Participating in Social Exclusion: a reflexive account of collaborative research and researcher identities in the field

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflexive perspective on a Participatory Action Research project with young people at a site of 'advanced urban marginality' (Wacquant, 2008). Its purpose is to explore the ways in which habitus based inequalities in the research field (Bourdieu, 1977) contributed to a parallel process of marginalisation and exclusion in the act of participating. More specifically, we examine how a particular professional academic research identity and taxonomy of participatory social research, animated by a benign intent, nonetheless exerted an ideological form of control over the enquiry, administering and recycling feelings of failure and marginalisation among participants - including the 'professional' researcher. To draw out the different ways this control took form, our analysis centres on a particular exchange within the group concerned with the distribution of a one-off financial stipend to participants. We endeavour to draw some conceptual insights in our exploration of this exchange, and in conclusion offer some ideas for a 'good enough' practice of action research undertaken in comparable socio-economic and psycho-cultural conditions.

Keywords:
participation, social exclusion, participatory action research, ethnography, critical reflection

Introduction

LAWRENCE [1] – Listen up yeah, this is Simon. He's got a project he wants to talk to you lot about.

UNKNOWN – Who? (Lots of background talking).

LAWRENCE – Simon, the guy I told you about. (Shouts). Listen up!

SIMON – Um, thanks for coming in. Basically I'm a student doing social work at university and I want to do some research with a group of you on what it's like for a young man growing up in St Pauls today. When I say I want to do it with you, I mean I'm looking for maybe half a dozen, maybe all of you, to become researchers with me, I don't just want to interview you or whatever. You'd actually be researching your own lives, if that makes sense.

UNKNOWN – Oh okay, how much? (Laughing).

SIMON – Hold up... I'll train and pay you a one-off amount but you need to sign up for twelve weeks of group sessions where we'll just hang and talk about issues you raise, then we'll do whatever you want with what we learn. We can make a music video, do photography or a film... whatever you want. Whatever that is will be yours, not mine. I just want to record the group sessions we do each week for my research and work with you to make something that's useful for the community and for you guys. It would be like three hours a week for twelve weeks, that's the basic commitment I'm looking for. After that you get paid and if we haven't finished you can carry on if you want, or leave... no pressure, no questions. You can leave anytime you like, but if you go earlier than the twelve weeks then obviously you won't get the full amount.

JERMAINE – Si, I have a question, so how much we gettin' paid for this? (Laughter).

SIMON – £100. But look, over twelve weeks at three to five hours a week that's only like £4 an hour... but it's all I've got in the budget... you also get skills in research or whatever interests you, so if you want to make a film or do music I'll arrange for you to get trained up in that too if I can, so, like, you can get a lot out of this if you put in... I hope that by doing this together we might come to see things differently; I don't know, anything's possible I guess.

JACOB – Look yeah, you don't need these lot. Let's just me and you work on it Si, and you just pay me the others share. (Laughter).

[1] All names have been changed (except Simon's).

MARCEL – It's a good opportunity, you lot don't do nothing anyways so you should sign up, you might learn something. You need to be motivated though, that is, have a motive to action.

In this paper we offer a critical reflexive analysis of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project undertaken with seven young men aged 15-24 in the inner-city neighbourhood of St Pauls, Bristol, a provincial English city of around half a million people. Animated by benign intent and a genuine attempt to build a collaborative enquiry, we will surface some of the different ways ideological control was nonetheless exerted inter- and intra-personally. Specifically, we will explore how PAR, as a particular participatory social research approach, exerts control over meaning in practice, and in the process administers and recycles feelings of failure and marginalisation among participants, including the 'professional' researcher. So that this description might deliver some real-world utility beyond postmodern descriptions of power, position and identity, we conclude by considering what actionable knowledge our analysis contains for the practice of participatory social research.

The project in question was my (Simon's)[2] doctoral fieldwork and took place over the eighteen-month period immediately prior to August 2011, when rioting young people took to the streets of several English metropolitan cores, including St Pauls, a small and diverse neighbourhood of around three and a half thousand people located immediately adjacent the city's central shopping mall and retail concourses. St Pauls was and remains one of the most youthful and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in the city, and also one of the most disadvantaged across a range of indices (for example, child poverty, over-crowding, unemployment, life expectancy), ranking at the time of the fieldwork 284 out of 32,482 'super output areas' [3]in England (North Bristol Primary Care Trust, 2004, Bristol City Council, 2010). I decided to work through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method and ethic with young men living in the area, with the intention of producing a highly situated (auto)ethnographic account of urban marginality and the increasingly consumerist identities of youth, masculinity, social class and race in the inner city.

[2] Although this article is jointly authored, much of the content is based on the subjective experience of the first author, who conducted the fieldwork. The occasional use of the first person singular is intended to reflect this, with the first person plural sometimes used to represent the researcher and co-participants collectively, as well as being used authorially. This should be clear from the context.

[3] This is a standard geospatial category used by the Office of National Statistics, denoting a local area with a mean size of 1,500.

I wanted to understand the worldview of a demographic of young people statistically over-represented as adults in the acute mental health and criminal justice systems (see Fernando, 2017, for more on this). And in contrast to the service cultures of the education, social care and health systems I had experienced in my professional life, which examined the issue of differential access and outcomes for Black boys and men (if at all) through a biomedical and observational lens, I wanted to subject the issue to a poststructural analysis drawn from a participatory and political epistemology (Sedgwick, 1982, Cresswell and Spandler 2009). Put another way, I wanted to engage with the social, economic and political context of my co-participants and offer a challenge to the prevailing and enduring locus of mental health as residing *inside the individual*. My hypothesis was that such an approach was morally imperative under circumstances of social exclusion because it returned the value of the research process to my co-participants. And I also supposed both that the ethical issues of beneficence and justice inherent to fieldwork would be best realised in this way, and that such a research process would deliver an emancipatory outcome of some kind for my co-participants.

John O'Neill once wrote that 'the privatisation of meaning… is a principal source of social control in a liberal society' (1972: xi). My intention for this research was that its processes *re-socialise* the meaning my co-participants gave to their lives and 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977). Where so often these young identities and lives are problematised and pathologised by the state, and commodified by the market (which does a sophisticated job of selling particular identities and lifestyles back to the young people and street culture from whom it has appropriated them), I was keen that the voices of my co-participants should destabilise the assumed purpose and role of public services (for example the assumption that health professionals deliver care that is benign), their real life encounters exposing the different ways in which power is administered and experienced, intra- and interpersonally.

Briefly, the most important theoretical influences on my research and practice at this point were multi-disciplinary and critically engaged. Phenomenology provided my philosophical instincts with a language that simultaneously rejected the mind/body dualism of Cartesian science (which dominates the professional and policy landscape of mental health) and legitimised experience as evidence. The disciplines of 'liberation psychology' (Martín-Baró, 1994, Watkins and Shulman, 2008) and critical pedagogy built on this foundation, offering me an epistemological frame that I embraced for its politics and provocation as much as its method. (Freire, 1971, Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, Rahman, 1993, Cahill, 2004, 2006, Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Postmodern critical

theory was generally important, but the reflexive ethnography advocated and practiced by Behar (1996), Bourgois, (2002) and Belmonte (2005), was especially influential in encouraging me to consider and make visible my own positionality. In the same postmodern current, critical childhood studies and theories of children and young people's participation (Percy-Smith, 2005, Thomas, 2007, Cordero Arce, 2012) were also contributing influences, not least because – at the time – the voices and perspectives of young Black working class men were almost entirely absent from this literature. To find them I looked to a body of sociology concerned for issues of social exclusion, race and class in the British inner city (Gilroy, 1987, Back, 1996, Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008) and, in particular, to an ethnographic monograph of St Pauls written a generation earlier, *Endless Pressure* (Pryce, 1979).

The data presented in this paper come from the transcripts of our taped Friday night group discussions in a small local community flat in St Pauls between June and December 2010, a much longer period than the twelve weeks I originally set aside and anticipated. In fact, because of the way the recruitment and research had unfolded, I was still a weekly visitor to the neighbourhood throughout the spring and summer of the following year. My eventual withdrawal was prompted by the rioting that gripped several English metropolitan areas, including St Pauls, in August 2011, which mobilised elements of its youth to overrun and smash parts of the nearby retail mall). The additional period was largely spent trying to encourage the completion of a short film my co-participants had wanted to make, but because our relationships deepened over these months it also contributed to a more nuanced understanding of their lives on my part. The young men I recruited to the project were offered training, skills and accreditation in film making, as well as an individual stipend of £100 for their (anticipated) twelve weeks participation in the project.

Our critical reflexive analysis in this paper centres on a heated exchange in the group that brought to a head my decision some months earlier to offer this one-off stipend. We have chosen this extract over others that might also have provided fertile territory for the same themes, because it is an opportunity to lay bare an inconvenient truth about participatory research: that too much of what is personally uncomfortable and challenging to our identities as researchers is often tidied out of the final presentation, when in reality, as Olesen & Nordentoft observe, 'we can only learn from what we are doing as researchers and facilitators if we dare to explore sensitive incidents and gain insight into what is at stake in dialogical reflexive processes' (2018, p.12).

The 'stipend'

The extract that follows was informed and preceded during the week by a dramatic split in the group. I had booked a local production company to visit us at the community flat to help with the film making process, providing support and equipment, training and skills to the group as they scripted and shot their idea for a short documentary film. The group, comprising Ashley (aged 16), Jermaine (19), Tyreese (17), Ledley (15), Lawrence (24), Marcel (23) and Trigga (17) had agreed to meet every day that week at eleven, and to work through the afternoon. For my part, work commitments made my joining their efforts each afternoon difficult, and so on the Friday evening I went and met the group as usual at the flat, with the intention of catching up on progress and distributing the stipend:

ASHLEY – Hold on, I got to say something, Simon are you gonna pay these two? (Pointing at Ledley and Jermaine)...'cos you should know that they quit.
JERMAINE – I didn't quit... hold up, he's trying to brainwash you. That's his thing...
ASHLEY – You didn't show up at all this week, you did fuck all, what have you done for this project, tell me?
JERMAINE – I been here every week...
SIMON – C'mon mate, every week, really? I was here every week, I was about the only one who was here every week.
JERMAINE – Most weeks then.
TYREESE – You don't say nothing though even when you was here, fucking sleeping through most of it! (Laughter).
SIMON – Look, yeah, I never ever wanted this to happen, where we got to this place. I thought offering you a few quid to participate would make things fairer. I'm committed to writing up what we've done and getting something out of this, a qualification and stuff. I wanted you all to get something out of it too, but it was difficult because half the time people didn't turn up, or fell asleep, or fucked about. So now what do we do? I was going to just pay everyone regardless tonight and ask if anyone wanted to carry on meeting and working together. But hardly anyone turned up last week to film, and I gotta tell you that pissed me off 'cos we spent nearly £2k for him to come down here and work with you on your film.
ASHLEY – How much!?
SIMON – Yeah his time and crew and equipment costs money, and he gave a lot of it away for free still.

ASHLEY – Fuck, man, I didn't know that. Look, all I'm saying is that it's supposed to be a group thing, yeah, and two of us didn't do nothing. I don't think them two should get the same as say me and Tyreese.

SIMON – So what should we do about it, I'm finding it difficult to know. Shall I just pay out to everyone equally like I was going to?

JERMAINE – Yeah, don't be brainwashed by Ashley. (Ashley shaking his head).

LAWRENCE – I got an idea, why don't we pay them that's worked hard these weeks what was agreed, and then Jermaine and Ledley, 'cos you done less you should get like sixty percent of it or something.

ASHLEY – They ain't done sixty percent of the work though.

SIMON – (Looking at Jermaine and Ledley) What about if we give you the chance to get the other forty percent by helping to finish the film?

JERMAINE – You been brainwashed by Ashley, oh my days! I put in the work, I been here every week. You know what? I don't give a fuck about St Pauls people anyway, I only did this for the money. I had plans for that money. You been brainwashed!

LEDLEY – (To me) Ah, I'm ok with that.

JERMAINE – Nah. It's not fucking fair Ledley! (To me) You been brainwashed!

SIMON – Look you can still get the full amount no problem, everyone wants that to be the case, but these guys obviously don't think it would be fair given the effort they put in that you should get the same at this point in time. If I give everyone the same at this stage what message does that send out to these guys?

ASHLEY – It says you're a mug.[4] *(Silence).*

SIMON – So is this how it's happening, like Lawrence suggested?

TYREESE – It's embarrassing the way we've been tonight, it shouldn't be about money... man is giving us a break.

SIMON – So is anyone willing to carry on from this point, meeting each Friday, talking, working on the film? There's no money left but I'm up for carrying on…

TYREESE – Yeah I want to get finished.

ASHLEY – Yeah, yeah. Jermaine?

JERMAINE – (Shrugs) Yeah.

LEDLEY – Yes.

[4] A fool.

The exchange above, and the session around it, were highly charged and full of strong feelings – anger, embarrassment, confusion, fear, anxiety – that moved in a complicated pattern that was sometimes adversarial and dominating, and sometimes highly participatory and self-organising. The embodied and expressed feelings involved – which are only partially captured by the text – are an important site of information in any critical reflexive analysis since they speak to a group process and embodied experience that might otherwise get lost beneath the noise of multiple and competing voices (Heen, 2005). That the stipend (or perhaps more accurately my administration of it) should elicit such strong feelings might reasonably supply evidence of it being a poor ethical decision to include one. And yet some years later, and even through a critical reflexive lens, the outcome remains more complicated to judge than that.

I had made my mind up some time before the fieldwork started to offer the stipend in return for participation in the project. I had wrestled with the ethical implications of this, and had no satisfactory answer to the objection that it might act as an inducement (although it was approved by the university ethics committee). In fact, as the period of engagement and recruitment wore on (six months in all) I confess I ended up hoping that it would induce participation. However, I also saw compelling ethical reasons for offering something material to participants when I was in position to do so because my studentship included a small budget to support fieldwork costs. I was looking for co-researchers (not research subjects) in a place of enduring and multiple material disadvantages, and I was asking for an investment of time and labour in a supposedly 'horizontal project', the fruits of which were likely to increase my own status and prospects through award of a PhD. It was, I thought, an appropriate acknowledgment of the lived concerns, priorities, and material reality of my co-participants.

While the money was not initially intended as an inducement to participate, I nonetheless found myself increasingly wielding it as such as the weeks wore on; or at least, to induce participation in particular ways *consistent with my understanding of participatory research and my identity as a researcher*. Each week the group meetings were undermined and interrupted by my co-participants' absence, routinised lateness, and their ability to sleep through much of our time together. Just as frequent were the silences, apparent boredom, and incessant 'messing about'. Rarely was any proposed fieldwork actioned between our meetings, and even the best sessions contained within them less than an hour (of the three hours for which we met) of reflective, generative, dialogue and planning. Through all this I was often left feeling frustrated and de-skilled, confronted by strong feelings of failure that my efforts were not 'good practice' and that the project was in some ways

confirming stereotypes rather than challenging them. The stipend soon began to show subtly in my conversations with the group, in the form of a joke or a gentle reminder that was also undeniably a language of compliance and control through which I aimed to corral and mobilise.

This came to a climax in the excerpt above. Despite the ongoing challenges of attendance, punctuality and participation, I was keen not to withhold payment for worry this might herald a complete breakdown in our accumulated trust, even though I badly wanted to in the case of Jermaine and Ledley, who were entirely absent at least half the time. By this stage I was simply happy to be rid of the money and hoped that enough interpersonal work had been done that the group would want to continue to meet and finish our enquiry together.

As it turned out, Ashley and Tyreese were very keen to discuss the ethics of my decision. Because of this, the exchange delivered a rare dialogic moment in our time together. It was a conflict but it 'felt' horizontal and participatory as I was for a time submerged beneath feelings and agency – stronger than my own – about the value of the stipend beyond its monetary worth, and about the issue of collective accountability and fairness: "It's supposed to be a group thing, and two of us didn't do nothing." In the moment the feelings were raw, but only because they were honest, and this emotion achieved a genuinely catalysing and galvanising effect, clarifying purpose, commitment, and expectations ("It shouldn't be about money"). For my part, and contrary to my expectations, I actually got more respect from the group when I sounded "pissed off" at the money we had already wasted, than when I didn't just propose to give it away like "a mug". When it came, this respect was a relief, but only because it gave me permission to acknowledge the frustration I had experienced and administered in much more subtle ways over the preceding weeks.
Because it is certainly true that while I was 'holding' the money I was also in fact nourishing a particular process of subjectification that meant my co-participants were required to conform to a position in the group that was more or less consistent with my beliefs about what a valid, successful participatory action research project contained, by way of outputs and outcomes (see also Healy, 2001). An unacknowledged academic research identity was present that remained, to my embarrassment, hidden in plain sight throughout. For it was not at all obvious to me that my commitment to realising emancipatory research of the kind described by my textbooks, and embodied by my own personal search for legitimacy, could ever become an ideological project seeking to control the process and privatise its meaning (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, Lilleaas, 2013). Self-evidently, I thought, I was trying to effect the very opposite of this outcome.

The consequences of this unacknowledged identity, and my adherence to its structure of thought in practice, was an occasionally oppressive reliance on the kinds of technical skills and personal and intellectual faculties privileged by it (literacy, self-confidence, planning, timekeeping, sociability, motivation, teamwork, emotional intelligence and critical thinking). For my co-participants these qualities were either very badly wounded, perhaps, by earlier formal experiences of scholastic failure and exclusion, or suffocated by the effects of the local moral economy articulated by street culture, which was suspicious of and often hostile towards behaviours inconsistent with the local image and story of Black masculinity. Much of what I sought from my co-participants as the correct research behaviour (for example; studiousness, attention, effort, curiosity), was coded in street culture (and reinforced by my positionality) as 'White'. The move towards me risked exclusion from the group and accusations – typically delivered using humour – of betrayal; or 'washout' as the group would know and call it.

Under these conditions the stipend became a potent symbol not only of the research(er) identity that I was affecting, but also of the embodied and expressed dispositions, manners and symbols of my adulthood, my whiteness and my middle-class identity. At various times, these dispositions became positional techniques and effects of power that, unintentionally but too frequently, revealed and poked at the wounds of my co-participants. One example was my assumption, which became an insistence, that there should be a social action output; a 'thing' that we (I) could point to as evidence of the validity and success of our enquiry, and a demonstrable disruption of the "story of failure" the group had assigned to St Pauls. Another was my asking the group one evening to *write down* questions for the interviews they hoped to carry out, which had the effect of humiliating Jermaine, whose lack of functional literacy was exposed and exacerbated by the clumsiness of my noticing and the group's laughter at his exposure – notwithstanding their own limitations in the same area.

Throughout our time together I would have considered my efforts to be grounded in an ongoing spirit and practice of critical reflexivity, so it is no easy thing to acknowledge that some internal assumptions escaped my interrogation and bled out into the research process. Eventually, time and distance from both the field and the text revealed a deeper level of insight than I was capable of in the moment and immediate aftermath. My opening analysis at the time located my 'failure of the methodological form' as speaking to a deficit in representation of young socially excluded men in the available literature on PAR, and a romantic idealisation of emancipatory research born in another time (Freire, 1971, Gutierrez, 1988, Martín-Baró, 1994). Only more recently have I been

able to connect with a deeper layer of assumptions I was still, even in my initial analysis, holding onto about the meaning and identity of academic research, and, by extension, myself as its student.

Critical encounters

> *JERMAINE – I think what we say anyway, they already have planned anyway, so it ain't gonna really matter. This is just a cover up. We care, but our thoughts don't really count.*

Critical-reflexive analysis here is concerned with the ways in which power is distributed and moves through a participatory research setting, in particular the embodied intra- and inter-personal aspects of this movement (Arieli et al. 2009, Berger, 2015, Levy, 2016). Critical reflexivity is really the only route to engaging effectively with the situated, contextual and contingent operation of power/knowledge, particularly that produced by a process of group enquiry and sense-making that claims to be highly participatory and emancipatory. This is because '[b]eing attentive to power/knowledge relations makes it possible to recognise reproductions of cultural norms and how such norms constantly mould our relations, interpretations, and categorisations' (Nordentoft & Olesen, 2018: 56). Put more simply, reflexivity in research processes is needed because existing power differences between participants may generate tendencies to re-enact the same social norms that we set out to challenge (Healy, 2001).

Bourdieu's theories of *doxa* and *habitus* (1977) offer real descriptive and explanatory value in the reflexive effort at this point. Bourdieu views power as culturally capitalised and constantly recycled and re-legitimised through the dialectical interplay of agency and structure. *'Habitus'* – the socialised norms and tendencies that guide our behaviour and thinking – is thus 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways' (Wacquant 2011, p. 316). Context and environment are key influences on *habitus*, and in this sense the 'container' for the enquiry – PAR – is a 'field' in which we, as participants, both wielded and experienced power in an ongoing dynamic.

Bourdieu's related concept of *doxa* allows us to move towards a fuller description of the ways in which my identity as a 'researcher' obscured 'research' itself as a contested and ideologically privileged site (Lilleaas, 2013). For Bourdieu, *doxa* is 'an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-

evident' (1984: 471). The analysis of power expressed by these two concepts can help the collaborative researcher unpack the ways in which we can and do resist particular forms of power and domination in one field, and collude with them in another (Moncrieffe 2006).

The particular discourse I was busy administering represented only one side of the dialectical struggle and one voice in the dialogic story. The other side was variously expressed and enacted by my co-participants as agents of a local street culture partially constructed from a re-purposed image and story about them told from above. There was no cultural capital to be earned by my co-participants expressing feelings of vulnerability among their peers; in fact street culture rewarded interpersonal presentations that flowed in precisely the opposite direction; *habitus*-based inequalities that found normative expression in values like '*swagga*', an embodied disposition that aesthetically extended to both the particular brand and relative 'newness' of one's clothes, while asserting one's individuality, independence, self-reliance and, consequently, dignity.

Our research space flickered into life for only three hours each week; it was simply too temporary and fragile to nourish a countercultural challenge to the reality produced outside it every day. Consequently, when they did get going, our group discussions were for many weeks filled with cautious generalisations and third-person voices, and our social action project (the documentary film) was stymied by a culture of self-reliance that meant individuals were keen to work alone (preferably on their own ideas), and were reluctant to lead, assume collective responsibilities, and even adopt a specific role within the group effort.

Whilst PAR trades on its capacity to deploy multiple and diverse methodologies, many of them purposefully non-scholastic (for example, through use of the arts, oral history and community mapping), this feature alone does not overcome the kind of deficit in personal and collective confidence which profound inter-generational social and economic exclusion will eventually produce. For example, consider the inheritance of a racist discourse, internalised and embodied, that Black men don't do intellectual work. (For an exploration of this discourse and its consequences in a related context see Sewell, 1997). Local street culture, as its dialectical antithesis, had re-claimed this discourse as a site of personal resistance and dignity (synthesis); ascribing status and *respect* (the principal local cultural capital) to young men who moulded their selfhood to its racialised image of hyper-heterosexuality, physicality, self-reliance, and certain expressions of creativity like musicality and entrepreneurialism. Confidence and self-worth were made possible in and by this identity, but only on these narrow terms. This dialectical call and response, whereby 'through

cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that larger forces impose upon them' (Bourgois, 2002, p.17), might have been at the centre of our enquiry, but it was also in the room with us.

Wacquant (2008) describes this dialectic as 'the objective divisions that pattern social space and the subjective visions that people acquire of their position and extant possibilities in it' (p. 197). For example, the extract below reveals how "staying out of trouble", "thinking ahead", "talking posh" or "doing stuff Black people don't do" is regulated by street culture through the out-group accusation and image of "wash out".

> *ASHLEY – This ain't nothing racist but I reckon this neighbourhood needs more White people. The thing is, White people give a good vibe, I reckon White people give a good vibe.*
> *TYREESE – (Pointing at Trigga) If there were more white people here you'd end up like him. (Laughter). Nah, it's a good thing, like, he stays out of trouble, and he like, thinks ahead. He always does stuff, trying to find a job and stuff, that Black people don't do.*
> *SIMON – So why is that like White people?*
> *TYREESE – Because he talks posh! (Laughter).*
> *ASHLEY – White people do have a lot of patience though, you know.*
> *TRIGGA – I have patience, it ain't that hard! You don't have to be White to have patience!*
> *LAWRENCE – Yeah, if someone speaks a bit posh, you gun them down and say they're 'wash out.' (Mockingly) 'So let me wear my saggy trousers and stuff'. You lot just naturally think if you give a Black person a job with money, and you had a choice between the Black man and the White man working with your money, you'd rather pick the White guy just because the way you been built up to think. Like, you just think the Black guy is gonna take the money and run away. (Laughter). That's just how you think in your mind, 'cos you've been stereotyped for so long that that's just in you lot's mind. Once you get out of that you'll feel better.*

In our penultimate session some weeks after the stipend had been discussed and distributed, Tyreese said to the group that he was going to miss meeting every Friday night: "It's good to just chill and talk, it don't ever happen normally. I like it." In the room in the moment, I missed it, but much later his statement on the meaning of our time together (that the value of the project was in the opportunity it provided to relax and reflect) finally penetrated the academic research *doxa* and came into view*;* a moment I caught only when I named the guilt I felt reading it back – an embodied clue

as to the divergence my own priorities had represented and delivered in the project. Confronted by Tyreese's words, I was finally able to recognise and consider that a participatory ethic in these circumstances of exclusion had demanded a radical re-positioning *of research,* and not, as I had tried to effect, a re-positioning of my co-participants (Reason, 2006).

Consequently, perhaps one of the reasons we often seemed 'stuck' in the reflective side of the PAR 'cycle' was because *reflecting* may have been the most meaningful purpose and outcome of the enquiry to the participants. In this, an alternative image and practice of social research emerges, bottom-up; one that assimilates storytelling, testimonial (Brabeck, 2003), and the remembering and naming of cultural experiences and knowledge (Belenky et al, 1997, Quiñones Rosado, 2007). In this re-positioned form of enquiry, a group of young men 'whose members have suffered from diminished senses of themselves by virtue of racism and classism', could use the temporary and fragile research space to nurture a shared understanding of themselves (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, in Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 276). According to Tandon (1988), this is an image of participatory enquiry with an ancient heritage, a history of ordinary people working together to understand their world, most often orally or through the arts rather than by formal research outputs. Because of this form, 'such efforts have been largely unrecognized and delegitimized by those producing knowledge at the dominant centres of societies' (Watkins and Shulman, 2018, p. 270).

Conclusion

> *(LAWRENCE) "Sayin' people in St Pauls is good or bad isn't breaking it down enough. People can be good and bad. Listen yeah, say if my family ain't got no money to eat and I go out a rob some guy for money to feed my family; am I good or bad? Like, what's more important, feeding my family or not being seen as bad by you?"*

By way of a conclusion we wish to briefly consider some of the more actionable insights that fall from this experience and analysis. To do this we must begin with a necessary provocation in order to lift the paper out of a preoccupation with itself and a continued collusion with the very academic research *doxa* we've attempted to describe and de-centre. Because while we have been especially keen to embrace critical reflexivity, we are nonetheless concerned for the ways a self-conscious presentation risks denying and prioritising the suffering delivered into the lives of our young co-participants. The anthropologist Philippe Bourgois describes this as:

> ‘the profoundly elitist tendencies of many postmodernist approaches. Deconstructionist ‘politics’ usually confine themselves to hermetically sealed academic discourses on the ‘poetics’ of social interaction, or on cliches devoted to exploring the relationship between self and other. Although postmodern ethnographers often claim to be subversive, their contestation of authority focuses on hyperliterate critiques of form through evocative vocabularies, playful syntaxes, and polyphonous voices, rather than on engaging with tangible daily struggles. Postmodern debates titillate alienated, suburbanized intellectuals, they are completely out of touch with the urgent social crises of the inner city’ (2002, p.14).

I walked away from St Pauls each Friday night knowing that Jermaine was going home to care for his depressed mother; that Ashley’s mother was exhausted from working double shifts and struggling to find the rent that month; that Lawrence was in mourning for a friend who had killed himself by hanging in the local park; and that Sol (who had initially been keen to join the group) was now in hiding for fear of his life after being accused of a stabbing. I also learned that Ashley gave the stipend to his mother to help her make the rent; that Tyreese gave his to a younger brother for a school science trip, and that Jermaine used his to take some driving lessons on his way to a hoped-for driving job. These tangible actions and what they tell us about the realities and priorities of the material world my co-participants negotiated daily are important considerations in any ethical judgment about my choices, the offer of the stipend, or indeed my co-participants.

In their early ideas for the short film, my co-participants wanted to invite those outside their neighbourhood to consider a less binary judgment of their lives and the choices their environment delivered to them –*“People can be good and bad”.* In this same spirit we think they also invite the would-be collaborative researcher to embrace both/and thinking. My co-participants lived lives filled with love, joy and growth as well as want, violence and suffering. They were at times frustrating and flawed; as was I. And each member could be morally sophisticated in their thinking and appraisal of me and the world around them; as could I. The offer of a stipend acted as an inducement to participate in the project. And, given the material difference it made to my co-participants’ options, it was the right thing to do. Finally, one can work in a critically reflexive way that de-centres ‘truth’ *and* still say something about a material world that is everyday and tangible in its injustices.

A foundational piece of learning from this experience is that the collaborative social researcher cannot hope to engineer another reality where knowledge and power relations will be fixed and can be planned for. Nor should they be seduced by the neatly rendered research write-up, characteristic of an academic research identity, that confers sequential order and clear methodological form but that is not representative of actual experience. As collaborative researchers we must guard against the creation of 'coherence, singularity and closure' where there was none, and avoid creating 'a cosy camaraderie with the reader' in an 'ultimately conservative and uncritical' rendering of the status quo (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 49). Collaborative research is messy, often contingent, rarely emancipatory, and always underpinned by intra- and inter-personal conflict (see Percy-Smith *et al*., 2019). Critical reflexivity is a basic requirement in this context simply because there are no guarantees for what happens in a process of this kind (Pedersen and Olesen, 2008, Arieli et al., 2009, Olesen and Nordentoft, 2018).

Finally, if, as professional researchers, we aim to work in places of significant social exclusion and contribute to a socialisation of meaning that 'restores to knowledge its value as the basis of community' (O'Neill, 1972: xi), then we may have to reconsider our minimum expectations of what must be 'done' for an enquiry to count as 'research'. For as much as this represents a challenge to our ways of working and capacity for self-reflection and critical insight, it is also a challenge to the professional identity of the academic researcher.

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