Power and Struggle in Educational Research

Interrogating the "Unity" in "Community"

by Janice Hladki

Cet article examine les concepts d'unification du "communautaire" dans la recherche en éducation collaborative et avance qu'on exige des femmes en éducation, un degré plus avancé de compréhension.

For women involved in educational research and concerned with relations of domination and subordination in sites of education, it is important to complicate understandings of how women work together to produce knowledge.

How knowledge is produced and circulated is a critical issue for women engaged in educational research for social change. Consequently, debates in feminist and critical qualitative research which raise ethical questions about coalition-building, "cross-cultural" research, researcher/participant relations, and collaborative process (Archibald and Crnkovich; Gluck and Patai; Jipson *et al.*; Visweswaran), are of particular salience. Concepts of "community" are a significant feature of these ethical issues. In this paper, I explore how discourses of "community" in collaborative educational research tend to ignore relations of power, social difference, and struggle. These discourses constrain complex understandings of what it means for women to collaborate to do educational research and to work towards changing inequities in education. Educational research has great effects on theories and practices about the nature of sexism in education and the consequences of social differences, such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, and class, in various sites of learning. For women involved in educational research and concerned with these issues and with relations of domination and subordination in sites of education, it is important to complicate understandings of how women work together to produce knowledge. Interrogations about discourses of community are central for considerations of these collaborative research relationships.

Some qualitative research approaches are concerned with dismantling the hierarchies of researcher/participant relations (Maguire; Reinharz). These approaches are often termed "collaborative," and they include such educational research processes as critical action research, feminist collaborative research, and participatory research. They are also designated as activist research (Carr and Kemmis; Taylor and Bogdan) and empowerment and emancipatory research (Carr and Kemmis; Lather; McKernan). Collaborative research approaches make claims to serve the interests of collaborating participants jointly and equally and to recognize the researcher's position of power in such a manner that the researcher em-powers the researched. The goal is "to create social and individual change by altering the role relations of people involved in the project" (Reinharz 181).[1]

In focusing on collaborative research approaches, I want to problematize notions embedded in these approaches that overemphasize the "unity" in community. My intent is to underline complexity and heterogeneity rather than harmony and homogeneity. A closer attention to specific subject and social locations of the researcher and research participants and the effects of power relations in particular contexts are required for clearer understandings of what constitutes "community" in configurings of researcher/participant relations in collaborative research in education.

How women engage in research is a complex issue of subjectivity. Subject locations such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and age are central to an interrogation of researcher/participant relations. A focus on issues of subjectivity, difference, power, and knowledge in feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist work propels my exploration of how discourses of community are constructed in collaborative research approaches. A concern with the importance of attending to my own location, as a white, educated, wor-king-class woman, and the locations of those with whom I engage in my doctoral research, also motivates this re-thinking of "community." What different possibilities for practice might be opened up for women involved in forms of collaborative research and community education?

Community as universality and authenticity

One of the main features of collaborative research intentions to dismantle the distinction between the researched and the researcher is the concept that the research originates in "the community" (Hall, B.; Park). There seems to be some confusion and lack of detail, however, about the beginnings of collaborative research projects and the nature of collaboration in the early stages. Moreover, "community" is understood as harmonious relations and unambivalent solidarity between and among individuals.

The notion that the more the research is intrinsically generated in a community the more the community will control the political consequences of the research embeds discourses of community in collaborative educational research. As one participatory researcher observes:

> If the research process is genuinely ... situated in a community, work-place, or group which is experiencing domination, then we need not, I believe, be afraid that the knowledge which is being generated will be used for purposes that the community or group does not need or wish for. (Hall, B. xix)

The "only" research projects that can avoid power imbalances are those that are "genuinely in the control of a community, with the community assuming the role of both researched and researcher." This perspective is sedimented in collaborative research approaches.

The "we" in this quotation are university-based participatory researchers. The statement presupposes a unity both in this group and in the community. The complex and contradictory social locations of individuals at both sites is erased. In addition, it is the community that is constructed as dominated and as requiring new knowledge for change and transformation. While the researchers, who are outside of the group needing social change, might be viewed as changing—personally—in the research process, they are not constructed as dominated by social forces. Furthermore, what does it mean to emphasize a "genuinely and organically situated" research process? It suggests there can be an authentic grounding or initiation of research in a community. But what is genuine, or organic, or authentic? Who would determine this? How can it guarantee that the research will not "be used for purposes that the community or group does not need or wish for?"

In her examination of feminist research situations where inequalities between white academics and "Third World" women shape ethical concerns, Daphne Patai suggests that the "only" research projects that can avoid power imbalances are those that are "genuinely in the control of a community, with the community assuming the role of both researched and researcher" (147). This perspective is also sedimented in some collaborative research approaches. While generally I sympathize with the impulse that urges self-representation by the non-dominant, representation is not as straightforward as Patai indicates.

I have difficulty with her recommendation on a number of grounds. First, Patai's point depends on a unified notion of community, and embedded in her remark is the notion that there can be an authentic community "voice." I will return to the notion of a community having voice later in this article. For now, I want to assert that a community is not a homogeneous whole, and it is likely to be achieved in struggle. In any community there are unstable and shifting relations of power, diverse political positions, and subjects are constituted by multiple and unfixed locations and driven by complex and contradictory motivations. As Bhabha points out, it is necessary to rethink "the profound limitation of a consensual and collusive 'liberal' sense of community" (17).

Decision-making about the elements of a research project, such as data collection and analysis, may be a highly contested process. Furthermore, not everyone can do the same tasks and collaborating on one aspect of the research does not necessarily translate into harmony, agreement, and reciprocity. There will be power imbalances within the parameters of engaging in the research in any group of people. Following from this, what is meant by Patai's notion of "genuinely in the control of a community" (147)? How does a community have "control?" How do differences among and within individuals in a community effect the control of the research? Moreover, what happens, for example, when a leader or leaders emerge or someone takes on a leadership function? This situation may be impermanent or in flux, but in privileging the views of one or some individuals, what other positions get obscured or erased? How does this effect the writing up of the research project: What is included and excluded and who decides?

Finally, Patai's comment suggests that power works hierarchically and that communities that control their own research can get beyond power and its imbalances. Following Foucault, I would say that individuals are "always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising" power (98). Power is exercised in all contexts. Even if a community does its own research, there is no guarantee of a place safe from any exploitation.

In contrast to discourses of community that emphasize coherency and authenticity, James Donald and Ali Rattansi illuminate a view of community that suggests provisionality, struggle, heterogeneity, and difference. They state:

> The rethinking of culture in the light of theoretical advances and political experience over recent years undermines the claims and comforts of community understood in terms of a normative identity and tradition, whether that of nation, religion, ethnicity or "the black experience." It emphasizes the contingency of *any* instituted cultural authority. (5)

Donald and Rattansi indicate that categories of identity are contestable, and, in terms of race, for example, they emphasize that different racisms must be examined in specific social and historical contexts. These authors de-

mand a move away from conceptualizing community as coherence. Rather, they argue for "a shift from the idea of inherited or imposed authority and towards the principles of difference and dialogue" (5). This understanding of community resists an us/them binarism, and in terms of collaborative educational research, it highlights the complexity of engaging in researcher/researched relationships where the researched, as a community or group, cannot be reduced to "an originary holistic, organic identity" (Bhabha 13). Homi Bhabha insists on the urgency of a politics of difference:

> The whole nature of the public sphere is changing so that we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and potentially antagonistic, political identities. (12)

"Women always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time."

For women who are engaged in educational research projects which address structures of privilege and oppression in knowledge-making communities of schools and universities and who are committed to collaborative process and social justice, it seems important to recognize that practising these ideals includes (perhaps *requires*?) living dissonance, tension, conflict, and struggle.

Community as "the people"

In the participatory research literature in particular, unitary, pre-given, and undifferentiated concepts of "the people" and "the oppressed" are concomitant with constructions of homogeneous community (see, for example, Comstock and Fox; Hall, B.; Maguire; Park). As Bhabha points out, however, a "simplistic polarity between the ruler and the ruled ... is not going to be a very accurate reflection of what is actually happening in the world" (17). A researcher might consider a group or community's situation as oppressive and might consider "the people's" position in relationship to their oppression as naive, non-political, and/or reproducing their own inequality. "The people," however, might understand their political subjectivity very differently: not as a "totalitarian monologue" (Minh-ha 99), not false consciousness, and not simple domination but complex struggle. Both Stuart Hall and Arlene E. MacLeod argue that Gramsci's notion of "consent" is a complex interaction that points to a rethinking of the behaviour of the oppressed and underscores the idea that politics can cover "a range of possible consciousness and political activity" (MacLeod 544).

An important quote from Bhabha offers a crucial perspective on the notion of "the people." Bhabha writes:

> The concept of a people is not "given," as an essential, class-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of society *prior to a politics*; "the people" are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites. "The people" always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed. (17)

Writing about the politics of women's veiling, for example, Arlene E. MacLeod argues

> that women, even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time. Power relationships should be viewed as an ongoing relationship of struggle, a struggle complicated by women's own contradictory subjectivity and ambiguous purposes. (534)

From this point of view, the oppressed are not deluded or stuck in false consciousness. Furthermore, this argument challenges the idea that the oppressed, because of their very powerlessness, cannot organize or do research and that they require the researcher as the "organizing force that will act as the focal point around which they can rally and deal with their problem" (Park 9).

Community as sameness

Having explored some discourses of community and connections to concepts of the people, I want to continue with a focus on the issue of the dismantling of the distinction between the researcher and the research participants by reflecting briefly on a feminist collaborative research approach and the notion of "difference."

In identifying collaborative research as one of five feminist methods that emphasize action, Shulamit Reinharz emphasizes the shift in "control" away from the researcher to the people being studied. She notes that "differences in social status and background give way as shared decision-making and self-disclosure develop" (181). In a researcher/researched relationship where power relations are complex, shifting, and circulating, shared decisions and self-disclosure are not as simple and straightforward as Reinharz suggests. In an interview, for example, the reflections of a researcher and that of the researched do not operate identically nor are the effects of these reflections the same. Furthermore, I question an understanding of difference as an element in collaboration that can "give way" since this suggests either a hierarchy of differences and the yielding of one difference to another or a blending of differences

and a retreat into sameness. Who gives way to whom? In light of the extensive critiques of some feminist theory where the category of "woman" is essentialized, such that women from diverse backgrounds are excluded from its boundaries, I question Reinharz's conception of difference as giving way or disappearing.

In research relationships where issues of self and other are significant, how one constructs the concept of difference is a crucial question. The work of Avtar Brah is helpful for avoiding thinking about difference within simplistic notions of pluralism or a celebration of diversity. Furthermore, her analysis confronts a concept of difference that

> feature of the political, enforces the boundaries of the domain of the political in such a way that that enforcement is protected from political scrutiny. (4)

Voice, whether understood as speakings or any form of knowledge production, might be described as provisional, conditional, contradictory, and/or in flux. This does not impede the possibility of political action but points to the complex multiplicity of speakings.

understands it as something that can recede or give way. Rather, Brah's work questions the appeal to the authority of experience; emphasizes the complexity of concepts of identity, community, and political alliance; and underlines the struggle of subjects to make meaning/make change in collaborative and collective educational activities.

Community as having "voice"

The notion of community "voice" is another key configuration in collaborative research perspectives on researcher/participant relations. For some educational researchers this resonates around empowering the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups in their efforts to speak, theorize, form coalitions, and take political action (see, for example, Hall, B; Park). However, as women interrogating power arrangements in education have pointed out, emancipatory projects may have oppressive effects (Ellsworth; Lather).

Contained in the discourse of community voice is the conception that having voice will lead to awareness and, consequently, to political action. This ignores "conscious and unconscious pleasures, tensions, desires, and contradictions which are present in all subjects, in all historical contexts" (Orner 79). Furthermore, in calls for the voices of the oppressed there is the assumption of authentic, coherent, and fully conscious subjects who can (or want to) speak to their "realities" and who can translate their experiences into apprehensible and unambiguous meanings and political actions. Judith Butler warns, however, that to require a stable subject

> means to foreclose the domain of the political, and that foreclosure, installed analytically as an essential

In the examples of collaborative research approaches that I am discussing here, oppressed subjects are constructed as understanding their lives with a common meaning that leads to a common politics. In addition, the subjectivity of the researcher is not an issue. There is an assumption that the educational researcher has "already dealt conclusively with their own inscription and involvement in oppressive power dynamics" (Orner 87).

Drawing on feminist poststructuralist theory, I would suggest that language can be understood "as a site of struggle where subjectivity and consciousness are produced" (Orner 80). Consequently, voice, whether understood as speakings or any form of knowledge production, might be described as provisional, conditional, contradictory, and/or in flux. I would argue that this view does not impede the possibility of political action but points to, and holds in tension, the complex multiplicity of speakings and representations of a community or group.[2]

Calls for voice require interrogation. How is silence understood in the discourse of voice? Can silence be a political position if voice is constructed as necessary for resistance? Why must the "disempowered" speak? Who is asking whom to speak? To what ends? Certainly not the least of my concerns is the following: When educational researchers in positions of privilege need to call for, hear, explain, study, and comprehend the voice of the Other, there is always already the possibility that that voice can then be mastered and colonized.

Rethinking liberal notions of "community"

In reflecting on "community" within a feminist and critical frame, my intent is to provoke and extend my own perspectives, and those of other women engaged in educational research, on researcher/participant relations as a feature of questioning how knowledge is produced. I do not wish to denigrate the complicated work of researchers involved in collaborative projects with/in various groups and communities.

Discourses of community as authenticity, homogeneity, harmony, and consensuality are limiting for women working in sites of education in a number of ways. First, these discourses inhibit understandings of how community connections, alliances, and coalitions are generated and engaged in complex, contingent, and contradictory relations and struggles (Brown; Reagon). Second, the multiplicity of differences in relation—in individuals and in a community—are effaced in a sense of a homogeneous and collusive group. Third, in terms of researcher/participant relations, these discourses position the researcher as centre and the "community" as knowable, containable, normalized territory, and essentialized Other. As Trinh Minh-ha illuminates:

> Essential difference allows those who rely on it to rest reassuringly on its gamut of fixed notions. Any mutation in identity, in essence, in regularity, and even in physical place poses a problem, if not a threat, in terms of classification and control. If you can't locate the other, how are you to locate yourself? (73)

In my own collaborative research with/for women in sites of education, I want to underline the following: a critical and political attention to the complications of my investments, motivations, and decisions in doing research; my relationships to research participants and how my multiple locations and their's inscribe difference in relation; my conception of what "community" signifies; and how collaboration with/in a community might be engaged with an interrogative approach to discourses of "community."

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[1]Other educational research approaches also make the claim that collaboration is important for the empowerment of research participants (see for example, Anderson; Clandinin; Diamond).

[2]I remember when Ellen Gabriel, a Native activist, was interviewed during the siege of Kanesatake, and I remember her calm insistence that non-Natives would have to get accustomed to hearing diverse viewpoints from Native peoples no matter how much easier it would be for non-Natives to fix "a Native position" on the events at Kanesatake.

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CHRIS WIND

The Thinker

strong, solid
chin on hand
right elbow on thigh
left arm across knee
leaning forward
breasts filling in the spaces
between the lines.

the thinker

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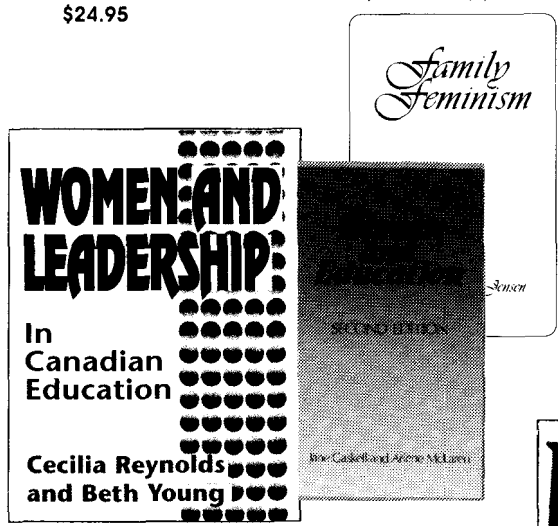

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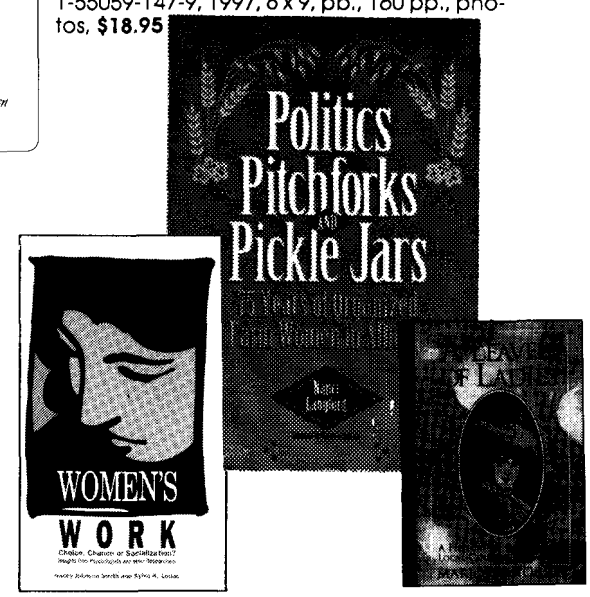

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