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Positionality and Racialization in a PAR Project: Reflections and Insights from a School Reform Collaboration

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Abstract

This paper shares findings from a critical reflection on a collaborative participatory research initiative called "The Improving Schools Project." The first author's reflections explored the interaction of race, space, and positionality within the context of a cross-racial participatory research project. She considered how the racial identity of organizations and individuals nested within organizations impacted patterns of engagement and participation in this project. Through engaging in critical reflexive work facilitated by co-inquirers, she developed a clearer understanding of how the racialization of organizations played a critical role in mediating participants' engagement in terms of control, collaboration, and commitment. Organizational histories and legacies grounded in (mis)treatment and relationships with communities of color shaped and were shaped by the racial identities of individuals representing these organizations. Multi-layered critical reflexivity allowed for the examination of unintended impacts on participatory processes and practices in cross-racial participatory projects.

Keywords

Participatory Research, Racialized Identities, Critical Reflexivity, School Reform

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Positionality and Racialization in a PAR Project: Reflections and Insights from a School Reform Collaboration

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This paper shares findings from a critical reflection on a collaborative participatory research initiative called "The Improving Schools Project." The first author's reflections explored the interaction of race, space, and positionality within the context of a cross-racial participatory research project. She considered how the racial identity of organizations and individuals nested within organizations impacted patterns of engagement and participation in this project. Through engaging in critical reflexive work facilitated by co-inquirers, she developed a clearer understanding of how the racialization of organizations played a critical role in mediating participants' engagement in terms of control, collaboration, and commitment. Organizational histories and legacies grounded in (mis)treatment and relationships with communities of color shaped and were shaped by the racial identities of individuals representing these organizations. Multi-layered critical reflexivity allowed for the examination of unintended impacts on participatory processes and practices in cross-racial participatory projects. Keywords: Participatory Research, Racialized Identities, Critical Reflexivity, School Reform

Community-based participatory action research (PAR) projects address complex problems, which, if solved, would improve the quality of life of people in local communities (Garaway, 2004; Hall, 1992; Selener, 1997). Projects typically are collaborative in nature and involve representatives from multiple organizations who possess different skill sets, research expertise, understandings of problems, and motivations for involvement.

An important aspect of PAR is the need for ongoing and critical reflection to guide the work (Chiu 2006). Inherent in participatory research intending to expose and disrupt inequities through research *with* rather than *on* indigenous community-based researchers is the recognition of the importance of ongoing reflexivity to challenge the privilege and power relations that professional researchers bring to the collaborative research. This is especially critical in cross-racial partnerships where racialized identities of all researchers intersect in the conduct of the research in ways which open and close doors to the power disruption embedded in the intent of PAR researcher. As Lee and Simon-Maeda (2006) suggest, without critical reflection scrutinizing the intersection between shifting positionalities and racialized identities, participatory researchers risk perpetuating research practices situating indigenous researchers as the victimless others in need of empowerment. This critical reflexivity, or the individual and collaborative examination of critical moments, turning points, and blockades becomes central to authentic participatory research processes. Through self and collective reflection using conversations, writing, and retrospective examination of data as vehicles for sense-making, participatory researchers create additional data relevant to developing understanding of the impact or change achieved through the research. This reflexive examination should take place at all stages of the research. In this article, we share findings from a critical self-reflection as Black PAR researchers (Drame & Irby, forthcoming) on a

collaborative participatory research initiative called “The Improving Schools Project,”¹ designed to empower members of an African-American community to expand the options and quality of local public education.

I, as the first author, invited Decoteau, my co-author, to become a co-inquirer external to project, tasked with engaging me in reflexive dialogue and exercises allowing me to construct, co-construct, and re-construct my experiences and selves throughout the life of the project. His facilitation helped me confront how specific assumptions and competing commitments influenced my shifting roles and which identities were foregrounded in the researcher. Decoteau’s role and identities are more fully described in the methods section. For the purpose of clarity, use of first person refers to the first author, whereas the collective “we” refers to shared understandings developed between the two authors as a result of the co-reflective work. This paper explores in particular how nested positionality within a racially neutral organization, not imbued with the racial legacies of the city, shaped involvement in a participatory research project.

Participatory Research in a Racialized World

Steeped in a deep tradition of engaging marginalized populations, PAR is often defined by level of engagement of community-based researchers in all aspects of the research and the nature of participant involvement (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). While some consider insider-participants’ involvement in even a cursory advisory capacity as constituting participation, others frame PAR as “authentic” only if it reflects a deep involvement on the part of insider-participants. For our purposes, we understand participation along a spectrum of practices that emerge from a set of guiding principles (Suarez et al., 2004). Ideally, participation is collectively determined with consideration given to the research context, assessment of insider and outsider participants’ strengths and resources, and project goals. With an understanding that context and power-differentials shape possibilities in terms of level of participant involvement and the purpose of research projects (Krumer-Nevo, 2009), we understand the dimensions of participation in university-community partnerships in terms of degrees of control, collaboration, and commitment (Suarez et al., 2004).

As other researchers have also acknowledged, participatory research poses many challenges for “expert” researchers and community-based researchers alike (Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007;; Fine & Torre, 2004; Torre, 2009). The literature reflects a near universal acknowledgement that large-scale collaborative research projects are bound to be subjected and influenced by politics and power differentials. This is especially so in cross-racial collaborations. Situated in a region of the U.S. with an entrenched history of racial conflict, the Improving Schools Project was rife with distrust, skepticism, and tensions that have come to characterize post-Katrina New Orleans (Kiel, 2011). Many education scholars, community activists, and members of New Orleans’ African American community viewed choice-based school reform efforts as an extension of neoliberal policies designed to “reclaim” and “rebuild” the city to serve corporate and White middle class interests and sensibilities, respectively (Buras, Randels, Ya Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010; Miron, 2008). One of these measures billed as a ‘necessary’ step in the redevelopment of quality public schools was the passage of Act 35, which redefined a failing school, such that the majority of New Orleans public schools were judged as failing and moved under the “stewardship” of the state-run Recovery School District. Coinciding with the state take-over of New Orleans public schools was the wholesale firing of predominantly Black, middle class public school educators to make way for supposedly more “reform-oriented” and inexperienced mostly

¹ Pseudonyms used throughout the paper for all organizations and individuals except for co-authors.

White teachers supplied by entities, such as Teach for America. According to Buras and the Urban South Grassroots Research Collective (2013), "...with support from state policy makers and venture philanthropists, White entrepreneurs in New Orleans have seized control of public schools in Black communities and attempted to create a racial geography that furthers their economic interests all while ignoring the claims of color to educational resources and urban space" (p. 22).

Black researchers embracing participatory research are often acutely aware of and sensitive to race-based forms of marginalization in the conduct of PAR (Drame & Irby, forthcoming). University-based, professional Black researchers, such as I am, should and do leverage our status and power as knowledge brokers to move projects forward. Yet, we could inadvertently serve as instruments of control and marginalization without a critical look at how we engage and for what reasons and aims.

As a Black outsider joining the Improving Schools Project, I was naïve as to how deep-seated the racial divisions were. I found myself brokering conflicts and attempting to foster consensus without a true understanding of the historical race-based legacies that played out over the duration of the project. The fact that I acted, inadvertently at times, in an "altruistic" expert outsider role, wanting to come in and help "fix" the problem of public education, fed into this racial narrative. During and after the project, I wrestled with issues around power, commitment, and control, as well as the extent to which I impacted in positive and negative ways the level and quality of engagement. Even after distancing myself from the project, I remained concerned about whether I indeed helped the community achieve the goal of creating and accessing high quality public education for historically (and contemporarily) marginalized African American students. Did I inadvertently encourage exclusion from participation through my interactions with community partners? Did I privilege the narratives and histories of certain individuals and organizations over others in my data collection and interpretation efforts? Did I use my expert status to achieve personal goals rather than supporting the priorities of the group? Did I silence certain histories in order to advance the stories of the marginalized members that I was more concerned about (e.g., children with disabilities)? I engaged in a facilitated critical reflection in an attempt to answer these and other questions.

Theoretical Perspective

We relied on Nicholls' (2009) three layers of reflexivity, described below, to guide my individual and collaborative critical reflection and to define my relationship with my co-inquirers. Engaging in this critical reflection with co-inquirers, one a Black colleague (Decoteau) not part of the research and the other, the main indigenous Black female researcher (Donata) I collaborated with throughout the duration of the PAR research was strategic.

Nicholls' three layers of reflexivity include self-reflexivity, interpersonal reflexivity, and collective reflexivity. The first layer, *transparent self-reflexivity*, required that I dig deep into my subconscious assumptions, exposing them to the light of day. What personal beliefs about being Black in New Orleans inadvertently informed my interactions with Black community-based research partners? How did I exercise my power and privilege in deliberate and unintentional ways? How did I attempt to influence project goals and direction rather than letting the project evolve based on community researcher priorities? While it was important for me to examine my difference, as much as I situated myself as similar, critical reflexivity demands a deeper analysis of the spaces between a dichotomous "me-them" continuum that I occupied.

Nicholls acknowledged the importance of attending to relationship in collaborative inquiry projects in her second layer of reflexivity, *interpersonal reflexivity*. This layer of reflexivity considers the intersection of positionalities and identities within different contexts including institutional, spatial, political and relational. To facilitate my reflection at this second layer, I enlisted the help of my colleague, Decoteau, who had conducted participatory research with indigenous Black researchers and had grappled with position and power in his own work. As an outsider to the research project, Decoteau facilitated reflective conversations with me forcing me to confront assumptions not previously revealed in my self-reflection. Through a series of audiotaped discussions focused on examining specific incidents I wanted to explore, we co-identified ways in which I constructed and reconstructed myself, my position, and my identity throughout the genesis of the project. Given how personally invested and embedded I was in the project, co-reflecting with a neutral co-inquirer allowed a more critical analysis of my position of power and privilege shifted over time, impacting key decisions throughout my involvement in the PAR project.

Collaborative participatory researchers engaging in the final and third layer of reflexivity, *collective reflexivity*, co-examine how the collaboration evolved over time and how levels of participation shifted and changed across different actors in the research. This level of reflexivity requires collective dialogue with collaborating partners about the impacts of the research partnership on the outcomes of research partnership. This collective reflexivity counteracts the potential pitfall of romanticized introspection described by Salzman (2002) in his critique of self-reflexivity evident in his statement “The way to improve ethnographic research is, thus, not for the solitary researcher to delve within him- or herself, or to make him- or herself the subject of the account, but to replace solitary research with collaborative, team research, in which the perspectives and insights of each researcher can be challenged and test by the others” (p. 812). I rely on co-reflective conversations I had with my key community partner, Donata, as one data source. The next section provides a snapshot of the co-inquirers involved in this reflexive process (myself, Decoteau, and Donata) followed by a background of the Improving Schools Project.

Co-Inquirer Identities

I (Author 1) am a Black woman who happens to be a researcher, a mother, and a special educator. I am a child of Haitian immigrant parents and was socialized in Chicago to have a blended Haitian and African American cultural identity. Though I attended predominantly White educational institutions throughout my educational career, I gravitated towards majority Black schools and educational environments as a professional educator and scholar. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit, I had just begun working as a tenure-track assistant professor at a Midwestern university. I felt strongly compelled to do something to help. I spent over 2 ½ years trying to find a way in to post-Katrina New Orleans. Simultaneously, I was on the tenure-track rat race, trying to publish or perish.

Donata is a native third generation New Orleanian who grew up in various parts of Uptown, most notably the 17th and 3rd Wards. She was raised in a Black, working class family that placed a high value on education. She spent a number of years as an adult outside of New Orleans before returning back to hometown. In living her deep and personal commitment to transformative work in the field of education, Donata experienced many instances of navigating the insider-outsider continuum as a Black woman from the city’s working class, who now occupied a more privileged space.

Decoteau is a Black male who grew up in a working class single parent family in South Carolina. He attended a number of predominantly Black and predominantly White private and public schools throughout his educational career. He spent a significant amount of

time living, studying and working in Philadelphia and is now a professor in administrative leadership at a Midwestern university. His lived experiences and personal and professional socialization cultivated a strong commitment to Black liberation and commitment to confronting White supremacy in all forms.

The Improving Schools PAR Project

The Umbrella Group, a collaborative of local organizations, was formed in 2007 to address civic capacity development in post-Katrina New Orleans. In 2008, the collective invited other community organizations to form the Improving Schools Project. The purpose of the project was to foster community engagement and activism within historically underserved New Orleans communities around issues of educational quality and access. The project focused on enabling community members to participate in educational restructuring. To accomplish this, the Umbrella Group led a PAR project to engage local citizens in the transformation of New Orleans public schools. Early on, the Umbrella Group sought collaborators and consultants who could assist them with implementing the community engagement project. I became involved when the Umbrella Group contracted with me and one of my colleagues from the University of Tome to facilitate the project's development.² As a project consultant, I designed and carried out a pilot study, trained community-based researchers, and reported findings among numerous other activities.

As a faculty member at University of Tome, I represented one of 18 organizations engaged in the Improving Schools Project. Table 1 provides names (again, pseudonyms are used for all individuals and organizations except the co-authors of the paper), brief descriptions of each of the partner organizations.. Some participants simultaneously acted as members of the Umbrella Group and representatives of their own organizations. While they actively supported the Umbrella Group's mission, board members' interests were more aligned with the agendas of the organizations they represented. Oftentimes, their loyalties to their organizations clashed with the Umbrella Group's goals and priorities, which impacted level of engagement and participation.

Table 1. Racialization of Participants and Organizations

Primary Organizational Affiliation	Organization Racialization	Participant Name	Race of Individual
		Insiders	
Bethel Center - Community-based advocacy organization	Black	Sandy	Black
Labor Group - Civil rights, legal advocacy organization	Black	Tabitha	Black
MBA - Racially diverse community-based organization focused on public education	Black	Anne	Black
MBA	Black	Ken	White
Uptown - Nonprofit youth and community development organization	Black	Crissy	Black
White Wolf - Community - based youth group	Black	Leonard	Black

² All research activities were completed collaboratively with another colleague from my institution, however, since I based my reflections on my person involvement, I only refer to myself when describing project activities.

Outsiders			
Colden Center - University-based education policy group	White	Nettie	White
Crystal College - Local public university	White	Anton	Black
Lakeland - Community-based private foundation funding	White	Fabian	Black
LTL - State-based organization	White	Perry	White
LTL	White	Peter	White
Nearland - Quality chartering and school management organization	White	Sandrine	White
Pandora Group - National policy think tank	White	Miriam	Black
RTI - State-level educational group	White	Redona	Black
Insider-Outsiders			
Band Group - Association of independent charter schools	White	Rae	White
Star Corp - Community-based marketing company	Black	Byron	Black
Sumner – Public District Group	White	Tanisha	Black
Outsider-Insiders			
Grand Corp- Philanthropic community-based foundation	White	Felix	Black
Grand Corp	White	Barry	White
Umbrella Group - Nonprofit network of organizations focused on public school reform	Ambiguous	Donata	Black
Umbrella Group	Ambiguous	Celestina	Black
University of Tome - Out of state public university	Ambiguous	Liz	Black
University of Tome	Ambiguous	Ethel	White

I worked for over 2 ½ years with the Umbrella Group to guide the Improving Schools Project. The project progressed in four Phases. During Phase A, I collaborated with the Umbrella Group to co-establish the initial project goals. I provided an orientation to participatory research and the capacity building needed to lead community-based research efforts. In Phase B, the Umbrella Group was uncomfortable with getting intimately involved in the research process, so I was asked to execute all phases of a PAR pilot including collecting, transcribing, and thematically analyzing all interview and focus group data.

Phase C was marked by the Umbrella Group's increased confidence in participatory research as a vehicle for change as a result of the pilot. During this phase, the Umbrella Group's executive staff recruited and trained community-based facilitators from different groups to conduct focus groups and interviews with local residents. These facilitators interviewed approximately 600 students, teachers, school leaders, school advocates and other community members. Concurrently, my role shifted to the development and analysis of a survey, as well as the analysis of state-level student demographic and academic data. Phase D reflected the expansion and solidification of the Umbrella Group's infrastructure. They

procured additional funds, hired administrative, logistical and research staff, and developed a plan to broaden the level of community engagement. As the Umbrella Group's capacity to lead grew, my involvement was reduced to writing, reporting, and dissemination activities. The Improving Schools Project served as a springboard for Umbrella's ongoing advocacy and community engagement efforts.

Study Procedures and Data Analysis

With the niggling concern about my role in facilitating (or impeding) the emancipatory objectives of the Improving Schools Project, I decided to engage in a post-project critical reflection of my role in the process. To do this, I sought Decoteau's assistance to facilitate a systematic process of reflection on organizational roles and levels of participation in the PAR research project and my experience "working the hyphen" of outsider-insider within it. My goal for the reflective process was to develop a deeper understanding of shifts in control, commitment and collaboration and how these shifts shaped both my experiences as a researcher and my interactions and relationships with community research partners.

I elicited Decoteau's support to avoid the inherent limitations of isolated self-reflection and to engage in deeper levels of reflexivity, particularly, the interpersonal and collective reflexivity in Nicholls' model. We initiated the reflective process in summer 2011 and concluded in fall 2012. The first step of the data collection process involved the identification of key archival documents capturing the phases of the project as it evolved over time (Table 2 summarizes the number and type of data sources). We individually reviewed these documents to first reconstruct organizational and individual participation to develop a master narrative of the Improving Schools Project drawing on personal recollections, project artifacts, visual analysis and dialogue. After I developed a description of the key project phases, Decoteau cross-checked it against the archival records, holding two audiotaped reflection sessions to clarify our collective understanding of the project phases. We then collectively reviewed the archival documents again to identify critical incidents where my identity and positionality shifted and changed. Subsequent reflective sessions were focused on exploring these incidents and reconstructing my*self (Day, 2002) in the context of the situation. The situations we explored focused on the role that race, class, professional and organizational identity, and access to financial resources played in participatory engagement. After each session was transcribed, the transcript became another data source we co-examined to further bind the critical examples discussed in the results of our critical reflections.

Table 2. Data Sources

Source	Type/Focus
Archival documents	Meeting agendas/minutes (14 total), training presentations (8 total), reports (3 total), focus group transcriptions (15 total)
Recorded and transcribed discussions with Decoteau	10 sessions over 12 months (2011-2012)
Recorded and transcribed discussions with Donata	Monthly recorded sessions over six months totaling 6 sessions (2014)

In addition to engaging in these interpersonal reflections with Decoteau, I engaged in collective reflection with my community-based partner, Donata. Reflective discussions with Donata were focused on her and my perceptions of self and each other as we moved through each phase of the PAR project. The discussions with Donata occurred after the discussions with Decoteau. As these reflections were by design intensely personal and involved delving

into personal assumptions, backgrounds and identities, synopses of our profiles were provided to illuminate key aspects of our identities which interacted within the PAR project and reflective discussions. The analytical process was collaborative throughout and conducted manually rather than using qualitative data analysis software.

Using an organic and evolving reflexive process, we were able to understand individual and by extension organizational participation over an extended period of time and how my shifting identities influenced project progress. But more importantly, by interpreting the patterns in relation to organization status and racialization, we began to theorize how I, an African American woman of color and outside researcher, fit into the research process, the organizational and geographic spaces, and the cultural and racial politics of the project (Valentine, 2007). When was I involved? What was the nature and extent of my involvement? What impetuses created and fostered these tendencies? Many of these questions related to how I was situated within an outside organization that was considered more racially neutral than the local organizations of key actors in the project.

Results of Critical Reflections

My initial analysis of project participants revealed distinct individual and organizational identities along a spectrum of insider-outsider statuses. Twenty-three individuals representing 18 organizations were integral to the Improving Schools project. Table 1 captures the nesting of these twenty-three individuals within their primary organizations, the individual racial identity (based on self-identification) and organizational racialization (emerging from an analysis of the archival documents), and how individuals were situated along an insider-outsider spectrum. Individual representatives brought to the project their own personal priorities and agendas. For example, I engaged in the project because of my commitment to achieving educational equity for marginalized African American children and their families. Organizational agendas entered into the project dynamics as well. In my case, my organization expected that I secure large grants and publish research articles to increase the profile of my university. As a result of the reflective process, I arrived at an appreciation of how racial identity (both through self-identification and racialization) of individuals shaped participation. I also developed an understanding of how the racialization of organizations constrained and/or privileged engagement and participation of individuals.

Self-identity and projected identities played a tremendous role in shaping interactions and participation, which influenced project progress. I self-identified as an insider because of my racial identity and my commitment to marginalized Black people. Members of the local insider community and the outsider organizations viewed with favor that I was an African American woman. The Umbrella Group was invested in my professional outsider status because of the objectivity they felt it brought to the collaboration. They also rightfully believed that my racial identity would allow me to foster relationships with local community members. But I learned that my racial identity and outsider status were only two factors that shaped my participation. My organization's racial, spatial and psychological distance from the racially charged spaces in the New Orleans public education landscape proved as important as my race and professional outsider status. In what follows, I describe three critical moments where my shifting and racialized identity and positionality influenced the course and direction of the PAR project at crucial junctures.

Reflection 1: Understanding Self in Raced Space

Coming in to the project, I was very naïve about the racial dynamics of New Orleans public education. I walked into muddy waters when I first met with the board of the Umbrella Group. It wasn't being in the trenches building homes but I was so excited that I finally could do something concrete to "help." I had many opportunities to check my altruistic but misguided and sometimes desire to 'help empower the natives'. This realization is captured in a reflective conversation with Donata (excerpt from conversation in November 2014) where I reflected on my motivations and initial intentions.

Thinking back on my language, since language is so very important and can shape how I and other perceive of what's in front of us, I cringe. I used the term "empowering others" when referring to my reasons for doing the PAR project in New Orleans. In retrospect, I think I was being very condescending by implying that I could and should "lift someone up from where they are at." I now have the same concern with the concept of *giving voice*. It becomes a question of how do I work with people in equal partnership and equal relationship so that whatever changes they want to see or choices they want to make, they are equipped to be able to move those changes forward. They have the capacity to see what they need and how to get what they need, and how to build those relationships and how to say no, "we don't need you to do this." I began my work presuming to know what the Black people of New Orleans needed for their children. But failing to ground relationships in a presumption of competence and knowledge could lead to disempowerment. Creating spaces where people have the strength, knowledge, confidence to say this is what I/we need, I/we don't need that or want that opens the door to how power is reclaimed.

I had to step back and put myself into a listening and learning stance as I began my work with the Umbrella Group. I did this by holding informal conversations with key informants. Participants, such as Leonard of the Black, insider organization, White Wolf, and Nettie of the White, outsider organization, Colden Center, preferred to speak on an individual basis. In some respects, my naivety about the impact of race and class on access to quality public education of New Orleans served me well. In addition, my racial and professional identities intersected in intriguing ways depending on who I was interacting with. My Black identity made it easier for Black informants to trust me and my motives; even though I wasn't part of them, I could speak and listen to Black experiences of oppression and marginalization. My professional, expert researcher identity fostered a sense of legitimacy and comfort that allowed White informants the freedom to talk about perceptions of race, class, and education from a data-based perspective.

I represented a racially neutral outside organization viewed to be independent of the historical racial politics characterizing New Orleans, in contrast to organizations of each board member which had localized historical and racial legacies and identities. For example, behind closed doors, some outsider organizations were viewed to support the "White takeover of schools," by many in the Black community who lost their schools and jobs. On the other hand, these outsider organizations viewed the school takeover as a necessary step towards providing quality education to poor Blacks. The quote below from a reflective dialogue with Donata captures the conflicting feelings of this moment.

Their feelings were hyper visceral and they didn't see any good in it and had a justified anger about how Act 35 was passed. This is at the core of the anger and pain that the Black community had. That when people were still locked out of the city, you could not get in, it hurts even to say it. The Act 35 legislation passed to take New Orleans' schools at a time when the community had no voice. I wasn't one of those people who lost their jobs. The disregard for the people of this city when that act was passed was part of what some Black community members brought to that table. That was what brought the race conversation fully into the room. We can't build this new thing and not acknowledge the how in this space. If they drew the blue print, the experiences of young Black people colored it in. They brought in the fullness of the multiplicity of the human experiences that Black people had. That tension, we are really still experiencing the tension between the reality of what people experienced vs. the greater good we supposedly aspire to, we can't fully reconcile that real harm was done and an apology is owed. We washed away and made light or almost trite about the harm that was done because it was done for "the greater good." That theme "for the greater good" is a great synopsis of the past 10 years.

My outsider status and individual racial identity uniquely positioned me to solicit these racialized perspectives on the group's inner perspectives. As a result, representatives of both sides of the debate engaged me in honest dialogue that they may not have been able to engage in with each other.

It became very clear in these initial conversations, that the work would not move forward unless there was some consideration of the motives of the partner organizations and how their agendas and motives were influenced by their organization's interactions with the local African American community. These discussions surfaced individuals' mistrust of certain partners and the barriers that this mistrust presented as the Umbrella Group attempted to move towards action. One of the barriers to active engagement in the initial participatory work stemmed from this lack of trust amongst the organizations as they worked to clarify their purpose and vision. For example, Tabitha, with the Labor Group, expressed her concern that progress was being stymied by the White organizations with the financial wherewithal to fund the Umbrella Group's work. Yet, Barry, with the White Grand Corp organization, while expressing his belief in the Umbrella Group's mission, refused to commit to funding an effort without a clear purpose, goal and desired outcome.

I was able to anonymously reflect these racialized perspectives in a more neutral, balanced way to the board and challenge their organizational commitment to moving the participatory work forward. This case is an example of how my position of power as both a Black person and an outsider with insider connections, situated within a neutral, non-racially tainted outsider organization privileged my voice in the initiation of the community-based participatory research. Because my institution was not intimately engaged in this history and past actions -therefore viewed more objectively than local racialized organizations - my perspective was considered trustworthy. As a result, partners listened to my thoughts about how to best accomplish the community engagement process. Key partner organizations with the wherewithal to jump start the PAR project through funding, decided to commit significant financial resources once their representatives felt that there was consensus on Umbrella Group's direction. I served many roles, intended and unintended, during this early phase: an interlocutor, a person who reminded them of their stated mission, a re-director, and someone who could remind them of the need for catalytic action to move from two years of talk to action.

Reflection 2: Leadership Matters

By Phase B of the research project, the Umbrella Group understood that their acknowledgement of deep racial divisions would not be allowed to hijack their commitment to a racially neutral education reform agenda. While this expectation of remaining racially neutral sounded good in theory, it proved difficult in practice. How could the Umbrella Group connect with the African-American community for which the Improving Schools Project was designed to engage while maintaining a racially neutral reform agenda? In this case, I highlight the fact that leadership matters. I examine how Umbrella Group's decision to hire a community insider with historical ties to the pre-Katrina school district reinstated racial wounds that had, earlier, threatened the progress of the Improving Schools Project. This reflection also highlighted the need for community-based researchers to be clear and have consensus about what they want to accomplish and what is needed to accomplish their purpose.

By early 2009, several months into the Improving Schools Project planning, the Umbrella Group hired Celestina to lead the organization's newly emerging programs. At the time, the group did not understand the need for a strong organizational infrastructure, partially because they still were not clear about the logistical demands of implementing a broad, community-based participatory project intended to engage hundreds of community members in dialogue across racial, economic, and political divides. They sought someone who could inspire and connect with the Black community, the focus of their participatory efforts. So, Celestina, a Black woman with strong community ties, was an ideal choice because of her close connections with area marginalized African American communities. However, the Umbrella Group wanted to position themselves as a racially neutral convener of disparate voices and ideas about public education. There was a disconnect because Celestina did not view herself as a racially neutral, instead viewed herself to be in a unique position to advocate for those who lost schools and family and community-sustaining jobs as a result of the post-Katrina political aftermath. While they found an insider with strong connections to marginalized Black communities, they also needed the technical and logistical skills to carry out the project.

Since my role was to demonstrate that participatory research could work for the larger community engagement process the Umbrella Group wanted to launch in the following year and I possessed the technical and logistical skills to execute a PAR project, the Umbrella Group asked me to lead the implementation of the pilot PAR project. Specifically, they requested that I teach them about PAR and then implement a pilot project to demonstrate how PAR works. Suddenly, I found myself in yet another high stakes position to move the project forward. But I wasn't an insider. I already played an influential role in the genesis of the project, acting as a sounding board for group to work through deep racial divisions that I was not even aware of or a part of. Being placed as the lead of the pilot project went against a foundational PAR principle that insiders should ideally be in the "driver's seat," determining, designing and executing all aspects of the research process. Coming into the project, I expected high levels of engagement by community-based insiders in all aspects of the research work. But the Umbrella Group leaders knew that I was uniquely positioned to move the project forward. They requested that I initiate the project as a means of developing their confidence and competence in the approach. The end goal was still to foster community engagement. Still conflicted, I began to rationalize my implementation of the actual research activities as means to an end, a stepping stone to building the organization's capacity to do PAR.

Despite my rationalization, my ongoing high levels of engagement in terms of leading and conducting key research activities made me uneasy. Differing perceptions of what was

needed to successfully execute the project resulted in a lot of frustration for me since there was no clear person to liaise with regarding the technical aspects of the pilot project, despite efforts to clearly spell out what was needed to make the PAR pilot successful. An example of the necessary resources needed to conduct the pilot is provided in the excerpt below.

Resources Needed:

- Provision of access to community stakeholders who should participate in the initial engagement pilot
- Logistical support
 - Coordination of meeting spaces in the community (schools, churches, community centers) for focus groups
 - Defining optimal opportunities for connecting with the community
 - Who they are/where they are – which organizations are going to connect with us out of the gate
 - Recruitment and outreach to community stakeholders (do this through partnerships ... have with different community-based groups – begin working through the relationships they already have (excerpted from November 2008 report).

At the time, the gap in logistical support and responsiveness led me to take more of a role in working with community-based groups to schedule focus groups, a huge undertaking given the geographical distance and my outsider status. I felt that the commitment to learning what it takes to employ participatory research as a vehicle for community engagement varied depending on who, within the Umbrella Group, I was interacting with. I grappled with the reality that I couldn't push the process forward alone. It was supposed to be participatory, right? Why was I, an outsider, moving the project forward in a city, an organization, and community that was not mine?

In response to ongoing requests for logistical support and more active involvement from the Umbrella Group in the actual implementation of the project resulted in the hiring of a strong, more racially neutral leader who could simultaneously serve as an effective liaison Black insiders and the more privileged outsider organizations. I was this temporary substitute for a time, but this was not sustainable for the long-term community engagement process they wanted to launch post-pilot.

I was framed as an asset rather than a liability for this nascent organization trying to establish itself in the murky waters of public education. I was a different kind of “Black,” one who wasn't implicated, in the eyes of some White community members, in the discredited Black pre-Katrina educational regime. Until they could identify a necessarily local Black and neutral person to lead the Umbrella Group's initial participatory work, I was entrusted to take on a more prominent role in Umbrella's work. I have come to more clearly understand that the color of my skin along with the fact that Tome University was viewed, locally, as racially neutral factored into how I was racialized throughout the project. This racialization process, and the manner in which I was disembodied from the local and historical racial divisions, enabled me move the project forward. Of course, without my participatory research skills, I would have not been able to make inroads either. Though I struggled internally with the need to be more in the lead of the pilot project, I understood that my commitment to the project's success required a much more active role on my part at this stage. For other researchers wanting to engage with communities to conduct participatory research, the time it can take for representatives of partner organizations to build their capacity to conduct PAR can be prohibitive to a university researcher who is expected to publish or risk not achieving tenure

and promotion. This can be a real disincentive for university researchers who would like to engage in participatory research but feel that it is too time-consuming. Also, who serves as the primary community-based point of contact for university researchers can often make or break a partnership.

Reflection 3: Shifting Roles, Shifting Priorities

Changing roles and priorities can create friction and strain in already established strong relationships. During the community engagement phase, I maintained a high level of engagement in project activities, particularly those that could be considered behind the scenes. This phase still involved a significant amount of capacity building, due to the shift leadership in the Umbrella Group. Donata was brought on board for her skill, competence and ability to broker dialogue and partnerships with organizations with competing agendas and the broader New Orleans community. When she started, I moved to the back seat of the car. I assumed the role of supporting rather than capacity development, a role that I was much more comfortable with. This shift didn't mean that I was unengaged or uninvolved. For example, I was responsible for collaboratively training with Donata community members to facilitate of PAR research activities. However, I felt, for the first time, that I could turn over some of the major participatory research activities that required direct work with community members. A significant amount of work went into cultivating relationships with the new community-based facilitators. I was not on the ground and could not have the face time needed to develop the trusting rapport essential to the broadening of the reach of the PAR work. The capacity of these new facilitators to execute key participatory research actions, such as conduct and record focus groups was a result not only of the training I conducted with Donata, but the ongoing meetings, calls, and visits she conducted with facilitators over several months.

At this point, my role began to shift. I did not dictate who Donata recruited to be a facilitator, nor did I have a say in who the facilitators engaged in their kitchen table conversations about quality public education for Black children. Instead, I served as a sounding board for Donata. This meant that my role became more of a guide rather than actor. In this consultant role, I drew attention to groups that were missing in the community engagement process in significant numbers. For example, I noticed that youth in general, particularly those from poor families, were not involved in large numbers in the project. The youth that were engaged, were already connected to different youth leadership programs. I advocated for the inclusion of greater numbers of marginalized community members during our collaborative debriefings with our community partner organizations.

As a more behind the scenes supporter, I also felt that it was really important to not just do the participatory work, but to actually put the voices of the people that were touched in the participatory work out in the broader community. This goal, while supported by the Umbrella Group, proved to be a major hurdle. Part of the power of participatory work is how the data is used to affect change. I really pushed to have the community-based facilitators, under Umbrella Group leadership, analyze, interpret, and write the reports from the data they collected during focus groups, surveys, and interviews. Given the time-intensive nature of qualitative data analysis though, I had no other choice than to complete this analysis myself, in order to get a report written. I tried to ensure community input by conducting initial qualitative data analysis of focus group data, quantitative survey data analysis and academic achievement data analysis, and then presenting the results to the community-based facilitators for their feedback. During this session, I asked them to review the data, particularly my interpretation of the qualitative data, which was organized in terms of themes and subthemes, in a workshop setting. I asked the facilitators to cross check the findings with what they

heard when conducting the interviews and focus groups. This turned out to be an effective way of facilitating community input since community-based facilitators did not have much time to participate in the data analytic process. Donata suggested this approach and it worked well.

While reviewing the data, a conflict arose around the use of data collected. Many facilitators had difficulty understanding why they could not use data collected as part of the PAR project to address their individual organizational needs. I held the approval to conduct research with human subjects through my university. This gave me unique and sole access to raw data with identifying information. The community-based facilitators did not understand why they couldn't have access to the conversations that they held in their homes with close members of their communities and organizations. Facilitators didn't own the digital recorders, they were owned and lent out by the Umbrella Group, which created a significant amount of tension and confusion. The community-based facilitators were in the trenches on a daily basis and saw tremendous value in the conversations they were facilitating about public education. Their own organization's work could benefit more immediately from the perspectives shared in these discussions. They had legitimate questions, such as, what was human subjects protection and why did data have to be "cleaned" before analysis? Also, there was some distrust amongst facilitators who represented different constituents and groups. Some were suspicious of how other groups would use the data and welcomed my control and oversight. Others questioned the policies and motives. The excerpt below represents an attempt to clarify roles, responsibilities and access to data.

A discussion occurred at the second training regarding the individual use of data by a facilitator in isolation of the work of Umbrella Group. Much group discussion ensued on this topic and an initial rule of engagement was agreed upon by the group (see below):

It is determined that in order for facilitators to conduct their participatory engagement activities, individuals' identity and statements must be kept confidential and anonymous. Also, any data collected as part of the participatory research study are to be used for the purposes of the Umbrella Group PAR project only (excerpt from correspondence, October 2009).

When it came to finally disseminating the full report, the historical relationships amongst the organizations considered to be Black-insider organizations, such as Uptown and MBA, and White-outsider organizations like Band Group, reared its ugly head. Much of the report, included findings that used quotes speaking to the historic discrimination and marginalization expressed by Black parents and teachers. In addition, many of the Black participants in the PAR project, expressed their frustrations and belief that that they were being actively excluded from quality charter schools. Many participants stated that outside organizations were being allow to take over public schools for monetary reasons, not for improving quality education for all in New Orleans. Disseminating a report that consistently presented these types of perspectives was seen as problematic by some of the White outsider organizations who felt that the goal of fostering broad-based dialogue would be derailed by the report.

Donata in particular expressed concerns about alienating outsiders representing policy and legislative organizations. I strongly advocated for releasing the full report; however, what was eventually released was an executive summary that did not include the more scintillating and provocative quotes. Though racially neutral, my status as an outsider still ignorant of the deep-seated racial divides permeating New Orleans interactions, I did not have enough power to surmount the conflict about releasing the report. The reflection questions considered during the ongoing discussions of what to do with the report (listed below notes from a

meeting in September 2009) highlight the sensitivity with which Donata facilitated the debate about full or partial dissemination. The questions provide a window into her racial sensitivity and consideration as an insider that I was incapable of myself, despite my status as a Black woman.

- 1) Are there constituents who will have a difficult time with how the report is presented and/or data within the report?
- 2) How will you respond to such questions/responses as a board (for consistency in responses)?
- 3) How will the group situate itself as the “broker” of the report (i.e. the views in the report may not be the opinion of group – but one of the community).
- 4) How will group reflect that this report begins to represent the voice of the community?

As my hands-on involvement decreased, my priorities shifted towards my own personal dissemination priorities. This shift was in part driven by the fact that after having spent close to three years working with the Umbrella Group on its participatory research project goals, I needed to show some product of my work. Universities, in their tenure and promotion process, do not value the relationship that is built with communities, nor do they understand the amount of time it takes to develop these relationships. The IRB approval that I had secured in my institution’s name, gave me the permission to publish on the data that was collected. However, if I went ahead and published without the approval of the Umbrella Group, I would have jeopardized my racially ambiguous status because of the questions around my motives that would have arisen as a result of such a preemptive decision. I did not publish any work without the express permission of the Umbrella and did so in collaboration with Donata as a co-writer.

Over time, roles, priorities, needs and relationships shift and morph within collaborative participatory projects. I was highly committed to this project for the long-term given my personal and professional ethics. However, I could not ignore what I needed to do to maintain my university status and this tug-of-war can be difficult to navigate. My partner, Umbrella Group with Donata as its leader, had achieved a level of trust and confidence as a racially ambiguous leader in public education. At this point, I needed to withdraw from the project to pursue more professional rather than personal goals.

Discussion and Conclusion

I wanted to better understand how I defined myself, how others defined my role over time, and how these perceived roles influenced our collective action in a cross-racial participatory action research project. My reflections on own experiences forced me to confront the impact that my power as an “expert,” African-American, female researcher and outsider had on interactions and on all aspects of the participatory research. I subconsciously operated from the assumption that race, class, and professional authority, did not have an impact. However, participatory and emancipatory research within racially, socially, and economically marginalized communities require an active questioning by the researchers if true equality is to be achieved.

Central to the reconstruction process was our exploration of how race moderated the interactions of the various participants over the duration of the project. Using critical reflexivity as a framework for guiding my process of discovery, I wrestled with the question of how I, an African-American woman academic, contributed to or stymied the goals of the

research project. With the assistance of my co-inquirers, the iterative process of critical questioning and dialogue allowed me to examine, in a systematic manner, issues of power, control, collaboration, and commitment. Before examining my role within the project, I needed to better understand how each participating organization was situated along a race and place continuum. This realization structured my reflections on interactions, reactions, and engagement. We found that our ability to problematize emergent understandings around the impact of race and racial identity in PAR led to more penetrative and complex questions that an analysis using a standard PAR insider-outsider spectrum did not address.

Our findings suggest that, in addition to understanding participants along an insider-outsider group status, participants (groups and individuals) must too be understood in terms of how they are nested within or attached to organization and geographic places with particular racialized histories and legacies. My individual power within interactions was mediated by the racial identity of University of Tome, the organization I represented. Other project participants' organizational affiliations mediated their interactions too. My reflections revealed that representatives of racially ambiguous organizations who individually identified as Black possessed the most power to move the project forward at critical junctures. In a large-scale PAR project that brings together multiple organizations focused on promoting action for critical and sustained change in African American communities, it is critical to understand not only the individuals who are at the table, but also the perceived and real historical relationships of the organizations they represented with the insider community.

The fact that most PAR projects address the needs of local communities who are invested in improving the local conditions speaks to the importance of using space, place, and time as important lenses for analysis. Insider groups typically are present in the study location and remain there after outside researchers are long gone. While the explicit goals of PAR projects are often to (re)shape the places where the research is conducted, the places also shape the projects. The mutually constituted relation of research and place underscores the need to consider spatial subjectivity as an important counterpart to racial subjectivity as well as the racialization of space and place. Racial legacies shape the extent and nature of how individuals participate in collaborative research projects. Racialized organizations shape the experience of racialized individuals in PAR and thus allow some individuals to move along the insider-outsider spectrum in ways that others cannot. This movement itself is a form of power. Individuals, regardless of race are better advantaged if they are viewed as representatives of racially ambiguous organizations. The ability to be a powerbroker is determined by a person's position within a framework of the racialized organization.

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