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Enhanced Member Checks: Reflections and Insights from a Participant-Researcher Collaboration

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Abstract

This paper shares the process of an enhanced member check in a qualitative study about the schooling experiences of teenage mothers. The process of co-creating a participant narrative is presented as an alternative to traditional methods of member checking and data analysis. In the collaborative process presented in this article, the researcher and participant worked together to develop interpretations of interview data and to collaborate on a final narrative. The author developed a member checking process that included iterative rounds of collaboration in the liminal space between raw data and final narrative. This paper provides an example of evaluating and augmenting the role of the participant in the process of inquiry. This process offers possibilities for enhanced member checks that interrupt the traditional power dynamics in participant-researcher relationships. This paper ends with an exploration of issues of power that arose in the researcher-participant relationship and an examination of how alternative forms of member checks can provide room for new understandings of participant experiences.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Member Checks, Participatory Research, Marginalized Youth, Teenage Mothers

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This paper shares the process of an enhanced member check in a qualitative study about the schooling experiences of teenage mothers. The process of co-creating a participant narrative is presented as an alternative to traditional methods of member checking and data analysis. In the collaborative process presented in this article, the researcher and participant worked together to develop interpretations of interview data and to collaborate on a final narrative. The author developed a member checking process that included iterative rounds of collaboration in the liminal space between raw data and final narrative. This paper provides an example of evaluating and augmenting the role of the participant in the process of inquiry. This process offers possibilities for enhanced member checks that interrupt the traditional power dynamics in participant-researcher relationships. This paper ends with an exploration of issues of power that arose in the researcher-participant relationship and an examination of how alternative forms of member checks can provide room for new understandings of participant experiences. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Member Checks, Participatory Research, Marginalized Youth, Teenage Mothers

Introduction

The roots of this paper started with a hesitation about member checks. As an emerging scholar familiar with the crises of representation (Lather, 2007), I take as a foundational assumption that there are no correct versions of data. Rather, as Richardson (2000) argues, there are interpretations and angles that depend on a person's standpoint, something she likens to looking at information as though it were a crystal. What we see in the data depends, as she says, on our angle of repose, on the lenses and perspectives we bring to the work. In addition to this foundational assumption, I struggle with issues of representation that are voiced by Britzman (2000), Fine and Weis (1996), and Lather (2007): What does it mean to collect stories from others? Is my role as a researcher academic, exploitative, productive, other? And how does power shape my inquiries? As I write from my own particular political, social, and intellectual location as a white feminist researcher and scholar, I am eager to engage in emancipatory and activist research. I am also keenly aware that emancipatory research is a goal towards which I work, rather than an outcome I regularly attain.

Through this research framework, I explored nontraditional understandings of success and achievement for young mothers in high school in a year-long qualitative study that relied on interviews and artifacts as the main modes of data collection. My concerns with representation, coupled with the sensitive nature of my inquiry into my participants' lives as teenage mothers, crystallized a desire for an alternative to member checks as they are traditionally conceived. Customarily, a member check involves a participant reading through transcripts to check for accuracy of ideas and representation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is typically a single event that takes place with transcripts or early parts of the analytic process. In qualitative research, member checks are employed as a method of ensuring validity, a way to confirm the truth of a participant's account. As such, they are considered one of the

most significant methods for establishing or strengthening the trustworthiness or credibility of a study (Doyle, 2007). Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) identified trustworthiness and authenticity as criteria that ensure there are standards of rigor associated with qualitative research. Member checking is a technique – among others – that ensures trustworthiness, and therefore, can lead to the conclusion that a study has been performed with rigor. At minimum, member checks are methodological tools that researchers employ to demonstrate that their research project is worthy of consideration and further inquiry.

Concrete descriptions of procedures for member checking are sparse in the research literature (Harvey, 2015). There is no guide of "must dos" for increasing trustworthiness in qualitative research, rather there are only a series of studies, articles, and chapters outlining "should dos" (Carlson, 2010). A review of the literature on enhanced, or alternative member checks reveal a small body of work on the topic. Simpson and Quigley (2016) explored the use of I-poems and word trees with adolescent participants as a way to build in further options for participants to validate the data during the data collection process. Reilly (2013) used found poems as a way to blend participants' voices more fully into the process of analysis. Harvey (2015) addressed the limitations of member checking by co-constructing the design and the analysis with participants. Similarly, Doyle (2007) deepened interpretations and themes by designing a member checking interview in which researcher and participant listened to the audio recording of the initial interview, discussed overall themes from the interviews, and co-read the primary narrative that had been created by the researcher.

My interest in enhanced member checks was rooted in the concern that traditional modes of member checking did not allow me to display the level of sensitivity to my participants that I was seeking. I was interested in something that went beyond affirmations or amendments of raw data and instead approached a participatory methodology. In searching for an expanded or more critical version of member checks, I was seeking a methodology that would result in some instability with regard to power and privilege in my work (Lather, 1992). Lather (2007) identifies these efforts as postpositivist attempts to resolve the problem of validity, the question of how we legitimate knowledge in our research. Cho and Trent (2006) identify two different approaches to validity: transformational validity (involving self-reflexivity) and transactional validity (where member checking and triangulation reside). They argue that while these two approaches have benefits, neither is sufficient. Instead, they propose a process-oriented view of validity that would support researchers in making claims about the knowledge they produce.

My desire for a different approach to member checks responds to concerns with the methodological processes discussed above and also to concerns presented by scholars within my field of study: young mothers in high school. Researchers have called for in-depth accounting of the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy by the people who are experiencing it themselves, rather than policy makers and legislators (see Arai, 2009; Brown, 2016; Duncan, 2007; Luttrell, 2003; Stapleton, 2010). The goal of my study was to foreground the voices of young mothers as we explored their experiences in high school and beyond. In particular, I was interested in exploring the participants' counter narratives as we examined their alternative ways of understanding success and failure while they were in school. Qualitative research on teenage mothers is rarer than quantitative research. And the former is often underrepresented in policy and decision making. My study focused on a relational and contextual understanding of teenage motherhood that unpacked the complexity of their meaning making in educational contexts.

In addition to my interest in teenage mothers' schooling experiences, I was keenly aware of power differentials in my research. Similar to Harvey (2015), I was eager to render them equal partners in the process of inquiry. I wanted to develop their narratives with them, allowing them to feel ownership and verify their voice. Yet, I also wanted my study to be

sufficiently interpretive and academic to meet high standards of qualitative rigor. I felt that if I were truly acknowledging my participants as agents in their own lives, then I needed to recognize that they were also theorizing their experiences and I needed to seek access to that insight.

Member checking is offered as a way for participants to address the data collected by the researcher, but as a tool, it did not meet the needs I had established for myself in this study, which were to invite my participants into the process of creating their narratives. Some researchers seek to augment a traditional member check by regularly providing their participants with written descriptions to determine if the emerging analyses are on the right page (Carlson, 2010). In order to enhance my member checks, I designed a methodology that allowed for participant-researcher construction of the participant narratives, in the space between raw data and published pieces. I employed this collaborative reflection process as a way to layer further data into the narratives (Lather, 2007) and to provide a space for participants to confirm or contest my thinking. The collaboration developed as a response to Delgado Bernal's (1998) meaningful call to invite participants into the analysis of the data as "speaking subjects who take part in producing and validating knowledge" (p. 575). The aim of this strategy was to establish the participants as experts, who theorized their positions and negotiated power in the study. In this paper, I explore enhanced member checks as a way to interrupt the researcher's role as the sole interpreter of knowledge, as I situate myself as a researcher-voice that lies alongside the voices of my participants. In the sections that follow, I present my participants' words as well as my own, with the goal of producing a variety of speaking subjects herein. I begin by outlining my research design as well as theories of counter narratives, which have been instrumental in shaping my approach to participant representation. Then, I share the process of constructing narratives with one of the participants, as a form of enhanced member checks. Finally, I share limitations within this study and questions about how to use enhanced member checks as a tool that creates space where participant voice is valued.

A Tableau of Methodology and Theory

The exploration of this collaborative relationship between researcher and participant grew within a qualitative research study on the counter narratives of school success from the perspective of Black and Latina teenage mothers. Using a combination of narrative inquiry and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997), I explored the stories that young mothers shared about their experiences in high school. The aim of the study was to bring forward considerations of success that are different for young mothers, who are often branded as failures because they have voided a social contract that demands asexuality (or at least, a hidden sexuality) by becoming pregnant and bearing a child in adolescence (Kelly, 2000; Stapleton, 2010). Contrary to dominant, negative images of young mothers, the participants in this study shared narratives of being fiercely committed to graduation, family, and meaningful employment in the face of challenging odds.

Since the metanarrative on teenage mothers circulates around failure, I began this study with the goal of seeking a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. In particular, I used narrative inquiry to explore nontraditional understandings of success and achievement that challenged metanarratives of failure. A main goal of the study was to craft narrative portraits *with* each participant in order to present a more nuanced understanding of success, failure, and what lies between. In initial iterations of my research design, I planned for a linear process with data analysis, one that would involve transcribing, coding, and categorizing the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). However, I was concerned that this did not offer my participants the opportunity to tailor their narratives and theorize their experiences with me.

Thus, I sought a methodological tool that went beyond asking the participants to review transcripts and confirm the veracity of the interviews.

McCormack (2004) suggests that feminist researchers involve our participants in interpretation by returning our writing to them for comment, critique, and discussion. As discussed in the Introduction, calls for enhanced member checks are present in the literature but descriptive analyses of how to weave such tools into a study and how to assess the outcomes are less available in the extant literature. I chose to involve my participants in the research as a primary focus of the research design because of the documented concerns about the extensive commentary and decision-making being done for teenage mothers by policy makers, administrators, and pundits, who have themselves never been teenage mothers (Arai, 2009; Brown, 2016; Duncan, 2007). It was important for me to involve my participants so that the women who were experiencing school as young mothers would be intimately involved with the representation of their stories, and ultimately with the creation of their narratives.

The end products of these enhanced member checks were narrative portraits of each participant's life and school stories that were reflexively crafted over time using interview data, artifact review, researcher notes and participant-researcher collaboration. To begin, I selected participants for this study through criterion-based purposive sampling that was guided by the research questions and the purpose of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I worked with three participants, two of whom identified as Latina and one of whom identified as Black. All participants were within the 18-23-year-old age range, had experienced pregnancy and childbirth in high school, and had graduated from high school with a traditional diploma. Each participant joined in three individual interviews and one focus group interview. Interviews ranged from 90-120 minutes, were audio-recorded, and were accompanied by artifacts that the participants brought with them. I asked the participants to bring artifacts from their days in high school to the interviews in order to add visual reference to their memories and narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Artifacts, such as photos, important documents, ticket stubs, and other similar items provide a rich source of memories because these are the materials that we collect as we compose our lives. Additionally, creating space in the study for the participants to choose what we examined and what we reviewed also fostered a sense of trust between us. That is, inviting my participants to bring artifacts of their own choosing to our interviews suggested that I was interested in more than just their responses to my interview questions because I wanted to know what they chose to shed light on through their artifacts.

By using interviews as a principal method of data collection, I relied on two assumptions: first, that the instrument best suited to learn about human existence is another human, and second, that in-depth interviews allow researchers and participants to build meaning around experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I also chose a focus group interview in order to address the themes that had emerged from the individual interviews. Focus groups encourage a variety of opinions and create an atmosphere in which participants can offer personal and conflicting viewpoints (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I chose a focus group interview as a way to understand the participants' experiences because it was a methodological avenue that allowed participants to share their perspectives without being further marginalized (Madriz, 2000). As Women of Color who were teenage mothers, the participants in this study experienced marginalization in multiple ways. In taking part in each interview, the participants opened themselves up to a series of personal inquiries from someone who did not share a racial or socioeconomic background. By contrast, the focus group created an opportunity for the participants to exchange and confirm their experiences among peers who shared similar backgrounds (Madriz, 2000).

After the interviews were completed, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, omitting utterances and false starts for better flow and readability. It was at this point that the participants and I began our collaborative work to craft the narrative portraits from conception

to final product. First, I read the transcriptions together as a set, along with my researcher notes, marking places that struck me as interesting or confusing. My goal was to get a feel for the data, to reacquaint myself with the work that had been done, and to mark (ir)regularities (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In a second pass over the data, I looked for repetitive refrains and resonant metaphors, which are patterns that can indicate a theme. This approach was guided by the portraiture work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) who suggest that themes emerge in two ways: one, from identifying similar refrains from a variety of people, signs, and environmental symbols; and two, from identifying metaphorical symbols that might "express a large arc of human experience" (p. 198).

Using initial reflections and my analytic questions as a guide, I pulled out segments of interview transcripts that coalesced around an idea and compiled them in an electronic document as a possible emerging pattern. In subsequent reads of the transcripts and notes, I looked for confirming and disaffirming data to rework the patterns or disrupt an emerging pattern. In my analysis, I was guided by the suggestion that data analysis should not strive to reduce difference and agree to meaning but rather make use of the differences between interpretations in order to tell a more complex story (Walkerdine, 1997). I wanted to use the data to tell a more complex story about *how* young mothers internalized, experienced, interpreted, and recalled success while they were in high school. In striving for this complexity, I was less concerned with locating *what* narratives of success and failure emerged from the transcripts, and more concerned with *how* success and failure was experienced and produced (Marshall, 2004).
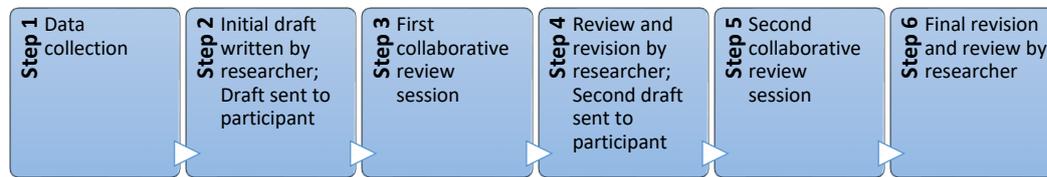
Using my initial inductive analysis, I assembled a draft portrait for each participant that included quotes, anecdotes, examples, and descriptions from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It was at this point that the participants and I began to work together on the process of crafting and revising the narratives. I sent each narrative draft to the participants two weeks ahead of a scheduled appointment to review the narratives. I asked each participant to read her portrait, add commentary, question the parts that were not clear, and mark places where there was agreement or disagreement. Each participant used the opportunity to write notes in the margins of the text, marking places throughout the texts. Sometimes these marks resembled editing marks and sometimes these marks reflected personal notes, as in underlines, stars, exclamation points, and question marks. Participants also noted where they wanted to clarify a detail I had missed or update a detail that had changed since the interview had taken place. There were also more substantive comments that addressed items the participants felt were missing, or places where they felt the narrative did not express their true feelings.

To engage the participants in constructing the draft narratives together, I solicited verbal feedback from them when we met to review the drafts. We examined two copies of the narrative portraits, one clean copy without any markings and a second copy that had their comments written in the margins. Previously, I had noted parts of the narratives that I did not feel were fully fleshed out. In our discussion, I would address these parts of the narratives, asking for clarification and extension (e.g., "I was trying to explain this particular incident here but I don't think I fully got it. Can you help me write it out?"). I took notes while we talked about the written representation of their experiences so that I could capture their words, which were revisions of my written words, which were written reflections of responses they provided in our interviews. In this way, our collaborative process began to grow into a multi-layered, iterative process that was contextual but also responsive to the collaborative nature of meaning-making.

After our first collaborative review session, I returned home with extensive notes on our revisions. I worked on a second set of revisions alone, which consisted of me rewriting the parts of the narratives that we had collaboratively edited together in our in-person review sessions. When I completed the second set of revisions, I again returned them to the participants

for further commentary, questioning, and review. After the participants had time to review these drafts, we set up one final review conversation that allowed us to review the drafts and confirm the veracity of the accounts together. Figure 1 shows the process of this augmented version of member checking.

Figure 1

| Step 1 Data collection | Step 2 Initial draft written by researcher; Draft sent to participant | Step 3 First collaborative review session | Step 4 Review and revision by researcher; Second draft sent to participant | Step 5 Second collaborative review session | Step 6 Final revision and review by researcher |

This study on the schooling experiences of young mothers was rooted in a critical commitment to challenging dominant categories of failure through the exploration of counter narratives and alternative ways of knowing. As such, the tenets that guided my construction of the study centered on disrupting knowledge in order to create sites of doubt rather confirming what exists (Britzman, 2000). To understand how the participants contextualized and responded to the stereotypes about teenage mothers as school failures, I employed counter narratives, an important tool within critical race theory. The origin of counter narratives lies in W.E.B. Dubois' idea of double consciousness, which he explained as a stance that allows one to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion (DuBois, 1903/2013; Ladson-Billings, 2000b). This idea of having a secondary perspective, of being able to perceive otherness as well as the mainstream, is a way of transcending "either/or epistemology" (Ladson-Billings, 2000b, p. 262) and provided a framework within my study for looking past success and failure as a static binary.

One of the persistent themes in critical race theory is storytelling, the idea of presenting counter stories as narratives that name one's own reality and explore experiences of racial oppression. What critical race theorists find in the examination of metanarratives is that "the dominant group justifies its power with stories – stock explanations – that construct reality in ways to maintain their privilege" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). Thus, other stories, narratives that are told by People of Color and other marginalized groups, can create the catalyst for rethinking the categories that instill and perpetuate discrimination based on race, class, and social standing among others.

The goal of this study was to explore the opportunity structures that guided the experience of success and failure for my participants in high school and beyond graduation. As a white researcher, I have been afforded a cultural and political history of privilege (Banks, 2004; Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000a). Not sharing the same racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background with my participants necessitated a reflective and reflexive stance regarding my interpretation of their experiences and "the narratives [I] presumed to collect" (Fine & Weis, 1996, p. 263). Honoring that commitment to reflective researching came in many forms, ranging from a researcher journal, to a critical friend, to the purposeful methodological decision at issue in this article: collaborating with my participants on the creation, review, editing, and crafting of the narrative portraits. The section that follows offers a window into the process of working with one of the participants in the liminal space between raw data and published pieces.

The Collaborative Process

When we began working together, Kendra[1] was 21 years old, a mom of two, a high school graduate, a college hopeful, and a wage earner struggling with consistent employment. At the time of the study her oldest son, to whom she had given birth in her junior year of high school, was almost five, and her younger daughter was almost two. Kendra and I engaged in three in-depth individual interviews that were designed to explore her school story and her life experiences as a young mother. Kendra also participated in one focus group interview with all of the other women in the study. Each interview spanned multiple hours with the intention of having participants reconstruct their experiences and explore the meaning of those experiences with me (Seidman, 2006). In this section, I present a pastiche of the work that Kendra and I created together. A pastiche creates new understandings in a piece of writing by allowing different texts to act upon each other. In this way texture is created, which leaves room for new meaning making on the part of the author and reader (Ely, 2007).

A large part of the narrative portrait that Kendra and I crafted revolved around her school story, which was complicated as it involved stops and starts, two different school locations, and a number of other related factors including housing, finances, and family support. I begin with a portion of our final version of the co-constructed narrative portrait in order to lay a foundation for understanding some of Kendra's schooling transitions:

After graduating from a middle school in the South Bronx, Kendra attended a parochial high school. At this school, Kendra was a reliable student, not getting particularly high grades but pulling her weight with Bs and Cs. She was on the step team and the Latin dance team, took French, and had aspirations for college and a career in law. Her focus in high school was partly driven by having to repeat 7th grade when she was in middle school. She talked about her desire not to let that retention affect her education negatively, and she explained that it was part of the motivation that drove her to and through graduation.

Kendra found out she was pregnant a few months into her junior year. She decided to keep her pregnancy a secret for as long as possible and was able to hide it until the start of the third trimester. At that point, she was no longer able to terminate the pregnancy, despite her mother's preference, and she had also firmly decided to keep the baby rather than choose adoption. When she started showing, she was forced to leave her parochial high school. She recalled:

> *I couldn't stay at [the school] no more because they didn't . . . how can you say it . . . they didn't want girls there who was pregnant. Anyone who got pregnant never lasted . . . they never stayed.*

She left her parochial school at the end of junior year, riding out the rest of her pregnancy during summer break.

Over the summer, Kendra's mother found a new high school that enrolled young mothers and provided daycare for the children through an onsite program. On Kendra's first day of senior year, she arrived at the new high school fully pregnant and ready to give birth. Kendra laughed when she recalled going into labor on that first day and having to leave school for the hospital. She delivered a healthy boy and recuperated at home for a short period of time but recalls being back in school the next week "like nothing happened."

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[1] A pseudonym, as are all related names in this article.

When I shared the initial draft of Kendra's narrative portrait, I asked her to review the details to ensure that I had the chronology, the locations, and the places correct. I also asked her to think about the tone and tenor of the piece. Was I conveying what she felt at the time and what we had discussed in our interviews? What sections needed more and what sections needed less? Where had I written with too much emotion and where had I written with not enough? In sum, I asked Kendra to comment on the feelings that she had while reading the narrative in addition to all of the details. I hoped that this would layer further data into the narrative while also enhancing a traditional member check process. Kendra and I set a date for two weeks after she received my draft narrative. In the days preceding our review appointment, Kendra sent me her written comments so that I had a chance to preview them before we sat down together to review them.

Working backwards in this section, I share examples of initial draft text (in italics) juxtaposed with Kendra's comments and questions as well as our shared analysis of the revisions to create a pastiche of writing that brings together different texts and voices. I offer commentary for each pairing of texts that allows the reader to understand how this enhanced member check created space for the participants to join me in the process of constructing their narratives.

New Questions

Kendra's experience as a young mother in high school was marked by a dogged determination, not only to finish, but to finish in the year that she would have graduated had she not been retained in middle school and had not become pregnant. When Kendra walked across the stage during her graduation, Shane [her son] was in her arms, both of them smiling wide.

Kendra:

Did Richard every play a role in her reaching her goals?

Reflection and analysis. Richard is the father of Kendra's children. I had written about him extensively in other parts of the narrative, using details that she shared with me during the interviews. In sum, Richard was supportive but later incarcerated. They had housing trouble throughout their relationship, at times living with family members when they would have preferred to live on their own. She loved him but she knew she could not rely on him for all of her needs. In particular, he was not a financial support, though his mother did provide housing support that Kendra found extremely helpful.

With this one written commentary on the draft material, Kendra asked a question that I had not only failed to ask but that was clearly quite meaningful to her. In this written question, Kendra used the third person, referred to the father of her children with the pseudonym that I had used for him in the narrative, and posed a question for which I would have assumed she knew the answer. It was a complicated methodological moment in which I – the researcher – became the researched. While Kendra was at once asking a rhetorical question designed to force both of us to reflect on Richard's role, she was also employing her own power by posing a question to which she was the only one who knew the answer. Further, she was pointing to an absence in the written narrative, allowing us both to identify a place in which the narrative could get stronger.

When we met for our first collaborative review session, this question became a significant topic of discussion. I asked her what she felt about Richard, in retrospect, and I

asked her about her feelings as she read about him in the narrative I had written. I asked questions about his role in her life that I had failed to ask with my initial interview questions. In the end, we did not identify one coherent answer to the question of Richard's role in her life; rather, we unearthed a complicated conversation about the many roles that Richard played in her life and the life of her children. We also identified the ways that Richard was not present for her, the kinds of roles she would have liked him to play. Kendra spent time reflecting on how this connected to her own childhood and her complicated relationship with her own father. This conversation opened up an area of tension in the written portrait that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Getting it Wrong

When she transferred to the new public high school, Kendra used the free onsite childcare as well as family support to watch the baby while she did her schoolwork. Often, she went to her brother-in-law's house after school to get help watching the baby while she did her homework. After completing her work, she would travel with Shane to her mother's house for the evening. This was her cycle for the few months that she was at the public high school finishing her degree. Determined to finish within the semester in which she arrived so that she could graduate in her "right year" and only needing a few credits to complete her requirements, Kendra made a full court press to get the courses finished by that December.

Kendra:

I believe the second high school became my foundation of adult life. I think you should add that in. I don't think I would have made it without there [sic] program. I was an equal at that school, never an outsider. I was able to still have a life and be a mother.

Reflection and analysis. The conversation that arose in our collaborative review session reflected the directness of this portion of Kendra's commentary. I thanked her for suggesting new content to add to the narrative. More importantly, I was appreciative of the fact that she was identifying an area in which *my* analysis of *her* interview data had not gone far enough. This comment created room in the research for the typical researcher-participant relationship to be interrupted in order for a new relationship to be tested, one in which the participant holds the power over both the reality and the representation. When I encountered these types of comments from the participants, I accepted them as windows into spaces where I either made too much or too little meaning from their interview responses. Revising my portraits to address their comments was my way of honoring the participants' voices and honoring my own investments in writing narratives that represented their experiences in faithful ways.

The richness that these revisions added to the narratives cannot be understated. It allowed me to layer further data into the text; and more importantly, it allowed me to layer in data that was important and meaningful to the participants. It gave the participants the opportunity to call my attention to something that was critical for them and missing from the data. By pointing out a place where I undervalued something that was clearly very important to her, Kendra took an opportunity to exercise control over the narrative and the direction of the final product.

Missed Nuances

She frequently mentioned wanting to be there for her children in a way that her parents were not there for her. Kendra's father was not in her life during her teen years and she felt that his absence contributed to her having Shane. She said that if her father had been in her life or if she had had a closer relationship with him, she felt she would have delayed childbearing. For this reason, it was very important to her to have Shane's father in his life and to have two parents around for her children.

Kendra:

I learned later my mom had me believe bad things about him [*arrow pointing to "father" in draft text*] but I was always a daddy's girl and I don't think that will change. I still agree if I would have kept in touch with my father like my mother should have made me do I would have still have had Shane, but just a little later in life. I felt my father was my structure . . . kept it in line. Because of that I would never keep Richard away from our children. Family is important, ain't nothing like it.

Reflection and analysis. This enhanced member check accomplished the main goals of member checks, which is to ensure that what I said about Kendra's words were accurate in her estimation. But this process also pushed that goal further by making the member check a participatory experience. With comments like the one above, Kendra took the opportunity to participate in the data collection and analysis with me, guiding me towards an interpretation that properly addressed the nuance that she felt was important to this section of her written narrative.

This example of Kendra's commentary highlights one way in which she theorized her experiences and shared that insight with me. The question of her (largely absent) father's role in her childbearing decisions is complicated. Kendra proposes that the absence of her father had an impact on her decision to bear a child while in high school. Further, she also evaluates Richard's role in her life as the father of her children and her position – informed by her own upbringing – not to keep the children away from him no matter the circumstances of her personal relationship with him. Her written comments served to open our conversation when we met for our collaborative review session. Naturally, Kendra held the expert opinion on the roles held by Richard and her own father. In this way, she and I were able to muddle traditional roles of power in the participant-researcher relationship.

Limitations, Ruminations, and Further Questions

In highlighting the possibilities and tensions within a researcher-participant collaboration on an enhanced member check, I aim to make visible some spaces of negotiation and possibility within the transition from raw data to final narrative. In this final section, I discuss limitations and lines for further inquiry. First, I explore issues of power that arose in the researcher-participant relationship, even as this collaborative process was employed to mitigate power differentials. Second, I address how enhanced member checks can provide room for new understandings of the experiences of marginalized youth.

Relations of Power

Traditional researcher-participant relationships are defined by being on opposite ends of an inquiry spectrum; one person shares and the other person collects. A collaborative relationship between researcher and participant creates room for thinking differently about power dynamics within research relationships. An important element of any participatory research methodology is that the research process unfolds *with* those involved in the study (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The importance of ongoing and critical reflection in participatory research models challenge the privilege and power that professional researchers bring in situations where they are working *on* a community of participants instead of *with* a community of participants (Drame & Irby, 2015).

While this method of enhancing member checks added depth to the findings in my study, I call attention to some absences and limitations in the collaborative process. My intention in the collaborative review was to invite the participants to "to look where I did and see what I saw" as a way to spotlight my own subjectivity (Peshkin, 1985, p. 280). I hoped that it would make visible a layered process in the data analysis that made the narrative portraits richer and more complex. While it did make the narratives more complex, it also highlighted issues of power and representation that arose as participants navigated the new terrain of providing feedback to me. In the shared work with my participants, I expected – somewhat naively – that all of the participants would ask me questions about why I chose to organize the narratives in the ways that I did or challenge representations that I made in each portrait. Yet, these comments only happened after a considerable amount of time engaging in the revising and writing process together.

Though Kendra was direct with her comments and challenged my thinking at various times, many other comments that participants made were enthusiastic and kind. This finding is borne out in the literature as other researchers share that participants typically comment about grammar or make notes of appreciation when providing feedback in their collaborative work (McCormack, 2004). Miller (2005) states that it is an assumption that collaboration can dismantle the "circulations of power that attend any human interactions" because participants in a collaborative exchange do not move through the work in similar ways and at identical times (p. 138). Even as I employed this collaborative process to mitigate the effects of researcher-participant power differentials, they were still a factor.

In reflecting on this issue of power, I was mindful that researchers have a "responsibility to talk about our own identities, what we choose not to report, on whom we train our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work" (Fine & Weis, 1996, p. 264). Involving the participants in the representation of their stories was an attempt to amplify the protections in this work but collaboration is not enough. Working on constructing knowledge with participants in deliberate and meaningful ways allows for a transfer of power through the participants' close involvement in analysis and discussion. By engaging in conversation about the data and the findings, I hoped to make the work meaningful to the participants in local ways. That is, findings are often published in journals and presented at conferences that are not read or attended by participants. The point of any participatory approach is to make the research valuable and to affirm the power of the findings in a local context as well as an academic one (Udas, 1998). The collaborative process that unfolded through my enhanced member check created a local context in which the meaning of the findings were evaluated and sometimes contested. As researchers involved with participatory research note, this local context can become a space in which the collaborative process can have the effect of resolving conflict and differences of power (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Participatory Methodologies

Participatory member checks provide an opportunity for participants to comment on what is being said about them. This is an issue of increased importance because of the concerns with quantitative representations of marginalized youth, in particular, with regard to young mothers. Researchers have shown how broader cultural norms have situated teenage mothers as dangerous failures because they are young, poor, without higher education, in need of financial assistance and headed towards risky outcomes (Kidger, 2005; Luttrell, 2003; Nathanson, 1991). Typically, the policy and legislative work that is aimed at supporting young mothers – and other groups of disenfranchised youth – rely heavily on quantitative research, giving policy makers a one-dimensional view of teenage pregnancy that is unremittingly negative and also devoid of the perspectives of young mothers themselves (Duncan, 2007; Graham & McDermott, 2006). These superficial views obscure the ways in which young mothers redefine achievement and success for themselves and their families, and in so doing, they do not acknowledge their lived experiences (Weed, Nicholson, & Farris, 2015). Conducting and promoting qualitative research that offers a complex picture of school achievement and social inclusion represents one way to address this superficiality (Arai, 2009; Brown, 2016).

Methodologies that support participants' direct involvement in data analysis and theorization, Doyle (2007) argues, should be a requirement of research that works towards social justice, equity, and empowerment. A guiding principle of participatory methodologies is that the research methods facilitate collaborative inquiry based on mutual respect and trust (Udas, 1998). These are important guiding principles because of the inherent dangers in speaking for others, which reside in forgetting who we are studying because we are consumed with our own answers as well as the answers we want to see through the data (Ely, 2007). Only through a critical look at how we engage in research – and to what ends – can we move our inquiries away from being instruments of control and marginalization (Drame & Irby, 2015).

Participatory methodologies generally have socio-political agendas. People can empower themselves through examining their own situations, developing an understanding of the forces that impact their situations, and taking action to enhance the quality of their lives (Udas, 1998). In my work with teenage mothers, I was drawn to a method that involved collaboration and participation in order to renegotiate the boundaries around knowledge production. I argue that this renegotiation is important for all participants who occupy marginalized identities. In working with the participants to tell a more complex story about how they internalized, experienced, interpreted, and recalled success while they were in high school, we were compelled to focus on what was absent from the stories as much as what was present. This is evident in Kendra's comments and responses to the draft narrative. Creating room for an enhanced member check allows for important work in the field of qualitative research: paying attention to what is missing as well as renegotiating the narratives that are present.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite recognition of the utility and purpose of member checks, there is little guidance on how they should be conducted, and what alternatives could look like (Doyle, 2007). This article adds to the small but growing body of literature on member checks as a means of participatory inquiry. In presenting the collaborative work of one researcher-participant dyad, I aim to consider questions such as: How can expanded member checks be used to generate further data? And, what questions and practices make participants more inclined to point out spaces where the researcher got it wrong, needed more data, or missed a nuance? These are

enduring questions that require more attention and recognition in future work on qualitative methodologies.

Participatory methodologies – such as enhanced member checks – have the potential to draw attention to neglected areas in qualitative research and stimulate reflection on social practices (McTaggart & Curro, 2009). I argue that we need these kinds of participatory inquiries when working with populations who have been historically disenfranchised. Through participatory research, resiliency and competency can be attributed to all participants because they have not had research conducted *on* them, but instead *with* them, creating a joint process of knowledge production (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Involving participants as active agents in the processes of generating and presenting the research provides the opportunity for more socially responsible and emancipatory research. Within a shifting political landscape of populism and intolerance, we need these levels of critical inquiry in order to promote and support all constituents of a research project, in particular, those who may not regularly experience empowerment.

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