



Repositioning Ethical Commitments: Participatory Action Research as a Relational Praxis of Social Change

Caitlin Cahill¹

Community Studies, University of Utah, Utah USA

Email: caitcahill@gmail.com

Abstract

The development of participatory action research (PAR) reflects an ethical commitment to creating conditions for social change to be used by the community for their own purposes. But what are the ethical issues and responsibilities involved in participatory research? And how do these differ from the ethical guidelines mandated by our Institutional Review Boards (IRB)? Here I illustrate how participatory research grounds the IRB's abstract ethical principles in terms that are meaningful to the community, referencing a youth participatory video research project "Equal access to higher education for all" that focuses on the challenges undocumented students face trying to go to college. My analysis engages this project as a way of exploring participatory ethics as a relational praxis, specifically outlining the epistemological orientation of participatory action research (PAR) as an 'ethic of care'. The Equal Access project raises critical questions relevant to our conceptualization of risk and responsibility. I argue that participatory research re-positions our understanding of ethics within the broader socio-political, global context of our everyday lives. With this in mind, researchers have a collective responsibility to address ethical questions of representation, political strategy, and emotional engagement.

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Deep breath. Slow down. I have been here before. I remember this feeling. This is familiar. ‘This’ referring to the ups and downs, the worries, the sleepless nights. This is the emotional engagement of doing participatory research. While I knew our research project was going to be political and possibly even controversial - how could it not be? - I had not thought through the implications of the project in terms of the emotional places we would be going together. And yet this is at the heart of our work. The questions I circle around are: how can I do this in a way that’s responsible? What are my responsibilities – our responsibilities? - to whom? And what risks are involved?

The research project I am referring to is a participatory research video documentary project I am working on with young people from Salt Lake City, Utah on the subject of Equal Access to Higher Education for All. The project is focused on the challenges undocumented students face in trying to go to college. Here I will engage this project as a way of exploring participatory ethics as a relational praxis, specifically outlining the epistemological orientation of participatory action research (PAR) as an ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan, 1982) and addressing the emotional engagements and responsibilities of doing research. To begin I discuss the different ethical orientations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and PAR. Referencing the Equal Access study I consider how issues of risk and accountability take shape in our participatory project expanding the IRB’s abstract principles with oxygen and sighs of frustration. Specifically I argue that we need to reconceptualize risk within in the everyday social and political context of our research in order to address ethical issues of representation, political strategy and emotional engagement.

Ethical Principles

Developed in the late twentieth century in order to preserve public trust in research involving human subjects, the IRB functions as a regulatory body in US higher educational institutions overseeing a process for safeguarding the protection of human subjects. The IRB is charged with ensuring that research conforms to a set of ethical principles guided by respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (as defined by the Belmont Report). The most basic premise is that the research poses no risk or harm to the human subject participants. While the IRB offers a process for evaluating risk within the research process through application, peer review, and informed consent, its top-down ethical practices are subject to debate and critique. For one, scholars have suggested that the IRB’s priority is the protection of the university itself from liabilities and risks. Another significant concern raised is that the IRB’s regulations are based on a medical model that is not appropriate for the social and behavioral research paradigm. As such, the IRB’s lack of understanding of research practices that are ‘outside of the box’ may present an obstacle; this can be especially challenging for participatory researchers (see

Bradley, this volume; Martin, this volume; Elwood, this volume). Another concern is that the IRB's legalistic model reduces the complexities of ethics to a boiler plate consent form, a piece of paper where one signs off at the dotted line, giving over control and releasing the institution from liability.

But as the war stories of rejected applications, frustrations, and the challenges of negotiating the IRB reflect, this is not a straightforward practice. The IRB itself is not a monolithic establishment, but in fact a collective of people whose interpretations and practices vary from institution to institution. This may present both a challenge and an opportunity. While we (participatory researchers) exchange models of success, tricks of the trade and strategies for submitting participatory research proposals, one thing that becomes clear is the need for all of us to educate our IRBs of the PAR model and its ethical commitments. And, further, how might we engage the principles of PAR to extend and reform our ethical review boards in order that they might facilitate social justice research, rather than limit it (Halse and Honey, 2005; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007).

That said, the reality is that PAR is also not a uniform practice; the term may refer to a variety of research practices, some which may not be very participatory at all. Critical scholarship has pointed to the ways broad applications of the term 'participation' may mask tokenism and provide an illusion of consultation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 2001). When participation is presented as a set of techniques rather than as a commitment to working *with* communities, it may result in the reproduction, rather than the challenging, of unequal power relations (Kesby, 2005; Kothari, 2001). Here, however, I speak to the promises and potential of PAR as an ethical praxis of care in which primacy is placed upon relationships and the responsibilities involved in working *with* communities, as opposed to just not doing harm (Gilligan, 1982). PAR is a negotiated process developed between people – collaborators - who have agreed to work together to solve a particular issue. This, again, is in contrast with the IRB model of ethics that is framed by abstract concepts of morality and assumes the consent process to be between strangers (Ellis, 2007).

The development of PAR reflects an ethical commitment to creating conditions for social change to be used by the community for their own purposes (Fals-Borda, 1979; Freire, 1982; Lewin, 1946; Martín-Baró, 1994). To this end, PAR is a response to exploitative research practices of outsiders who have used communities as laboratories. Communities, particularly communities of color, have rarely benefited from the results of studies conducted (Breitbart, 2003). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains:

Research, like schooling, once the tool for colonization and oppression is very gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages, histories and knowledge, to find solutions to

the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and of being. (Smith, 2007, 10)

Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck pushes this even further in her discussion of participatory research as a ‘decolonizing project of recovery, knowing, analysis, and struggle’ which she calls ‘*theorizing back*’ (Tuck, 2007). In this sense, PAR can be understood as a profound ethical praxis of sovereignty of particular relevance for those communities whose voices have been silenced, excluded, obscured, or otherwise censored – as is quite obviously the case with undocumented communities (ibid). This is, as Leonie Sandercock puts it, a project of making the invisible visible (Sandercock, 1998). Our project does this quite literally by creating a safe space for undocumented students to speak out and share their frustrations in a public forum through participatory video.

An Ethic of Inclusion

As an ethic of inclusion, participatory research potentially represents a challenge to white privilege’s investment in maintaining and producing racial hierarchies in the normative production of knowledge. PAR is a method of disruption that Michelle Fine identifies as ‘contesting research’, designed to interrupt dominance (Fine, 2006). It represents a commitment to centering marginalized voices, to ‘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). For white researchers such as myself, PAR involves a conscious and articulated positionality and an ethical obligation to foregrounding and advocating for the perspectives of historically excluded groups, such as undocumented young Latinos in Salt Lake City. Working from the inside out, PAR creates an opportunity for the production of new knowledge and the development of new theory.

In the Equal Access to Higher Education for All research project, the youth researchers developed a project based on their own concerns. The focus was identified by the youth research team after doing field research in their community, mapping, interviewing their peers, and after many group discussions on the challenges and opportunities faced by their community. Their project explores the everyday experiences undocumented high school students face in pursuit of higher education and the ‘American Dream.’ As part of this action project the youth researchers are making a video documentary to inform multiple audiences - other young people, families, community members, school administrators, and policymakers - and address the misinformation and misgivings surrounding the college application process. Prioritizing the needs of the community, participatory research grounds the IRB’s abstract concepts of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons in terms that are meaningful to the community.

The youth research team is especially concerned that many young undocumented students drop out of high school because they do not see college as a viable option. As one student put it when faced with filling out a form for college credit: 'Mexicans don't go to college'. Fears of deportation compounded with the everyday struggles of just trying to get through high school lead many young people to reconsider whether it's even worth it to stay the course. Why bother finishing high school if college is unattainable? In fact, the high school drop out rate for Latino students in Utah, documented or not, is unconscionably high (Alemán and Rorrer, 2006). The 'achievement gap,' or as reframed as 'the race/class and opportunity gap' (Fine et al., 2004), reflects the inequitable educational outcomes of white and Latino students and the structural failures of Utah's already overwhelmed public school system to adequately serve *all* students. As Alemán and Rorrer suggest:

If the state is to benefit from a well-educated workforce and fully active citizenry, political and educational leadership will have to overcome its deficit notions of those that are different and, instead, commit to changing current educational practices and policies. (Alemán and Rorrer, 2006, 9).

However, all evidence is pointing to the contrary. And this is especially true for undocumented students whose particular needs and concerns are rarely addressed at all in educational settings.

As public education is a key site for social reproduction, our understanding of the challenges young undocumented students experience may provide an opening for interrogating global socio-economic disparities on the ground and as they are understood by the young people (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993; Bourdieu, 1977; Ginwright et al., 2006; Willis, 1977). Education is understood as a particularly important stepping-stone in the ideology of achievement, in 'making it'. As Fine and Burns (2003, 844) state, 'schools are sold as the exit ramp out of poor communities and into the middle class'. The dominant discourse insinuates that North American society is an equal playing field and that success is due to personal effort and drive: 'you can be or do what you want to be if you just work hard enough' The discourses of meritocracy are particularly seductive for recent immigrants in 'the land of opportunity' - if you work hard enough you will succeed - and achieve the 'American Dream'. But, as our study illustrates, this is not so simple or straightforward. How to negotiate the tensions between the American achievement ideology and one's own everyday experiences of social inequities in school? The Equal Access project documents the experiences of young people who are working hard, but who despite their work ethic are challenged by backlash public policy, anti-immigrant public sentiment, and in their everyday negotiations of schools that do not recognize their strengths or particular needs. The irony and

immorality of this injustice is clearly explained by an activist/scholar interviewed for our documentary:

‘As far as I'm concerned, anybody in America who benefits from the low cost of goods and services that undocumented workers provide should be on the bandwagon about their children receiving a good education because we are all benefiting from the work of undocumented people. How much more so do we owe their children a chance of a good life? If we don't, think about what that makes us. That makes us a people who created a serving class. .. we are saying we are going to totally exploit your parent's work but we don't want you to in any way better yourselves.’

The sociopolitical context for our research reflects the grim realities of globalization's geography of inequality, the reproduction of an economically polarized labor force, racial oppression, and a constellation of public policies that serve to sort and discipline young people of color, in particular young immigrant and undocumented students, for particular roles in the economy (Harris, 2004; Lipman, 2003).

The timing of our project is uncanny. Just as we started our documentary video research in winter 2007 a committee hearing was convened by the Education Committee of the Utah State Legislature to discuss proposed legislation that would repeal House Bill 144 (HB 144). HB 144 gives undocumented students the right to in-state tuition in state colleges and universities if they have been in residence for three years and have graduated from a Utah high school. Utah is one of ten states in the US that grants this important right to undocumented students. We went to the session excited to film it for our documentary - to document history in the making - not perhaps fully understanding the ramifications of what we were witnessing. But when the legislators voted 9 to 5 in favor of repealing the HB 144, we ‘got it’ all too clearly. This is the hostile political context for our work; this is what we are documenting. A week later we breathed a sigh of relief as the House voted 38 to 37 not to repeal the bill. A reprieve. Every year for four years now, HB 144 has been challenged and so far it has survived. Each time the bill is revisited the same politics of racism and fear are resurfaced. This year it was saved by one vote. This was not taken for granted. And then, just as the state legislature session was about to close, another bill was put on the table that proposed eliminating all state and local benefits for undocumented communities including students' right to in-state tuition. Holding our breath, we documented the work of the tireless activists who are organizing communities to fight again and the undocumented students whose educational futures are at stake. The bill failed. One more year! But what about next year?

Unfolding Layers of Risk

The Equal Access study raises critical questions relevant to our conceptualization of risk and responsibility. A consideration of the ethical dilemmas and concerns we faced in this project illuminates both the utility and futility of the IRB's regulations. Here I want to unfold some of the 'layers' of vulnerability within a feminist relational framework of ethics paying attention to how risk is embodied and grounded in everyday experiences and situated within a broader social, economic, political, and global context (Cahill, 2006; Dowler and Sharpe, 2001).

The thickest 'layer' of risk for undocumented communities is the issue of confidentiality. Indeed, the guarantee of anonymity is also central to the IRB's code of ethics, but this is obviously paramount for undocumented people as the disclosure of identity portends the potential of deportation. But these risks extend beyond the parameters of the research project and the processes of informed consent. Within the context of real people's real lives and ongoing struggles to find stability within a very precarious situation characterized by mobility, displacement, rupture and disorientation, institutional assurances of protection feel hollow.

The irony of the institutional promise takes shape in the consent form, a legal document that presumably protects participants by spelling out the risks and benefits and the voluntary nature of research (see Martin, this issue; Fine et al., 2000; Lykes, 1989). But asking participants to sign a form that releases the university from liability and gives up control, reaffirms the power imbalances inherent in the research encounter and belittles the experience of undocumented people whose everyday lives are ensnared in a web of legal binds. So, while the informed consent process may reflect the 'good intentions' of the institution, not only did it not facilitate trust but it was a potential barrier which forced us to confront the chasm between the concerns of the research participants on the one hand, and the university on the other. In the end, if people chose to participate in our project it was not because of institutional documents guaranteeing anonymity, but instead due to trusting relationships with members of our research team and a stake in the broader purpose of the project.

Significantly, the relational ethics of participatory work moves beyond the IRB's individualistic model of risk, in its commitment to produce scholarship that is accountable to the communities most affected by it and to contribute towards social change (see Bradley, this volume). Here our project aims to address the risk the community faced of being deported, exploited, and dehumanized. Rather than 'doing no harm', PAR is 'tethered to political obligation' (Fine et al., forthcoming), and recast as an ethical injunction to address the asymmetries of our unjust world. In practice, this pushes us to rethink the role and impact of research 'beyond the journal article' and the ivory tower (Cahill and Torre, 2007; Torre and Fine, 2007).

In the Equal Access project our objective was to understand the challenges young undocumented students faced in trying to go to college, but how could we strategically position our research to be 'of use' (Fine and Barreras, 2001)? As our goal was to contribute to local organizing efforts to advocate for in state tuition for undocumented students, critical questions we grappled with in our process included: how could we strategically represent the concerns of undocumented students to multiple audiences - that include other undocumented students, their families, school administrators, policy makers, the general voting public? Which audience do we prioritize? In which language do we speak? With representation comes ethical responsibilities and risks that are not addressed explicitly by IRBs, but that are central to engaged participatory research. In practice this involved thinking through the entanglements of representation, audience, and the presentation of research especially as we hoped to speak to a broad audience with diverse political commitments. What is safe to share and what isn't? Who is made vulnerable by the research? Do we, for example, edit out stories of cutting school or dropping out because they feed into stereotypes about students of color (what Fine et al., 2000 identify as the 'bad stories')? How can we contextualize the 'bad stories', and address the damaging consequences of globalization, structural racism, and exploitation (ibid)? And how do we frame a critique of an educational system that is not meeting undocumented students' needs and still advocate for their inclusion? How do we contextualize the exploitation of undocumented communities in a larger conversation about structural racism and economic injustice and still hope to reach out to and engage decision-makers invested in meritocracy? That is, how do we present our work so that it is 'received' and acted upon? Risk in this sense involves a careful consideration of the consequences of telling particular stories and how they could be used or potentially misinterpreted (Fine et al, 2000). These decisions are at the heart of the ethical commitment of PAR and point to our responsibility, and a process, to consider the political ramifications of making the invisible visible. In our case this has involved creating opportunities for previewing our documentary in 'safe' spaces - with trusted colleagues, friends, and family members - in order to talk and think through questions of political strategy and representation before going 'public'.

Emotional Layers

As PAR begins with the premise of working with intimate others rather than strangers (Ellis, 2007), it suggests an ethical commitment to the integrity of our collective process and to engaging the emotions provoked by our research (Torre and Fine, 2007). A participatory process may provide what social psychologist Erika Apfelbaum (2001) identifies as a social and shared context for the witnessing and reliving of each other's private experiences of discrimination and insecurity. 'Narration is tragically bound to the interlocutor's capacity for hearing what is said' (Apfelbaum, 2001, 29); critical to the sharing of traumatic experiences is being

heard. For example, in our research project one student articulated his profound sense of alienation:

‘The moment you shut me out you cut my arms and legs off. And I cannot move. And there is nothing left – sometimes – but a feeling of desperation because you’re reminded that you don’t belong here. And then you think, but I’ve lived here all my life.’

In this instance ‘listening is not a biological capacity, but rather an emotional relationship between people and requires trust. In this context consensus is not significant, what is important is a willingness to become part of the transmission’ (ibid). The Equal Access documentary offered a platform for undocumented students to reach out to a larger public and narrate their stories on their own terms. PAR offers a collective intimate process for sharing with others, for coming to terms with one’s pain, or at least releasing it. As part of the process of telling one’s story, research participants identify their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political (Cahill, 2007; hooks, 1995).

While potentially therapeutic, this is not easy work. I worry about what we are getting into, even as I know we are already in it, if that makes sense. While what we are addressing in the Equal Access project are the realities that young undocumented people and their communities are already confronting everyday, we wonder: is doing research to consciously dig in deeper? Analyzing racist anti-immigrant discourses side by side the narratives of hope articulated by young undocumented people who are working to try to get through high school is painful. Through the research process we are confronting head on not only the politics of hate and fear, but also the stark inequities of the political and economic context that depends upon the exploitation of an uneducated population. And while this is not news, to place one’s experiences in a larger historical context of social injustice is to come to terms with it in a different, more personal way. How to balance the despair with a sense of agency? And what is my role and responsibility in this process? And can I - or should I - soften the edges? Freire argues the pain is necessary as part of the process of conscientização, the awakening of the critical consciousness and ‘becoming more fully human’ (Freire, 1997). And if PAR is committed to developing critical consciousness, a relevant question includes -- what happens outside of our process? Could new found critical perspectives on everyday experiences not lead to feelings of demoralization in other unsupportive spaces (such as school)? Or frustration? Perhaps poking holes in the achievement ideology - that if you work hard enough you will succeed- may be a dangerous enterprise if you still have a few years of high school left. Or can it be liberatory? This, of course, echoes the very tension that the youth research team is exploring in their work – how young undocumented students grapple with their aspirations, fears, dreams and sense of futility in a hostile anti-immigrant context. This speaks to our ethical responsibility as participatory researchers to create safe and

supportive spaces for not only raising critical questions, but for collectively processing the bleak realities of structural racism and global inequities.

Reframing Ethical Commitments

For the undocumented students interviewed for the Equal Access project, sharing personal experiences was motivated by a desire to participate as ‘citizens’, that is ‘as active contributing members of society who care and think about the world they live in’ despite their ‘legal’ status and marginalization (Quijada, forthcoming). Here young undocumented students chose to take risks that are emotional, personal, and political, in order to enter the fray and be included in a national dialogue on immigration rights that too often silences the stories of those who have the most to gain - and lose. The Equal Access project provides an opening on how participatory research reframes and extends institutional ethical principles by connecting everyday struggles within a broader social and political context. Negotiating ethical questions is at the heart of our collective process, our emphasis upon relationships, and our political commitments to social change. It is an ethical obligation to challenge what Paolo Freire identifies as ‘the scourge of neoliberalism, with its cynical fatalism and its inflexible negation of the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia’ (Freire, 2001, 22). There is, Freire, argues, nothing inevitable about our social-historical reality. Or as James Baldwin put it, ‘the world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in’ (1961, 137). With this in mind, the goal of the Equal Access project is to speak back to, and intervene in, the dominant discourses on immigration and cultivate the critical consciousness of a broader public to act ethically and with humanity.

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