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Thinking Through our Processes: How the UCSC Community Psychology Research & Action Team Strives to Embody Ethical, Critically Reflexive Anti-racist Feminist Praxis

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Thinking through our processes: How the UCSC Community Psychology Research & Action Team strives to embody an ethical, critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis

Abstract

Co-written by eight people, this paper describes how the UCSC Community Psychology Research and Action Team (CPRAT) organizes itself in weekly group meetings and how this structure is an attempt to embody an ethical, critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis. First, we outline the community psychology core competency of an ethical, reflective practice (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012). We offer a friendly amendment to consider an ethical, critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis. Second, we discuss how we organize CPRAT meetings to uphold these ideas. We describe our current structure, which includes personal and project check-ins, rotating facilitation, and attention to broader professional development issues. Third, we provide two examples to illustrate our process: (a) why talking about poop matters in addressing imposter syndrome and (b) getting our team on the same page regarding a research site. We end the paper with a description of a “rough edge,” or an area for growth in our praxis.

The UCSC Community Psychology Research and Action Team (CPRAT) began in 2006, when Regina (hereafter, Gina) moved to UC Santa Cruz as an assistant professor. In this paper, we describe how CPRAT works to embody the core competency related to ethics. First, we outline the community psychology core competency of an ethical, reflective practice (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012). We offer a friendly amendment to consider an ethical, critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis. Second, we discuss CPRAT’s organization as a critically reflexive anti-racist feminist space. We summarize how our meetings have changed over the past 10 years as well as our current structure. Third, we provide examples to illustrate our process of: (a) personal check-ins and (b) how our team came together to address challenges at one of our research sites. Finally, we end with a description of a “rough edge,” or an area for our growth.

Core Competencies and an Ethical, Reflective Practice

Some community psychologists have been interested in developing core competencies (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012; Nelson, Poland,

Murray, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2004) while others question the usefulness of such a framework (Dzidic, Breen, & Bishop, 2013). Yet all seem to agree that community psychology educational programs should assist students with engaging in ethical and social justice oriented community-based research. Since at least the 1980s, some have discussed the importance of reflexivity, examination of privilege, and self-discovery as central to ethical practices and accountability (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012; Lykes & Hellstedt, 1987; Nelson et al., 2004; Serrano-García & López-Sánchez, 1991; Watts, 1994).

A recent discussion of competencies, written by the Society for Community Research and Action’s (SCRA) Committee on Education Programs and Community Psychology Practice Council Task Group, describe “ethical, reflective practice” as foundational and as a core competency (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012, p. 11). The authors argue that community psychologists must “articulate how one’s own values, assumptions, and life experiences influence one’s work, and articulate strengths and limitations of one’s own perspective” (p. 11). This is needed for

accountability and ethical improvement.

We agree that this process is foundational to and for community psychologists, yet we offer a friendly amendment to this competency. We urge the field to consider an ethical, critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis as a core competency. A critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis is situated within an episteme of relatedness (Montero, 2007) and therefore helps to hold us accountable to other researchers, our community collaborators, and ourselves. Indeed, reflexivity alone has not transformed the role of the university-based researcher (Lykes & Crosby, 2014). A critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis, however, may provide a more generative framework. It demands that we interrogate entanglements, contradictions, complications, and our web of relations among research team members, community-based collaborators, and in ourselves. The rationale for this interrogation is so that we can hold fast to the idea that we all have intersectional positionalities, desires, and histories, which we must consider if we are to create socially just change (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Fine, 1994; Langhout, 2016; Lykes & Crosby, 2014; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

We therefore suggest the following friendly amendment to competency 5: Ethical, ~~Reflective Practice~~ Critically Reflexive Anti-racist Feminist Praxis: In a process of continual ethical improvement, the ability to identify ethical issues in one's own practice, and act to address them responsibly, *in relation with others, and in ways consistent with liberatory practices*. To articulate how one's own values, assumptions, *structural privileges and marginalizations*, and life experiences influence one's work, and articulate the strengths and limitations of one's own perspective. To develop and maintain professional networks for ethical consultation and support.

Our argument for this shift to an ethical anti-

racist feminist praxis builds on the work of feminists of color, who have argued for decades for a critically reflexive praxis, particularly for those engaged in community work with subordinated groups (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981; Collins, 2000; Hurtado, 1996b). This is particularly valuable for communities of practice, such as research teams, where privilege can manifest in ways that undermine the overall project (Hurtado, 1996b). As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/1999) argues, to engage in this praxis means that one must both hear and *listen* to the "clash of voices" for transformation to take place. That is, an anti-racist feminist reflexive praxis helps root our practice within the hyphens, in-between spaces, and from critically engaged subjectivities, as we strive to collaborate in liberatory ways (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Fine, 1994; Langhout, 2016; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

Striving Toward a Critically Reflexive Anti-Racist Feminist Space

We endeavor to create a critically reflexive anti-racist feminist space. We want our space to recognize our intersectional positionalities, desires, and histories, and to root our practice from in-between spaces. Therefore, one important practice is to carve a space where we maintain ourselves within the academy. In meetings, this often takes shape as checking-in about our lives, including topics not directly related to research. Thus, we often share what we are feeling in our bodies. This brings our whole selves into the space and reminds us that our bodies are a site of examination for our work. This is vital because ethics is about what is rational, and also what is connected to and felt in the body (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

Beginnings

The PhD program in which I (Gina) was hired was a social psychology program organized around social justice. Although a community psychologist was on faculty years ago, there

were no current CPists, or CP graduate courses. It was important to me that my graduate students receive social-community psychology training. Also, I wanted my team to meet to draw upon the wisdom and experience of each member (Lykes & Hellstedt, 1987; Sarason, 1972). Accordingly, graduate students, undergraduates and I met together for the first three years. After some trial and error, we jointly constructed the space to include personal check-ins (a time for each person to talk about what they desired), project check-ins (a time to discuss field-based research), and focused on foundational readings for community and social psychology. My goals were to reduce hierarchies and fixed power structures, and to build a shared theoretical foundation for a new research group, while attending to theoretical traditions within the UCSC Psychology Department. Therefore, this was new terrain for all of us.

For some of us, this structure worked well. For others, the space was charged. Some graduate students found it comforting to have the undergraduates present as they struggled with imposter syndrome. Others felt responsible for their undergraduates' contributions, and that they should opine brilliantly in front of undergraduates, which was difficult as they struggled with imposter syndrome. Some felt tokenized because the space was about 66% white and they were Latina. Additionally, attempting this more horizontal structure within the hierarchy of academe, many of us felt frustrated with navigating two white undergraduate men who talked a lot, despite our interventions.

Eventually, some graduate students came to me and requested the undergraduates be disinvited so that we could focus on their professional development. Although this proposal made me and graduate students uneasy because it seemed to reify structural power, and would mean leaving some social positions out of our knowledge construction, I agreed because I thought the group was

coming to a common theoretical foundation, and was also frustrated with the expressions of white male privilege in the space.

Current Structure

Currently, I (Gina) meet weekly with all graduate students in a group and individually as needed. Separately, graduate students meet weekly with undergraduates on their team. Considering graduate student meetings (the focus of this paper), we each facilitate at least one week each quarter. We spend the first hour on check-ins taking turns discussing how our week has gone and/or upcoming issues. Each person shares as much/little as they desire. For project check-ins, each graduate student can discuss their project(s) and receive feedback from the group. During the second hour, the facilitator uses the group in ways that person deems most useful, including practice job talks, feedback on paper drafts, talking through data coding, and discussing research possibilities. Professional topics might include creating a syllabus, navigating job interviews, or other skills graduate students feel are needed.

Our Bodies, Our Critically Reflexive Anti-Racist Feminist Selves: Two Examples

Thinking critically about our bodies and processes is a way to make ourselves visible, which means taking ourselves and accountability seriously (Collins, 2000; Langhout, 2016). Feminists of Color have argued that rendering our identities *invisible* can lead us to ignore/overlook the struggles of our collaborators' social groups (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981). In order to do socially just work, therefore, acknowledging our lived experiences and differences is essential to our growth, including as a collective. Making ourselves visible also helps us remember that community psychology competencies are contextualized, relational, and process focused (Dzidic et al., 2013). Therefore, our capacity building must be multi-sensory if we

are to engage deeply in social justice (Nelson et al., 2004; Thomas & Mulvey, 2008). In this section, we describe two examples of our critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis.

Why talking about poop matters: Using check-ins to address imposter syndrome

For years, I (Danielle) have been plagued by what I refer to in polite company as a “nervous stomach,” resulting in “digestion issues.” In lab meetings, which convened on Wednesdays at mid-morning, my predictable stomach rumbles and growls elicited laughter and curiosity from others. These moments sometimes served as comedic relief during tense conversation, or provided a reason to excuse myself momentarily. They also served as a reminder that our intellectual work is not separate from our corporeal presence, despite the notion (often critiqued by feminist scholars) that “professional performance... is premised on headwork, on a disembodied authority dependent on the Cartesian split of mind/body common to western epistemology” (Bartlett, 2005, p. 199). Weekly personal check-ins were an opportunity to talk openly about poop (among other things), which subvert the pretense of bodiless intellectuals.

It is a not so well-kept secret in academia that many of us struggle with digestion issues. Indeed, when I dared broach the subject with others, the customary response was inevitably, “me, too!” As I neared my dissertation defense Gina passed down her “Eating for IBS” (Irritable Bowel Syndrome) cookbook, which she had received from a tenured UCSC professor. In CPRAT meetings, the shared experience of managing unpredictable bodies within the Cartesian academic context, and identifying malfunctions of those bodies, led to confessions of other maladies – an expanding catalog of stress-related afflictions that had been exacerbated by or begun while in graduate school or as an assistant professor. Some include: acid reflux, insomnia, hair loss,

weight gain, weight loss, autoimmune disorders, bruxism (clenching and grinding of teeth that can result in headaches, jaw and tooth pain, and cracked teeth), nausea, tendonitis, and back, neck, and shoulder problems.

The Cartesian mind/body split is not performed successfully by all bodies. As Bartlett (2005) reminds us, “the privileging of mind over matter, of disembodied knower, actually presumes a straight white (able) male body” (p. 197). Thus, academics unable to embody the straight, white, able-bodied male are hyper-visible within the academy, as they contradict the social identities presumed representative of the intellectual.

As community psychologists operating reflexively, we are called to recognize our subjectivities and identities, or our embodied selves. Acknowledging that we have bodies and corresponding physical functions is a mode of integrating our minds and bodies. As Hurtado (1996a) writes, “successful [feminists of Color] negotiators avoid the bifurcation that has been documented in the psychological literature as being the cornerstone of the difference between women and men” (p. 387). Talking about our bodies, including how they suffer, resists bifurcation, as we recognize that knowledge production is always situated within raced, gendered, and classed bodies (Hurtado, 1996a). I consider the public discussion of bodily functions, including poop, a kind of personal “anecdote, or gossip, as a counter-discourse” that disrupts conventions around what it means to be an academic; conventions that have historically excluded people like those of us in CPRAT (i.e., first generation/working class, women, people of Color; Bartlett, 2005, p. 195).

What is striking about CPRAT personal check-ins is how commonplace the experience of ill-health (digestion related or otherwise) is among us. Talking about poop matters here, because it calls attention to the prevalence

and ordinariness of illness, and in doing so makes the personal political. The impact of these conversations extends beyond simple rapport building or creation of a “safer space” to discuss crude topics. Attempts to relate to one another in anti-hegemonic ways, however, are always negotiated.

Given the diversity in ages, genders, races, ethnicities, and class statuses, the sharing of life experiences can be complicated. I (Janelle) joined CPRAT during my last two years of graduate school. I was not accustomed to sharing personal experiences in a space where everyone was essentially a stranger to me. I resisted check-ins, often limiting my responses to one or two sentences. I made a considerable effort to get to know other students on CPRAT, but I was unsure “why” we were sharing. My lived experiences had made me cautious in regards to trusting people in power, particularly those who come from dominant social groups. I constantly pushed Gina regarding her racial and ethnic identity because I needed to know that she was aware of her positionality before I could share aspects of myself in a space where I had less power. This was an area of growth both for me and CPRAT. Over the years, we have learned to acknowledge differences, positionalities, and to recognize discomfort. We must continue to allow for those entering CPRAT to be resistant to the group’s dynamics and for all of us to grow in our understanding of how transformative spaces can be uncomfortable when we are accustomed to traditionally organized spaces (Aime, Humphrey, Derue, & Paul, 2014).

From an anti-hegemonic perspective, the structural incorporation of personal check-ins and its ability to affirm values of relatedness allows for ways of being, knowing, and doing typically marginalized by the predominantly independent, white, middle-class values embedded in the everyday practices of U.S. institutions of higher education (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus,

Covarrubias, & Johnson, 2012), and “the Western academic traditions, discourses, and structures that reproduce historical power hierarchies intertwined with the legacy of colonialism” (Reyes-Cruz & Sonn, 2011). When I (Angela) first joined CPRAT, the meetings had already transitioned into the current structure. It took years for me to warm up to everyone and claim my voice within this space, but it was the practice of personal check-ins that allowed for this process to happen. This practice continues to validate my sense of cohesion and belonging as a developing scholar-activist and “historical being whose life is developed and fulfilled in a complex web of social relations” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 109), both inside and outside the academy.

As is the case with many first-generation, working-class, im/migrant, and/or students of color with significant ties and obligations to their home communities (Gordon, 2002), navigating the cultural norms and power dynamics of the various spaces I am obliged and privileged to participate in for my studies, whilst negotiating the meaning of these experiences in relation to my home community, has proved daunting. As a Vietnamese American woman who grew up within an interdependent, refugee community context, facing the demands of the academy and its sterile environment *for* my family while being *away* from them takes its toll on my well-being, and physically manifests itself as chronic insomnia. The additional burden of imposter syndrome would halt my progress altogether. Yet, hearing about the struggles (poop-related or otherwise), strategies, and quirks of others in CPRAT, I can reaffirm three things: 1) research and professionalization are developmental processes; 2) my personhood in relation to my home community can be acknowledged as integral to the scholarly work I produce; and 3) others in CPRAT are also dynamic human beings who can be engaged with as such. I feel encouraged to

exist and participate as a whole person.

For me, the personal and the professional are integrative, not bifurcated (Hurtado, 1996a). My identities and lived experiences directly inform my research, and the labor of research has bearings on my daily living. I therefore make little distinction between personal and project check-ins, and often communicate them as one. By hearing how others experience challenges and problem-solving together, I likewise feel enabled to share my own struggles and seek support. This carries forward beyond the weekly group meetings, through informal one-on-one and small group conversations, which are as important as our collective meetings. Institutionalized attention to scholar-activists as dynamic and relational beings is pertinent for community psychologists and community-based researchers, who may be more likely to risk burnout from intensive work demands. Therefore, check-ins allow us to inhabit in-between spaces where we can recognize both the hegemony and generative potential within the academy and communities with which we collaborate.

Getting onto the same page: How CPRAT comes together when needed

Over the first seven years at our elementary school research site, we engaged undergraduate students as research assistants [RAs] in a youth participatory action research (yPAR) project. I (Jesica), like other graduate students, trained RAs on the ethics and values of yPAR with youth. RAs had experiences that informed their ways of interacting with youth. Every fall we familiarized RAs with literatures on yPAR, youth empowerment, and critical youth studies. We also oriented RAs to the history of the program, including the sociocultural context of the school and community. We made every effort to prepare the RAs before they entered the school context; however, we always, unsurprisingly, experienced challenges.

Our yPAR program sought to create a space for young people to critically learn, grow, and meaningfully engage. Therefore, we did not encourage disciplinary practices from traditional classroom environments, as they did not align with our goals of fomenting empowerment. Yet we were often perplexed when RAs used these practices to get students to participate/focus, or when RAs provided almost no boundaries for youth. Our intention is not to place blame on the RAs, youth, or even ourselves, but to demonstrate how engaging in the community, while upholding community psychology values including feminisms and anti-racism, is a complex task that requires an ongoing ethical and reflexive praxis of thinking through our values, actions and practices.

During my (Angela's) third year as a graduate coordinator for the yPAR program, our team faced challenges that hindered our growth and progress. Multiple RAs experienced recent deaths of close friends, and our team encountered events at the program that we were unprepared to handle professionally or emotionally (e.g. one youth's disclosure of experiencing violence). Gina and I also identified the following issues: 1) our team feared reproducing dominant child-adult relations, which led to a disorganized yPAR space that led to 2) too much time focusing on behavioral issues; 3) a need to further develop the RAs' understanding of the connection between theory and practice in yPAR; and 4) a need for more practical, hands-on skills training.

Beyond a sense of responsibility and commitment to the youth and RAs, I was concerned by the vulnerability of my own well-being and what that meant for the program. I communicated my concerns to Gina, indicating the issue was likely our team's insufficient experience but also my exhaustion. I felt relatively *safe* sharing these feelings because of the relational dynamics within CPRAT, which, as previously mentioned, acknowledged me as a whole

person. As such, I did not perceive the temporary limits to my developing capacities as threats to the validity of my academic existence, but rather as an opportunity to seek support. Gina responded to my concerns by pooling the strengths and resources from members of CPRAT to organize a workshop for RAs.

One training component included a workshop on Positive Discipline (PD). I (Stephanie) provided this training due to my expertise in PD. Positive Discipline includes five core criteria: 1) developing a sense of connection 2) mutual respect and encouragement 3) a focus on long term effectiveness 4) social and life skills development and 5) opportunities for youth to discover their capabilities (Dreikurs, 1971; LaSala, McVittie, & Smitha, 2013). Respect is a leading principle of PD, especially for youth who have less power in relation to adults. Respectful communication is encouraged through connection while still maintaining boundaries (Nelsen, 1987).

Setting boundaries kindly and firmly, a central PD practice, involved research team self-reflection on our positionality as adults in relation to the youth. In this way, we worked with RAs to develop their critically reflexive anti-racist feminist ethics as we discussed our raced, classed, gendered, aged bodies and how they related to those of the youth. For example, during the training, the research team practiced tone of voice, body posture, and other nonverbal cues to communicate respectfully and firmly; being firm was challenging for most RAs, many of whom were young women. Developing greater awareness through role playing and discussing patterns connected with gender socialization was a way for adult team members to feel more confident to practice, informed by social structures, and a desire for liberation, our work with young people and critique and build their youth-work skills. In this way, we disentangled “firm” from “oppressive,” and connected life experience,

Rough Edges: Some Places for Growth

Organizational power structures: What's a community psychologist to do?

All of us are concerned about power, oppression, and liberation, and like others, we have a critique of how hierarchies often impede social justice (Aime et al., 2014; Williams & Lykes, 2003). Many of us were therefore happy to eschew a hierarchical team structure and to strive instead for something more horizontal. Yet, as should be clear from our decision to disinvite the undergraduate research assistants, we have not implemented horizontality, but we have not implemented a rigid hierarchy either. What we have settled on, for now, is a heterarchical structure.

Heterarchy is a system consisting “of an interconnected and overlapping network of components that operate dynamically to both emerge from and govern the interactions of constituent components” (Tebes, 2012, p. 25). Heterarchy implies an adaptive system that changes based on demands. At different points, different system components might express expertise and power depending on system needs and component resources (Aime et al., 2014). In this way, heterarchy facilitates the development, communication, and participation of its components (Tebes, 2012). Heterarchy is therefore about relationships, interdependence, and collaboration and is, therefore, well aligned with an ethical and critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis.

This shift toward heterarchy, in the form of distributed responsibility, tasks and reasoning, is advantageous to the construction of academic knowledge (Dunbar, 2000; Stokols et al., 2004). Further, a heterogeneous group (in terms of research backgrounds, experience, and social locations) can be beneficial for distributed collaboration under certain conditions (Dunbar, 2000). High levels of social support and shared values can promote effectiveness

in collaboration, yet a considerably diverse group with competing goals can inhibit heterarchical ideals (Dunbar, 2000; Stokols et al., 2003). It is important to reiterate that CPRAT members occupy different positionalities and thus have differing experiences of psychological violence within and outside of the academy (e.g., racism, sexism, classism), and differing access to resources including knowledge, social and cultural capital.

I (Erin) experience the CPRAT setting as having the potential for resources to be dynamic and collective. Yet our collectivity is also in the context of individual competition over scarce resources given the context of academe (e.g., a spot on one of Gina's funded research programs, competitive fellowships, and Gina's time, attention, and recognition). Further, Gina cannot shift her responsibility for our training or her ability to influence our lives. Heterarchy is only possible if those in the system view power as dynamic and view shifts in the expression of power as legitimate (Aime et al., 2014).

The ability to uphold heterarchy is one of our "rough edges," and one we experienced as we wrote this paper. Specifically, we had disagreements when writing parts of this paper, which resulted in a long conference call where we asked another member of our research team, who is not an author on this paper, to facilitate the call. How we are positioned partly influenced how much or little each of us was willing to disclose during the call. This example is a reminder that when considering social systems, the hierarchical structures within which CPRAT is embedded pose challenges to shifting expressions of power, and thus some social relationships are less dynamic than others.

Conclusion

When I (David) returned to graduate school, my sister gave me a set of juggling balls, to exercise a different part of my brain. I laughingly said that it seemed fitting for

graduate school as I was adjusting to having to juggle many responsibilities. As I have spent time at this university and in CPRAT, this analogy is perhaps more fitting than I originally ascertained. At any given time, I must give attention to and accommodate for my multiple identities and positionalities. Unlike the juggling set given to me, each of these positionalities has its own facets and characteristics. To give greater weight to any without accounting for the others is to risk falling out of balance. As an ethical scholar-activist, I must "articulate how [my] own values, assumptions, and life experiences influence [my] work" (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012, p.11). To ethically collaborate with my colleagues and with the greater community, though, this is not enough. I must also be able to understand how my identities and positionalities impact my relationships with others in consideration of their own multifaceted experiences. If we are to truly collaborate, to juggle life with others, we must be attentive to the experiences and positionalities of those with whom we are collaborating. In a movement toward a critically reflexive anti-racist feminist praxis, we consider not only the complex nature of our own experience, but also that of those with whom we practice.

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