaluations of participatory research projects; we need to know what works and what doesn’t work in self-reflexive accounts of the practice of doing research with young people. The analysis of power dynamics within a youth research collective is especially important as many participatory action research projects are done with marginalized young people (Christensen, 2004). To this end, we also need to articulate how issues of race, gender and class are addressed within participatory approaches (Breitbart & Kepes, 2006; Cammarota, 2006; Torre, 2005). Beyond the benefits that being involved in research may have for young people (Strobel et al., 2006; Kirshner et al., 2003; Sabo, 2003 & 2001; Hart, 1997), how have young people been able to contribute to social change through participatory research (Cahill & Hart, forthcoming/2006; Cahill, forthcoming/2007; Ginwright et al., 2006; Torre & Fine, 2006 b; Youth Speak Out Coalition & Zimmerman, 2006; Chawla et al., 2005)? In highlighting the contributions of young people I am not espousing a “singular vision” of ‘usefulness’ (Horton & Kraftl, 2005) nor proposing that participatory research is the only valid approach for young people’s geographies. Rather, I am arguing that engaging with young people in research might in fact create a more vibrant research agenda opening up new theoretical possibilities. In this regard, PAR offers the potential for challenging the false dichotomy between research “of use” and theoretical engagement (Beale, forthcoming/2006).

In short, I would argue that the involvement of young people may even push scholarship in new directions. Significantly, we need to understand better the value of participatory approaches as a research methodology for working with young people. As researchers know better than anyone else, if you ask a different question, you get a different answer. In this regard it is important to identify the new questions and concerns young people contribute to scholarly inquiry. A critical concern for researchers, in this regard, is how to help young people make deeper analyses, including understanding how their local research and action is connected to broader global conditions (Katz, 2004). This may be an area particularly relevant for geographers as the PAR process foregrounds contextualized knowledge while placing an emphasis upon social theorizing that may create an opportunity for an analysis of issues and problems at different scales (Kesby, 2005; Cameron & Gibson, 2005).
Building a community of researchers

My discussion of methods for doing research with young people refers to a participatory action research (PAR) project that I developed with six young women (aged 16-22) who all lived in the same neighborhood (the Lower East Side) in New York City. The youth researchers were paid a stipend for their participation in the project which initially involved a 4-week commitment. We met daily at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) and at various sites in their home community. My main concern from the beginning was how to engage the young women as fully as possible in every stage of the research project and help them to take ownership over the whole process. For the young women to ‘own’ the process it was imperative that they were involved in defining the focus and purpose of the project from the ground up; this is an absolutely crucial stage in developing a fully participatory research program. To this end, the project was initially conceptualized broadly as the study of the “everyday lives of young women in the city” so that it would be open to follow the lead of the young women involved. After much deliberation and debate the young women decided to focus our research around the issue of stereotypical (mis) representations of young people of colour and the relationship between these images and the financial disinvestment of their neighborhood, entitling the project “Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of Young Urban Womyn of Color.”

How could I create a space where the researchers would express themselves and take control? Ownership was not an end goal, but an integral part of a participatory process and thus had to be developed from the outset. Reflecting upon lessons from grassroots social movements such as the civil rights movement, Myles Horton, the radical educator/activist and co-founder of the Highlander Research and Education Center, explains the significance of this principle:

“I think it’s important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society, you have to act democratically in every way. If you want love and brotherhood, you’ve got to incorporate them as you go along, because you can’t just expect them to occur in the future without experiencing them before you get there.” [Horton, 1990, 227, my emphasis]

Rather than ‘establishing trust’ with ‘informants’ simply in order to gain information, making the co-researchers comfortable in the space of the university and creating a warm collegial atmosphere understood along the lines of hospitality. I wanted my co-researchers to feel at home, and not feel intimidated by the unfamiliar institutional setting. Welcoming the young women was taken seriously.

An important way to put the young women at ease and make them feel welcome involved my making it clear from the outset that I considered the participants/researchers to be competent agents and experts in understanding their own lives. I stressed that their experiences and perspectives would guide the project: “What matters to YOU?” I asked the young women at the first meeting. They interpreted the openness of the research agenda as a lack of structure, which was an unusual and different experience for most involved, as expressed in the following retrospective reflections (Cahill et al., 2004; 237-8):
Indra: The fact that we had a very loose idea of what we were there to do gave us an opportunity to make the space our own and to express our thoughts and ideas more freely. ...Because we were at CUNY [City University of New York], clearly an educational setting, there was potential for us to feel intimidated or feel that there were going to be specific expectations of us, but because we only knew we were going to be there to do some level of discussion and because our activities were loose enough to be group directed they resulted in shared thoughts and ideas that were particularly unique to us as a group.

Tiffany: If it was more structured it would have felt like school to me, and I know Caitlin was worried about coming off as a teacher but she wasn’t. She gave us the opportunity to speak our minds about everything and anything even if it was racial. ...For me the unstructuredness helped me to develop ideas on what to do and made it easier to work knowing there were no barriers. The most important thing for me to be able to do this work was it not feeling like school.

In fact, while the project was undefined, it was not unstructured. At the same time however, precisely because it was collaborative I could not plan and structure the process ahead of schedule. The research evolved in a slightly messy and organic way. Again this was a different way of working which was unsettling at first for some who were used to following directions and who were not sure how to contribute to a very open process. Perhaps then, the PAR approach points to what is missing in highly structured educational settings where young people are rarely asked their opinion, much less engaged in producing knowledge (Lipman, 2002). I had purposely left a lot of room in the process in order that there was space available for the unexpected to occur, for co-researchers to fill gaps (literally and theoretically) with their bodies, desires, and concerns.

The PAR process followed a Freirian model which started with the concerns and questions of young women (Freire, [1970]1997; hooks, 1994). The late great Brazilian philosopher Paolo Freire (1974) proposed a radical reassessment of education as the “practice of freedom.” Education, according to Freire, is the “practice with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or groups) in their incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freire, 1997, 30). The “practice of freedom” is conceived as an ongoing process of dialogue and critical reflection towards the goal of conscientizacao, the awakening of a (Marxian) critical consciousness. It starts with a reflection upon the conditions of one’s own life, which in terms of our research project involved a process of personal investigation.

Because ‘deep’ participatory research is a practice of researching with, rather than on participants, the building of a community of researchers is critical to the success of a PAR process (Torre et al, 2001; Lykes, 2001). It entails both taking seriously the processes of collaboration and community-building, but also involves the development of research proficiency among all participants. The development of skills is significant because it serves to challenge the power dynamics of the relationship between the facilitator and participants (and between participants with varying levels of experience with research) in the PAR process. In addition, this may also be in itself “emancipatory” and personally transformative (Hart, 1997; Lather, 1986).

In keeping with these theoretical premises of PAR, I developed an integrative youth-centered approach to training the co-researchers in research skills and started by
building upon the knowledge and experience of the young women involved. Our project began with the young women investigating (and learning how to do research as part of this process) what they shared - their neighborhood and what it meant to be a young woman growing up in the neighborhood. The young women researchers ‘learned through doing’ developing research skills in an applied way through their own inquiry process.

In our exploration of the young women’s everyday lives, I introduced my co-researchers to multiple methods, including mental maps, behavior mapping, a guided tour of places of significance in the Lower East Side neighborhood, a social map of roles identifying the responsibilities associated with the expectations in their everyday lives, and daily focus groups/brainstorming sessions. This preliminary training and collective research process in turn informed the development of research questions (discussed further). As stated earlier, the young women were involved in each step of the research process—problem identification, data collection, data analysis and the presentation of research findings (action!). The research process was complicated, cyclical, and “layered” in which each turn of the process pushed us to ask new questions and re-think our interpretations (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, 107). Here I focus on the role of the facilitator in guiding this process, on methods of writing and reflection which were at the heart of our collective praxis—our approach to doing participatory research—and data analysis.

Facilitating collective research

The redefinition of research as a collaborative process necessarily changes the role of the academic researcher who may be identified as a facilitator, training participants to do research, or as a collaborator, who researches alongside participants providing technical assistance (Hart, 1997; Lewin, 1948). The role of the academic researcher in PAR is increasingly problematized in the literature, particularly critical of the use of PAR in developing countries (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). At the heart of the critique is the challenge of negotiating the underlying power structures within the process (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, Kesby, 2005). A critical concern in this regard is the relations of power between the researchers and participants, and also between the participants themselves (Stoudt, 2006; Torre, 2005; Pain & Francis, 2003). How do you create a “democratic space of radical inclusivity” (Torre, 2005) despite social inequities along lines of race, gender, class etc (Fine et al., 2003; Maguire 2000)? And, despite differential skills and proficiency in research and self-expression? Another significant issue is that the power dynamics in a participatory process may be more confusing to negotiate because of the collaborative structure of the process (Cooke, 2001; Kothari, 2001).

If participatory approaches are to be successfully applied in children’s geography, these issues become especially relevant given that young people may identify researchers with adult authority figures (Matthews, 2001). In my own case I was quite concerned about this issue as I was aware that most of the older white women the co-researchers had come into contact with are teachers who come from outside of their community. Early on, therefore, it was critical for me to locate myself politically & geographically, and to identify my standpoint, paying special attention to my whiteness and related privileges. Acknowledging race was not only a step towards creating space for discussing differences, it also served to disrupt the power connected to the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness (Fine et al., 2004 b). The challenge for everyone involved addressing how power played out in the project and making it as transparent as possible within the process. Given
these significant considerations, I had a very particular interpretation of what my role as a facilitator and collaborator should be within the collective research project.

As I have already suggested, from the outset I attempted to set up an open structure for participation. Transparency was my primary concern, given the highly uneven relations of power that usually structure the research process. This was especially important given my overlapping roles as the initiator of the project, co-researcher and facilitator for my less research-experienced research partners, not to mention the obvious differences in age, race and educational levels between me and my co-researchers. My strategy for creating a transparent process involved a conscious and explicit ongoing explication of every step or decision made. In practical terms this meant sharing with the co-researchers all the nuts and bolts of doing research from financial issues to my own struggles and thought processes. When possible all decisions were made collaboratively, whether they were large or small. So for example we discussed everything from how long we should take for lunch, to the agenda for research, to deciding what to do with a $1000 grant and how to develop a budget for the project.

I believed that a primary element of my role as a facilitator, was to create ‘a safe space for honest dialogue’ in order to create an environment where everyone involved would feel comfortable to express themselves and contribute (see Stoudt, 2006 for an insightful discussion of creating a “safe space” for research). At times this involved taking a more active role as a facilitator to engage everyone involved. Sometimes this meant interrupting silences: e.g. ‘Alice what do you think?’; or disrupting dominant voices by creating regular opportunities for group reflection & checking in with the group periodically: e.g. ‘Do we all agree? Why or why not?’. Part of my role involved modeling this as a facilitator in a way that was conscious. As an active listener, I worked to validate people’s contributions to the group, and to check in and clarify my understanding of what was being said for all of us. This became especially important when we were trying to articulate conceptually complex ideas. It was often necessary to ‘break down’ and clarify the group’s understanding of the sometimes abstract and theoretical interpretations offered by individual research team members. This, in turn, generated richer analysis of our data.

I did not, however, interpret my role to be that of a passive facilitator of others’ participation. My view of deep participatory research is that it is collaborative and reciprocal. As a co-collaborator I also was involved in the research process and had opinions about our heated conversations. Of course sometimes I disagreed with others. At times, I decided to silence my perspective so as not to potentially dominate or derail discussion, other times I decided to share my interpretation or challenge another’s. The key issue however, if one is to participate in ways that do not silence others, is to be very careful about the grounds on which you make a contribution. When I did disagree, I made sure to first clarify I was speaking from my own experience: e.g. “for me, I experienced it like this” so as to break down any claim to authority and to consciously articulate my particular standpoint and what experiences contribute to my particular perspective (Hardstock, 1983). I also regularly shared my interpretations with the researchers throughout the process. This served as an informal method of analysis. I would confirm and clarify my understanding with the group: “Is this what you meant?” in order to gain further understanding or to challenge my assumptions. On the one hand, this is a common sense, tried and true qualitative research practice to ensure against the misinterpretation of the young women’s contributions. On the other hand, this process served to reflect back to the young women their interpretations in a way that drew out
political/social/ethical implications. For example, when one co-researcher, Carmen, suggested that other students at her school brought failure upon themselves, I questioned what she meant by that—"Do you mean that they don't try because they don't care? Or do they try but still don't succeed because they aren't capable?" And later, another co-researcher then asked Carmen why she didn't think the students cared and then, how she fit into this understanding as she was also having a hard time in school. In other words, I took seriously the social analyses my co-researchers articulated and saw my role as supporting the connections between their interpretations and social and political theory. This was a role that soon all of the co-researchers played for each other and through this process we collectively developed theory in the Makes Me Mad project.

**A collective praxis methodological approach: Rituals to share power**

We began our collaborative work with a set of 'agreements,' essentially informal guidelines for our collaboration. These included being present on time to participate, respecting others' opinions and points of views—which we interpreted to mean actively listening, disagreeing with each other in a way that was constructive or explicative— in other words clarifying one's own point of view rather than dismissing someone else's—and taking our work together seriously. Indeed, everyone involved took our 'agreements' seriously. Keeping in mind the critique that participatory work prioritizes consensus (Kothari, 2001), it was crucial to create an environment where everyone's perspectives got aired and was accepted as a valuable contribution, even if disagreed with. For example, while the researchers could agree that their neighborhood was disinvested, they disagreed about how to deal with this issue at a personal level; some wanted to get out of the community, while others wanted to stay put and improve their neighborhood. Rather then avoiding difference, the researchers kept returning to this faultline, excavating it as they constructed their personal and collective analyses of urban restructuring across multiplicity (Cahill, under review a).

In order for the project to be open and inclusive, it was necessary to create a way of working that maximized participation by everyone and which was transparent so that it could be guided by the group. The process needed to be based upon exchange. In concrete terms this involved establishing a series of practices, repetitive ways of working that were collaborative, facilitated group ownership, and move towards the concrete application of the knowledge the group generated. I call these practices the 'collective praxis approach' in the spirit of Patti Lather's (1986) call for 'research as praxis' that is designed to advance emancipatory knowledge in 'an unjust world' (cf. Zusman, 2004). Building upon critical pedagogical approaches that emphasize the relationship between dialogue, critical reflection, and action, the collective praxis approach references Gramsci's ([1971]1999) and Freire's ([1970]1997) action-oriented approach to knowledge production and social transformation.

The collective praxis approach draws upon complementary methodological strategies or 'rituals' which were embedded within the participatory epistemological approach. A key praxis involved writing and reflecting in our journals. This was a way for the researchers to think through individually and privately on paper an issue or topic such as "what I like in my community," or to reflect upon what we had (or hadn't) accomplished during the day and what still needed to be addressed. Journals served as a private space for
reflection, for spending time thinking and developing one’s own perspective, and were used even while crowded in a room with others. Writing can be an important generative and productive process through which one can start to make sense of feelings and experiences. This is particularly important for young people who may be experimenting with different identities, writing can provide a space to ‘try on’ different selves and to re-write one’s personal narrative (Brodkey, 2000; Proweller, 2000). It is a constructive space for participants to formulate their perspectives, through the process of writing through one’s feelings the young women develop their consciousness. In this way, writing also served as a preparation for public participation. After writing, we would share excerpts of what we wrote with each other. This might bring closure to the end of the day, be a way to start a group discussion, begin a process of comparison, or jump-start a decision-making process. The practice of journal writing established a process of moving from personal to shared experiences. A related practice I established was what might be called ‘reflective note-taking’. As the co-researchers shared their writings I would take notes on what they were saying on big sheets of paper on “our wall” (see Figure 1). I would then check in –is this what you were saying? The notes would serve as documentation of our conversation which we could refer back to. For example, I might raise ‘it seems like everyone likes the fact that the neighborhood is diverse but yesterday some of you expressed some problems with the newer residents. Do you want to talk about that?’ Our collective wall was a point of reference and a public memory of shared knowledge production from which we could build new ideas and construct our project together.

**Insert Figure 1**

Another important practice was setting the agenda. We did this informally at the beginning or end of each day when we would discuss issues such as: What did we accomplish so far? What do we want to do next? How much time should we spend on each thing we want to do? Is this realistic? One of the researchers volunteered to be a timekeeper (as I was having a hard time with this role). Sometimes agenda items would grow out of our morning discussions based on the reflective journal practice. We would also check in periodically on the overall process—“we have only 2 weeks to collect data, do analysis and whatever else we decide to do! Oh my god! How are we going to do this!” This would feed back into the practice of setting the agenda and a backwards planning process: if we want to accomplish this we need to do this first. We would set priorities together for long and short-term goals. Not only, then, were the young women researchers involved in framing the research from the outset, they were also engaged in analytical and organizational capacities, and, importantly, in making plans for our future collaborative work and building new research agendas.

Methodologically, the collective praxis approach established a set of rituals which created an open structure for our day-to-day activities and the collective ownership over the process. While I initially determined the topics for reflection broadly based on what the group shared (the neighborhood, gender, age) after a short time our reflections grew organically out of our discussions or issues researchers would bring to the table. Rather than “purifying knowledge” or “tidying up” people’s messy lives and excluding anything that does not fit into the structured representation of participatory tools (Kothari, 2001),

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1 Sometimes the researchers would take turns doing reflective note-taking, but most often this became my role as I wanted to privilege my co-researcher’s contributions to the discussion.
the collective praxis approach is open to redefinition by participants. Within the structured process of critical reflection, group discussion, and collective determination of the agenda, conditions were created in which the group could shape the project.

Writing as a method of inquiry

Writing itself can be understood as a form of praxis, as Freire ([1970]1997) defined it, because it generates a critical space of reflection and action. Within the research process, writing could function as a private space to work through personal thoughts before sharing one’s perspective with the group. My research approach was informed by the scholarship of the ‘writing-to-learn’ and ‘critical thinking’ movements in educational practice. These argue first, that learning involves an active engagement with problem-solving (Gilyard, 1996; Bean, 1996; Fulwiler & Young, 1982; Elbow, 1973; Britton, 1970) and, second, that writing is itself a process of inquiry and is closely linked with thinking; when ‘we struggle with writing we are struggling with thought itself’ (Bean, 1996, xiii).

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach is also in keeping with post structural theory, which conceptualizes subjectivity as a process that takes shape through discourse. Writing is a way of reflecting on a particular subject, and a means to the interpretation of personal experience. As the feminist researcher Laurel Richardson (1994, 516) argues, writing is a "method of inquiry", not only a mode of ‘telling,’ but also a way of “knowing.” How we choose to write and represent reveals different aspects of ourselves.

‘Free-writing,’ the practice of writing continuously whatever comes to one’s mind, is a way of starting to give shape to what psychologist Lev Vygotsky identifies as “inner speech”, which mediates between thought and language, “a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought” (1962, 149, cited in Fulwiler, 1983). The process of writing thus offers a transitional space of reflection for developing one’s thinking. Toby Fulwiler argues that it is through using “language we come to represent, come to know and understand the world” (1983, 276). Writing is an act of discovery, Fulwiler explains, it allows us to make our thoughts visible and concrete and allows us to interact with them (ibid, 277). In a similar vein, Peter Elbow suggests (1973, 15) “meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with. Think of writing not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message.” In our project, writing was in this sense, a means for processing one’s thoughts, for clarifying one’s position e.g. ‘what do I think about my neighborhood?’ Through the process of the working collaboratively on the project the young women ended up challenging the individual meanings they originally assigned to their neighborhood and together reworked their initial interpretations (Cahill, forthcoming/2007).

There are, however, definite limitations to an approach that puts emphasis upon, and involves a substantial amount of, writing. Not everyone was equally comfortable with writing, and some perceived writing as a barrier to personal expression. Aware of the potential for exclusion, I nevertheless decided that the benefits of personal writing were compelling and outweighed potential drawbacks. In our project, this proved to be the case; although some were initially uncomfortable, they became more at ease with writing over time and expressed pride in being paid for their writing as part of their work. Others relished the time to write freely and express their perspective, a few even started to use the journals for personal use. More generally, however, it is significant to note that not everyone brings the same skills to bear in a participatory process. We need to be flexible and prepared to try different ways of working in order to maximize everyone’s
participation. This follows Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1993) which argues that different people learn in different ways, for example, some people are more visual, others more verbal. We need to recognize and be open to the fact that the strategies we use may engage some and alienate others. In addition, this means that it becomes necessary to first collectively identify and validate the different capacities the co-researchers bring to the project, and second to create opportunities for these diverse strengths to be mobilized. This may be particularly true for working with younger people and children who might find the methods discussed in this paper as intimidating and even disabling (see Hart, 1997).

Notwithstanding the emphasis upon writing, in fact our collective praxis approach privileged oral expression. Therefore for us, writing also functioned as a means to prepare for conversation and dialogue. One researcher in particular, Carmen, was much more comfortable talking then she was writing. She used the writing time as an opportunity for making notes and reflective thinking. During the feedback sessions, rather than reading verbatim from her diary she would articulate her thoughts extemporaneously. Like writing, talking can be conceived as a way of processing and understanding our thoughts. Britton (1972) argues that “human beings use “expressive” speech—or talk—more to shape their own experience than to communicate with others: the words give concrete form to our thinking and so make it more real.” This “shaping at the point of utterance” (Britton, 1972, 53) helps us discover the meaning (our own meaning) of our everyday experience” (Fulwiler, 1983, 277). Collective dialogue in this sense functions as a space for both individual and collective inquiry and interpretation. It is a space for making sense of and aligning oneself with particular subject positions.

All of the researchers felt very comfortable with expressing themselves and their thoughts verbally, with the exception of Alice. Alice, who had emigrated from China two years before, felt understandably less confident in English than in her native language. In fast-paced group discussions, Alice would at times ask others to explain or to clarify their perspectives. Her ‘outside’ status forced others to be more precise with their language and to define terms. However, more often that not, Alice was quiet, actively listening, but not participating verbally. Nevertheless, outside the group context, one-on-one, in individual conversations with me at lunchtime or after hours, Alice would talk through the issues we had discussed in the group. Thus, by comparison with Carmen who used writing as a prelude to the main business of speaking, for Alice, writing became the place where she could most readily express herself and articulate her opinions. In this way, the collective praxis approach served her in that she could read aloud from her writing, which was easier than expressing herself extemporaneously, even if this was also sometimes difficult for her. Again, here is another example of the need for flexibility and for identifying different ways for participants to contribute and express themselves in the ways that feel comfortable for them.

**A Collaborative Autoethnography**

The researchers developed what Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 7) called a collaborative ‘autoethnography,’ in which they re-present “themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms,” in comparison with ethnography in which the dominant group “represents to themselves their (usually subjugated) others” (Pratt, 1992, 7; see also Butz & Besio, 2004; Ellis & Bocher, 2001; Moss, 2001). This was a theoretical, practical, and methodological decision.
In keeping with the emphasis in PAR upon self-representation, the project 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 (Fine et al, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Grounding their project in the concrete details of their everyday lives at the neighborhood scale, the researchers proposed an analysis that engaged issues of power and self-representation. The ‘Makes Me Mad’ project was a response to common and oppressive stereotypes of young women of colour, and was conceived of as a strategic intervention into the ways in which outsiders perceive them. It aimed to “force a dialogue in which many (westerners) would not willingly engage” (Pratt, 1999, 47). The project, and the young women’s experience of conducting an autoethnography is about the struggle for self-determination and control over the terms and conditions of material local/global practices (Pratt, 1999).

“This project is about us;” the young women researchers kept returning to the obvious again and again, that their own life stories could serve as evidence challenging reductive stereotypes. After developing the research focus, we realized that we had already collected a lot of information relevant to the study. The decision to use the journal writings, and all of the materials they had already gathered as part of their personal investigation—became a practical and methodological decision. This made sense given the constraints of the project, which included time (at that point we thought we only had 2 more weeks of a 4 week project) and IRB constraints (which would have made it impossible to do research with anyone else who had not signed a consent form).²

Data analysis

In a PAR project, data analysis is grounded within the research process. In our project, analysis was an ongoing part of the cyclical research approach, although it was often organically arrived at, rather than formally decided that ‘we’re doing data analysis now.’ Data analysis was the regular practice of comparing our experiences and findings as part of our reflective process. Analysis fed back into our project as part of a looped process of critical reflection. Importantly, the analysis process was not external to the process but an integral part of it in which all the co-researchers participated and learned. Similar to the “listening guide,” developed by feminist psychologists who read through transcripts for different voices (Brown et al, 1988; Way, 1998), in a collaborative data analysis process researchers engage in a process of comparing perspectives, actively listening, contributing, and explicitly taking into account the subtle differences between points of view (Bhavnani, 1999). The research team developed and extended grounded theory organically from within (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) as they identified shared interpretations and made sense of the similarities and differences in perspectives as part of the research process, rather than after the fact.

For example, it was through the practice of critical writing, reflection, and discussion that the co-researchers realized that sometimes they were also implicated in reproducing the very stereotypes that marginalized them. This finding complicated the ways in which the researchers conceptualized their project and it fed back into their development of research questions, requiring further analysis. Instead of just considering the ways

² Most likely, if we were able to do research with other people, the researchers might have taken another approach and interviewed other young women, for example.
outsiders (defined variously as white, wealthy, and powerful people, people from outside their community, and others more generally) stereotyped young women of color, they also turned their gaze inwards. This necessitated another level of analysis of the different ways the young women themselves adopted stereotypes and how and why they did this. This in turn then fed into the development of research products and the conceptualization of intended audiences which included a website designed for other young women of color (www.fed-up-honeys.org), a sticker campaign, and a report (see Cahill, 2004 and Cahill, under review b, for further discussion of research products). This, I would argue, is an example of how young people themselves can benefit directly from being involved in research practices and gain insight into their own lives if we can develop ways to conduct research in a more participatory manner.

The researchers did, however, also engage in a variation on established content analysis procedures (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) in order to be able to write a report of their findings. This was part of the skill-building component of the PAR process, through doing it themselves the co-researchers learned how to do data analysis. It could be argued that in fact engaging the participants/co-researchers in the process makes for an even deeper level of analysis because the ‘inside perspective’ of young women means that interpretations can be confirmed and because they have insights an outsider lacks. In our case this process was especially complex because the researchers were analyzing what they themselves had written throughout the project. This more formal procedure of data analysis involved reading through their journal writings again and again for themes, coding individually their collective writing, discussing the codes as a group, and then re-coding collaboratively and paying attention to our differences and the contradictions within our writings. It was quite intense to read through one another’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.

The content data analysis process was also difficult because it was confusing. While everyone was trained and understood the mechanics of the coding process, the process felt somewhat convoluted and insular because it involved a sort of psychoanalysis of oneself and others. The limitations of our analysis quickly became obvious. Soon enough we realized that our analysis only captured what we were thinking and writing at a particular moment in time, and of course we were always changing our perspectives. How can a qualitative data analysis process document the shift in the co-researchers points of view overtime? We felt it was important for us to try to record how we changed as a result of our collaboration. For example, as discussed earlier, at the beginning of our research one young woman, Carmen, blamed the poor quality of her school on other students and their parents: “how people bring up their children and how people act. That has nothing to do with the school.” She argued that if her school was in the (middle class/white) suburbs it would be better. Later in the project, however, not only did she acknowledge the problems endemic to her school, she also ended up leaving the school altogether. It seemed somewhat problematic to ignore the ways all of us shifted our perspectives over time. How to account for both perspectives? Perhaps by suggesting that the process of data analysis reconfirmed our complexity, and the ways in which we both accept and reject stereotypes, day in and day out. While this was another finding, it something we already knew. We wondered aloud: Did we really need to do this systematic analysis to prove it? Why? Who does it serve? It felt like a hoop we needed to leap through to prove we were doing research (and the hoop, like the ones the lions jump through at the circus, was on fire). This points to the potential tensions in doing this
kind of research. On the one hand, it seemed important for the co-researchers to gain academic research skills doing data analysis. But on the other hand, because we didn’t have the distance from our data usually afforded to researchers, it felt like we were taking a very formal approach to the more free therapeutic and reflective practice we usually engaged in collaboratively. Another tension, was between my own training as to how to generate academically worthy ‘results’ and our collective desire to do analysis for action.

After already having gone through the conscientização process of problem identification (an emotionally difficult process) to analyze our own writings involved knowingly re-visiting this process, studying oneself under a microscope. In this sense, data analysis can be understood as an engagement of conscientização, but perhaps in a more Foucauldian sense, because this time the researchers are looking at the ways in which hegemonic logic has found its way into the everyday ways we make sense of ourselves, into our language and our interpretations at a micro-level. Data analysis involved sorting through distorted characterizations, and coming to terms with the violence of these stereotypes on our everyday lives (Cahill, 2004). As Kesby points out, far from being an under-theorized practical ‘technique’, participatory action research might provide an opportunity for young people to engage with complex (and often extremely inaccessible) post-structuralist theoretical approaches in a way that makes sense to them (Kesby, 2005).

**Conclusion: Including excluded perspectives**

The research collective made their own assessment of the value of the participatory approach in a retrospective reflection:

> “Womyn of color are all the more in need of the space and the encouragement to start shaping their paths within society. Part of the journey starts with young womyn of color smashing the skewed pictures of themselves that they see being constantly portrayed and reified in the world that they live in. Participatory action research is one such method of making sure that we, as young womyn of color, could control how our voices and our thoughts would be portrayed and interpreted through the lens of research.” (Cahill et al., 2004, 239)

Self analysis leading to a reworking of self-representation is one of the most critical contributions of a PAR process (Cahill, forthcoming/2007). The “Makes Me Mad” project is an example of how a small group of young working class women of color chose to self-identify and speak back to reductive mischaracterizations. Aside from its principal objective as a research approach “of use” outside of the academy (Fine & Barreras, 2001), PAR’s generative methodological role in producing new knowledge is less understood. What is the value of PAR as a methodology for doing research with young people? The most obvious benefit is the involvement of underrepresented perspectives in the research process—young people’s perspectives. This is in keeping with the emphasis upon young people’s agency and competency in contemporary children’s geographies (Aitken, 2001; Hollaway & Valentine, 2000). In a very direct fashion, the PAR approach privileges young people’s voices and reflects a commitment to young people developing their capacities.

Committed to bringing new and underrepresented voices into the academy, PAR acknowledges the intellectual power of what Gramsci (1999) identifies as “organic
intellectuals" whose critical perspectives are developed from everyday experiences (Fine et al., 2003). Participatory action research starts with the understanding that all people, including young people, develop social theory in their course of their life experiences. Foregrounding the perspectives of marginalized groups opens up critique and troubles the status quo (Guinier & Torres, 2002; Torre et al, 2001; Bell, 2001). While certainly not all young people are marginalized, as a group their voices are not often taken seriously and they are excluded from many decisions that affect their lives.

What happens when those with underrepresented perspectives are invited to participate in the production of “official” knowledges? The same question has been raised by feminist and critical race scholars (Collins, [1990], 2000; Kelley, 1998; Alcoff, 1995; Katz, 1995; hooks, 1994; Minh-ha, 1989) who have shown how women and people of color entering the academy not only have an opportunity to transform themselves, but also effectively transform the institution. This is the ground upon which new knowledge is rooted. To include the excluded is to push scholarship in new directions, ask new questions, challenge old assumptions, ‘think outside the box’ and move beyond the privileged perspectives of the ivory tower. Participatory action research creates an opportunity for exchange, for academic researchers to engage responsibly with communities and use their expertise as well as be open to learning from communities (Maxey, 2004; Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Mitchell, 2004; Zusman, 2004). On the other hand, whether PAR would be an effective model for excavating privilege within privileged communities is debatable. Would, for example, privileged young people in suburban schools identify the issue of finance inequities between urban and suburban schools? It remains a challenge to consider how to use it in “studying up” (Burns, 2004, but see Stoudt, 2006).

A participatory approach to research offers a “bottom up” approach which is especially relevant to the critical study of young people and children’s geographies. Because theory is developed from within the PAR process as opposed to being framed by the concerns of the literature, there are more opportunities for challenging accepted points of view. In this case, the Makes Me Mad project contested the academic literature’s preoccupation with young women of color’s bodies, sexuality and pregnancy, in effect holding up a mirror to the literature and suggesting the critical problems young women face have to do with the ways in which they are perceived and represented as “problems.”

PAR is an approach that could be understood to be more rigorous, more involved, that gets “better” data because insiders “simply know things that outsiders don’t” (Torre et al., 2001). Without romanticizing “inside” knowledge as the “truth,” or erasing difference between diverse young women of color, there is a line of vision that “insiders” carry that is not readily accessible to outsiders (Fine et al., 2003; Domosh, 2003). Young people are less likely to pathologize or romanticize themselves, more likely to understand the ways in which different parts of their lifeworlds are connected (Fine et al., 2003). “Inside” cannot, of course, be defined statically as a singular place, it is a shifting, multivalent perspective. This complexity is especially evident within a collaborative where your ‘inside’ is different then mine. PAR values the perspective gained from a particular standpoint (Hartstock, 1983; Collins, 2000), such as a shared interpretation of discrimination across multiple different experiences. ‘Inside’ could be identified as an emotion, what it feels like, and at the same time addresses the banal negotiations of everyday life invisible to those ‘outside,’ and that might slip below the radar of “data.” For example, one researcher, Ruby pointed out how only two of the classmates that she
started with 9th grade were still in her homeroom, their missing bodies invisible in quantitative reports of drop outs since they were purged from the attendance rolls (Lipman, 2003). Or Jasmine, another researcher, reported how she was surveilled in one store and ignored by a salesperson in the next, an experience corroborated by the other researchers which collectively begins to pain a portrait of the hypervisibility and invisibility of racial discrimination. Another common shared experience was identified by Annissa who observed how the neighborhood bodegas were being replaced by more expensive 24 hour Korean markets catering to newcomers in the area. In a PAR process observations of everyday life become validated as data.

How can research function as a site for “counter work”-- “where what could be, is sought; where what has been, is critiqued; and where what is, is troubled” (Torre et al, 2001,150)? Engaging young people fully in the research process offers a starting point for a more inclusive research agenda, one which recognizes young people as social actors and creates an opening for their concerns to influence new knowledge production.

Acknowledgements

Together with the Fed Up Honeys I experienced just how powerful collaboration in action could be. Thanks to each of you --your collective energy and insight continues to inspire. Sincere gratitude to Mike Kesby for his incredibly generous editorial guidance and critical feedback. Thanks also to the referees whose insights informed my revision. I am most appreciative of the encouragement and constructive critique of Cindi Katz, Michelle Fine and Roger Hart on earlier drafts of this paper. This work was supported by a fellowship from the American Association of University Women and a CUNY Writing Fellowship at Medgar Evers College.

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