Participatory Ethics:
Politics, Practices, Institutions

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Introduction

> Research in […] a time of uncertainty, and in an era when knowledge
> as power is reinscribed through its value as a commodity in the
> global market place, presents tricky ground for researchers. (Smith,
> 2007, 102)

This observation from indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith about research in the twenty-first century has special resonance for participatory research. As participatory researchers, we pursue research and other activities with communities (or traditional research 'subjects') as collaborating partners, with the primary goal of working towards positive changes on issues identified by the collective (Kindon et al., 2007). We try to engage in all aspects of research - research questions, the choice and design of methods, the analysis of data, the presentation of findings, and the pursuit of follow up action - as collaborative projects which require negotiation between the different parties. So the complex challenge of negotiating 'ethics' – as multiple and contested, and whether in institutional or everyday spaces – is central to our research process and inquiry.

This special issue provides an opening on the messy, behind-closed-door conversations we participate in as we negotiate the ethical quandaries that riddle our research, writing, and theorizing. It grew out of a desire to excavate the 'tricky ground' we stand on as participatory researchers grappling with the politics of collaboration, positionality, accountability, and responsibility (Smith, 2007). We articulate these questions within the framework of 'ethics' in order to engage in the thorny dilemmas that participatory research presents for theory, practice, and institutional policies. Teasing out the critical issues that participatory research raises for research ethics, we hope to contribute to the ongoing public conversation about the obligations, challenges, and tensions involved in engaging in collaborative research towards social change (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007), and to recent debates around institutional ethics[2].

The epistemological approach of participatory research has profound implications for rethinking our ethical commitments, and raises a series of critical questions. What do participatory theory and practice tell us about the nature and location of 'ethics'? What are the ethical dimensions of participatory work? Are there fundamental principles at play in ethical decision-making in participatory projects? And, finally, is there such a thing as an 'ethic of participation'; and if so, what does it look like?[3] As Manzo and Brightbill (2007) argue, many choose to do participatory work for ethical reasons, but doing so does not circumvent ethical

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[2] See Alderson and Morrow, 2006; Evans, 2004; Halse and Honey, 2005; Hodge and Lester, 2006; Israel and Hay, 2006; Leadbeater et al., 2006.

[3] See Manzo and Brightbill, 2007, 33-34, for further discussions in this vein, while Khanlou and Peter (2005), and Rambaldi et al. (2006), summarize the ethical issues which particular participatory approaches may face.

dilemmas. Indeed it raises new dilemmas, and these often collide with institutional ethics procedures in especially problematic ways. To this end, the papers here critically interrogate the tensions involved in participatory work, and seek to advance a deeper, more critical conceptualization of participatory ethics. This is especially important given recent trends towards the institutionalization of research ethics, and the call for greater accountability for research processes, outcomes and politics to researchers, institutions, funders and research participants.

At the heart of this special issue is a deep-seated belief in the transformative potential of participatory research. Our conceptualization of a participatory ethics is motivated by a vision for 'what could be,' and the possibilities of addressing asymmetries of power, privilege, and knowledge production. Inspired by the radical philosopher Paulo Freire (2001), we conceptualize participatory ethics as an intervention:

> When I speak of intervention, I refer both to the aspiration for radical changes in society in such areas as economic, human relations, property, the right to employment, to land, to education, and to health, and to the reactionary position whose aim is to immobilize history and maintain an unjust socio-economic and cultural order. (Freire, 2001, 6)

In this sense participatory ethics might be understood as an ethical stance against neutrality, and 'an "existential" commitment to an ethical ideal rather than to historical inevitability' (Aronowitz, 2001, 7). To this end, participatory ethics are affirmed as an epistemological curiosity; a responsibility for critical reflection and action that is an integral part of being alive (Freire, 2001); and a 'retreat from the stance of dispassion' (Fine et al., 2000, 128; Haraway 1991). While such a stance has been advocated and debated amongst critical geographers and feminist scholars in recent years (e.g. Bondi 2003; Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Moss 2002; Nast 1994), our interest here is the ways that these goals inform and encourage certain participatory research practices and research ethics.

Central to participatory ethics, too, is a presumption of engaged scholarship, of doing research informed by an 'ethic of care' in its most profound sense as a deep respect for relationships and humanity (Ellis, 2007; Gilligan, 1982; Halse and Honey, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000; Lawson, 2007; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007). A participatory ethics builds upon long-standing traditions of grassroots social movements, activism, critical race and feminist theories and the work of social justice advocates who strive to address unequal relations of power, open up new spaces for decolonized knowledge production, and challenge the dominant hegemonic paradigm (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1996; Tuck, forthcoming; Kelley, 1998; Smith, 2007). At the same time, such approaches raise critical concerns about the implications for this practice, especially in the increasingly corporatized academic setting. Below, we map out the ethical dimensions of participatory

research in the three overlapping domains of institutional policies, research practice, and politics, with reference to the papers that follow our introductory overview.

Ethical Domains

Institutional policies

This special issue originated in a series of dynamic conference sessions at the Association of American Geographers and the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers in 2006 that engaged participants in a dialogue about the whispered frustrations and dilemmas involved in doing collaborative work. Of particular concern to those involved was the debate about institutional ethics versus ethical practice which, while not limited to participatory research, is thrown into sharp relief when considering participatory practice. Our sessions became safe spaces to publicly air grievances, share strategies, and work collectively to understand and respond to the tensions between institutional ethics and participatory ethical practices. On the one hand, researchers seem increasingly subject to a restrictive, inflexible and top-down view of what 'ethics' *should* be, via the codes of human subject panels which we are expected to adhere to. On the other hand, debates about what participatory ethics *might* be emphasize an emergent process of negotiating research ethics with participants based on their concerns. All of the papers in this collection touch upon these issues, which are of particular concern because of the demands of ethical clearance from universities and the institutions that fund and control research.

To begin, Deborah Martin's paper offers an historical context for the 'regulatory regimes' of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and human subject committees. While there are slightly different issues in the United Kingdom (where ethical review boards are only now being established systematically in some social science disciplines), her critical insights into the institutionalization and bureaucratic enforcement of ethics are relevant to all participatory researchers. She illustrates how the IRBs' codified power relations and assumptions about agency serve to disenfranchise all involved.

Sarah Elwood, Kye Askins, Megan Blake, and Matt Bradley all share personal journeys negotiating IRB gatekeepers, revealing the contradictions between ethics that are embodied, engaged and negotiated collectively, and the imposition of one-size-fits-all ethical standards. Sarah Elwood discusses the challenge of maintaining the 'reflective dialogue with research participants that lies at the heart of participatory ethics' in the face of institutional requirements that do not recognize that research questions and procedures, as well as findings, may be emergent as well as open to negotiation with participants. Megan Blake's emphasis is on different constructions of the researcher and subject between participatory action research and institutional ethical review, and the particular issues faced by

researchers who already know, or come to know, participants as friends. For Kye Askins, becoming a member of her university's ethics committee was one solution to her frustration with their limited view of what research is and how it happens. Her experiences, recounted ethnographically here with the humour that may be a qualification for sitting through these meetings, underline her insistence that notions of ethics are multiple and contextual, and best understood in place. Matt Bradley shares his frustrating experiences of trying to get IRB approval for a participatory project. His self-reflexive critical analysis of his interactions with the IRB provides an opening on how the review board marginalizes 'and disenfranchised and disadvantaged they claim to protect, all the while ensuring the survival of the commodification of knowledge for an academic political economy dominated by a cultural elite'. The authors collectively reveal the contradictions of a top down institutional ethics which in the name of 'protection' gives control of the process to the researcher. We join Fine at al. (2000, 113) in asking 'who's informed and who's consenting?'; 'what is consent? and for whom?'; and how might an informed consent process look different in a participatory project?

While we bemoan the headaches and restrictions imposed by IRBs, the authors here are also keen to think through how ethics might facilitate rather than limit our research practices (Halse and Honey, 2005), and how we might continue to co-create participatory ethics in the face of growing pressures from our institutions. This raises a critical issue that emerges across the papers: whether participatory ethics should be understood in opposition to human subject committees, or whether, as Manzo and Brightbill (2007) suggest, we should struggle to extend the core principles of participatory ethics to existing review bodies. So, for example, rather than doing no harm, participatory research aims to create social change, as they argue: 'indeed, a PAR [participatory action research] inspired understanding of social justice suggests that it is in fact unethical to look in on circumstances of pain and poverty and yet do nothing' (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007, 35). With this in mind, we ask how participatory ethics might provide new insights for reforming ethical review board structures in order that they encourage, rather than restrict or obstruct, emancipatory collaborative research projects (Pain, forthcoming).

Research practices

A participatory ethics is about inclusion, as Freire argues:

The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world. (Freire, 1982, 30-31)

Participatory research 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 and Fine, 2006, 458). But what does this look like in practice? Many of the papers in this collection address important considerations for engaging in participatory research, such as: how are ethics negotiated with participants? What power relations and hierarchies become considerations in doing research? How can we create an iterative and responsive process for developing ethical codes and agreements with our partners in a way that reflects and honors our collective negotiated process? Do respondents have different ethical priorities to those researchers may take for granted as 'good practice', and what issues does this raise for research? What are the ways in which participatory ethics can be operationalized in research practice? If ethics are understood to be socio-culturally and contextually specific, how can we co-create an ethical practice with our co-collaborators? What particularities are there for international research, across different places and scales, that might require different or additional attention?

These issues raise important questions about how intersections of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality inform practice in particular contexts. As Peter Hopkins and Farhana Sultana discuss in their papers, researchers are faced with multiple dilemmas in engaging with marginalized populations that require the researcher to be critical of their own positionality, reflexivity, and the power relations involved. Both describe negotiating ethics in practice: Farhana Sultana, as a Bangladeshi-born woman returning to conduct research from a US University, speaks of the impact of multiple axes of difference, inequalities, and geopolitics in framing the possibility of ethical encounters. Peter Hopkins' comments are made in light of his sameness as a Glaswegian young man, difference in relation to the young Muslims and asylum seekers in his research, as well as other aspects of positionality that are less often subject for reflection.

Indeed, the prioritization and value of relationships, and the alliances which emerge in participatory research - as opposed to the brief functional research encounters of many approaches - are what differentiate participatory research, and characterize it as both ethically challenging and rewarding (Pain et al, 2007; and see Megan Blake in this issue). Participatory research aims at 'mutual respect, dignity and connectedness between researcher and researched… [It] requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others' (Ellis, 2007, 4). Further, the development of relationships as part of a process of collaborative engagement may be personally transformative for all who are involved in the research (see Cahill, 2007). But with collaboration comes commitment, and this may clash with institutional expectations. For example, Evans (2004) argues against the rule of confidentiality in regard to the communities involved in research, which institutional ethical procedures assume is beneficial.

He suggests that if research is participatory and 'ethical in content and structure rather than structure alone' (Evans, 2004, 75) then there is no reason for anonymity. Moreover, Evans argues that participants have the moral right to be recognized as sources of information as well as to accrue any benefits for their communities coming out of research.

A participatory ethics reframes the issue of the 'protection' of vulnerable subjects beyond the process of informed consent and institutional liability. For example, if research 'subjects' consent, 'does this mean that their stories (and aspects of their lives they choose - or feel compelled - to share) no longer belong to them?' (Fine et al., 2000, 115). A participatory ethics suggests otherwise, and represents a commitment to addressing the differential power imbalances and privileges between researchers, and reframing issues of protection in terms of personal and political responsibility. As Michelle Fine reminds us, 'stories of lives and relations are not sitting there like low hanging fruit, ready for the picking. You have to work with the community to determine what is sacred, what will not be documented, reported, defiled' (Fine et al., in press). The practical and political implications include creating opportunities for all involved to review and challenge interpretations, and creating critical dialogues as to how 'data' might be misinterpreted or used strategically for different purposes (Fine et al., 2000; Kelley, 1998).

The papers in this special issue are seeking more liberating, more meaningful research practices, and are grappling with ethical issues in order to further the project of decolonizing research (see Smith, 1999). But it is important to maintain a critical awareness about who participates in our research, with what means, and to what ends. Concerns about romanticizing a simplified 'community' or indeed the process of 'participation', have been raised by scholars engaged from a variety of theoretical positions (most notably in development studies/geography)[4]. Unless we recognize and embrace these concerns in our research, exercises of privilege, power or exploitation may be reproduced by the very participants who claim to speak for all others in their own community.[5] Negotiating the multiplicities of power relations, negotiated strategies and fractured communities is not easy, and it necessitates careful research approaches that are moral, ethical and pragmatic. As Lawrence Berg et al. argue in their paper here, from their research collective of academics and Aboriginal people, participation is

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[4] See Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kapoor, 2002; Mohan, 1999. Roberts Chambers' early work on Participatory Rural Appraisal in development contexts was one focus of these critiques, though his later work has addressed some of these issues more fully (see Chambers 2005).

[5] Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Kesby, in press; Sultana, forthcoming and Williams, 2004 are among those geographers who are retheorizing participation in light of these critiques.

always already power-*full*, and we need to be aware of the effects of these power relations on complex ethical relationships (cf Kesby, 2005).

Politics

A participatory ethics recognizes research as a site of contestation in itself, and is also engaged in the project of 'contesting research', where critical research is designed to challenge hegemonic practices and discourses, and rearticulate our understanding of on-the-ground realities (Fine, 2005). This is not easy or 'safe' work; an ethical commitment to participation necessarily involves an explicit interrogation of power and privilege both within the research process itself and in terms of thinking through its intended impacts. In practice this includes excavating disjunctures within collectives rather than smoothing over dissent in the interest of consensus (Torre and Fine, 2007). A participatory ethics suggests that we must 're-member' that which has been excluded or forgotten, that which lies on the margins, and that which disrupts the status quo (Fine and Torre, 2004). To this end, research collectives must take seriously sharing responsibility and direction for the research, and building the capacity of all involved to participate. How do we negotiate, share or hand over ethical frames and responsibilities to research participants?[6] Further, there is the challenge of finding common ground and a shared language, but in so doing, how can we research across differences without erasing and ignoring the multiplicity within? And how do we address the push and pull between multiple commitments and responsibilities to activism, the academy, the community and ourselves? While there is no simple or single answer to these questions, addressing them helps to clarify our priorities and justify our actions.

If 'the point is to change the world, not only study it' (Maguire, 2001), then there is an implicit ethical emphasis in participatory work upon action and inciting social responsibility. The papers by Berg et al. and Cahill (this volume) illustrate some of the complicated entanglements of political activism and research, speaking to questions of representation, impact and scale. For example, in her paper Cahill discusses her research team's efforts to reframe the experiences of undocumented students within the grim structural realities of globalization's geography of inequality, in order to counter criminalized discourses of 'illegals' that erase and justify their exploitation and dehumanization. A critical question here is how to strategically position our work to most effectively contribute to social change efforts. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2005) suggest, the relevance of our research is indeed a political question shaped by the social context in which research is

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[6] See also Kindon and Latham, 2002; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007; Pain, forthcoming; Randstrom and Deur, 1999; and Sanderson and Kindon, 2004 for further details.

presented, interpreted, and used. With this in mind, how can we present research findings so that they are 'received' and acted upon by a larger public (Cahill and Torre, 2007)? While a participatory ethics suggests an attention to how our research might motivate and provoke action, it also involves a caution as to how it might be 'misused' or misinterpreted (Torre and Fine, 2007). Here we also need to consider how our research might be challenged or used in service of oppositional purposes (Fine et al., 2000), or rejected altogether (as Farhana Sultana demonstrates in her paper here).

As participatory research is a practice of researching *with*, rather than *on* participants (Lykes, 2001), it has profound implications for rethinking the politics of representation and challenging what Foucault (1980) identified as the 'subjectifying social sciences.' Again, this does not mean that ethical questions are circumvented, but instead engaged: who has the 'authority' to represent a community's point of view? Who should speak for whom, and in what language? How might the research reframe social issues? And, further, do the methods and practice of participatory research create enough of a shift from traditional research approaches to 'dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 1984, 112) and contribute to social change? (Cahill & Torre, 2007)

How can a participatory process produce 'counter stories' that challenge the status quo and the hegemonic logic of what is understood as 'natural' (Harris et al., 2004)?   If we are to effectively redress social inequities and misrepresentations, there is, we would argue, an ethical imperative to *position* participatory work to play a role in challenging neoliberal politics.   In practice this involves an explicit engagement with 'how the intimate and global intertwine' (Pratt and Rosner, 2006, 15; see also Mountz and Hyndman, 2006) in participatory work. In other words, we have a responsibility to locate our research in a social, structural, and geographical context. The political potential of participatory work lies in its ability to 'jump scales.' We need to draw connections between personal, on-the-ground experiences and their broader geopolitical significance, in order to extend the reach and affect of our work. At the same time, we need to take seriously the argument about obligations to the ground when jumping scale, so that our work remains situated and accountable to place (Fine et al., in press; Marston et al., 2005; Kesby, in press). A place-based politics creates a productive ground to stand on, to engage in the slippery ethical dilemmas of participation. As Fine et al. (in press) remind us, 'struggle is ongoing, global provocation is powerful but home is where we live'. The scholars in this collection offer insightful reflections and critical strategies for reforming our institutional homes, a place that has potential for embodying an ethical, responsive, inclusive, and accountable participatory engaged scholarship.

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank David Butz, Sarah Elwood and Salvatore Engel DiMauro for very helpful comments on this paper. We would also like to thank all the presenters and participants at the 2006 AAG and RGS/IBG sessions for great discussions, which enriched all the papers in this collection.

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