

Unearthing Tensions in a PAR Project

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Abstract: Learning scientists are increasingly shifting the epistemological and axiological basis of their research towards participatory approaches. In these approaches, tensions are viewed as sites for learning, as they reveal lines of power which can be reconfigured towards more just ends. Vignettes from a PAR project with mathematics teachers, leaders of youth-based community organizations, and university scholars illustrate how tensions around *practicality* and *performativity* can be taken up or ignored in the research process, and the implications of these moves for new social arrangements. The importance of digging into tensions is underscored.

Introduction

Researchers who study and design educational environments for social transformation recently have been pondering questions such as, “How?”, “For what?”, “For whom?”, and “*With whom?*” [emphasis added] in their research and design activities (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Philip, Bang and Jackson, 2018). Responses to these questions are reflected in calls to engage in participatory approaches that aim at “creating a significant reorganization of systems of activity in which participants becoming designers of their own futures” (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016, p. 566), and in which axiological innovations (Bang et al., 2016) bring about new meaning-making systems that fracture and unhinge dominant sensibilities and logics (Patel, 2015). Researchers realize with growing awareness that research for the purposes of maintaining status quo systems and processes is a project of white supremacy and structural oppression.

Different instantiations of participatory approaches have emerged in the learning sciences, including social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2015), community-based design research (Bang et al., 2016; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2020), participatory design research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) and others. A centerpiece of these approaches is a commitment to embracing tensions as sites for learning (Fine, 2018; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Mendoza et. al., 2018). Yet, it is difficult to uphold this commitment due to the discomfort it brings, as if the research is digressing and valuable time is being lost. As Fine argues (2018), however, tensions often reflect fault lines across lines of power, and are critical to revealing subjugated worldviews and knowledges.

Here, we illustrate the role of tensions in learning through two vignettes taken from a research study grounded in participatory action research, or PAR. The PAR project brought together high school mathematics teachers, leaders of youth-based organizations near to where the teachers taught, and university scholars to theorize noticing for equity and justice in mathematics classrooms. In the sections below, we provide a brief overview of PAR, including what we have found to be its basic commitments. Following this, we turn to vignettes to illustrate tensions, the first featuring Bang & Vossoughi (2016)’s notion of *practicality* and second around the concept of *performativity* (Fanon, 2008). Lastly, we explore how ignoring or digging into the tensions can have implications for transformative activity.

Participatory action research

Participatory Action Research (or PAR) is generally accepted to have taken root outside of the United States (Fine, 2018). Some scholars argue that PAR originated in Northern Australia in the fields of “agriculture, social work, education, health, housing, and community development” (McTaggart, 1991 p. 169). Other scholars view PAR as an outgrowth of Freirean liberatory philosophy of involving everyday people in the dismantling of knowledge and structures that oppress them (Morrell, 2006), or similarly, that it emerged from scholars (in Colombia) who were attempting to employ Marxist principles to situate research in the historical materialism of their particular contexts. Across these different instantiations, an orienting principle is involving minoritized groups and communities in a process of reflection and action, or praxis, designed to bring about change in their local conditions. PAR is distinct from action research (AR), which Morales (2016) argued positions the researcher as facilitator of the research, and youth-participatory action research (YPAR), which centers youth as the participants.

PAR is often mistakenly treated as a methodological approach. Instead, as Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) argued, it is a research approach guided by a specific and unique set of epistemological assumptions and commitments. It is grounded in the participatory/cooperative research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2000) characterized by an ontological commitment to systems of meaning that stem from practical, experiential, and relational activity concurrently (Heron & Reason, 1997). The centerpiece of PAR is the notion of “participation” (McTaggart, 1991) or “participatory consciousness” (Heshusius, 1994), which is “an awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known” (p. 16). Beyond a rearrangement of subject-object relation to subject-subject relations, participatory consciousness is an embodied perspective that calls upon researchers to let go of the self and turn to the other with humility and curiosity, rather than want or need. Acknowledgement of the ways that power structures work to maintain knowers/known social positions and dominant systems of meaning-making makes PAR a critical perspective as well, focused on subverting dominant social relations and systems towards new arrangements and axiological re-imaginings (Fine, 2018).

While PAR cannot be defined through a specific set of practices or guidelines, key commitments in this research approach, similar to other participatory approaches, include: 1) historically minoritized communities are co-researchers, 2) disparate forms of knowing are brought into continuous contact with each other, 3) people, institutions, and practices are historicized, 4) tensions are embraced as sites for learning, and 5) practices are re-negotiated towards making social change (Osibodu et al., accepted).

The approach to knowledge production in PAR is aligned with the learning sciences, particular sociocultural theories of learning, that center attention to power, and the way expansive views of learning can facilitate collective learning and challenge the status quo (Mendoza et. al., 2018; Gutiérrez, 2008). Dominant and subordinated forms of knowing and doing are brought together to open a space for alternative knowledges and practices (Gutiérrez, 2008). However, this effort inevitably leads to tension between the status quo and the subordinated. In this paper, we focus on how tensions are viewed and valued, and the ways these decisions can constrain or expand new social imaginaries.

Tensions as sites for learning

Researchers who take participatory perspectives have identified several tensions common in their research. Below we examine two tensions -- practicality and performativity -- to explore what can happen when these tensions are either ignored or embraced. In the former, the unaddressed tension continued to plague the project and stifle productive conversation. In contrast, centering the tension of performativity in project activities created an opportunity for new learning and social arrangements, and fundamentally shifted the nature of the work.

Practicality

Participatory approaches can easily reinforce dominant discourses and structures around learning and equity despite a commitment to including co-researchers centrally in the work. This can occur, for example, when the research is constrained by discourses around *practicality*. Discourses of practicality, as Bang and Vossoughi (2016) argue, can be “mobilized in ways that can deflate wider forms of social and pedagogical imagination, tethering the visioning and exploratory work of design to what is practicable given, at minimum, current disciplinary and political-economic structures” (p. 178). The focus on what is realistic given current educational structures and systems constrains the possibility of deeply interrogating and historicizing these structures, and ultimately, imagining new possibilities.

We explore a tension around discourses of practicality that emerged from the project described above, a failure to recognize this tension, and the way that possibilities for shifting into new discourses were narrowed. One aim of the PAR project was to collaboratively construct a framework for noticing for re-humanizing mathematics that interrogated dominant ideologies of whiteness in mathematics education. To do this, the group read and discussed articles about ideologies (e.g., Louie, 2017), learning, and noticing in the context of watching videos of classroom mathematics teaching.

In this vignette, a mathematics teacher (ML), a community leader (CL), and a university scholar (US) had a conversation over Zoom about ideologies present in noticing around the prompt: “What does it mean that our noticing practices often stem from dominant ideologies?” This prompt was embedded in a larger discussion about the nature of ideologies, noticing, and their connection to classroom practices.

The exchange opens when the university scholar points to the idea that one might articulate a commitment to anti-racist teaching but due to socialization could reproduce dominant ideologies in their everyday interactions:

US: I can articulate an ideology that is anti-racist, but because I have institutional-social practices that I’ve been socialized into, I don’t always. I still produce racist ideologies in my

discourse practices. So, it's not a perspective to me as much as it is a discourse that I have been participating in for a very long time.

In this way, the university scholar is drawing a distinction between commitments and ideologies. The community leader refers to the overarching question and to the article and describes the importance of frameworks for noticing dominant ideologies for recognizing that all noticing is necessarily "interested":

CL: Um huh. I think this is where you are going with this question, let me know. I know this article was talking about different frames of noticing and how you have to build habits. And we have to get into our inner subjectivities of even being able to notice. Um, so like, "Oh, I didn't notice that I thought of smartness in this way!" Or, I didn't realize that smartness could be exuded in this way by "these" particular types of students. Right. Which is why I think those frameworks are really powerful in thinking about noticing, and to be constant, incessant, and intentional, because otherwise, we absolutely could end up failing to acknowledge that noticing is political. It's not neutral and we can't be color-blind towards it.

Here, the community leader reinforced the importance of noticing ideologies, such as the ones around smartness, in education. This example of a concrete instantiation of dominant ideology is powerful as it directly relates to mathematics learning, the labels that get organized for students, and broader systems of oppression. The mathematics teacher responds to this exchange by focusing on the importance of knowing subject matter well enough to be able to see the value of students' ideas. The teacher describes their own experience as a teacher learning enough mathematics content to be able to notice different forms of smartness.

MT: ...I think in my first two years of teaching, I wouldn't be able to look at a student's work and pull out, notice, "yes" notice what they are doing correctly or really understand what they're thinking until I've had the experience to look back on things. I would say I didn't really...I learned math in a certain way. I was good at following directions and regurgitating. When I became a math teacher, I realized how much I didn't actually think like a mathematician and I didn't understand a lot of connections, and now that I've seen student work, I've seen different students produce different work. I've gotten better at not saying that's wrong, but I see what you're thinking. Talk to me more about it. So, I think content knowledge is also huge as we start to do that—notice what's smart.

Utterances by the teacher, while focused on expanding smartness, shifted the conversational space back to the practicalities of teachers' content knowledge, and away from race, ideology, and regularities in noticing. Content knowledge may support expansive noticing of students' mathematical activity, but it may also be coupled with colorblind or deficit discursive ideologies. Instead of diving into the tension that emerged in this exchange, however, the group moved on.

The tension between identifying anti-racist noticing ideologies and teachers talking about their current instructional practices is not unexpected since teachers are looking for ways to ground abstract discussions in concrete practices. This tension around practicality occurred regularly in the project discourse but was not identified by project participants until the project ended. We wonder what it might have meant to pause during moments like this one, and to think together why grounding discussions in existing classroom practices might dilute critical conversations. For example, we could have located discourses around teacher content knowledge in dominant ideological discourses that reify distinctions between learning mathematics and pursuing equity and justice. Instead, this tension became a reoccurring "stuck place" that constrained imagined possibilities for the group.

The next vignette is a contrasting case in which a tension that emerged for the group was taken up centrally into the project and inspired new activities and social arrangements.

Performativity

The second tension, performativity, refers to situations in which minoritized individuals are tacitly or explicitly expected to perform their racial, ethnic, or gender identities (Fanon, 2008). It is also a tension that occurs regularly in participatory work through racialized power dynamics that cause undue burden and racial battle fatigue to minoritized groups. As Patel (2015) writes:

...precisely because of the variances among and within dynamics, a closer attention and rigor should be paid to questions of coordinates and ongoing responsibilities and relations among peoples, places, and practices. This stance has a long history in many worldviews and even some research traditions, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches, but by and large is not common place in institutionally sanctioned research with the Western academy (p. 57).

Ongoing vigilance to positionalities, social arrangements, and patterns of interaction and destabilization of these is a focal point of participatory work. Yet, performativity is often mundane and ubiquitous as it is woven into the fabric of invisible racism, making it difficult to discern in moments everyday activity.

This vignette explores how the tension of performativity was experienced by project members, and steps taken by the team to examine them. The excerpt below is taken from an interview with one of the community leaders (CL), who in response to a question about tensions they were experiencing as part of the project, mentioned that they were feeling the need to perform around race:

I sometimes experienced it as a performance for me to have the discussions around race because it feels like it is expected. It's fine because it's something I embody and embrace, so it doesn't feel like it is a chore. But it feels performative knowing that expectation is placed on me. Since the summer, some healthy tensions have come up in that micro-moment when a question is posed like: "Who is going to bring up race, first?" I've been trying to play more of an educator, waiting eight seconds, instead of jumping in. The performative element comes in when I feel like I need to jump in right away.

Here, the community leader is naming the burden they experienced in deciding when and whether to bring a racial perspective to project interactions. They talk about the expectation that was "placed" on them by virtue of their body being in a space with whites, and the way they try to navigate this tension by taking an educator point of view. The positioning of the community leaders, all of whom were Black and brown, as the ones to explain the system of racism and how it impacted Black and brown students was a regular feature of the conversations early in the project and was noted by the community leaders as a source of harm and fatigue. Instead of ignoring this tension, the project team decided to explore it further. The community leaders were interested in pursuing academic publications, so a self-selected group of team members (including all of the community leaders) conducted a study on the tensions around performativity that emerged in the project. This group wrote a conference proposal, which was accepted and later co-presented (Authors, 2019). The group also presented the conference paper to the entire project team at a summer institute, and the topic became foundational to the group's decision-making, which was to take the burden of being vigilant about race off community leaders. This decision was represented, for example, in the group's design of a professional development (PD) for mathematics teachers on noticing. Instead of having everyone participate in the PD, the group wanted to protect the community leaders from once again having to perform with white teachers who were new to these issues. Thus, they designed the PD to be led by the primarily white members of the project team, with the community leaders serving as "outside experts", providing ongoing advice on design decisions. In this case, then, moving deeply into the tension led to new social arrangements for joint activity in ways that the group felt excited about.

Conclusions and Implications

Our goal in exploring tensions that emerged in a participatory action research project was to invite conversation about the importance and challenges of participatory epistemologies. As a centerpiece of the participatory paradigm, unearthing tensions is complicated, messy, and emotional work. Tensions often represent stuck places where lines of power are colliding and making waves in the social interaction. Because of this, we worry that learning scientists who desire smooth interactions and clear goals, boundaries, and outcomes will be hesitant to take up participatory perspectives. Researchers who adopt participatory approaches to research recognize that transformation only occurs when lines of power are made visible and recognize the potential of tensions to reveal these hierarchies. As we illustrate, when a tension around practicality was not explored, dominant discourses appeared to be maintained. When a tension around performativity was taken up, it appeared to prompt new imaginaries for the group's work together.

We believe that as learning scientists we are primed to take up participatory epistemologies, such as PAR, more centrally in our work, and that seeking out tensions will become an important way of pursuing equity and justice goals.

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