



UTS
ePRESS

Gateways:

International Journal
of Community
Research and
Engagement

Vol. 14, No. 2
December 2021



© 2021 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercial, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: DeMeulenaere, E. 2021. Helping Homeless Youth: Epistemological Implications of Power in a YPAR Project. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 14:2, 1–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v14i2.7773>

ISSN 1836-3393 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://ijcre.ePRESS.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Helping Homeless Youth: Epistemological Implications of Power in a YPAR Project

Eric DeMeulenaere¹

¹Associate Professor of Education, Education Department, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA, 01610, USA

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v14i2.7773>

Article History: Received 16/06/2021; Revised 07/08/2021; Accepted 11/11/2021; Published 12/2021

Abstract

Text from Nasma: “I’ve started moving my things out of the house. I’m putting it in your office for now.” Thus began the story of how one of the youth I had worked with for four years on various YPAR projects became homeless and turned to me for help. Entering this crisis with Nasma took time and an emotional toll, and it affected the power dynamics of our relationship when finishing our YPAR project. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) works to rebalance power in inequitable relationships based on roles, age, race, gender, etc. Providing *care* to Nasma as she confronted the traumatic situation of homelessness affected our collaborative relationship as she became dependent on me for basic economic resources. Through this process, the inequities in age and material resources between Nasma and me were centred, displacing the more equitable interactions that we had constructed through YPAR projects. This article employs critical autoethnography to examine the epistemological ‘risks of care’ and argues that the calls for ‘care-full’ scholarship still need to contend with the pitfalls of differential power dynamics in YPAR.

Keywords

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR); Horizontal Relationships; Risks of Care; Relational Power Dynamics; Epistemology

Introduction

This article uses critical autoethnography ([Garrett-Walker, Cann & DeMeulenaere, in press](#)) to examine the complexity and precarity of power in relationships involved in

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

youth participatory action research (YPAR). Inherent to the work of academics involved in YPAR is the complicated negotiation of power differentials in social identity related nearly always to age and education and often to class, race and gender. To truly embrace the epistemology of YPAR, participants must navigate these power differentials so that the voices and ideas of the youth can guide the inquiry and analysis, referred to as constructing more horizontal relationships (Freire 1970; Von Kotze, Walters & Luckett 2016).

In this article, I examine the relationship I had with a student named Nasma¹ with whom I worked over several years in a youth film producer's program and later in a YPAR project. In the years we worked together, we had to navigate our relationship across differences of race, class, gender, education level, age and immigrant status. I am a white male middle-aged Professor of Education, while Nasma is a young Black immigrant woman who was in and, later, just out of high school. I also examine how the success of creating a more horizontal relationship with Nasma, whose voice, ideas and leadership were central to the success of the YPAR project, occurred through Nasma maintaining boundaries that worked to decentre the differences in our social status. Indeed, the epistemological strength of YPAR and all participatory action research (PAR) is rooted in the voice and contribution of all the participants, across the power differentials of varied social identities. When a personal crisis forced Nasma to become vulnerable and dependent on me, the differences in our social status became more salient.

As the following narrative illustrates, this moment of crisis resulted in a more authentic and caring relationship as it pushed us both to be more vulnerable and made our social realities more transparent. But it also brought to the foreground the inherent power differentials tied to class and age, which, in turn, eroded the horizontal relationship we had cultivated to make the YPAR project effective. I use critical autoethnography to examine (1) the ways in which the construction of horizontal relationships necessary for YPAR can also prevent more authentic relationships from forming; and (2) how crises may foster what I call 'risks of care' that bring to the fore relational power dynamics that can create dependencies that undermine these horizontal relationships. This article argues that we need to attend to the complexities of these relational dynamics and how the power differentials in these relationships affect the epistemological dimensions of YPAR.

The Narrative Part 1: The Crisis

Friday, 5 May 2017, 11.45 pm

Hey, Eric, I'm in a difficult spot. So Bahati totally dipped and left me hanging. She's still in Worcester but doesn't stay in the apartment. Tomorrow the landlord is coming to check the apartment and I'm worried he'll see my things and kick me out. I'm not sure what to do now.

Saturday, 6 May 2017, 8.49 am

Just want to let you know that I've started moving my things out the house (I'm putting it in your office for now) just so when the landlord comes this morning my things aren't in the house.

1 All names, except the author's, are pseudonyms.

Saturday morning, as I prepared for a conference call, I noticed that I had received the above two texts from Nasma. I quickly responded that it was okay to drop stuff in my office and that I would call her when I was free.

After I finished my conference call that rainy Saturday morning, I called Nasma to check in. She was riding in an Uber to work at Sam's Club when I reached her. Earlier that morning, before the landlord arrived, she had hauled all of her possessions in two separate trips through drizzling rain to unload everything into my office, three blocks away. She had a full day of work, but she was going to try to call some people to see if she could find a place to crash temporarily. I told her I would put the word out to my networks to see if I could locate any housing for her or find a room in an apartment that would be available for rent. I posted a request for help to a friend on Facebook and sent out a bunch of emails on my iPhone during the conference call. Several people offered to help, but no one offered to take her in. Nasma and I texted intermittently throughout the day while I was engaged in activities with my family and she was at work. I went to my friend's birthday party that night, hoping Nasma had figured out something since she was getting off work about the same time.

I didn't head home from the party until after midnight and I called Nasma to see if she had found a solution, but was sad to learn that she was in my university office as she had no place to go for the night. I dropped my spouse at home and headed to the campus. Arriving at my office around 12.45 am, I found Nasma sleeping behind my desk where she had laid out some blankets and a pillow. Her bags and boxes were strewn across my office. Not having any alternative, I brought her home to spend the night at my house, setting her up in my office, which also served as a guest bedroom. The next morning I introduced Nasma to my daughters and spouse during a somewhat awkward breakfast as everyone was atypically quiet.

The previous Monday, we had flown back from a conference in San Antonio, Texas. Nasma had the extra key to my office because in the weeks prior to the conference, she had been working to finalise the documentary film we were to present as part of a larger youth participatory action research project we were working on. She ended up staying in my home for over two weeks while I scrambled and pushed her to find a more stable housing situation.

Critical Autoethnography

I pause here in the narrative, before going into a more detailed background to the story, to explain the analytical and epistemological approach I use in this article. For the type of analysis I wish to make, the use of detailed story is central, and so I rely on critical autoethnography ([Cann & DeMeulenaere 2020](#); [Garrett-Walker, Cann & DeMeulenaere in press](#)), recognising with [Sara Worth \(2005, p. 19\)](#), that 'traditional forms of knowledge (knowing *how* and knowing *that*) are not sufficient to cover a third kind of knowledge (knowing *what it is like*) in the way that storytelling can'. Through sharing a detailed story of what I have termed the 'risks of care', I seek to engage others in complicating the epistemological implications of power differentials when conducting research and reconsider the notion of inevitability that often is ignored in the final presentation of research ([Bourdieu 1977](#); [Rosaldo 1993](#)).

Critical autoethnography enables me to reflexively turn the research gaze onto myself, which is necessary for analysing the complications of power dynamics in my relationships with others in a collaborative research project, in which we all have different social identities that reflect different forms of social power. This is all the more requisite in the YPAR projects in which I, a white cisgendered male professor in my fifties, engage with high-school age youth of colour from low-income neighbourhoods in Worcester, Massachusetts. Through the use of detailed narratives combined with ethnographic analysis, critical autoethnography enables me to uncover the subtle ways that power is enacted. Dimensions of power are present in all relationships, but often they are revealed only in subtle ways over time. Detailed narratives, combined with critical and reflexive analyses, are necessary to uncover and make sense of them.

Attending to the more subtle dimensions of relational power, critical autoethnographies, as [Adams \(2017, p. 79\)](#) describes:

ascertain vital and often unforeseen connections between personal experiences and cultural experiences; identify manifestations of power and privilege in everyday practices; discern social injustices and inequities; and describe beliefs and practices that should—and should not—exist. Critical autoethnographies also offer strategies to curtail abuses of power and privilege; challenge social injustices and inequities; change dangerous beliefs and practices; improve living conditions; promote resistance and transformation; and determine how to get along better, together, in ways that recognize and celebrate difference.

This is an important component of the *critical* in critical autoethnography. It is about identifying how, to use [bell hooks' \(1997\)](#) wording, the 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' becomes manifest through everyday interactions and relationships. Critical autoethnography attempts to humbly pull back the curtain to the processes of learning and developing new knowledge, which is often quite messy and filled with uncertainty. Too much academic research relies on analysis after the fact without any narrative accounting, which leaves it devoid of what [Bourdieu \(1977\)](#) called *tempo*. Such analyses hide the multiple levels of 'uncertainty as to what may happen ... to overcome the effects of time ([Bourdieu, 1977, p. 9](#)). The construction of neatly crafted analyses at the end of an inquiry process portrays authors as brilliant and all-knowing rather than as learners or co-learners, which highlights another level of power in the research process: authorial power through the control of tempo and the construction of the narrative. Further, these analyses, often removed from the narrative, hide the relational power dynamics which may not only undermine the portrayal of authorial brilliance, but also authorial benevolence. Just as [Freire \(1970\)](#) sought to demystify the dimensions of power embedded in the banking model of education by indicating that teachers need to reveal themselves to be co-learners in process and in dialogue with their co-learning students, so too must researchers share their learning process through attention to a processual analysis ([Cann & DeMeulenaere 2020](#)) that only a detailed narrative and analysis can capture. Critical autoethnography opens a window into the vulnerable process of reflection in Freire's praxis cycle, whereby the researcher can critically analyse and reflect on the actions that took place. We can come to understand that the actions that occurred were never inevitable and often fraught with uncertainty, improvisation and relational power dynamics.

I have written elsewhere about what my co-author and I termed critical co-constructed autoethnography ([Cann & DeMeulenaere 2020](#)), in which the narrative of autoethnography is co-developed by multiple authors. Given the critical examinations of power dynamics between Nasma and me in this story, this would have been an ideal experience to employ this methodology. I reached out several times to Nasma to see if she would be willing to co-author the article or even just the narrative, or collaborate with me in some way. I felt that the process of co-authoring, or at least collaborating on this manuscript, could have afforded us the dialogic space to process what had happened in our relationship and really work through the tensions that developed after I brought her to my house. She never responded to my repeated suggestion. This likely stemmed from the distance that developed between us after she stayed with me and my family. Nevertheless, it raises additional questions about authorial power in storytelling. While this story is definitely a story I experienced, it involves others in the narrative, as do nearly all of our stories. What are the power dynamics and ethical implications of telling stories that involve the lives of other people involved in the story? How are those power dynamics and ethical implications impacted when the person authoring the story has more social power? How are they impacted when the person with the more marginalised identity declines to participate? What are the implications for reflective story-telling, even when the goal is to critically and reflexively examine power dynamics in an experience?

Below, I provide a more detailed background and nuanced story of my relationship and collaboration with Nasma. I do this to capture the subtleties, processes and shifts over time. Afterwards, consistent with

critical autoethnography, I interrogate and analyse the story to examine the ways that power is manifested and how that had epistemological implications for my research project and for YPAR more generally. I pick up the story below a few years earlier to identify the collaboration Nasma and I had over the years preceding the narrative crisis that opened this piece.

Narrative Part 2: The Backstory

In her second year in high school, Nasma became a student in a critical media and youth film-makers program I ran. She was such a strong leader in her first year in the program that my co-founder and I invited her to be a teacher assistant the following year. In the second year of working with her, she not only became a leader in the program, but also one of the four youth featured in the film the youth developed that year on colourism. To complete her role in the film, she had to be vulnerable and share details about her life and her experiences of growing up with a dark skin tone. But she never talked about or shared with me some of the difficulties she was dealing with at home.

Through the years of collaborative film-making, I travelled throughout the country with Nasma and other youth and colleagues to present films at conferences and film festivals. These trips were fun. We ate together and explored the cities we travelled to. We laughed a lot. We practised our presentations together in hotel rooms. We grew close on these trips and Nasma and I learned more about each other. But Nasma also maintained a certain level of distance.

It became clear that she could be vulnerable, but it was always on her own terms. She would reveal herself in certain vulnerabilities for the film or in a college essay, but she remained in control. She never presented herself as needy. She never asked for rides home after meetings. She willingly ate the pizzas we often provided, but unlike some of the other youth, she never requested my co-facilitator or me to order them.

At the beginning of her senior year in high school, I received a small grant to begin a YPAR project to examine the impact of the youth film-makers' program I had co-founded four years earlier. I recruited Nasma to be a part of this project and she quickly emerged as a leader. Throughout her senior year of high school, we interviewed all the previous participants in the program and some of the parents. Nasma suggested that I should not be a part of the interviews of the youth as she felt that they might try to give me the answers they thought I would want to hear. Based on her suggestion, the YPAR team, including me, agreed. Thus, the high school students conducted all the interviews of the youth. I was only present for parent interviews.

Also, during her senior year, I wrote letters of recommendation for her college applications and supported her as she completed the applications. At the end of the senior year, I attended her graduation and cheered when she walked across the stage. By most accounts we had developed a close working relationship. She offered ideas for the project that we mostly followed. She also offered critiques and modifications of the ideas brought forward by others, including ones that I offered. Although only in high school, she was a full contributor and a strong leader in the YPAR project. She was funny and we laughed a lot. The other youth on the team looked to her as a leader.

Soon after her graduation from high school, as we were about to enter into a more intensive period of analysing the data, writing up our findings and editing the interviews into a documentary film, Nasma called me. She said she could no longer work on the project because she had some personal problems and was going to live with her uncle in Maryland. In fact, she was already down there. She didn't offer any further explanation, and I didn't pry. I was completely oblivious of there being trouble in her home life. I wished her well and told her to let me know if I could be of any help. I hired someone to replace her in the role she was to play in the YPAR project and we continued on with the paper and documentary film over the rest of the summer.

I learned from some of the other youth that towards the end of the summer Nasma had returned to Worcester and was preparing to attend a college in the city where she had received the best financial aid package. I had not really interacted with her since she left town, aside from a few texts. Then, in the middle of September, I received a text from her:

Hey, Eric, I need your help. So I'm not liking [my college] at all and I want to transfer really bad I'm talking as fast as this semester. Would you be able to help me with that process?

Of course. Where do you want to go?

UMass Boston, Georgia State or a school in Maryland. I want to try leaving Worcester again.

We later spoke on the phone and I learned more about Nasma's current predicament. When she left for Maryland earlier in the summer she was experiencing conflict at home. Her uncle, who had come up for her graduation, took her back to Maryland to stay with him. She came back to Worcester towards the end of summer to reconcile and prepare to attend college. She only stayed at home for a couple weeks before the conflict re-emerged and she became homeless. She stayed at a friend's home for a while, and later went to sleep on the couch of another friend. She had her old job back selling pizza slices and hot dogs at Sam's Club and had started college. Amidst the stress of everything, her many hours of work and the difficulty of getting to her college campus without a car, she started to miss classes. By the time I met up with her in October she had basically stopped attending classes.

When she reached out to me, she wanted to try to simply start over in the spring semester, change her major and move onto a campus away from Worcester. Most of the schools she was interested in had either already passed their deadlines for spring admissions or did not accept spring admissions. I offered to ask the admissions folk at Clark University, where I taught, if they might accept her application for the spring semester even though the deadline had passed. Surprising both of us, they said 'yes'.

Nasma decided to try to make that work and to see if she could move onto Clark's campus in the spring. Together, we scrambled to get all the components for her application into Clark in under two weeks. She submitted the application and was soon notified that she had been accepted. Her financial aid package expected her family to cover a portion of the costs, but since Nasma was no longer supported by her parents, she applied for an additional loan to cover that portion.

Nasma was supposed to move into her dorm room on Sunday and have a day of orientation on Monday, Martin Luther King Jr Day. But since she had still not heard about the status of her loan application, she was uncertain about what to do. In the end, I helped her move into her dorm room on Sunday. On Monday she went to orientation. On Tuesday, she learned that she had been rejected for the loan. She received an email that day from the university indicating that she needed to move out of the dorm and return her key, and that she would be billed for any meals and nights spent there if she did not move out right away.

Nasma said she could not go back to her friend's apartment where she had been staying and that, basically, she had overstayed her welcome at all her friends' homes. So we both began to scramble to find her a place to live. I put the word out to my students, asking if any of them knew of rooms for rent. I quickly heard back from Bahati that there was a room available in her apartment. I called Bahati and she said that the room was furnished and that she could get her connected with her landlord. It was clearly not the

outcome that Nasma wanted, but we agreed to try to work to get her into a better situation for the autumn semester. We made arrangements with Bahati so she could get a key and move in right away, and Bahati said she would work out the arrangements with the landlord.

That was how I left it. I assumed that they would add Nasma to the lease and she would pay her share. What I didn't realise was that they didn't add Nasma to the lease and Bahati just made an arrangement to have Nasma pay half of her room rent, so that they both could save money. Even though I was unaware of the living situation they had worked out, I stayed more connected with Nasma that spring. I found money to hire her to help finalise the film and the paper that had been mostly completed the previous summer. She, along with some other youth involved with the project, came to present with me at a conference in Philadelphia in February. She continued to further develop the film in preparation for our presentation at a national education conference at the end of April in San Antonio. We continued to talk and I helped her prepare her applications to two colleges in Georgia. We also strategised about how she could be viewed as financially independent from her family for the purpose of financial aid.

I was concerned about her wanting to attend school away from Worcester without much of a support system there, but I didn't want to dissuade her. I shared my concern for her as I would with any friend or colleague, but I didn't try to talk her out of attending college so far away. Again, this was about maintaining a level of distance in support of our more horizontal relationship. Truth be told, I was going to miss her – both the insights and the laughter she brought to our work. I really cared about her. I had urged her to think about coming to Clark if we could secure her financial situation. I felt like I would be able to connect her with a group of critically conscious students of colour with whom she could develop some meaningful relationships. But I also understood her desire to move away from a difficult family situation and such a cold climate.

We had a good conversation about her future on the plane trip home from San Antonio. It was nearly midnight and raining lightly when I dropped her off at her apartment after driving from the Boston airport. Nevertheless, I hopped out of the car to help her get her bag from the trunk and to give her a hug and thank her for all her work preparing our film for the conference presentation and the way she shined at the conference. We made plans to connect in a couple of weeks after my semester wrapped up, knowing I would be pretty busy with final projects and grades. Things seemed pretty good between us until I received the text messages that prompted this article merely four days after we returned from the conference in San Antonio.

I did not know what to do when I learned that she had moved out of her apartment and had no place to go. I brought her home to my house thinking I could figure things out in the light of the new day. On Monday, I spoke with city officials from the housing office about programs that served homeless youth and even with a woman who used to work in a youth program that Nasma was a part of, who now worked with a non-profit that addressed homelessness. All these people were kind, supportive and sensitive, but none of them provided any material support or guidance. We were not looking for free housing as Nasma had a job and was willing to pay rent.

Despite extensive communication with several people employed in government and non-profit organisations focused on homelessness or housing, we found no available housing options for Nasma. I kept asking and pushing Nasma to follow up with some of these individuals who were not always easy to reach. One of my students offered his room in a shared apartment for Nasma to rent for the rest of the summer for a rate she could afford. But it was only going to become available after the current tenant moved out following Clark's graduation two weeks later.

For the two weeks that Nasma stayed with my family and me, she continued to work at Sam's Club. When she was not working, I invited her down to eat meals with my family. But for the most part she stayed in the guest bedroom/office. We stopped talking about college planning and finalising the paper for publication; we were focused on her housing crisis.

Not finding any other solution, we waited for my student's room to become available. This situation took up a lot of time for both Nasma and myself right in the midst of finals for me at the university. It affected the dynamic of my relationship with Nasma as we were working to finalise a paper and a documentary film for publication/distribution. There was a growing sense of awkwardness between Nasma and me. The humour, joy and small talk diminished. She also probably felt the tension between my spouse and me, which no doubt affected everyone in the house.

After a little over two weeks, I helped Nasma move into the summer sublet that my student had offered. We communicated during the summer, but not as often as before and it was more serious, with less of the teasing and banter that had marked our relationship previously. We pretty much stopped working on the video, which was mostly done, and our rare conversations were about getting her established in her new college in Georgia or finding housing down there. In the end, she bought tickets and flew to Georgia without telling me or saying goodbye. I remember being surprised when I called her to check in and discovered she had already moved. I worked to try to stay connected with her. I emailed and texted her, but rarely heard back. Although I had intended to do so earlier, I sent her a house-warming gift card for Target in late September, but I never heard if she received it. Later, I learned that she had struggled to make ends meet in Georgia and ended up returning to Maryland to live with her uncle before she could finish the fall semester.

Since then I have reached out to Nasma on occasion, but have only been able to exchange text messages with her twice, one of those because one of the other youth from the YPAR project had told Nasma to text me back. That was when I had been trying to reach her to work with me on this manuscript. Eventually she reached out, but never responded to my requests to collaborate on the project. I have stayed in much more regular contact with some of the other youth to whom I had never been so close.

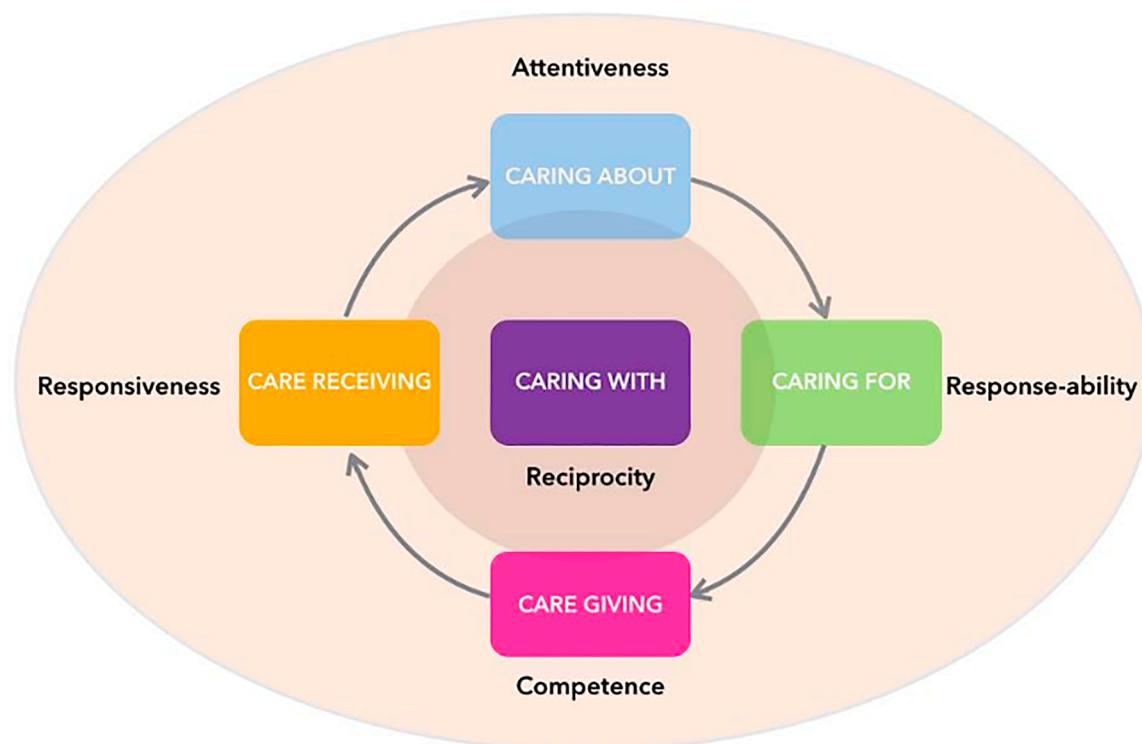
Discussion

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) strives to rebalance inequitable relationships based on roles, age, race, gender and other factors. In my efforts to enact YPAR, I seek to create projects that centre the voice, ideas and questions of the youth with whom I work. Yet in my efforts to help Nasma as she confronted the challenging and traumatic situation of homelessness as a 19-year-old, our collaborative relationship shifted as she became dependent on me and the resources I, because of my many privileges, could provide for her. Through this process, the inequities in material resources – which are linked to age, education and social class, and indirectly to race and gender – between Nasma and me were centred, complicating the more equitable interactions that we had previously constructed in our knowledge creation through collaborative work in the YPAR projects. These types of power differentials raise questions about dependency and independence in constructing equitable relationships. They pose challenges to what it means to develop close and caring relationships through YPAR work, recognising that those relationships extend beyond the connections developed through the research project.

CARE-FULL SCHOLARSHIP

Recently there has been a call for greater care in our research practice in response to the dehumanising neoliberal forces at work in the academy. This focus on 'care-full' scholarship has at times emphasised the humanity and needs of academic scholars ([Mountz et al. 2015](#); [Puāwai Collective 2019](#)). In addition to recognising the need to care for our own humanity as scholars within neo-liberal universities, [Moriggi \(2021, p. 2\)](#) argues that care-full scholarship is a call to change the 'tangible practices [scholars] perform when engaging with research participants'. She developed a framework that involves five interconnected forms of care: (1) caring about, (2) caring for, (3) care giving, (4) care receiving and 5) caring with. Given the product-driven dehumanising space of the neo-liberal university, the call for care-full scholarship seems not only a welcome respite, but a moral imperative. However, a deeper examination of the framework

reveals a missing power analysis which, in turn, allows us to disregard the possibility of what I term ‘risks of care’. While Moriggi’s framework is visually represented in a circle with the idea of reciprocity in the centre, the realities of power differentials based on social inequities are real and often material, and can at times undermine reciprocity in caring relationships. The argument I am making is that enacting care in our research relationships, especially when there are existing inequities of power related to different social identities and lived material realities, can create a sense of dependency and shift the power dynamics in the relationship. While we may aspire to the construction of reciprocity in our caring relationships, differential needs related to different social realities can make the reciprocity unattainable or, at least, feel unbalanced. This can have epistemological effects as it shapes the nature of the relationships and collaborations. Below, I analyse this story to examine the complications of power differentials and these ‘risks of care’ in providing material help to youth in crisis.



From [Moriggi \(2021\)](#)

BUILDING HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS

YPAR’s epistemological lineage links to Freire’s critical pedagogy ([Cammarota & Fine 2010](#)). [Freire \(1970\)](#) recognised that the liberatory educational endeavour becomes undermined when facilitators solve the problems on behalf of the oppressed, what he called ‘charity’, because it positions the oppressed as passive recipients rather than historical agents of change. One of the primary problems of charity is that it fosters dependency, which leads to hierarchical relationships between those who exert their agency and those who are constructed as passive recipients lacking agency.

Critical pedagogy and YPAR seek to disrupt hierarchical relationships fostered by class, race, age and other factors and instead foster more horizontal relationships. Writing about participatory research, [Von Kotze, Walters and Luckett \(2016, p. 103\)](#) state, ‘an important first task in any popular education undertaking is the attempt to establish more horizontal relationships of power’. Further, they continue, ‘These must be consciously established and continuously re-negotiated’. What these combined comments

reveal is that the more equitable relationships necessary for engaging in effective participatory research projects are not easy to foster or maintain. The efforts to build more horizontal relationships with participants in YPAR projects are even more challenging as they must overcome the power differentials related to age, education and often class and race, and other social identity power differences.

My efforts to develop authentic YPAR projects with youth meant that I worked to create more horizontal relationships with them, to situate their voice, ideas and power as valuable and essential to the work. To do so, I sought to decentre my own voice, perspective and power. I also specifically talked with those involved in the YPAR projects about differential positional power related to race, class, age and, at times, gender. My previous work with Nasma involved working on two films and for both, my co-teacher and I taught students how to engage in the technical aspects of film production, but they conceived, shot, directed, edited and produced all aspects of the film. My past work with them and my willingness to trust them with the data collection further established our trust and fostered a more horizontal relationship as we interacted on the ideas and approach to the research questions. When we began the analysis of the data, we developed a collective process where we all wrote our reactions to the data that we coded individually, and then shared it to develop a collective analysis. I worked hard to make sure that the young people's perspectives were central to our full analysis of all the data. I listened to and valued their perspectives.

RISKS OF CARE

There is a complicated challenge, what I call a 'risk of care', inherent in the relational work essential for effective YPAR projects. We need to develop close caring relationships based on trust with our youth collaborators to enable us to form horizontal relationships that are not characterised by hierarchy and inequality. In creating these, we focus on the value of different ideas, perspectives, ways of reading our data and experiences that we all bring to collective work. But in attempting to build more horizontal relationships, we tend to de-emphasise the obvious differences related to age, wealth, independence and, in the case of Nasma and me, race and gender. While we acknowledged these differences openly, and at times humorously, construction of the horizontal relationship was based more on the value of our different perspectives in the work and the area of ideas.

Part of our initial ability to create a more horizontal relationship was due to Nasma's efforts to appear and remain independent. I am sure part of the reason that I saw her as responsible and mature was because of the ways she did not entrust me with her more personal struggles. Perhaps part of why I thought we had a more equitable relationship was because she did not openly reveal the various challenges she faced. It was only when her housing crisis escalated and she couldn't see any way out that she reached out and I was offered more insight into her private world.

This raises interesting questions about trust in YPAR relationships. In writing about them, [Mirra, Garcia & Morrell \(2016\)](#), p. 43) state that it is 'crucial to build relationships of caring and trust with young people'. But given the narrative I offer above, it seems that care and trust need to be understood as two separate elements that may inversely affect each other. Care is about attending to the needs and desires of another. However, there is a power dynamic involved in all forms of care giving and care receiving ([Cushing 2003](#); [Freire 1970](#)) — power associated with the generosity in giving and humility in the receiving. The power is balanced when there is reciprocity. But when different social locations undermine the possibility of reciprocity, a power imbalance develops which can create a sense of dependency and shame in the receiver and power in the giver, regardless of the intentions behind the giving. In contrast, trust requires independence and some degree of mutuality. One person may initiate trust by being vulnerable or sharing secrets with another, but if this only ever goes in one direction, then typically it is not sustainable. And if one person breaks another's trust, the trust is broken in both directions. So if the care I provided to Nasma created an imbalance or even a sense of indebtedness as it could not be easily reciprocated, how

did that affect the level of trust between us in our work? Was the trust that I thought we developed only experienced by me? If she had confided more in me, would that have undermined the equity we seemed to have developed while working on the project? Did her voice in the project shrink because of how she felt or because such knowledge would affect the way I perceived her?

The closeness of the relationships developed in YPAR often affords us access to vulnerability in moments of crisis. It was clear that Nasma didn't know where to turn when I received the texts that opened this article. She didn't want to ask for help, but didn't know what else to do. She turned to me because we had become close over the years as a result of our collaborations. Seeing her in a moment of crisis, I wanted to reach out and help her. And I had the means. I had an extra bed in my home and money for food. Regardless of the reasons for Nasma's situation, she was in need, and I could help.

My heart broke for Nasma when she ended up in my office late at night with nowhere else to turn. Not only did I empathise with the material reality of her not having a bed to sleep in, I also felt for what must have been a deep sense of loneliness at that time. I didn't hesitate. I offered her shelter in my home even before checking in with my family. At the time, I couldn't see any other option. I didn't even think about what it would mean for my family or what the long-term implications could be in terms of my working and personal relationship with Nasma.

My decision to help Nasma in this situation shifted the focus of our relationship from being relatively equal to one of dependency, thereby reinscribing the hierarchical aspects of power that YPAR seeks to transcend. She became the recipient of care and I became the giver. This brought to the fore the differences between us in wealth, which were directly tied to our differences in age, class and educational levels, and no doubt implicated race and gender as well. Her becoming dependent on me diminished her independence which, in turn, affected the nature of our horizontal relationship and her own sense of agency and power in our relationship and the collaboration. How did this, then, shape our interactions moving forward and what were the impacts on epistemological aspects of our work?

FACE WORK

Erving Goffman's theories on face work ([1959](#), [1967](#)) offer some insights into how we might make sense of what occurred in the 'interaction ritual' between Nasma and me. Goffman presents a dramaturgical framing of social interactions where most interactions involve a level of performance, in which actors engage to maintain not only their own dignity, but the dignity of all individuals in the interaction. The chain of interactions builds over time, and effort is made to maintain the consistency of face so that people can work to maintain the performance of the self that was developed in the previous interactions. Most often, the roles we each portray are established by the stage on which we are cast, and we work to maintain our portrayal of our role and the role of the others in this stage. We engage in face work to maintain a consistent portrayal of ourselves, as failing to do so, 'losing face', can result in embarrassment, shame or even stigma ([Goffman 1963](#)). Thus we hide aspects of ourselves that, if revealed, might cause us to lose face.

The question I ask is how was the stage constructed that established homelessness, financial insecurity or neediness as a form of losing face and what was my role in the construction of that stage which may have led to certain forms of face work? When I presented an initial draft of this manuscript as part of a panel of YPAR papers, an astute audience member questioned the panel on why we always expect the low-income youth of colour, with whom we work on our YPAR projects, to be heroes?

This question really struck me. Those of us who engage in YPAR and have a deep commitment to its epistemological underpinnings really believe that the ideas and voices of the youth with whom we work are critically important. Indeed, drawing on feminist standpoint theory, there is deep belief that the youth with whom we work are 'members of marginalized groups [who] possess epistemic privilege' ([Park 2018](#), p. 111). As [Janack \(1997](#), p. 126) frames it, 'Members of oppressed groups ... have a perspective on the

world that is not just different from the perspective available to members of the ruling class, but is also epistemically advantageous'. I subscribe to this epistemological stance. It is evidenced in my commitment to YPAR. Indeed, my focus on YPAR seeks to disrupt many of the predominant white saviour myths that are routinely constructed in the media and in school classrooms. But is this work and my belief in the voice and perspective of young people constructing a stage that makes the youth with whom I work feel like they have to be heroes without flaws? In my disruption of white saviour tropes, am I inadvertently and unfairly constructing youth of color as new saviours? I took Nasma to multiple conferences and film festivals around the country where she dazzled audiences not only with her films, but also with her presentation skills. Afterwards, people, sometimes prestigious scholars, would line up to talk with her and express their appreciation. In many ways, I set her up to be exalted, literally. When a crisis caused her to falter, was the pain of embarrassment caused by the height of the pedestal onto which I helped elevate her? How much did that construction shape her need to hide? How did it shape the face work she had been engaged in? How could I have set up the stage differently?

Conclusion

I sorely wish that I could have written this article with Nasma. It would have been healing for our fractured relationship, I believe, to have collaborated in this analysis and reflection. My own reflective analysis reveals I have a lot of work to do in how I engage in YPAR with youth across the divides of age, class, race and gender. My learning would have been enhanced by having Nasma's perspective and insights on all of this.

Building on the framing of critical autoethnography by [Adams \(2017, p. 79\)](#), I have tried to employ this to 'identify manifestations of power and privilege in everyday practices'. The telling of a more detailed story is important to reveal the nuances and subtle ways that power is made manifest in everyday interactions. Figuring out the appropriate amount of narrative detail to enable effective analysis is a difficult balance to walk. What is important, I believe, is that the analysis of the story critically interrogates the ways that power becomes manifest in both subtle and unintended ways so that as I continue to engage with YPAR I do so with greater consciousness of my own enactment of power. Particularly, I have tried to situate my analysis in the spaces where I had agency in the narrative. There are many complexities to power in YPAR. At times these power differentials simply exist, and perhaps the best we can do is acknowledge them. In hindsight, I now realise that many of these performative aspects of power and face work remained unacknowledged, and I wonder what explicit conversations about this might have done to offset the awkwardness that occurred when I stepped in to help Nasma when she became homeless.

The analysis of this story raises more questions than it answers. When we develop long-term caring relationships with the youth with whom we work on YPAR projects, we are afforded access to the lived realities that extend beyond the scope of our collaborative research, particularly when they encounter crises. In these moments of crisis, it is difficult to know how best to respond. But of course these are the very moments when the risks of care are brought to the fore and must be recognised and negotiated. My sense of care and empathy for Nasma in the moment when I found her lying down behind my desk meant that I would take her to stay in my home. Looking back, I would probably not change my response. There are, of course, a host of ethical considerations attached to risks of care that I have not taken up here. Should she have had a key to my office? What would be the ethical and professional implications of a student sleeping in my university office? Similarly, what would the ethical and professional considerations be of taking her to my home? There were also familial implications that I barely noted. While this article does not explore these ethics, nor how we should respond in terms of emotional and material support in such situations, it does recognise that how we respond will impact the relational dynamics which has epistemological implications.

This article reveals that there are important navigations of the power dynamics as we build the stage to develop more horizontal relationships in YPAR. How did my own commitment to creating horizontal

relationships and my belief in Nasma's epistemic privilege build a stage that forced Nasma to engage in face work that prevented her from being her more authentic self? This raises important questions for YPAR. How might we develop YPAR projects that both affirm the voice and epistemic privilege of youth of colour while not placing an unfair and inauthentic performative burden upon them? Could I have constructed the space and the relationship differently, such that the crisis did not disrupt the powerful work we had been doing together?

Second, the work we had done to develop a more horizontal relationship in regard to the YPAR project and to overcome the hierarchical power dynamics related to our social identities became undermined when I offered the material help that I could easily access. There was a power dynamic in being in a social location where I could offer material resources that Nasma both lacked and needed, and this asymmetrical power dynamic affected our working relationship moving forward. It created a feeling of and material dependency that shaped the dynamics of our relationship. This is not to say that I regret my decision to help Nasma in this situation. But I do recognise that there were epistemological and social consequences for our YPAR work.

Both of these relational power dynamics are central to the epistemological stance of YPAR. Too often, YPAR projects are presented without attention to the complexities of relational dynamics and how power differentials in those social relationships affect the epistemological dimensions of the inquiry. We are asked to create relationships of trust and care in YPAR without recognising the complexities and, at times, the contradictions of such tasks. Exploring these implications needs to be addressed in the epistemological considerations of YPAR projects and within the methodology more broadly.

References

- Adams, T 2017, 'Critical autoethnography, education and a call for forgiveness', *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 79–88. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i1.1387>
- Bourdieu, P 1977, *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Cammarota, J & Fine, M 2010, 'Youth participatory action research: A pedagogy for transformational resistance', in J Cammarota & M Fine (eds), *Revolutionizing education: youth participatory action research in motion*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 1–11.
- Cann, C & DeMeulenaere, E 2020, *The activist academic: Engaged scholarship for resistance, hope and social change*, Myers Education Press, Gorham, ME.
- Cushing, P 2003, 'Negotiating power inequities in caregiving relationships', *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 83–91.
- Freire, P 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York, NY.
- Garrett-Walker, W, Cann, C & DeMeulenaere, E (in press), Critical autoethnography, in J Salvo & J Ulmer (eds), *The Routledge encyclopedia of qualitative methods*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Goffman, E 1959, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Anchor Books, New York, NY.
- Goffman, E 1963, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.
- Goffman, E 1967, *Interaction ritual: Essays in face to face behavior*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- hooks, b 1997, *Wounds of passion: A writing life*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Janack, M 1997, 'Standpoint epistemology without the "standpoint?": An examination of epistemic privilege and epistemic authority'. *Hypatia*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 125–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1997.tb00022.x>

- Mirra, N, Garcia, A & Morrell, E 2016, *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*, Routledge, New York, NY. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315748047>
- Moriggi, A 2021, 'Practicing care-full scholarship in research, education, & collaboration: An analytical framework'. *Zenodo*, pp 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5095175>
- Mountz, A, Bonds, A, Mansfield, B, Loyd, J, Hyndman, J, Walton-Roberts, M & Curran, W 2015, 'For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 1235–59.
- Park, J 2018, *Learning from urban immigrant youth about academic literacies*, Routledge, New York, NY. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351263368>
- Puāwai Collective 2019, 'Assembling disruptive practice in the neoliberal university: An ethics of care', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 101, no. 1, pp. 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2019.1568201>
- Rosaldo, R 1993, *Culture & truth: The remaking of social analysis*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- Tilley-Lubbs, G 2014, 'Critical autoethnography and the vulnerable self as researcher', *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 268–85.
- Tuck, E & Yang, K 2014, 'R-words: Refusing research', in D Paris & M Winn (eds), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 223–48. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544329611.n12>
- Von Kotze, A, Walters, S & Luckett, T 2016, 'Navigating our way: A compass for popular educators', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2016.1155850>
- Worth, S 2005, 'Narrative knowledge: Knowing through storytelling', Fourth Media in Transition Conference 2005 conference proceedings.