

Commentary

**GLOCAL PROVOCATIONS: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON
COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION DESIGNED
AT THE (GLOCAL) INTERSECTIONS OF THE GLOBAL DYNAMICS
AND LOCAL CULTURES**

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In this short reflection I draw lessons from the essays about the ethics and epistemologies of designing community based research and interventions with a critical global sensibility. I present these as glocal provocations that call for situating communities in history and political economy; appreciating the multiplicities, intersectionalities and tensions within communities, and designing work with deep participation by a range of community based colleagues to reflect a democratic commitment to the "right to research" by those most marginalized by social arrangements and even by the checkered history of community based research.

Key words: *situated communities, intersectionality, multiplicity, participatory community research*

After both Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island, New York, and after both White officers were not indicted, videos of police brutality swept the globe and #BLACKLIVESMATTER protests sprung up in Paris, Egypt, Hong Kong, Ghana, London, Toronto, Cuba, etc., and throughout the United States. Spontaneous communities of solidarity punctured the global landscape.

Late in December 2014, Emerald Snipes, the youngest daughter of Eric Garner, visited the home of 12-year-old Jaden Ramos, son of now deceased Officer Rafael Ramos, who was murdered by a psychiatrically impaired man on a mission to kill police officers to avenge the deaths of Brown and Garner. The headline reads: "I know how it feels this season to not have your father around: Eric Garner's daughter visits memorial of murdered NYPD officers to 'stand with' and support their grieving families."

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In a public gesture, Snipes positioned herself at once as daughter, Black woman, member of a family that includes police, grieving relative, and cultural icon who at this moment embodies the collateral damage of aggressive state violence. By standing with grieving families and police, she refused to be contained by the “anti-cop” box the media constructed for her father and her. In one move, Emerald stood for (justice), against (state brutality) and with (families devastated by the murder of a parent). As she extended her arms to the Ramos family, she did not abandon community, betray her father’s memory, or undermine the conviction of protestors.

I find myself searching these days for binary busters like Emerald; solidarity seekers; those who stand for, against and with; those who are firmly grounded in critical analyses of community but/and/also/therefore carving common ground with Others across dangerous power lines.

These people make, and remake, communities in and across place, and they challenge our academic understandings of how communities and cultures emerge, sustain, transform and remix.

The poet Emily Dickinson once wrote, “Tell the truth but tell it slant” (1955).

This is my wish for those who study and work with the precious constructs “community” and “cultures” in days of destabilization, nostalgia, and protest. To tell the truth, but tell it slant, in ways that reveal the workings of power and swelling inequality gaps, dramatic movements of bodies and capital, the violence of occupations and deportations and the bold moves of resistance and solidarity, which define, disrupt and animate emergent communities today.

The essays in this volume pose a serious challenge to community based researchers and interventionists: how do we theorize and study the oscillating constructs of “community” and “cultures” on a global landscape?

Across the volume, the authors narrate an engaging multi-method tour of the enduring and fleeting, comfortable and conflictual, geographic and affective features of communities and cultures in transition, in Quebec and Rome, Occitania and in ‘The Station Zone’, within community-university partnerships in rural Pennsylvania and Egypt and within Aboriginal-settler relations in Indigenous Canada. I appreciate the geographic and theoretical range of the full volume and the specificity of each essay, the powerful diversity of methods, the careful attention to affects and words, and the profound appreciation of power and what one writer called “asymmetries” that litter communities, particularly those in “partnership” with universities, public or private organizations. The task of a “discussant,” if I may, is to think across essays and harvest insights that can support critical research in and across other communities. In that spirit, I offer here a brief memo on “glocal provocations,” to think aloud about how we might tune-up the field of community studies and interventions at a moment in history when high velocity winds of global economics and politics are disrupting everything in their path, and the devastation and protest are all captured on the internet.

With humility, I offer a three conceptual tapas – small plates of ideas - inspired by these essays, toward a *theory of method* for studying communities with global sensibilities: on situating communities, complicating communities and participating (with) communities.

Situating Communities in history and political-economy

In the *Harvard Educational Review*, Lois Weis and I published “Critical Bifocality and Circuits of Privilege: Expanding Critical Ethnographic Theory and Design” (2012) in which we argued for *critical bifocality* so that researchers could account theoretically and empirically for global, national, and local transformations as insinuated, embodied, and resisted by youth and adults trying to make sense of current educational and economic possibilities in massively shifting contexts. We advocated research designs that situate lives within history and political economy; juxtaposing analyses of one community alongside others so that linked circuits of dispossession and privilege (Fine & Ruglis, 2008) could be made visible; interrogating the complex dynamics within a neighborhood so neither community nor culture can ever be falsely homogenized, and documenting the laughter, subversions, hidden transcripts of resistance and the wounds of oppression that signify the jazz of life within a single neighborhood.

Critical bifocality invites community researchers to place our “object” of inquiry within a scholarly framework of history and political economy. The essays by Badali and Barbieri and Zani do just that, representing their communities historically, as economically and culturally contested spaces. Readers come to understand that contemporary identities are neither natural nor trans-historic, and that over time identities and cultural commitments morph through language, family, imperialism, desire, immigration and segregation. Readers come to appreciate the significance of a sense of place and the impact of disruption. We recognize how affects of belonging can metastasize into moral exclusion once economic or cultural fear and precarity sweep into the neighborhood.

These essays raise an epistemological dilemma for community researchers: our deep dive into the “stubborn particulars” (Cherry, 1995) of place may come at the expense of not attending adequately to the imposing dynamics of power, structure and context. The essay by Parent, Simard, Roy, & O’Neill moves right to the heart of this dilemma: elaborating both the significance and the limits of focusing primarily on the “culture of place.”

In an ethnographic analysis of SDC (support for developing communities) the researchers note: “*This study reveals that community actors, at least in the case of the SDC initiative, have little control over these systems [necessary to reduce health inequities]. The SDC steering group, composed primarily of citizens and community workers, was mainly seen as a bridging mechanism to circulate information... volunteers or charity workers rarely dared go beyond the mandate of the organization... it remained difficult for community actors to recognize that they could act on broader health determinants at work in their neighborhood such as housing, urban planning and education.*”

These writers raise a crucial question about the ethical responsibility of community researchers: if we leave the space between community actors and policy systems vacant – either invisibilized or evacuated – our studies may leave the impression that communities are unable or unwilling to tend to their own problems; that is, we white-out power inequalities. If community researchers and interventionists remain primarily focused on local dynamics, how can we also attend to broader structural arrangements and policy frameworks? They offer a provisional solution: “*With much more attention devote to the contextual and cultural aspects of a community situation...Public health actors would be able to reflect more thoroughly on the social, historical, economic, political and environmental factors that shape community development and integrate them in their interventions. SDC would also gain in being more explicit regarding the importance of sharing power and alliance to achieve SDC. Health could then more likely become a genuine local construction.*”

As these writers suggest, those of us concerned with interventions and social change have a responsibility to explore a *wide unit of analysis* (which should include structures, policies and systems of power) even if we focus empirically upon a relatively *narrow unit of data collection* (which may very well be the local community). I am inviting us all, as community researchers interested in the intimate and cognizant of the global, to experiment with designs that retain a rich ethnographic depth and still place this complex portrait of local life within a landscape of structural dynamics. I realize this is half a thought, a provocation, the beginning of a conversation... but one that communities deserve.

Complicating communities: multiplicity and structural intersectionality

Just as it is essential to situate the study of communities within history and political economy, so too we must be equally deliberate about exploring the multiplicities and intersectionalities that traverse life within community. Those of us who collaborate with communities have typically both under-theorized the impinging forces pressing from outside the community membrane, and ignored the vibrant, sometimes boiling complexities within. I ask what happens to our analyses if we dare to introduce the press of policy and structure, and the percolating intersections within?

A simple and crucial notion is sometimes difficult to introduce within psychology and other social sciences: identities, communities and (be)longings are multiple, diverse and sometimes even contradictory. Feminists writing through critical race and post colonial theory – Gloria Anzaldúa (2003), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and Elizabeth Cole (2009) – write on human experience as richly intersectional, identities as multiple, historic and shifting, and structural arrangements with sharp pointy edges that benefit a few and contain/punish many. These theorists are fundamentally suspicious of “pure” categories of identity or community, and of scholarship that presumes such purity. They appreciate communities as dynamic and catalytic, constituted by varied and sometimes contradictory and intersecting identities, grounded in diverse, bloody, playful and hugely inequitable relations of power. As a consequence, they would never ask people to rank their identities or assume that communities are homogeneous. In fact, what is delicious about their writings is that in order to understand the full luscious quality of community and culture, they search for evidence of transgressions, contradictions and hypocrisies as well as the whispers,

moans, screams, laughter and hysteria of women, queers, people with disabilities, trans folks, those living on the streets and in prisons, lepers, those who are a shade too dark – who would tell another story about community life if only they were asked.

That is, these writers love, and trouble, community as a space of desire and contestation, pitched on a sharp fork of inequity.

Like these writers, community psychologist Anne Brodsky gestures toward the texture and wild valences within *community* with her construct Multiple Sense of Community (see Barbieri & Zani, this volume). Brodsky acknowledges that individuals embody multiple and even contradictory commitments to communities and develop a dynamic sense of belonging and exclusion, desire and critique. Most of the essays in this volume share Brodsky's perspective; they both appreciate and complicate community as a complex noun and a verb, made and always being remade – and for that I am grateful. But I want to push this theoretical point a bit further, to provoke new thinking about multiplicity, uncertainty and intersectionality.

What if *multiplicity, uncertainty and intersectionality* were conceptualized as generative social and psychological resources within and between communities, rather than [only] disruptions or burdens to community?

One of the essays argues that “uncertainty created by the global extension of the self increases the importance of the local level” and I have no doubt that is true – for some, at some moments, but not for others or always.

As researchers and engaged citizens of the world, we know that uncertainty and intersectionality may also provoke new understandings of self and others (see Fine & Ruglis, 2008; Nishida, 2015); multiplicity, complexity, and intersectionality have been conceptualized primarily as destabilizing, but when are they generative? (see Tartaglia & Rossi, this volume)

In the face of threat and uncertainty, or what has been called cognitive dissonance, many indeed shrink to self-protection and justification. But, as we know from studies of emergent social movements, in the midst of threat, others seek alliances with surprising allies. The rise of the Indignados (the indignants) in Spain and the quite diverse constituents of Occupy in the U.S., the coalition that has built Undocuqueer (a collective of undocumented and queer students) and developing solidarities between native and indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand, Togo, Haw'aii, mainland U.S., Alaska and the peoples of Puerto Rico and Palestine (see proceedings from National Women's Studies Association, 2015) suggest that new constellations (Giesecking, 2013) and coalitions across communities emerge from a recognition shared oppression and shared fates.

Again I offer this as half a thought, but one to inspire perhaps a new critical line of inquiry within community studies such that destabilization is not always viewed as an insult to identity which triggers defensive self justification but perhaps also as an opportunity for shifting grounds, innovative “remix” and surprising solidarities.

Participating communities, working across cultures

I want to end with a note on participating communities; that is to dive into critical participatory research as an epistemological and ethical standpoint, not mentioned in the volume, but one I would consider crucial to community studies when working across cultures. As many readers know, critical participatory community studies enjoy a long rooted history in Central and South America, associated with the work of Orlando Fals Borda, Ignacio Martin Baro and Paolo Freire, and also in Canada with Cynthia Chataway and New Zealand with postcolonial scholar and research Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Seduced by the depth, sustainability and impact of these projects, I now believe deeply that the epistemological grammar of prepositions – research *about, on, for, with* and *by* – matters, enormously. For my tastes, I am now a strong advocate of research *with* and *by* the very communities that lay at the heart of the inquiry and/or intervention. Critical participation by those who most intimately know injustice not only strengthens the political depth and ethics of a project, but also the validity of the science and the sustainability of the findings.

Having said all that, it is not that participation is without troubles. As the chilling volume *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, by Cooke and Kothari (2001) attests, participation too has become a neoliberal strategy of international corporate and philanthropic cooptation and development, whereby local knowledges are extracted and/or folded into major international development strategies, while neither power nor governance are shared.

Indeed participation – which includes the deep involvement of local residents as knowledge holders and co-researchers – between community and university is always fraught with questions of power, privilege, money, vulnerability and uneven benefits of the research. I will lay out the aspirational conditions for critical PAR below, provide an example of work at the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center CUNY and return to some of the dilemmas sketched above.

Over more than two decades, at the Graduate Center, CUNY in the United States, the Public Science Project has evolved as a center for participatory research collectives of critical psychologists, community activists and residents, policy makers, lawyers, public health researchers.... dedicated to quantitative and qualitative studies of social (in)justice and resistance. Indebted to the legacy of Fals Borda and Ignacio Martin-Baro, and in a 15 year ongoing collaboration/conversation with Linda Tuhiwai Smith and colleagues engaged in indigenous Maori research in New Zealand, we take up Critical Participatory Action Research with historically marginalized communities who deserve, and have been denied, “the right to research.” (Appadurai, 2006). Like indigenous theorists, disability rights groups and the HIV positive community, to name a few, in all of our projects we take the position: “No research on us, without us.” Together variously situated co-researchers design democratic science to generate theory, document wounds of oppression and histories of resistance, cultivate evidence for policy alternatives from the ground up. We work in communities, with activists, on topics of aggressive policing, stop and frisk, racial and sexual disparities in school suspensions, LGBTQ experiences of public institutions, college in prison, and access to college for women and men after serving time in prison... (www.publicscienceproject.com) We work on issues of cultural competence, write on the opportunities and delicate collaborations and ethical landmines when universities

work with community leaders. We aim to craft research questions that are borne from within community struggle and remain attentive to the delicacies of university privilege, designing projects across cultural, class and institutional lines (see Forden & Carrillo, this volume, for important insights on university-community partnerships and attending to culture/privilege)

While these are our aims, the work is always more fraught. Issues of power, and urgency, whose knowledge is recognized, surface relentlessly. We spend time as research teams discussing which troubling issues can be made public and which remain protected; analyzing who is made vulnerable by the evidence and findings and whose stories/identities should remain on the cutting room floor. When we study deeply ingrained and long standing social issues like aggressive policing or miseducation in communities of color, and we have an opportunity to “influence policy,” we dedicate much time to deliberating about whether it is worth contributing data for reforms that will be superficial when we know structural problems to be much more entrenched – and yet we labor on.

One of our core principles concerns whose expertise is valued:

For each project, we gather a research team that reflects varied kinds of wisdom about experiences, issues, institutions, politics and research methods. That is, we recognize that expertise is widely distributed but legitimacy is not, and that persons who have most experienced injustice should be shaping the questions, methods, samples, analytic practices and products of social (in)justice research. Following Martin-Baró’s commitment to a “preference for the poor,” our projects tilt toward the critical frameworks narrated by those who most intimately know injustice in their skin (see Martin-Baró, Aron, & Corne, 1996).

And yet the question of who really constitutes community hovers:

In the abstract, full inclusion is a lofty goal, but when designing the team the questions multiply: who is the “community?” if we are studying prisons, do we need correctional officers on the team? Or dropouts if we are studying schools? Or elders if we are studying violence against girls and women? Or formerly incarcerated college students if we are investigating how colleges exclude people with criminal justice records?

Once the team is established, how do we share money, credit and vulnerabilities? How do we each contribute what we do best, and feel comfortable about shared distribution of labor, given our different biographies and skill sets? What happens when community members are hyper-critical of community dynamics and victim blaming? What happens when community is more fractured (or multiple, as in section two above) than one would like? Or when academics can’t get beyond their/own privilege to hear the wisdom and struggles in community? How do we handle the absolutely predictable moment when members of the community laugh at the absurd language and grammar of our standardized instruments? How do we travel as a group to a professional conference when some of us can’t fly because of criminal justice histories or immigration issues?

We have tried to be inclusive about the question of who constitutes community:

When we study the uneven consequences of the racial desegregation of public schools, the research team includes a wide range of students in Advanced Placement/honors classes and those in special education, student government and those who have been suspended, students from the Gay/Straight Alliance and the Black Action and Latino clubs, students who spend too much time in discipline room and those who have dropped out/been pushed out, as well as educators, alumni, graduate level researchers and policy makers (Torre & Fine, 2011). When we study stop and frisk and aggressive policing in the Bronx or Brooklyn, our research team includes academics, lawyers, grandmothers who have been filming aggressive policing, boys who have seen too much of police brutality, and young women who have been policed and harassed by young men in their communities (Stoudt, Torre, Bartley, Bracy, Caldwell, Downs, Greene, Haldipur, Hassan, Manoff, Sheppard, & Yates, in press).

Once these very diverse research teams are assembled, how can we create spaces for learning about each others' expertise, and probably making mistakes, stumbling on our own assumptions and advancing a bold research enterprise?

For each project, we design a collaborative research camp – at the university and/or in the community – a retreat for a week or more, where we pool our varied wisdoms about community, root causes and symptoms of social problems, the best way to ask questions, how not to reproduce stereotypes or judgments in our questions, sampling, what kinds of analyses to conduct. And after we gather data from/with community (usually a combination of large scale community surveys and focus groups, stories, interviews, mapping), we hold Stats ‘n Action workshops where together we produce descriptive statistics on the policy issue in question (e.g. aggressive police stops, arrests, suspension, school push out), run cross tabs of our newly collected data (by neighborhood, race/ethnicity, sexuality, immigrant status...), conduct secondary analyses of official databases (e.g. New York City police or Department of Education data), and shape an analytic plan for both qualitative and quantitative data to be shared in community settings for interpretations, recursive feedback and more analytic sessions until we understand “good enough” how the data map onto community experience and policy desires.

At times the unevenly distributed emotional load in the room halts the collective process; those who carry injustice in their bodies are freighted by the heavy affect of the material while those of us who are “interested” in the topic or working in solidarity may indeed experience a less embodied reaction to the material. We have had to improvise analytic techniques to attend to these differential existential weights in the room – with graffiti walls, where young people speak back to data that say “achievement gaps are because people of color are genetically different” or with the expertise of Maddy Fox (Fox & Fine, 2012) we have introduced embodied methods and theatre of the oppressed and play back theatre to use the arts to act through and act out the data, finding a way to express the pain of quantitative findings for example that compare “the academic and health outcomes of children of mothers who have dropped out of school to the children of mothers who graduated,” when so many of the co researchers are indeed children of mothers who have dropped out.

Once we gather the data -- How do we determine appropriate products, audiences and who can speak for the evidence? How much do we talk about community secrets, e.g. violence or

drug use or other problems, within communities under siege, even as we know that these issues are absolutely closeted, buried and silenced in more privileged communities?

And so we try to decide together – in community, libraries, schools, youth organizations, bars, prisons, legal offices, reproductive health clinics and/or at the Graduate Center -- what we will produce from the evidence: working papers, amicus briefs, academic papers, popular newspaper articles, community dialogues, organizing brochures, spoken word performances, street theatre, short videos (see Morris Justice Project at www.publicscienceproject.org)...

These sessions also can be laden with tensions of those who want to produce tenure-ready publications and those who want brochures that reflect the outrage of the findings to inspire social movements. Some want more empirical evidence in the materials and some more art; some seek to write/perform/publish on the edge and others to work with mainstream discourses. The discussions swirl around research, public science, advocacy and critical science, rage as a discourse and evidence as a fig leaf on oppression; the debates are lively.

Who presents the findings at professional conferences? Do we spend as much time and resources creating community-friendly/organizing brochures as we do academic publications? Who owns the data when the project is over? And do the relationships just wither at the end?

After more than twenty years of such collaborations, community groups now solicit the collaboration of the Public Science Project to help design participatory (not just compliance) evaluations, craft policy research to answer questions of meaning on the ground, investigate the collateral damage of neoliberal “innovations” being sold to disinvested communities (e.g. school closings, charter schools, broken window policing, LGBTQ youth disparities in suspensions). When we publish, all of our names are listed as authors; when we testify, all of us testify.

And there are still and always much deserved questions about whether university researchers – not from the community – can ever be full partners. We work through the questions, unevenly and probably unsatisfactorily, and we learn in the midst the skills of working through the speedbumps of cross-cultural, cross-class, cross-zip code work.

Participation is neither a methodological nor ethical stance; it is an epistemology about where knowledge lives and who has the right to research. Participation doesn't foreclose research problems, it just produces a new set of issues. But rich, sustained and critical participation, among diverse communities of researchers – some of whom hail from the university and some from the neighborhood – advances democratic science, designed for the common good, in ways that holds the academy accountable and supports the desires of community. (Visit our website for examples of our work, our mistakes and our provocative videos/white papers/publications/brochures/products).

Imagining critical community studies

I end with a humble and provisional sketch – another provocation – for a critical theory of method in community studies; a cocktail of insight from the essays in this volume and from my 20 years of participatory community research. Building upon the rich legacy of work produced by community based theorists, researchers, practitioners and activists in theorizing, documenting and standing with communities in struggle, *and* accounting for the weight of contemporary global forces that shape and reshape communities, I would love to imagine that critical community and cultural studies can be:

- * designed by rich and diverse participatory collectives of researchers who bring distinct kinds of expertise from the ground and the academy; who set out to
- * document the sweet and prec(ar)ious meanings of communities, rooted in land, place, ethnic/racial group, gender/sexuality, cultures and languages, public institutions, affect, oppression, segregation, transgression and history; and
- * interrogate the linked circuits of dispossession and privilege that sculpt community and cultural life, while
- * attending to the great variations and delicious anomalies that operate beneath the smooth veneer of culture and community, and always
- * cataloguing the bold and modest expressions of protest, resistance and remix that metabolize within the delicate home spaces we call community.

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