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Troubling PAR: Institutional constraints, neoliberal individualism, and the limits of social change in participatory filmmaking with homeless youth

Dr. Jacqueline Kennelly¹
Dept of Sociology and Anthropology
Carleton University

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This chapter grapples with the dilemmas and contradictions encountered within my recent qualitative, participatory action research (PAR) project with homeless and marginally housed young people in Ottawa, Canada. The goal of the project was to develop a better understanding of homeless youths' conceptions of and engagements with citizenship and democracy, and ultimately to co-design an advocacy project that addressed the civic issues they felt were most important to their lives and well-being in the city. As the country's national capital and site of colonial nation-building aspirations, Ottawa represents a specific space of social and political dynamics encountered by homeless young people on a daily basis. It is also ostensibly the seat of democracy in this settler-colonial nation-state, or at least it carries the visible and symbolic representations of liberal democratic structures through its tourist-drawing parliament buildings and the inescapable presence of thousands of federal public servants travelling to and from work each day. It is thus a particularly fruitful, and often troubling, field site for research with homeless young people on their views of, and experiences with, civic engagement and democratic processes.

The design of the project envisioned three 'phases': the first involved movement-based focus groups and interviews with youth, accessed through local youth-serving organizations and drop-in centres for homeless youth. The second phase mobilized visual and spatial methods in the form of photo journals, walking interviews, and arts-based methods to further develop the research team's understanding of the major issues facing

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the youth in the city (see also Kennelly 2017 and Kennelly under review, for discussion of methods used and their phenomenological underpinnings). The third phase was left intentionally unstructured, with the goal of building a collaborative action-research project with youth participants that would respond in some meaningful manner to the issues they had identified as most salient. As will be discussed throughout the chapter, the unfolding of the action research phase did not follow as expected -- indicating that indeed we had expectations, despite the ostensibly 'unstructured' nature of this phase.

My ambitions with this chapter are threefold: to situate participatory action research within the current context of faddish claims to community engagement by contemporary postsecondary institutions and query the degree of institutional support that comes with such claims; to question the problematic historical and cultural categories that seep into and permeate even the most well-intentioned efforts to engage in participatory action research; and to reflect on the limits to the claims we make as academics -- to ourselves, to funders, and to those who read our work -- about the potential for generating social change through 'action' projects such as the one described here. In other words, and as indicated by the title of this chapter, I seek to 'trouble PAR' through a deep reflection on my own complex process of undertaking a project that falls within this category. While remaining committed to many of the ethical and epistemological orientations that are associated with participatory action research and its cognate approaches (variously called Community Based Research, Participatory Research, Community Based Participatory Action Research, etc), I seek here to uncover some of the troubling fissures and faultlines of undertaking research of this kind within the contemporary neoliberal context. In doing so, I wish to contribute to discussions occurring within this edited volume and elsewhere about the implicatedness of our own research efforts, and the manner in which we are both constrained and enabled by historical and contemporary circumstances to generate the work that we do.

In what follows, I begin by examining the underlying and generally unarticulated assumptions and cultural pressures associated with 'participation' and what this means in the context of intensifying social inequalities and the tyranny of 'community-engaged research' discourses emerging from institutional sites such as universities. Following Dillabough's (2008, 205) caution to be conscious of the manner in which research may result in reproducing notions of young people "as a potentially banal, paralyzing category who [have] either been 'deconstructed' or redeemed as ... autonomous liberal actor[s] only through the agency of the research," I move on to consider the weight of sedimented categories of youth 'citizenship' and its entanglement with (neo)liberal individualism. More specifically, I interrogate how cultural assumptions about the 'good, rational and responsible youth citizen' are smuggled into PAR designs, even by researchers -- such as myself -- who have attempted to disentangle and critique these problematic cultural categories. This is in keeping with Dillabough's incitement to "assess ... youth poverty in the present [by seeking] to capture this 'space of experience' as the past made present" (Dillabough 2008, 208). In other words, part of my task here is to interpret current manifestations of youth experiences and articulations through the lens of historicity that appreciates the 'surplus meanings' that manifest, as old meanings are reappropriated and integrated into new meaning-making processes for young people and the researchers who

work with them. This weight of historicity also bears down on the researcher's perspective and experiences. For instance, gendered structures of feeling impact upon researchers in particular ways within the generally feminized space of participatory research. I turn to reflections on this in the middle part of the chapter. I finish by considering both the question of 'action' and its meanings and limits, as well as the impact of institutional processes that are not aligned with the rhythms and requirements of community research.

Neoliberal individualism, Canadian universities, and the community-based participatory action research paradigm

Canadian university strategic plans, websites, and press releases are littered with references to community engagement, benefitting the community, and overcoming the gown-town division that has ostensibly marked historical post-secondary institutional relationships with the municipalities in which they reside. The reality of this history is, of course, more complex, but the public perception of post-secondary institutions -- particularly universities -- as 'ivory towers' disconnected from the everyday concerns of the communities in which they are located is a pervasive one reproduced through everyday sites such as news media and popular culture. Carleton University, my institutional home, is no exception to claims-making about its community focus. Its most recent strategic plan, covering the years 2014 to 2018, is entitled "Sustainable Communities – Global Prosperity" and includes multiple statements about the importance of engaging with community, such as this one:

Carleton will conduct research, develop programs and undertake other initiatives that foster further understanding of community strengths, needs and interests, build community capacity and enhance community sustainability. Our initiatives will focus on regional community development across Canada and around the world. We envision significant engagement with communities in eastern Ontario, Aboriginal communities and northern communities (<https://carleton.ca/sip/wp-content/uploads/Strategic-Integrated-Plan.pdf>, p 5).

Despite such community-oriented rhetoric, researchers engaging in community-based participatory research will be familiar with the ongoing institutional and systemic barriers that continue to marginalize our research projects, from unfavorable responses by research ethics boards to pressure to publish faster and with single-authored pieces in the interests of attaining tenure and/or promotion -- practices that are typically antithetical to the timelines and ethics of participatory community-engaged research. I am thus in no way suggesting that contemporary Canadian institutions now privilege or create particular space for the type of community-engaged participatory research I am describing here, though perhaps it is fair to say that there is more legitimacy lent to community-based participatory research than in previous years. Institutions are certainly pleased to make use of such research to promote their image as community-engaged, in keeping with the claims made in strategic plans. The research I am describing here has

been used in just such a way (with my active participation, for my own ends) and has been featured on Carleton's website and within a publication directed at alumni.

Appeals to community-engaged research have many roots, and not all of them are easily aligned with progressive goals and the expansion of justice for marginalized peoples. As Alastair Roy notes in the UK context (2012, 638), "Some may see PR [participatory research] as a form of consultation, some as a mode of emancipation, some as a developmental opportunity, some as a political activity, some as a mode of articulating needs and others as a more traditional enterprise in generating new knowledge." In the Carleton University case, community-engaged research projects that have been showcased range from grassroots collaborations such as my own to providing student volunteers to the RCMP (the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the federal policing institution), to collaborating with government bodies on issues of urban planning. What these initiatives share is little beyond the fact of bringing together staff from the university with individuals who work or live outside of the university. The notion of 'community' is stretched almost beyond recognition here, but this matters little to the promotional machinery that seeks to position Carleton at the vanguard of "regional community development."

There are several assumptions that lie beneath claims about the efficacy and importance of community-engaged participatory research. Those which are most often articulated seem transparently positive, such as acknowledging that individuals and organizations outside of the university are also bearers of expertise, and that research ought to be applicable and useable beyond the confines of academic conferences and journals. But other assumptions are less explicit, for instance, the assumed subjectivity attributed to those who engage in participatory research. As Roy (2012, 637) points out, "The ideals of PR [participatory research] appear to embody the current political vision of rational, independent, autonomous and agentic citizens" – in other words, the neoliberal citizen. The neoliberal citizen is a phantom accompaniment to many participatory community projects, including my own: the self-directed and responsabilized individual who can move in a straightforward manner from insight to action. This phantom recurs in many otherwise critical accounts of participatory research and its constraints, for instance the claim made by Garcia et al (2014, 19), that "Youth in participatory action research may demonstrate increased self-efficacy... and be less likely to engage in risk-taking behavior and more likely to engage in subsequent civic activities." The redemptive narrative of PAR as the means by which young marginalized people are rehabilitated into 'good citizens' reproduces a historically entrenched discourse of young people as inherently lacking and requiring remediation to save them from the grips of 'bad citizenship' in which they otherwise become caught (see Kennelly 2011; Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011; Kennelly 2009 for further discussion of the neoliberal elements of contemporary youth citizenship).

The phantom of the neoliberal citizen, or the transparently rational, self-reflexive, liberal individual (Brown 2005; Rose 1999; Wacquant 2009), is also reproduced through claims about the 'authenticity' of the perspectives and views of community-based research participants. Julia Janes (2016, 78) critiques this tendency as the function of

unacknowledged power relations in community-academic collaborations:

The subordination of community knowledges frequently operates in CBPAR [community-based participatory action research] discourses that valorize community knowledges as more ‘authentic’. This quest for unmediated representation not only obscures the labour of community knowers, but the labour of their elite partners. ... This valorizing of the local also obscures that dominant discourses are reproduced by community, as well as elite, knowers.

The notion of community participants as unproblematically ‘authentic’ in their perspectives maps onto the rational, liberal individual inasmuch as it strips participants – and researchers -- of their embodied and affective embeddedness in historical, political, and social contexts that obscure relations of inequality. In other words, participants are expected to ‘see through’ conditions of systemic marginalization and oppression, rather than reproduce them. For instance, Smith et al (2010, 413) comment that “The ideals that we embraced in PAR [participatory action research] corresponded to a valuing of participants’ views, yet we had (naively) not expected that participants’ understanding of their own community would have been so thoroughly shaped by dominant culture ideologies.” This self-professed naïveté emerges directly from the hegemonic notion of participatory research as inherently emancipatory, representative and democratic (Smith et al 2010; Garcia et al 2014; Clover 2011), and also the general lack of engagement within participatory research literature with social theory and its insights into conditions of marginalization and inequality. For instance, anyone familiar with the work of Pierre Bourdieu would recognize the salience of his concept of ‘symbolic violence’ in accounting for the reproduction of ‘dominant cultural ideologies’ by marginalized peoples (see also Kennelly 2016).²

The neoliberal citizen haunted my own participatory action research project from its inception. As noted above, the design of the project envisioned a final ‘phase’ that took the insights generated from the previous two phases and transformed them into some sort of ‘action’ or advocacy project that would address the issues raised. Although I had written this element into the project myself, I was plagued by a consistent low-level feeling of ambivalence about it, one I could not place until fairly far into the project. The opportunity for young people to create an advocacy project was a big selling point to the youth centres who granted us access to their young clients – the gatekeepers – as they felt it was distinct from the model of research they had come to mistrust as ‘taking’ from young people without ‘giving back.’ It was this same sensibility that brought me to design a project with an action phase, grounded in my own history of activism and resonant with the oft-repeated experiences of service providers who perceive researchers as oblivious to the harms they do to an already over-researched population (homeless

² Bourdieu (2000, 170) describes symbolic violence as, “...the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination) when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator, which, being merely the incorporated form of the structure of the relation of domination, make this relation appear as natural.”

youth).³ The action research component was also a vital element that attracted two talented graduate research assistants to apply to work with me on the project, both of whom had experience in the community service provider sector (see Kennelly, Stam, and Schick 2018). Finally, I am a researcher with fifteen years of experience conducting ethnographic and arts-informed research with young people, and although this prior research has not incorporated explicit claims to being participatory or action-oriented, it has carried this same sensibility of ethical engagement, open communication of findings, and creating meaningful research that can contribute to a more socially just world. What was it, then, that sat uncomfortably for me in the excitement that the as-yet undefined ‘action phase’ generated from service providers and student RAs?

As our project progressed, my anxiety about this component only increased. This is reflected in the following excerpt from a transcribed discussion between myself and my two graduate RAs after one of our focus groups in the first phase of the research:

Jackie: The thing that worries me or that I'm most anxious about, about this project, is the moving into action component. Right? What that is going to look like, how to make it feasible. So when we were talking about the problems [with the youth participants] and they're HUGE, right? And that's great, I'm glad they're talking about poverty. They're talking about, like how unsafe it is in Ottawa. But in the back of my mind I'm thinking, oh my god, how are we going to get from here to [action]? And it's still not clear to me.

These comments capture the essential tension I felt throughout the project between my own lived sense of social change as difficult to achieve, and the celebratory rhetoric of ‘youth civic engagement’ that everyone loved when I told them about the project. It was not until much later, as I was thinking through the components of this chapter, that I identified this as the haunting effects of the neoliberal citizen at work.

In my earlier ethnographic work on youth activism, I note the troubling relationship between youth and citizenship as follows:

[D]iscourses of ‘youth citizenship,’ and the desirable qualities that are attached to this status— which is not about legal belonging within a state but rather about identity and characteristics seen as valuable by the state— function as a form of governmentality designed simultaneously to shore up state power and disperse potential threats to that power (Kennelly 2011, 25).

I go on to trace the manner in which neoliberalism has created a fundamental contradiction for young people vis-à-vis citizenship. Due to its valorization of independence and rationality, neoliberalism has rendered full citizenship (in the sense of identity and attributes) as something attainable only by those who are seen to be fully

³ I have been privy to these critiques of researchers from service providers in various settings, most recently in my role as the co-Chair of the Research and Evaluation Working Group of the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa, a body that brings together researchers, advocates, and service providers in efforts to better respond to the homelessness crisis in Ottawa.

independent – not young people, in other words, and certainly not homeless young people. As I note,

That citizenship has always been associated with those privileged few who have been at the centre of political and social structures has more recently been mystified by the supposed ‘equality’ that liberal democratic regimes are meant to uphold, and the concomitant call for universal citizenship participation. ... The ‘good citizen’ of the contemporary moment continues to valorize a particular kind of middle-class enactment and set of assertions ... ‘Active citizenship’ ... functions in this regard as a particular kind of neoliberal injunction ... to shift the burdens of state responsibility away from the government and towards the individual (Kennelly 2011, 140).

The phantom of the neoliberal citizen, then, is one that assumes a set of individualized and classed capacities that may not be accessible to homeless youth from poor and working class histories – or indeed, may not be available to *any* young person without extensive coaching and sculpting of CVs and biographies. Although the notion of youth citizenship is culturally valorized as an aspirational identity that any young person ought to be able to achieve – hence the excitement about moving the young people in the project to ‘action’ – it is in fact a category with deeply classed, raced, and colonial histories. It presumes an ability, and a desire, to transform present circumstances into something better, the classic ‘pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps’ neoliberal approach to poverty. It locates the impetus for such actions within individuals, rendering them as individual problems to be overcome, rather than recognizing the decades-long collusion of state-driven policy shifts that have resulted in, for instance, the homelessness crisis in Canada today. It also entirely overlooks the actual skills and capabilities of homeless young people, which are numerous and inspiring, and their ability to survive circumstances that would crush many others. These survival mechanisms are often criminalized (such as sex work, using marijuana to self-medicate, or panhandling) and thus can also result in their further marginalization, reinforcing state structures that keep the poor in poverty and shore up the middle and upper classes within the mythology of a meritocracy.

This tension between the neoliberal citizen that I had unwittingly smuggled into my research design and the divergent skills, interests, and capacities of my research participants became apparent when we attempted to move from the information-gathering stage of phase 2 to the action stage of phase 3. First of all, there was the pragmatic challenge of bringing the same young people through the entire project from start to finish; given the instability and chaos they faced on a daily basis, this proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. In the end, we settled for working with youth from the same drop-in centre, with only a few young people participating in more than one phase of the project. When we were ready to move on to phase 3, only three youth turned up for the focus group discussion about moving from insight to action; all three had participated in some elements of phases 1 or 2. As we discussed the possible action projects we could undertake to address their issues and concerns in the city, the first suggestion by a participant was to make short films. The youth at this particular drop-in centre had

recently participated in another film project, so it was fresh on their minds as a desirable goal. Subsequent suggestions ranged from the improbable to the impossible, given the constraints of time and resources that we faced. I was particularly stymied when Ben⁴ offered this suggestion for an action project:

Ben: I've seen that – how do I explain it? The human race I guess, has actually taken away the actual meaning of it, like, the Bible. The Bible is bogus, bogus stuff because if there was a God, well, there is something that made everything but if there was one God that, there wouldn't be a hundred Bibles. So if there's a hundred different types of Bibles out there that means none of them are true. And I have done, I've read, when I was in jail a bunch of the Bibles and there is no meaning of life in the Bible so that's all hogus bogus stuff. So, I like doing, I like reading up on history and stuff like that and I think life got taken away after the Romans. Romans were a lot about other planets, statues of women, they always had a presence of life and then after that got taken away they, like, if you go back towards England and all of that, there's nothing there really. And so what I want to do is bring more of the country to the city and have more statues and a painting showing the meaning of life and what the meaning of life is. I want to make two books. Two books, the book of creation and the book of life because there's life and then there's creation, which made mankind, and a painting. There's a painting I want to do with a guy, with a man sitting down looking at his hands because what life is, is it could go vice versa but a man is usually the creator. That's how it went, like, the woman would stay back, take care of food, take care of the house type thing, the kids, and the guy would have to go out and do things like go hunt, go get things for the woman type thing. So my mum always told me that I had the hands and heart of God but the soul of a devil. So what I want to do is a guy sitting down with one hand kind of like giving, like, trying to help and then one hand squeezing, trying to show the different sides of the two. And then a woman standing behind them showing the meaning of life because if you can bring life you can also take life away. So what I want is kind of 50-50 with her, too, so kind of like flowers coming down around the bad side and then the good side would be the dying side. So it would be kind of a circle effect there. So showing the meaning of life would probably be a lot more. Uh, I don't know. It helped me a lot with my life. Kind of showing, like, if you think, that your life is all fucked and you think everything around you is fucked or like just what's going on is fucked but then when you can understand the actual, what's going on around the whole world, you'll see like it ain't so fucked up. The whole world's fucked up. You know what I mean? Kind of takes a step back and realizes wait a minute, if I could change my life around and do it and think the way I want to think and the way I think is right, then fuck what everybody else has to say because who says that they're right? You

⁴ All participant names are pseudonyms.

know? What do you do? What do you say? What do you think? You know what I mean? So. When you think the normal things and the right things it's the right way to go.

Jackie: All right. That's ambitious.

Ben: It is. But.

Jackie: It might be more than we could do in our project.

My efforts to manage Ben's expectations seem somewhat petty in comparison to his expansive vision for a public art project that would take on the meaning of life, gender relations, and the fallacies of Biblical prophecies. Ultimately, we decided to proceed with the first suggestion -- to make short films -- although even these seemed ambitious to us at the time, as a research team without film experience and no budget allocated to the costs of filming.

On the tyranny of 'participation', or, feminized liberal guilt

Christine Rogers Stanton (2014, 574) points to the following three values as guiding the work of community-based participatory research (CBPR): "Scholars should recognize and value the community as a partner in the process, research should be comprehensively collaborative, and results should benefit all partners through continuous action and clear applications." Although she troubles these expectations by noting that (2014, 574), "[d]espite its potential, the practice of CBPR often falls short of its theoretical goals for several reasons," she concludes by locating the failure with the research and the researchers, rather than the paradigm itself. These failures result in what she describes as "abridged or superficial versions of CBPR" (2014, 574).

The fear that I would be guilty of conducting 'abridged or superficial versions' of participatory research haunted this project as persistently as did the neoliberal citizen. Once we had decided on films as our action component, I was immediately beset with the fear that this was not going to meet my own unspecified vision for action research and its results. In the grant application I wrote to fund the project, I gave the example of helping the youth advocate to city council to provide accessible public bathrooms for homeless people. It was only an example, as I made clear in the grant that the action research component would be led by the interests and issues raised by the youth, but it points to the kind of concrete and specific advocacy project I was envisioning, ideally leading directly to positive impacts for the young people themselves. Films were not this, at least not on their own. Also unclear to me was whether we ought to train the youth to make their own films, in order to maximize the 'participatory-ness' of our participatory action research. Our intention was to keep working with the same drop-in centre and continue to recruit new and returning participants to this next phase of the project; with this in mind, we did explore the option of training the youth to make their own films, but concluded that it would be much more time-intensive and not necessarily yield films that spoke to

the issues we had explored to date with the young people. It also would mean involving fewer young people in the film project, given the intensive training and time required.

Alastair Roy (2012, 650) frankly addresses the prevailing mythology that being ‘participatory’ means maximizing participation at all levels: “It is important to move beyond the notion that all that is required to solve the problems of PR [participatory research] is more involvement in fieldwork.” He goes on to note (651):

It is reasonable to make the case for PR designs in which participation occurs to different degrees and in different stages of the research process including some parts where there is no participation (McLaughlin, 2010). This may happen because people express more interest in certain elements of a project, because some of those who take part have certain skill sets or forms of knowledge others don’t have or because certain projects prioritize particular objectives over others.

In spite of this very reasonable assertion, the guilt about being ‘participatory enough’ is one that appears to haunt many researchers. As Julia Janes (2016, 82) confesses, “my most common source of guilt paralleled the literature: that of ‘not being participatory enough.’” Janes notes this profession of guilt as one that is reproduced in other participatory research literature, notably to resuscitate the ‘goodness’ of the [female] academic, through indulging in what Wanda Pillow (2003) calls the ‘confessional tale.’ As Janes (2016, 82) points out:

Inquiries into the academic subject are rare in the CBPAR [community-based participatory action research] literature, who remains monolithic and monochromatic, except perhaps in her femininity. However, certain discursive themes mark the CBPAR researcher: she is a ‘good’ alternative to the ‘parachute in and parachute out’ researcher who mines community knowledges for professional gain (Healy, 2001; Stoecker, 2009). Her ‘goodness’ is articulated through claims to being ‘useful’ and ‘empowering’ (Dick, 2010; Israel et al., 1998).

It is noteworthy that Janes marks the participatory researcher as female here, particularly when referencing guilt as an affective response to the limits of participatory research. In my previous research on youth activism, I identified the prevalence of ‘guilt’ as motivator and debilitator for young women engaged in global justice organizing, pointing out that “Guilt belongs to women under retraditionalised forms of gender in modernity” (Kennelly 2014, 246). Could some of the same dynamics be at play within the generically female participatory researcher? Sandra Bartky (1990) noted the connection between women and guilt almost three decades ago; it is a gendered emotion with precedence.

What is important in discussing the relationship between women and guilt is not to locate this emotional response as an individualized feeling, but rather as a social one: “Guilt is a signpost, not an objective fact that stands separate from the social context of how gender

is lived in our high modern societies, but an indicator of some of the strains and threads that run through contemporary gender relations” (Kennelly 2014, 242). In my earlier work, I connect women’s experiences of guilt to both traditional gender roles and the imperatives of neoliberal citizenship (Kennelly 2014, 246):

It is not surprising that under increased pressures to become more self-regulating and to shift the emphasis of care away from the state and towards individuals that women have come to play a central role. As Ruth Lister ([1997] 2003) and other feminist theorists of citizenship and the state have pointed out, the public/private divide that has been at the centre of liberal notions of citizenship has often left women in the position of private caregiver, located within the domestic realm. As the public gives way under neoliberal pressures to an enhanced place for the private – through shifting the focus of public care away from the state and towards individuals – it is women who fill in the gap left by the retrenched welfare state. Simultaneously, as women play a larger and more visible role within the public, the sedimented burdens of gendered expectations for care and nurturance shift with them, following them from the devalued private sphere and into their new roles within the public.

If the participatory researcher is generically female – or, more accurately, is operating within a feminized space – then perhaps this is why guilt seems to have become one of the emotions that circulates and attaches itself to participatory research, specifically the question of ‘participatory enough?’. As Sara Ahmed (2004, 4) points out in her phenomenological work on emotions,

Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others.

While the question of whether research is adequately participatory is, on the one hand, an ethical question with material impact, the experience of female researchers such as myself of never being ‘participatory enough’ – and the guilt attached to that feeling – may be an indicator of something altogether different. The unspecified, and unspecifiable, metric for being sufficiently participatory, or for producing research that is sufficiently action-oriented (more on this below), sets researchers up for inevitable failure – or at least, the constant fear of not having done ‘enough’, a fear that echoes eerily with the experiences of the young female activists in my previous study (see Kennelly 2014).

Aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical issues of films as action research

Other ethical and pragmatic dilemmas emerged with the decision to make short films as

the action component of the project. Gallagher and Kim (2008, 112) point to the importance of understanding “the aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical impact of video on research relations and knowledge production.” One of the aesthetic and ethical issues our research team contended with was the question of how visible youth ought to be in the films; in other words, the perennial research ethics question of ‘confidentiality’ took on a new tenor. We also encountered at least two epistemological issues, the first emanating from the research institution itself (i.e. Carleton University), and the second relating to the question of how to translate films into ‘action.’

After deciding on films as the ultimate goal, we developed a process to narrow down the topics. We held three distinct focus group discussions, with different groups of homeless young people, where youth participants ‘voted’ with stickers on a chart for the top three issues they thought ought to be covered. Of all aspects of the project, this felt the most participatory and the least ethically troubling, in part because there was a clear and broad consensus that the top two issues the youth felt ought to be documented through the films were youth-police relations and decriminalizing marijuana. There was less clarity about what the third issue ought to be; each of the three focus groups generated a different third priority issue. I ultimately decided to focus the third film on transitioning out of homelessness, which had been one of the issues identified. This was in part an effort to resuscitate the ‘action’ aspect of the film project, as I thought the film might be directly useful in the context of a community project to support youth out of homelessness with which I was also engaged (see <http://endhomelessnessottawa.ca/a-way-home-ottawa/> for more on this project).⁵

Given that two of the three films were going to directly tackle issues that might put the participants at risk if their identities were revealed – through discussions of illegal behaviour (smoking pot) or negative interactions with police – we were extremely concerned with how to protect their confidentiality while still making the films visually and aesthetically pleasing. We recruited a talented local filmmaker to handle the technical aspects of filming, and ultimately it was his deft handling that created the balance between visually interesting footage and concealing the youths’ faces. We chose not to alter their voices, however, and made it clear to them through special consent forms just for the film project (more on these below) and through discussion prior to filming that someone who already knew them may be able to identify them by the sound of their voice. We were fairly confident, however, that they would not be identifiable to people who did not already know them. We also gave them as many opportunities as possible to review the films and remove any parts with which they felt uncomfortable; just as was the case with the project itself, the chaos and instability of these young people’s lives meant that only two participants (of eight) from the filming day showed up to these review screenings.⁶ I emailed everyone with the draft version of the films, but received

⁵ The other issues that were identified as of interest to the young people included youth hangout spaces, CashStop/Money Mart shops and how they exploited the poor, literacy, economic segregation, addiction, and youth political action.

⁶ As was true throughout the project, we recruited participants for the filming by posting a notice in the drop-in centre and asking them to sign-up with youth workers if they’d like to participate. We also notified former participants by email (if they had provided an email address) to let them know the filming date and

neither confirmation nor feedback. In the end, we had to proceed with our own sense of what would be safe to reveal for the participants, while still trying to accurately convey the complexity of the issues they had identified.

The new film consent form generated its own multi-faceted epistemological conflict between us as researchers and the university as institutional body invested in protecting itself from perceived 'risk.' In good faith, I approached the Carleton research ethics board to discuss how best to proceed with films, while ensuring that the youth were protected from harm (as research ethics is meant to do). I was referred to the university's 'risk manager'; he suggested I send him the draft film consent form I had been working on, and he would offer feedback. When I received his notes, I was shocked and horrified. He had added a clause to the consent form that read, "although every effort will be made to ensure individuals cannot be recognized by physical appearance or voice, Carleton University and its employees, officers and agents will not be held liable for damages of any kind arising from the use of the participants' image and sound including voice." The statement was clearly intended to protect Carleton University from the risk of litigation, rather than to protect our research participants from potential harms. It also, as I pointed out in my email response to the ethics board, threatened to undermine the previous eight months' worth of trust-building that we had undertaken with both the youth and the community organization. To ask them to engage with us through a multi-staged research project, revealing vulnerable details about their lives, then to address them as potential litigants against whom we needed to protect ourselves, was to commit an extremely troubling betrayal of the research relationship we had been working to establish.

Ultimately, we were not required to include such a statement on our film consent form, but the experience left me feeling fairly cynical about the university's professed commitment to supporting community engaged research. In a follow-up meeting with the chair of the ethics board, it seemed that the issue was less one of intent and more of an overwhelmed board and staff trying to handle more than was feasible – a perennial condition of contemporary academic life, as I have discovered through my relatively junior career as a university faculty member. This led to my original question to the research ethics board being farmed out to the 'risk manager', whose job IS to protect the interests of the university. In other words, he is not at all versed in the conditions of research ethics or the TCPS 2 (Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans), which ought to guide all research ethics decisions. I would not, in the end, go so far as to suggest this as a systemic failure on the part of Carleton's research ethics office, though I have heard colloquial stories of other troubling encounters with the board that mirrored my own in various ways. The struggle between research ethics *in practice* versus research ethics *as procedure* is well established in existing literature on qualitative research (Ells 2011; McCormack et al. 2012; Guillemin and Gillam 2004). In this case, the issue was complicated by institutional and workload issues that threatened the very foundation of our always-delicate research relationship with our participants and the community organization that acted as gatekeeper.

give them an opportunity to sign up before others who had not been involved in the process thus far. In the end, five of the eight youth who took part on the filming day had participated in some capacity in the previous phases of the project, while three were completely new to the project.

The final issue I would like to explore here is one with which I am still struggling: can we really call the creation of films an *action* project? As discussed above, my original conception of action involved some concrete intervention into the public sphere, in a manner that would have direct and observable impacts. There may be remnants of the phantom neoliberal citizen playing out in this desire: am I seeking ‘measurable’ and ‘efficient’ results, congruent with the neoliberal emphasis on efficacy and quantitative outcomes? I am not sure; I live in this cultural space, and so I absorb these cultural ideas and ideals, despite efforts to critically analyze their effects. Perhaps the desire has a different genesis, rooted in a radical ethic of transformative possibilities, and the importance of mobilizing research to make the world a more socially just place. More likely, it is a bit of both. I am compelled by Megan Boler’s (2008, 31) statement that, “As researchers, we face the challenge of injecting complex research into the public sphere – a challenge that public intellectuals need to take seriously by developing our rhetorical and popular means of interpreting our research into public debate.” I believe that the films we generated go some way towards meeting this challenge, but is that sufficient for an action research project committed to social change?

The question of what constitutes ‘action’ within participatory action research is not clear within existing literature. For instance, unlike me, Smith et al (2010) seem quite comfortable with categorizing as ‘action’ the documentary film that emerged from their community-based participatory action research project with homeless participants. The definition provided by Hilary Bradbury-Huang (2010, 93), in her article entitled “What is good action research?”, seems rather too broad to be useful: “action research represents a transformative orientation to knowledge creation in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers.” This has *always* been my approach to research, including in projects that I would not label as ‘action research.’ Like David Matthew (2002, 12), “I agree with much of the spirit of such an approach, but want to raise some warnings about the practicalities.”

In an effort to actualize my original vision of creating an ‘action’ project that would have some positive impact in the world, our research team worked to extend the life of the films beyond our immediate circles and circulate them strategically to people who could make good use of them. We created a resource guide to facilitate educational discussions in classrooms or community settings about the films and the issues they raised. We conducted a Twitter campaign, sending the films out to community organizations, policy makers, and other academics working in the areas of youth, homelessness, policing, and drug policy. I have personally screened the films in various academic and public settings, including at the City Hall annex of the Ottawa Art Gallery, at a launch event for a national youth homelessness initiative, at conferences in Ireland, England, Thunder Bay, St. Catharines, and Vancouver. I have shown the films to service providers and homeless young people in Ottawa and Manchester, UK. The youth and policing film has become the basis for several Grade 10 Civics projects initiated by a not-for-profit organization called Youth Ottawa, who work with Grade 10 students in Ottawa high schools to engage them in meaningful civics projects. I have heard from colleagues who have used the films in their classes for various reasons; I have also been invited to show the films to classes ranging from first year Sociology to graduate level Geography.

I am proud of the films, and colloquially I know they have an impact on people who view them. I have had several encounters that have reinforced this perception. After screening the films at the annual Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa research forum in November 2015, I was approached by a woman who had been in the audience. She told me that she had also been homeless as a younger person living in London, Ontario, more than a decade ago, and she had been struck by how similar the experiences of the youth in the films were to her own. Another encounter occurred after I showed the films at an event organized by the Carleton University Criminology Students' Association. One of the other speakers for the evening was a former OPP (Ontario Provincial Police) officer. After watching the films, she approached me with tears in her eyes to tell me that the film about the youths' experiences with police was very accurate, and that this was the reason she had left policing.

Hannah Arendt wisely notes that we can act in the world, but we can never know how our actions will impact the world in which we act: "action...acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes" (1998, 190). Trying to effect a specific outcome with an 'action research' design is thus inherently fraught. Nonetheless, I continue to internally query our ultimate product (the films) and whether they are adequately 'action' oriented in their effects and impacts on the world.

Conclusions

In her Introduction to the first edition of this book, Kathleen Gallagher (2008, 2) points out that we "risk our comfortable norms and truth claims each time we seek understanding" through a new research project. I would add to this insight that we also risk a regressive return to the culturally constituted norms that shape our everyday worlds; this in spite of previous intellectual efforts to see through such norms and make transparent their repressive power. For example, the phantom of the neoliberal citizen haunted many aspects of the project I have described here, despite my own extensive critical work on this conception of youth citizenship in the past. Likewise, I experienced the cultural weight of feminized guilt associated with the question of 'participatory enough?' throughout this project, again despite my own theoretical efforts to untangle these associations in previous research.

Also shaping the cultural present in ways we cannot control are the broader circulating fads and fashions that shape institutional rhetoric, if not institutional practice. The current vogue includes an emphasis on 'community engaged research,' which seems a positive innovation for researchers attempting to do participatory action research, but which is not necessarily matched by resources or approaches that can help facilitate such work. What constitutes 'community' in this formula is vague, and universities intent on selling their particular brand to potential donors, students, and alumni may not be particularly concerned with who falls inside this category and who ought to be outside of it. Meanwhile, risk-averse institutional practices threaten to undermine forms of community engagement with non middle-class stakeholders, and create barriers to participation for those who ought to be at the centre of justice-oriented research. Almost as vague as the notion of 'community' are the categories of 'participatory' and 'action', ostensibly at the

center of a participatory action research methodology. This leaves open the possibility of endless interpellations and anxiety-wracked self-condemnation, at least for certain gendered subjects acting within a reponsibilized neoliberal era. Whether films ought to count as ‘action’ rather than representation – akin to academic publications, really – is a question I have not yet settled adequately for myself.

The promise of participatory filmmaking with homeless youth is one of expanded understanding of their complex and multi-faceted experiences in the world, in particular for policymakers and individuals who might be in a position to shift the structural conditions that shaped those realities to begin with. Whether this promise can be met from within my own research project is a question as yet unanswered – and perhaps unanswerable. Yet despite the incursions of historicity -- via the cultural weight of categories such as the neoliberal citizen and feminized guilt – I believe that the films we produced through our collaborative research process offer something unique to the world. Although my culturally structured desire to state definitively that *this* is the contribution these films have made can perhaps never be met, I seek to satisfy myself with the knowledge that we have begun something in the world that will now move forward, perhaps planting the seeds of positive social change for future young people and expanding the possibilities for justice.

To view the films that were generated through this research project, please visit www.jacquelinekennelly.ca/encountering-democracy

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