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The False Paths, the Endless Labors, the Turns Now This Way and Now That: Participatory Action Research, Mutual Vulnerability, and the Politics of Inquiry

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Abstract Participatory Action Research (PAR) and its many variants are rapidly gaining prominence as viable research tools and methodological alternatives to address histories of exploitation, surveillance, and social exclusion, deeply embedded in mainstream research. However, it is at this transgressive intersection of theory, action, expertise, power, and justice that a host of new challenges to the conduct of research in collaboration *with* and not just *on*, or *for* subordinated people, emerges. This article attempts to intimately describe the challenges of using PAR methods to revise Paulo Freire's notion of critical consciousness in the context of a parent organizing group and a youth research project, while taking seriously the speed bumps, multiple subjectivities, implicit racism, sexism, classism, and politics of knowledge production that are too often obscured behind published academic writing.

Keywords Participatory research · Writing · Mutual vulnerability

> "In the social sciences the lore of objectivity relies on the separation of the intellectual product from its process of production. The false paths, the endless labors, the turns now this way and now that, the theories abandoned, and that data collected but never presented—all lie concealed behind the finished product. The article, the book, the text, is evaluated on its own merits, independent of how it emerged. We are taught not to confound the process of discovery with the process of justification. (p. 8)." Buraway et al. (1991)

This article highlights contentious and vulnerable moments I experienced as a beginning researcher working in collaboration with five youth researchers, a community based organization (CBO), to conduct a longitudinal Participatory

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Action Research (PAR) project in the South Bronx. Fundamentally our research was aimed at ascertaining an empirical example of the ontogeny/evolution of critical consciousness across two, and sometimes, three generations of poor and working class Bronxites (Guishard 2005). Relying upon individual oral histories, participant observations, focus groups, and archival analysis I/we sought to understand the history and contemporary conditions under which African American and Latino parents struggled for equal/quality education and social mobility for their children in the context of parent organizing group. The role that participatory research played in assisting young people in nurturing their own political consciousness, while working as youth researchers, on this project was also explored.

The details of my participatory consultation with the youth researchers and mothers and fathers of MOM are elaborated elsewhere (see Guishard et al. 2003, 2005; Guishard 2005), suffice it to say that after two and half years of field work, data collection, and analysis I/we were ultimately successful in:

1. Developing a dynamic social psychological understanding critical consciousness—a conceptualization of "lived" critical consciousness that detailed empirically how people affected by multiple oppressions navigate their disadvantages, while battling an acute awareness of systemic injustice, a burgeoning sense empowerment, feelings of betrayal, and hope.
2. Assisting young people in learning about and bearing witness to the activism that was and is still being conducted by their parents and grandparents on their behalf, while providing an opportunity for them to participate in their own movement toward achieving equity in educational opportunities.

In between these successes, however, there were many difficult gray areas. There were times when I did not know if I was a researcher or friend, when I was actually uncomfortable having to don an academic voice and appearance to add legitimacy to my thoughts, and when I and the youth researchers felt oppressed and not liberated by critical consciousness and participatory research. I also frequently felt unsure if my methods of trying to sustain participation bordered on coercion. I suffered with deep seemingly interminable depression and anxiety about how to write up this fluid, sometimes incoherent, sometimes harmonious project in a linear, "scholarly" way that was respectful of my co-researchers, our participants, and the organization. In this article I will detail two tumultuous periods in this project when I struggled with: integrating existing theory and the data we collected and my shifting multiple identities to this work.

Defining PAR

While PAR and other action research methodologies have varied definitions, these terms are generally used to describe a continuum of research activities with varying levels of participation and control (from low to high) between community-based entities and academic researchers (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Fals-Borda and Muhammad 1991; Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Kangsen-Scammell 2004; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Reason 1994; Wadsworth 1998) PAR projects

should be construed as representing more of stance or posture to research, that aims to develop knowledge, products, and outcomes that are mutually beneficial (to science and humanity), rather than a predetermined methodology, because its characteristics vary widely sometimes employing qualitative, quantitative, and/or combined research methods (Chataway 1997; Khanlou and Peters 2005). Ideally however, PAR aspires to initiate transparent, democratic inquiry; that is collaboratively designed, conducted, analyzed, and disseminated in the context of equal partnerships *with* university scientists and members of disempowered groups (Fantuzzo et al. 2006; Kangsen-Scammell 2004; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003; Mohatt and Thomas 2006). According to Wadsworth (1998) PAR is:

> "more conscious of 'problematising' an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematising it and why we are problematising it; more explicit about 'naming' the problem, and more self conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it…more intensive and comprehensive in our study…more self-skeptical in checking our hunches; attempting to develop deeper understandings and more useful and more powerful theory about the matters we are researching, in order to produce new knowledge which can inform improved action or practice… (p. 4.)"

That is, PAR specifically aims to attend to the politics of knowledge production by problematising and engaging in reflective dialogue concerning whose ideas and viewpoints are traditionally privileged and excluded in research (Torre this volume). In this vein the nonacademic research partners are not viewed as passive, unintelligent subjects, but as people who possess valuable insights and experiential knowledge into the conditions and problems that affect their lives; expertise that is parallel and as legitimate as academic knowledge (Payne and Hamdi this volume).

Initiating and sustaining counter-hegemonic relationships between PAR scientists, their fellow research team members, and participants can be very difficult because the environments we conduct research in often times have vested interests in preserving unequal power relationships (Stoudt and Ayala this volume). Fostering ethical, respectful, relationships with high levels of input, shared agendas, and decision making power can be especially arduous for neophyte researchers because few PAR enthusiasts write about the speed bumps, and *particulars* of the participatory research process (see Chataway 1997 and Weis and Fine 2000 for a notable exceptions).

Why is it important to talk about the difficulties of PAR? What can be gained by providing an example of the in-between-spaces—moments betwixt your formulation of research questions, participant observations, data collection, attempts at triangulation, analyses, and final write up? The goal of this work is not to engage in an exercise of vanity, dissuade usage of participatory methodologies, to endorse positivistic approaches to studies of injustice, or contribute to the qualitative vs. quantitative diatribe. As the utilization of action research projects increases so too does a host of new challenges to the conduct, interpretations, analyses, and dissemination of participatory research emerge at the intersection of the different values systems of science and justice. Though there are many such obstacles,

perhaps the most dangerous one PAR faces is commodification. Action research methods are commodified when they are romanticized and touted as panaceas to institutional racism and structural injustice and when members of disempowered groups are superficially included in research. The recreation of existing knowledge hierarchies like erudite researcher—and unwitting passive participant is an *especially* delicate and subtle appropriation of participatory methods. As a Black female intellectual and organizer, I am thoroughly committed to elevating action research to the mainstream of my discipline, social psychology, not as veneer, decoration, or tasty frosting but as a valid and powerful mechanism of change. But even I, for a time, was guilty of appropriating PAR by neglecting to attend to the politics of inquiry and my own "awakening of critical consciousness," in my work and writing.

The business of who gets to know and theorize about/on others and who is known by eyes that lack self-scrutiny is difficult subject matter in research. As scientists we are ostensibly committed to preserving the myth that research is ideologically neutral and free of biases (Smith 1999). Illuminating the micro-politics of the research process it is at the core of what is beautifully unique, trangressive, but at the same time challenging about conducting participatory research.

PAR requires researchers to be *more* reflective and *more* transparent about our respective standpoints, vulnerabilities, and the limits of our theories and analytical strategies. If we are serious about participatory approaches to research we *must* highlight our blind-spots and biases with as much detail as we spotlight the seeming contradictions and inconsistencies of the people we conduct research with because as the late Cynthia Chataway (1997) advised:

> "This is a method within which the researcher cannot escape vulnerability, nor should he or she try, since mutual vulnerability allows the effects of domination to be reflected upon more accurately and safely (Behar 1996). 'Research that does not reflect on analyze the social context from which it springs serves only the status quo (Kirby and McKenna 1989, p. 16)."

I offer up my own self-critical journey of mistakes, naivete, theories embraced, worshipped, and abandoned, anxiety, depression, identity crisis, and search for a critical race theory that would help me emerge on the other side to contribute to the de-commodification and de-mystification of PAR. I intentionally juxtapose my participants' and co-researchers' moments of vulnerability and contradictions with my own, the evolution of their critical consciousness with mine because this type of counter-hegemonic writing and approach to research is in keeping with the ethics of social accountability, reflexivity, and praxis that is the heart of participatory research.

In the Beginning There was a Motivating…Frustration!

As cliché as it sounds, my desire and passion in undertaking this project embodies the un-divorceable nature of the personal and political. When I began this line of inquiry I was a second year doctoral student struggling to find my intellectual

footing in the academy while the rest of my appendages and body were deeply entrenched in their working poor origins. While I was seasoned in conducting quantitative neuropsychological research I was newly acquainted to empirical research on oppression and to participatory approaches to research. Everything was so new to me that I did what any passionate novice would do, and scoured voluminous bodies of literature (relative deprivation, political socialization, and false consciousness/system justification) in order to find a theory/concept that I could possibly complicate and deepen its understanding using PAR. While I was acutely aware of the scientific racism and classism that perpetually permeates the academy I was still surprised by the realization that the prevailing theories of the social consciousness development of oppressed people were largely posited through white-male-eyes-and bodies from relatively privileged positions. Equally alarming were the resulting deficit, individualistic, and mainly cognitive conceptualizations produced from these locations. Eager to contribute a different perspective to this literature and interrupt the master narrative that theorizes people at the bottom of social hierarchies as resilient despite their intersecting, and multiple oppressions, and inspired by the writings of Martín-Baró (1994) I found the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1994) and his notion of critical consciousness (CC).

What is Critical Consciousness?

At its root critical consciousness has two inextricable components—reflection and action. This reflective action or *praxis* engages disempowered people(s) in unremitting social comparisons and explorations of the causal roots of their material, political, and psychological conditions. These analyses hopefully illuminate the shared, systemic nature of realities that were once perceived as individualized and unchangeable. The awakening of critical consciousness or conscientization refers to the *process* by which members of oppressed groups cultivate abilities to perceive and deconstruct the prevailing ideologies and practices that veil inequalities as legitimate and how they progressively work to change the conditions of their lives through action aimed at restructuring hierarchal power relations (Freire 1970, 1973, 1998). According to Freire (1970),

> "in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform."

From a Freirian perspective the oppressed are not passively ignorant of their suppression, but are obstructed from developing competencies to perceive more nuanced understandings of the multiplicity and intersecting nature of the forces that shape their material deprivations because they are submerged in a matrix of hegemony that suppresses and clouds structural critique and action. This milieu of false consciousness is constructed by dominant groups in order to perpetuate beliefs in a just world and an anesthetized sense of injustice (Deutsch 2004). For Freire

(1970) subjugated people are the only people competent to direct the liberation of all humanity.

The Stages of Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is "the maximum potential of consciousness," the end product of the successful navigation of a series of stages: semi-intransitive consciousness/magical consciousness, naive transitivity/naive consciousness, and finally critical transitivity/critical consciousness (Freire 1998; Mustakova-Possardt 1998; Roberts 2000; Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998). At each of these stages the victims of injustice analyze, understand, and interact with the world in distinct ways. That is on the journey to understand the causal ingredients of their current realities attributions of blame shift from dispositional to situational, the scope of injustice expands, and structural critique, group consciousness, empowerment, and self determination are all catalyzed.

Semi-intransitive consciousness is characterized by limited perception and inability to perceive problems outside of the survival and "biological necessity." People stuck at this stage of consciousness do not have "sufficient distance from reality to objectify it in order to know it in critical way," in other works they lack "structural perception" and thus make attributions to supernatural forces or "to something in themselves (Freire 1970)."

Naive consciousness is marked by fear and vulnerability, by a tendency to diminish and reduce the scope of societal problems, "by nostalgia for the past, by and underestimation of the common man; by a strong tendency to gregariousness, by fragility of argument; by the practice of polemics rather than dialogue (Freire 1973, p. 18)." Said in other terms someone at this stage of consciousness is deeply enmeshed in the dehumanizing throngs of oppression and lacks a sense of historical and contemporary forces impinging on their lives thus they cling to the past unable to imagine a different world and engage in dialogue. Both semi-intransitive consciousness and native transitivity represent a precarious "quasi-immersion" from false consciousness (Freire 1998). For Freire (1973) the progression from naïve transitivity to critical consciousness does not occur seamlessly "achieving this step would thus require an active dialogical educational program concerned with social and political responsibility (p. 19)." In other words without the nourishment of a space were one can reflect, deliberate, and de-ideologize reality, with others, naïve transitivity can revert to a level of consciousness that is immersed deeper into the dehumanizing abyss of oppression than semi-intransitive consciousness. That is critical consciousness needs participatory spaces. Indeed the southern/radical tradition of PAR, deriving from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and critical consciousness are intimately linked (Fals-Borda and Muhammad 1991; Kangsen-Scammell 2004; Khanlou and Peter 2005). Through "authentic collaborations" the academic and methodological knowledge of scientists is married with the concerns, problems, and experiential knowledge of marginalized people. This exchange of knowledge builds capacities for all contributors (Torre this volume). The participant researchers can use the data gathered in PAR to "de-ideologize" their realties,

analyze the source(s) and contextualize the shared nature of their problems, and use this information to advocate for change. For liberation psychologists like Martín-Baró (1994)

> "practical knowledge acquired through participatory research should lead toward the people gaining power, a power that allows them to become the protagonists of their own history and to effect change (p. 30)."

The academic researchers also widen their own understanding of social phenomenon in PAR by acquiring insight into the perspective of affected people rather abstract theories posited from privileged positions. Embracing this new epistemology and critical consciousness of knowledge production in the academy does not endeavor to completely reject existing bodies of research but to reveal the limitations of this "expertise:"

> "have we ever seriously asked what psychosocial processes look like from the point of view of the dominated instead of the dominator…only then will the theories and models show their validity or deficiency, their utility or lack thereof, their universality or provincialism. Only then will the techniques we have learned display their liberating potential or their seeds of subjugation (Martín-Baró 1994, p. 28).

I undertook this work to understand what critical consciousness looks like on the ground, situated in high levels of injustice and action, to move beyond the practice of conjecturing abstract preconditions and roadblocks to developing social awareness toward providing a much needed empirical description of lived critical consciousness. I aimed to understand the nuances of its progression, to gather a deeper understanding of the movements between stages, when perception of the inevitability of one's fate crumbles, and internal attributions of the blame for educational inequities (lack of ambition/drive, bad parenting, "cultural lessons"…, etc.) metamorphose into discontent and outrage, structural critique, despair, and a catalyzed sense of agency.

Meeting the Parents of Mothers on the Move

Serendipity actually provided me with the opportunity to explore my research interests when the CBO, Mothers on the Move/Madres en Movimiento (MOM), in the Bronx was on the eve of celebrating 10 years of fighting for social justice. At the time the organization's pivotal role in instigating social change, in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx was largely chronicled by Bronx media and other outside forces. The member's of MOM desired a history conducted by their own, told from the perspective of the members, a history that they could own and pass on to future generations. Dr. Michelle Fine and I shared with them my desire in detailing lived critical consciousness, and her interests in documenting MOM as a site of urban possibility to be subsumed under the umbrella of a larger project on youth and elder views of the achievement gap across the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area.

Enter the Hunts Point Longwood Historical District of the South Bronx

When one thinks about the Bronx perhaps, the last things that come to mind are generations of passionate and revolutionary activism. I have uncomfortably heard and read my home borough likened to Belfast and Lebanon, other "disorganized environments" (Cohler et al. 1995) and distressed parts of the world. From an outsider's perspective, the section of the South Bronx where this study took place "objectively" fits the criteria for a dangerous space. Take the uptown number six train bound for Pelham Bay Park and depart at the Hunts Point station. Upon arriving on the Boulevard encounter innumerable clothing, fast food, liquor, and 99 cents stores densely positioned together as far as they eye can see, separated occasionally rodent infested empty lots. That you have entered the poorest congressional district in the country might escape your awareness as you walk in the rear and shadows of the largest meat and produce distribution markets in the United States (which Hunts Point residents only recently acquired access to). Observe too many scantily clad women walking briskly on their way to dance, exotically, occupying and hiding in these shadows, hanging out on street corners waiting to pick up a john in the rear of a factor or desolate parking lot too near to neighborhood schools for comfort.

On your walk towards the Mothers on the Move office pass a bodega on every other corner, decorated with vibrant graffiti murals of loved ones murdered or lost due to rampant drug abuse, gang violence, police brutality, or killer commercial trucks. Try to resist inhaling the putrid stench emitted from this heavily industrialized zone, a combination of diesel fuel, left by the 11,000 trucks that deliver goods to the Point daily, and the conversion of the majority of New York City's sewage sludge into fertilizer pellets. This noxious mixture produces abysmal air quality and asthma hospitalization rates that are the highest in the country (Rutenberg 1999; Gittrich 2000; 2001). Yet, amidst this sometimes un-aesthetically pleasing setting, it is not difficult to find *beauty* and hope through, among other things, rebellious parent organizing to resist these oppressions and activist youth research directed at chronicling, witnessing, and joining the struggle on Intervale Avenue.

Vulnerabilities Erupt!

When I began my participant observations at MOM headquarters I was new to the world of grassroots CBOs but felt assured by my extensive theoretical knowledge of PAR, critical consciousness, and my own insight into the realities of living in the South Bronx. Because I lived very close to the Mothers on the Move office and I wanted to get an organic feel for the organization I hung out at the organization a lot. During these visits I was frequently asked to explain the type of research I planned to conduct with children and grandchildren on MOM members. At the time I did not have any examples of my own work so I often brought examples of my colleagues' research with youth. One of these examples was Dr. Caitlin Cahill's work (http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/mainpage.html) on reconstructing stereotypes of urban women of color, living in the Lower East Side, a project in which young women developed and used stickers with negative labels to illustrate the prevailing

conceptions of their identities. The stickers were labeled with common derogations of women of color such as: "lazy" and "on welfare", "burden to society", "likely to become a teen mom", "uneducated" and "promiscuous." By chance my discussion caught the ear of a new tenant organizer I had just finished reading about in a MOM newsletter. In the article she single handedly organized other tenants in her building to petition their landlord to make much needed repairs and convinced tenants them to refrain from paying rent until the repairs were completed. She spoke so poignantly at a recent organizing meeting despite being very pregnant and nauseous, with wisdom beyond her age.

The young woman asked me if she could have some stickers and then proceeded to place them on her shirt while shouting (with what looked and sounded to me) with great pride and in seeming agreement that the labels matched her reality. I think she had missed the irony of the stickers, and invited a new, almost deafening sarcasm and representation of a parent activist into the room. I wish I could say that that was the first and last time I experienced or witnessed an unsettling, and for lack of a better word "contradictory" observation in this project but there would be many more. I will never disclose all of them because I would never want to ridicule, disrespect the generosity, and dignity of the staff, parents, and children of Madres en Movimeinto. I make mention of some of these moments because I know from conferences, course work, and informal correspondence about my work that many beginning researchers have had similar experiences. These observations and my own personal periods of vulnerability while conducting this work also helped me to fully appreciate what the Dan McAdams (2006) calls "problems of narrative coherence" and what I deem the hybrid, polyphonic composition, intricate and delicate nature of forging critical consciousness in contexts with high levels of injustice. As Hill-Collins (2001) notes, "if power as domination is organized and operates via intersecting oppressions then resistance must show comparable complexity (p. 203)."

Constructing My Research Questions

The goals of my research were to gather a deeper understanding of the nuances and progression of critical consciousness. In this study critical consciousness is defined as the continuous process by which parent organizers and youth researchers nurture capacities to identify, perceive, and name the structures, policies, and practices of educational oppression and how they engaged in actions to radically transform these conditions. Further, I wanted to know about the circumstances that assist in the cultivation of *internal* changes in oppressed people's worldviews—when perception of the inevitability of one's fate crumbles, and internal attributions of the blame for educational inequities metamorphose into discontent, outrage, structural critique, despair, and a catalyzed sense of agency. I wanted to investigate critical consciousness empirically to recreate and facilitate these conditions again and again. While many educators and researchers frequently employ critical consciousness in their critique of education, in their analyses of the social, economic, and political inequalities, few explore the notion empirically.

Like many who have tried to import Freire's ideas and utilize them on American soil without reflecting on when his ideas were posited and in what contexts they originated in I made a lot of mistakes. By focusing on the cognitive aspects of critical consciousness development I committed the fundamental attribution error and under-socialized a profoundly social psychological concept. By uncritically embracing Freire's linear stage like progression of critical consciousness I also I under-theorized the fluid, inharmonious, and cyclical process of cultivating lived critical consciousness.

If I'm really honest, and ask myself why I engaged in such theory worship I think I prioritized these frameworks so much because I felt disempowered and unworthy—to theorize, to embrace with a hermeneutic of faith (Josselson 2004) what our data revealed about deficiencies in existing theory. Oral histories that initially read like blatant disregard for our questions during data analysis were in retrospect attempts to enlighten the research team on the true intertwined sources of inequalities in the South Bronx and the complexity and contradictions inherent in cultivating critical consciousness. But who was I, a young Black female social psychologist from the humblest of beginnings, to offer an alternative conceptualization of a well embraced theory? How could I articulate what critical consciousness looks and sounds like outside of a lab, Likert scale, and/or chart adorned in confounds likes history, experience, other extraneous variables, and in contexts that necessitated immediate social action? I started out this journey confident and insurgent, passionately enthusiastic at the prospect of conducting research for women who so resembled my ma, granny, and aunties and with young people who could have been (and later became) my little sisters and brothers. Later I felt overwhelmingly oppressed by the literature on oppression. I'm not quite sure what happened. Even now as I search for reasons they are difficult to articulate, the best that I can convey is the *bleach* almost got me (Fine et al. 2003a, b).

In case you were wondering, the bleach is the pungent detergent of the academy that exemplifies institutionalized racism, sexism and classism in science. It legitimizes and authenticates knowledge by dictating which bodies can conduct research and posit theory and which bodies get to be researched and theorized about (Hill-Collins 1998, 2001). The bleach thrives on homogeneity and depersonalization. Thus any characteristics you share with the subjects and objects of research must be sterilized, because these biases contaminate the purity of the research process and undermine objectivity (Harding 1993). The bleach demands that you "must keep the intellectual, the personal, and the political sharply compartmentalized (Hill-Collins 1998, p. 191). It says that knowledge emanating from marginalized standpoints is unworthy and deficient and it consequently inculcates uncertainty, suspicion, and fear. As Hooks (1991) notes, "such fears inhibit intellectual production (p. 157)." Initially the bleach's toxicity deeply repulsed me and I fought it at every impasse but eventually I tired of fighting and regurgitating it, and later because of its ubiquity, I developed an uncomfortable tolerance for it. That I sometimes unknowingly speak or write to the bleach reminds me of the young parent organizer decorating her clothing with disparaging stickers and how I have at time adorned myself with deprecation.

I later found relief from my depression, solace, direction, and a renewed sense of group consciousness in Black and Chicana feminist writings on resistance (Anzaldua 1987, 2003; Davis 1990; Hill-Collins 2001; Hooks 1991; King 1988; Lorde 1984) postmodern literature on multiple subjectivities (Crenshaw 1991), and critical work on Black intellectual life (Hooks 1991). My research was originally guided by the following research questions:

1. How do parent organizers view educational disparities/the achievement gap? What do they envision are its causes, consequences, and remedies?
2. What do their attributions and organizing experiences reveal about the stages and progression of critical consciousness?

But like much participatory work that is constantly evolving and iterative these queries did not stay my research questions for long. I eventually outgrew them (and developed a semi-permeable force field to thwart the effects of constant bleaching). Because I did not have the benefit of critical race theories, or a critique of academic bleaching at the beginning of our PAR project, I think I may have formed research questions that were dehumanizing to my co-researchers and participants. My initial research questions were potentially dehumanizing because any answers the parent organizers or youth researchers provided forced me to categorize their consciousness as critical or false. This dichotomy not only reified the existing literature on oppression and concientization but it also failed to fulfill my desire to provide an alternative nuanced viewpoint of this theory.

Fast Forward to a Year Later

After our research team conducted and transcribed seven interviews of MOM members, recorded numerous observations at meetings and demonstrations, and after the youth researchers had participated in their own focus groups, I was excited at the wealth of information we collected. Soon afterward my excitement morphed into anxiety, and my anxieties shifted to depression. What were my research questions again? What are "my findings"? How do I write this project up, especially when the representations of the insurgent parent organizers as detailed in the transcripts did not exactly coincide with the hyper consumptive, self blaming, and self derogating more public representations of the same folks I observed at casual meetings or with the stories their children and grandchildren told about them? I did not know what to do. I assembled a research team being and presented what I perceived as my dilemma to the group, after all it was *our* project, Ashley, Christine, Jeunesse, and Travis individually and collectively possessed a wealth of knowledge about our project and multidisciplinary literature on oppression. I was confident that we would work it out as a team. I was so naïve! While the youth researchers were empowered in their role as researchers (when they interviewed parent organizers) they were very uncomfortable with me positioning myself as a learner and with being the participants of the second phase of the project later on. I was supposed to know what to do next because I was the academic, the more knowledgeable research team member. My efforts to maintain transparency, shared

decision making, interpretation, and analysis in keeping with the principles of PAR were rejected.

I remembering thinking that they were beaten up, depressed and anxious in this process too. At first the youth researchers were excited about the project, about the prospect of learning about the work their parents and grandparents were actually doing at the organization, getting extra money, college credit, and traveling to conferences. But later it was difficult to nourish and sustain their enthusiasm because of what they learned about the extent of academic opportunity and resource disparities in education and the multiplicity of forces that were designed to ensure their failure. While Jeunesse below was empowered by the work of our PAR project, Christine was not always as optimistic:

> Kids should be taught about critical consciousness. They need to know what's going on at a young age so that when they get older the truth won't be a surprise to them. Growing up with prior knowledge about life if helpful do that kids can try to do something about it. They'll be able to bet ready and tell their peers what's going on and maybe one day there will be a change. If everyone becomes critically conscious then things will not be the way they are now in the future. Jeunesse, youth research focus group transcript

> During this project I also learned about the activism in my community, the Achievement Gap, and the tracking system (which I never really gave any thought about). I think that there are a lot of good things that can come out of teaching "kids" to be critically conscious, but I feel like there are down sides to it also. It helps kids to question things that they might not question on a regular basis. They want to know the who's, what's, when's and why things are the way they are and hopefully want to find ways to change them or contribute to change them, but on the other hand, kids may find themselves being critical all the time about everything. Sometimes kids may just want to be kids, have fun, and not be so critical all the time. They might find that it will be harder to enjoy a lot of the things that they enjoyed in the past. I say this because from my own personal experience I found myself being very analytical and critical while listening to music or watching a movie. It's hard to have fun and enjoy a song when I am saying "what the hell did Nas just say?" or "I know Jay-z didn't just say that!" Sometimes I just wanted to dance to a song or sing along without feeling that I wasn't critically conscious. Christine, youth researcher, focus group excerpt

Thankfully I had wonderfully supportive parents, an amazing organization to fall back on, and support from Michelle and the Spencer Foundation to finance breaks and much needed fun to get the research team through uneasy times, but I often worry whether the positive aspects of our work was surpassed by the pain.

Later I went home and attempted to integrate the research teams' participant observations and the oral history interviews to answer my research questions. From this individual analysis I gathered that none of the mothers, grandmothers, or fathers we interviewed blamed themselves or their children for contributing to educational disparities. This made sense in terms of Freire's theory of critical

consciousness; parent organizers in their increasing awareness of the ideologies, policies and practices influencing their children's education shifted attributions of blame from themselves to systemic injustice. But this wasn't new, this preliminary finding didn't deepen my understanding critical consciousness and I was not sure if I could generalize these kinds of attributions to all of the parents of Mothers on the Move.

To ensure that I was accurately representing the parents of MOM's perspectives I decided to utilize what qualitative researchers call a member check. I went to an educational committee meeting at MOM, to basically ascertain the validity of the claims I was about to make. The following are my field notes the day after the meeting:

> " …As I attempt to revisit them now, my notes seem hardly legible. Between the constant cross talking, the simultaneous English to Spanish translation, the sounds of ringing phones, and children playing in the next room, I had only managed to make random scribbles. After Serena and Silky introduced me, I asked Christine to take notes, and I tried to explain where we were in the project, what I thought some of the preliminary findings were, and why I asked to be part of this meeting…After presenting this brief snapshot of where we were in the project I asked members the same question the Rockefeller research group (Fine et al. 2004) asked 9,000 teenagers in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area—how do you explain the "academic achievement gap" between minority students and their Asian and Caucasian peers/what factors do you think contribute to the achievement gap? After a brief silence, I explained what I meant by the achievement gap, I also drew a chart of the board (this chart also accompanied the aforementioned questions on the survey), capturing who gets a college degree by age 24 by race and then by social class. My back still turned to the board in an effort to make my handwriting legible, the room erupted…"it's parent's," "it's the kids," "they don't want to learn," "they're lazy." I felt my entire body wince, I quickly told myself to contain any judgmental emotion, and I continued writing, putting their responses in the upper right hand corner of the board. I heard someone say, "you know one is reason is that Black people don't know how to do research" at that I turned around and looked at Christine, "they don't know how to do the necessary research about what you need to know to help your child get into college" the women continued. A chorus of umm hmm's filled air.
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> …I looked at James, the co-director of MOM, and Serena, the education committee facilitator. I don't remember which but one of them interjected but one of the said "what about resources," "what about high stakes testing; what about the finance inequity meeting we're going to next week?" How did the conversation shift from a collective deliberation of inadequate resources, under-qualified teachers, and school personnel to blaming parents and kids for differential college graduate rates? Serena and James looked as bewildered as I was and attempted several times to redirect the attributions of blame toward structural injustice without success."

Monique's Field Notes September 24th 2003

When I attempted to synthesize and juxtapose what happened that night with all of the evidence our research team collected of the amazing activism these parents engaged in, and with the literature on critical consciousness I felt overwhelmed and confused. The members of Mothers on the Move comments' during these and other participant observations could not be conceptualized as critically conscious; they were more suggestive of earlier levels of conscientization (naïve transitive consciousness, of false consciousness and system justification (Jost et al. 2003). As I reflected on the parent organizers oral histories, my participant observations of MOM, the youth researchers' field notes, and my literature review of critical consciousness I recall feeling compelled to impose some notion of appropriate/correct consciousness and correct attributions on their explanations of the gap. I also felt obligated to assert some form of coherence in their discourse. I wanted their justice attributions and perceptions of blame to match their vast experiential knowledge of systemic injustice and their insurgent activism—because that's what over 200 years of literature said and who was I to contest these prevailing conceptualizations.

My mind was in desperate need of mothering so I asked Michelle if we could meet for lunch. I remember staring before talking trying to figure out how to convey without seeming to foolish that I was hopeless mentally constipated despite having read every textbook on qualitative data analysis I could get my hands on. I managed to mouth the words and remember waiting for her response as she took what seemed like a hundred bites out of the world's largest piece of lettuce, she said, "it sounds like you are hiding behind the theory, the moms, and the youth researchers. I was needless to say devastated and confused. What did that mean? If I'm really honest with myself it took months for me to figure it out.

Reading Freire through these pre-modern positivistic lens' I built prescriptions for how oppressed people *should* envision, respond, and act toward their multiplicative and intersecting deprivations. More specifically, materially-underprivileged, social and politically deprived folks *ought to*: perceive themselves and the group(s) they belong to as disadvantaged (Crosby et al. 1989; Gurin et al. 1980; Runciman 1966), reject of the legitimacy of status/power differentials and the ideologies that sustain them, make systemic attributions to societal problems, view the system as changeable (Jost et al. 2003), and possess a consciousness of oppression that is distinct from their oppressors. Upon achieving these realizations, the victims of unjust circumstances must also subsequently engage in collective social action directed at achieving social justice for all of humanity. Any attempt to capture the nuances of the progression and content of social consciousness and avoid this linearity is difficult. In a study of parent involvement and critical consciousness among nine Chicanas, Rosa Furumoto (2003) reached a similar conclusion:

> "One of the problematic aspects of any discussion of human consciousness is the inherent difficulty in describing its dynamic nature. In many obsolete physics textbooks there are descriptions of levels of electron orbits, sometimes

> accompanied by a picture with an electron orbiting around the nucleus. More recent physics books discuss the impossibility of placing an electron in any definite orbit. Instead they refer to orbitals and clouds to describe the electron's location. This example is analogous the following discussion of critical consciousness…human being' consciousness cannot be conceptualized as linear, static, or neatly boxed and labeled (p. 128)."

I found my discipline equally "obsolete" and lacking the language necessary to describe what I have come to understand as the complex personal, social and often cyclical journey of awareness, experience, empowerment, hope, agency and action. I lacked a sense of entitlement to critique and independently theorize about social consciousness fearing that my conceptualizations would pale in comparison to established theorists. I needed to create a coding scheme that could treat the variability I heard and represent the fluid and cyclical dynamics of cultivating lived critical consciousness. I remembered my uncomfortable the lunch with Michelle. What I think she was trying to tell me was that I needed to liberate myself from the confines of parenthetical citations and the dominant theories of oppression. I needed to record my own thinking and embrace my standpoint to this work however, naive, contradictory, and limited my conceptualizations might be because they were as good if not better than theorists before me. This advice, ironically coming from a self-actualized Jewish woman, embodied the essence of black feminist thought and epistemology, the struggle to re-theorize, reanalyze, recover, and discover "the independent, oppositional, yet subjugated knowledge" of women of color (Hill-Collins 2001). By embracing, uneasily, my outsider-within (and at times insider without) positionality to this work as an attempt to re-conceptualize critical consciousness from a standpoint that endeavors to explore the many ways ingenious strategies oppressed folks use while living with, challenging, surviving and thriving despite the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, this work took on an entirely new meaning for me. I learned like Eve Tuck (this issue) by espousing this not so new at all epistemology, in additional to critical race theories, that in my analyses of critical consciousness,

> "it might be more useful to assess Black women's activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women's beliefs systems—whether they hold conservative, reformist, progressive, or radical ideologies based on some predetermined criteria—and more by Black women's collective actions within everyday life that domination in these multifaceted domains."

My Research Question then Became:

1. How has organizing for equal, quality education, resources, and opportunities for their children in the South Bronx influenced parents' awareness and sense of injustice of educational inequity?

I shifted my analytic strategy to detailing and describing the activities the members of MOM engaged in that facilitated the cultivation of critical consciousness. That is I made a distinct stand to interrupt the andocentric tradition of describing development in linear sequential stages to utilizing a more dynamic,

polyphonic unit of analysis—moments of critical consciousness defined as unremitting instances when a person talked about identifying, perceiving or acting on injustice (distributive, procedural, and/or retributive).

Moments of critical consciousness is a unit of analysis that is considerate of the social-psychological dynamics of cultivating critical consciousness because it explicitly analyzes the interminable reciprocal influence of individuals and groups and the multiple contexts they live, work, and play. These emergent moments are not mutually exclusively but are interdependent, nested, and can occur concurrently. Each nascent moment I attempt to detail occurs in the midst of Mothers on the Move organizing activities. Following this analytic strategy three key burgeoning moments of CC stand out:

1. Moments of revolutionary love
2. Moments when the scope of injustice is perceived
3. Moments of contestation/confrontation

What Role did MOM Play in Fostering Critical Consciousness?

What follows is an attempt to particularize the role that Madres en Movimiento's organizing activities played in assisting in the cultivation and sustenance of parent activists' conscientization. However, I do not intend to convey that MOM is the only source of parent activists' critical consciousness. Indeed I aim to communicate that the process of forging abilities to identify and name the multiplicity of forces that shape a person's and groups' material realities are intricate, intersected, and complex. Critical consciousness varies in form and expression, by historical circumstances and settings. I aim to impart that Mother's On the Move is one of very few critically important free spaces pregnant with possibilities for transcendent experiences, emerging thoughts and actions to occur. Organizing activities such as issue meetings, leadership development, public accountability and direct action campaigns build on experiential knowledge, catalyze agency, personal empowerment, group and political consciousness providing fertile soil for the cultivation of nascent moments of critical consciousness. The distinction between developing and cultivating conscientization is ostensibly superficial, but my position is that the former denotes the absence of critical thought and action while the latter subsumes that MOM's organizing activities enhance abilities that parent organizers already possessed prior to formally participating in the struggle for social justice and meeting MOM. In the interests of brevity I will only describe moments of revolutionary love.

Moments of Revolutionary Love

> "Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth. Only love can give us the strength to go forward in the

> midst of heart break and misery…The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change (Hooks 2001, p. 16–17).

Empirical explorations into conscientization largely begin with a moment of emergence from a previous state of ignorance about the causes of oppressive conditions (Mustakova-Possardt 1998; Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998; Watts et al. 2003). None of our oral histories contained narratives of emergence. Most of the parent activists' interviews we collected were replete with stories of informal activism, critique, and resistance prior to joining Mothers on the Move. The roots of these varied activities were an extension of South Bronx parents' parenting practices, motivations, and "desires to improve the lives of their family and neighbors (Naples 1992, p. 447)." Grievance, anger, and frustrations are often discussed as key motivating emotions to engender activism but the foundation of the mothers and fathers of MOM's critical consciousness was insurgent love and concern for their children's welfare and futures. This love catalyzed what researchers like Naples (1992) call political and activist parenting. Activist parenting aims to build positive self images for children growing up in the atmosphere of denigration and sustain hope in the context of rampant injustice and hidden curriculums for parent activists' daughters, sons, and grandchildren. Many grassroots organizations utilize issue meetings and "individual story telling and reflection to help people affirm personal worth and recognize their power to and power with (Veneklasen and Miller 2002, p. 7)."[1] Through organizing activities like issue meetings parents were able to meet in a safe space to: engage in interactive dialogue sharing individual stories of struggle and frustration with their children's schools, reveal personal experiences with power and feelings of powerlessness, and forge strong empathic and loving relationships with other parents and their children. Through issue meetings Mothers on the Move fostered moments of revolutionary love, as parents move from perceiving themselves and their children as individually/uniquely deprived to understanding the collective and shared nature of their problems.

Moments of revolutionary love also built contexts for perceptions of the urgency of mobilizing power and action to ensure the promises of the American dream are kept and that education is an actual, viable route to social mobility for all of the children of Hunts Point. As activists like Davis (1990) note,

> "within every culture in the world, children represent promises of material and spiritual riches that their mothers and fathers have been unable to attain…children make more realizable those aspirations toward progress that are not within their parents reach… today however, the lives and futures of those to whom the dream should be offered are in great jeopardy (pp. 73–74).

Señor Coquí and Ms. Sojourner's narratives below both eloquently capture the dynamics of revolutionary love, which aims to interrupt the cycle of oppression;

[1] Power to is defined as, "the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world." Power within is defines as, "the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfillment (Veneklasen and Miller 2002, p. 7)."

"preserving a vital legacy of collective struggle for freedom" for the community's children (Davis 1990, p. 74), for "as long as I got breath:"

Señor Coquí: "I have a children I have a grandchildren and and and when I see that you know I see all these things happen in my community with the teenagers in my community I looking far and I see my children my little children from 3 years the other one from four, five, six, seven and I see them involved in this problem if I don't stop it if I don't do nothing I'm very sure they gonna be the same the same ah (Looks to his right and asks Monique) How do you say?

Monique: Cycle?

Señor Coquí: (nods) The same cycle.

Ms. Sojourner: My children my daughter, my youngest child is in second year of college. I coulda stopped along time ago, but see I don't take my children I take all…I been living in this community for years so I take all the children in my community to be mine…because I would love to see my neighbor child graduate from college also because I don't have to see them on the corner where they setting him up cause that's what they do they fail our children and set them up for the jail so I will fight til' I cant fight no more as long as I you know as long as I got breath I'll fight for them cause they in my neighborhood and every child is mine

This family atmosphere replete moments of revolutionary love also highlights the need to involve children and spread the legacy of lived critical consciousness across generations so the organization's children "are more politically aware," have abilities to "identify the oppressor" and "organize" for themselves:

Sati: What effect do you think/hope your involvement has had on your children?

Señora Organizadora: Well I know for a fact the change it has had on my children is that they're more aware of oppression what that word means and different ways to deal with it not accepting it so they're they're more politically aware then I think than children who weren't raised in this kind of atmosphere so they can identify injustices pretty quick and identify why that is who's the oppressor and they would know how to deal with an issue you know they would know how to organize.

Discussion

This work detailed a longitudinal ethnographic PAR project which utilized oral histories, participant observation, and archival analysis to elucidate the role that a CBO, Mothers on the Move (MOM), played in supporting and sustaining the

cultivation of lived critical consciousness (CC) for parent organizers. I described the conditions and activities under which poor/working class African American and Latino parents embarked on individual and collective struggles for quality education, and social mobility, against social reproduction, for their children in the South Bronx. I also detailed how the data I gathered on specific community organizing activities like issue meetings, public accountability campaigns, protests, and other demonstrations facilitated the occurrence of transcendent/nascent moments (not levels) of critical consciousness. This article also captured my own emergent moments of conscientization as Black female intellectual contending with inexperience and disempowerment while attempting to articulate an authentic voice and forge a sense of entitlement to critique more established critical and social conscious theorists. Rather than recapitulate this study's major findings I would like to I conclude by offering some cautionary theoretical levers to researchers exploring social consciousness in contexts with high levels of injustice and action in these complex and confusing times.

The first notion I would like to impart is that contradictions and incoherent data are a space to understand and not retreat from social consciousness inquiry. Critical consciousness varies in form and expression across individuals and the contexts that facilitate its articulation. Conceptualizing conscientization in interdependent moments is my attempt to attend to both heterogeneity of expression and the social-psychological nature of this liberating process, while also rejecting the notion of a linear progression. That is individuals' social action, reflections, emotions, and thinking about the forces that shape their realities are not compelled to be the same, nor do we as theorists need to force them into categories such as contradictory or ambivalent to fit our prescriptions.

The second cautionary tale/lever I would like to advance is that studies of political awareness and action need not be qualitative in their methodology but must involve longitudinal inquiry (multiple observations) and include analyses of the researcher's assumptions and position to the people they are theorizing about/or with. Critical consciousness does not develop in a vacuum. Without multiple observations we run the risk of simplifying a profoundly circuitous, contextual, and social process. Without explicit inclusions of the researchers assumptions' and standpoint to their research and participants we disregard the political aspects of PAR, and of conscientization by acting as unbiased and detached voyeurs we contribute to the commodification of PAR. Neither of these exclusions in our academic writing respects the spirit of Freire's imaginings and hopes for critical consciousness.

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