Queer de-participation: reframing the co-production of scholarly knowledge

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Abstract

This article critically examines the play of power in the co-production of scholarly knowledge in the context of a queer, feminist Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. By unpacking the power relations inherent in crafting a narrative of a collective project for a broader audience, we consider the conflicts, silences, and erasures that we experienced as participants, gatekeepers, and co-authors. We analyze iterations of a co-produced conference and journal article papers to recall the power dynamics that framed and reframed the outcomes of this project. In so doing, we critique what 'co-' and 'with' actually mean in the practice of publishing queer feminist PAR. We argue that there is an accelerating process of de-participation and exclusion that can work to erode the progressive, inclusive politics of feminist participatory methodologies.

Introduction

In this article, we scrutinize the experience of a collective approach to academic research and knowledge generation to critically examine the limitations of what co-production and collaboration can mean within the disciplining confines of contemporary scholarly conference and publishing practices. The queer feminist Participatory Action Research (PAR) that informs this article was grounded in the everyday experiences of residents from

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Toronto's West-Central neighbourhoods who volunteered with a queer youth program in 2011. The purpose this program was to create an enriching and safe social space where young people can build relationships and exchange knowledge in relation to their queer identities. In response to an e-mail invitation from the volunteer director to develop a youth event on queer urban space, we collaborated to facilitate two arts-based workshops that used maps and photographs as starting points for beginning a conversation about the forces that drive the evolution of the places where we gather, organize, play, live, and love. The project volunteers, like the people who may drop-in to participate in programming, identify across a spectrum of sexual- and gender-based cultures and participate in a range of occupations (including educators, students, community organizers, and writers).

Through an extended period of collaboration with these volunteers to host these workshops, we sought to build bridges between the queer community and the university using feminist participatory methodologies, and in the process to inspire young people to think critically about making and claiming queer space in cities. The workshops attracted people with the skills and background to engage with academic conversations about queer space and they also coincided with an international conference call for papers on sexual diversity. We sensed an opportunity to bring new voices into the academy by co-authoring a conference paper, which later became a published journal article (Bain, Payne and Isen, 2014). However, we learned that the lengthy timelines, extensive protocols, and significant costs associated with participating in an international conference and publishing in a respected scholarly journal not only demanded long-term, voluntary commitment to an unfunded research project, but also conditioned the narratives that could be disseminated in academic venues about it.

In what follows, we examine the power dynamics inherent in the construction of a singular narrative about our collective project for a broader academic audience. We consider the conflicts, silences, and erasures that were present. Through an analysis of the iterations of the co-authored papers that we produced, we explore the power dynamics that (re)framed our project outcomes. The process of legitimizing scholarly knowledge production through publication, we argue, initiated accelerating dynamics of de-participation and exclusion that can erode the progressive, inclusive politics of feminist participatory methodologies. While some might subscribe to a worldview in which academics are privileged knowledge producers, our feminist politics underscores that all people have the capacity to engage in intellectual imaginings about the society in which they live and to share those with a broader audience. As such, we assert that the objectives of co-authoring a conference paper and a journal article are not unrealistic in themselves, but rather are illustrative of how the ivory tower maintains its isolation through hierarchical structures of 'unearned privilege' (McIntosh, 2015). While we recognize that it is easier to be critical of structures that we are not involved in creating, we argue that feminism is fundamentally about a willingness to engage in, and to be receptive to, such critique.

Power and praxis: queering feminist participatory methodologies

A praxis-based approach to the production of knowledge treats it as a dialectical process that involves action and reflection with the political goal of social transformation; it

builds on the work of Paulo Freire to disrupt power imbalances that too often structure pedagogical processes (Maiter et al., 2012). Feminist scholars have also played an important role in pushing beyond definitions of knowledge that see detached observation by an all-powerful researcher as essential (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995). For several decades, geographers have grappled with what constitutes critical scholarship and have oriented their research to take seriously issues of power, to pay attention to the position of the researcher, and to reconfigure understandings of what counts as knowledge including who produces it and where it is produced (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004). A feminist infused geographic research praxis that recognizes the importance of disrupting traditional hierarchies of power seeks to create knowledge that extends '"epistemological curiosity"… for all involved' (Maiter et al., 2012).

PAR and feminist and queer research are approaches to research that share similar values and practical concerns; they are driven by transformative social justice agendas that interweave knowledge and action, rely upon collaboration and dialogue, and recognize that truths are partial and socially constituted (Wright, 2010). PAR, in particular, 'is committed to democratizing the research process, places emphasis upon knowledge "from below," takes lived experience as the starting point for investigation, values the knowledge produced through collaboration in action, pushes scholarship to be accountable to the communities most affected by it, and may contribute to social change movements' (Cahill, 2007: 268). With its emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge through collaboration and dialogue, PAR treats research as praxis – a process that recognizes the lived experiences and knowledge of the people involved, often from oppressed social groups, and builds power with them to enact social transformation (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000). Collaboration, as Pratt (2010: 46) details can 'be one means of achieving the kind of reflexivity necessary to recognize the limits of the knowledge that we produce so as to enable the localizing and situating of knowledge claims.' Collaborative relationships vary significantly in duration and extent, from minimal involvement to long-term partnerships, but they have the potential to empower and enhance the involvement of marginalized communities in the production of knowledge. Critics of participatory research caution against a disjuncture between theory and practice and question how participation and collaboration are enacted and how power is embodied. We contend that while feminist participatory methodologies helped us to achieve more equitable researcher/researched power relations during the project design and fieldwork stage, a regressive process of queer de-participation sets in at the analysis, write-up, and publication stages.

We characterize our research project as queer because it emanates from our own lived experiences as queer subjects and because it explicitly involves the views, experiences, and research design direction of queer-identified participants (Browne and Bakshi, 2011). We deploy queer as an umbrella identity term to encapsulate sexual and gender dissidents, but also as an anti-normative socio-political stance. These two definitions of queer can be framed as mutually exclusive, but we assert that they are imbricated in one another. When we use the term queer to reframe feminist PAR, we do so to emphasize the disruptive potentialities of queerness as lived experience that subverts gender and sexual normative value systems and rationalities and allows us to consciously negotiate multiple situated positionalities.

When PAR is approached from a queer angle it can mean that the subject of the research involves queer identities, but it can also be about going 'beyond "explaining" the social, making it clear that queer theorizing and social research fields are mutually constituted' (Browne and Nash, 2010: 14). Detamore (2010: 170, 174) proposes deploying a new kind of 'queer ethics' in research as 'a method for crafting and defending alternative social worlds' in ways that 'disrupt, parse out, critically analyze and fold together new and overlapping intersections on which difference and social justice can occur.'

From the start, we approached our research project as an ongoing, collective conversation between interested queer-identified people from inside and outside of academia. We partnered with a non-profit community organization and its youth programming arm to host workshops at a local community centre to discuss how urban space is queered in the surrounding neighbourhood. We did not initiate this project as separate, neutral academic researchers theorizing about others. Our queerness and social and emotional ties to this neighbourhood were deeply embedded in the project. We experienced our queerness as extremely personal – an intimate part of our everyday lives, that crosscut our professional, political, and private worlds.

Employing the skills and ideas of research participants in conjunction with our own geographic imaginations, in the first workshop we collectively mapped the surrounding neighbourhood as queer. In the public imagination, this part of the city has come to be seen as queer-friendly. Our colourful hand-drawn mental map co-created through memory and narrative represented spaces of queer belonging and spaces of translesbihomophobic violence and exclusion. At our second workshop, we used photovoice to interpret photographs we had taken on disposable cameras of queer spaces in the neighbourhood. Our photographs were a way for us to co-author stories that narrated the past, but also allowed us to occupy the present (Nagar, 2013). Our polyvocal interpretations of photographs allowed us to disrupt the 'practice of looking' and 'to challenge conventional relationships of power associated with the gaze' (Kindon, 2003: 143).

Both workshops relied heavily upon group discussion as a tool to 'enable group members' social agency and collective knowledge production; their "voice(s)" … constitute[d] a space of resistance' (Hyams, 2004: 106). While poly-vocality can shift the balance of power towards the group, a focus on public voices can also disempower by distracting from what silences can reveal. Silences are ambiguous. They may 'signal assent or dissent; may heal or wound; may inform or conceal; may signal power or submission' (Hyams, 2004: 110). Sara Ahmed (2010: xvii) emphasizes the importance of sharing stories of silence and secrets in the research process and values efforts to, 'return to research that has already been done not in order to reveal … what had hitherto been concealed about that research, but in order to produce new understandings of why some things are difficult to reveal'. This paper is one such attempt. Silences, as we reveal, permeated our research project. Silence as unstated motive. Silence as collectively unarticulated community social justice allure. Silence as an academic capitalist system of intellect. Such different forms of silence necessitate 'a radical rethinking of how we can (re)make knowledges and redistribute the "right to theorize"' (Nagar, 2013: 4).

Genealogy of a project: complicated motives within academic capitalism

It is important to realize that social justice work is dialogic work and in-process and, through its counter-hegemonic practices, can produce its own exclusions and contestations. This project emerged out of a desire by the researchers to be activist participants in processes of queer place-making in the city. To render a place queer is to ground it in visible residential and commercial concentrations of difference while also treating it as a motivational community-building strategy (Bain, Payne and Isen, 2014). Complicated and synchronic motives structured both how and why participants became involved in our community-based research project: opportunities for social interaction and friendship; access to social and political space with like-minded people; opportunities to learn and build self-confidence; and a desire to be part of the ongoing remaking of society. For ourselves, as academics tied to a university, 'doing research' is a critical part of our job description.

Knowledge is produced within an academic capitalist cultural economy, governed by particular rules and expectations. Many of the people involved in our workshops expressed curiosity and interest in collaborative writing, however, 'having a publication' was not a form of currency relevant to their employment or life situations. In the academy, however, publishing is the currency that determines career trajectories. There are other ways of disseminating research findings that could have engaged a wider audience, but these did not emerge organically from our collective work. Given the immediacy with which we had initially responded to a community organization's request to participate in youth programming, we also did not have the institutional resources in place to extend the project.

At the outset, we recognized that project participants had a range of different skills sets and that the development of personal skills was an important component of our work together. We treated skills as developing and mentored and as an essential part of the micro-politics of self-transformation that could lead to empowerment (van Wijnendaele, 2014), rather than as static or inherent to individuals. Designing and facilitating a workshop with specific political goals, co-interpreting data, and analyzing findings in light of a queer theoretical framework are skills we sought to nurture. The project design did not include explicitly delineating roles and the project labour was divided based on how tasks fit into people's lives. All participants were invited to imagine the breadth of their own participation.

Iterations of an academic text: a process of queer de-participation

In what follows, we examine the rise and fall of ideas across three versions of a now-published academic journal article. Following our last workshop, project participants interested in co-authoring a conference paper were invited to attend an informal brainstorming session in which we identified our collective writing goals and individual writing interests within the parameters of the conference session call. The session, 'Does sexual diversity divide?', was part of the 2011 International Sociological Association

Research-Committee-21, Sociology of Urban and Regional Development's conference in Amsterdam with the overarching theme 'The struggle to belong in 21st-century urban settings'. Our discussion produced an outline with sections allocated to four individuals to write based on their expertise and interests. The faculty member on the team assembled the component parts into a polished draft that was circulated electronically for feedback from co-authors before being submitted to session organizers. Only the faculty member and one of the graduate students had access to the institutional travel funds needed to present the paper at an international conference.

Given the conference focus on urban struggles of belonging, our argument centred on the ruptures within Toronto's queer community that emerged from competing visions of a queer-friendly neighbourhood. We documented how a not-for-profit community organization was established by an older, white, gay male resident with a website at its core. Our website textual analysis revealed the organization to be predominantly an individual venture to connect queer people in West Toronto through arts programming. The outreach occurred from within a controlled virtual space, atrophying the organization by conditioning social relations and limiting the sharing of decision-making power. Our initial argument emphasized the generational and gendered clash between the process and network focus of youth volunteers and the product and territorial focus of the organization's adult founder.

When we presented this first iteration of our paper, the white, male, senior sexuality studies scholars who organized the conference session, defended the labour of the founder, and suggested that our critique was heavy-handed. Though these academics neither knew the organizer nor the organization, they empathized with him. Yet they had not experienced his disruptive behaviours – verbally dominating planning meetings; undermining collective in-person decision-making and trust, both in-person and with dismissive group emails; combative and misogynistic behaviour in a workshop discussion that silenced individuals and produced discomfort; and violations of anonymity protocols by photographing a workshop event without consent. Although he was part of the project from its inception, he seemed uninterested in engaging with the group as equals. We felt that our characterization accurately reflected some of the many challenges we had experienced individually and collectively, trying to collaboratively work with him.

All of our invitations to the founder to be part of the collective writing process and to be interviewed for the project were declined. It became clear that the founder's previous encounters with academics had left him suspicious of the motives of those working within academic institutions. He self-selected to de-participate: 'No thanks, no interviews nor papers. When I [have] a strong opinion about something I blog it; feel free to use anything you like or cobble something together' (2011, personal communication). We returned home to Canada to confront still more written aggression. Angry at our representation of him and his organization, he used the platform of his website and email to lash out and to send letters of complaint threatening legal action to individuals and to employers. He characterized our paper as 'a smear job' and 'hearsay' that contained 'angry, hurtful, and unkind remarks' that were an 'attack'. While he did not have the social capital to be a significant threat, there is no denying that he did have agency. He sought to gain control over our representation of his

organization and the social relations through which we produced our representation. He challenged the perceived oppressiveness and classed conceit of our ivory tower vantage point by using ethics protocol to disrupt our collective knowledge production process.

We met as a group to reflect upon his charges against us. We were adamant that our feminist critique was never intended as a personal or organizational attack, but rather as a dialogical exchange about the lived experiences of queerness in a neighbourhood. The participatory feminist methodologies we chose were deliberately designed to share decision-making power through collective planning and writing. We worked with visual research methods that permitted differing perspectives to be held in tension. However, when we had to distil the narrative into a linear argument for public consumption we faced challenges. We produced a paper that fundamentally questioned relations of organizational power, highlighted queer generational and gender differences in political organizing, and did not directly align with the public face and dominant organizational narrative of our research partner. Rather than acknowledging the potential validity of different perspectives, our writing was characterized by the founder as a biased and a destructive misrepresentation. In his estimation we had misused and manipulated our educational social capital. We engaged in a protracted 'struggle for interpretive power' (Pratt, 1999, cited in Cahill, 2007) filtered through individuals and broader institutional structures.

While spaces created by sexual and gender minorities were once commonly seen as inherently safe, even liberating, our experience demonstrated the emerging consensus that 'the intolerance and exclusions that operate within … gay spaces' are not themselves anomalies (Browne and Bakshi, 2011: 181). The conflicts that we encountered also contributed to the breakdown of organizational working relationships. But the conflicts could also be interpreted as productive: they challenged taken-for-granted interpretations; they provided different points of view; they fostered new writing relationships; and they demanded greater self-reflexivity and stance clarification from co-authors. In this project we experienced some of the limitations of participatory feminist methodologies. Specifically, we lacked direction in how to: work with an individual who did not share all aspects of our project goals; negotiate, manage, and document conflict that could undermine the supportive space of our collective research; and tell a counter-story that called attention to disagreements with, and critiques of, a research partner.

When we finally reached the publication stage, nearly two years later, the managing editor of the journal recommended, on the advice of three anonymous peer reviewers, that we restructure our paper and 'revise and resubmit it'. An anonymous referee asserted: 'I do not think that framing it as about "competing visions" works. In fact, if the discussion of the … organization/website and its founder were excised I actually think the paper would be stronger' as it would be about 'the queer "renderings" of neighbourhood that the mapping and photovoice projects represent' (2013, personal communication). While this referee was 'sympathetic to the ethos' we described and 'suspect[ed]' that our 'conclusions may also be correct', our interpretation of the website 'just isn't well demonstrated by… evidence.' Our organizational analysis was determined by this referee to 'reflect the authors' and participants' own values and

ethical orientations, and feelings about the individual behind' them rather than to be a substantive and valid critique. We were advised to reorient the manuscript away from intra-organizational conflicts.

We followed the editor's recommendations, responding to the 'powerful structural relations that inter[polate] the production of geographical knowledges' (Berg, 2009: 398). First, we excised our website-based organizational critique from the manuscript and with it all the work of one co-author. An important participatory voice was lost. Second, we muted our descriptions of painful emotional responses to dissonant written and in-person organizational interactions. We recognize that this reorientation of the manuscript had value because it allowed us to emphasize our contribution to scholarly literature on queer neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, there remain some very real silences and erasures in the story that we have 'officially' told in the published public record. It is such choices of omission, we contend, that are themselves plays of power in need of disclosure and collective negotiation, if knowledge is really to be co-produced and valued for its situatedness.

In research fields dominated by masculinist epistemological leanings, feminist scholars sometimes avoid dealing with emotions in their writing out of a concern not to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes that link emotions with the feminine (Sylvester et al., 2011). Wekker (2006: 4), however, proposes that if the researcher is recognized 'as the most central and sensitive instrument of research, it behooves us to be transparent, accountable and reflexive about the different modalities in which the self engages with others'. While feminist scholars usually celebrate collaborative efforts across social divides both within and beyond the academy, some also recognize the productive nature of the 'inherent tensions and frictions within disparate partnerships forged at border crossings' (Johari, 2014: 81). Such unanticipated frictions, even betrayals and co-optations, can sometimes contribute 'to new and rewarding connections when fully engaged with' (Johari, 2014: 90). We are thus challenged to engage with the uncomfortable emotional terrain that we experienced in the research process.

Collaborative research projects such as PAR have sometimes shown themselves to be messier and more laden with tensions than initially expected (Houston et al., 2010). The most emotional part of this project for us was dealing with the founder. We experienced his presence as disruptive. Our encounters with him led to emotions of anger, frustration, fear, sadness, and disillusionment. Emotions are both cognitive and socio-culturally constructed, while also being 'pre-conscious and deeply embodied knowledges' (van Wijnendaele, 2014, 275). We cannot ignore or erase how we felt. We experienced strong negative emotions associated with the politics of class and gender that, to date, have not been transformed into successful outcomes of community-building or empowerment. Van Wijnendaele (2014, 279) reminds us that 'the same emotion can be enabling or empowering.' While our negative emotions motivated us to co-author a conference paper and journal articles they did not inspire us to provide ongoing project leadership. Nevertheless, we sense that this project did result in positive experiences for some participants. Trust was built, cooperation experienced, and opportunities created for developing and refining skills. And together we experimented with ways of being queerly social and imagining queer futures.

Conclusions: plays of power in the co-production of scholarly knowledge

The forum of publishing is one in which knowledge is invariably both produced and erased. As queer scholars we are attentive to the insidious ways in which the disruptive power of queerness itself is continuously scrubbed from ways of being. This was symbolically manifested in the translation of our article abstract into Spanish and French: in both versions the word 'queer' was translated as 'gay', itself a loanword from English. This translation, really a mistranslation, obscured the competing meanings of 'gay' and 'queer' that were fundamental to our paper.

The authors involved in this research project who are positioned within the academy, had a career investment in seeing our publication expeditiously through to completion. We are embedded within the long-waves of academic capitalism, and from our first-hand experience navigating the competitive world of academic publishing we could understand ourselves as 'subjects of knowledge' (Berg, 2001: 511). It was less easy for contributing authors who had graduated from university and moved beyond its disciplining expectations, to feel or see or value themselves as scholarly knowledge producers with significant enough meaning-making expertise to respond to the judgments and criticisms of peer reviewers. There were hidden expectations about the 'processual relations of academic publishing' that needed to be decoded in order for us to collectively agree upon how we wanted to respond to the issues raised by the referees and to understand the political consequences of our decisions (Berg, 2001: 512). Such institutional and disciplinary demystifying, coupled with the stamina needed to withstand drawn-out publishing timelines that afforded no prospect of remuneration for volunteer, non-academic co-authors, worked to reinforce 'status differences' between us (Barata et al., 2005). As a result, we lost the active involvement of another co-author at the revision stage. In order to maximize the coherence of the narrative voice and to address the detail and disciplinary specificity of the requested changes, the final paper was largely re-written by the first author, the changes reviewed by the second author, and consent to publish given by the third author. Queer de-participation had set in.

What began as a multi-vocal political project, grounded in experiential knowledge and the by-product of intersecting social relations of power, was whittled down by the duration and disciplining expectations of publishing. This process requires a unified authorial voice, a theoretical framing grounded in the relevant scholarly literature, and a project coordinator, which, in this case, were roles taken by a tenured, white, middle-class academic who is part of 'the classed system of the intellect' (Carroll, 1990 cited in Nagar, 2013: 3). She had the time and motivation built into her paid employment. Thus, despite our strategic deployment of feminist participatory methodologies designed to share social power and privilege and to foster greater inclusion, the published outcome eventually perpetuated, rather than significantly challenged, traditional hegemonic knowledge production paths within the academy.

As academic researchers, we continue to hold the balance of power – we have chosen 'what to do with data, how to make it public, and what to make of it' (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000: 100). While there are ways in which we limited our power by the communal development of ideas, by discussing with some participants what would be made

public and enter academic debate, and by circulating drafts of papers to participants who had expressed interest in reading them, we are mindful that we could have done more. As queer scholars, we also recognize that we are disciplined by the structural contexts in which we find ourselves. The personal emotional and career toll of potentially protracted or exacerbated conflict with the organizational founder dissuaded us from eliciting broader feedback. This research project reinforced for us how power and privilege are entangled in knowledge production practices, fostering exclusions and divisions that cannot solely be transcended by the critical and progressive agendas of feminist research methodologies. While we remain convinced of the value of PAR for its ability to disrupt social hierarchies, we now have a more realistic comprehension of the structural constraints to its deployment in the production and recognition of institutionally validated knowledge within academia.

Funding

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