

CHAPTER 1

The Terrifying Truth: Interrogating Systems of Power and Privilege and Choosing to Act

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FOUR SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF A SHAPESHIFTER

Scene I: I can kill with one punch. I would never strike anyone for fear of causing death. Never injury, death. The terrifying truth of this statement has never been tested and is completely unjustified by any outward appearance or action. A middle-aged woman, average height and weight, graying hair, bifocals—my appearance masks my lethal nature and there are many who underestimate my power. I show restraint. I have learned to use words instead. With words I can protect myself without fear of actually killing my opponent. My victims often register horror and surprise at the vehemence with which I attack. They don't know how lucky they are to be alive.

Scene II: "He leads with his stomach," my friend says. It describes him perfectly. A big, loud man who occupies all available space as if we are unwelcome squatters on his farm. His voice alone overwhelms us—laughing or shouting, he controls even the air. After yet another disagreement he storms into my office, towering over me and clearly angry.

"If you have a problem you take it up with me. Why did you go to the Dean?" he bellows.

"Because I knew this was how you'd respond." Trying to keep my emotions under control, I can barely manage a whisper.

"Whaddya mean?" he demands.

"I mean I knew you'd come in here and try to bully me." I am trying to steel myself.

"Bully you?!" He sits down uninvited, blocking any possible exit. I feel a quiet node of panic forming in my chest.

"I'd like you to leave now," I say. He ignores me and continues to press me on our disagreement.

"I would like you to leave now," I say again, my voice sounding taut and barely under control. He continues to rail against me. Eventually I start to

cry and tell him exactly what I think of him. Sobbing, I call him names and review each abuse. I have the sense he almost enjoys it, the Sturm und Drang of my furious tirade.

At one point I take a breath, exhausted. "I hate arguing with you," I say quietly, spent.

He looks puzzled, "I thought you enjoyed it."

I am incredulous. "Just because I don't back down, don't imagine I enjoy it."

When the Dean hears of the incident he tells me I use tears to get my way.

Scene III: Dr. Brydon-Miller, Gerontology Program Director. One of my favorite tasks is to drive through the Notch, into what they call the North Country, where I meet with a local elder activist group. One of the members of the committee is an older man who continues to wield a significant degree of control both locally and at the state level. He is intelligent, self-assured, and politically experienced. He is also a poor listener who tends to hold forth at meetings, making it difficult for others to take part. The staff person who chairs the meetings is at her wits' end trying to deal with him. Most of the other members of the committee are older women, women whose insight and experience I respect greatly, and it distresses me to see them silenced, so I am perfectly happy to be brought in periodically to facilitate a meeting. I understand why I am there and I understand my position. I am an expert, someone sanctioned by the authorities, someone with titles and connections. I am powerful and confident, professionally dressed, and I knowingly use these characteristics to control the meeting. I make a point of seating this man next to me, where he cannot make eye contact easily and so is prevented from taking the floor. I stand; he sits. When he does speak and goes on too long, I put my hand gently on his shoulder and suggest that we might hear from others, and he complies. I assign roles and tasks in such a way as to draw out competent, but more self-effacing members of the committee. I direct questions and support ideas proposed by the women in the group. I'm good—really good!

Scene IV: I walk out of the faculty meeting between two colleagues. I no longer remember what issue we had been discussing, but I had voiced an opinion sure to be unpopular with the administration. My colleagues, both people I consider friends, discuss my statement and prospects for a future at the institution—one attacking my position, one defending it. Both are male, both more than half a foot taller than I am. My defender is a professor of economics, lean and handsome, patrician looking. The attacker, a member of the business faculty, resembles an old boxer. I stand between them, beneath them, the object of their discussion, unable to enter the space within which the debate is taking place. I gaze up at them. Women are so often depicted gazing up at men in adoration. I gaze in fury. I will myself to grow. Almost comically, I attempt to move the conversation to higher ground, taking a step back, a step to the left, up the hill, hoping that in doing so I can take advantage of the difference in elevation to enter the fray. For a moment, I even consider returning to the building to get a chair on which to stand. In the end I simply leave, unnoticed.

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Powerful and powerless—the kind of shapeshifting we have all experienced at different points in our lives. This chapter explores the protean nature of privilege and oppression. I consider how those of us who are academics and activists might use our personal experiences to develop greater self-awareness regarding the dynamic nature of these opposing positions. I suggest that, if those of us within the academy are to work with those facing oppression to challenge injustice, we must be able to draw upon whatever experiences of powerlessness we have had in order to develop a more humane and truly emancipatory practice. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge and be willing to wield the power granted to us by our positions of social and economic privilege in an effort to achieve our shared goal of positive social change.

For nearly twenty years I have identified myself as a participatory action researcher. I was driven in this by the need to reconcile my deeply held belief in the power of democratic processes and community action with my equally valued professional and intellectual location as an academic researcher. By integrating popular education, community-based research, and an explicit commitment to social justice, participatory action research seemed to make possible the identity to which I aspired—that of the scholar/activist. But too often this practice has seemed to be grounded in the facile assumption that once we have rejected the elitism of traditional positivist research and have made public our dedication to taking part in processes of social action, our work is done. The nuanced interplay of class, gender, race, and other aspects of identity within our own ranks, as well as in the communities within which we work, have too often been overlooked. In our zeal to bring about fundamental social change, we have too often failed to address, or even to recognize, the kinds of oppression embedded in our own practice. This volume represents our attempt to address these issues in a more critical way by bringing together feminist theories and participatory action research. In feminist-informed participatory action research¹ this coming to terms with power and privilege is especially important as we attempt to negotiate the contradictions inherent in our efforts to confront injustice while at the same time occupying positions of social and economic privilege. Neither playing the victim nor taking the role of the committed but cloistered critic will suffice; we must choose to act.

SURPRISE, CHALLENGE, AND REVENGE

In recalling the scenes described in the opening of this chapter, and those that appear throughout, I have been surprised, challenged, and, if I am to be truly honest, revenged. I have been surprised at the strong emotions these memories still evoke: challenged to uncover and own instances in which I have used power shamelessly and revenged in discovering that

in telling these stories I am finally able to wrest power back from those who would rob me of my own sense of autonomy and agency. I found in writing these scenes that it was relatively easy to identify and write about experiences of powerlessness. Painful, perhaps, but these moments are still vivid in my memory and the details have stayed with me. It has been much more difficult for me to recall those experiences in which I have been the one holding power over others. Perhaps this is because as a woman I have been socialized to avoid such depictions of my own behavior, perhaps such actions seem at odds with my stated belief in equality, or possibly it is difficult to see beyond my own experience of the world. Whatever the case may be, this has presented a particular challenge and I have found it harder still to imagine the effect of my use of power on others involved in those interactions—how my own good intentions might have conflicted with their needs and desires in significant, and perhaps detrimental, ways.

As an Irish-American, storytelling is a part of my own familial and cultural heritages, but as an academic, storytelling seems fraught with the dual dangers of dismissal and dispute. It seems self-indulgent, especially coming from a privileged, White academic whose story, or one very like it, is at the very heart of the dominant cultural narrative. On the other hand, if I am to encourage others to critically examine their own uses and abuses of power and privilege, it is by probing and dissecting just such experiences that I can best exemplify the process. It is only by placing this "near environment in which researchers conduct their science, learn, teach, and judge the efforts of other scientists" (Morawski, 1997, p. 677) under scrutiny that we can hope to create change in our own practice.

This use of personal narrative, once considered anathema to serious academic writing, recognizes the subjective presence and active participation of the scholar in any research endeavor. To pretend invisibility through the use of the passive voice or a bland third-person narration of events masks the multiple ways in which the researcher, scholar, author shapes any act of inquiry. As Delgado suggests, "We participate in creating what we see in the very act of describing it" (2000, p. 61).

Much of the initial impetus for this acceptance of subjectivity came from feminist scholars who searched for but did not find their own experience or that of other women reflected in the master narratives of their fields.

More recently, American feminist authors and critics have begun to weave autobiography into history and criticism, journals into analysis, and the spirit of poetry into interdisciplinary prose. This more personal writing at times even obfuscates the boundary between the author's self, the subject of the discourse, and the audience. (Tedlock, 1995, p. 276)

Thus the traditional rules of academic writing are rejected in favor of a rhetoric more consistent with the engaged, collaborative nature of feminist scholarship and participatory action research.

One scholar who has led the way in her evocative intermingling of personal narrative and ethnography is Ruth Behar (1996). At the same time that she champions this genre, luring readers and would-be writers with her open and emotionally engaging prose, she warns against it as she describes the effect her work has had on her own family.

I've adopted the strategy of silence, exile, and cunning with regard to my writing, keeping every word hidden from my father and mother, withholding from them the knowledge that I am flying around the country inscribing the story of our dissolution as a family ever more irrevocably into the academy. (1995, p. 82)

Behar's position as a Jewish Cuban immigrant to the United States reflects the emphasis on lived experience that continues to inform feminist writing from a variety of cultural perspectives, as well (for examples, see Abu-Lughod, 1995; Chen, 2000; González, 1999).

Critical race theorists have also embraced the use of the personal narrative, or what they have called "counterstorytelling," as a means of making minority voices heard and for increasing what Delgado has called our "empathic range" (2000, p. 70). Growing out of critical legal studies, critical race theory faced the enormous challenge of making these voices heard against the dominant narratives of the legal profession (Banks, 1995; Hom, 2000; Mrsevic, 2000). As Wing notes,

Opponents have attacked this approach as nonlegal, lacking intellectual rigor, overly emotional, and subjective. This methodology, however has significant value. Many of us prize our heritages in which the oral tradition has had historical importance—where vital notions of justice and the law are communicated generation to generation through the telling of stories. Also, using stories enables us to connect to those who do not understand hypertechnical legal language, but may nonetheless seek understanding of our distinctive voices. (2000, p. 5)

Delgado goes further:

stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half—the destructive half—of the creative dialectic. (2000, p. 61)

My own mentors, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1991), were both immensely talented and devoted storytellers and understood the important role that storytelling can play both in giving individuals an appreciation for their own personal experience and in establishing a sense of common ground and common goals among community members. I have endeavored to follow their example by incorporating personal narrative, oral history, and other forms of storytelling into my own practice (Brydon-Miller, 2002). As these scholars and researchers suggest, storytelling can be

dangerous and destructive. It can also be enlightening and affirming. In either case, stories capture the core of our experience; in telling and hearing them we acknowledge "the storied nature of human conduct" (Sarbin, 1996).

THE INSIGHTS OF IMAGINATION

Feminism has traditionally focused on gender as the location of oppressive relationships, and, as the scenes that open this chapter suggest, this is certainly where I have most commonly experienced subordination. However, feminism also has been accused of overlooking the multiple sources of power and privilege that function to create the complex webs of power relationships that, overall, have served to increase my advantages over others (Mohanty, 1997). In Wing's critique of feminism, she challenges "that movement's essentialization of all women, which subsumes the variable experiences of women of color within the experience of white middle-class women" (2000, p. 6). Writing in 1980, Audre Lorde was quite blunt in her analysis: "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age" (1997, p. 375). Lorde was writing about the feminism I first encountered as a graduate student and her critique helps to explain my long-standing reluctance to identify myself as a feminist. Somehow it felt unseemly to focus on this singular location of my own disempowerment when clearly I held so many other sources of both power and prestige that in most settings seemed to vastly outweigh any disadvantages I might experience as a result of my gender.

Over the intervening 22 years, I think both feminism and I have matured and, hopefully, in the process we have both become a bit less doctrinaire and a bit more nuanced in our thinking. As a result, I now feel more comfortable and confident in identifying myself as a feminist. As Maguire notes, "Because our voices and stories cannot be extracted from our social, cultural locations in the world, the interactions of gender, multiple locations, interlocking oppressions, and voice become apparent" (2001, p. 63). Having now embraced this new identity, I ask whether I can take the lessons I've learned from feminism and from my own experiences of subordination and apply them to situations in which I am privileged. Acknowledging my own shifting positions and potential locations of continued subordination, I concurrently recognize that in most situations I do, in fact, hold considerable power. I can choose to mask this fact, allowing others to control the decision-making process, or I can choose to act, invoking my power in ways that I hope will be empowering to others.

Powerful and powerless. Frightened and fearless. From the perspective of critical race theory, Wildman and Davis (1996) describe the multiple dimensions of personal power and subordination as akin to a Koosh ball.

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Picture hundreds of rubber bands, tied in the center. Mentally cut the end of each band. The wriggling, unfirm mass in your hand is a Koosh ball, still usable for throwing and catching, but changing shape as it sails through the air or as the wind blows through its rubbery limbs when it is at rest. It is a dynamic ball. (p. 23)

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Rather than see ourselves and others as single points in some specified set of dichotomies, male or female, White or Black, straight or gay, scholar or activist, powerful or powerless, this image allows us to imagine ourselves as existing at the intersection of multiple identities, all of which influence one another and together shape our continually changing experience and interactions. These individual systems of power and the ways in which they intersect with those of others allow each of us to be both privileged and oppressed, with the potential to use these two aspects of our experience as counterpoints to one another, each informing our understanding of and response to the other. These tensions "can help reveal privilege, especially when we remember that the intersection is multidimensional, including intersections of both subordination and privilege" (Wildman & Davis, 1996, p. 22).

Despite these multiple positionalities, those of us who are White, American, educated, and upper middle-class, whether male or female, enjoy a level of protection from experiences of subordination that we rarely acknowledge.

When we look at privilege we see several things. First, the characteristics of the privileged group define the societal norm often benefiting those in the privileged group. Second, privileged group members can rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to oppression. And third, privilege is rarely seen by the holder of the privilege. (Wildman & Davis, 1996, p. 13)

This definition of societal norms has sometimes been referred to as master scripting. As Swartz described the dominant narratives of the American educational system,

master scripting silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, white, upper-class, male voicings as the "standard" knowledge students need to know. All other accounts and perspectives are omitted from the master script unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation. (cited in Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 21)

Scene V: I live in a city in which a young African American man was recently killed by the police. I work in another. Do I feel that the police force in my city does an effective job of protecting me? A recent public opinion survey sought to explore community attitudes toward the police. Yeah, they do a great job of protecting me, I thought. I'm a middle-aged White woman. I'm the kind of person they were hired to protect. Now if I was a 16-year old African American male, I don't think

I'd feel that way at all. There's probably not a box on the survey for that. I've been working for the past several months with a group of young Sudanese men, refugees who have survived years of war in their home country. I keep wondering what I should say to them about the police. I fear that after all that they have experienced, they will have come to this country only to be killed by a police officer who is suspicious when he sees them hanging out in a large group, mistakes their fear for threat, and fires. But, yeah, they do a great job of protecting me.

The challenge then, according to Wildman and Davis, is that "to end subordination, one must first recognize privilege" (1996, p. 20). The authors note the importance of distinguishing between perpetrators of discrimination and beneficiaries of oppression, insisting that those of us who are privileged by these systems acknowledge our complicity. Even those of us who would denounce racism still profit by racist economic and political systems. Critical race theorists would suggest that "although individual whites are 'innocent,' they do, by no personal intent benefit from dominant group membership in numerous ways" (Taylor, 1999, p. 199). And yet it can be difficult to maintain an image of ourselves as at once opposed to and the beneficiaries of systems of oppression.

One means of making the connection to another's experience of oppression or subordination may be to draw comparisons to our own experiences. As Grillo and Wildman describe, the use of analogies to try to build empathy and understanding for the experience of others can be helpful. "Starting with ourselves is important, and analogies may enable us to understand the oppression of another in a way we could not without making the comparison" (1996, p. 99).

Scene VI: I sit next to a Bosnian woman who is illiterate in her own language and struggling to write letters and to recall words in English. Her courage, determination, and good humor amaze and humble me. When another teacher comes in to discuss the schedule and exercises, I find myself speaking English rapidly and using a vocabulary unavailable to my student. The teacher and I work things out and I turn back to the woman beside me who has sat, struggling to understand what was being said, looking from one to the other as we discussed her education and her progress with the materials.

In trying to critically re-examine my interaction with this Bosnian woman, I think back to a time when I was waiting anxiously in a tent in an Italian camp site with a local doctor and a British employee of the campground who was translating for us. One of my sons had been running a high fever and the doctor was examining him and determining a treatment. I know enough French and Spanish to pick up a few words of the conversation between the two of them, but it was both frightening and humiliating to sit beside my son, unable to take part in the discussion and utterly dependent on others to determine what would happen to him. The doctor was kind and gentle and affectionate. The translator was kind and helpful and understanding. I was grateful and relieved and, yes, a bit angry.

And I remember my anger at being excluded from the debate between my two male colleagues and my inability to participate in a discussion that centered on my

actions. What might they have done to make me a part of their interaction? Were they even aware of my presence standing between them? I wanted them on my level—literally. I wanted to be in a position to make eye contact with them both—to be not an object of discussion, but a participant in that discussion.

Reflecting on these experiences I can return to the classroom and my Bosnian student more aware of the frustration and feelings of infantilization, born of being talked about rather than with, and make a point of finding ways of making such conversations both inclusive and accessible to all involved.

However, despite our best efforts to uncover power relations and to engage in open dialogue, these differences of power and privilege persist in being elusive. This reflects Wildman and Davis's third point regarding privilege: that it is seldom recognized by those who hold it. How, then, am I to bring such experiences of power and privilege to light? One strategy is to try to recast experiences of powerlessness by taking on the role of the more powerful character and attempting to examine the moment from that perspective. If I take the example of the two male faculty members discussing my behavior after a meeting, I wonder if either of them was really even aware of my presence. Or the faculty colleague who said he thought I enjoyed arguing—what might have informed his perception when I experienced the moment as one of brutalizing harassment?

Perhaps such analogies are most effective when we recognize ourselves as the oppressor and not as the oppressed; taking these insights of imagination and embedding them in those moments in which we do hold power; asking questions, observing interactions, examining our own behavior in such a way that we can begin to be more alert to our own everyday abuses of power.

Mary Louise Pratt describes contact zones as "the social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1991, p. 35). Pratt's metaphor of the contact zone acknowledges the critical, and yet often unspoken, role of power in cross-cultural interactions and examines the ways in which these differences can lead to misunderstanding, frustration, and anger. It is only in recognizing my own uses and abuses of power that I can begin to engage in interactions within the contact zones that are my research sites, my classrooms, and my communities in a more genuine and reflective manner. And in so doing, perhaps I can at the same time develop a language of power and privilege that I can make available to others to enable them to participate in these negotiations in an informed and effective manner. As a participatory action researcher and as one who is both an outsider to the experiences of the communities with which I work and most often invested with greater power by dint of my race, class, education, and academic position, nothing could be more important.

THE LIMITATIONS OF IMAGINATION

Empathic imagination can give us some insight into the lives and feelings of others. However, it can also mislead us into assuming that our own experiences of oppression are equivalent to those of others, giving us the right to speak on behalf of those whose true experience we have no way of fully comprehending. In this instance, Grillo and Wildman suggest we try to "listen more carefully" (1996, p. 95). Writing from an ethnographer's perspective, Ong suggests that we must "recognize informants as active cultural producers in their own right, whose voices insist on being heard and can make a difference in the way we think about their lives" (1995, p. 354).

But "listening more carefully" implies that the voices of oppressed or subordinated persons may be heard. Spivak (1988, pp. 271-313) challenges this notion in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Using language drawn from Gramsci and the example of the British response to the practice of sati or widow sacrifice in India, Spivak problematizes issues of voice and representation. She offers no simple conclusions but suggests that while it is impossible for the subaltern's experience to be rendered in a truly genuine manner, it is nevertheless the responsibility of the intellectual, and especially the "female intellectual" according to Spivak, to continue to try to do so. "The subaltern cannot speak ... Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (p. 308). While I would agree with Spivak that intellectuals (and I would include here both male and female intellectuals) have a responsibility to represent the world as they know it, I would argue that their greater responsibility is to continue to seek means through which the subaltern can find voice and can be empowered to represent her own interests. This is the true task of the intellectual and the potential contribution of feminist participatory action research.

In a similar vein to Spivak's defense of representation, Wing claims a legitimate role for "translators," scholars whose minority status makes them a bridge between "those who have the luxury of time and capacity to read a book like this and the cultures of those who will never have the opportunity to enjoy such intellectual largesse. As translators, we therefore are assisting in demarginalizing the lives and legal concerns of women of color" (2000, p. 4). Just as I would reject the notion that as a woman, I can speak for *all* women, I think minority scholars are mistaken if they believe that this status alone qualifies them to speak on behalf of others, ignoring differences in class, educational attainment, and other factors that distinguish them from those they claim to represent.

I struggle with these questions of voice and representation, and I believe they will continue to confound scholars who recognize the dangerous implications of their attempts to speak on behalf of others. At the same

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time I feel compelled to attempt to speak out regarding important social issues and to communicate to a wider academic audience the observations and insights this work has granted me. Accepting the legitimacy of my own voice, I also believe that we must continue to seek authentic ways in which the subaltern may articulate her experience and speak on her own behalf in ways that can be heard and understood by members of the dominant culture.

Scene VII: In the spring of 2001, the city of Cincinnati saw rioting break out in Over-the-Rhine, a primarily African American inner city neighborhood, in response to the killing of a young, unarmed black man by city police, the fifteenth police killing in the community in the last six years. When sheets of plywood were put up to cover broken out windows, urban minority high school students along with university art education students, participants in a project called Art-in-the-Market, used these surfaces to create community art that reflected their reactions to the events going on around them. A cityscape in flames, a broken heart tentatively held together with a bandage, these boards provided the canvasses for murals through which they expressed their feelings about what was going on around them; how they understood the events and how they saw the city's response. (Bastos, Brown, Brydon-Miller, & Hutzel, 2003)

THE NECESSITY OF ACTION

To decry injustice and refuse to act strikes me as a cowardly stance. It is my chief criticism of many scholars who, whether they derive their critiques from feminist, postcolonial, or critical race theory, rail against injustice but only from within the protected rooms of the academy and the quiet pages of journals. There are, of course, exceptions and there are many scholars who are also passionately engaged as activists. For too many, however, these roles seem divorced from one another. Activism is an avocation, scholarship the day job, and the contradictions implied by this schism remain unspoken.

The notion that scholarship must float like a lotus of objectivity above the muddy sea of lived experience still permeates much of the academy, perhaps no more so than in my own field of psychology, in which the perennial fear of being inadequate scientists seems still to haunt us. Or perhaps it is not our fear of failure but our history as would-be social and behavioral engineers, our conviction of superior intellect and insight, that lead us to the absurd belief that we can design and impose systems of democracy, equality, and justice. Whatever its source, we continue to hide behind obtuse statistical analyses and comically complex models of social processes, leaving actual action to others.

As Mohanty so succinctly puts it, "There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship" (1997, p. 256). Cossman echoes this sentiment when she observes, "We make no claims to neutrality in our work, but rather begin

from an explicitly and unapologetically political location" (2000, p. 36). But perhaps my favorite observation on the subject comes from Gordon who says, "my impression of anthropology is that as it has come to terms with its colonial legacy, it has designated applied anthropology, advocacy, and action-oriented research as *entirely politically dirty* [italics added]" (1995, p. 384). I love the idea of being "entirely politically dirty." It sounds like fun!

Even much interpretive research, though acknowledging the legitimacy of subjective experience and the centrality of human relationships, often fails to articulate a specific agenda for taking action. The assumption seems to be that change will come about by simply giving voice to those taking part in the research, by allowing their stories to be told. But who, then, owns the stories, and who profits by their telling? Are we simply more cunning compradors, merchants in the lives of others, advancing our own careers through exposing the pain and poetry expressed to us, entrusted to us, by those participating in our research? Behar describes this process of engaging research participants only to take advantage of their trust in furthering our own careers as "commodifying" (1995, p. 80) the research participant, and she expresses her concern about her possible complicity in such a process. Newkirk calls it an "act of seduction" (1996, p. 3) and suggests that "a more disciplined response is to acknowledge the exploitative potential of qualitative research and to consider guidelines that may do what traditional consent forms clearly fail to do—protect the person being rendered" (p. 4).

Hermes refers to "the legacy of exploitation that has continued under the guise of research" (1999, p. 91) and observes that "relationships of reciprocity" (p. 95) might replace those of exploitation. Although she doesn't seem entirely clear in how the results of her research on designing a school curriculum more reflective of Ojibwe culture and the development of what she calls a "First Nations Methodology" might be applied to the issues she and her research participants identify, it is clear that she intends to continue to work within her community to effect social change and that this research is an attempt to begin that process.

It is this commitment to action that typifies participatory action research and other activist-oriented approaches. In contrast to more traditional psychological research, whether quantitative or qualitative, participatory action research is founded in the notion that action and collective reflection on that action in themselves constitute a valid form of knowledge generation and that the legitimacy of the research endeavor can be judged in part on its success in addressing community concerns (see Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001, for examples). In theory, participatory action research requires that issues of ownership and agency be openly acknowledged and negotiated with research participants who define the issues, generate and interpret the

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data, and determine the action to be taken as a result of the study. In too many cases, however, theory and practice diverge, often due to unacknowledged tensions and differences in perceived power and authority both between the academic researcher and members of the community in which the research is being conducted, and among community members themselves.

The challenge for participatory action researchers is in overcoming the naïve sense that we can somehow set aside differences of power and privilege that exist within our community settings, just as they exist within all aspects of our society. We have tended to overlook critical issues of representation and voice, often engaging in a kind of ventriloquism in which we pretend that we speak for the members of marginalized communities with whom we work. At the same time we have chosen to portray "the oppressed" as univocal and homogenous, failing to explore the impact of gender, class, and other differences that empower some factions within communities over others. It is at this intersection of theory and practice that participatory action researchers have the most to teach, but also the most to learn.

THE INEVITABILITY OF ERROR

I screw up. Sometimes I recognize it immediately. Sometimes it takes me months or years to realize that I have acted in such a way as to silence discussion, I have failed to recognize disagreement and resistance, or I have taken charge when others could more effectively have led. This is largely uncharted territory, and it is impossible not to make mistakes.

Scene VIII: At 24 I was a founding member and convener of the Pioneer Valley Gray Panthers—the youngest Gray Panther convener in the country. "Age and Youth in Action" is the motto of the Gray Panthers. "That means we decide what to do and you do it," my older fellow members laughingly told me when I was made convener of the local chapter. At the time we shared the experience of powerlessness, they due to their age and me to my youth, and yet through our collective action we were able to accomplish many goals. I learned a great deal about power and powerlessness from my Gray Panther friends, but at the same time I failed them. I wanted so desperately to take care of things, to be a leader, and to be in charge that I shut them out of any leadership roles themselves. Eventually, exhausted by my efforts to do it all and frustrated because no one seemed to want to assume control (how could they when I had erected such great fences around my territory), I simply quit and soon the organization folded. At the time I attributed this to a lack of leadership. Later, to my chagrin, I realized how correct I was in this assessment.

The inevitability of error is not an excuse for inaction. I learned from this mistake and have tried in more recent organizing efforts to make a point of building leadership and of acknowledging the expertise and skill of

those with whom I work. Comparing myself to the groups I have worked with, I am not yet old nor disabled and I hope never to experience what the refugees I currently work with have lived through. As an outsider I have been in a position to provide resources and some degree of technical expertise, but because my experience is so different from that of the communities within which I work, the real knowledge is theirs. When I have been able to remember this, I have been able to truly learn.

At the same time, I don't believe that any of us can ever fully rid ourselves of the legacy of discrimination that shapes every aspect of our culture, nor can we truly resolve the issues of power and privilege that continue to affect our interactions with others. To assume otherwise is to fall into the trap of believing that we are done and have moved beyond, and this hubris blinds us to the new challenges we face in our attempts to confront these issues in our daily lives and in our work. We cannot transcend nor escape our cultural context and the myriad ways in which we have been socialized to respond to one another. We can only hope to remain vigilant and open to instruction.

THE TERRIFYING TRUTH (AND A MORE HOPEFUL FINAL THOUGHT)

The terrifying truth is that we have a choice. We can continue to be immobilized by the fear of making mistakes and can hide behind a veil of cynicism claiming that change is impossible, or we can choose to act, knowing that we will misjudge situations, fail to see alternatives, and be faced with the unanticipated negative consequences of our actions. It's Pandora's box. But like Pandora's box, look a bit deeper and there is hope. I have faith in people. That is at the core of my work as a participatory action researcher. I have faith in their intelligence, kind-heartedness, and basic sense of justice. Occasionally I am proven wrong. Far more often, however, I find that in approaching others with this expectation, my faith is well founded. I believe in the possibility of change and I realize that I am not responsible for bringing about that change by myself but for taking what action I can with the conviction that in the long run change is the result of shared action. And so I choose to act.

NOTE

1. Other terms have been used to describe approaches that focus to a greater or lesser extent on the active involvement of the researcher in working with communities to achieve positive social change. These include community-based research, "action research" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), activist "feminist fieldwork" (Gordon, 1995, p. 375), "action-oriented research or advocacy research" (Gordon, 1995, p. 381), and "critical race praxis" (Wing, 2000, p. 6).

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