

Researchers as Participants, Participants as Researchers

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INTRODUCTION

Sociological research is filled with quandaries and tensions that need to be negotiated, especially where the research purpose is to gain an inside and interrelational perspective. Such a perspective embraces a level of intimacy in the co-construction and analysis of data that requires researchers to engage with not just their voices but also the voice/s of the participant/s. If social studies are about educating citizens for a democratic society, Johnston (2006) argues that research methodologies as well as teaching should include democratic processes. By adopting a democratic approach, we draw from Freire (1972), who highlighted that social action is not about positioning individuals as automatons but, quoting from Fromm's (1964) *The Heart of the Man*, about encouraging and engaging the individuals in a:

freedom to create and construct and to venture. Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible not a slave or a well-fed cog in the machine . . . It is not enough that men [sic] are not slaves; if social conditions further the existence of automatons, the result will not be love of life, but love of death. (Fromm, 1964, as cited in Freire, 1972, p. 43)

We assert that this is an important stance for researchers, as well as how researchers position participants in their inquiry. Narrative inquiry and arts-based research methods enable researchers to explore marginalized, controversial, and disruptive perspectives that have often been lost in more traditional research methodologies (Estrella & Forinash, 2007). These more experimental approaches to research offer the possibility of disruption to the dominant discourses within theory and research. As researchers we are drawing on work like that of Slattery (2003) and Whitehead and McNiff (2006) to suggest that substantive qualitative educative research can be conducted drawing on practitioner knowledge of the craft. We situated ourselves as autoethnographers applying arts-based methodology, in which through praxis we theorize

the nuanced and reflexive roles that we adopt in our inquiry. In arts-based research, practitioners use a variety of arts-based methodologies to undertake their research and/or to communicate their understanding. Arts-based research provides democratic direction that embraces challenging moments in the research journey for the purposes of further extending our understanding of practice and theory.

Researchers must always consider the ethics associated with how they collect and analyze their data. In this chapter, and through the use of three metaphors, we suggest that ethics is understood, as defined by Levinas (1994), with consideration for the other in our social interactions throughout the inquiry. In taking this perspective we seek to embed a social ethic of care into our everyday experiences as educators, researchers, and arts practitioners. We suggest that this is strengthened through collaborative practices and through a dialogical conversation between researcher/s and participant/s.

These understandings of interrelationality and agency came to the fore as we, the authors, came to know each other through our shared conversations of how researchers and participants (can) work together. We discussed at length the tensions and possibilities for reimagining participants in our offices and the corridors of a faculty of education in which we both worked. Through these conversations we found common ground, one of which was enthusiasm for seeing and being in the world through story and drama. And so I (Louise) invited Agli to join a small improvisational drama group of which I am a member. Our conversations then had physicality as well as words, within the academy and without. Over time we came to define principles of exploring interrelationality and agency when researchers and participants work together in metaphoric terms. We saw that the metaphor of *sitting beside* aptly depicts the principle of meeting on equal terms; actively seeking to view each other's perspective. *Spinning a web* is seen to capture the active principles of interrelationality as researcher and participants democratically work together to see connections. Artisan crafts of *knitting and tailoring* offered a description of analytical processes performed collectively—that is, reducing, selecting, and shaping data into a story/findings to tell (*co-tailoring*). By seeing these principles as metaphors we began to imagine multiple ways of exploring these principles from our experience of operating in worlds of story, drama, and improvisation. This then led us to the idea of role-playing these metaphors for a research symposium that explored research issues relating to participants. We saw the symposium as an opportunity to share our perspective and to have it debated by our colleagues. We wanted to provoke critical thinking regarding the application of democratic research practices in reimagining participants. As we are both familiar with operating and responding through improvisation, we chose to facilitate the presentation in-role¹ as researcher-participants responding accordingly to the presentation-participants. Our intent was to make the metaphors visible through our actions; to dramatologically

explore with the seminar participants the potential for democratic processes in research. Like in arts-based education research, we chose to experiment with modes and break boundaries and conventions through experiential methodology (Slattery, 2003; Hannula, 2009). This chapter provides explanations, quandaries, and tensions of our identified metaphors (sitting beside, spinning a web, collective tailoring) through folktales and discussion of our narrative accounts of the presentation with related theory. We embrace the established body of literature (e.g., Abbs, 1989; Bruner, 1986; Greene, 1995) and shared practitioner knowledge, which directly addresses the nature of knowing and learning aesthetically, and applies drama and storytelling to the processes of making, recording, and analyzing data. The paralanguage of drama and storytelling enables multiplicity in communication, expression, and perspective.

SITTING BESIDE: INTERRELATIONALITY

To explain the metaphor of *sitting beside* we draw from the Irish folktale “The Man Who Had No Story” (see Timoney, 1965/1985). In this tale, the central character, Brian, ventures into the unknown and uncertain territory of a faery glen, where he is suddenly swept up and dumped outside the door of the home of an old man and woman. The old woman invites Brian to sit beside her. Later, he suddenly lands at a wake and a young woman invites him to sit beside her. Each woman effectively plays the role of provocateur, spurring Brian to dive into new roles and acquire new skills and perspectives. When a researcher positions herself² as a participant, it is an explicit act to sit beside fellow participants. Researchers and participants can potentially both provoke each other to experience different roles, skills, and perspectives. Practitioner research imagines existence with others, not as separate from others. This assumption of co-existence draws from the ideas of theory and practice proposed by Habermas (1974), who argued for the roles of practitioner and researcher to merge. As practitioners we seek to imagine our existence with others and not separate from others. We situate research as embodied praxis that enables an ethical and socially just movement away from simply focusing on “what is right” and “what is wrong.” We consider this as working within a third space that is encompassing of social ethics premised on “difference, responsiveness and uncertainty [which is] akin to feminist communitarian models of ethical research . . . an ethics of embodiment [that] insists that inquiry is rooted in community and that knowledge arises out of being-with others” (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008, p. 86). We see that an ethics of embodiment is a movement forward from a Habermasian view of collaboration between practitioner-researcher and participants, and practice and theory through processes of critique and critical praxis.

Through an arts-based approach we seek to advance sociological inquiry beyond traditional models and look for spaces where knowledge

is created in being-with others. This enables practitioner-researchers to imagine innovative junctures among art, education, and research that embrace the diverse talents and interests of stakeholders in the inquiry (Piantanida, McMahon, & Garman, 2003). Practitioner-researchers and participants are seen to engage in doing research together. In a living educational theory approach to practitioner research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), the practitioner-researcher sees herself as part of the lives of the participants with whom she conducts her practice. Piantanida, McMahon, and Garman (2003) suggest that in doing so the process engages with the thorniness of doing research—that is, researchers embrace thorny questions before, during, and after the inquiry. It is hoped that by embracing the quandaries found in research endeavors, researchers also come to challenge and rethink notions of status and agency. Research must move from the sometimes rigid, narrow, and exclusionary definitions found in methodology books in order to enable practitioner-researchers and participants to negotiate a democratic and relational approach to sociological research.

In working to gain a deeper understanding of participant perspectives, the researcher sits beside the participants in order to elicit subjective experiences and gauge personal attitudes, perspectives, and lived experiences. This is achieved from an emotionalist position (Silverman, 2001), which enables the creation of a level of intimacy that embraces the complexity of human interaction. In conducting research from an emotionalist position, the focus is not to minimize complexity but rather to increase it (Flick, 2002). The aim is to describe inner experiences of respondents that reflect their thinking, feeling, and doing selves, to gain deep, rich understandings of the complexities of the inquiry issue.

At our presentation, titled “Researchers as Participants: Participants as Researchers,” we began by bringing to the fore the metaphor of *sitting beside* through explicit actions. The presentation took place in a room with tiered, fixed seating facing an open space, which housed audiovisual equipment and a whiteboard. We challenged the expected norm by sitting in the fixed seating among the gathered audience participants without any preface or explanation to provoke and give time for authentic raw responses. We used the metaphor of sitting beside, as portrayed in the folktale “The Man Who Had No Story,” to play the role of provocateur spurring the other participants to enter in an active role and in so doing acquiring new skills and perspectives. This reflects our personal experiences as researchers. In achieving an inside and interrelational perspective, a researcher must firstly be open to sharing with others what she sees and feels. Doing this is an acknowledgment of shared space in time and an inherent tension that exists when embracing the various perspectives about what is seen and felt. We made this tension evident by being the first to speak to the questions: “What do I see? What do I feel?”

I (Louise) began the presentation by verbalizing my experience of sitting in such a position in the context of a research seminar presentation:

By sitting here with you, I get to see what you can see. Right? So I can see that we are looking forward. I am conscious that you're beside me. That I have people beside me that we are turning our heads to look at each other . . . that we are definitely all facing forward with expectancy.

I described what I could see, the observable actions, and an interpretation of the intent of our actions. Agli vocalized recognition of who she knew in the room ("I know you, I know you too"). Upon invitation by Louise, Agli then gave an account of what she observed and felt by sitting with the participants in that room. This was a means to share with the participants our intention and reflected our desire to create a level of intimacy where the metaphor of sitting beside might enable us to co-construct some kind of shared understanding about "researchers as participants: participants as researchers." Our actions, of course, were not a neutral act. We were prepared to take risks and diverge from the norm to see what happened, responding with a commitment to ethics and social justice.

Looking back and reflecting on shared understandings about "researchers as participants: participants as researchers" we believe that it is important to acknowledge and account for physiological and emotional states that arise in the various roles (researcher and/or participant) in the research process. This means that confusion and expectations of what should go on during the data collection and analysis periods are openly acknowledged and discussed. We believe that established practices can be challenged through divergence from traditional methods, bringing to the fore notions of cultural power and discursive practices in research that need to be discussed and resolved before, during, and after an inquiry. We are also reminded that with the best of intentions "everything is dangerous, nothing is innocent" (Foucault, 1980,

p. 33). Arts-based research is about challenging existing norms and practices by negotiating and creating new understandings with the reimagining of participant roles. The democratic practice of *sitting beside* in research may need time for many participants in many contexts to build rapport and identify suitable democratic participatory processes of critique and critical praxis, such as those referred to by Habermas (1974).

Although we explicitly acted to break from conventions and *sat beside* participants and asked for their perspectives, we began the process, which positioned us as the leaders. The participants still looked to us for guidance on what was happening, based on preconceived expectations aligned with the context. They knew the conventions of research symposiums. The participants wanted to hear from the authors and be informed by them as to what the presentation was about. This alerted us to another dilemma in democratic research: can leadership be shared? The initiator of the study is typically looked to as the leader. The impetus

is then on the researcher to sustain a commitment to democratic practice and deflect attributed power and leadership, supporting notions of collective leadership as espoused in critical leadership theory (e.g., Foster, 1989).

Although as researchers we chose to sit beside and cultivate equal status between participants and researchers, external forces can drive the researcher to make decisions on her own. Such forces may include the brevity of time allocation for research presentations, pressure of meeting research deadlines, or the convention that the academic publishes accounts of research, so it is ultimately the researcher's perspective that is publicly told. In research that blurs the lines between researcher and participant, the metaphor of *sitting beside* aids understanding and experience of an inside and interrelational view. To authentically cultivate this approach to research is not, however, a smooth and easy path. It can take time to build democratic ways of interacting and sharing power. Researchers need to continually critically reflect on how external forces and their practices may intercept the democratic act of *sitting beside*. Dramatological research methods assist with exploratory role shifting and blurring between researcher and participant. In doing so the researcher's aims are to "voice the silent" (O'Toole & Drama Australia Community, 2006, p. 96). This is achieved by being mindful and demonstrating foresight as part of our ethic of care throughout the inquiry through the use of paralanguage. O'Toole suggests that researchers, working to "voice the silent," must be ready to engage with both positive and negative data. Our interconnectedness and our need to embrace an ethic of care are demonstrated in our next metaphor.

SPINNING A WEB: INTERCONNECTIVITY

The Greek folktale "The Child Who Was Poor and Good" (see Ragan, 1998) provides a great metaphoric example of spinning a web of interconnectivity. In the tale, a young girl has only an old shirt to wear, so she goes in search of warm clothing. She helps a spider and a bird on her way. As she passes a bramble bush, it rips her last threads of clothing. To assist the despairing young girl, a lamb then works with the bramble bush to retrieve tufts of wool to make a warm garment for the girl. On her way home, the girl meets the bird again, who spins the wool, and the spider, who weaves it. The girl arrives home with cloth, which her mother sews into a warm garment. There is interconnectivity between all elements of the story. The story does not continue in a linear format but doubles back on itself after the climax, forming an intertwined loop of connections. Meaning is then shaped by the interconnectivity of the characters and the story structure.

The metaphor of spinning a web flows on from the ontological assumption of an interrelational view in which all beings are seen as connected. Bateson (1972) suggested that everything is linked through

invisible ties with space and boundaries. In addition, the idea of *inclusionality* articulated by Rayner (2004) argues that all phenomena are related to each other, and metaphors of fluid and dynamic networks describe these relations. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of rhizomatic knowledge production also proposes a view of interconnectedness. Growth is seen to occur in the same pattern as a rhizome (such as a ginger plant), budding in unregulated patterns, as opposed to the classical view of growth as tree-like: unified and linear with an onward and upward growth pattern. Deleuze and Guattari state that a "rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles" (p. 7). In research, this involves plotting and mapping connections in the data. When operating from a space of inter-relationship between researchers and participants, these connections are plotted together. Further connections can be identified and verified from an inside and interrelational position, by plotting shared experiences and conversations of perspectives of these experiences and cross-checking identified connections.

Bringing to the fore the metaphor of spinning a web through explicit action also requires negotiation of culturally and historically held beliefs about the roles of researcher and participant. Like the metaphor of sitting beside, the context within which spinning a web was explored also played a role in how relationships were established and how meaning was achieved. In working through the ideas of spinning a web we again chose to embrace democratic, arts-based research methodology, in which equal opportunity is provided for different versions and experiences to be expressed (Hannula, 2009). Louise commenced the process by asking, "What are the historical and cultural conditions that have influenced our experience of attending a seminar presentation?" From a critical social science position (Habermas, 1974), active meaning-making was provoked by asking how the participants' ways of knowing and doing have been influenced by historical and social conditions. Through questions, paraphrasing, and clarification, ties between how the authors and the participants operate in this space were made visible (Bateson, 1972).

During our presentation we made these ties literally visible by spinning a strand of wool from one speaker to the next. As researchers we believe that both participants and researchers become intimately connected to the inquiry and to each other. This is also true when conducting forums or discussion groups. In making this visible our intention was to highlight connectivity and the collective voice and authorship of both the data and findings that emerge from analysis.

Through application of dramatological methods, representation and discussion of the researcher as a member of the inquiry were enabled as opposed to a representation of someone simply conducting and reporting the findings of an inquiry. This accounts for the practitioner role of the

researcher when *sitting beside* but also the interconnectivity between the researcher and the participants in the pathways taken after commencement of the inquiry. Conducting democratic research can enable researchers to highlight the individual and idiosyncratic nature of experience as well as the way meaning is assigned to those experiences, and webbed to aid collaborative meaning-making. Although this may be the intent of democratic research, there are quandaries and tensions in this process. Invariably the researcher's readings of connections are privileged. Research lenses shape the connections that are noticed and recorded. Multiple participants may produce multiple combinations of connections, and according to Levinas (1994) create a complete picture. From an ethical position, he adds, interpretation is formed with consideration for the other. Maps of connections in a rhizomatic manner (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) need to be open to ongoing alterations following the emergent changes of the research process.

Mapping identified connections is important in collaboration, co-construction, and co-analysis of data and ultimately the final story that is told by the researcher. The challenge for any research is to include an account of the research that acknowledges reality as socially constructed—that is, a reality that is co-constructed through the inquiry. One of the tensions that emerge involves managing authorship and signature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We associated authorship and signature with our next metaphor of democratic, arts-based research: “collective tailoring.”

COLLECTIVE TAILORING: DISCARDING, SALVAGING, AND CRAFTING ANEW

The Jewish folktale “The Tailor” (Schimmel, 2002) offers a means to explain the metaphor of collective tailoring. In this story, a poor tailor gathers remnants from the garments he makes for others to make himself a coat. He wears the coat until it is falling apart, and then he cuts off the worn parts and tailors a jacket from the fabric that is still strong. In time, the jacket begins to show signs of wear and tear, so he tailors the remains of the jacket to be a vest. The same then happens over time to the vest, from which the tailor crafts the salvageable fabric into a cap, and then into a button until all that remains is a good story. This process of discarding what is worn out, salvaging what still has worth, and crafting new structures can be likened to the analytical process of data reduction, data organization, and drawing conclusions from data. Data is reduced by determining what data is worn out, based on long-held beliefs, or no longer has relevance or meaning to the inquiry. What still has meaning to the inquiry is sustained. From the remaining data, interpretations are drawn and new understandings created. But these understandings have terminal life in the form that they have been shaped. Through further

experience and intersection with others, worn-out components are disregarded and further understandings are formed that still provoke questioning and inquiry. By the end of the analytical process the data no longer exist in their original form. They have been cut and reshaped numerous times to form differing understandings. What remains is the story of the analytical process to share.

When researchers and participants work alongside each other, the decision of what to cut and what to examine and reshape of the data can occur democratically. From a critical perspective, the worn-out parts might be what are understood as long-held beliefs, metanarratives, or dominant discourses that shape patterned or routine ways of being simply because that is the way it is. The crafting of new understandings is informed by an ontological assumption that people exist in “constantly unfolding processes of creation” (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p. 86). The emphasis is on creative processes rather than working toward closure. Creative processes are understood as “free, self-transforming, relational and inclusive” (p. 86). This ontology is based on ideas from Polanyi (1958) and Chomsky (1986). Polanyi acknowledged that all people possess a wealth of tacit knowledge. Chomsky suggested that all people have boundless aptitude for the creation of language. On the basis of these ideas, Whitehead and McNiff (2006) formed an understanding “that people have infinite capacity for the creation of new ways of thinking and acting” (p. 87). The art of provocative questioning determines the cutting of data and reshaping to form new understandings. This process is also one that must account for the emotional nature of research (Silverman, 2001) as researcher and participant work together in cutting and reshaping the data and to establish new understandings. Co-construction and co-analysis of data, when adopting a democratic methodology, are therefore akin to respectful, warm, and energy-filled discussions that bring together different perspectives and worldviews.

In the seminar, we orchestrated this by facilitating a whole group reflective discussion of the experience while three invited participants wrote their summative accounts of the discussion on the whiteboard. Care was taken to listen to and validate all experiences, make links between comments and provoke critical reflection. Engaging participants in the meaning-making process is important in fully representing different perspectives and world-views. The differentiated accounts of what is happening in the data make visible what is being discarded, what has relevance and validity, what is salvaged and crafted into the collective summative text about the shared experience. Participants are actively involved with the researcher in the process of tailoring the data into a story that is shared with a wider audience. By telling this story we continually acknowledge the patchwork nature of its construction but at the same time explicitly account for how we further tailor the data—to tell the story for different purposes. This is central to conducting research

from an autoethnographic stance.

Working with subjective data in the emotional space when adopting a democratic research process requires researchers to work with participants when choosing to retain or salvage what emerged through the participant researcher interactions. Engaging and giving voice to participants in this way enroll them as participant researchers in the inquiry. The quandary or tension here might be one of whose account is privileged. And even if participants are reimagined as co-researchers, the author will shape publications of the findings of the research; the author will complete the final tailoring touches, ultimately presenting the world as she sees it.

It is important when using democratic research methods that the relationship between researcher as participant and participant as researcher authentically includes voice, authorship, and signature, and not rhetorical statements. By the instigating researcher being inclusive, acknowledging, and creating space for collaboration, she can foster deep understandings of differentiated experiences that are reflective of diversity. Democratic research processes refine capacity to “hear” participant voices in acknowledgment of multiple perspectives both in the inquiry and in the presentation of the final story about the inquiry. To openly and authentically commit to democratic practice complexities, quandaries and tension need to be brought to the fore and debated throughout the entire research process.

CONCLUSION

Through exploration of the metaphors: *sitting beside*, *spinning a web*, and *collective tailoring*, a view of research that embraces interrelationality, agency, interconnectivity, and evolving creative processes of researchers and participants forming knowledge together offers scope for reimagining participants. These metaphors place emphasis on working *with* participants, with explicit acts to share perspectives and connections and then collaboratively craft findings together. Although much can be gained through democratic approaches to research, it can be challenging as authenticity is marred by conflicts with the metanarratives at play of established research mechanisms that traditionally position the researcher as outsider and controller of the research process. This can occur in the broad view of research as evidenced-based, which places emphasis on technical expectations, such as the practical role of the researcher (Biesta, 2007). And it has been questioned whether we can claim “democracy exists when voices of many are excluded and the pressures to conform exceed those of dissidence and difference” (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995, p. 8). Presence and commitment to democratic practice need to be actively sustained by all. Arts-based research methods offer a way to explore the potential of

reimagining participants as co-practitioners and co-researchers through experimental, experiential, and multi-modal means with ethics of embodiment.

NOTES

1. "In role" is a dramatic convention in drama education, in which a teacher or a student assumes another character, position, or role for the purpose of provoking a different point of view.
2. Female pronouns are used throughout chapter as both authors are female and as a small effort to bring balance to the historical masculinization of language.

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