Participation as Entangled Self Assertion

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Abstract: In this article, we explore the concept of participation, tracing the history of how participation has been understood and used in ethnographic and critical participatory action research methodological traditions. Within this exploration we push on the limits and boundaries of our ordinary conceptions of "participation," presenting and working through scenarios from our fieldwork in which we took for granted an ordinary concept of participation. As we work through these scenarios we encounter participation first as rebellion, then as resistance, and finally as entangled self-assertion, as opportunities for establishing one's dignity and worthwhileness in an institutional context that diminishes or denies recognition of one's dignity and worthwhileness. This notion of participation as a mode of self-dignity speaks back to the way in which knowledge is not neutral for self and is not separate of self.

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1. Introduction

"Knowledge" is often presented as a unified synthesis, erasing "outliers," silencing contest, and faking certainty. But those of us who actively engage participation as a methodological orientation experience it as messy and often disunifying. Caught in a system of academic knowledge production that seems to favor clarity and linearity, it can be difficult to navigate the messiness of participation in a way that feels productive or acceptable. Sometimes there can be a strong temptation to seek out unity within the moments of separation and to seek clarity within the fuzziness. Patti LATHER (2006) urges us to revel in the messiness, "saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories" (p.48). Maria TORRE (2009) talks about these messy spaces as "'contact zones,' ... where very differently situated people could work together" (p.110) within/among/through/between their multiple identities and relationships to power. This conceptualization of participation, as messy, unclear, interrupting, and potentially disunifying, allows participation to stand as a worthy critique of traditional or positivist approaches to knowledge production. [1]

Our goal as methodologists is to foster knowledge creation that has as its core equitable and peaceful approaches to knowledge generation and sharing, including a destabilization of authority and expertise. Democratizing knowledge production is an ideal that we take not only as a serious aim, but also as conceptually implicit in basic principles of participation, action, and understanding. Here we draw on our own methodological journeys and experiences engaging inquiry to explore the concept of participation and to hopefully add fruitfully to it. This is an effort to spur a re-envisioning of participation that has at its core a sense of collective entanglement, rather than an evaluation of individual actions that are somehow summed up to equal or not equal an ideal amount of participation. [2]

This conceptual wandering and wondering takes place within a firm—and humble—recognition that both of us have in years past written and thought about participation in different ways (see for examples CALL-CUMMINGS, 2017 or DENNIS, 2014). This current conceptualization of participation as entanglement represents a new idea that builds on our old ones. Rather than trying to ignore what we have written in the past, we bring that into the conversation here, as we explore our own methodological roots. We are using the word "entanglement" in the positive sense of deeply, inter-penetratingly connected. This meaning deliberately moves forward Karen BARAD's (2007) use of the word "entanglement" as an ontological, epistemological, ethical description of relationships in the material/conceptual world. [3]

We begin with an exploration of the methodological concept of participation as discussed in ethnography and critical participatory action research (Section 2). We then offer two scenarios from our own fieldwork in order to tease out our thoughts around participation as entanglement (Section 3). We then move into a discussion of participation as entangled self-assertion (Section 4) and conclude with final thoughts (Section 5). [4]

2. An Exploration of the Methodological Concept "Participation"

Here we explore the methodological concept of participation through ethnographic and critical participatory action research literature. We acknowledge the important ongoing analyses and theoretical debates around participation in other traditions and disciplines, particularly in the interdisciplinary field of development studies (CHAMBERS, 1994, 2008; CHAMBERS & LOUBERE, 2017; HICKEY & MOHAN, 2004; HOLLAND, 2013). Scholars in that field describe the democratic value of equity-oriented participation, that is, participation where those who are disadvantaged in routine social settings are given a more powerful opportunity within the research process itself. We seek to simultaneously hold the problematics of democratizing a research process across unequal relationships (researcher/participant) and taking up such social inequities as purposeful methodological opportunities. Contributions in this field toward the methodological practice of participatory inclusion have moved development studies forward, especially in globally minoritized places. We are particularly drawn to the work of COOKE and KOTHARI (2001), who engage critically with the concept and ideology of participation as theory, method, and practice. While acknowledging the ongoing conversations present across disciplines, a close and personal look at the traditions of inquiry that reflect our own methodological herstories has merit. We are able to help develop fertile ground on which to grapple with and think through how we ourselves have experienced participation in our own fieldwork as compared to how we have conceptualized an ideal participation theoretically and methodologically. We realize that this exploration is both partial and positional. We are hopeful that the reflections can enter the disciplinary conversations already ongoing. [5]

2.1 "Participation" in ethnographic research

The descriptive phrase "participant observer" was introduced in ethnographic practice in the late nineteenth century through the work of Frank CUSHING (1981) in his study of Zuñi peoples. This approach to research was developed by EVANS-PRITCHARD (1963, 1965), MALINOWSKI (1944), and MEAD (1934) in their studies of people who were different from them. Following which, ethnographic practices became closely associated with participant observations where the outsider researcher learns to behave and understand the lives of others by participating in their cultural activities. Though participant observation is still considered important in the conduct of ethnographies, important critiques have located the limits and distortions of participant observations produced in those early years. Generally speaking, western ethnographers were to travel to do research *on* peoples who might be lesser known, considered more "native," or exoticized (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986). We learned that ethnographers of course may participate in different cultural activities and may come to understand, to a certain extent, the practices, meanings, norms, and identities of people with whom they engage; however it is impossible for ethnographers to produce knowledge that is either neutral or free of the ethnographer herself (ROSALDO, 1993). [6]

Feminist ethnographers began imploring researchers to engage *with* rather than *on* research "subjects" (KORTH, 2005; VISWESWARAN, 1997). This transition involving who the research participants are in relation with the research process itself, as well as the knowledge produced through that research, has called our attention to the positioning of research participants. We have been asked to rethink positionality not in terms of individuals (how the researcher is positioned, how the participants are positioned), but in terms of relationships. This re-thinking has not been brought to fruition and it is still common for ethnographers to conduct research *on* people. In fact, early feminist ethnography relied on life history methodology rather than the more typical participant observation— bringing into the foreground the participatory aspect of the women of study (see LANDES, 1971 [1938] as an example). More complicated notions of positionality emerged, for example the idea of the hyphenated and multi-modal participant/subject is central to MORAGA and ANZALDUA's (1981) "This Bridge Called My Back." [7]

Some contemporary ethnographic enactments and engagements foster a concept of "participation" that acknowledges the positionalities of actors, and is understood as a set of activities co-engaged and co-produced. Understanding "participation" in this way carries the responsibility of having to locate the positionalities that matter, including both sociocultural and physical material. However, this idea of participation is still problematic. For example, there is a strong tendency for researchers to *control* the participation of "participants" in ways that limit participatory freedom (DENNIS & HUFF, 2016). Merely *using* one or two "participatory" methods without grounding the entire work in appropriate participatory onto-epistemological commitments is insufficient for establishing a democratized research engagement (ibid.). [8]

Though the seeds of democratization were there in the early conception of "participant observer," equity and social justice were actually compromised in important ways during that time (for example, referring to cultural practices as "less civilized"). Recently, authors have attempted to promote equity and democratization by adopting more engaged approaches to research which give the participant some direct say over the details of the research. Nevertheless, participation rejection, resistance, and ownership are often left on the cutting room floor of the knowledge produced. Despite an important shift from research *on* participants to research *with* participants, democratized knowledge production and the full range of participatory potential in ethnographic practices is left under-developed. It is difficult to envision this possibility with conceptions of participation in place which center on "participants" rather than on "participating" as conjoined activity. [9]

2.2 "Participation" in critical participatory action research

Often work that is presented as participatory action research (PAR) or critical participatory action research (CPAR) is situated within the rather technical and very familiar, methodical cycle of plan, act, observe, reflect attributed to Kurt LEWIN's social psychology experiments in the 1940s. Yet, in tracing the conceptualization of "participation" from a critical perspective, it might be more useful to consider Jacob L. MORENO's earlier work with prostitutes in Vienna. MORENO is reportedly the first to consider those with whom he worked as "co-researchers" in community development and actionist/activist initiatives (McTAGGART, 1994). Emerging later in 1970s Latin America as a nonviolent approach to "the initiation and promotion of radical changes at the grassroots level" to "unsolved economic, political and social problems" (FALS-BORDA, 1987, p.329), CPAR, drawing on MORENO's work, Ignacio MARTIN-BARO's (1994) liberation psychology, and Paulo FREIRE's (1970) critical pedagogy, became a process of raising awareness and gathering the experiences of oppressed groups to use as leverage for "revolutionary action" against injustice (FALS-BORDA, 1987, p.329). During these years activists like FALS-BORDA explicitly resisted traditional, top-down ideas of research and hierarchical ownership of knowledge (FALS-BORDA & RAHMAN, 1991) and moved the field toward an authentic participation through which researchers engaged community members' knowledge, honored their expertise on their own experiences and their ability to serve as change agents in their own contexts (CAMMAROTA & ROMERO, 2010). [10]

Since the 1970s, PAR has grown into a diverse network of inquiry methods, not all of which remain close to these underlying epistemological commitments that actively resist more positivist treatment of those often referred to as research "participants" or "subjects." Generally, researchers who have taken up these "participatory methods" agree that *participation* should take place through a flexible, responsive process rather than a series of defined steps (KEMMIS & McTAGGART, 2005) and that "participants" should be involved at every stage of the research process in making decisions about the goals, the collection and analysis of data, and the use of findings (see articles in the *FQS* special issue on participatory research, for examples, BERGOLD & THOMAS, 2012; BORG, KARLSSON, KIM & McCORMACK, 2012). Yet, often these basic ideas of what constitutes participation have moved in some perversely magnetized way back toward the routinized, mechanistic approach typical of more traditional approaches, and participation is not a concept that is engaged with in a critical way. One of the reasons for this move back may be due at least in part to institutional review boards that require specific and standardized considerations of what constitutes ethical research. [11]

In the past few decades CPAR scholars have questioned how to ethically engage marginalized individuals beyond these standard considerations (DODSON & SCHMALZBAUER, 2005). For example, some CPAR scholars have considered how power structures potentially complicate issues of informed consent and the interpretation and representation of data or even put participants at risk of

community retaliation for speaking up (COOPER, 2017; HOLTBY, KLEIN, COOK, & TRAVERS, 2015; PRINS, 2010). Others have examined CPAR enacted within institutional settings, such as schools, that operate under a distinctly hierarchical structure based on a binary division between adult/knower and child/learner (CALL-CUMMINGS, HAUBER-ÖZER & ROSS, 2019; DENNIS & HUFF, 2016; FINE & TORRE, 2004; MAYALL, 2000). These authors have suggested that although CPAR seeks to break down such structures, it is difficult in practice to ensure that true consent and a desire to contribute drive authentic participation. [12]

Out of this focus on ethics, and in conjunction with a related concern about the validity of CPAR, has come an increased emphasis on the importance of taking the time to develop authentic relationships of trust with participants/co-researchers (DODSON & SCHMALZBAUER, 2005) and a practice of critical reflexivity to recognize and respond to potential ethical pitfalls of CPAR (CALL-CUMMINGS, HAUBER-ÖZER, BYERS & MANCUSO, 2018). This reflexive stance involves explicit negotiation of roles, relationships, and power dynamics that in turn builds the validity of CPAR engagement because it clarifies how those involved participate in the knowledge production process (CALL-CUMMINGS, 2017). This recent CPAR work emphasizes that participation should be conceptualized not as a binary either/or but rather as a spectrum of complicated communicative action that transforms us/them (university-based researchers and community-based co-researchers) engagement to a WE (all of us) engagement CALL-CUMMINGS, 2017; CALL-CUMMINGS, DENNIS & MARTINEZ, 2019; HABERMAS, 1984 [1981], 1987 [1981]). While these moves are encouraging, the vast majority of PAR and CPAR scholarship foregrounds an "ordinary" conceptualization of participation that is still problematic because it takes for granted and reinstates structures of research that separate the roles of "participants" and "researchers"—similar to the problematic ways ethnography does, as discussed above. While the work cited here does push against this ordinary conceptualization of participation, it still implicates separate agents or selves. [13]

3. Participatory Scenarios

We draw here on the data from previous research studies (ethnographic and CPAR respectively) to re-examine how we have both conceptualized and engaged participation in our own work. These scenarios are meant to exemplify the complexities enacted as "participation" and to set the stage to re-think "participation" as inter-subjectively constituted yet rejecting the subject-subject duality that is implicit in the concept of "*inter*subjectivity." [14]

3.1 Barbara's scenario: The participants take over

The scene I share below happened toward the end of a year's long ethnographic experience in a fifth grade class in Houston, Texas. All of the students in the class were African American and the teacher was a white male. In this elementary school, at the time, there was a lot of paddling going on and there was a debate happening amongst the teachers about this practice. A district wide

discipline committee was involved in efforts to change these practices at the school. The teacher, Mr. Morton[1], was on that committee. He was strongly opposed to the use of corporal punishment, but he was a singular voice in a chorus of adults at the school (including parents) who valued the use of paddling to correct children. This context is important to understanding the scenario because Mr. Morton's discipline was an odd mix of critique of local practice (claimed by parents to be culturally valid) and instantiation of institutional imposition on the school community. This didn't play out well in his classroom practices. His disciplinary approach had aims that resonated with the institution, i.e., control of children's bodies for various "good" reasons. But the strategies that he used were not very effective. His most common disciplinary response was to hyperbolically yell at children demanding they write unreasonable numbers of sentences ... "I will not xxx" for example 3,000 times. He did have some kind of formal warning system—color codes next to names on the board—which in moments of no-control would devolve into these unreasonable requests. It came across to us in the room as "In this moment when someone else would paddle you, I am going to ask you to write an unreasonable number of sentences and I am going to change the class dynamics right now by yelling." [15]

From time to time Mr. Morton would leave the room to go to the office or the bathroom, for example. Toward the beginning of the school year, students wondered what my role as an adult in the room was when Mr. Morton had stepped out. Given that they never did anything unsafe, they soon learned that I was willing to witness them without reporting what they were doing to Mr. Morton or correcting them. I was an unusual adult in the space. That unusualness opened up opportunities for participation that would not have been the same had I planned for them, but still controlled what and how of their roles as participants. [16]

As was typical, I sat at a side table in a full room. I had the tools of my work—an audio recorder, a notebook, pen, and watch. At many points of any given day, I was as superfluous as the class window. But at some points, the youth in the class took up a strategic relationship with me and "my" research. These are the moments when the participants took over the research. [17]

On this particular day in May, the students were working on a writing assignment and Mr. Morton was called to the principal's office. He left the room. I was sitting in my usual spot at a table on the side of the room. My recorder was running and I was writing notes in my field notebook. Cory was an active student who garnered a lot of attention from his teacher and his classmates. Once Mr. Morton was out of the room, Cory walked over and picked up my audio recorder. He began to dance around singing directly into the device as if were his microphone. He pretended to be Mr. Morton on steroids. He performed a reprimanding Mr. Morton, audio-recorder in hand, using song and dance. His "scolding Mr. Morton" was a way of acknowledging how students felt about Mr. Morton's discipline—acknowledging this for their own sake *and for the sake of the research*. [18]

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1 All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms except for ours.

Cory, holding the running recorder, approached a female student, putting his face close to hers, and with exaggerated expressions scolded her saying, "I told you to stop moving your eyes across the page. Write 5,000 times *I will not move my eyes*." The girl student pretends to quiver and Cory moved on to the next student. Cory wagged his finger on the right hand while holding the recorder in the left hand and poetically kept up the pretense, "You. There. 5,000 times. Don't breathe so loud. I said don't breathe. Breathing too loud, I said. Do as I said. Do it 5,000 times." [19]

The students laughed as Cory caricatured their present, in the absence of the teacher. Their collective critique doubled as a research event, bringing forward an always-already present rebellion. Our co-participation was layered and complicated. My being there as a familiar liminality in a space where I was explicitly not enacting the teacher's rules gave us, together, an opportunity to co-participate in this doubled event. [20]

Standing near the door was an impromptu student-guard. There was always an impromptu student guard. At nearly 10 minutes, the guard heard Mr. Morton's familiar heavy footsteps. Quickly alerted, Cory walked past me, dropping the recorder back where it was while his classmates resumed their assignments. Mr. Morton entered a well-ordered, quiet, and working class with everyone properly in their seats. I know that Mr. Morton purposefully alerted the class as he colluded with them to avoid catching them doing something he needed to reprimand. [21]

3.2 Meagan's scenario: Not following the script

This scene happened when I was working with a group of 52 undocumented Latinx high school students in rural Idaho. This project was going to turn into my dissertation. I was dedicated to engaging with students and teachers in some sort of participatory way as I worked to understand how I could democratize the production of knowledge around schooling, especially the experiences of marginalized individuals and populations in U.S. schools. [22]

This town, Atkinville, Idaho, had recently undergone a dramatic demographic shift. Where it was once almost completely White, rural, and Mormon, the recent boom for the dairy industry in the area had brought with it groups of workers, most of whom spoke Spanish and came, often without the requisite legal papers, from Mexico, Central America, and South America, to work jobs that White people could not or would not fill. These workers and their families upset the status quo in this town to such an extent that by the time I arrived in 2012, the population was almost 50 percent White, 50 percent Latinx. This also led to much more socioeconomic and religious diversity as well. From what I heard from students, teachers, and administrators at Atkinville High School, there was a lot of conversation-avoidance around what this recent shift meant. Everyone was silent. "It used to be more difficult," I often heard, "but now it's fine." Or, "Well, I see a lot of biracial couples in the hall," which was, apparently, an indication that all was well with the world. [23]

I was invited by Mrs. James, my aunt and a teacher of Spanish at Atkinville High School. Mrs. James also ran the local chapter of Spanish Speakers Serving (SSS), which was a nonprofit organization headquartered in Utah that aimed to increase access to higher education for the growing Latinx population in the region. SSS recruited teachers to form clubs at their respective schools and these clubs often ended up as formalized classes, which met daily and provided service in the school and community, such as translating for parent-teacher conferences, translating during class time for newcomer students, or tutoring younger students in various subjects. These service and leadership opportunities were meant to build the resumes of those students who took advantage of them, thus, according to SSS, increasing the likelihood they would gain access to an institution of higher education and persist to graduation. I went to Atkinville to meet the students there who were in the course. I was interested in this approach to "empowerment" and also wanted to get a sense of the students' and Mrs. James' experiences in the program thus far. [24]

After a few days talking with these students they narrowed in on a question they were particularly interested in thinking about together: why are our teachers racist? This struck me, as a White, middle class, woman, who was fairly privileged and definitely unaware and uncritical of various structures, systems, and forces that upheld my privilege. I was impressed and excited to think about these things with this group of students and their White teacher. [25]

One of the first aspects of the research we did together brought several of the students' White teachers to the classroom for a class interview. We did this whenever I was in town (which turned out to be every few months for about a week at a time over the course of 18 months). These interviews must have been terribly intimidating for the teachers. It was pretty widely known what we were doing—talking about race and racism!!—and so they must have known they would be under scrutiny and potentially made very uncomfortable. [26]

As the students and I prepared for the interviews, I asked the students what they wanted to ask the teachers—what they wanted to *know*. One of the first questions shouted out was, "Why are they racist?!" I remember holding back a wide smile. "Uh huh ..." I let out with a straight face. I remember trying to be patient. [27]

"So, that's interesting. What do you think the response will be?" The students looked around for a while, not really answering. So, I offered to role play it out. I became the White teacher and they asked the kinds of questions they had in their minds.

"Why are some of the White teachers at this school racist?"

"Why do some teachers at this school seem to treat White and Latino students differently?"

"Why do you treat White students better than Latino students?"

"Why do more Brown students get in trouble than White students?"

"Why do White people automatically assume it was the Brown student that was doing the bad thing?" [28]

Looking back, I realize that by asking these very open and clear questions they were entering this opportunity with a genuine, albeit backgrounded, openness to hearing what the teachers had to say—even if that would mean finding out that some of their starting assumptions were wrong (e.g. the starting assumptions that their teachers were racist). [29]

My assumed teacher-like responses were quickly defensive and offered no real insight or help. No honesty or authentic discussion. The students seemed to quickly understand that they would have to be more subtle in order to lead the teachers into places and topics and discussions where they felt safe, where they felt like they could be more open and authentic in their responses. [30]

The day came when we would conduct the interviews. Two teachers came—both male, both White, whose names were Mr. Blunt and Mr. Shaw. We had created an interview protocol of sorts. The students had created their own list of "covert interests" (what they really wanted to know) and I helped them craft a list of questions that could hopefully get people talking around those interests. We had printed out the list and given one to each student. They were to speak up when they wanted, just picking a question off the list to ask. [31]

The first few minutes went well, I thought. They were generally sticking to the list we had, engaging with our visitors, laughing with them, making them feel comfortable. I was pleased. The teachers were not really giving up much, but that was okay, I thought. They were just warming up. After about ten minutes one of the students, Eddie, veered off the list of questions we had prepared:

> "I have a question. Do you guys think that like, it's okay to have favorites? Do you think it's bad or in your way do you think it's good to have favorites like, to show it or to not show it? Just like, not to treat everybody equally but like, just be good with like everyone. Like in your opinion. Like how you said with your basketball players, right? And if they didn't play basketball would you treat them any different like from your basketball players?" [32]

Mr. Blunt and Mr. Shaw both agreed that they actually *do* treat those students they know or are close with (like basketball players) differently, but that they do so because they expect more from them. The students did not really seem to believe them; it was a kind of ridiculous answer and we all knew it, but we did not challenge it or follow up. Then Jaime, a leader in the class, chimed in:

> "Yeah, like what do you guys think about *us*? Do you guys understand the whole purpose of our project, or do you not know anything about it? Because you're not really taking time to really consider or like, talk about it at all. Like, your Latinos in your class or something. Like, have you ever like really thought about like, what, what do they do? Like, what do they really do?" [33]

Mr. Blunt responded:

> "I mean I love Latinos, and this group that you've formed together, mainly because you guys have stepped up and you guys have set the bar higher than what normal students want to be part of. I mean I think that's great that you guys help tutor and you guys are in classrooms helping other Hispanic students. Because I think that's the way we, you guys are going to learn and grow. Because you guys are obviously very intelligent kids, and you excel in the classroom and I think that it's great that you guys want to excel even further." [34]

The teachers were being—maybe predictably—condescending and patronizing. The students were trying to get them to be real, to answer authentically, but it seemed like the teachers would not accept the invitation for engagement. At one point one of the students, Sebastian, who had sat in on Mr. Shaw's class to help newcomer students understand the class by translating as Mr. Shaw taught, told Mr. Shaw that it was really hard to translate in his class because of the very difficult vocabulary. It was not a question, but rather a subtle suggestion to Mr. Shaw that he should understand how hard Sebastian and the other students who helped with translating worked to help their White teachers who didn't speak Spanish. Mr. Blunt responded that yes, perhaps he should learn Spanish because he doesn't speak it either, but he's just too old to learn at this point in his life. Jaime followed up with him:

> "I have a question for Blunt. Um, I remember taking history with you last year and we had a student in there who didn't speak English very well and whenever we had tests or things like that you would send him to I think it was Mr. Garcia's room. Do you think there's anything that you could have done specifically to maybe simplify the whole?" [35]

Jaime was really pressing him. He was asking in the form of a question but he was really telling Mr. Blunt he needed to step up. It was a way for Jaime—and the rest of the students—to assert their own authority over the situation, to call on their own expertise, to value their own knowledges, to question and push on what I had set up as the boundaries around acceptable participation, all in an effort to get their real questions answered—to strengthen the research. [36]

4. Participation as Entangled Self-Assertion

As we have reflected on our experiences over the course of several months, we realize that we have both undergone several iterations of understandings of our experiences from the first moments of experience to reflections during or immediately afterward to more recent reflections. Perhaps the first phase of understanding was, even implicitly, being caught off guard with the thought that the students were somehow misbehaving or doing something *wrong* as they engaged in the research process. They were not following "the rules" or "the plan." We may have described this at the time—or, to be honest, even in moments more recently—as a kind of rebellion. In Barbara's example, this happened when Cory mocked Mr. Morton and the other students laughed. They were rebelling against classroom rules, against Mr. Morton, even against

Barbara's research goals. In Meagan's example, the students chose to ask questions in a more straightforward manner than what they had originally planned with Meagan's well-intentioned facilitation and support. Their rebellion was against Mr. Blunt's and Mr. Shaw's sterile responses and perhaps also against Meagan's control of the research. [37]

Phase two of our understanding moved us away from seeing the students as acting in a wrong way to understanding that their actions were resisting, rather than rebelling. In their own ways, both groups were resisting powerful others. In Barbara's example the students were clearly resisting the power Mr. Morton was exercising over them but they were also resisting the expectations of Barbara and her audio recorder that could have been—and possibly was—seen (and used) as an instrument of power. The students effectively took that power to use it for their own ends. In Meagan's example, the students were resisting the rather tidy answers the two teachers were giving in response to prepared questions, but they were also resisting the power those responses had to curtail the conversation the students really wanted to have. They were also resisting the power of the interview protocol to control the dialogue. Just like Cory and his classmates, the "participating" students took up the instrument of power to resist and use for their own goals. [38]

Phase three of our understanding happened much later. As we wrote our own scenarios and then read each other's experiences, we were struck with the way participation presented not just as resistance, but as *entangled self-assertion*—that is, as opportunities for establishing the students' own dignity and worthwhileness in institutional contexts where their identity/identities was/were diminished. In Barbara's example, Cory's mocking was an effort not only to establish his own worthwhileness but also the worthwhileness and dignity of all the other students in the classroom. Jaime's straightforward question, "What do you think about *us*?" in Meagan's example also illustrated Jaime's ability to not only establish his own dignity, but in asking about "us" he was working to establish the dignity of all the students who were in the room. That said, in that instance it was not just Jaime asking the question. The question somehow emerged from Jaime's mouth but was collectively asked. Many of the SSS students were nodding—and all were fixed and present in the moment of the questioning. The uttered question, just like Cory's mockery, became a *collective* reclaiming of power and of dignity even though just one person seemed to actually act. All were acting. Upon reflection we also realize that the collective action included Meagan and Barbara in our respective scenarios, for our lack of physical action—neither of us made any sort of movement or raised our voices in any way to stop or change or even encourage what was happening—indicated our complicity in the entangled assertion of self. Participation in this instance inhabited not just an *inter*subjective, where Jaime would have been one actor and Meagan or Mr. Blunt was another. Rather, the participation brings forth an *intra*-active space where the subject-subject duality no longer works. The participation of *us* cannot be separated into individuals or their discrete actions. The intra-action—and the participation—is both collective and entangled self-assertion. [39]

4.1 Participation and agency

We use the phrase "entangled self-assertion" to bring Karen BARAD's (2007) concept of entanglement to mind.

> "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather than time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future" (p.ix). [40]

BARAD uses the term entanglement to describe agency as a co-operative endeavor that involves human and non-human intra-actions. She contrasts this with the more common autonomous human-centered idea of agency, which is how we might have understood our experiences early on, when we were thinking of them as rebellion or resistance. In those moments we may have seen discrete acts of agency by an individual—what Cory or Jaime *wanted* or *chose* to do in that instance. But an entangled way of thinking of agency allows us to take seriously the institutionalized social routines, materials, and structures as aspects of agency. [41]

We appreciate BARAD's description of entanglement as a diffusive and diffractive way of thinking about agency—that agency is co-produced through entangled states of affairs, opportunities, and relationships.

> "Diffraction, understood using quantum physics, is not just a matter of interference, but of entanglement, an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. This difference is very important. It underlines the fact that knowing is a direct material engagement, a cutting together-apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework the agential conditions of possibility. There is not this knowing from a distance. Instead of there being a separation of subject and object, there is an entanglement of subject and object, which is called the "phenomenon." Objectivity, instead of being about offering an undistorted mirror image of the world, is about accountability to marks on bodies, and responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part. That is the kind of shift that we get, if we move diffraction into the realm of quantum physics" (BARAD interviewed in VAN DER TUIN & DOLPHIJN, 2012, p.52). [42]

We see participation as ongoing and as not merely a description of what someone does. Participation is a concept that is broader than the observable behavior one might record in field notes. It is an attitude or orientation toward an impending to-be and it involves the imaginary. At the same time, it is, of course, practical—one actually does or does not do something within the entangled moments of opportunity and possibility—it is participa*ting*. *Agentic cuts* are

performative moments enacting particular aspects of the entangled whole (BARAD, 2007). An agentic cut is an action that sets a trajectory for subsequent acts and their interpretations. For example, when a conversation is started from the field of multiple possible ways to act, starting a conversation sets momentum for roles, topics, what aspects of the environment are considered relevant, and so on. When this is done, *positioning of self and others is produced*. BARAD describes this production as diffractive—that is, diffraction connotes our reliance on paying attention to differences that matter in understanding, in claiming, and in enacting. These differences are performed through agentic cuts. In this way of thinking, self-assertion is the manner in which agentic cuts produce an assertion of the self that is already part of that entanglement, evidenced in new ways. [43]

4.2 Participation and reflexivity

Much of the literature on reflexivity and participation still assume agency prior to, rather than as an effect of, an agentic cut (FINLAY, 2002). Entangled participating is the co-production of participation, not merely co-participation. Ruth NICHOLIS (2009) drew on her work with indigenous communities to outline three layers of reflexivity—a personal reflexivity, which poses questions of the first person experience; an interpersonal reflexivity, which poses questions of the interactions and relationships; and a collective reflexivity, which poses questions about how the knowledge produced is an effect of the participatory activities set about methodologically. Such questions would include, "What does the participating produce and what are its structural dependencies?" This collective reflexivity does not obliterate hyphens or differences, but rather welcomes their reverberations. One of the potential effects of these reverberations would be self-dignity, or self-assertion. Self-assertion, like participation, cannot adequately be conceptualized as something one does individually or independently. Neither can it be controlled. It must freely co-emerge. [44]

5. Final Thoughts

Indeed, there are other theoretical approaches that have pushed toward uncovering the complexity of the participation process. MATON (2008) has written usefully about the phenomena of empowerment as inherently participatory, yet within this definition continues to conceptualize the process through individualized terms. Each person must engage in the process in order to "gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization" (p.5). MATON writes with the group in mind but the process described hearkens back to the interpersonal reflexivity described by NICHOLIS (2009), which relies on interactions and relationships between and among individuals. A special issue of *FQS* (MRUCK, ROTH & BREUER, 2002; ROTH, BREUER & MRUCK, 2003) engages several authors in describing and showcasing various approaches to reflection and reflexivity. For example, FICHTEN and DREIER (2003) describe the "triangulation of subjectivity" in which researchers and research teams continually and constructively reflect on their perspectives in an effort to increase understanding among team members and,

ultimately, the quality of the research. While inspiring and useful, the process of participation still depends on the individual or on the idea of a collective as made up of individuals engaging (participating) alongside one another rather than on posing methodologically-grounded questions around how participation is structured (NICHOLIS, 2009). While critical participatory action research literature has turned a bit toward conceptualizing participation in terms of a collective and in terms of collective experience, the idea of participation still often relies on outcomes connected to the actions (or inaction) of the individuals who make up that collective. Conceptualizing participation through the concept of entanglement provides a unique opportunity to more fully grasp the complex intra-activity of participation. [45]

The notion of participation as a mode of self-assertion—of asserting one's own dignity—speaks back to the way in which knowledge is not only not neutral, it is also not separate from self. When we produce knowledge, there are consequences for self and for dignity, and we wonder about the potency of these consequences within institutional settings that are hierarchical, rigid, and quick to limit or deny recognition. Here we have engaged examples that took place in schools, but there are also examples of entangled, intra-active participation in institutions such as prisons (see, for example, FINE & TORRE, 2004). No matter in which institutional setting we engage intra-active participation, rather than thinking of participation on a continuum ("very involved") or through a typology (for example, "key informants"), and rather than thinking of it as people (participants) and connected outcomes, we see (and have experienced and reflected on) participation as entangled research performances. [46]

Self-assertion is a product of agentic cuts, not merely an outcome of critical reflexive practices. The concept of entanglement and agentic cutting explains why collective reflexivity (NICHOLIS, 2009) makes sense—that is, asking how and why and to what end relationships have been enacted is to precisely ask about the agentic cutting of entangled participation. Understanding the agentic cutting of research work deepens the way we see the entangled participation of researchers/others in the research process and in the knowledge production process. It brings into relief the ways in which the dignity of all is connected to the knowledge it claims. Just as we cannot take the position that knowledge is unified, neither can we assume that individual self-dignity is universally granted through all forms of knowledge. Reflexivity that begins with the presupposition of separated selves does not easily allow us to see the link between dignity and knowledge. [47]

The notion of entanglement conceptually destabilizes the binarial way of locating agency and the outcomes of action; participants and researchers; research materials and research activities; and knowledge and its producers/consumers. By specifically expanding our understanding of agency, we are able to locate participation as agentic intra-action given the research context as co-productive and co-creative. Through this agentic arrangement, participation will entail an emergence of BARAD's "agentic cut," whereby action establishes the parameters through which interdependence and individuality can be recognized and

described—in other words, the dialogic interpretive frame through which human identity and meaning can be grasped as such. Agentic cuts co-produce, reinstate, and transform knowledge all at once. [48]

Acknowledgments

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