

THEORY MEETS PRACTICE:
INTERSECTIONAL ANTI-OPPRESSION IN ART AND ACTIVISM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Social justice-oriented art and activism have given rise to an evolving dialogue between theory and practice toward social justice. The insight that a problem has a social dimension and the impulse to address the problem are starting points for activity that is neither purely practical nor purely theoretical. The pictures and songs are profound. Likewise, the distinction between art and activism in this time of development is fluid.

The research brings together several efforts from the last fifty years of global concern with racism, disability justice, economic inequality, sexism, and gender-based oppression in which the dialogue between theory and practice has been particularly active. This project explores how the concepts of disability justice, counter-narratives, intersectionality, systems theory & subjectivity-objectivity, modalities of perception, form & formation, communities of practice, anti-oppression practice, life as method, demechanization each came out of particular practical problematics, and in the process of being theorized, were extended either by their originators or others into different situations and problematics that were or are struggling to come to voice.

One concept in particular, "demechanization," a term from the work of Theater of the Oppressed (TOC), was the focus of the author's exploratory workshops with practitioners at TOC conferences in Brazil in 2018 and 2019. The research also draws on the author's personal experience with the Story Circles, coming from Black Civil Rights Workers, as well as work with Brazil's Restorative Justice Circles. The author's own long-time artistic practice, activism, and educational formation are brought to bear in some reflections on and illustrations of qualitative research via visual, musical, and theatrical media.

The project, as a whole, shows that certain problematics that arise in social theory and social justice practice can be addressed by creative crossing of the theory-practice divide.

Her mouth opened out like a stream with rocks and branches in between
settle, let's settle out what's happening.

Painlessly, touching teeth, tongue tries to intercede
in the rocks and the dark, in the bark, and the leaves
cagily bearing teeth!

Settle, let settle out what's happening.

She tries to pull the leeches from her
and leave the current underneath her
tongue tied among the reeds

but out comes the stream, the stream!

Settle, let's settle out what's happening...
settle, let settle out what's happening.

Video: **“exquisite limb”**, 2021

<https://youtu.be/R2wK6YYvKkU>

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To my mom and dad, Michelle and Biff Simpson, and Paul Kaiser:

I will always remember the way you rushed to me, cared for me after my stroke, and all the ways you've shown me love over the years.

To Pepere, who has passed, and Grammie, who is still with us:

I am a PhD!

To my whole family:

I love you.

To Curtis Muhammad, who has passed:

We love each other.

To my mentor, Anghy Valdivia:

Thank you. I did it!

To Mark Enslin, Editor:

The words are there on the page.

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INTRODUCTION

Socially-minded art and socially-minded activism exist in a space between theory and practice. Even if the socially-minded art or activism arise out of personal experience rather than study—worry that pollution from a nearby factory will harm your children, for example—the impulse to do something about it and the insight that the problem has a social dimension are moments of proto-practice and proto-theory. The ensuing activity coming out of the impulse and the insight, figuring out how to talk to yourself and others about what's wrong and what to do about it, reflecting on causes and connections and constraints while taking action, is neither simply practical nor purely theoretical. Likewise, the distinction between art and activism in this time of development is fluid.

This research brings together several efforts from the last fifty years of global concern with racism, disability justice, economic inequality, sexism, and gender-based oppression in which the theoretical and practical between-space has been particularly active. The concepts brought forth by these disparate efforts that this project delves into—disability justice, counter-narratives, intersectionality, systems theory & subjectivity-objectivity, modalities of perception, form & formation, communities of practice, anti-oppression practice, life as method, demechanization—each came out of particular practical problematics, and in the process of being theorized, were extended either by their originators or others into different situations and problematics that were or are struggling to come to voice. Some of these concepts have long

been guiding lights for my artistic practice. Some rose in importance in the process of pursuing this research.

One concept in particular, “demechanization,” is a term and idea that arises in the multifarious work of Theater of the Oppressed, one aspect of which is treated in Chapter 4, and more broadly taken up in Chapter 5. The idea has not been the focus of much scholarly concern, and, having been engaged in Theater of the Oppressed (TOC) work since I attended three days of workshops with the founder, Augusto Boal, in Worcester, MA in 1999, I became interested in the question of how demechnization is infused in all branches of TOC work, not just the more popularly known TOC theater games. With this question in mind, I conducted exploratory workshops at PTO conferences, then in a series of individual and group interviews with *jokers/curingas* at the Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro between December of 2018 and July of 2019.

This dissertation also draws on my experience with Restorative Circles, an approach to conflict developed by Dominic Barter and others in the favelas of Rio Janeiro, and subsequently brought to the US. This set of practices has been introduced and nurtured in the Champaign-Urbana area by Mikhail Lyubansky. I participated in numerous workshops there in 2011, and visited Dominic Barter in Rio during my research trips in Brazil.

Another strand of the research process was learning from John O’Neal, one of the founders of the Free Southern Theater, a theater group explicitly formed to connect with the civil rights movement. They and other activists developed a practice of story circles. I studied this

practice primarily with my mentor, activist Curtis Muhammed, whom I met at a Critical Resistance in New Orleans in 2003.

Chapter One begins with the discourse around disability justice as an anti-oppression effort and the role of narrative: personal narrative, counter-narrative, social narrative, formulation of identity, in manifesting this effort. Narrative is both an artistic form and the means by which certain lives become medicalized. The chapter traces the intersections of autobiography, socially determined identity, academic objectification, and creation of alternative narratives as resistance. The chapter then moves into a history of the term and concept of intersectionality, from its coinage by Kimberlé Crenshaw to address a particular problematic related to understanding power and privilege in relation to Black women, to its adoption in a number of fields, contexts, and identities with its invitation to reach beyond individualist, single-axis frameworks. Several applications of this critical lens are explored to show how it notes not only social location but relative position to other independent and overlapping social positions, tracking how oppressive power reshapes itself. The chapter concludes with a look at intersectionality as an interdisciplinary tool, as a means of solving certain kinds of problems in small groups, and as a crucial component of self-reflexive research.

Chapter Two concerns form and formation both in the artistic, epistemological sense and in the sense of education and becoming. Taking off from the theme of autobiography from the disability justice section of the first chapter, this chapter begins with an account of my intellectual background and personal philosophical framework and how it evolved over the years of my upbringing, education, artistic development, and activism. This trajectory includes some

reflections on legitimation, autoethnography, and heuristic procedure, arriving at an exposition of a creative/critical working process I call “Life as Method.” This presentation loops back to disability justice and then makes a detour to a defense of visual modes of reasoning as a complement to discursive reasoning. Chapter Two then takes up the notion of communities of practice and what is entailed in the process of integrating newcomers to such a community. In this section, a distinction is drawn between tacit, explicit, and situated knowledge which is part of the definition of a community of practice and a significant aspect of integrating newcomers. A discussion of the role of learning specialized terminology along with gaining an embodied understanding of the actions the terminology names leads to a reappearance of narrative, of story.

Chapter Three takes the lines of argument of the first two chapters into the artistic media of photography, poetry, posters, and song that I created and/or curated during the time of this research. These works put into practice and reflect on the ideas of intersectionality, counter-narrative, awareness of social location, reflexivity, community of practice, small-group collaboration, and Life as Method outlined in the first two chapters. This chapter adds a dimension to the preceding discourse and acts as a springboard for the next two chapters.

Chapter Four continues in the realm of small groups from the second part of Chapter Two, and focuses on an exploration of the possibility of devising practices that inhibit oppressive dynamics in small groups. It begins by defining the terms “oppression” and “anti-oppression,” and identifies some common group practices that either contribute to oppressive dynamics, or align with an anti-oppressive approach. Next there is a presentation of three examples of

groups/practices with an anti-oppressive or liberatory orientation—Women’s Liberation Front, Restorative Circles, and the Image Theater of Theater of the Oppressed. The work of each of these groups/practices is analyzed to derive potential criteria by which to evaluate the efficacy of an anti-oppressive practice. Finally, the chapter outlines an agenda of how to go about constructing anti-oppressive small group practice, with an emphasis on the role of ongoing evaluation to maintain alignment with the identified criteria.

Chapter Five takes up the work of Theater of the Oppressed overall which has encompassed several ways of working beyond Image Theater described in the previous chapter. Particularly this chapter focuses on a concept that appears occasionally in the theoretical texts of Augusto Boal, the founder of Theater of the Oppressed, but has been seldom mentioned in the extensive secondary literature, namely “demechanization.” It begins with a description of the concept as a way of understanding the intentions and practices of Theater of the Oppressed. This is followed by exploration of the concept in relation to small group problem-solving, where demechnization is presented as both a set of practices and a set of principles. After a critical application of the concept *to* the work of Theater of the Oppressed, there is an illustrative application of demechnization as a way of enacting intersectional anti-racism and anti-oppression. The chapter closes with an account of research work that went into creating a performance piece that invites audiences to think critically about the concept of whiteness, and an excerpt of the script.

CHAPTER 1

DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

“Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized will justice and human rights be possible.”

- Amanda Baggs (2007 via Von Duuglas-Ittu 2008)

In My Language (Amanda Baggs, 2007)

Introduction to Disability: Personal Narratives

Narratives do cultural work. They orient our perspectives of raw experience, providing a frame for meaning. Within the frame of narratives, a life story is of the utmost importance. Life stories are how we demarcate our identity and preserve its consistency over time, in particular as our physical form changes. The story we tell of ourselves is how we recognize who we are; it is how we have ourselves, and have our communities (Garland-Thompson 2007). Without a personal narrative, whether self-described or other-inscribed, we cannot locate ourselves in relation to others.

Historically, members of the disability community have been represented publicly by so-called “able-bodied” voices, whether of authors, scholars, or scientists. With the advent of disability studies and the disability rights movement, forms of disability narrative have both become more visible and have taken new shapes. In particular, the assertion of autobiographical counter-narratives by members of the disabled community has been a powerful force towards reshaping traditional disability narratives, allowing for disability self-identities with greater agency

and pride, as well as for more authentic experiences of empathy between the disabled and temporarily-abled communities. However, there has been resistance to these stories. Therefore, to fully represent the social narrative of our society, in conjunction with the new ways of telling, there must be new ways of listening. Such listening will require willingness to orient differently to vocabularies and languages of disability narrative.

A personal narrative contains personal and social traits that orient us to our community and our role within it (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). To ground our understanding of who “I” is, we can look to culture and see who “looks like us.” Two sources for locating identity narratives are stories told about “us” by members of our group and stories told about “us” by others. In this latter category I include the narratives found in cultural works such as literature, informal narratives found in daily life, and formal narratives told by those who study “us,” including scholars.

Disability Identity in Academia

The field of disability studies is relatively new. Its trajectory has been marked by continuing calls for the re-evaluation of its premises. In specific, Linton (1998) articulates how the field is marked by the same dynamics it, at times, critiques: its scholarship often individualizes disability, presents disability as a pathology—that disability is a problem to be addressed—and fails to address the subjectivity and agency of disabled people, whom it objectifies through a preponderance of oversimplification and stereotypes.

The field of disability studies indirectly, but significantly, contributes to the objectification of disabled people via the absence of contributions by disabled-identified scholars. The lack of disabled people represented in a subject position contributes to the assumption that authors are non-disabled, a dominant theme around disability narratives (Linton, 1998) In the interest of complicating such assumptions, I hereby disclose my status as a person on the post-stroke spectrum. To my surprise, this was not something that factored into my study of disability narratives. However, while doing research on self-narratives of disability at large, I found Amanda Baggs' video *In My Language* (2007a) to be an extremely articulate challenge to ableist assumptions about communication. It does not escape me that the affirmation I felt towards her story may well have been reciprocation for feeling affirmed by it.

Disability Within and Beyond Academia

Before launching into questions of disability narratives, an understanding of the language of disability, and its implications, is in order. Disability studies, in its nascent form, has yet to establish a firm foundation of discourse analysis. However, Grue (2011) offers four theoretical models. The first model, social construction, is the one most frequently referenced in both contemporary disability studies and the disability rights movement. It names disability as the economic and political oppression enacted on people whose bodies do not conform to the needs of the dominant society, which Grue denotes as industrial capitalism. One description within this model is that disability occurs when impairment contacts social norms and acquires a social meaning (Gardner, 1978, p.125). The next model is the minority model, in which disability is

seen as one form of social otherness. This model is commonly supported by the deaf community, which considers itself to be a linguistic minority, and by the autistic community. The gap model, unlike the previous two, lacks a political position. It simply posits disability as a gap between the capacities of a portion of the population and the opportunities afforded by society. The medical model is most prevalent in colloquial discourse and is lambasted by many members of disability communities because of its dehumanizing nature. Moreover, it is not supported by contemporary scholarship. In this model, disability is simply seen as any one of a number of biomedically recognized phenomena (Grue, 2011).

Whatever the framework, and regardless of whether the disability is “physical, static or progressive, congenital or acquired, formal (physical) or functional, visible or invisible” (Couser, 2005, p. 602) the experience of disability is fundamental to human beings. Disabled people are the largest global minority with intersections across many, if not most, other demographic markers. Unlike such currently static categories as race and gender, anyone can become disabled, and, given sufficient years, everyone will. Conceptually, disability can also be considered a foundation for the construction of other social identities such as race and gender in the sense that, historically, women were viewed as deficient men, black people are deficient white people, and so on (Couser, 2005).

Disability and Narrative Disability within Narratives

Culturally, disability is highly represented and can be found throughout literature, to the point that the universal “disabled body” has been objectified into a referent, rather than existing

as a distinct person with unique experiences. In fact, Berube (2005) noted that he continued to be surprised at the prevalence of disability narratives, once he began looking for them. The role of disability in literature has traditionally been metaphoric (Garland-Thompson 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, Berube, 2005; Couser, 2005; Garden, 2010).

Within various narrative genres, disabled figures serve to represent the existence of a backstory (Couser 2005) given that deviations from bodily norms provoke a demand for explanatory narrative. The strength of this cultural reflex can be seen in the responsive phrase, “What happened to you?” (Couser, 2005; Thompson-Garland, 2005). For example, the frequency of encountering this question prompted Keith (1994) to use it as the title of her compilation of stories of disability.

Though the experience of disability is nigh universal, the tropes of disability narratives as a genre are frequently variations on themes of abnormality. Recovery from/triumph over adversity, the culturally preferred narrative (Frank, 1995) dominates able-bodied narratives of disability (Garden, 2010). In such stories, disability is tangent to a state of normalcy/ability, which can be resumed if sought. Garland-Thomson (2007) notes that plots involving suffering, catastrophe, isolation, overcoming, or pity abound. Within such plots the character of the “good patient” is lauded. Disabled people are to show good behavior, including an exaggeration of health, good nature, and steadfast endurance (Garden, 2010). This is exemplified in the initial title proposed for Keith’s book: “Mustn’t Grumble” (1994).

Given the decay of the fashion of portraying the “crippled” character, in modern literature it has become trendy to reference an autistic character. It's easy to see autism's appeal to

storytellers. Even mildly autistic people have problems communicating and understanding social behavior; what's more, these difficulties remain tantalizingly unexplained in an era when medical advances have demystified so many other ailments (Couser, 2005).

Literary use of disability as metaphor negatively affects the way actual people with disabilities realize their lives and construct self-identity. As Garland-Thompson (2006) notes, “The aesthetic portrayal of disability as a narrative problem demanding a solution narrows the range of imaginative accommodations to corporeal variation that human communities might offer.” Moreover, this literary propensity to use disability as a narrative crutch, so to speak, both affirms and shapes discriminatory attitudes that range from pity and condescension to public policies that “extend from segregation to euthanasia” (Garland-Thompson, 2006, 412).

Societal Narratives of Disability

Life imitates art imitates life. Triumph narratives reinscribe disability as an aberrance to be survived/transcended (Couser 2002; Darke, 1998) and negate the experiences of those who value their dis/abilities. In conjunction with literature, the medicalization of disability and the pathologizing of difference have contributed greatly to loss of self-determination and self-definition among disabled people (Linton, 1998). For example, the ways in which their caretakers refer to the disabled indicates them “as a problem to be solved, as in need of surveillance, and show(s) evidence of the routinisation of daily life, surveillance, and mortification of the self” (Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurel, 2011, p. 405)^[11]_{SEP}. The dominant models of disability narratives function to narrow the possibilities for self- and other-concept

around disability. Insistence on affliction/recovery and good patient narratives can suppress righteous expressions of dissatisfaction. At the same time, the story structured by the shape we think of as disability is not imagined as a pretty one (Garland-Thomson, R. 2007).

However, people with disabilities, as well as parents of children with disabilities, are asserting counter-narratives that serve to expand the prospect of what life with an impairment could be (Fisher & Goodley, 2007). This story of despair, catastrophe, loss, excess, suffering, and relentless cure-seeking that we tell about disability is being retold (Garland-Thomson, R. 2007).

Personal Narratives of Disability

As Couser (2005, p. 603) succinctly explains, “cultural representation of disability has functioned at the expense of disabled people in part because they have not controlled their own images.” Disability autobiography is a response to traditional misrepresentation. This form of disability narrative, though present prior to 1990 (Couser, 2011), was significantly vitalized by the disability rights movement, which is considered to have manifested most visibly around the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The dissemination of disability life narratives can provide access to untold perspectives, providing an alternative to the “moralizing, objectifying, pathologizing, and marginalizing representations” (Courser, 2005, p. 605) that have preceded and obscured them. These narratives offer the counterintuitive idea that disability can provide a meaningful life in which one thrives rather than languishes (Garland-Thompson, 2007). For example, there is an assertion of deafness as a linguistic minority identity (Jarman et al., 2002). Where previously a diagnosis of “deafness” was the mark of a

deficiency—the absence of hearing—and exclusion from society at large, a story of “deaf culture” offers inclusion in a non-dominant community. Another example is that of viewing Autism as a rhetoric, not as a disability (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011).

With narrative in the hands of its subject, language itself offers opportunity for changes in form. For example, a shift from the objective “disabled person” to the subjective “person with a disability” seeds a new narrative of agency by awarding primacy to the inclusion of person-ness and placing the (currently) exclusionary condition of being disabled, second. Another example is the establishment of “neurodiversity” as a frame for autism.

In order to signify people who do not have autism, the autistic community has coined the term “neurotypical.” This indicator is intended, for better or worse, as a peer to the term “autistic”, and both are referents for a spectrum of “neurodiversity,” in contrast to a binary of “normal” and “autistic.” In an interesting move of what might be misunderstanding, counter-adaptation, or solidarity, many scholars have also adopted this term, to the point that a simple database search reveals it has moved from a term internal to the autistic community to an academic one. The impact of such changes cannot be overestimated. The availability of language to recognize and thus describe an experience provides means to contextualize that experience. Available language for an experience codes it both as a possible concept (this is the case) and potentially, as a socially acceptable experience (it is ok that this is the case).

Autobiographies by People with Disabilities

In *Life Stories*, Linde (1993) wrote that, in order to exist comfortably in the social world, one must have a coherent life story, and that an internal life story serves to organize our past life, current situation, and imagined future. As Garland-Thompson described (2007) personal narratives are also how we locate ourselves in relation to others. A personal narrative of disability identity entails a positive sense of self, and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community. A coherent disability identity is believed to help individuals adapt to disability, including navigating related social stresses and daily hassles (Dunn & Burcaw, date). Among the numerous self-narratives of disability identity that have emerged in the last decades have been autobiographies of people with Autism, first as told by parents of children with autism, and in more recent years, by people with autism themselves (Couser, 2005).

While disability narratives have been rampant in literature, stories of disability in the first person have not been (Garden, 2010). Because having a disability often means a person has their story told for them, either because of the constraints of existing narrative forms or due to a disconnect of communication styles between teller and listener, the possibilities of autobiography are particularly significant due to their first-person positionality: through autobiography the metaphoric object of traditional disability narratives takes a subject position (Couser, 2005). Use of the form's convention alone counters the assertion that a disabled person is not fully a person and, as such, does not have a story. Couser (2011) describes a trajectory of disability self-narratives. Having become more prevalent after WWII with the popularity of stories from veterans, a large number of disability self-narratives were made about a few conditions: first polio and war injuries. In the 1980s and 1990s stories of HIV/AIDS and breast cancer became

popularized, as did stories of blindness, mental illness, and depression, in particular. In conjunction with bodies of narratives relating stories experienced by many, subsequent years saw a surge of stories relating numerous conditions affecting experienced by smaller groups of people.

In recent years of autobiography, there has been a surfeit of ‘nobody memoirs.’ Of note to disability scholars is the predominance of such stories about a *specific* body: a disabled body (Couser, 2011). A fad of “me-too” disability memoirs, in which people who do not identify as disabled reveal impairments, has also come to pass. The narrative currency of disability has gained such traction that, in recent years, even ‘somebody’ memoirs are being undergirded by bodily impairment (Couser, 2011). However, such memoirs often maintain the distance between impaired and disabled by narrating experiences as having already happened. This type of story reifies the traditional triumph narrative and the trope of ‘overcoming’ disability.

In stark contrast, “new disability memoir” positions disability as the social, cultural, legal and architectural obstacles to people living with impairments (Couser 2011, 2005). While narrative arcs are organized by a chronology that often results in resolution, traditional ‘triumph over adversity’ trajectories may not fit (or even be desired to fit) in the life stories of many disabled people (Couser, 1997).

Because of their power, alternative forms of disability narrative can be considered a “postcolonial, even anticolonial” (Couser, 2005, p. 605) force in society. New disability narratives sharply contradict the usual stories of misery, diminishment, and calamity to which we are accustomed (Garland-Thomson, R. 2007). As such, disability life writing is a “tool to shape social and political ideologies about the body and identity.” (Torrell, 2011, p. 336).

The Impact of New Disability Memoir

The voice of a single disabled person can help constitute the creation and maintenance of a cohesive disability community (Torrell, 2011). This is of particular import to the disabled, many of whose experiences are marked by isolation. It also contributes to a re-symbolization and re-signification of disability. This is important because dominant representations constrict not only the lives and bodies of people thought of as disabled, but also those considered able-bodied. Re-symbolizing disability offers alternative understandings of disability and contributes to positive political impact (Garland-Thomson, 2004). The publication of disability autobiographies is essential to this political impact. “The individualized personal narrative ... is thought to have only latent political and redemptive value until it is somehow performed and communicated in a social context.” (McKinney, 2007, p. 270).

However, some readers are dissatisfied with the new shapes of disability memoir.^[1] Readers want the characters of these autobiographies to be “real” and “authentic.” (Garden, 2010). They want to experience disability memoir as a direct recollection of the experiences expected of disabled people, as shaped by traditional narratives of the “triumphant,” “good patient.” They want an answer to “What happened to you?” It is expected that people with non-“normative” bodies will account for themselves and their behaviors, soothing the discomfort of those around them, and when such assurance is not provided, some readers can become restless.

At times disability life narratives meet this desire. It is no surprise, given Linde’s explanation of a life story as a “product of a member of a particular culture,” that a person’s

identity would be shaped by the narratives she is told about it. But while the genre of disability autobiography can fall prey to the pitfalls of traditional narratives of disability, reinforcing marginal and pitiable status, it still offers a place for people historically told about to tell themselves on their own terms (Terrell, 2011).

But disability autobiography is as subject to convention as any other genre. Readers forget that conventions of literature shape narrative publication. Though there is a “speaker” in poetry or a “narrator” in a novel, many readers assume the direct experience of the first person in an autobiography. Because of this, those who expect the text to both meet their expectations and be “true” place a huge and disproportionate responsibility on the author.

However, by referring to the narrator of an autobiography or to the expectations wrought by traditional narratives, an author can draw attention to the constructed nature of even their own story (Garden, 2010). Another practice that complicates disability autobiography is the renegotiated ending afforded by an afterword. The meta-commentary of a personal companion may or not mitigate a “good patient” or “recovery” narrative, but certainly complicates what constitutes the “truth” of an autobiography, as seen in Ann Pritchett’s contrary, post-mortem afterword to Lucy Greely’s *Autobiography of a Face* (ibid.)

A Note on Empathy

When hearing the story of another’s experience, a listener might respond with empathy, an experience of shared affect, e.g. “I feel your pain.” It is important to not do that, that while the listener *believes* they are feeling the same as the author, they may be mistaken (Keen, 2006).

Whether or not the listener experiences what they believe are the author's emotions, they can have feelings about the author's experience. When supportive, such feelings can be called sympathy. Sympathy is prosocial and other-oriented; it seeks and/or maintains connection. However, if the feelings are unsupportive, they can be referred to as personal distress, which is self-oriented and anti-social. When experiencing personal distress, listeners seek to distance and disconnect themselves from the experience of the author (ibid.)

Eliminating the Counter-Narrative

"Any institution needs control in order to exist." (Luciano, in Biehl, 2005, p. 42)

"If we do speak, we're only allowed a voice if it agrees exactly with the people who say they're speaking for us" (Baggs, via Biever, 2008, p. 9)

One of the most cunning ways to achieve narrative coherence is to omit or reframe counter-narratives. Through what I assert is a form of collective repression, the stories of our elderly, dis/differently-abled, and abused, as well as those otherwise incarcerated in jails, nursing homes, and mental health institutions are not included in, or are dis-included from the public sphere, from our social autobiography.

Schuman (2010) references that personal narrative experiences can be collected in an effort to "grant a voice" to a group whose ideas, perspectives, or experiences have not been heard. However, it may be that those seeking to grant voice do so on the authority that they can not only give it, but also take it. An autistic woman who uses the screen name "Abscout" created an Autism Speaks parody site called *NT Speaks*, where NT stands for neurotypical. In response,

Autism Speaks, with great legal and financial power and with no autistic people in decision-making positions, pressured Abscout to remove the site, which she did. Autism Speaks claimed that it wanted the site taken down so that it would not confuse people looking for the organization. After the shutdown, supporters of Abscout and the NT Speaks site were “outraged” because Autism Speaks was “suppressing the views of the very people it (was) supposed to represent and help (Biever, 2008, p. 9)

Coherence

“I find it very interesting by the way that failure to learn your language is seen as a deficit but failure to learn my language is seen as so natural that people like me are officially described and puzzling rather than anyone admitting that it is themselves that are confused not autistic people or other cognitively disabled people who are inherently confusing. We are even viewed as non-communicative if we don’t speak the standard language, but other people are not considered non-communicative if they are so oblivious to our own languages as to believe that they don’t exist.” (Baggs, 2007b)

In current society, social self-description does not include disability identity: though they/we are the largest minority in the world, people who have disabilities/are disabled are seen as external to the dominant culture. This robs us of an accurate social self-description. Personal narratives are how we recognize who we are (Garland-Thompson 2007) Without the voices of disability-identified people as part of our collective voice, we are mis-identified. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize such stories as our stories.

Coherence requires cooperation between the speaker and her audience (Linde, 1994). In the case of disability narratives, where traditional, objective forms are being rejected and countered by new, subjective ones, coherence will require willingness to adapt to new stories and

language on the part of both disabled and temporarily-abled people. “The necessary ingredients for effective communication apply equally to individuals on and off the spectrum” (Wilczynski, 2010, p. 51). Given how infrequently the stories of disabled people are self-authored and heard by others, including their/our stories in the dominant discourse around ability/disability would be a giant step towards collective coherence. It is how we can begin to hear the whole picture of who “we” are.

In this section, I will reflect upon intersectionality as theory and method as it relates to research on approaches to small group collaborative problem solving. First, I will provide an overview of intersectionality and its affordances with emphasis on how its use can reveal covered or unseen impacts and processes. Next, I will reflect on the dissemination of intersectional methods across disciplines. Finally, I will explore how an intersectional approach might inflect small group communication research, including research design and the role of the researcher. It is my intention that this inquiry continues to “encourage and contribute to intersectional feminist scholarship” (Valdivia, 2010, p. 111) by supporting the application of intersectional methods in small group research.

Intersectionality and its Uses

Intersectionality as a research paradigm was initially developed by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s through her study of the experience of discrimination against Black women, especially in legal settings. In her foundational work, Dr. Crenshaw found that Black women could not press their legal claims of discrimination because, though the women involved

couldn't find work where white women were employed because they were Black, and couldn't find work where Black men were employed because they were women, the places of work employed both Black men and white women and therefore were found non-discriminatory by the legal system. That is, due to "narrow and mutually exclusive approaches to intersecting patterns of subordination" (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 790), existing laws could not account for Black women's both/and positionality and so their plight was left invisible in plain sight. This situation highlighted the need to see how systems of oppression interlock in order to avoid the pitfalls of additive paradigms for analyzing race and gender (Hill-Collins, 1990), and Dr. Crenshaw developed "intersectionality" as a term to attend to the "vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of anti-discrimination and social movement politics" (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 787).

The development of intersectionality is important because "complex situations deserve a name" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 7) and intersectionality serves to overcome the "inadequacies of the individualist utilitarianism" and "start over conceptually" as Christians calls us to do (2015, p. 156). An intersectional approach responds to this call by inviting the researcher to reach beyond individualist, single-axis frameworks, to refrain from resolving analysis into paradigms of same/different, and to instead point out the complex ideological, social, and material architectures in which subjects, problems, and solutions are positioned. For example, when analyzing social and civic participation, an intersectional researcher could point out that people have varying degrees of cultural capital to exert in their own interests: some are better placed to

generate their own identity, while others reside in identities supplied from outside their position (Moreley, 2006).

In the field of media studies, we can see an example of this type of intersectional approach in Isabel Molina-Guzmán's 2013 work identifying self-commodification among Latina/o actors as a contributing factor in a larger system fueled by racialized capitalism. In this system, Blackness and Latinidad are distinct forms that play out in a U.S. media context. There, each can be evaluated in their relation to whiteness, but may not be compared in parallel, because Latina/os are not considered a racial category. Towards remedying this gap, Molina-Guzmán illuminates how neoliberalism creates a racialized rubric to organize people heretofore unaccounted for by strict definitions of race.

Another example that brings forward unique positional elements heretofore unseen is Kelly Gates's study of facial recognition software (2014), which disrupts assumptions of the supposed neutrality of technology with regard to replicating racialized structural inequality. Gates dislodges this invisibilized assumption and marks it as an attempt to claim a post-racial modality. However, she does so without resorting to binary yes/no answers to the question "can computers be racist?" Instead, she looks for a more complete answer, offering the critique that prototypes may not replicate lab results at scale because "the real world is a lot messier" (Gates, 2014, p.4) and reminding us that claims to future perfectibility can mask contemporary flaws that perpetuate discrimination.

Intersectional methods allow us to look beyond "perfect" single axis identity markers, which unto themselves may not constitute concern, in order to comprehend the actual

mechanisms of primal harms such as racism, here understood as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore, 2007, p 28). Moreover, it can render visible political intersectionality, the applied dimension of structural intersectionality, which include the less-than-lethal ways in which procedural testimonies of “inclusivity” fall short of actual legitimate participation in deliberations and decision making that shape social and material worlds. Through political intersectionality, research can describe social dynamics and resist “systemic forces that significantly shape the differential life chances of intersectionality’s subjects, reshaping modes of resistance beyond allegedly universal approaches” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 16).

Political intersectionality is one way Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall urge the uptake of intersectionality as a “tool to investigate and intervene in the social plane” (2013, p. 786). They argue that, unlike some traditional methods, intersectionality has room to “achieve greater theoretical, methodological, substantive, and political literacy without demanding unity” (2013, p. 792). For example, intersectional methods allow the researcher to explore how mutually dependent categories create cultural meaning in ways that disrupt what those categories are commonly understood to mean (Joseph, 2012). This intervention is a major contribution in light of claims that attribute preservation of inequality to social (re)construction of categorical pairs which repeatedly classify (and reclassify) people into two exclusive and exclusionary groups, for example, male/female black/white (Verloo, 2013).

To identify co-constitutive categories risks reifying categorical constructions of identity. And to do so without attending to power is to miss which difference makes a difference

(MacKinnon 2013). But, while an intersectional approach centers the recognition of identities as what “may be the most effective solution to the problem of exclusion, at least in the short run” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 799), it does so in the service of attending to power and so can see not only identity categories as the “ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies” but can also point to the “dynamics that create them” (MacKinnon 2013, p. 1023). Looking at different positionalities within a common dominant system can reveal not only the subject(s), but her/their systemic context and the ways in which the system and its subjects are co-constitutive.

We can see examples of how an intersectional approach illuminates systemic context in *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* when Isabel Molina-Guzmán traces how the symbolic value of Latinas in media are derivative of broader social and political tropes and notes that “contemporary symbolic values indicate precursory power relationships and formations that shape social and political dynamics” (2010, p. 8). She then points out that these symbolic values, when viewed as a discursive regime, reveal what “supports/colonizes and disrupts/ruptures particular ways of understanding the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and class” (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 8). Molina-Guzmán makes clear that the articulation of a social location previously obscured by symbolic colonization will simultaneously render more visible the mechanics through which the colonizing paradigm operates. For example, when Lisa Cacho (2012) tells us that “citizenship and social justice cannot be disentangled from how gender, race, nationality and legal status work together and differently to produce social value and evoke public sympathy,” we are reminded that approaches that fall short of an intersectional lens *can*

pull considerations of citizenship and social justice apart from gender, race, nationality and legal status, leaving numerous significant systemic couplings out of the inquiry. Noticing how patterns of inquiry support or disrupt the re-inscription of dominant narratives is yet one more offer of an intersectional approach.

Intersectional methods provide means to interrogate the fluidity of hegemonic forms, which is important given that social formations are constantly shifting (Casey et. al., 2002). Tracking forms as they change is not only a matter of keeping up with neutral shifts, but also following the patterns of oppressive dynamics as “technologies of power [begin] to work with and through difference in order to manage its insurgent possibilities.” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 4). Because an intersectional lens notes not only social location but its relative position to other independent and overlapping social positions, its rhetorics allow for the tracking of how power reshapes itself to take new form while maintaining old dynamics. Given that critics of hegemonic analysis indicate that its roots limit its application (Casey et. al., 2002), one could consider an intersectional approach as a corollary surrogate that exceeds those limits while conserving the purpose of analyzing power and ideology.

Intersectionality Across Disciplines

Intersectionality is both theory and method, an interpretive lens that conserves its overall orientation rather than the specificities of application or topic (Molina-Guzmán and Cacho, 2014). In reflecting on the diffusion of intersectionality over the years since its inception, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) comment that intersectionality may be best framed as an analytic

sensibility, a way of thinking about conducting analyses. In this light, what makes something intersectional is the “adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about sameness and difference in relation to power” (Cho et al., 2013 p. 795). Recognizing, as Moreley reminds us, that “we must acknowledge the complexity of intercultural flows and the ambivalence of their signification, when imported into new contexts” (2006, p. 37), as I consider migrating interdisciplinary methods to the study of small group collaborative problem solving, it is important to recall that though it has been applied to numerous other sites, intersectionality originated as an analytic of the specific cultural location of Black women. At the same time the question of whether its derivatives are in fact intersectional if they do not center Black women remains an important one to retain. Intersectional analysis is indeed exceeding its origins, and its originators see this as a potentially productive aspect of its use. Reflecting on its uptake, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall describe two possible models for tracing how intersectionality is engaged across intellectual space. The first is centripetal: as intersectionality is employed, it is shaped by and adapted to the methods and mores of the space in which it travels, becoming incorporated within established modes. The second model is centrifugal, wherein intersectionality remains on the margins of its environment without allegiance to disciplinary convention, spanning boundaries, and in doing so, potentially unearths novel insights that might not have been reached through traditional means. The authors note that, in either mode, it can be prudent to notice in which—if any—ways the dialectic of the research and its context influence one another (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013).

In the centrifugal mode, undertaking an intersectional lens can cue an interdisciplinary approach both because the interdisciplines, an “ensemble of institutions and techniques that offered positivities to populations and constituencies that had been denied institutional claims to agency” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 13), provide tools that resist the historic circumvention of marginalized subjects, but also because, in the same way that intersectionality spotlights heretofore obfuscated social locations, an interdisciplinary approach can provide analysis unavailable through a single academic root. Undertaking interdisciplinary methods to pursue intersectional research also makes sense because, as a social formation itself, any discipline will have its own habituations or methods and categorizations that may contain artifacts of analytic bias that inhibit world views outside the boundaries of its disciplinary allowances. As Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall write, “there are always elements of power embedded in language (and) disciplinary methods” (2013, p. 796). This is not to say that disciplinary form is designed with malicious intent, but rather recognizes that all power is exercised with intent, even independent of any single agent (Ferguson, 2012). A discipline is defined as much by its ways of gathering and organizing content as it is by its content. Understanding that “insurgent qualities of intersectionality can be equated with incompetence and unruliness in rigor” (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013, p. 793), and asking which practices are viewed as virtues or as liabilities in any modality (Moreley, 2006), an interdisciplinary grounding can allow for cross-reference of methods and frames to correct for single-axis biases in any one field and intervene in analytic practices that rationalize relationships without due process (Crenshaw, 1989).

As Christians describes, “the retheorizing of theory must be done henceforth without the luxury of a noncontingent foundation from which to begin” (2015, p. 14). While rendering any result necessarily requires simplifying the entire playing field of interaction to a reduced number of variables, single-axis thinking in research methodology can exclude data that is integral to the topic of study simply because the analytic has insufficient variety to accommodate the complexity. However, oversimplification can undermine both knowledge production and social justice efforts (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013), and so intersectionality asks to maintain tension between definition and obfuscation, and invites us to attend to when academic work produces “formulas for the incorporation rather than the repudiation of difference, all the while refining and perfecting its practices of exclusion and regulation” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 12).

Intersectionality and Small-Group Problem-Solving

The current inquiry asks how an intersectional approach might unfold in small-group collaborative problem-solving. The methods of intersectional research are well positioned to highlight “what we know is there but cannot see” (Molina-Guzmán and Cacho, 2014, p. 79). That is, intersectional methods can allow us to parse the complex dynamics of small-group interactions and reveal pocketed dynamics invisible to those unencumbered by their deleterious effects. As a general framework, one use of intersectionality applied to small groups could be to seek out the areas in which the group, when viewed from the whole or from a position of certain members, appears to be functioning but which on inspection serves to exclude the needs of those located in the blind spots of the practice. Taking up an intersectionalist call to intervene in the

social plane, an inquiry could more pointedly ask: what practices either result in a contribution/amplification/reiteration of decreased life expectancy, or fail to ameliorate the social dynamics which result in the same? Drawing on Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, at the level of the small group we can ask “how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to our collective and individual disadvantage and how those very tools also constitute structures of knowledge production that can themselves be the object of intersectional critique” (2013, p. 706) by regarding small group knowledge-making practices and how they shape group outcomes. As regards structures of knowledge production, we can also explore in what ways the transfer of practices from one context to another results in symbolic colonization (Molina-Guzmán, 2010)—for example, facilitation training that implicates Latina/os as a homogenized category, narrowing the facilitator’s capacity to attend to the culture of the specific people they are working with.

Moreley comments on cultural flows that are not unidirectional, but also not entirely beyond a center-periphery model (2006). When conducting research, I can take note of the sites of cultural production in group practice and how they are integrated by individuals outside that site in reception and enactment, e.g., how/when is a practice developed for corporate decision-making utilized by grassroots organizations, and what about the practice is conserved or hybridized? Further, recognizing that audiences are actively filtering media to their own purposes, and that “globally distributed media forms are often reinterpreted by audiences through their own local and particular cultural frameworks” (Moreley, 2006, p. 39), when looking at small group processes I could examine communication techniques as a form of media that potentially replicate global hegemonies as they are “invaded” by local use (as described in Hall regarding

English as an “international language,” 1991). In this, it may be of use to engage Fiske’s concept of “semiotic democracy” (1986) to ask what might be understood about communication technologies of decision-making practices through applying theories of audience effects taking into consideration that while people are not empty vessels to be filled, neither are they critical users who always appropriate into local conditions/ethics (Morely, 2006).

Intersectionality in Research Design

To take an intersectional approach in studying small-group problem-solving means to engage an intersectional lens not only during analysis, but also in research design. As regarding sampling, an intersectional approach values the inclusion of numerous perspectives from which to triangulate the question at hand. At the same time, it is vital to attend to the criteria for sample selection, in the sense that participants should be included for their expertise within the field, not merely as tokenized members of what are dramatically heterogeneous groups whose experiences can’t be simplified without potentially gross loss of granularity (Valdivia, 2010). Additionally, when writing and presenting research, an intersectional approach will attend to whether the form or content prioritizes the dominant culture at great cost to other cultures (Valdivia, 2010). This will of course require familiarity with relevant literature, but will also demand special attention to the patterns of its subjects and the ways in which its results do or don’t resonate with recognizable trends of marginalization, both putting forth a dominant interpretation and downplaying or invisibilizing an insurgent one. As Valdivia expresses, while there are many forces that compel us to employ less complex analyses and provide a simplified narrative,

intersectional researchers have a responsibility to represent the breadth and difference both of those studied and of colleagues in the field (2010). Finally, as with any findings, it will be imperative to relativize them, i.e., to provide sufficient context to distinguish why and how the conclusions were drawn in light of the socio-historic moment and location (Moreley, 2006).

Role of the Researcher

One aspect of intersectional methodology is its reflexive orientation to the researcher as the site of research production. The scholarly work of intersectionality occurs within the field of social power (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013), which includes the researcher. Therefore, depending on the work, intersectional research can be self-illuminating and/or self-incriminating, as its enactment is subject to the forces it describes.

Gaye Tuchman describes how “occupations develop ritualized procedures to protect themselves from blame” (1972, p. 18) and, in particular, points out how journalists embrace a series of rituals upon which to rest their claim to objectivity. She notes that “processing news leaves no time for reflexive epistemological examination” (Tuchman, 1972, p. 662), and takes for granted the reader’s understanding of the urgency of the news cycle in contrast to the affordances of the sociologist who does have such leisure, or at least appeared to at the time in 1972. However, the contemporary pressure to publish or perish while balancing teaching, research, and service as well as personal well-being, familial responsibilities, and communal/civic engagement, could very well be considered sufficient circumstance to question whether a researcher’s access to reflexive epistemological engagement is par for the course. In

such a time, the pressure to ward off critics through rituals of objectivity is strong. But even in times of high temporal pressure, it is possible to be objective in the sense that a researcher “remain(s) sufficiently impersonal to follow routine procedures appropriate to a specific case” (Tuchman, 1972, p. 677) while not abdicating responsibility for the ways in which social location inflects the observation and documentation of the subject. In fact, given that to a degree all research is autoethnographic in the sense that what is recorded through data collection is not only the content but the way in which the researcher influenced its collection, it makes sense to document the researcher herself as an element of the method. In particular, as intersectionality moves into disciplines whose practices and traditions are themselves imbued with patterns of power and access, the intersectional researcher is invited to “draw attention not only to the institutional politics of knowledge production that shape the context in which insurgent projects are formed but also to the way such projects are received, historicized, and engaged” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 789) as one more aspect of mining the nuances that intersectionality affords.

Intersectionality as a Tool

Intersectionality is a tool to intervene in the social plane. But what does it mean to wield this tool? It is “to ask the difficult, sometimes unpopular questions, to write the insightful but sometimes shaming answers, to research responsibly as well as thoroughly, and to hold ourselves accountable to those who make our work possible” (Molina-Guzmán and Cacho, 2014, p. 79). The researcher who takes an intersectional approach is willing to analyze inclusively and

incisively, taking into the account of her research the overlapping axes not only of her subjects, but of her discipline and herself. Understanding that in interrogating her home discipline the intersectional research may experience “simultaneous estrangement from and appeals to institutional power” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 12), she can anticipate finding herself distanced from disciplinary norms at the same time that she is making an invitation for colleagues to consider and take up new directions. However, keeping in mind that “what is worth preserving as a good cannot be determined in isolation; it can only be ascertained within specific social situations where human identity is nurtured” (Christians, 2015, p. 15), taking an intersectional approach to small group problem solving is to take a worthwhile opportunity to align the ethics of research “with a politics of resistance, hope and freedom” (Denzin, 2003, p. 258).

CHAPTER 2

LIFE AS METHOD, BIAS AGAINST VISUALS, AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

To respond to the question “what is my form” is to answer what has informed me and shaped me into who and how I am. As are we all, I am a person formed through complex experiences which are in turn shaped by unruly forces inflected by massive webs of social dynamics, personal choices, and collective successes and failures enacted over generations. I will first review early factors that contributed to my overall orientation to systems analysis and reflexivity, sociotechnical perspective of knowledge-making practices and their data. Then I will consider what constitutes the legitimacy of a methodological form, and assert the value of usefulness over the shine of novelty. Finally, I will introduce the cluster of forms I refer to as “Life as Method” and their relations to critical arts-based research and grounded theory.

I was raised into a multitude of methods, disciplinary and cultural. Two primary influences were the scientific method of positivism provided by public school education, and the poetic mysticism acquired through Catholic catechism. As a student of biology and physiology from grade school through undergraduate studies, I was conditioned to understand that knowledge emerges from the scientific method: make a hypothesis, find an empirical way to test it (using methods that are recognized as valid), and report on the results without reference to the social context of the experiment or the social location of the researcher. With later exposure to the social sciences, my understanding of what would be received as “credible” remained about the same. Though positivism has roots in the Christianity of Western enlightenment and its quest to

find god-like Truths untainted by human fallibility, Catholicism provided a parallel and but seemingly incompatible framework stipulating that truth is ineffable and comes as a result of personal relationship with what is to be Known. However, because of the colloquially imagined separation of church and science, I was rarely if ever called to task on these apparently paradoxical frameworks. As an undergraduate student who was no longer a positivist nor a Catholic, I wrestled with the conundrum of the relativity of lived experience: social constructions are real to those who experience their effects, whether or not they are material in their manifestation. After graduation, I discovered ways to articulate this complexity.

Shortly after graduating with my B.A. I joined the School for Designing a Society (SDAS); a small community-based project of performing arts and social change anchored in the systems theories of second-order cybernetics. This intellectual but not academic exposure to systems theory was deepened through introduction to science and technology studies (STS). I was first introduced to STS via yearly participation in the New England Workshop on Science and Social Change between 2010 and 2018, and ultimately anchored more firmly via my affiliation and subsequent fellowship with the “Seeing Systems” INTERSECT program of the graduate college of UIUC. Through these projects, I found that cybernetics and systems theory, in particular the biologically based work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1992), but also the likes of von Foerster (2002), Beer (1995), Parenti (2000), Krippendorf (2008), Brün (2004), Bunnell (2019), and Bateson (1972), helped me navigate a path through materialism, constructionism, and constructivism by providing a systemic paradigm that could accommodate almost all of their fundamentals. As a result, I approach my work with the recognition that what a person does,

whether a research subject or myself, is the result of interplay between individual choices among socially constrained options in systemic relation to one another. Therefore, I use the capacity of systemic analysis to address complexity as a foundational aspect of the genre of my forms.

By complexity I explicitly do not mean complicated-ness: assemblage and iteration for the sake of amassing bulk or feigning significance. Rather, I refer to allowing for a more comprehensive description of the webs of relation that yield both materials (living and nonliving things) and their meanings. In shaping my theoretical frameworks, I look not only to meta-theories of how systems work but also to applied theories such as the matrix of domination described by Patricia Hill Collins (2008). In taking a non-reductive approach to topics such as class and race (Hall, 1986), complexity can attend to the necessary wholeness required to perceive adequate relevance to social questions. So, part of my form is tending to the concentric enclosures of the subject of study, explicating them to the degree allowed by study conditions, and ultimately presuming the existence of other factors beyond the scope of study. One of these enclosures is the researcher herself.

There are numerous framings of reflexive research. John Van Maanen refers to critical ethnography as including a social justice/advocacy agenda and autoethnography as contextualizing ones' own group (1998). In these terms, I understand critical autoethnography to be an element of my research ethic, at least in terms of design and evaluation. That is, whether or not it is included in formal reports of data collection, analysis, and dissemination, I consider the domain of research to holistically and implicitly include the researcher as she regards her subjects, including herself and her ways of looking. In cybernetic terms, we refer to this type of

recursive reflection as a “way of thinking about ways of thinking, of which it is one” (Richards, 2001, p. 61). However, I don’t consider myself to be an auto-ethnographer: I regard this element less as a discipline-specific method and more as a lens through which to regard any research activity, because it isn’t possible to separate the research from the researcher.

My exposure to science and technology studies convinced me of “the artificial distinction between analysis and analysts, individuals doing research and the world of scholarly knowledge” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 4). In drawing attention to how forms of knowledge are created and applied locally, I was encouraged to look “through” facts to see the processes that created them. As any instrument measures its object, the resulting data is simultaneously a measure of the object and the instrument’s capacity for assessment. This is true both for techniques and tools (e.g., metrics, surveys, statistical analysis) and also for the “instrument” of the perceptual and analytical mind of the researcher.

In the abstract, data is a result of the instrument’s relation to its object. In practice, it is the result of the reader’s relationship to that relationship, as she reads disseminated forms through her own perceptions. This brings us to consider the under-sung role of what is recorded. A requisite for the creation of data is to “capture” it through inscription. As someone introduced to collaborative decision-making at the onset of my adulthood through intentional communities, with the hindsight of having been a professional facilitator for 22 years, I can recall innumerable instances of small-group decision-making where what was recognized as “agreement” almost never occurred through an assessment of relevance or accuracy but instead was created retroactively by recollection of the words most frequently spoken, the concepts asserted without

subsequent disagreement, the literal “last words” said, or perhaps most powerfully, by what (if anything) was written down. This experience has backlit my understanding of how fragile “data” is: its potential for existence depends on the scope of research, the methodology, tools, and perception of the researcher ... but practically, it only exists in the social world if noted and recognized as legitimate. This brings us to the academic equivalent of respectability politics, and its influence on research.

Legitimate Methods

Positivist traditions have, along with their merits, the pitfalls of accumulating legitimacy despite “subjective predispositions” that result in biased outcomes simply because they “look and sound scientific and are promulgated by reputable scholars” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 12). In particular, given that social sciences and other disciplines have historically been led and structured by white males, it is useful to notice how and when white masculinist logics that “defin(e) the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 17) underpin methodological and epistemological assumptions. For this and other reasons, I have looked to Black and women-of-color feminisms (in the U.S.) to inform and counterbalance both my disciplinary and social inculturation into reproductive colonial and counter-indigenous epistemologies. Because of my ethics, decolonization is necessarily an ongoing active process within my research. As with STS, forms of praxis such as intersectionality “draw attention not only to institutional politics of knowledge production that shape the context in which insurgent projects are formed but also to the way such projects are

received, historicized, and engaged” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 5). However, “consensus assumes a policing quality once it abolishes dissensus” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 18). Just as traditional disciplinary forms can be lauded, others can be denigrated for the mere fact of their novelty. Though qualitative and art-based methods have been recognized and published for decades, their constituents and products can suffer from a lack of perceived legitimacy. At times this is simply bias, but at others it is due to concerns about methodological consistency and rigor.

Though “the artist’s thinking is not discipline specific but exists as part of a wider research process” it “needs to stand up to methodological scrutiny” (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2014, p. 6). By the same token, having seen a lot of what I would describe as underwhelming attempts to claim arts-based inquiry based on token employment of arts-based methods, I extend this call to scrutiny across both sides of the aisle: those who come to research from art need to meet the standards of academic research, and those who do academic research and wish to engage arts-based methods need to meet the rigors of artistry.

Outside of the academy, “discipline” is recognizable as rigor: maintaining coherence and legibility to others with common purpose, content, or mode. Within or across academic disciplines, utilizing or especially developing non-traditional methodologies creates a threshold for understanding that requires appropriate literacy to receive, interpret, and interrogate what is offered. This threshold can be of innate value in that the acclimation process slows the whirlwind rush to understanding such that, like particles which fall when the wind stills, assumptions may be laid bare and clarified or corrected. However, the sort of attention required to develop literacy calls for both willingness and ability on the part of the reader, who may not care to invest in

understanding, or feel that the requirements to do so are too high. Therefore, the charge to the interdisciplinary scholar who wants to be legible and is experiencing “simultaneous estrangement from and appeals to institutional power” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 17) is to conserve only the “differences that make a difference” (Bateson, 1972, p. 459) and otherwise adapt as much as possible to the audience’s native paradigm.

Because each facet of disciplinary difference (method, framework, vocabulary, content) is a degree of separation, it can be advisable for an interdisciplinary or multi-methodological scholar to prioritize the coherence of their integrated method rather than emphasize its disparate origins: a dilettante approach will justly draw criticism. But even culling concepts from across many fields with due process can, without tying them into a unifying whole, read as paltry and undermine credibility, putting the researcher at risk of seeming a mile wide and an inch deep, more of a collector who wants to showcase her objects than a composer who has synthesized many parts into a whole. For these reasons, and because “innovative thinking at the margins of a discipline may leave scholars isolated” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 10), while my processes, principles, and methods sit both across and between numerous disciplines, I am called to tame my forms into coherent translations, at times choosing the collaborative possibilities afforded by connection and communication over the risks of solipsism.

Nuance over Novelty

As an intellectual creative who moved in diverse modalities prior to entering academia, I don’t have a need to diversify my portfolio or rebel against a strict disciplinary upbringing. My

challenge is instead to harness elements of my multi-disciplinary background to a coherent method that is legible not only across its home disciplines but also beyond the physical and literary boundaries of academia. My forms are pragmatic in the sense that their legitimacy hinges on their application, however “pluralistic and provisional” (Baronov, 2013, p. 18). As such, they could be considered political; however, this does not mean doing “one-sided, sloppy, research” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 334), which insists the ends justify the means. Instead, I undertake a heuristic trajectory that adjusts itself to its findings.

My forms are heterodox as a result of the confluence of my “uncoordinated” histories of training and discipline. However, neither they nor I fetishize divergence from traditional forms as a virtue unto itself. To do so would center the very form from which distinction is sought. Instead, my methods are selected according to their coherence with foundational premises and ethics, rather than by degree of difference from established modes. Knowing that “oppositional critiques run the risk of a totalizing depiction of power’s relationship to difference” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 18), rather seeking to “potentially unsettle things” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 11) and alienate practices friendly to my inquiry simply because they are “the usual,” my approach is motivated to activate the domains required to attend to the needs of the research objects, seeking to “emancipate the gaze through which we approach the world around us” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 12) and “explore the possibilities of new approaches to research” (Brown and Strega, 2005, p. 3) so that meaning and subsequent understanding are unhindered by methodological or disciplinary gatekeeping. At the same time, the critique of methodological conservatism (Pasque et al., 2011) applies as much to novel approaches or one’s own practices as it does to traditional methods. A return to a

traditional form can be innovative if its application forwards the aims of the research. As I interrogate and document my forms, I have found both overlap and divergence from groundwork laid by others.

Life As Method: My Forms and their Predecessors

Recognizing that “knowing is a transformative process that transcends the limits of analytic language” (Kossak, 2008, p. 64), I came to realize the power of associative and affiliative grouping across fields, media, and cognitive domains as an analytic form within a larger creative thinking process that precedes and includes moments of data collection and analysis. I colloquially call this emerging form “Life as Method” (LAM) and upon reflection, see overlap between its contours in the shapes of grounded theory and critical arts-based research.

My backgrounds in collaborative musical, visual, theatrical, and written composition have, because of the communication required to create collectively, led me to reflexive explication of process and purpose and so primed me to recognize critical arts-based research as an appropriate tool for consideration of “the process of knowledge creation in response to lived conditions” (Osei-Kofi, 2013, p. 136). In addition, because so much of my creative work has centered community concerns, I find various forms of critical arts-based research appropriate as they explicitly seek to advance progressive social change (Wang, 1999) and “address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (Leavy, 2009, p. 3). I also recognize some of the pliability of my forms represented in Osei-Kofi’s outline of the potentials of arts-based research to address “questions of how knowledge is

defined, the relationship of power to social inequities, modes of resistance to oppression, and possibilities for radical praxis” (2013, p. 148) and find resonance with the a/r/tographic principles of “enacted living inquiry” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 83) that see theory, praxis, and poesis as joint processes (Irwin, 2004). Life as Method also has commonalities with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994), as will be articulated later in more detail.

The phases of LAM include Upbringing, Direction, Focus, Outreach, Analysis, Recursion, and Evaluation, which occur within the arcs of Context, Initiative, and Research. Qualitative characteristics of the phases can include narrowing, expansion, orientation, and evaluation. Narrowing involves closing the aperture of attention, reducing the field of inquiry to a relational scale, where “relational” means “able to relate to,” i.e., comprehensible. The characteristic of expansion is a re-opening of receptivity inflected and channeled by the contours carved through the narrowing process. Orientation is a reflexive phase in which the field of attention neither decreases nor increases, but pauses to ascertain its contents asking: “what is here?” from within the realm of “here.” Evaluation is an action of contrast within orientation, using elements of what is known to qualify other elements.

Table 1: Life as Method Phases and Characteristics

Context

- Upbringing (Expansion, Narrowing) *cultural upbringing yields ‘self’ as a knowledge-making process*

Table 1: Life as Method Phases and Characteristics (cont.)

Initiative

- Direction (Narrowing, Orientation) *context and interaction yields direction*
- Focus (Narrowing, Orientation) *inquiry and intuition yield focus*

Research

- Outreach (Expansion) *opening to receive*
- Analysis (Expansion, Narrowing, Orientation)
- Recursion (Orientation, Narrowing)
- Evaluation/Iteration (Orientation)
- Disclosure (Expansion)

Not surprisingly, the phases of research map somewhat onto Helmholtz's stages of scientific discovery: saturation, incubation, illumination, along with Poincaré's addition of verification and Kneller's contribution of first insight (Edwards, 1987; Kneller, 1965; Getzels, 1980). However, I do not propose that these phases occur in linear form. Rather, as with the premise underlying Marshall Scott Poole's multi-sequence model for group decision making, these phases are a "set of continuously evolving tracks of activity, intertwining over time" (1983, p. 321). In another nonlinear turn, this method is applicable at multiple levels of scale beyond a particular project. In one look, LAM maps onto familiar research typologies of problem

definition, data collection, analysis, findings and dissemination. However, I suggest that it can occur not only at the level of an individual research project, but also within and beyond it. For example, Recursion might happen after years of engaging in a particular type of research practice, retroactively positioning use of that practice as a phase of outreach in a larger project of determining its affordances, and Upbringing is a continuous process that envelops all activities of life.

The initial phase of Life as Method, "cultural upbringing yields 'self' as a knowledge-making process," or Upbringing, occurs as context for all other aspects. Through physical and social interactions, I became the person I am, as a continuity in the people and beings who were before me and those adjacent to those who are with me now, where "with" indicates any correlation of impact/experience. The next two phases mark a specific initiative within that context. The first is "context and interaction yields direction," or Direction. Because of where I am, what I'm doing, and who I'm doing it with, in conjunction with my basic needs for contribution, connection, purpose, and meaning, a space of curiosity arises and illuminates a gap in what is known and what is wanted to be known. It is this gap that becomes the direction of study. The second part of the arc of initiative is "inquiry and intuition yield focus," or Focus, where longing to close this gap defines inquiry into more familiar strategic forms: identification of a problem, creation of a question, impulse to specify certainties and the desire to justify them. Intuition, the emergent analytic frame constituted through all previous life experience (physical, emotional, intellectual, and relational) influences the course of strategy by providing an initializing focus to channel it. The development of this phase has the earmarks of the theoretical sampling found in grounded

theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994), where in LAM the initial sampling is the life experience of the researcher. At this point, criteria develop for what will constitute significance/satisfaction of the inquiry, and the arc of research begins.

In a linear description of research phases, data collection is followed by analysis and discussion/evaluation. However, as with grounded theory, in LAM outreach and analysis may co-exist, whether at the level of data collection (e.g., using snowball sampling) or analysis (e.g., developing new analytical frames through the process of data collection). Grounded theory acknowledges the recursive nature of its data collection and analysis in the designation of open, axial, and selective coding types and in its emphasis on constant comparative methodology. LAM may or may not incorporate the typology, but resonates with the constant comparative method.

Cyclic unfolding notwithstanding, research begins with “*opening to receive*” or Outreach. In looking to find answers (connections, inquiry and experience), I become receptive to input, data, answers, influence, perspectives, and wisdom through means such as interviews, dialogue, listening, watching, and experimentation. In this method, receptivity explicitly occurs both within and beyond boundaries of what is perceived to “count” as relevant; I soften my gaze to find whatever is to be found both in places I am and am not expecting, and open to seeing where I wasn’t looking as a way to subvert inherited cultural biases and methodological training that would preclude the input/wisdom needed to fill the gap. This willingness extends far enough that the epistemology of the project may ultimately supersede the epistemology of its origin.

One place of overlap between LAM and grounded theory is that the methods involved may include common forms such as interviews, participant observation, and collection of texts and artifacts. However, LAM is less likely to be limited to them. During this phase, retention of that which was perceived can occur through familiar means of notes, recordings, photographs, stories, measurements, etc. However, it may also be held in transactive memory (Wegner, 1987), retrievable only through relational recall with another. Or, it may be retained through its imprint on intuition and no more, shaping deep analytical archetypes without explicit “capture,” much like impact can transmit through skin to bone without a bruise. These traces, while elusive to convey through traditional means and simple to discard due to their intangible form, are no less “real” or impactful. To disregard them, while simplifying research, will not negate their significance. This awareness of extra-verbal cognition is a hallmark of LAM.

One unique aspect of LAM as a practice is the engagement of diffuse cognitive realms that support creative thinking and “aha!” moments (Gardner, 1978) that mark the illumination phases of discovery. These include wide varieties of so called “breaks” such as taking walks, reading on “unrelated” topics, napping, etc. LAM stipulates that any life experience, when wielded as an analytic instigation, can yield purposeful insight and have particular value in circumventing or circumflecting inherent biases. One distinguishing practice in LAM is the purposeful employment of analogic thinking. For example, when considering a conceptual object of study, looking at another physical object and asking, “what does this have to tell me about it?” Answers may occur through direct correlation of form (e.g., a pencil may imply: “if you don’t refine the point the matter is useless”) or use (e.g., a potted plant may indicate: “it’s ok to take a thing out

of context as long as there are sufficient resources to support it”). These nonlinear means can be employed both in outreach and Analysis, or “becoming present with what was there and what comes next. ”

As a visual thinker, to me even more traditional forms of analysis in grounded theory, are “rooted in aesthetic considerations” (Baron and Eisner, 2012) and can therefore be considered arts-based research. In the analytical phase of LAM affiliative and associative coding are often produced through implicit aesthetic qualities that allow for the perception of relationships across genres of form. This use of implicit logics rather than explicit characteristics can allow for correlation across dynamic or contextual characteristics as well as content of the object. Further leveraging the possibilities of visualization, in making these associations I literally locate the concepts in space, often by writing them on pieces of paper, and then move them around to create cohering groups and groups of groups. This visual organization allows me to easily spool out to the whole or into granular parts, and to employ kinesthetic thinking in my analysis. This has always been how I synthesize large projects whether written or otherwise, and it was my immediate tendency when I was introduced to grounded theory early in my graduate work. Exactly because they aren’t linear, such arts-based techniques offer the potential to slip around methodologic constraints that may block what’s “allowed” to be known through linear logics. In particular, they allow for insightful visualization of complex systems.

Another aspect of research is Recursion: in light of what I’ve received, I track what emerges, and re-direct my Outreach based on both themes and outliers. Here there is a significant divergence from grounded theory wherein satisfaction, rather than saturation, signifies the end of data

collection in LAM. Satisfaction incorporates the reality that financial, temporal, relational limits will often curb the sample prior to complete saturation. Understanding that universally applicable outcomes are not only imaginary but also unreachably impractical both in research and dissemination, we can recognize the limits of research not as drawbacks but as coordinates that locate the research to the researcher in a socio-temporal node of a coordinated network of others. As such, conducting research that is thorough according to its own standards is both more achievable and more significant than attempts at global outcomes. Rather than enlightenment-like aspirations to perfection, the measure of relative completion in LAM is significance as informed by satisfaction: have I/we sufficiently met the gap of inquiry to provide a meaningful offer to address the questions at hand? If so, Evaluation/Iteration occurs: I check what has come from Outreach against the criteria of the initial Focus. If the gap isn't closed, I reiterate the Outreach phase. If it is, I iterate towards a new Direction and Focus, in light of Upbringing enhanced by all that's been gleaned.

At some point, and perhaps at various points throughout the form, Disclosure occurs: I extend what I've understood to others as a contribution to our collective orientation to "what is." LAM doesn't specify a form or genre of disclosure, and can accommodate traditional academic venues such as peer reviewed journals, white papers, conference presentations, and the five-chapter written dissertation, though it may well exceed them. However, though "accessibility is a firm focal point" in arts-related research (Wimpenny and Savin-Badin, 2013), and a critical stance is inherently counter-hegemonic, seeking to contribute to emancipatory knowledge (Madison, 2011), I have encountered plenty of (to me) cryptically written critical theory and apparently

inaccessible presentations of arts-based outcomes. As a poet and lyricist, I soundly approve the manipulation of language for the sake of curating elicited meanings unavailable otherwise.

However, I am also quite familiar with the use of exclusionary language that may serve more to mark status than communicate knowledge. Brushing up against certain articulations in and near critical theory, I at times wonder whether some academic forms, even those which seek to “bring to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (Madison, 2011, p. 5) are replicating exclusionary practices in their dissemination. Therefore, in the exposition of my form I want to maintain a careful eye to what is being composed in order to “invite another into meaning” in contrast to what is composed in order to “signify an insider perspective,” which may or may not also serve to obfuscate its contents such that onlookers without requisite references (here meant in terms of both literacy and credibility) won’t find enough purchase to either embrace or challenge it. As part of this attention, I understand that research can serve multiple domains, and aspire that my collaborative research practices will include forms of simultaneous and asynchronous translation that serve dissemination throughout their course.

Let’s consider a case in point: during observation/self-observation, participants are at once 1) speaking among us, to us: we the constituents of the interview, or workshop, or creative practice, and we the participants: know what we know when we know it because we are there creating the knowing through being, including the being of naming our knowing. And at the same time, we are 2) speaking to the inscription process, which will later be harvested for analysis: when I/we the researcher will create a second knowing through recursive analysis of the inscribed data; and dissemination: when we the readers know what they knew because we’re reading the analysis of

the inscription of the knowledge making through being. With each subsequent iteration, whether it be a participant referring to her participation or a colleague citing the work, alternative translations occur “simultaneous” to the observation because they occur at the moment of speaking, and as “translations” because it is not a repetition, but a re-iteration made through a secondary (tertiary, etc.) understanding. These iterations and translations complicate understandings of authorship and intellectual property.

During Dissemination, the question of citation arises. Though to “recognize the importance of the co-construction of knowledge with research participants” (Osei-Kofi, 2013, p. 137) is a vital step beyond citing only those who have published, for me it falls short of full reckoning with what I refer to as the wisdom lineage that undergirds any knowledge making. At minimum, in LAM I want to include in my list of references every source I employ during the course of a project, whether or not I quote or paraphrase it directly. Beyond that, I want every disseminated object to include reference to a wisdom lineage that functions much like a curriculum vitae in the sense that it tracks all those who have informed my upbringing. I understand that though this is not beyond possibility in a digital age, it is sufficiently out of bounds for the culture of most academic publications. However, I have begun to keep such a list, and I reference it whenever the context allows.

Life as Method and Intersectional Disability Research

As a researcher with membership across multiple communities including academia, I know that I am one voice in a chorus of voices that help each other stay in tune by singing and listening

together. I seek to “valid(ate), legitim(ate), and center subjugated knowledges” (Patton et al., 2010, p. 334) not only in the subjects of my research, but also in myself. In part, introduction to arts-based and other forms of qualitative research has been a journey of homecoming as I reclaim forms of wisdom suppressed by creative-phobic norms that sought to restrain expression for the sake of conserving “the way we do things.” At the same time, I am not motivated towards *de facto* vanguardism for its own sake. I do prioritize being “relentlessly self-correcting” (Zuberi, and Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 5) at the scale of the researcher, the methods, the logic, the discipline, the field, and the lineage in the interest of “explicat(ing) what *is* in order to ultimately liberate us from the destiny of what *has been*” (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 320, emphasis in the original). I have answered questions of form by tracing my epistemologic roots to the emerging shape of Life as Method, noting both commonalities and differences with traditional forms, and marking out pitfalls to avoid with methodological conservatism and dissemination practices that undermine liberatory goals. Life as Method is one attempt to approach disability narrative research in an intersectional way. The next section delves into an aspect of the research landscape that arises for visual thinkers.

Bias against visuals

Embracing visualization may not be as large a step as one might think, as “any interface is a data visualization of sorts.” (Gitelman, 2013, p. 12) Also, the field of visual rhetoric has made clear that “visual arguments are not a particularly exciting conceptual novelty; they do not constitute a radically different realm of argumentation” (Blair, 1996, p. 38). This is good news, as building

bridges toward the regular use of graphics in conducting and communicating research will surely be a boon. Not unlike the promise of how algorithms can parse Big Data, visualization is touted for its capacity to mobilize data such that it can be considered a requisite for expressing large data sets that can't be communicated any other way (Gitelman, 2013) Data visualization can thus emulate what Latour called a theatre of proof; providing a comprehensive vantage point from which to behold the entirety of a complex situation (1993) For a many objects, images allow a greater possibility to see a thing, "on its own terms" whereas language will always be *about* the thing (Sousanis, 2015)

Nonetheless, there have been many assaults against the use of visuals. Primary amongst them is the accusation that "a drawn image implies that someone drew it." (Woo, 2010, p. 175) That is, as obvious creations, visuals are implicitly subjective and therefore should be considered deceptive. This is the key complaint that undergirds opposition to the use of visualization: the accusation of its deceptive qualities. Interestingly, it speaks to the subsumed nature of writing that the same is not said about words, which are equally constructed (Tufte, 2001). However, from at least the time of Descartes, thinking has been correlated with words and writing, and from the time of Plato, visuals with deception (Sousanis, 2015). Of course, subjectivity is only betrayal when one imagines knowledge in the 17th century paradigm as innocent of human contamination. However, even in a time where the possibility of universal application of research results is being contested, the habitual concept of "pure information" has continuing implications for visualization. Related to concern about the deceptive nature of visuals is the sense that they are extraneous additions used only to embellish otherwise boring material (Tufte, 2001). This

relates to another irk: graphics are considered tools for the ignorant. The underlying assumption being that those who are intelligent don't need visual means to understand: those who are not dullards wouldn't need such spice to engage pursuits of the mind.

Potentially contributing to the bias against illustration, even amongst those who advocate for the use of visuals, is a powerful attitude against artists and illustrators, who are portrayed as data illiterates with cares only for aesthetics, and contempt for their audience. It is interesting that, in this characterization, it is the artists who are considered deficient in their understanding of statistics, rather than considering the researchers as insufficiently artistic. Nonetheless, it is quite a common unfolding of the visualization process that the labor of artist-illustrators is seen as finish work, and to consider what artists might have to say about the data would be like “allowing typographers to control the content, style, and editing of prose” (Tufte, 2001, p. 87). Here, we can see clearly that artists are situated as mere technologists rather than participants. Just as “local people” are positioned as objects of inquiry, able to answer but not ask questions (Tsing, 2010), so too artists are considered to be making images, not making knowledge. Upon closer look, it seems not to be the capacity of visualization that is in question here so much as that the problem of translation between statistician and artist.

Perhaps in the interest of skirting such concerns to move towards the obvious benefits of graphic expression, a distinction is sometimes made between illustration and visualization: illustration foregrounds the creative while “creative” is conflated with fictional. Both visualization and illustration are forms of rendering information. However, the former is perceived as credible, a mere transmission of content, whereas the other is seen as at least mediated, if not fanciful. It is

useful to recall that such a distinction has not always prevailed. Burton, Hobbes and other 17th century thinkers used illustrations to communicate ideas in a “second language” because of its power to convey ideas (Tufte, 1997, p. 138).

Considering the capacity of graphics, a number of affordances become clear. For example, data maps can act more efficiently than calculations, showing millions of information points in one page, making graphics more powerful than any other method to show statistics (Tufte, 2001).

Images can also convey information on multiple planes of depth and angle, and show both sequential and simultaneous concepts (Sousanis, 2015). In this way and others, images allow for greater density of information than text or numbers. Considering its invaluable capacity, it is somewhat surprising that use of abstract images to show numbers is relatively recent, entering Western scientific method between 1750-1800. Tufte suggests that this may be because it requires the confluence of mathematical, artistic, and empirical intelligences, but it is uncertain what about this place and time would lend itself to that juncture, versus another period.

Nonetheless, the use of visualization fell out of favor until a return to the visual as a method occurred in the late 1960s when the revered statistician John Tukey began to advocate for its use. With this endorsement, graphics came further to the fore.

Still, the use of graphic representation beyond the scope of basic charts and tables continues to be rare in academic publishing. At the same time, the advent of digital technologies that accessibly afford visualization (e.g. Excel’s chart functions) and reproduction (e.g. photocopying, projection, web publishing) beg questions of why visualization remains an underutilized practice, especially when, as Tufte mourns, “It wastes the tremendous communicative power of graphics

to use them merely to decorate a few numbers. Moreover, much of the world these days is observed and assessed quantitatively—and well-designed graphics are far more effective than words in showing such observations” (2001, p. 87). That is, academics are using data that would benefit from the use of graphics, and are using graphics to some degree in their dissemination, but continue to use them poorly, perpetuating the sense that graphics are mere addenda to “real” results.

Visualization as A Knowledge-Making Method

Underutilizing visualization as a method is a loss in terms of representation of results but also in knowledge production. In addition to its utility in translating data, to employ visualization practices means leveraging not only the exhibitive capacity of the form, but also of our thinking. By employing visual capacities, we can “extend the depth of our own knowledge and experience” (Tufte, 1997, p. 10) through engaging material representation to augment the mental imagery that allows for unique problem solving approaches, both in production and reception (Ware, 2008). In production, the act of arranging information becomes an act of insight, making seeing and thinking identical without a need for translation. The absence of visualization as a common research practice makes sense when one considers how few tools have been promoted to engage it.

While there has been research into how visual thinking works, there is much that is still unknown. It is common to state that between 60-90% of communication is non-verbal (e.g. Mehrabian, 1972). This vague attribution under-recognizes the capacity for visual literacy, leaving it to

people who “just have it” and others to common statements such as, “I’m not creative.” While the mechanisms of visual thinking remain murky, it is clear that to leave visuality outside the realm of academic thinking would fail to account for much of the social world (DeLuca, 1999). Therefore, it is in the interest of knowledge production writ large to invest in making the processes of visual thinking discrete and communicable.

Edward Tufte, professor emeritus at Yale University, is renowned for his work on graphics and data visualization. He has published four books to great acclaim, receiving over 40 awards. In 2010, President Obama appointed Tufte to the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, charging him with the daunting task of making the recovery.gov website readable. Tufte’s first book *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* was published in 1983 and reprinted in 2001, and has been hailed as the “bible of graphic design” (Greenberg, 2010). In it, Tufte provides a review of graphical practice and provides numerous principles for graphic excellence.

Interestingly, excellence in graphics, as in academic writing, is equated with making production invisible. Tufte makes two points exceedingly clear: that a good graphic draws no attention to its production in terms of methodology or technique, and that graphics should be “true to the data” (Tufte, 2001, p, 96). The aspiration to yield a frictionless, pure relationship between the viewer and the data sublimates first the myriad ways in which graphics are the product of choices and second that data are not pure, as discussed earlier. Curiously, Tufte alludes to this when he acknowledges that both graphics and calculations are only as good as what goes into them. Here

we see a contrast between their producers, a tension not unlike that between the aspiration to universal truths and the reality of necessarily local application.

Coming to Terms with Subjectivity

As both a rendering and a way of thinking in its own right, visualization, like data, is a form of inscription: a result of the friction between the observer and their context, in light of their history of interactions with other contexts (including their disciplinary training). So, what does it mean to be true to the data, when data itself is a construction, any rendering will surely impact perception due to ambiguities in representation, and in any case, as Tufte remarks dishearteningly, “different people see the same areas somewhat differently; perceptions change with experience; and perceptions are context-dependent” (2001, p. 55)? When Latour makes clear that facts happen “after the fact” (1988), as readers interpret and reinterpret what has been said prior, and Tsing marks that even globalized knowledge is the result of local friction, it seems finding a universally stable “fact” is impossible. However, Tsing encourages that even when “categories have limited social usefulness in helping us understand...particular social and natural landscapes” (2010, p. 160) they still have value. As discussed prior, Bowker tells us that it makes sense to retain simplified interpretations as long as one doesn’t negate others. So, in the absence of the possibility of creating a single, fully stable and mobile object, another alternative is to embrace triangulation, relationship, collaboration, and polyvocal accuracy. We could, as Tsing suggests, envision any research results as “within historically changing conversations, rather than as transcendent knowledge” (2010, p. 162). But what would it look like to create a universal that

was not immune to its application, but specific to it? To recognize knowledge objects as responsive to its observer.

Consider the circumstance of a composer who has written a song. In this case, it is Bach, and he has written a suite for cello. At some point, a cellist picks up the score, reads it, and performs a rendition of the piece. Another time, a different performer uses the same score, and also follows it precisely, but somehow the results are slightly different than the first performance. The notation was followed exactly, the data were rendered accurately, but still the outcome was different, because the representation has more variety than what was scripted. Nonetheless, another composer could likely create almost an exact replica of the original score from hearing the rendition. That is, the data are conserved across the inflections of varied knowledge bearers. This allegory shows how the exact same data can be shown in multiple accuracies by readers whose capacity for perception and representation supersede the data set.

When we recognize the impossibility of a monolithic rendering of any object, we are free to embrace multi-pronged accuracies inflected by the subjectivity of observers and their contexts. In this mode, it would no longer make sense to seek impartial and objective positions, but instead to include the specifics of observational context *as part of* the research. In the past, even alluding to this extended data set may have been overwhelming, but perhaps it is possible to harness the capacity of Big Data in order to catalyze such new protocols. The development and use of metadata is already an accepted method. Perhaps it can be used to facilitate the expansion of research objects to include even more of its social and material context.

Reclaiming Visualization

When the call for objectivity is set aside due to impracticality, the “inevitable eclecticism and serendipity of the knowledge-making process” can be recognized (Tsing, 2010, p. 163), the accusation of partiality becomes moot, and previously maligned modalities accused of partiality (e.g. visualization) can rejoin writing as a form of research and publishing. In such a circumstance, the apparent subjectivity of illustration may well become an asset, its inherent assertion of labor a far cry from the apparent (but misleading) impartiality of information presented as “fact.” Graphics “absorb the objective into the subjective and make the processes of mediation self-evident” (Woo, 2010, p. 175). This evidence is itself a form of metadata, reminding the reader to consider the conditions of production, and stimulating literacy.

To re-learn visual thinking and communication as sociotechnical tools would extend the current conceptualization of what thinking is (Sousanis, 2015). In many fields, the person who develops a theory is also responsible for its representation, and scientists who engage artistic skills have been shown to hold an advantage over those who don’t (Root-Bernstein, 1985). Many of the problems would be ameliorated if researchers increased their artistic capacity and voided the need to translate to an external agent. This could happen at the level of individual researchers, as they develop and apply visual literacy, or it could happen through collaboration with researchers who address complimentary topics.

Collaboration may even offer extended benefits. It is commonly understood that any inquiry leaves work undone (Sousanis, 2015). This humility creates a sense of shared work among colleagues within a discipline. Imagine what could be gained if the same approach were taken

with methodologies, such that alternative approaches were valued for their capacity to do work beyond the scope of one's disciplinary practice. Improvements often come from revisions and comparison of other designs. Allowing multiple partners to add to a picture can make it "bigger, more complete, more detailed, and synoptic, and thus more reliable as a basis for action" (Liboiron, 2015, p. 159). Allowing for interplay between the visual and verbal serves to "expand our view by revealing boundaries enacted by a single node" (Sousanis, 2015). And Latour suggests that an object's dimensionality allows us to move around it (2005). By collaborating across methods, an object of study can be triangulated, allowing for more comprehensive understanding. Collaborators needn't have identical goals, and participants may not experience parity, despite contemporary etiquette to profess equality. In fact, imbalances can contribute by "draw(ing) attention to formation of new cultural and political configurations that change the area of conflict, rather than just repeating old contests" (Tsing, 2010, p. 161).

The sort of research and publishing that might come from a more holistic, collaborative and inter-methodological approach to academic inquiry may not look familiar. This can raise concerns about legibility, whether due to a lack of literacy or resistance to change. Here Tufte reassures us (in reference to the use of recently formulated statistical graphics): "with use, the new designs will come to look just as reasonable" (2001, p. 138). Nonetheless, changing long-held disciplinary patterns will require a "profound" push. Sousanis suggests that this push will need to come from outside academia (2015), but with sufficient motivation, it may simply come from outside academic *thinking*: from the professors, researchers and students who already engage visual practices but regularly code-switch into text-restricted modes. These many could

embrace a “Self-conscious project of placing a local niche within a global imagining” (Tsing, 2010, p. 156) and in doing so, contribute to the perturbation necessary to stimulate a resounding and expansive shift in research and dissemination practices.

Song played by different individuals:

Mischa Maisky plays Bach Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major BWV 1012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px0j2OyXzkI&t=19s>

Bach: Gavottes, Cello suite Nr.6 | Ophélie Gaillard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiybOypvagQ>

Yo-Yo Ma Bach Cello Suite No 6 in D Major

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnUVrMgsRFA>

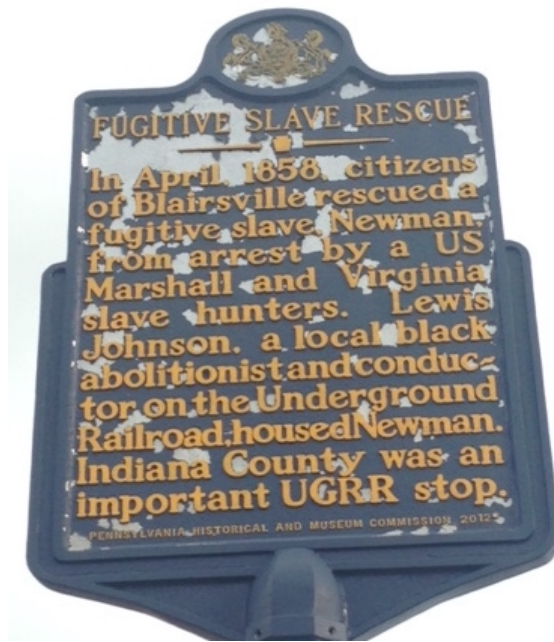


Figure 1: Picture: “Fugitives Then and Now,” Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission 2012, photographed by elizaBeth Simpson

Pictures: Images in the FSA/OWI File by elizaBeth Simpson

<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/envisioning-peace-images-of-the-sojourner-truth-housing-controversy/images-in-the-fsaowi-file?path=images-of-the-sojourner-truth-housing-conflict>

“It’s not something I can explain”: Theoretical Perspectives on Welcoming Newcomers to Communities of Practice

There is a long-standing tradition in communication and management literature to seek the codification of knowledge. However, there are numerous groups for whom, given the complex and situation-dependent nature of their practices, tacit knowledge unique to the group is a defining aspect of membership and therefore, codification of knowledge is an impractical

objective. This inquiry attends to socialization in such groups in order to clarify why episodic knowledge transfer processes are often ineffective, and to propose interventions that will be more successful. I will provide theoretical grounding for the proposal of four characteristics to incorporate into newcomer socialization processes in communities of practice (CoP): cycles, collectivity, situated learning, and indexicality. In addition, I will explore the development of terminology as a socialization process in line with these characteristics and demonstrate story circles as a means to do so.

Socialization

Socialization, “the manner in which the experiences of people learning the ropes of a new organizational position, status, or role are structured for them by others within the organization” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 19), is an inevitable part of group membership. Nonetheless, researchers and organizational designers alike often overlook socialization processes. In some cases, socialization practices go unexamined simply because their significance is not understood. In other cases, status quo practices continue as part of organizational structure simply because of a prevailing attitude of: “that’s the way I learned, so that’s the way it’s going to happen.” However, while the structures of socialization practices are often the result of merely not making a decision to design them, they are not in fact inevitable. It seems apparent that, because it is often neglected in organizational design, socialization is an area ripe for consideration of how more effective choices can be made in service of the group.

Socialization is an important concern for groups because the stability of the group is dependent on the success of the newcomer. A new member’s receptivity to direction is tied to how they are

socialized (Van Maanen, 1978); therefore, attention to socialization practices can profoundly impact the dynamics of the group: when new people are able to uptake group norms, the group's mission will keep being fulfilled, group behavior will be predictable, and the group will be more sustainable. Socialization is also important to the direct experience of the newcomer, for whom a primary concern is developing a set of “guidelines and interpretations to explain and make meaningful the myriad of activities” that constitute the group (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 21). Often laden with uncertainty and ignorance, the newcomer experience is full of conflict. The new member is both trying to understand and accommodate the existing group while finding their unique place within it, which will inevitably impact the group's existence.

People in transition are in an anxiety-producing situation and are therefore motivated to socialize and understand how to act appropriately, as the ability to do so, and to somewhat accurately anticipate a response, provides the newcomer with a sense of stability. Being able to act in accordance with the group provides member with a sense of order about the group, a frame to experience relationships, and creates ground rules from which they can engage. Though a vital aspect of the organizational life cycle, the socialization process does not happen in isolation, and so will usually be more unwieldy than what is described in official protocols or reports. This is due, in part, to the high degree of situated and tacit knowledge involved in becoming a member of a group, especially a community of practice.

Communities of Practice

According to Iverson and McPhee, for a group to be considered a community of practice it must fulfill three criteria: mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and negotiation of a joint enterprise

(2008). Mutual engagement is the process by which members of the group communicate and interact with one another. It is how they accomplish their coordinated tasks, share knowledge, and recognize themselves and one another as group members. Activities of mutual engagement could include either synchronous or asynchronous activities, for example, meeting, emailing, co-editing a wiki, etc. Shared repertoire is the “knowledge, capabilities, and shared (communicated) reifications within the group of people” providing both the vocabulary of the group and serving as a mark of group identity (Iverson and McPhee, 2008, p. 179). Negotiation of a joint enterprise is the enactment of the CoP, wherein members navigate the tasks that constitute the activities of the group. These three characteristics are culled from Wenger’s foundational book, *Communities of Practice* (1998), but well prior to this, Geertz called attention to an additional key characteristic of communities: that they generate and are bound by webs of belief, systems of symbols local to the group which defy explication, and which may be opaque to those outside it (1977). These belief systems emerge from but are not directly correlated to any specific activity. I assert that attending to this web of belief as an emergent property, rather than as an object which can be conveyed or transferred, will help those interested in socialization understand why episodic training and orientations are often insufficient to the socialization process in communities of practice.

It can be particularly useful to study CoP in which there is no financial imperative to stay in the group. This allows for attention to qualities of participation that rely solely on group cohesion, rather than the external impetus of financial gain or loss. The subject of this section is groups whose members are not bound by a financial imperative, in which full membership requires a

high degree of tacit knowledge not available through membership in the general population, and which at least have no stable membership or even have a proclivity for high member turnover. In these groups, the structure and cohesion of the CoP are paramount as the source of dynamics, rather than the characteristics of the particular set of members, or the structure of the host group (e.g. the business in which the CoP arises). Examples of such could include hobbyist groups, grassroots political groups, student groups of various types, volunteer emergency responders, and any number of other volunteer groups. Attending to the needs of these types of groups can of course provide insight into CoP within businesses, nonprofits, and whose membership and structure are equivalent (e.g. the group identity is congruent to its particular members).

Tacit, Explicit, and Situated Knowledge in CoPs

In his formative description, Michael Polanyi described tacit knowledge as “knowing a thing by relying on our awareness of it for the purpose of attending to an entity to which it contributes.” (1962 p. 601). Tacit knowledge is understanding that comes from direct experience or practice (Nelson & Winter, 1982), colloquially referred to as “know how,” in contrast to “know what” (Ryle, 1949). By contrast, explicit knowledge “is transmittable in formal, systematic language” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 95). After his initial writings on tacit knowledge, Polanyi later clarified that all knowledge has a tacit dimension. This is to say that explicit knowledge of “know what” relies on the tacit “know how” that underpins it. For example, to use a written recipe relies on all sorts of tacit knowledge such as literacy in reading English, that a hot stove will burn flesh if touched, and the understanding that flour or oil will fall out of a measuring cup if you don’t hold it upright.

Because it is something we rely on but can't articulate directly, we often don't understand the sorts of tacit knowledge we're using until we encounter someone who doesn't have it.

All explicit knowledge requires a degree of tacit knowledge, but challenges in sharing explicit knowledge can arise when the type of tacit knowledge required to participate in an activity falls outside that which could be reasonably expected of a member of the society in which the CoP exists. For example, among people proficient in computer use, the instruction to "click the link on the screen" is self-evident. But to people who have no experience with a computer mouse or with what a "link" is on a computer screen, this direction is insufficient. These people would need to also be told that links are indicated by differently colored or underlined text, and that they should click the right button on the mouse while keeping the mouse still. It's important to note that even this level of explication still assumes tacit understanding of what a mouse is, what it means to "press," what "right" indicates, and so on. Problems arise in CoP when mistaken assumptions are made about the degree of codification required to indicate an activity type. Therefore, while some may consider the instruction "click the link on the screen" sufficient to indicate the array of behaviors required to do the intended task, it may well be that for some people, some of the many necessary sub-behaviors that have not been articulated are not known, and so the instruction will fail. In CoPs, because so much of the shared repertoire can include tacit knowledge, including the local web of belief which gives it context, it's quite possible that existing members may overlook the assumptions they are making about the tacit knowledge required to fully participate in-group activities. It seems reasonable that one aspect of the ineffectiveness of codified knowledge "transfer" in orientation processes be a failure to

recognize assumptions made about the degree of tacit knowledge required to enact the described behaviors. Another, likely more rare, aspect is that the types of tacit knowledge required are recognized, but a mistake is made in overestimating the newcomer's tacit repertoire. A final aspect that impacts the topics under consideration is the need to anticipate the nuances, explicit or tacit, involved in applying the knowledge to the local situation in which it is to be used.

The situated nature of knowledge is a cornerstone of knowledge sharing in CoP. Ryle maintains that "know how" is acquired through practice (1949), and Polanyi, who refers to knowledge acquisition as "comprehension," is clear that it requires both intellectual and practical engagement (1966). Brown, Collins, and Duguid, in explaining situated knowledge, note that while using tools group members generate local understandings of how the tools are used, to the extent that a practice is defined as much by those who employ it as by its formal structure or purpose (1989). The nature of local knowledge can be understood by considering any number of communities whose repertoire includes diagnosis. For example, a medical student may well know the abstract indicators for a particular condition, but, because a "universal patient" does not exist, they will also need the capacity to recognize those indicators across a variety of distinct bodies. Testing for strep throat will be relatively straightforward because bacteria is either present or not, but identifying abnormal breast lumps, whose primary indicator is change in the breast tissue, requires local knowledge of the patient's healthy state. In some cases, even being able to assess the object of diagnosis requires practice. For example, medical patients are told that it will take about 100 pelvic exams before they're actually able to assess the size of the patient's uterus. Other examples of diagnosis requiring local knowledge include being able to

identify what an unusual car sound indicates, how to tune an instrument, identifying addiction, or even something as simple as how not to burn or undercook pancakes on an electric stove.

Given the situated knowledge often required for full membership in a CoP, it would be unreasonable to expect that a newcomer would share this repertoire. In this circumstance, how can a group provide entrance without compromising its values and practice, or alienating the newcomer? An answer is being intentional about the socialization process. But what sorts of socialization processes would take the gap between interest and alignment into account? Steps towards these solutions can be found in examining the characteristics of this type of group, one of which is legitimate peripheral participation, which is by definition a situated, “reciprocal relation between persons and practice” over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 116).

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

A vital aspect of a healthy CoP is the possibility for legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), the ability for newcomers to contribute as members though they don't yet have the full skill set of a longer-term participant. In this role, a newcomer “participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14). For example, it would be absurd to expect the young child of a gardener to wield a full-sized shovel. Instead, the child is offered a much smaller, lighter shovel appropriate to their size, strength, and ability. With this right-sized tool, the child can actively participate in digging holes for seeds, though it may take longer, and the results may be less accurate. Still, their role in the endeavor is a meaningful contribution to the project. Providing right-sized tools and tasks is an example of supporting LLP. Another example would be to allow

the child to put seeds in the holes (a low-risk activity) but not to hold the large heavy shovel (an activity with an opportunity for harm). In either case, the novice is provided with a means to engage with the practice in a way that does not pose risk to themselves, others, or the project as a whole, and is able to evolve in membership through learning.

Acknowledging the significance of LPP invites a re-imagination of mastery such that attributes of expertise are decentralized and attributed to the organization of the CoP rather than to old-timers within the group. Generating the possibility for LPP requires providing newcomers with access to the skills and experiences of tenured members, with the expectation that their enactment will be proportional to their understanding. This reorientation locates tenured members as co-learners alongside newcomers. By affording members a location on a spectrum of experience, LPP allows newcomers to see himself or herself as a bona fide group member on a path to full membership, which is central to their protracted membership. It also identifies both the newcomer and the old-timer as iterative participants in the life of the group. Providing support for LPP contributes to the sustainability of the group through nurturance of new members, which engenders retention and the continuance of group dynamics, but also by affording the group insight into its activities and identity via newcomer questions and input (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When considering the design of socialization processes in CoP, it's important to remember that it's only through processes of engagement that newcomers will understand what it means to be a member, that is, what constitutes legitimate action in the group (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989).

Designing socialization for communities of practice

It is impractical to imagine that newcomers will have knowledge and skills entirely congruent with those of the group they are joining. Contact with a group begins the socialization process whereby a person transitions into group membership to some degree or other. In any group, socialization of some kind is inevitable, but self-aware groups who wish to steward newcomers into effective membership for the sake of the new individual, the group, or both, can take care to design mechanisms by which socialization is facilitated in a manner that yields desired, rather than unintended, outcomes. Socialization processes “represent an identifiable set of events that will make certain behavioral and attitudinal consequences more likely than others” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 20). But as Lave and Wenger caution, the challenge is determining which events to foster (1991). One concern is that, because group-specific tacit knowledge plays such a large role in CoP, it can be hard to discern what types of requisite knowledge are not and cannot be made explicit, which can be explicated, and at what granularity to do so. Returning to the link-clicking example: it’s possible to name out all the physical actions involved in completing the task, but to do so would be resource-intensive (e.g. Lift your hand and place it on the top of the mouse. Put one finger above the right button while holding the mouse still with your remaining fingers. Press the button down and release it quickly). The concepts of LPP and situated learning provide insight into this dilemma. For example, offering apprenticeship, providing opportunities for “non-purposeful” group time, and co-working have been suggested to support LPP (Iverson and McPhee, 2008). In light of the elements explored in the first part of this section, I propose four qualities to incorporate into the design of socialization structures: cyclical, collective, situated,

and indexical. Of note: due to the local nature of the expression of any given CoP, these characteristics are themselves necessarily indexes that point at qualities of the practice, rather than a prescription of which explicit practices to use.

Cyclical and Collective

Cycles of reproduction, wherein a newcomer becomes a full group member who helps newcomers develop into full members, are essential to communities of practice. Learning what is necessary to effectively participate in a CoP is inextricable from direct experience in the self-renewing context of the group. And because CoPs are autopoietic, the experience of acquiring knowledge in a CoP is situated not only in place and time, but also in iterative patterns over time. Knowledge acquisition in a CoP is thus often non-linear. Practically, this means “everyone’s participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect ... everyone can to some degree be considered a ‘newcomer’ to the future of a changing community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 117). It therefore makes more sense to provide, rather than the episodic trainings so common in formal orientation processes, ongoing opportunities for socialization to all group members, not only so that newcomers can learn from old timers, but so that old timers can continue to learn. One way to do this would be to offer repeated opportunities to engage the “same” experience, but one that is flexible enough to afford improvisation sufficient to accommodate the socialization needs of those present (Lave, 1988). Taking these factors into account, recognizing the value of a CoP’s developmental cycle could include aspects such as articulating the value of newcomers, providing for participation at multiple levels through shifting roles, supporting independent problem solving, normalizing mistakes and conflict, and providing ample opportunity for sharing

experience through the telling of stories.^{[1][SEP]} Learning in a CoP is embedded in co-learning. It occurs through the process of participation, rather than within an individual mind. Because of the cyclical process of LPP wherein members of various tenure continue to learn from one another, incorporating collective learning into socialization will foster acculturation better than individualized training will. Beyond providing a greater accumulation of knowledge, groups afford synergy that yields insights that wouldn't occur otherwise (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). In addition, group learning, in its collective wisdom, can also recognize and address faulty logics, misunderstandings, and mistakes more effectively than any one of its members. Also, when people learn in groups, the multiple perspectives provided are better able to populate the learning environment with the requisite variety needed to distinguish the concept to be understood from the particulars of any one example used to illustrate it. Therefore, socialization for CoP should include opportunities for collective activity to support mutual engagement and the development of shared repertoire.

The cycle of reproduction of a community of practice occurs in a social, material world that is also in a “process of reproduction, transformation, and change.” One of the challenges for socialization is to “address the structural character of that world at the level at which it is lived” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 123). One way to do this is to ground socialization practices in situated knowledge.

Situated

Earlier in this section, situated knowledge was explained as a tenet of communities of practice. One reason is that the kind of understanding required to participate in a CoP is “developed though continued, situated use” (Brown et al., 1989, p. 33). The person, the context, and the activity implicated by participation are so interrelated that it is impractical or even impossible to separate the anticipation of the activity from its setting (Lave, 1988). In fact, Lave offered the term “person-acting” to denote this amalgam (Lave, 1988). This dialectic occurring between person and environment in a CoP means that teaching newcomers to address problems (which may simply be the disparity between a newcomer’s values and those of the group at large) will not be served by separating outcomes from processes (Lave, 1988). That is, simply stating a goal without acknowledging the unique path by which each member might move towards it will leave out the majority of what the member will encounter when striving towards the desired outcome. In a manner of speaking, knowledge within a CoP cannot be mobilized (Latour, 1988).

In a CoP, the newcomer does not receive knowledge that they can transfer to another situation. They develop appropriate skills by engaging in group behaviors as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Therefore, in CoPs, socialization processes should incorporate what Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989, p. 34) call “authentic learning,” that is, learning that occurs “through ordinary practice of the culture.” In light of this, and because the application of any instruction will be inflected by the way in which it plays out in a local context, it can be useful to consider avoiding the prescription of specific goals during the socialization process (Lave, 1988). Instead, the proposal being made is to offer explication at the level of the

characteristics, dynamics, or patterns when discussing aims, that is, to offer codification at the level of the index.

Indexical

It might appear, from the proliferation of manuals and instructions that litter learning experiences, that representation of activity in language is an effective way to convey knowledge. However, as previously described, there are numerous circumstances in which the tacit dimension of the codified knowledge exceeds what could be expected in the repertoire of the newcomer. And, even in those circumstances in which action could be codified, the varieties of local application will far exceed the capacity for documentation, or the human attention to take in the documentation, were it possible. As scholars including Lucy Suchman have discussed at great length: plans are distinct from situated actions (2006). Therefore, rather than seeking to memorize a catalog of minutia detailing specific actions, it is vital that socialization support the newcomer in generating a categorical sense of what types of activities might happen, whether they will or not, and to develop an ability to respond to varying circumstances, that is, the ability to improvise (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

For scholars who view knowing as a process, this sort of ability is what is meant by “knowledge.” Brown Collins, and Duguid (1989) affirm that knowledge is indexical, a product of the circumstances in which it was generated and sufficiently flexible to allow for future application to similar, though not identical, circumstances. Therefore, I am suggesting that socialization processes be designed with indexicality in mind, seeking not to specify exact behaviors (Lave,

1988), but instead to engender newcomers' capacity to improvise towards a desired outcome.

Lave describes continuity as the “active production of the reproduction of settings” (Lave, 1988, p. 187). Codifying knowledge at the level of the dynamic, that is, codifying the pattern of patterns across circumstances that are “the same” could facilitate a sense of continuity across difference, yielding an experience of consistency for the newcomer and therefore supporting stability as well as reifying group identity. So, rather than abstracting specific instructions, socialization practices could seek to outline a “field for action” (Lave, 1988) in which the newcomer has room to adapt responsively to their circumstance.

One way to indicate a field for action is, while engendering shared repertoire, to provide multiple interpretations of a term or concept, allowing sufficient variety of application that the newcomer can see the difference between the specifics of the example and the nuances of the dynamic the examples are serving to illuminate. In doing so, these indexical terms, as much as possible, should be transparent, simply drawing attention to an area whose iterations will reveal the structure and meaning to be conveyed (Brown et al., 1989). Instead of being prescriptive, they can point to “rich expectations generated over time,” allowing for “novel configurations that enable the production of continuity across occasions” (Lave, 1988, p. 190). Before exploring the idea of supporting indexical terminology more fully, it makes sense first to take a moment to understand why the sorts of characteristics proposed are not already prevalent in the design of socialization structures in CoPs.

Inhibiting Characteristics

Unfortunately, although indexicality, situated knowledge, collaboration, and cyclicity are important characteristics to attend to in designing socialization in CoPs, many practices have qualities that actually inhibit these aspects. Instead, socialization structures are often episodic rather than cyclical, abstract and static rather than situated and indexical, and individualized rather than collective. Because of the need for LPP, these sorts of environments will likely fail to adequately support a newcomer in a CoP.

Phrases like “you’ll know it when you see it” are hallmarks of tacit knowledge. For activities that can’t be effectively communicated through a single verbal or written iteration, the practices of lecture-style trainings, manuals, or other organizational documents will be insufficient for providing the necessary support for LPP. In large part, this is because they rely on the banking model of teaching (Friere, 1993), which, because it deploys abstracted concepts in individualistic learning environments in a single-delivery format, is insufficient to the task. It would be unthinkable to present a new piano student with a code for which notes correlate to which keys, instructions for how to sit and strike the keys, and expect that they will play the piano. And yet many orientations are simply a diatribe of facts and recitations of process over a few-hour period.

If knowledge-as-index is so key to learning, if there is “no necessary implication that a learner acquires mental representations that remain fixed thereafter” (Lave and Wegner, 1991, p. 15), and if socialization practices rarely happen in direct correlation to official descriptions (Van Maanen, 1978), how is it that codified practices are so prevalent in socialization design? ^[1]_[SEP]Why

is it so often the case that we employ codification, which “lifts implicit and possibly even non-conceptual constraints out of the embedding world and tries to make them explicit or conceptual” such that they “take a place in our ontology and become something ignore to learn about rather than simply something useful in learning” (Brown et al., 1989, p. 41)? Brown, Collins, and Duguid locate this in a penchant for revering representation and Lave traces its history to the positivist aspiration to universal application (Lave, 1988). Additionally, some of the prevalence of descriptive causality is a property of the methods used to elicit information. When researchers ask an informant to describe how they do something, a linear response is likely, regardless of whether it incorporates the full breadth of what was done (Lave, 1988). But if the provision of codified “knowledge” is not the best tool for socialization, how is it that these practices have not been dismissed as ineffective? Codified repositories can appear to be useful tools because, just as it is possible to abstract a concept from its setting, it is often easy enough for those with sufficient tacit knowledge to re-apply the concept across sample settings *despite* their variance (what Brown, Collins and Duguid mean by “knowledge,” as referenced earlier.) This is to say that, with sufficient tacit knowledge, a newcomer will “know what you’re trying to get at” because they already know most of what is being conveyed. As a result, the idea that situations can be described as “the same” continues, in large part due to feats of intellectual categorization, which often erase their origins in the making. To describe any two situations as “the same” requires constructing a fiction that serves to create or maintain a sense of stability. They are only “the same” in the sense that there is a social agreement to regard them as such (Lave, 1988). In fact, the specifics of any two circumstances vary far more than they resemble one another. It’s

important to note that, where tacit knowledge is sufficient to ascertain some understanding of “sameness,” it is insufficient to fully grasp the nuances of what is meant, and this ability to generate explanatory mechanisms can breed misunderstanding. For example, employing examples of the disproportionate incarceration of African-American people in the United States can be taken to indicate the prevalence of crime in the Black community when the purpose was to point out the racial profiling practices of the police.

Especially when learning individually, there is risk of conflating correlation with causality, particularly in circumstances where the capacity to make rigorous assessment is absent (e.g., a single individual reflecting on histories of experience to create a manual or training without any recourse to relevant research or other collective wisdom, which is frequently the case). Because of this, manuals are more likely guides on how people talk about what they do than guides on how they do what they do. This conflation of a thing and its description further troubles learning in those representations of problem-solving that address the perception of the problem, rather than the problem itself, which is comprised of a set of situated actions and actors. Employing an abstracted exercise based on extracted characteristics creates “correct knowledge” rather than useful knowledge (Lave, 1988), robbing newcomers of the opportunity to see the context from which the knowledge arose, effectively inhibiting the stated purpose of the learning session (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989) and creating a circumstance in which a person who “knows how” will be judged as not “knowing what” because they demonstrate knowledge of the activity repertoire rather than the corollary repertoire of terminology. For example, a student who knows how to drive may fail their written driving test because, while they intuitively understand a safe

stopping distance, they may not be able to name it in feet. Conversely, a student may be able to recite a safe stopping distance of 40 feet at 20 mph but may not be able to gauge it while driving.

Though there can be times in which a learner has sufficient tacit knowledge to redeploy an abstraction, in CoPs the tacit knowledge required may well be too local for a newcomer to have encountered it. In this frequent case, codified versions of situated concepts, while conveniently mobile, will “lose their predictive power” when re-applied to the environments from which they came (Lave, 1988, p. 172). The linearity of description implicit in verbal renderings is all too frequently incompatible with the complexity of lived experience, and the cause-and-effect promise of abstract examples disintegrates in the light of life. Lived experience can be heuristic, but to render any action as singularly goal-directed cleaves away most of what constitutes it.

However, there can indeed be structural similarities across experiences, and if care is taken to attend to where the resemblance lies, that is, to name the dynamic rather than the specifics, then codification can serve the function of indexicality without precluding the specifics of any particular future case. In fact, partly because of a basic need for stability, there is much to be gained from “the routine expectability of ... cycles of activity” (Lave, 1988, p. 187). So, rather than supporting an unreasonable call to do away with codification entirely, I advocate explicating knowledge at a certain level of scale: that which incorporates the understanding that the codified aspects are markers for categories of experience and ability that will be illuminated through and only through practice. One way to do this is to identify the terminology populating the shared repertoire of the CoP.

Terminology and Socialization

According to Iverson and McPhee, “terminology provides a way to communicate specialized knowledge of the group” (2008, p. 188). And in their discussion of discourse and practice Lave and Wegner (1991) also make clear that learning how and when to talk in groups is an important aspect of participation. However, they also remind us that learning the appropriate terms to use when speaking is a practice distinct from being able to enact the activities the words indicate. In CoPs, terms will act as markers for activities that require tacit knowledge, in more than excess of that available to someone outside the community. Therefore, familiarity and even facility with a term is not necessarily correlative with the activity it indicates. Collins et al (2007) refer to this ability to converse in the language of a CoP without being able to engage in other practices as interactional expertise. Lave and Wegner (1991, p. 109) make a similar distinction between talking about, which is like interactional expertise, and talking within, which is “exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities.” Differentiating between the repertoires of terminology and skills can be an important aspect of newcomer socialization as it enables two sets of literacy: one with the terminology, one with the activities the terms reference. Both fulfill vital, but differing aspects of LPP that signal membership: supporting coordination around an activity (negotiation of a joint enterprise), and the activity itself (shared repertoire). Therefore, I recommend providing socialization structures for newcomers to learn terminology in word and deed.

However, though it may seem simple enough to make a list of terms and definitions used in a community, a newcomer can acquire terms but not yet be able to enact their referent practice (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). And it's also possible for a newcomer to enact the practice without having facility with the language appropriate to the group. For example, a person may well know how to fix the brakes on a bicycle without knowing the word "caliper." In one bicycle CoP, technical terminology may be a requisite for full membership, while in another it will not be. The word "caliper" is requisite repertoire among the people who use the term in discussion of brake repair (e.g. "you take the caliper and hold it together while you use the pliers to tighten the brake cable"), but it is inconsequential to those who use a different word (or no specialized vocabulary) to fix brakes without discussing it in detail (e.g. "you take this part here and hold it together while you use the pliers to tighten the brake cable"). Again, the assertion of "correct" knowledge "raises the questions of what circumstances surround the construction of verbal descriptions of embodied knowledge" (Lave, 1988, p. 183). Therefore, if assessment is to be part of a socialization practice in a CoP, strongly consider distinguishing a person's ability to convey their fluency with activity practices from their fluency with the language that refers to it. That is, while fluency in the language of the CoP is a vital aspect of its membership, including both specific terms as well as their deployment and the enactment of their indexes, it is also necessary to provide the newcomer with opportunities to enact appropriate behavior, regardless of their ability to articulate it.

In the preceding section, great emphasis was placed on the importance of supporting the generation and dissemination of indexical rather than definitional terms. That is to say, in

designing socialization processes, codify terminology that acts to support situated knowledge, rather than offering static, abstract dictionaries. But how can we create the pool of referents to which the indexical terms will point? One answer can be found in the telling of stories.

Stories as Vectors for Polyvocality

Sharing stories of experience supports legitimate peripheral participation, the development of shared repertoire, and the negotiation of joint enterprise (Cain, 1991; Iverson & McPhee, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Allowing narratives to circulate is a vital aspect of developing a community culture, as it provides opportunity to share and generate collective wisdom (Brown et al., 1989). Additionally, hearing stories allows members to see activities from the perspective of other roles and affords the opportunity for members to learn from others' experience and evaluate their own actions, in light of their congruence with another's story. People frequently misjudge the degree of their skillfulness (Lave, 1988), so hearing stories allows for calibration with the group. In this way stories are a primary conduit for identity transformation (Cain, 1991). Stories also "play a major role in decision making" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 108), facilitating both diagnosis and reinterpretation, and are especially helpful in problem solving, as they retain the contextual elements of the learning environment (Lave, 1988).

It's common that in CoPs newcomers will learn from other newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and sharing stories is a vehicle to support this learning. In addition, sharing stories allows newcomers to access understandings of mature practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but also provides old-timers with insight about newcomers' experience so that they can both better

provide responsive, corrective action and continue their own learning as peripheral participants. Perhaps most importantly to a CoP, sharing stories is a mode of learning that accommodates the cyclical form of the community, providing roles appropriate to all members regardless of their tenure in a situated, collective, indexical process commensurate with the needs of legitimate peripheral participation. Stories allow for situated learning as members disclose their analyses through authentic activity (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989), providing the contextual clues through which to interpret the group culture (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and, importantly, generating a context in which emotional capacity can be addressed (VanMaanen, 1978).

In addition to these useful capacities, I assert that stories, and especially story circles, can be employed specifically in the service of generating a pool of referents with sufficient variety to provide the group's terminology repertoire with the indexicality needed to accommodate the repertoire of tacit knowledge it implicates. As example, I encountered a particular form of story circles, first through my participation in a community of educators and community organizers in New Orleans, LA in 2004, and later through my participation in the grassroots organization Community Labor United, also in New Orleans. In my understanding, the practice I learned was a derivative of activities learned and developed by students and youth who worked with Ella Baker as part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These students included John O'Neal of the Free Southern Theater and Curtis Muhammad of SNCC, who were my primary mentors. In the process of a story circle, each member of the group tells a story of situated experience in response to a prompt (e.g., "Tell a story about racism in the school district"). After this initial round, members take turns again, this time naming what

commonalities they saw across the stories. Through this process, a collective sense of that is meant by the terminology of the prompt emerges but remains located in all of the stories that were told.

In this way, a somewhat codified description is identified without being severed from the many contributing locations from which it came. Since all group members are present, all have access to the local application of what becomes the “universal” definition. In the case of this example, the term “racism in the school district” elicits the “same type” of story, and the process of collectively synthesizing the stories yields a description of the characteristics of the dynamics of “racism in the school district” (e.g. Black youth being disproportionately punished, white youth being tracked into higher level math classes, etc.) exceeding any one definition or example. Once this polyvocal “definition” is created, and especially if the process is repeated at regular intervals, the term can be used without risk of being conflated with the specifics of any example, thus retaining an indexical character while fulfilling the need for continuity. Because of this, story circles may be a useful way to avoid the inhibiting characteristics of abstraction, while meeting the criteria of being cyclical, situated, collective, and indexical.

However, in line with the arguments of this paper, it is more important to adhere to the dynamics of the proposition (create opportunities for members to share stories) than to insist on the specifics of the story circle process, which of course can’t be adequately conveyed in writing, as it requires tacit knowledge local to the story circle community. In fact, in doing research for this paper I found a few codified versions of story circles attributed to John O’Neal (e.g. Randels, 2005; Research Center for Leadership in Action, 2008), some of which differed greatly from one

another and, of course, none of which actually express the situated knowledge required to enact a story circle, because it can't be codified. Nonetheless, this illustration seeks to serve as a means by which the abstract concepts names can be anticipated in lived practice.

Conclusion

This began by asserting the importance of addressing the socialization of newcomers in communities of practice. After defining characteristics of communities of practice, including legitimate peripheral participation, mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and negotiation of joint enterprise, recommendations were made towards a set of characteristics to be included in the design of socialization practices for CoP. These include cycles and collectivity, situated learning, and indexicality. Then, the repertoire of terminology was proposed as an area in which indexicality could be supported, and the process of story circles was offered as a method by which to enact terminology in an indexical manner, in line with the suggested characteristics.

Because socialization is an inevitable aspect of CoPs that has a profound impact on the life of the group, putting energy into designing socialization practices will likely yield more effective groups. However, because learning how to design socialization practices is itself part of a repertoire of the CoP to which the author belongs and to which the reader may currently be a newcomer (e.g., facilitators, teachers, party hosts, event planners, conference organizers), pursuing engagement in communities of practice who employ socialization practices with these characteristics is recommended in order to fully integrate the proposals herein.

CHAPTER 3
WE'RE NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT IT!
SONGS, POSTERS, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND POETRY

This chapter is a sequence of works in the media of photography, poetry, posters, and songs I created and/or curated during the time of this research. These works put into practice and reflect on the ideas of intersectionality, counter-narrative, awareness of social location, reflexivity, community of practice, small-group collaboration, and Life as Method.



Figure 2: Poster: “Listen,” 2020

Song, round: **“keep fighting, keep loving,” 2021**

<https://youtu.be/CzuEUguRuvs>

Video: “exquisite limb,” 2021

<https://youtu.be/R2wK6YYvKkU>

Song: “Not an Option,” 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUXjFqJgzgY>

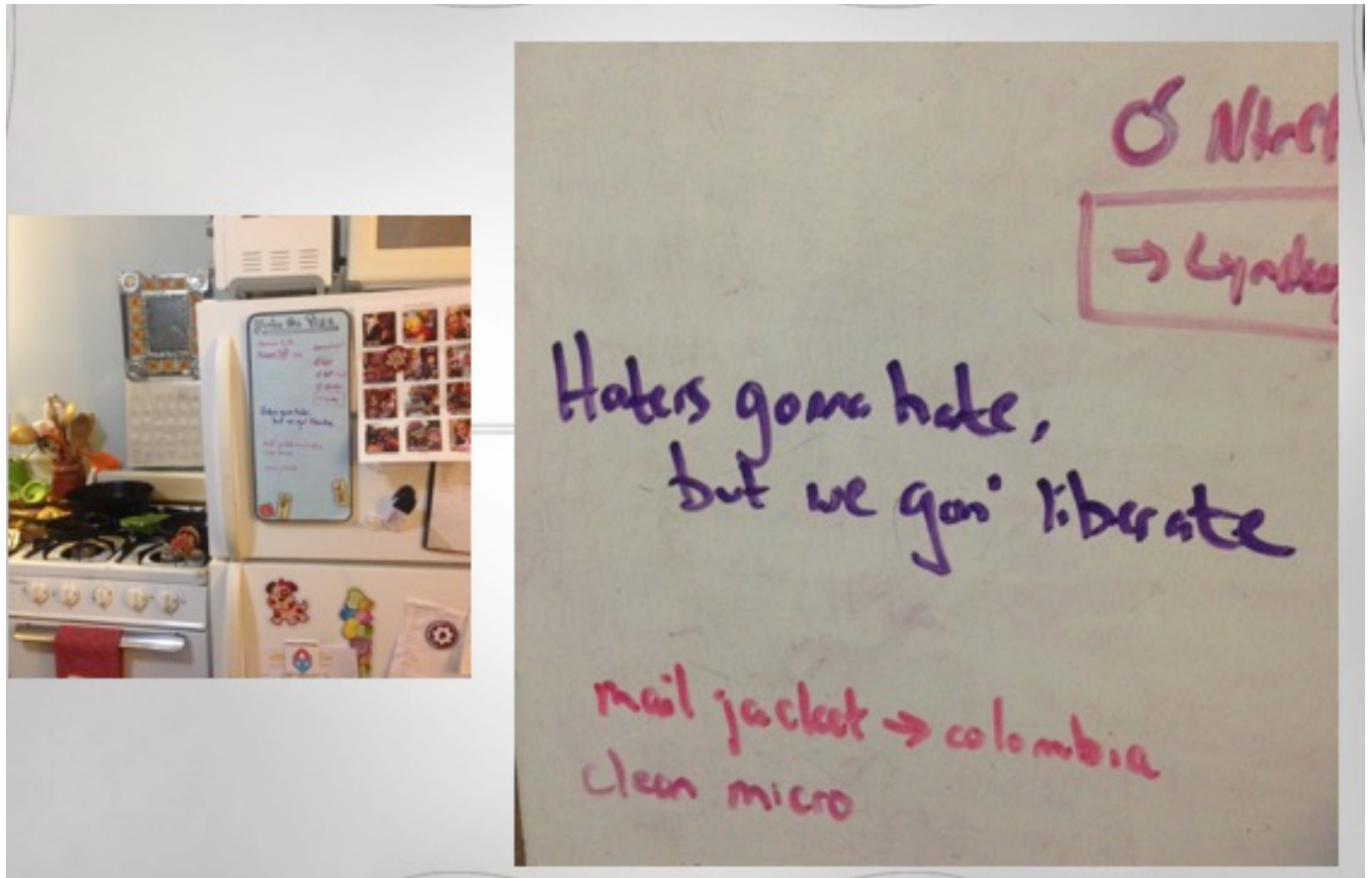


Figure 3: Photography: “Haters gonna hate,” 2020

Song: “Anne Braden’s Octopus,” 2021

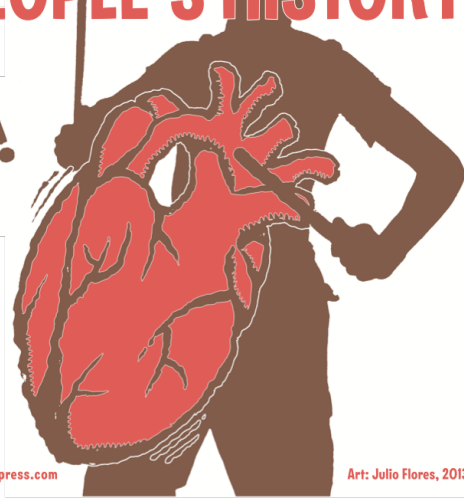
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkDRYgdfeg0>

CELEBRATE PEOPLE'S HISTORY

(Re)learn—
Hearts beat
louder
than drums!

The Douglass Center Drum Corps launched in Champaign, IL in the 1950s and won numerous regional competitions. In 1968 these African-American youth raised funds to travel to New York City and compete nationally against 346 teams from across the country... and **won first place**. Their legacy continued through the 70s and still reverberates today.

urbanapeopleshistory@gmail.com • urbanapeopleshistory.wordpress.com



Art: Julio Flores, 2013

Figure 4: Poster: “Celebrate People’s History: Douglass Center Drum Corps,” 2013

Art by Julio Flores, in collaboration with elizaBeth Simpson

Song, round: “We Wanna Woke,” 2018

<https://youtu.be/7fbS-cFzIUy>

A word to white women feminism, 2018

Miz Plantation had sweet tea and linen –
let me tell you the rest:

Being told to give my baby to your darker breast
late at night hearing his grunts, and your cries
hearing my husband's child coming from between your thighs

What could I do? This was my test –
and I chose to despise you.
What could I do? Not sympathize –
because that leads to action and..
What could I do?

white women are property, too.
compromise.

I took myself, and tore her in two:
on one side was whiteness,
on the other was you.

Sister against sister, our hearts: broken.
The song of our blood: divided.
Our wombs cut open.

I hated her
though he took her
after she was bought –
do you see the plan?
he never gets caught.

My mothers chose their comfort against yours –
the soft of their skin against the sweat of your pores
that's how it begins –
she said the course and I followed it.
That's what she fed me –
and I swallowed it.

Sister, we've been divided 1447 years –
Our stories, our pain, our tears.

It may take centuries to restore what's been denied you,
But now, it's my turn to decide.
And I, putting the safety of privilege aside,
choose you.

CHAPTER 4

DEVISING SMALL GROUP ANTI-OPPRESSIVE DYNAMICS

First, when social attitudes are rooted within the social system, that system must be changed before attitudes will change. Direct persuasive efforts to change a social attitude, before altering the supporting social structure, will fail. Second, communication can facilitate those social changes that are a necessary requisite for attitude change (McPherson 1973, p.37).

In this section, I will explore whether it is possible to devise practices that inhibit oppressive dynamics in small groups. To do this, I will define oppression and anti-oppression, articulate some common group habits that contribute to oppressive dynamics, and name some common practices that align with an anti-oppressive approach. Then, I will present a few examples of the practices of groups that espouse an anti-oppressive or liberatory praxis and analyze them for potential criteria by which to evaluate the efficacy of an anti-oppressive practice. Finally, I will outline an agenda of how I might go about constructing anti-oppressive small group practice, with an emphasis on the role of ongoing evaluation to maintain alignment with the identified criteria.

Though oppression is often enough referenced in communications literature (James, 2019), it seems communications scholars more often define dynamics in terms of power or domination (e.g., Mumby, 1988; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Therefore, for the purpose of this section, I will look to definitions in other fields for cues as to how I might define oppression within the field of communication. Oppression can be defined broadly as “a system of power imbalance maintained by controlling images and unrealistic social norms and expectations that make it nearly impossible for certain groups to fit in and excel” (Windsor et al., 2014, p. 405).

Another definition used in the anti-oppressive practice literature of social work is that “oppression takes place when a person acts or a policy is enacted unjustly against an individual (or group) because of their affiliation to a specific group ... It also includes imposing belief systems, values, laws and ways of life on other groups through peaceful or violent means” (Baines, 2007, p. 2). For the purposed of this paper, I define oppression as an alignment of system dynamics such that members of certain social classes are consistently hindered, above and beyond circumstantial influence, in full expression of self and livelihood including health, personal relationships, income, type of work, creativity, culture, etc., while members of other social classes are either not hindered, or in fact benefit from those same dynamics.

These definitions address oppression at large. Narrowing in on how oppression functions at the level of practices, we can regard structural oppression as the process by which history, culture, people, practices, policies, and systems interact across institutional domains to produce and sustain inequality, while institutional oppression is the process by which history, culture, people, policies, practices, and systems interact within a specific institutional framework (education, criminal justice, housing, etc.) to produce and sustain racial inequality (Rudd et al., 2011). In this section, I consider practices within the institutional framework of small group communication, recognizing that they may compliment or detract from enactment of oppression across institutional domains.

Before I begin this exploration it may be important to ask: is it possible for a practice to simply be neutral, that is, to be indifferent in the production of inequality? In line with Brown and Mistry who say, “patterns of social oppression will be repeated in social group work practice

unless active steps are taken to counteract these tendencies and replace them with a culture of empowerment” (1994, p. 133), I assert that this is not possible unless the practice were to exist outside of a system of oppressive dynamics. Group participants carry with them the social habits and norms of their culture, which is in turn informed by a dominant culture that shapes social norms and expectations (Poole et al., 1985). Thus, all groups will inherently carry and replicate the social patterns of action of the dominant culture, and in cultures where systemically invested imbalances of power are part of the social structure, any decision-making practice will allow for the replication of power imbalances unless it is explicitly anti-oppressive. That is to say: if a small group practice is merely “neutral” towards the social climate of the group, the process will replicate those biases simply by creating a space in which participants play out their inherited patterns unfettered. So, any group wishing to avoid replication of oppression will need to employ anti-oppressive practices.

In addition to playing out the dynamics of the dominant culture, other factors can contribute to group perpetuation of oppression through failure to intervene in patterns, or to fully use the wisdom of the group to address the problem at hand. A common occurrence in groups is the Abilene Paradox, in which “organizations frequently take actions in contradiction to the data they have for dealing with problems and, as a result, compound their problems rather than solve them” (Harvey, 1988, p. 20). This paradox can contribute to preserving oppressive conditions as participants fail to bring relevant data that would disrupt stereotypes to the fore. For example, if a solution includes elements that contribute to bias and no one speaks up though they know it will favor some and not others, the bias-enforcing outcome will move forward.

Because of social forces in some groups, even if members feel interdependent, they may be constrained by organizational factors to engage divisively, rather than to integrate their differences. Having subgoals that are counter to group or co-member interests or adhering to product over process can result in oppressive dynamics. Some factors that contribute to such “process loss” are power differentiation, independence, and assertions of intent (Tannen, 1998), management of multiple identities, especially dis-identification (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969), social distance, and as in the Abilene paradox, insufficient motivational pressure to overcome conflict avoidance (Friedman and Gal, 1991).

While groups may replicate oppressive patterns, some practices that could be considered anti-oppressive are already commonly found in group practices as well. For example, the norm of power sharing can be seen in the commonly implemented democratic value that “everyone has an equal voice,” which is supported by research indicating that groups with more equitable participation make higher-quality decisions (Bonito and Hollingshead, 1997). These types of norms can be seen in practices such as turn-taking, rounds, and consensus decision making. Similarly, the assertion that functional decision-making should evaluate all options, not only those initially perceived as “good,” help ensure that the contributions of underrepresented voices are taken up by the group (Orlitsky and Hirokawa, 2001). It is the objective of this section to review a set of case studies and identify such anti-oppressive techniques already at work.

When considering what anti-oppressive practice might be, I turn to the highly developed rubrics for anti-oppressive practice that have been developed in the field of Social Work. Donna Baines (2017, p. 4) refers to “anti-oppressive practices” as an “umbrella term for a number of

social justice-oriented approaches to social work including feminist, Marxist, critical postmodernist, Indigenous, critical poststructuralist, queer, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist.” For this paper, I am defining anti-oppressive practices as those having qualities that impede, or reduce the impact of, the inherited dynamics of oppression. Being anti-oppressive may or may not also be liberatory, where liberation entails “critical transformation” in the language and thinking of Paulo Freire (1968) wherein one must name the problem in terms of systemic assumptions, structures, rules, or roles that are flawed. Next, let us see what three case studies can offer towards a rubric of anti-oppressive practices in small groups.

Case Studies

Towards outlining an agenda for constructing anti-oppressive small group communication practices, I will review a few groups that claim to engage an anti-oppressive mode: the Women’s Liberation Front (WLF), Restorative Circles (RC), and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). In looking across these practices for themes, I suggest that an outline for criteria of anti-oppressive practice will begin to emerge. Two of the practices, TO and WLF, seek to address oppression directly, while RC employs anti-oppressive practices as a mode for interpersonal conflict resolution. I begin with the WLF.

Women’s Liberation Front

What is broadly referred to as the Women’s Liberation Front was a movement of women’s groups, primarily in the United States, who sought equality for women beyond the legislative means used by groups such as the National Organization for Women. According to a

New York cell of the WLF, “preconditions for a working internal democracy” were small group practices that engendered interpersonal disclosure, intimacy and trust; collectively acquired, common political awareness; and group experiences (McPherson, 1973, p.34). Meetings consisted of small groups of 10-15 people, excluding those not most directly impacted (men). It seems “for women to experience groups which can combine both personal and political change, they need to be without men” (Brown & Mistry, 1994, p. 136). No member lists were kept, and the groups were often nameless. Within the group, women often worked in units of 2-3 to provide support to overcome the lack of confidence that those targeted by the oppression inevitably experienced (McPherson, 1973). Maintaining a leaderless structure was important for supporting internal democracy in WLF groups, which encouraged participation and self-reliance because, without a leader to speak for them, members were implicitly called to speak for themselves and in doing so, developed confidence in their capacity to act. Another process used to balance participation was discouraging over-active members in the interest of encouraging less-active members to participate (McPherson, 1973).

A key purpose of the groups was to change the attitudes that members had about themselves, in relation to the problem at hand (internalized sexism in women), particularly beliefs in stereotypes about themselves. One pattern that was taken up in specific was the perception that non-women are the change makers, while the role of women is to have their problems addressed by others. As a result of distributed participation through self-disclosure, members came to see that what had previously been understood as a personal predicament was instead a social pattern that could be identified as an institutional form of oppression. Then,

seeing themselves as a body of people with common experience, members could pool their resources to address it collectively (McPherson, 1973). Another way in which members were supported to recalibrate their social role was through educational and informational opportunities, including access to non-stereotyped media and books. This exposure to other women's thinking allowed members to further recognize and re-articulate themselves not only as part of their local group, but as part of a historic trajectory that preceded and extended beyond them (McPherson, 1973). Once they understood themselves in a different light, members could aspire to shift their conditions by causing "society to react to them on their own terms." (McPherson, 1973, p. 34).

Recognizing that individual attitudes are shaped by the society in which they reside, the WLF sought to shift social structures. Once a group obtained a sense of directional purpose, it took social action, either independently or in coalition with other groups. While the activities of WLF groups were similar internally (e.g., consciousness raising groups), when they acted externally tactics were varied, reflecting the prioritized action strategy the group had identified. However, all tactics had the common aim to shift the way women were stereotyped and treated. At large, the WLF identified three general areas for change: nuclear family, abortion, and childcare; and two strategies: disrupting stereotyped media representations and generating their own media in support of women's autonomy. This emphasis on media was based on the sense that what happens in the media shapes what happens in peoples' minds (McPherson, 1973).

Because of the potential for cooptation, WLF groups avoided contact with "establishment" media, and any contact was made in pairs or groups to protect from misrepresentation. Instead of seeking to be covered in mass media, WLF sought to communicate directly with the general

population, seeking to empower audiences to “think for themselves within a revolutionary framework” (Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, in McPherson, 1973, p. 34). One form of communication commonly used to “violate the reality structure” in lieu of typical protest tactics was theatrical visual representations emphasizing the direct impacts of women’s oppression. Using methods such as impromptu skits, WLF members showed the sometimes shocking implications of sexist and misogynist stereotypes as they played out in society.

Restorative Circles

With its emphasis on mutual comprehension rather than outcomes, the Restorative Circle (RC) process is similar to the restorative justice “circles of understanding” form popularly used in the U.S. and described by Kay Pranis (2004). However, restorative circles originated outside of the Western restorative justice context, and have characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of Restorative Justice circle practice. Founded by Dominic Barter in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, RC has its roots in Nonviolent Communication as described by Marshall Rosenberg (2003) rather than in the restorative justice movement in the U.S. And Canada. The process of RC entails three phases: pre-circles, the circle, and the post-circle, and the methodology of these phases center around precise questions, often called didactic questions (Clute, 2012).

Restorative circles welcome all parties affected by the action, but none other, and seek balanced participation from all members. In communication, emphasis is not on giving participants the opportunity to speak, but on the listener understanding what was said. Restorative circle practice aims to avoid professionalization, instead seeking to support community ownership of the process at all times. Notably, RC explicitly sees the harm as

occurring in a systemic context. As such, it does not prioritize addressing the harm directly so much as creating the container in which participants are able to reconnect with one another (Lyubansky, personal communication, 4/30). As Barter writes, RC seeks to develop an “integrated, systemic response to painful conflict, crime, and disagreement, including creating the conditions in which restorative processes and their results can emerge” (2012, p. 21).

In part, restorative circles identify conflict as a situation in which members of a community have become disconnected from one another to the point that they lack mutual comprehension or understanding of their interconnectedness. Therefore, the primary criteria for the effectiveness of the process are participants’ reconnection to one another’s humanity (Barter, 2012). As such, solutions are sought through supporting the capacity of participants to hear one another’s experience as facilitated by the circle process. Because of this, restorative circles are in themselves a solution for disconnection between the involved parties, within which problem-solving processes to remedy the impact of the conflict may unfold.

Unlike other practices that may engage a variety of methods for facilitation, RC stipulates an “impoverished toolkit” from which the facilitator can operate. The circle seeks to support participants in walking through their own conflict, and the more tools the facilitator uses, a) the more attention is taken from the participants and put on the facilitator, b) the more participants attribute outcomes to the facilitator, c) the more training that is required to be a facilitator, and d) the less accessible the process becomes to the community because of the training required. This results in inhibition of the principles of power sharing and accessibility. Therefore, the principle of the impoverished toolkit seeks to inhibit these undesirable outcomes.

Additionally, there are numerous interventions against egocentric constraints in the restorative circle process. Avoiding the roles of victim and offender serves to intervene by redistributing responsibility across the circle. Similarly, other hierarchical roles are also to be set aside in the time of the circle. Even the role of the facilitator is considered temporary; in the next circle she may be in a different role. Finally, a significant intervention in power egocentric constraints is found in the technique of reflection, which serves to intervene by disallowing control of communication by any one participant. For example, any dominating comment made would be followed with “what did you hear?” which serves to redistribute power between speaker and listener, emphasizing what was heard over what was said.

Though restorative circles have a clearly articulated process and method, one of its key principles is to be responsive to those who use it, or in Barter’s words: “to be a dynamically shifting investigation into the power of community self-responsibility and personal responsiveness to the interdependent web of our lives” (2012, p. 21). As such, its forms are expected to shift to accommodate the distinct context of the environment in which it functions.

Image Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed)

Image theater is one of the core practices of Theater of the Oppressed, which is generally considered to have originated in 1973 in Brazil. The translator's introduction to one of the books by its founder, Augusto Boal, describes image theater as: “...a series of exercises and games designed to uncover essential truths about societies and cultures without resort...to spoken language...” (1992, p. xxii). Image theater seeks to disrupt physical and mental patterns that replicate undesirable power dynamics, so that participants can express alternate visions of the

world (Ikemire, 2010). The participants in image theatre make still images of their lives, feelings, experiences, oppressions. Then, groups suggest titles or themes, and individuals “sculpt” three-dimensional images under these titles, using their own and others’ bodies as the “clay” (Boal, 1992, p. xxii). The method for this process of disruption, which is a cornerstone of not only image theater but all forms of Theater of the Oppressed, is called demechanization.

Demechanization seeks to re-invigorate participants’ capacity to sense and feel (Boal, 1992) by forcing awareness of how the body moves in habits and replicates dominant ways of thinking (Ikemire, 2010), stimulating uncommon motions and sounds in order to experience the world from unfamiliar perspectives (Vierk, 1997).

Though there are many variations on image theater, it generally consists of three stages of image: the real image: image of reality; the ideal image: the world as it could be; and the image of possible transition: how we might move from the real image to the ideal image (Boal, 1992). During the process, it is essential that sculptors create images without recourse to words. In particular they should not think out what image to create and then make it, but instead to create the image from impulse, without first translating into spoken language (Boal, 1992). In the creation of each image, all participants have the opportunity to reshape it, such that the process is one of emergent consensus. In fact, at every stage of the process the group has input; image theater is predicated on the awareness that everyone involved in a social system impacts it. Therefore, along the way, everyone present is always considered part of the image, even if they are simply standing by (Boal, 1992). In this way, image theater is always systemic in scope: there are no externalities.

In image theatre, participants are encouraged to point out impractical, “magical” solutions and re-direct efforts towards feasible outcomes. A facilitator, called the joker, assists the process as needed, but without directing content. Where power dynamics exist between members, the joker also acts as an advocate for marginalized voices. In this way she facilitates equitable, though perhaps not equal, participation as informed by an understanding of histories of power dynamics manifested both in the visualized narratives and in the material space of the process itself. As a popular form of pedagogy, the methods of image theater are accessible and non-proprietary, requiring no specialized skills or certification, and needing few resources other than the participants. At the same time, by necessity of its design, image theatre employs only the bodies that are present in the moment of inquiry. This immediacy is part of its effectiveness, requiring recognition in the present moment rather than memory, which is notoriously inaccurate (Taylor, 2006; Schmolck et al. 2000).

Image theater does not stipulate its results (Mutnick, 2006) Instead, through its acts of immediate feedback, it affords a recursive process that allows for continual creation of new structures through reflexive iteration. In image theatre, feedback serves to preempt mistakes. Its results are immediately available to those who input them, inhibiting mischaracterization or inaccurate interpretation of what was meant to be shown (Nagler and del Pesco, 2011). As such, the process is fundamentally self-correcting, even to the extreme: if participants demand a change in the rules, the rules change (Boal, 1992). Because of its collaborative process, emergent dynamics, and nonlinear outcomes, image theater outcomes often result in the identification of systemic patterns. As Boal says, the process moves “from the phenomena presented in the plot to

the social laws that govern those phenomena” (Boal, 1985, p. 130). This property is in part attributed to the polysemy of images, wherein multiple individual representations of the same problem reveal a social vision of how the problem impacts a community. Image theater often concludes that not only the amelioration of a harm, but even comprehension of it requires seeing the macrocosm (Boal, 1992).

Analysis and Proposal for Constructing Practice

Having reviewed these three small group practices with the stated purpose to gain insight into devising practices that inhibit oppressive dynamics, it is incumbent to analyze them. But, in line with de-habituating standard practice, a theme common to all groups, it is wise to first articulate what the analysis is seeking to find.

Analysis is, in part, an effort to make knowledge mobile, stable, and combinable (Latour, 1987). However, because these groups use forms endemic to their communities of practice which are communicated through common use rather through formal trainings or manuals, identification of the practices needs be found by identifying shared repertoire: the “knowledge, capabilities, and shared (communicated) reifications within the group of people,” which provides both the vocabulary of the group and serves as a mark of group identity (Iverson and McPhee, 2008, p. 179). Indeed, to a high degree, identifying shared repertoire within and among these groups will require making tacit knowledge— understanding that comes from direct experience or practice (Nelson & Winter, 1982)—explicit, “transmittable in formal, systematic language” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 95).

In doing so, it will be essential to recall that any explicated knowledge has implicit in it the tacit “know how” to implement the explicit “know what” (Ryle, 1949). Though it may seem simple enough to make a list of practices used in a community, knowledge of the practices alone will be insufficient to enact them effectively (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). For these groups, and perhaps for any group seeking to perform anti-oppressive practice, simply identifying practice elements without understanding their purpose would be to miss the system lens that all of these practices advocate. And for this reason, in terms of evaluation, measurement at the level of practice could disguise ineffectiveness at the level of purpose. For example, if a particular group has equal participation, but access to participating in the group is inequitable, the group “succeeds” at implementing the practice at the group level but fails at the social purpose of anti-oppressive practices, which can only be measured at the institutional, structural, and system levels. Therefore, I advocate that the focus of this analysis be at the level of the emergent dynamic engendered by the practice rather than on the technicalities of the practices themselves. There is much to be gained from noting “the routine expectability of ... cycles of activity” (Lave, 1988, p. 187). In the case of this analysis, doing so will both allow for uptake of data gathered at the level of dynamic (e.g., reports that it is important to have balanced participation regardless of whether the specific participation-balancing tool is named) and, at the level of application, it will allow for outcomes to be applied through a variety of means, accommodating local cultural adaptations across different contexts. For example, Geertz named that communities generate and are bound by “webs of belief”—systems of symbols local to the group which defy explication, and which may be opaque to those outside it (1977). It would be

unreasonable to expect that the minutiae of a practice would be universal to all such group symbolism. But by stipulating the emergent dynamic, the practice can be adapted in concert with its purpose, in a form acceptable to group culture.

We can see the functionality of a dynamics-level analysis echoed in Baines's description of anti-oppressive practice in social work not as a universal model, but as a set of evolving practices (2007) and in Winner's description of technology as a means to generate frameworks to manage our experiences (1980). In such an iterative turn, use of group practice as a knowledge-making process is first informed by its context, and then contributive to the next iteration of "context." Along the way, each iteration illuminates a set of affordances that "recursively transform the ways we see and intervene in the world" (Myers, 2014, p. 156) and allow for adaptive local implementation as circumstances change.

In terms of creating an agenda for constructing anti-oppressive practices, this means that proposing practices may take more of a heuristic approach than a didactic one. That is, I propose to ground the construction in themes that function as criteria for evaluation, and then provide a repertoire of formal group practices (as described by Sunwolf and Siebold, 1999) which appear to fulfill the themes, but with knowledge that local use accompanied by ongoing evaluation will be the measure of whether the means are functional in context. I suspect this will involve the following steps, which to some degree follow the contours of functional decision making (Orlitsky and Hirokawa, 2001) with "what are anti-oppressive decision-making practices?" as the problem to be solved, but with awareness that the "solution" will not be stable, and will require ongoing adaptation:

- (1) identify oppressive group dynamics as avoidance criteria;
- (2) identify anti-oppressive group dynamics as acceptance criteria;
- (3) identify practices that appear to yield oppressive dynamics
- (4) identify practices that anti-oppressive group practitioners suggest yield anti-oppressive dynamics
- (5) Propose these practices to group seeking to engender anti-oppressive dynamics
- (6) Anticipate that the consistent presence of dominant social forces will influence the group to drift towards oppressive norms, and that group membership and social roles may change and therefore impact the efficacy of a given process for the group, and advocate regular use of process evaluation as a means to re-calibrate group process towards anti-oppressive dynamics.

In summary, because oppression takes many forms, and because local application of any technique will require cultural adaptation, I believe it would be foolish to seek a cure-all practice that promises efficacy in all circumstances. However, because oppression is a dynamic process, involving patterns of patterns, I think it is possible to identify correlative dynamics that counteract, subvert, or neutralize the oppressive dynamics. Regarding the cases described above, the use of open coding yields initial common categories of anti-oppressive dynamics in the themes of form, purpose, power and access, and de-habitation (See Table 1).

Preliminary analysis of the three groups, shown in Table 1, demonstrates that use of anti-oppressive practices may yield the evaluative dynamics criteria of a group constituted only of stakeholders: (1) who represent themselves and use interpersonal disclosure, collective self-

education, and disruption of stereotypes (including individual blame) to generate shared systems-level perspectives of the collective experience towards a goal of social systems change; (2) who use foundational practices that are common across groups but are applied locally with autonomy to self-determine application of the outcomes of those practices; and (3) whose practices affect equitable participation, including power sharing, individual agency and shared leadership.

Table 2: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices

Theme	Category/ Dynamic	Code	WLF	RC	TO
Form	<i>Small groups</i>	Small groups	Small groups	Small groups	Small groups
	<i>Common Foundational Practices</i>	common basic process	internal process is common to all groups	internal process is common to all groups	internal process is common to all groups
	<i>Group Autonomy</i>	autonomous process outcomes	autonomous external action (local application of process outcomes)	autonomous external action (local application of process outcomes)	autonomous external action (local application of process outcomes)
	<i>Local application</i>	local application of process		adaptable to local context	adaptable to local context
	<i>Collectivity</i>	collective action	address social problems collectively	address problems collectively	address social problems collectively
power and access		non-professional/community of practice	non-professional community of practice	non-professional community of practice	non-professional community of practice

Table 2: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices (cont.)

Theme	Category/Dynamic	Code	WLF	RC	TO
	<i>Equitable participation</i>	equitable participation	balance participation (including by mitigating imbalances informed by social roles, encouraging quiet people to speak and frequent talkers to refrain)	balance participation (including by mitigating imbalances informed by social roles, via reflection)	balance participation (including by mitigating imbalances informed by social roles)
		-	dyad/triad work within group to support participation	-	-
	<i>Power sharing</i>	floating roles/power sharing	floating roles/power sharing	floating roles/power sharing	floating roles/power sharing
		power sharing/distributed leadership	leaderless to support participation	leaderless to support participation	leaderless to support participation/shared access to group process tools
		temporary leaders serve collective agenda	-	impoverished toolkit/access to methods (Have a few basic practices to avoid limiting leadership)	joker isn't leader, is "difficultator" to support group in its expression
	<i>Access to Process</i>	access to group tools	common access to group tools	common access to group tools	common access to group tools

Table 2: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices (cont.)

Theme	Category/Dynamic	Code	WLF	RC	TO
self-responsibility	<i>Self-agency</i>	encourage agency	shift/discourage perception of self as passive/encourage personal and collective agency	directs participants to co-responsibility	avoids catharsis in favor of engaged action
		counter role/identity stereotypes	seek to shift stereotypical perception of social role as shaped by oppression (stereotypes)	seeks to disrupt roles of victim/perpetrator/bystander	seek to shift stereotypical perception of social role as shaped by oppression (stereotypes)
De-habituatio n	<i>Counter Stereotypes</i>	counter stereotypes/habitual thinking	seeks to disrupt stereotypes and habitual thinking	-	seeks to disrupt stereotypes and habitual thinking
	<i>Performance</i>	use theatre/performance	use theater to disrupt patterns of perception	-	use theater to disrupt patterns of perception
purpose	<i>collective problem solving</i>	Problem solving	identify desirable alternatives to current problem	identify desirable alternatives to current problem	identify desirable alternatives to current problem
	<i>social system change</i>	change social structures/system dynamics	seek to address social structures: nuclear family, abortion, childcare	seeks to change the system in which conflict occurs	seek to address social structures affecting the group

Table 2: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices (cont.)

Theme Category/Dynamic		Code	WLF	RC	TO
	<i>shared perspective of collective experience</i>	Shared understanding	emphasize common understanding of shared problem	emphasizes listening and mutual comprehension of personal experience	emphasize common understanding of shared problem
		collective self-education for political consciousness	collective self-education (including alternate media/book representations) for political education, so members redefine selves, can articulate the redefinition, see themselves in historic trajectory	-	collective self-education (through creating images and collaborative “editing”)
content	<i>Interpersonal disclosure</i>	interpersonal disclosure	interpersonal disclosure to build trust	Interpersonal disclosure to re-establish connection	interpersonal disclosure
	<i>Stakeholder inclusion</i>	populated by stakeholders	includes people impacted by the problem	includes people impacted by the problem	includes people impacted by the problem
	<i>Non-stakeholder exclusion</i>	excludes non-stakeholders	excludes people not directly impacted by the problem	excludes people not directly impacted by the problem	excludes people not directly impacted by the problem

Table 2: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices (cont.)

Theme	Category/ Dynamic	Code	WLF	RC	TO
		participant design	Core content/data is the experience of those involved	Core content/data is the experience of those involved	Core content/data is the experience of those involved
	<i>Self-representation</i>	direct self-representation	articulate experience from the perspective of those affected/generate independent media	Self-articulation of the situation at hand	articulate experience from the perspective of those affected/generate independent media
systems view	<i>Counter individual blame</i>	decline singular personal responsibility	re-orient from personal blame to systems analysis and historical narrative	re-orient from victim/perpetrator/bystander	re-orient from singular individual responsibility to collective action
	<i>Systems analysis</i>	system analysis	use commonality of personal experiences to identify systemic patterns	emphasize systemic context over individual actions	use commonality of personal experiences to identify systemic patterns
		(ad hoc)	anonymous to outside members (no group lists, no group name)	voluntary membership	use visuals for communication
			noncompliance with dominant media/direct communication and promulgation	-	-

Conclusion

“We cannot decide when or when not to practice. It must be about living – anti-oppressive living.” (Thomas and Green, 2019, p. 87)

The purpose of this research is to develop approaches that inhibit oppressive dynamics. Because oppression impacts the material, psychological, and emotional livelihood of those affected by it, the success or failure of this endeavor is of significant practical importance. Therefore, consideration of what success might look like, and whether or not success is possible, is relevant.

Given that groups replicate the dynamics of their contextual culture, the measure of the effectiveness of anti-oppressive small group practices cannot be the presence or absence of oppressive dynamics in society. Instead, it must be measured at the level of the group, by the degree to which participants are unhindered in full expression of self and livelihood at the group level.

As was seen in the study of Restorative Circles, the efficacy of any practice is potentially limited by the practitioners, whose implicit biases may inhibit right application of the practices (e.g., selective implementation). Ultimately, fully effective implementation of an anti-oppressive practice would require its practitioners to engage in an anti-oppressive way of life. As Thomas and Green describe: “We cannot decide when or when not to practice. It must be about living – anti-oppressive living” (2019, p. 87). Similarly, any commitment to anti-oppression at the level of the group or individual will require models for action at the individual, institutional, and structural levels.

Therefore, exactly because individual, group, and social culture are reiterative, practitioners will consistently face a pull to enact dominant forms of oppression. For this reason, in line with Charles Pavitt's assertion of the need to examine procedures in-use to determine what impact specific procedures actually have on outcomes (1993), I advocate that ongoing, participatory, iterative evaluation be applied to the use of any anti-oppressive practice by those who use them in order to ensure alignment with the intention of the process. This emphasis is especially needed knowing that evaluation is one phase of functional theory that is often overlooked (Orlitsky and Hirokawa, 2001).

Whether a knowledge-making process requires a set of social practices in order to maintain itself or is simply compatible with one (Winner, 1980) when employing a process, we can ask how it reifies existing perceptions or creates the possibilities, including those that might change the dynamics of the system. By seeing that the processes we use lend themselves to some modes of thinking and acting and not others, we are able to ask, again, whether these emergent properties, these ethics, are what we want to advocate for. Therefore, in looking at the structures of these practices, we can also ask whether there are particular types of outcomes afforded by their processes, whether or not they were part of the design criteria. By these measures, "success" can be measured by a pattern of decreasing degrees of oppressive dynamics, and increasing degrees of anti-oppressive dynamics.

CHAPTER 5

THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED—DEMECHANIZING WHITENESS

In this chapter I will explore the concept and activities of demechanization as they are found within the canon of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), and through some examples found outside of TO in other small group practices. First I will describe the forms of demechanization most commonly recognized by those who encounter TO through workshops or written works. Then I will present perspectives on demechanization as a pervasive process, as understood from within the TO community. Next, I will demonstrate how demechanization functions to “open” social phenomena that have been “black-boxed” by patterns of socialization. Finally, I will present a number of forms outside of TO that I assert serve similar demechanistic purposes within the small group decision making process.

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is a popular education method developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s which is currently in use in a number of countries, including the United States. Roles within TO include that of the “joker,” who acts as a coordinator of activities as well as a theatre director of sorts, and that of the spect-actor. Spect-actors include both the people involved in preliminary TO activities as well as those who attend TO events and performances. Though grounded in dramatic techniques, TO is not intended to offer mere cathartic performance but to instead provide “rehearsal for revolution” (Boal, 1979), through which society and its oppressions can be transformed at the individual, group, and societal levels (Österlind, 2008). As such, I assert that TO can be considered a problem-solving practice.

In developing TO, Boal claimed that through repeated responses to the stimuli of their environment, people begin to “feel little of what they touch, listen to little of what they hear, and

see very little of what they look at” (1992, p. 49). He said that this numbness was both a product of and a contribution to the replication of oppression, and that this habituation additionally functioned as a cognitive impediment to participants’ identification of solutions. To counter these cognitive inhibitions Boal, in conjunction with the TO community, developed a set of practices called “demechanization.” These practices are proposed as a set of techniques through which participants can dehabituate their thinking in order to expand cognitive capacity to generate solutions to a collective problem (Boal, 1992; Linds, 2002; Chung, 2011; Freitag, McGeough, and Huber, 2011; Raynor, 2017). Demechanization includes a set of clearly defined activities, but upon further inquiry, also calls for participants to engage an ongoing perspective of alertness to how oppression might be unfolding at any point in TO activities.

As a set of techniques aimed at expanding cognitive capacity, demechanization seeks to reinvigorate participants’ ability to sense and feel (Boal, 1992) by forcing awareness of how the body moves in habitual motions and how these motions prompt replication of dominant ways of thinking (Ikemire, 2010). Demechanization enhances this awareness primarily through stimulating the use of uncommon motions and sounds in order to prompt participants’ experience of the world from unfamiliar perspectives (Vierk, 1997).

TO emphasizes the body in part because Boal described movement as thought expressed via form (1992). Therefore, tending to visual, aural, and kinesthetic elements are central aspects of demechanization, because it is through such embodied engagement that demechanization expands participants’ horizon of possibility (Raynor, 2017) and makes way for nonlinear insights. Emphasis on demechanizing the body makes particular sense if one regards it as a site of cognition, i.e., not merely a “host” for the brain but also part of a neural network that is engaged

in information processing (Olsson, 2010). The emphasis of TO on the body can be seen in the categories of games included in the canon of demechanization: feeling what we touch, listening to what we hear, dynamizing several senses, seeing what we look at, memory of the senses (Boal, 1992).

Forms of demechanization are most visibly apparent in the games of TO, in the “branches” of TO, and in its rehearsal techniques. Within a TO workshop, an observer will easily note the use of games that prompt participants to combine and recombine physical (including verbal) activities, and to become aware of their bodies and surroundings. For example, a common game for spatial awareness is to ask participants to walk around the room at increasing and decreasing speeds, and to greet one another non-verbally while careening around. Participants are then asked to jump or duck when they hear “jump” or “duck,” and to walk or stop when they hear “walk” or “stop.” But next, a cognitive intervention may be introduced wherein participants are then advised to invert these instructions so that they walk when they hear “stop,” duck when they hear “jump” and so on.

Demechanistic aspects can be seen in each of the “branches” of TO: image theatre, newspaper theatre, invisible theatre, forum theatre, and rainbow of desire. In image theatre, dehabitation occurs by placing emphasis on images over words. For example, a person may be asked to “sculpt” another participant into a visual expression of the oppressive force being experienced by the sculptor, after which the sculptor places themselves in yet another still image/person demonstrating a relation to the one they just sculpted. In newspaper theater, two conflicting articles may be read alternately line by line to explore what hybrid meanings form. Invisible theatre jars perception by developing scripted activities to perform “invisibly” in

quotidian circumstances, for example, playing out a sexist argument between a man and a woman, live in a coffee shop where bystanders are unaware that the interaction is a fiction. In the rainbow of desire, internalized oppression is physicalized through the “performance” of them by other participants. This can then develop further by placing images of apparently corollary perspectives (e.g., “girls have to wash the dishes” and “girls have to appear neat”) in dialogue with one another, creating curious frictions whose reverberation ends up troubling sexist assumptions. Finally, in forum theatre, viewers of a rehearsed scene of oppression are invited to stop the performance and replace the protagonist in an attempt to alter the course of events, prompting all present to consider how things might be different than they are in society.

Across all of these forms, additional types of demechanization can occur through the rehearsal techniques of TO. For example, a participant may be asked to take up a physical image of oppression, then speak a running “internal monologue” of thoughts, where the prompt to continue talking in a stream of consciousness can result in verbalization of things the participant wouldn’t have thought to mention otherwise. Another rehearsal technique is to instruct participants not to use words at all, but to “speak” only in sounds. Rehearsal techniques can also be qualitative rather than directive, for example, participants may be asked to replay a single scene multiple times in a row, each one imbued with an exaggerated emotional quality (i.e., happy, angry, nervous, etc.). These well-documented aspects of demechanization—rehearsal techniques, TO forms, and games—are all essential to TO’s goal of recovering our ability to generate options beyond the boundaries prescribed by our oppressions. However, demechanization also occurs in less visible, implicit forms that become known through collective practice, and are therefore underrepresented in TO literature.

Demechanization is often mentioned at the beginning of TO training workshops, and games are listed in the “tree” of TO, a popular education tool used to explain TO to new participants. However, when I began to do preliminary research on demechnization, I quickly realized that there is little in-depth writing on the topic generally, and almost none that addresses aspects beyond the games. Demechnization was discussed in passing in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979) and mentioned directly but briefly in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Boal, 1992). But it otherwise appears to have received scant attention in print. This is problematic because, without sufficient documentation, people not embedded in a TO community can easily confuse the process of demechnization with use of its games alone, and to do this would overlook a significant aspect of how demechnization is meant to be engaged. Seeking to remedy this documentation gap for myself and others, I undertook preliminary doctoral research on demechnization first through a series of exploratory workshops at PTO conferences, then via a series of individual and group interviews with jokers/*curingas* at the Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro between December of 2018 and July of 2019. It is through that work that I have been able to confirm that indeed, demechnization consists of more than games alone.

In addition to offering a set of embodied activities, the activities of demechnization appear to inflect how the practices of TO are engaged at large. During my research interviews, informants confirmed that while demechnization is a bedrock for all TO activities, explicit documentation of it is scarce, as it is primarily communicated through apprenticeship. To date, key themes emerging from my research include the intended orientational nature of demechnization, the significance of the aesthetics of the oppressed, the reflexivity of the joker

role, and the oral and experience-based tradition of transmission of TO and therefore demechanization.

As regards its role as an orientation, demechanization is not meant to serve merely as a “warm up” to be done once at the beginning of a session or project and then left behind. Instead, its principles should infuse all TO activities and regularly inform what choices jokers and spect-actors make. Additionally, demechanization pivots on engagement with the aesthetics of the oppressed. That is, the colors, sounds, textures, movements, tastes, and smells that pervade the lived experience of those impacted by the oppression under consideration are to be fundamentals upon which all other activities of TO should be built.

It is also imperative for jokers to note any discrepancies that might exist between their role as outlined by TO principles, and their lived actions which may counteract both their training and their principles. As a case in point, despite strong emphasis that it is not the role of the joker to prescribe outcomes, it is very easy for a joker to become not only the coordinator of a process owned by participants, but also to sprawl into the role of a leader/director making executive decisions on behalf of the group.

Finally, much of the essential wisdom of TO and its practices are not written, nor can be sufficiently conveyed through writing alone: active and ongoing engagement supported by mentorship and apprenticeship are the means by which holistic understanding of the work of TO can be understood. Therefore, active, ongoing relationship with a TO community is the primary means through which to develop both understanding of and facility with TO practices, because it is only through reciprocal relationship that jokers and spect-actors alike can support one another

in noticing and undermining undesirable patterns that will inevitably resume through continued engagement in a society that is replete with oppressive dynamics.

Theatre of the oppressed seeks to disrupt physical and mental patterns that replicate undesirable power dynamics so that participants can express alternate visions of the world (Boal 1992; Ikemire, 2010). One of the ways to do this is to “look inside” what has been black-boxed by the oppressive system and to pinpoint the “unmarked” positions held by the dominant culture (Boyd, 2011, p. 210). Within a social system, a “black box” occurs when a sub-system is treated as a singular unit with expected inputs and outputs, instead of recognizing the sub-operations that go into the process of generating the outcomes of the black boxed process. This can happen at the level of objects, e.g., I purchase clothes at the store with no thought to their production and the child labor it may have involved: this labor has been black boxed. It can also happen at the level of social relations and roles, e.g., after many a holiday dinner, women do the dishes and men watch the game, without apparent discussion or decision: the decision of who should do the dishes has been black boxed. Though it requires coordination and work to make and maintain black boxes (e.g., socializing a girl over years through a variety of complex coordinated social systems such that she expects herself to do dishes) the activities within a black box are considered insignificant “unless the connections to the larger network come to be challenged in some fashion” (Kaghan and Bowker, 2001, p. 258).

However, because “black-boxing processes are never totally successful in controlling the boundaries and standardizing the organization of work of a selected sub-network” (Kaghan and Bowker, 2001, p. 258), it is possible for their contents to become notable. For example, buying a girl child a toy dish set may seem unremarkable until the role of such a gift in cultivating

internalized subordination is brought into question. So, while the contents of a black box are understood to be superfluous to understanding the function of the system (Winner, 1993), it is exactly because demechanization seeks to disrupt the function of oppressive systems that it prompts participants to be alert, scanning for the black boxes that automate replication of the oppression, in order to make them visible. In this way, the mechanisms of the black box can be explored and revealed, making possible interventions that “reverse” replication of oppression. The degree of irreversibility is predicated on how possible it is to return to a point where alternatives exist (Callon, 1991). It is the work of demechanization to create a path back to such points.

As a system of patterns, an oppression can be viewed as an actor-network. In the language of actor-network theory, if enrollment and translation are processes of “creating a body of allies, human and non-human, through a process of translating their interests to be aligned with the actor-network,” and delegates are “actors who stand in and speak for particular viewpoints which have been inscribed in them” (Walsham, 1997, p. 468), then as applied to socio-technical phenomena, demechanization can be described as an orientation towards daylighting the allies that have been enrolled to serve the interests of the oppressive pattern, including the identification of when anyone involved is acting as a delegate for an oppression. One sociotechnical phenomenon to which demechanization can be applied is small group decision making.

Group participants carry with them the social habits and norms of their local culture, which are in turn informed by a dominant culture that shapes social norms and expectations (Poole, Seibold, and McPhee, 1985). Thus, all groups will inherently carry and replicate the social action

patterns of the dominant culture, and in cultures where systemically invested imbalances of power are part of the social structure, any decision-making practice will allow for the replication of power imbalances unless they are specifically counteracted. That is to say: if a technique is merely “neutral” towards the social climate of the group, the processes it employs will replicate bias and oppression simply by creating a space in which participants play out their inherited patterns unfettered. So, any group wishing to avoid replication of oppression will need to actively employ anti-oppressive practices. Demechanization is one such practice.

Outside of the Theatre of the Oppressed, demechnistic practices can be seen in the creative problem solving practices of small groups. The purpose of demechnization is to disrupt replication of oppressive group dynamics and/or their delegates, whether those be actions, words, or ways of thinking, and to instead generate alternative options. As such, at the level of group activity, a demechnization function can be seen in the creative problem-solving techniques used in problem-solving groups. These techniques emphasize idea generation, divergent thinking, ideation, brain-storming, and elaboration with the purpose of introducing variety to the problem-solving setting (Puccio, et al., 2020; Treffinger, 1995). Like demechnization, these practices employ a set of specified processes through which to diversify participant contributions.

Groups that employ a specific process to guide creativity efforts will be significantly more effective at divergent thinking and the production of creative solutions than groups without a specific process, and groups who have had even minimal exposure to training in creative thinking skills will be up to doubly more effective at generating ideas than those without (Puccio, et al., 2020). We can see a simple example of creative thinking skills training in the instructions given to participants for “brainstorming.” Traditional brainstorming has four rules: rule out

criticism, welcome free-wheeling, welcome quantity, welcome contribution and improvement (Taylor et al., 1958). As with the games used in demechnization, in brainstorming a few structural rules provide a social frame within which productive ideation will be more likely. However, while these types of processes allow for the contribution of ideas generally, they may have no influence on the quality of the ideas generated, and certainly do not provide a mechanism for ideas to converge towards a solution. This means that, on their own, idea generation practices like brainstorming and the games of demechnization are at risk of generating an unwieldy “reckless novelty” (Cropley, 2006) if not paired with subsequent processes to reign in the exploration to meet the problem at hand.

To this point: for those interested in problem solving, it is important to note that brainstorming and demechnization games aim to remove cognitive constraints, but are not problem solving practices unto themselves: they are meta-practices whose purpose is to enhance participants’ abilities to engage the problem solving process. In the case of brainstorming, that may be engaging nominal group processes. In demechnization, it would be engaging one of the TO forms such as Forum Theatre or Image Theatre.

Another small group problem-solving practice with resemblance to demechnization is creative problem solving (CPS). A primary congruence is that, as with demechnization, CPS declines to employ a scripted set of techniques to be followed in order. Instead, it offers a set of divergent and convergent processes grouped by principle, any of which may be employed in a given moment based on the needs of the individual or group (Treffinger, 1995). For example, CPS employs categories of understanding the problem, planning for action, and idea generation, all of which are informed by the criteria of task appraisal, described as “deliberate assessment of

the intended outcomes, the people, the situation, and the methods available” (Treffinger, 1995, p. 306). Similarly, demechnization uses games in five categories of aesthetic activity, informed by the criteria of how to address a particular oppression. Demechnization also resembles the creative problem-solving technique of “checklisting” (Warren and Davis, 1969) in that it provides a set of options that may help stimulate new ways of seeing the problem or solutions.

Though creative problem-solving techniques are not usually described as anti-oppressive or counter-hegemonic, with their emphasis on generating variety, they are similar to demechnization in that they aim to remove cognitive constraints that would preclude prolific and differentiated idea generation, some of which were generated through contextual social forces of power and privilege. This type of functionality in creative problem solving practices can be seen explicitly in analyses of groupthink and retrospective sense-making wherein researchers look for observable patterns so that intervention becomes more possible (e.g., Cline, 1990; Henningsen et al., 2006).

It makes sense that there would be similarities between more traditional problem-solving groups and Theatre of the Oppressed because both are seeking to generate options and alternatives that fall within the “idea generation” category of functional theory (Gouran and Hirokawa, 1996). However, the scope of many problem-solving groups is often limited to a defined population or problem, whereas TO seeks ultimately to shift the conditions of society at large. Because of this, demechnization not only provides a set of idea generation tools to be used towards identification of solutions, but also encourages participants to maintain a reflexive eye on all aspects of its practice, so that its liberatory potential isn’t corroded through incidental “creep” from dominant culture dynamics. Because demechnization prompts ongoing

regard for how the activities of TO may themselves be replicating oppression, demechanization can also be seen as fulfilling an evaluation function, which is often missing in groups (Gouran et al., 1993).

The identification of criteria is another aspect of functional decision making that resembles demechanization in that it daylights the contents of black boxes. Often enough, a group will begin a decision-making process and jump to generating ideas or even deciding on solutions without engaging reflection on the criteria for an ideal solution, simply out of habit. For example, a small group that needs to find a restaurant to eat at might implicitly decide to go where they have usually gone before, which may or may not be satisfactory to its members. However, if the group stops to ask what the criteria are for an option that satisfies all members, i.e., if it “opens” the black box of going where they usually go without asking why, they may discover that they have more desirable alternatives. However, with both TO and small group processes, it is often the case that the criteria, once identified, can later be overlooked as the group gravitates again towards habitual solutions. This again highlights the importance of developing ongoing evaluation as a cultural norm for an effective group.

Demechanization can be viewed both as a set of practices and a set of principles. Its activities have corollaries in the creative problem-solving techniques of small groups, and its principles have resonance with the often under-engaged evaluation function advocated by proponents of functional theory. This latter, reflexive orientation finds common cause with the perspectives of actor-network theory in their emphasis on tending to the processes and dynamics that undergird any sociotechnical phenomenon, so that any elements that generate discrepancies between purpose and outcome can be identified and potentially addressed. Because of this, we

can consider how demechnization can be applied to sociotechnical phenomena, and also look at how studies of sociotechnical phenomena might inform and bolster the activities of demechnization within Theatre of the Oppressed.

Demechnizing Theater of the Oppressed

As a practice of bodies, Theatre of the Oppressed is a decidedly collaborative sense-making process (Olsson, 2010). But the prospect of engaging bodies in TO leads to a general question of which bodies will be included in its knowledge making processes and which will not.

A form of popular education, the methods of TO are accessible and non-proprietary, requiring no specialized skills or certification, and needing few resources other than the participants.

Additionally, TO specifically seeks to oppose binaries between knowledge producers and knowledge receivers (Ikemire, 2010) instead asserting that those impacted by a harm are specifically and uniquely positioned as experts on the topic. However, in all too many situations, access to planning, implementation, and follow-up are limited to a few key individuals, with those most directly harmed having no directorial roles. In participatory theater in particular, it is key to remember that visualization is not direct representation, but a speculative mapping that says as much about the choices of the visualizer as about the images themselves (Myers, 2014).

TO explorations will of course only employ the bodies that are present at the moment of inquiry, so projects that lack sufficient relationships with the community in question will suffer from a dearth of wisdom, and can incidentally misrepresent the broader community.

Without committed reflective praxis in which theater-makers and joker hold their choices humbly to liberatory standards that will be out of reach until we are all free, such patterns of enactment can counteract the radical roots of TO, and result in an evangelical paradigm of

advice-giving and paternalism, where empowered agents act on behalf of passive victims (Boal, 1992).

Demechanizing Whiteness

So, what does this have to do with whiteness? All decisions employed in the process of knowledge-making result from particular observations made at a particular moment (Bowker, 2014). That is, knowledge is specific to the people employing it, in a place, at a time, in a social context. And because any way of thinking is cultivated in a particular context, both the thinking and the product of thinking will inevitably show traces of the material and social contexts in which it was generated (Boal, 1985). This means that, in a culture undergirded by white supremacy, jokers and spectators alike will carry tenets of white supremacy (along with all the other gems and facets they carry) with them into the work, and it will take consistent demechnization at all levels of practice to undermine its prevalence. While I could include references to sources that offer typographies of white supremacy, it is exactly this kind of “tell me what to do so that I can do it right and be done with it” that I’m trying to advocate against by including the “lessons” on demechnization in “Table: Comparison of Anti-Oppression Practices”. It is the process of learning the specific ways any one of us implicitly supports white supremacy that is the teacher we need. But, there *are* habitual places where we can look for the patterns.

TO constructs narrative spaces that may allow or discourage varieties of discourse that would not emerge in another sort of space (Pantidos et al., 2010). But, any rendering channels what is seen and what is looked for, reducing capacity for answers outside of the scope of the method (Myers, 2014). As a simple example in TO, jokers can ask questions or provide directions that preclude

more expansive responses. Equally common, participants can tend towards representing problems as hero/villain dichotomies that at best disallow more complex understandings of causality, and at worst result in a victim-blaming perspective that puts the onus for systemic change on individual people (Wanasek and Weinberg, 2011). And always, keeping in mind that visual relationships are power relationships (Boal, 1992), throughout the course of the collaborative process, we can ask: Where is the joker in relation to the group?

In looking at the explicit and implicit structures of our own practices, we can ask: What ethics are being performed by these practices? What are they advocating for? (Fortun, 2009) What questions is this process providing answers to? Who are the authors of those questions? Who will the answers impact? We can also ask how the *way* we are going about the work reifies existing power dynamics or creates possibilities beyond them, including those that might change the dynamics of the system. And, when inquiring, it is essential not only to examine the processes themselves, but also to acknowledge their social roots. So, we can additionally ask: what political relationships undergird the emergence of TO as a method in this situation, both historically and socially, and in the current, personal moment (e.g. how did I come to be doing this, and why am I doing “this,” now, the way I’m doing it?). By seeing that the processes we use lend themselves to some modes of thinking and acting and not others, we are able to grasp how the present is, as Fortun calls it, the “anteriorized future” and ask, again, whether these emergent properties, these ethics, are what we want to advocate for.

A Specific Look at the Habitual Exploitation of Racialized Suffering in Cultural Work

As with any other type of violence, when creating cultural work involving racialized violence it is a simple and common trick to rely on exploiting empathy rather than engaging craftsmanship. That is, I can simply replay the horror by naming or showing the violence, and an audience will experience the piece as powerful though their feeling may have nothing to do with composition. In such a situation, whether done crudely or artfully, the audience member will experience their own powerful response to suffering, and attribute it to the performance.

When we, as composers and artists, create pieces that rely on this type of innate response to create an experience of meaning, we can find ourselves both re-inscribing trauma on those impacted and simultaneously cultivating an elevated standard for what counts as significant for those who experience the harm from a distance. That is, at a certain point, people can become terror-numb, and only the more intensely terrible receives attention and care. In TO terms: our capacity for compassion becomes mechanized.

I personally believe this type of collateral cultivation has contributed to what I have seen as a correlation between the mass and social media news cycles and widespread civic engagement in ending the suffering created through white supremacy. When those out of the line of fire see terrible things replayed on the news, we/they engage, and when, after a few months we/they stop seeing it, we/they disengage, and only those closest to the pain remain staunchly involved. But, part of this engagement/disengagement cycle is also a coping mechanism for our body-minds, which can't endure the sustained terrorizing messages that are so often relied upon to coax people out of their numbness. In some ways, the development of habitual body and thought patterns can be adaptive, allowing us relief from constant apprehension (Boal, 1992). When

either the news cycle or cultural work leverages fear, either for motivation or profit, we will run out of capacity as our body-minds brilliantly find ways to dissociate in order to stay alive.

Therefore, unlike statistics on violent crime, which are immediately recognizable and quantifiable, other forms of sharing knowledge, information and wisdom must be actively advocated for and engaged as legitimization forms of motivation. So, the challenge I make to myself is to create works that forgo invoking a terror response and instead invoke connection, companionship, inspiration, hope, testimony/witness and agency, and the incumbent sense of possibility that comes with being freed from fight/flight/freeze. For the sake of our collective resilience and capacity to topple white supremacy in all its forms, I invite you to consider the same.

Working on It

In wrestling with what content would be an ethical approach to topics of white supremacy and racialized violence for an impromptu, mixed-demographic audience, I first set upon a number of questions which I addressed to myself and others:

- What are problems or challenges of me (and those who share my demographics) talking/performing/writing about race?
- What has made you cringe in performances about race?
- What do white people in THIS community need to know about Blackness, anti-Black racism, white supremacy?
- Under what conditions is it healthful, ethical, contributive, to create this work?

In light of the answers I received, I settled on exploring the concept of being diagnosed with implicit bias because to varying degrees, it applies to both white people and BIPOC folks. I created a hybrid participatory performance bringing medical language, the experience of being tested for implicit bias, and the systemic analysis and personal humility of twelve-step programs into play with one another, with care to circumvent potential micro-aggressions between participants, an excerpt of which is below:

Excerpt from “We’re Working on a Treatment” (2016)

A clinic worker (of any racial identity) speaks to people in line waiting to enter the performance space:

While you wait for your results, I’m here to talk to you about what it’s like to find your test results are positive. Well, first, let me say that no one wants to find out they’ve got implicit bias, or what folks around here call “whiteness.” We all know we’re at risk, but I know I thought that even though everyone in my family has it, maybe I would get lucky.

pause

Don’t look at me like you’re so sure you’re clean. So many of us thought it was just “those types of people” who had it, we didn’t even think to get checked. But remember, research shows that 68% of Americans have some degree of implicit bias towards white people.

pause

Anyway, when I was told I had whiteness, I was surprised and defensive. I was all “but there’s got to be an ointment to cure this!” There was a lot of denial, you know? But I’ve come to accept who I am. I treat the symptoms, and I’m part of a patient advocacy group working on a cure. It may not happen in our lifetime, but if so, we’re gonna die looking for it. Anyway, the most important thing to know is that it’s contagious if unchecked, and that’s why we’re all here today. So, thanks for coming. Your results will be out shortly.

Participants receive a printed handout that include, among other graphs, the following text:

Thank you for taking all of the implicit bias test today. Here is your result: Your data suggest a slight to moderate automatic preference for European Americans over African Americans. We recommend attending a community treatment program. Please proceed to the meeting room at this time.

(End of excerpt)

Seeing how the concept and process of demechnization is interwoven in all aspects of Theater of the Oppressed in the last twenty years of my study of it and involvement in it, and seeing that the demechnizing look can be turned on Theater of the Oppressed itself, I continue to take this consciousness forward into my anti-oppressive artistic/activist practice, such as it is and such as it may become.

CONCLUSION

I am lying on the floor. The rug that tripped me also cushioned my fall. The host of the party, a teacher of writing, PhD, a supporter of many marginalized people in her life, and herself a survivor of a traumatic traffic accident, vows to banish all rugs on my behalf. A professor of storytelling, PhD, also recovering from a serious car accident, stands by the door, coat on, waiting to take me home. Sitting above me on the couch is R, a generation older than me, writer and artist, PhD, white guy, photographer, himself recovering from a stroke. R and I have heard about each other and are meeting for the first time. Gesturing to indicate that I'm addressing him while I'm aware friends are listening in, I tell my story, the story of two years ago, of what happened to me, of what I did. Some of the friends are hearing this for the first time directly from me. My telling then provides a platform for R to tell his. Just before I leave, R has an emotional moment holding my hands—he hasn't been able to share his experience with someone “like him” before.

It's almost like a tableau from Image Theater/Theater of the Oppressed, as if we are spect-actors narrating our roles in the image we have created. Who are the oppressed in this image? We who experience that particular form of socially generated ableist isolation? And who is the oppressor? The friends? Is this the question I want to be asking? Lying on the floor, I know I am doing something. There is small-group collaboration and decision-making going on, with different kinds and amounts of awareness among the participants. At some point, I know I am making a platform for R, as well as a shift in the consciousness of the friends. My telling is an attempt to help me and us figure out what has happened, is happening, to and with me and us.

The emotional moment with R is not reciprocal; it is, or I am, on the verge of being mechanized. I consent to stay a moment holding hands, not feeling the same, aware of the professor waiting for me by the door, but I make a decision that is in part political, with demechnizing intent. Theory and practice are having it out.

As the stories are being told in this impromptu tableau, various frames of consciousness arise and hover over the participants, corresponding to Grue's (2011) four models outlined in Chapter One. Definitely a sense of the gap between my experience as told, R's experience, and the experiences of the host and the professor and the friends. In the interaction with R, a nascent sense of membership in a minority, perhaps for the first time for R. (I had to leave, but for a second I felt that R was possibly a newcomer to a community of practice that I myself am still learning.) Medicalization enters into the content of the stories and also is held at bay. Social construction is the undercurrent of ready-at-hand labels used even in this account; social construction also could be named at any moment during the time everyone listening thinks, "Who am I in relation to this?"

I don't want to say this event was art, a performance. But it also was not NOT a performance. The living room was not a stage, but it was also not NOT a stage. And the event, at least in this telling, at first not an image, became an image. In Image Theater, the image created is a crucial component. The visual image of the tableau we were making in the interaction was a crucial aspect of our understanding what was going on while we were making it, and the event would not have taken place without the tableau we made and experienced. An embodied visualization was the catalyst of the storytelling.

The gathering also was not a story circle in the sense of the practice of the Free Southern Theater I described in Chapter 2. But there was something of that story circle dynamic in the way one story led to another, and there was a sense of group consciousness of a not-yet-theme and of significance to the convergence. The stories R and I were telling became a kind of collaboration in an emerging coherence of telling not “what happened to me,” but what I observed and what I did facing a set of constraints and circumstances that were new to me—with coherence requiring a willingness to adapt to new stories and language, as described in Chapter 1.

These days, for me, the moments of searching for a word have a different dynamic from when I began this research project. My listeners become hyper-aware of the search and wish to join in, to assist. There is also resistance, from my side; guesses are often way off. But really no one ever searches for a word alone. Language is communal and arises out of practice. The terms that I have dwelt on most in this work have an aspect wherein the word itself traces something of the struggle of its coming into existence. Demechanization has within it the process of noticing mechanization in a pattern of interactions and relations, and the gradual formation of a wish to counteract it. That wish, that intention and thus the word may even have formed as a consequence of practice—practitioners doing things over a period of time and variety of contexts, and in reflection, trying to describe what they/we are doing, arrive at an insight: what we are trying to do is demechnization!

Intersectionality carries a grammatical saga in its structure, going from verb to noun to adjective to noun form of the adjective—it's not just identities under oppression intersecting, nor simply the conjunction of identities, nor an attribute of being of multiple identities, nor even the

state of living under more than one mutually-constituting kinds of oppression, but an attempt to understand a problematic generated by this sequence and to devise action in recognition of its complexity. I find myself returning to the notion of intersectionality for its usefulness in addressing problematic situations—artistic, political, social—and even in understanding a brief moment of discomfort in an emotional moment where an imbalance of power shows itself.

This project is an exploration and demonstration of how my creative work is also qualitative research and how qualitative research is a necessary part of my creative work. None of the qualifiers of the art and activism I have been engaging in are completely settled. The intent to be aware of oppressive dynamics, to define what it might mean to counteract them, is an ongoing inquiry. How intersectional awareness might shape and inform what I work on is a continually open question. Being part of a community of practice is to be continually producing it in collaboration with others with explicit attention to what might be needed in orienting newcomers to the community and the practice. Life as Method means taking the study and creative experiments that I have written about here as input to the next. The practice, as well as the theorizing that arises from and generates it, is also an invitation.

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