



Stirring Dangerous Waters: Dilemmas for Critical Participatory Research with Young People

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ABSTRACT

This article explores dilemmas of critical, participatory research with young people, illustrating examples from research in the UK and the US and highlighting issues of access, participation, dissemination and the misuse of findings. The authors stress the need for new field strategies including more participatory approaches and attention to transgression of power through research.

KEY WORDS

critical social inquiry / participatory research / power / sexuality / youth

Researching to 'Make a Difference'

This article explores dilemmas and new directions in social research with and about young people. We suggest that an increasingly conservative landscape within the neoliberal state, described by Bourdieu as a 'crisis in politics' (1999: 2), has brought significant social change with potentially pernicious consequences for children and young people across the globe. Drawing on our fieldwork in the UK and the US, we outline our thoughts on research approaches that might respond to these challenges.

Our own research is grounded in the hope that our efforts will ‘make a difference’ for participants (Schostak and Schostak, 2008). Whilst acknowledging that this intent is easily subverted and difficult to deliver, we follow the tenets of critical, feminist and participatory traditions (Camarota and Fine, 2008; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) which tackle power and seek emancipation for research participants. Participatory research relies on collective investigation, indigenous knowledge, participation, communitarian politics and collective action (McTaggart, 1997), within a framework that also acknowledges the problematic history of research, which has been done *to* people or *for* them rather than *with* them (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Greenwood et al., 1993; Heron and Reason, 1997).

The Politics of Exclusion

‘Subjects’ in participatory research are fully involved in the research process and outcome. They share the status, sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem normally claimed only by researchers (Sinclair and Franklin, 2000: 1). Participatory research fosters the construction and accumulation of knowledge among participants, allowing them to see their world from a less partial stance. The children’s rights movement and new developments in the sociology of childhood have been redefining established views of the abilities of children and young people to participate creatively and effectively in research that concerns them (Alderson, 2001; Hill et al., 2004). Children and young people are cast as competent social actors (Christensen, 2004) who can play an active role in research and comment on the world in which they find themselves’ (Prout and James, 1997: 23). Our own work seeks to entrust and empower young people with tools to transform unjust social relations themselves as a result of research – an agenda that requires not only new methods and research strategies (which we describe here) but also bolder research agendas. Fine (2008: 229) refers to such agendas as ‘provocative generalizability’ – a move toward methods not yet practised and findings that are not yet imagined, but are concerned with what could be, should be in a socially just world.

We offer examples from three projects, conducted in the UK and the US, which focus on ‘forbidden topics’ of sexuality, sexual behaviour and sexual abuse. The most pressing dilemma in this research is how to engage young people in research on sexual issues, given the conservative ambience in the US and UK. Schools and other institutions have previously served as excellent research sites, but access is increasingly limited, and the potential for participatory work is being compromised. In addition, misunderstandings and misrepresentation of research by the media threaten our work, compelling us to press toward new skills in research practice and dissemination.

Here we briefly describe three projects, not because we regard our research as exemplary, but rather to highlight pitfalls for researchers who work with

young people for emancipatory ends. While we use the word 'dilemmas' to describe difficulties we have faced (and have not yet wholly resolved), we also regard these as *opportunities* to develop new ways of researching.

The Studies

The Las Vegas Project, completed in late 1990s, studied the ways that young girls make sense of their lives amid the mediated sexual and consumer culture that surrounds them in relation to sexual identity, gender roles and sexuality. A range of qualitative strategies were used to generate understanding of what it means to 'be a girl in Las Vegas' (Dentith, 1998, 2004).

The UK Project, completed in 2004, investigated teenage pregnancy and was funded by the UK Department of Health. It was a nationwide project set in three seaside towns and used qualitative research methods to understand some of the complexities involved in 'becoming' and 'being' a young parent (Bell et al., 2004).

The East Coast Project investigated individual and collective engagement with autobiographical narratives of senior year students participating in a school-sponsored, voluntary, extra-curricular group process experience in the US. One strand of this work, discussed in this article, focused on peer-group negotiated meaning around a narrative of male childhood sexual abuse survival (O'Malley, 2003, 2007).

Access and Participation in an Age of Conservatism

Each of us began with a commitment to participation and inclusion, but in the 'real life' context of our studies we encountered significant difficulties in achieving this goal. While we anticipated some difficulties in securing access to young people we were nonetheless astonished by forceful blocks erected to thwart participation. The examples below indicate how authorities can react when research touches on 'dangerous' topics such as youth and sexuality.

In the Las Vegas study with adolescent girls, school principals made it impossible for young people to participate in the planning of research even though parents had granted permission. This resistance was expressed as concern that discussions among young women might involve some critique of the city's tourist and sex industry, or might engender opposition from religious groups. A plan to create an after-school 'girls club' to enable girls' participation was blocked. As a relative newcomer to the city the researcher found herself marked with suspicion and ostracized by school officials who feared repercussions from religious groups and the corporate entertainment industry in the city. This silencing of young women revealed how 'authorities' can close off inquiry and use their jurisdiction to protect themselves from scrutiny. It also revealed the ways in which research is increasingly seen as a threat to established power bases.

A similar situation developed in the UK project on teenage pregnancy. When the research team attempted to recruit pupils from a privately funded school, she met with effective resistance. The headteacher did not refuse access to pupils, but offered an invitation to the researcher to come and speak at the school (only to senior pupils aged 16–18) about the findings of the research on ‘other’ young people – the kind who had become pregnant in their teenage years. In effect, a cordon sanitaire was thrown around these pupils; they were not allowed to participate in discussions regarding their own experiences. Instead they were positioned as an ‘interested public’ needing information about ‘other’ misguided young people.

These two cases remind us that participation in research does not occur in unfettered ways. Some authorities in the UK have validated participation of young people in research (Hill et al., 2004), but our research suggests that others are quick to step in if participation moves beyond a politically neutral arena (Cairns and Davis, 2003). As Schostak and Schostak (2008: 1) observe wryly, we should expect resistance when our research has critical aims and aspirations, since it will involve ‘questions that can make the powerful feel uncomfortable’.

Other forms of control worked to restrict young people’s rights and opportunities to participate in the Las Vegas project. Fear among the Latino community linked to practices of US immigration authorities was one such mechanism. A Latina community centre in the city agreed to support the research by offering space for meetings and contact with the young people that gathered in this site. Approximately 12 young Latinas volunteered to participate in the study. After several informal gatherings the legal protocol form was translated into Spanish and sent home for parental permission. This permission process led to fears among parents about revealing their non-citizen status as well as fears of exposing children to ‘foreign’ values. The parents’ subsequent decision to prohibit their daughters from participating in the research or *any* of the centre’s activities dealt an unexpected blow to the researcher and the centre’s staff.

The East Coast project provided a dramatically different experience. This research took place within a school-sponsored, voluntary, extra-curricular group for senior year students and the researcher was a close colleague of the school authorities that governed this institution. He himself was a school administrator at another affiliated site. The group offered access to discussion of taboo subjects, such as sexual abuse, within an educational process that was ‘safe’ for the young men involved. In this study, the researcher’s ability to include participants in the design and execution of a reflective study was facilitated by his insider status as an educator within the school system in which the study was conducted. While insider status can have well-documented difficulties, possessing a history within a place and life amongst a community can enable wider access to institutions and communities. This is not to suggest that the only strategy for conducting such research is to locate it in a setting in which the researcher is well known, but it demonstrates the importance of developing research strategies that can ‘get under the surveillance wire’ of agencies that seek to control young people’s participation.

In the Las Vegas study the researcher eventually abandoned formal channels for securing access and explored inventive alternatives. Eventually, through word-of-mouth contact, many girls volunteered for the study, and the setting became any space occupied by young people in the city. The researcher used informal networks to secure participants, contacting girls she knew through colleagues and neighbours. The young women, in turn, helped find others they knew through school, neighbourhood hang-outs, underground concerts and local churches. This strategy limited the diversity of the sample: participants were largely white or Latina working- or middle-class girls whose identities closely matched the researcher. However, the limitations of site also opened up space to discuss the topics that were of most interest to these young women – sexuality, sexual acts and the sex industry, for example – all of which are not sanctioned in traditional school settings. A focus group discussion on the meanings and practices associated with being labelled a ‘slut’ or a ‘ho’, and the painful experiences of one young woman who had been ostracized by her peers as a result, would not have been easily accomplished in a school setting. The research also used picture-taking excursions of representations of women in Las Vegas to illuminate the ways young women understood and resisted particular representations of women. Nearly all the activities for this project were orchestrated by the young women, not the researcher, revealing the powerful influence of popular, public spaces outside of schooling in the meaning-making experiences of young women.

The teenage pregnancy project in the UK alerted us to the dilemmas that arise when other conservative agencies – in this case, the media – focus on research. The British Department of Health planned the public release of information from the project ahead of time, well aware of the potential for the topic to attract sensationalist reporting. The research team had, of course, promised confidentiality and anonymity to participants. However, when the Department of Health released the research findings a number of newspapers discovered where the research had been conducted. Some British tabloids responded by being intrusive and sensationalist. The *Sun* ran with the headline ‘By the Sleazebide: Teen pregnancies boom at “partying resorts”’ (2 August 2004) and a picture of the semi-naked girl on page three that day included a comment from the model on her disapproval about drinking and sexual activity in the resorts. The *Sunday Telegraph* headline stated ‘Welcome to Casual Sex on Sea’ (1 August 2004) and gave teenage pregnancy rates for two of the towns involved in the research. The *Daily Mail* explored ‘Why seaside girls are twice as likely to become pregnant’ (2 August 2004). This coverage drew our attention back to questions of power and participation in research. On one level this sensationalism was simply designed to sell newspapers, but its wider impact was to limit the participation of young people. The important goals of hearing young people’s voices or offering information and guidance about sexuality were suppressed. The media coverage also reminded us that we must attend to when knowledge ‘which has been private floats into public view’ (Fine and Weiss, 1996: 211). As Strathern (2000: 309) warns, ‘There is nothing innocent

about making the invisible visible'. For critical researchers this means we must think very carefully about research dissemination. The dilemmas described here heighten the need for more sophisticated planning not only in the acts of research but also its dissemination.

New Strategies that Seek Transgression of Power

The need to bridge participatory epistemologies with methods that favour the transgression of power relations in research with young people is unmistakable. This requires us to reflect on our own subjectivities and the discursive relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, age and location within a discourse that seeks to reinvent 'others' through alternative understandings and representations. We also seek to transgress or rework the power relations that inevitably surface in research with young people. In the sections that follow, we describe some strategies that may be helpful in this respect.

Narrative Interviews, Peer Research and Advisory Groups

Each of our field projects moved away from traditional interviewing formats to favour more participatory strategies. The East Coast project used participant observation and focus group narrative interviews. Conversations with participants about the intent of the project and implications of participation before and during the project enabled participants to identify and extend the experiences they wished to investigate and the processes of collaborative inquiry. This included experiences outside official school discourses, such as depression and suicidal ideations, self-mutilation, homosexuality, and personal histories of male childhood sexual abuse. The group became a site of shared inquiry into adolescent experience. The focus groups elicited voices to expose and fill 'silences' (Fine, 1988); for example, the participants used one abuse survivor's narrative to explore themes in their own lives of voice and agency, social construction of identity, fear and anxiety, power and abuse, and solidarity. It is unlikely that the resulting range and depth of inquiry would have occurred with an interview structure that had been predetermined by the researcher. Moreover, an agenda orchestrated by the researcher would not have facilitated the transformative awareness that became evident among these young men. Their personal revelations evoked notions of Lather's (1986) catalytic validity in which participants come to understand anew and move forward toward some transformation in the process of research.

The Las Vegas project used *testimonio* (Beverly, 2000) or styles of interview that generated lengthy, in-depth accounts told by the subject/protagonist as central witness of the events in her experience. The transcripts of the two- to three-hour interviews omitted the researcher's questions and created a novella-like account of each girl's life. These first-person manuscripts were given back to each author/subject for editing and correction – another process which proved

to be cathartic, an affirmation of self and solidarity, akin to the empowerment felt by participants in early feminist conscious-raising sessions (Beverley, 2000).

The UK project used advisory groups and peer research. Local advisory groups of young people with power to comment on the direction and content of the research throughout each phase were established. They helped develop interview topic guides and drew researchers' attention to issues of importance to young people. This helped shift the focus of our research 'gaze', and played a significant role in the interpretation of data. Peer research introduced techniques of qualitative interviewing to young parents, who then inducted subsequent peer researchers into the process in chain-like fashion. The main defence of these strategies lies in the sheer quality of the data it generated, and the vociferous welcome given to it by the participants. While not all data in the project were generated by peer research, the approach broke through some power differentials and inscriptions of traditional research. It offered a way of 'doing' research that did not reproduce familiar relations of power and ways of listening that made young people central to the process of formulating the research problems, implementing the process, and interpreting the findings. The resulting data generated about young people's sexuality surpassed current understandings (Measor, 2006) and helped us 'move across the researcher–researched hyphen to apply our own work to practice and policy support' (Fine and Weiss, 1996: 264).

Reflecting on Power

Transgressing power relations in research involves more than new research strategies. It entails reflecting on and engaging with the relationships between and among self and others involved in research and recognizing that, like teaching, research is a very human act. In the East Coast project, the transgressive intent moved beyond a mere rejection of objectivist methodologies and researcher neutrality. When focusing on topics that are taboo or focus on individual pain, conventional research practices might encourage researchers to 'bracket' off emotional responses. We find it ethically unacceptable for adults to enter the private worlds of young people through 'research', for example to learn about sexual abuse suffered by them, and then to maintain distance from participants through reliance on 'objectivist' methods. For Anzaldúa (1987) the border is *una herida abierta*, an open wound that bleeds: non-transgressive research methodologies reify researcher–researched borders in a way that opens wounds, particularly when researching such 'forbidden' topics with young people.

Participatory research can also work to alter the perception or world view of the participants. For example, the candid dialogue about sexuality and desire among young women in the Las Vegas project helped them to see sexuality as socially constructed, and illuminated the ways in which society defined and limited women as subjects and sexual beings. All of the projects offered opportunities for young people with difficult issues to start telling a different story *about* themselves both *to* themselves and *to others*, as they shifted their own perspectives. The projects not only allowed space for these young people to

challenge the view taken of them by others but also worked to challenge the impact of that ‘othering’ process *on themselves*. One example of this is apparent in the names given to the subjects of the UK study. The participants chose to use the term ‘young parents’ when they spoke of themselves. It has different resonances from names used for them by authorities and the media. ‘Teen pregnancy’ focuses on their unusual age and the consequences of sexual activity, rather than their commitments to parenting. This was just one element in a process of challenging the processes of ‘othering’ to which these young people were subject. As researchers, then, we can provide knowledge of the struggles by those who are ‘othered’ as a means of helping them escape the powerful grasp that cultural imperatives have on us all.

If we take Lather’s (1986) notion of ‘catalytic validity’ in the ‘research process’ even further, we could imagine that research strategies might be taught more directly to young people for their own purposes – garnering information and sharing it publicly in ways that mirror the power and authority typically designated only to adult researchers or policy makers. Foucault (1993: 162) argues that there may be projects whose aim is to modify some constraints, ‘to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can simply, by its nature, assure that people will have liberty [since] ... Liberty is a *practice*’. Research knowledge gleaned from studies designed and conducted within intergenerational relationships of researchers, and among diverse people including activists and young people in communities such as those described here, can help make inroads into public arenas that have long disregarded young people.

Conclusions

The participatory work we are advocating can be traced back more than 60 years to Lewin (1946) and has been strongly influenced by feminist activist research (Hesse-Biber et al., Naples, 2003). Often termed Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Youth PAR (YPAR), these methods include participation (researchers and participants co-conceptualizing and implementing research); reflection as collective critique (reflection on practice, relationships and interpretation); communitarian politics (change aimed at justice and satisfaction of participants); and research (not simply community activism). Some scholars have organized anthologies and journal issues that feature scholarly articles written by the young researchers/activists themselves (see Cammarota and Fine, 2008). These academics are working with young people to build their capacity to study and analyse their own lives, through critical inquiries formed within youth collectives and situated within community settings rather than in university or institutionalized sites. The work beckons us to move beyond inclusion and participation in contemporary research with youth into a new paradigm of meaningful intergenerational research that imagines collaborative, inclusive and empowering research for powerful ways.

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