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Centering Community Voice and Knowledge through Participatory Action Research

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CENTERING COMMUNITY VOICE AND KNOWLEDGE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

This article analyzes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project focused on improving public safety and community lighting in one Latinx immigrant community in California as a case example to better understand the possibilities for university-community-government partnerships. The article explores residents' motivations for their sustained participation in the project, the relationships and power dynamics that led to a $100,000 commitment from the city government to fund the recommendations of the PAR collective, and the social contexts that allowed community residents to position themselves as community leaders as the PAR project progressed over the 2021–2022 academic year. This case example illustrates how including key stakeholders from powerful community institutions in the PAR process not only created opportunities for dialogue and social change that would not have occurred without this collaboration, but also provided critical spaces for the women to develop their stance as political actors in relationship to people in power.

Numerous scholars have long critiqued a large body of social science research that has done little to benefit the communities and people under study (Paris & Winn, 2014; Tuck, 2009). These scholars argue that an enormous amount of scholarship has, at best, primarily served the professional interests of academics and, at worst, objectified minoritized, and disenfranchised communities or perpetuated discourses of deficit and deficiency about the people in these communities (Paris & Winn, 2014). Some scholars have also emphasized that it is not only problematic for an outside academic to go into a community to conduct research *on* a group of people, it is also questionable to conduct research *for* a community with the aim of speaking on behalf of their interests (Cook, 2003; Tuck, 2009).

In response to such critiques, frameworks for Participatory Action Research (along with Community Engaged Research, Action Research, University-Community Partnerships, and other similar framings) have emphasized the importance of long-term relationships with community members, mutually beneficial partnerships,

and equal collaboration that allows community members to fully participate *with* academic researchers during each stage of the research process (Clayton et al., 2019). For example, the authors of the following definition of Participatory Action Research (PAR) highlight that,

> PAR pays careful attention to power relationships, advocating for power to be deliberately shared between the researcher and the researched: blurring the line between them until the researched become the researchers. The researched cease to be objects and become partners in the whole research process: including selecting the research topic, data collection, and analysis and deciding what action should happen as a result of the research findings (Baum et al., 2006, p. 854).

At the core of this definition is the ideal of a non-hierarchical, collaborative research process with community members participating as equal partners in every step of the project. Yet some scholars, including myself, have found it exceedingly difficult to co-design a Participatory Action Research project with community partners that meets this standard (Lucko, 2018). Wallace (2005), for example, writes that despite his best efforts to establish equal participation with community members on several different projects, "I began to wonder just how realistic PAR was for my work with the street community and other marginalized groups struggling with poverty, mental health issues and active addictions. How could individuals who faced significant barriers to participating fully in society be expected to participate fully in a social research project?" (p. 16). Wallace concludes that in their attempts to move away from colonial and postcolonial approaches to research, scholars all too often romanticize PAR as an all-empowering, socially transformative research methodology—without even considering if a proposed project would be relevant to ongoing community projects people are already actively supporting. Therefore, rather than assume research is necessary and wanted by community residents, Wallace urges scholars to first consider how their participation in a community would best advance existing advocacy efforts currently underway.

If scholars reject romanticized notions of PAR that begin with the assumption that community residents will necessarily want to "become partners in the whole research process: including selecting the research topic, data collection, and analysis" (Baum et al., 2006, p. 854), academics must then begin community collaborations by setting aside their own research interests and taking the time to understand what might motivate community residents to action. In an open letter to educational researchers in the *Harvard Educational Review,* Tuck (2009) implores researchers and educational practitioners to do exactly that—focus on the existing *desires* of people in order to leverage both the wisdom and the hope that continues to exist within all communities, regardless of the depth of damage within these communities. While acknowledging the legacies of genocide, slavery, and oppression that continue to inflict violence on the most vulnerable members of these communities, Tuck cautions researchers to avoid contributing to the persistent trend in "damage-centered" research. Despite the intent of such research to gain resources to repair the undeniable damage resulting from generations of systemic oppression, nonetheless, such research, "simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless" (p. 409).

Shawn Ginwright (2018), a leading academic and activist working with urban youth, also urges academics and practitioners working within marginalized communities to carefully consider what will inspire and motivate people to participate in group activities and collective action. Ginwright recounts how during a healing circle with traumatized African American young men, one of the youth he was working with reminded him, "I am more than what happened to me, I'm not just my trauma." (2018, para. 5). This comment led Ginwright to the realization that practitioners might inadvertently deny the complexity of people's humanity if they only focus on what is wrong or broken in a person's life. Instead, Ginwright encourages us to foster healing opportunities by creating collaborative spaces that center the aspects of life that make us human—our creativity, our curiosity, and our ability to form a community with one another.

It may seem simply obvious that researchers working in community partnerships should begin by asking what people living in these communities desire, what they hope to achieve through collaborative research, and what would motivate them to partner with academics. At least in the academic literature, however, there remains a heavy bias towards analyzing university-community partnerships from an academic perspective rather than privileging the community residents' viewpoints about their participation in these projects (London et al., 2022). Moreover, few studies have explored how residents' sustained motivation for participating in community-engaged research is affected by opportunities that foster their own curiosity and creativity (for an exception see Oldfield, 2015). Yet without a clear understanding of why residents would be interested in joining a collaborative research process in the first place, or what is necessary to sustain their participation, academics planning to undertake a community engaged research project may begin with the assumption that people living in the community will want to spend scarce time and resources to "fully" engage as "equal participants" in the lengthy and time-consuming process of designing and implementing a research project, analyzing collected data, and disseminating research findings. In the Participatory Action Research Project explored below, I confess that I began with this very premise.

At the same time, I also entered the research process with a commitment to creating a project defined by residents' desires and interests, designed to directly benefit the community, and implemented in a way that would empower the residents participating in the research process. Guided by these principles, during the 2021–2022 academic year I took advantage of a sabbatical to initiate a community engaged research project with Latino immigrants in the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael, California. This neighborhood is less than two miles from Dominican University and the University has many long-standing partnerships with schools, non-profits, and organizations within the community. What emerged during the academic year was a nine-month Participatory Action Research Project with members of the grassroots community organization *Voces del Canal* (Voices of the Canal) focused on improving public safety and neighborhood lighting. The project was initially supported by the non-profit organization Canal Alliance and the Center for Community Engagement at Dominican University. As the project progressed, we—nine Latina women from *Voces del Canal*, seven bilingual Latina undergraduate students from Dominican University, and myself, a white, female professor at Dominican University who speaks Spanish as a second language—began collaborating with the City of San Rafael and the San Rafael Police Department on the project. We found that these civic leaders were eager to partner with the community residents

to find ways to increase public safety in the immigrant neighborhood, and by the end of the PAR project the city dedicated $100,000 to improving street lighting in the Canal community.

In what follows, I attempt to move beyond romanticized notions of a non-hierarchical PAR project and trace the process through which novice participants in a research collaborative gained the necessary skills and knowledge to develop a stance as community leaders and political actors—despite their positionality as low-income, immigrant, Spanish speaking women. Specifically, I begin by conceptualizing the PAR collaborative as a Community of Practice (Lave and Wegner, 1991) to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the successful outcomes of the project. Next, I turn to a discussion of the specific context of the PAR project and explain the use of autoethnography as a methodology to explore several perplexing questions many academics encounter when engaging in PAR, including: How can research groups "share power" when conducting collaborative research despite the vast differences in skills, time and resources between university researchers and community members? What motivations, interests and goals inform community residents' desire to collectively engage in a lengthy and time-consuming PAR project? And, how can residents develop an identity as political actors in their community through collaborative research—particularly given differences in language, citizenship, class and educational background with government policy makers, public officials, and university researchers? In this methodology section, I also differentiate between the use of auto-ethnography in my analysis of the process of PAR and the research methods that were employed by community residents during the PAR project, including the use of Photovoice and the gathering of Canal residents' testimonials about their experiences with street lighting and public safety in the Canal neighborhood.

Following the discussion of auto-ethnography as a methodology for examining the PAR process, I use qualitative data from the project to illustrate the key findings from my analysis. One of the central findings of this project was that the sustained engagement over the course of the academic year for each of the women who engaged in Participatory Action Research was tied to their desire to *learn how* to advocate for themselves and their communities—in addition to their hopes for improving their neighborhood. At the same time, the women participating in the project were not passive students following my guidance as a university researcher. In fact, I illustrate below how the success of the project was tied to several pivotal moments during the research process when the women in the group took the lead in identifying the scope of the project, designing the process for data collection, and presenting the research findings to the City Council. I argue that by prioritizing the development of trusting relationships throughout the project, unanticipated opportunities to share power in the decision making process emerged that were critical to the success of the project. In addition, I demonstrate how including key stakeholders from powerful community institutions in the PAR process (specifically members from the city government and city police force) not only created opportunities for dialogue that would not have occurred without this collaboration, but also provided critical spaces for the women to develop their stance as political actors in relationship to people in power. I conclude by considering the implications of these findings for future community engaged research projects.

Understanding PAR as a Community of Practice

Participatory Action Research in the United States can be traced back to the founding of the Highlander Folk School in 1932 by Myles Horton (Baker et al., 2008). At the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee, many of the leading activists of the Labor and Civil Rights Movements, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis, came together to study, reflect, and organize with others who shared a vision for transforming pervasive systems of racial inequality in the United States. Although students at Highlander did not participate in structured research projects, they were invited to ask questions about their lived experiences and uncover solutions to their problems through a dialogic process guided by Highlander facilitators (Brian & Elbert, 2005). As Horton himself explained, in a Highlander workshop, facilitators "don't have to know the answers. The answers come from the people" (Slate, 2022, p. 193). Yet while Horton believed that community experience and knowledge were fundamental to understanding how to confront racism, discrimination, and social inequality in the United States, he also privileged insights provided by experienced activists and outside experts during the educational workshops at Highlander. Slate (2022) argues that because Highlander utilized a pedagogical approach that drew on both community wisdom *and* expert knowledge, students were brought into a Community of Practice that allowed them to develop new ways of understanding their experiences and construct new identities as civil rights activists.

The theory that people learn best when situated within a Community of Practice composed of both experts and learners was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). A Community of Practice is defined as a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Thus, a Community of Practice can range from an athletic team, to a religious group, to a school community. Whatever the context, new members entering the group are highly motivated by their desire to learn from knowledgeable experts within the Community of Practice. As such, new members first take on a peripheral role in the community, modeling their behaviors after more experienced members. Initially these novice apprentices gain skills and knowledge through participation at the margins of the community, but as they engage in activities with others (i.e., practice together), people gradually move towards the center and become full participants in the community. In this way, members of a Community of Practice not only learn new ideas, but also new ways of acting and speaking in the world. Moreover, as members of a Community of Practice develop relationships and trust with one another through their co-participation, they also construct a shared identity as members of this community. Smith (2003) explains that this shared identity frequently includes a common vocabulary, specific symbols, and a mutual level of commitment to their practice.

The social identity of the Community of Practice is embodied in the "stance," or way of being, that the members of the community exhibit. Novice participants in a Community of Practice must have access to the social contexts and repeated interactions over time necessary to gain the required knowledge and the specific competencies needed for a secure stance. In addition, a novice must establish trusting relationships with other,

more experienced members of the community that will allow them to feel secure and take the necessary risks to attempt new ways of being in the world.

Once established, a strong stance aligned to the identity of the group is closely linked to a person's motivations, interests and actions. However, social contexts and the dynamics of the power relationships within these contexts are instrumental in determining the stance individuals take up in any specific interaction. For example, in their study of classroom teachers learning to take on leadership roles at their school, Wenner and Campbell (2018) discovered that potential teacher-leaders enacted a wide range of leadership stances. While some teachers possessed what Wenner and Campbell referred to as a "thin" teacher-leader identity because they only occasionally took a stance as a leader in specific social contexts, other teachers exhibited a "thick" identity as a teacher-leader because they consistently took a stance as a leader across a wide range of social contexts.

In order to explain the process in which a person negotiates a specific stance during a particular interaction, Erving Goffman (1981) used the concept of "footing" to describe "the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance" (p. 128). That is, a person takes on a particular stance in relation to another speaker through the ways in which they speak to the other person and the ways in which they respond to that person. People often shift their footing multiple times during a social interaction by changing their speaking style to align with different roles and identities (Kiesling & Schilling-Estes, 1998). However, the ability to manipulate one's footing is circumscribed by existing power structures (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, language ability, or educational level) and influenced by the social context of the interaction (e.g., audience, topic, or setting formality). The various footings people take throughout an interaction often reinforce existing social identities and power relations, but people may also position themselves in ways that challenge social roles and redefine their social identities.

By conceptualizing PAR as a Community of Practice, I move beyond romanticized notions of a non-hierarchical PAR project to trace the process through which novice participants in a research Community of Practice gained the necessary skills and knowledge to develop a stance as community leaders and political actors. In this project, community residents did not join the research collaborative with the skills or interest to fully participate in all stages of the research process. Instead, they often looked to me—as the university researcher—to lead the design of the research project, the process for data collection, and the analysis of the qualitative data. At the same time, as trusting relationships developed within the Community of Practice, unanticipated opportunities to share power arose when community residents offered their insights and suggestions based on expert knowledge of the Canal community. Thus, although community residents entered on the "periphery" of the Community of Practice, their leadership at pivotal moments during the research process was crucial to the success of the project. Moreover, although I was often preoccupied about my inability to "fully" include the community residents in each stage of the research process during the academic year, at the end of the project the women shared that one of their key motivations for participating in the weekly meetings was the opportunity to learn from a university researcher how to advocate for themselves and their community. Finally, conceptualizing the PAR process as a Community of Practice underscores the importance of creating safe opportunities for community members to practice their emergent "stance" as community leaders and political actors, particularly when entering into

spaces where they are challenging existing social roles and redefining their social identity in relationship to people who are positioned differently from them in terms of citizenship status, educational level, English language ability, and economic power.

Entry into the Field and Research Methodology

The Canal neighborhood where I conducted Participatory Action Research during the 2021–2022 academic year is primarily a working-class, Latinx immigrant community. I first met with the director of a large non-profit in the community to ask about the possibility of designing a research project in collaboration with community residents during the first week of August 2021. I had previously collaborated with this organization during the 2011–2012 academic year on a Participatory Action Research project designed to identify community needs and priorities (van der Ryn et al., 2014). Although this project had produced a final report based on 678 interviews with community residents, in 2021 the resident concerns identified in the 2012 report remained largely unchanged. Therefore, the director of the non-profit suggested that I focus my proposed PAR project on one of the three main areas of concern from the 2012 report: public security and the lack of public lighting in the neighborhood. The director cautioned me that residents did not need—or want—another needs assessment. The issues were clear, what the residents wanted was action and change.

I agreed that I could work with community residents to collect community perspectives about the lack of public security and community lighting with the goal of presenting our findings and recommendations to the San Rafael City Council by the end of the academic year. At the same time, I would use the methods of participant-observation, the recording of fieldnotes, and individual interviews to better understand the role of the university researcher and the process of PAR in ongoing local efforts to advance social justice in their community. With this common understanding of the purpose of the project, the director arranged a meeting with the two leaders of the community resident organization called the "*Voces del Canal*" (Voices of the Canal) to see if there was interest in beginning a new PAR project. *Voces del Canal* had originally formed in 2012 in order to engage community residents in the previous PAR project, but the group had become inactive after the publication of the report. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, *Voces del Canal* had been remobilized by the non-profit organization to support COVID-19 outreach efforts.

At my first meeting with the group leaders there was strong agreement that a new PAR project must build on our previous work. Although they were still angry that nothing had come of the original report—and presumably skeptical about undertaking another PAR project—one of the leaders commented that we were now living in a different moment, and there was reason to be hopeful that we could finally create change in the community (fieldnotes, August 18, 2021). In early September I attended a general meeting of *Voces del Canal* to explain the project. Seven women agreed to meet together on a weekly basis to work together on the project, and two Spanish-speaking undergraduate students from the University also joined the project as part of the University's service-learning program. The group later expanded to include nine Canal residents, seven Spanish bilingual undergraduate students, and myself.

The findings described below are presented in the style of an auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is a research method that reflexively analyzes the researcher's experience as a participant-observer in cultural or meaning-making processes (Adams et al., 2017). Therefore, my initial conclusions were based on my qualitative analysis of fieldnotes and analytic memos written while conducting participant-observation of the PAR project during the academic year. I generally wrote my fieldnotes in English except when recording direct quotes from my conversations with the women even though the meetings occurred entirely in Spanish. The PAR group met at the neighborhood community center once a week for most weeks during the academic year, except for weeks surrounding major holidays. In addition, I met on Zoom with two *Voces del Canal* group leaders and the Director of the Center for Community Engagement at Dominican University most weeks to plan in advance for these group meetings. I also met with group members outside of the meetings on multiple occasions, for example at the community's Day of the Dead celebration, a Thanksgiving meal at the community center, a group dinner at a neighborhood restaurant, and a memorial service when one member of the group suffered the loss of a family member. My analysis is also based on participant-observation during meetings with city council members, city police officers, members of the non-profit organization supporting *Voces del Canal*, and University colleagues as we collaborated and planned how to develop the project, organize a collective data analysis session, and prepare for the presentation of the group's research findings at the May City Council meeting.

At the conclusion of the project, I conducted semi-structured interviews in Spanish with each of the nine women in the group over Zoom, transcribed the recorded interviews, coded the transcripts, and developed a concept map of relevant themes. The initial coding process of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and analytic memos was guided by my research questions exploring the experiences of community residents participating in a PAR project, but open-ended to allow for unexpected perspectives to emerge on processes, meanings, social contexts, or relationships. After developing a conceptual framework to understand the process of identity formation occurring through the Participatory Action Research project, I returned to the data for focused coding to identify additional evidence to support my claims and search for any discrepant examples. The majority of the direct quotations included in my findings are taken from the interviews that occurred at the end of the project as the women reflected on their experiences over the course of the academic year.

It is important to note that the findings presented in the next sections include descriptions of the data collection methods and the process for data analysis that unfolded as part of the PAR project. These methods included the use of Photovoice to document areas of the neighborhood that lacked sufficient street lighting and the collection of *testimonios* (testimonials) from Canal residents about their experiences with neighborhood lighting and public safety. Photovoice is a research methodology that invites participants to capture images of their day-to-day experiences—often in relation to a specific research theme—and is typically used as an entry point to the research process. I initially suggested the use of Photovoice as a methodology for the PAR project because Photovoice has the potential to destabilize existing power hierarchies and empower community members since they are responsible for capturing photos that will "direct the gaze" of the research collective and define the object of study (Swacha, 2022, p. 349). Walton et al. (2015) also point out that greater trust often develops within the research collective through the use of visual research methodologies such as Photovoice, not only because visual

methodologies shift power from academic researchers to community members, but also because the process values and publicly recognizes people's creative abilities. In a similar way, the decision to gather resident testimonials during the PAR project also empowered community members and centered their knowledge in the research process since their linguistic and cultural competencies were required to successfully collect the data.

In summary, the research collective analyzed qualitative data gathered through the use of Photovoice and the collection of resident testimonials to form conclusions about street lighting and public security in the community. These conclusions were ultimately presented to the San Rafael City Council and were instrumental in securing $100,000 of public funding to improve neighborhood lighting. The findings presented below utilize the methodology of auto-ethnography and analyze the PAR process as a Community of Practice in order to offer insights into the relationships between university researchers, community members, and public officials; the personal motivations of community residents for participating in the PAR project; and the social contexts that allowed community residents to practice their stance as community leaders and political actors.

Learning and Leading in a Community of Practice

My original proposal for a PAR project in the Latinx immigrant community was based on my desire to co-develop a research question, co-design the research methodology, and eventually co-analyze collected data. Therefore, in my proposal I included a timeline that dedicated a month for pursuing a photovoice exploration of the community and an additional month for sharing stories of personal experiences. However, these initial ideas for co-designing a research project with community members were completely scrapped during my first meeting with the director of the large, local non-profit organization in the community who ultimately agreed to support the project. The director insisted that if I was going to collaborate with community members, I would need to facilitate a project that would obtain tangible results that would directly impact the well-being of the community. He encouraged me to rethink my original timeline for collective exploration of potential research questions and the co-development of a research methodology and instead focus on practical steps that would achieve results. In subsequent meetings with the leaders of the resident organization *Voces del Canal*, we agreed that the project would focus on improving public security in the neighborhood with a specific focus on increasing public street lighting and include a Photovoice component in the project.

During these initial planning meetings with the group leaders of *Voces del Canal* we created an agenda to explore ideas for the PAR project at a one-hour community resident meeting during the first week in September. We met at the neighborhood community center on a Wednesday evening and the small group of seven women who attended spent the time discussing the goals for the project. I noted in my field notes that on that first evening together as a group, "Everyone participated and added something to the conversations.....It's extremely clear that everyone knows exactly where the problems with public security are and exactly what they want" (fieldnotes, September 8, 2021). The group agreed to continue our discussion the following week, but following the second community meeting one of the leaders of the group reiterated the need to advance the practical goals of the PAR project. After the meeting ended, she approached me privately to ask if the group would begin

photographing areas of the community in need of increased lighting at the next meeting. She explained that if we were just going to sit around and talk, she would prefer to spend her Wednesday evenings at home with her teenage granddaughter who was living with her and who needed her support and guidance. She also reminded me that each of the seven women participating in the weekly meetings worked full time, and most had children and families they were leaving at home to attend the meetings (fieldnotes, September 15, 2022).

Despite the fact I assured the group leader that we could conduct a community walk the following week to identify areas in need of increased public lighting, I found myself disoriented by the gap between my initial timeline for the project based on my goal of co-designing the PAR project—in which I planned to spend over two months simply identifying a research question—and the suggestion that the project was not progressing sufficiently after only two meetings. Moreover, as the project developed over the next months, I often felt obligated to take the lead in the process of designing the research methodology for data collection and analysis—rather than "co-designing" the research project—because the group understood that they were giving up their Wednesday evenings to bring about tangible improvements in the community. Therefore, I led the first meetings to explain the use of photovoice as a methodology for the women to document the lack of street lighting in the community. After the women captured pictures along seven key routes in the neighborhood that were in need of increased street lighting, I coordinated the process that allowed them to work in close collaboration with bilingual undergraduate students from the university to create seven posters for each of the identified routes. Originally, it was my suggestion that the women use these posters as a springboard for conversations with the larger community so that we could collect personal testimonials from as many residents as possible about their experiences with public safety and community lighting and present our findings to the city council and police department. I also spent time preparing before each community meeting to facilitate the planning process and expedite any decisions that needed to be made. For example, in my field notes I wrote, "I had decided to write up some phrases for the pictures and it was really good I had done that because otherwise we never would have gotten it done" (October 27, 2021), and "I had done some work creating posters with the pictures they had selected, along with subtitles, so I could introduce the idea of a community photo exposition. I think they liked the idea" (November 3, 2021).

During these initial months of the project the women in the group clearly looked to me for leadership given that I was the identified university researcher—and I often took up this role as I certainly didn't want to let anyone down. At the same time, several pivotal decisions were made in the early months of the project that were suggested by the community residents and ultimately ensured the success of the project. First, during the initial planning sessions for the PAR project one of the *Voces del Canal* leaders suggested adding the photovoice pictures to the Dia de los Muertos altar that *Voces del Canal* was already in the process of creating for the annual community celebration. By following this suggestion, the *Voces del Canal* leaders were able to recruit seven women who were already working on the Dia de los Muertos project for the PAR project. It was these seven women who continued with the project during the entire academic year. Second, while I initially proposed an indoor event that imitated an academic conference poster session to collect community residents' personal testimonials, the women made the methodological decision to create a street fair on a Saturday morning when large numbers of people were out walking in the community. Therefore, the data collection process was embedded in a larger

community event organized by the women that included tables from other community organizations (e.g., the local food bank); free snacks, water, and aguas frescas; and a community raffle. By this point in the project the relationships within the group were strong enough for the women to explain to me in a kind but critical way that if we wanted people to actually participate in the event and share their stories, we needed the event to be *"más divertido"* (more fun) and *"más llamativo"* (more striking) than what I was proposing (fieldnotes, February 3, 2022). Third, the women completely organized the publicity for the event based on their insider knowledge of the community, including distributing flyers through the school district, the neighborhood clinic, a local restaurant, and the non-profit organization collaborating on the project; creating a large banner to hang in the community in cooperation with a local business; and publicizing the event through their personal networks. Finally, the women made the decision to invite key public officials to the event including members of the city council and the police department—something I had not considered, but which later proved critical to the success of the project.

The street fair occurred on a cloudy Saturday afternoon in late February. That afternoon, as curious community residents strolled by, the women invited the residents to view their posters, explained their pictures, and asked the residents to reflect on their own personal experiences with their research question, "How does the lack of street lighting in the Canal affect you?" Each woman was partnered with a bilingual undergraduate student from the University who recorded the residents' *testimonios* (testimonials), and who later created transcripts from these recordings. Over the course of three hours the group recorded a total of 86 testimonials from neighborhood residents about their experiences with lighting and public safety in the community.

While everyone in the group was thrilled with the success of the street fair, after the event I continued to struggle with my positionality within the group. I found myself increasingly positioned as the leader of the group given that the next steps in the project included the process of coding the transcripts from the 86 testimonials, articulating common themes in residents' experiences, and preparing to present the groups' findings and recommendations to the city council. Moreover, regardless of my ambitions for co-constructing the research design for the PAR project, the women had little to no experience with qualitative data analysis.

It was around this time in the development of the project when I began to recognize that the women were identifying themselves as learners who were studying how to advocate for themselves and their community using qualitative research methods. I had first noticed this a few weeks before the street fair as we were practicing how to discuss the finished posters with community residents during the event. I had invited a few bilingual undergraduate students who were not familiar with the project to attend the meeting so that they would be prepared to help the group by recording and transcribing residents' testimonials. To start the meeting I asked everyone to introduce themselves, beginning with the new students. As each student took a turn, they provided a standard college student introduction that included not only their name but also their year of study and major. For example, *"Mi nombre es ..... soy estudiante de segundo año en la universidad dominicana y estoy estudiando salud pública."* (My name is....I am a second year student at Dominican University and I'm studying public health.) To my surprise, when it was the residents turn to introduce themselves to the students, several residents included in their introduction that they were *"estudiando para ser un líder en la comunidad"* (studying to be a leader in the

community), or *"estudiando este proyecto de fotovoz"* (studying this photovoice project), or simply *"estudiando este proyecto"* (studying this project) (fieldnotes February 10, 2022).

It was only after the conclusion of the project, however, that I began to reflect on the significance of the learning process for residents' emergent identity as community leaders. While coding transcripts from the interviews I conducted with each of the group members, I identified an unanticipated theme about the central importance of the learning process for each of the women in the group. I did not explicitly ask the women a question about learning in the entire interview, but all of the participants talked about what it meant for them to be part of a learning community, and most of them returned to this topic at several points throughout the interview. For example, when I asked them to explain what motivated them to show up each Wednesday evening to our weekly meetings, most discussed the critical role of learning in maintaining their motivation. As one resident explained, *"Todas estamos en enfoque de aprender y con aquella hambre de lograr algo para la comunidad y de ser parte de un cambio…Nunca hubiera aprendido todo el proceso que se debe hacer cuando uno va a abogar y cómo prepararse*." (We are all focused on learning and with a hunger to achieve something for the community and to be part of a change…I would never have learned the whole process that must be done when one goes to advocate and how to prepare). Another woman with two young children explained, *"Estoy aprendiendo muchas cosas que son importantes para el desarrollo de mis niños."* (I'm learning many things that are important for the development of my children.) This mother often brought her 9-year-old daughter to our group meetings, and as we talked I mentioned that she was being a great role model for her daughter. She responded, *"A mis niños les encanta que estoy participando en el grupo…me siento bien para que ella vaya aprendiendo."* (My children love that I am participating in the group…I feel good that she is learning.) A third woman, while discussing her motivation for attending the group, included that, *"Algunas son un poco calladas pero ellas apoyan también, ellas están aprendiendo."* (Some are a bit quiet, but they also support [the project], they are learning).

Before conducting the interviews, I hadn't realized that the learning process was such a powerful motivating force for the women. In fact, since I had been preoccupied throughout the entire project about overstepping my role while guiding the research process, I decided to ask the women during the interview how they thought my participation had affected the group. While I had anticipated that their responses would be polite, I didn't expect several women to once again emphasize the significance of the learning process. For example, one of the women responded, *"Su manera de liderazgo en este proyecto… todas nos hemos quedado con el aprendizaje"* (Your way of leadership in this project…. left us all with knowledge). Another explained, *"Usted llegó a todas las reuniones con algo que aprendimos y fue un poco difícil a veces entender pero con la ayuda de las alumnas y usted [logramos]."* (You came to all the meetings with something that we learned, and it was a bit difficult at times to understand but with the help of the students and you [we did it].)

In fact, the topic of learning came up throughout the interviews. While chatting casually with one of the women after first connecting on Zoom, I asked her how she was doing since we last met as a group and she commented, *"Uno se siente diferente al saber que ya no hay miércoles, ir cada miércoles es aprender un poco más cada día."* (One feels different knowing that there are no more Wednesdays, going every Wednesday is to learn a little more every day.) When I asked one woman how participating in the *Voces del Canal* group made her feel, she

answered, *"Feliz y segura, porque vamos con ese entusiasmo de aprender más."* (Happy and safe, because we go with an enthusiasm to learn more.) Even when I asked one woman what she hoped for in the future she referred once again to the learning process, *"Los días que estuvimos juntas, los miércoles y otros días, fue muy bonito, fue un aprendizaje grandioso para mi, y a pesar de que todo salió muy bien, yo todavía quiero más, quiero seguir."* (The days we were together, the Wednesdays and other days, it was very nice, it was a great learning experience for me, and even though everything went very well, I still want more, I want to continue.) It is important to note that for the women in the group, one of the most important aspects of the learning process was that they were learning together in community, and that the meetings were always welcoming and lively. For example, one woman made the comment that *"para mi es como ir a una fiesta"* (for me it's like going to a party). Another woman explained, *"lo mejor de este proyecto fue que convivimos juntas, platicamos, nos conocimos más, y como que hicimos más amistades."* (The best thing about this project was that we lived together, we talked, we got to know each other better, and how we made more friends.)

During the entire project I had felt conflicted about my role in the group because, on the one hand, I was eager to "co-design" the research methodology as a collective, and yet on the other hand, I knew that I needed to guide the process given my experience as a qualitative researcher. From the perspective of the women who participated in the group, however, the process of learning together in a community was central to their motivation for participating in the project on a weekly basis. Moreover, the skills the women learned in our Wednesday night meetings were crucial for their ability to position themselves as community leaders and political actors as the project progressed and we began meeting with public officials from the City Council and Police Department that spring.

Avoiding the "Gotcha Moment": Shifting from Confrontation to Collaboration

The City of San Rafael is publicly committed to "to finding solutions to address systemic racial injustice that pervade our society and community" (City of San Rafael, n.d., para. 1). Not only is the city a member of the "Government Alliance on Race and Equity," a national network of local governments, but Marin County, where the city is located, has developed a "Race Equity Action Plan" focused on increasing economic opportunities, improving housing, and increasing access to mental health care in marginalized neighborhoods (County of Marin, n.d.). Given the city's stance on increasing social justice and racial equity, I assumed that the city council would be willing to listen to the group's findings and recommendations at the conclusion of the project—even though when the PAR project began I did not have any official contacts within the city government. Yet it was not until January 2022 that I finally arranged a meeting with the Assistant City Manager for the City of San Rafael to discuss potential opportunities for the group to present their findings and recommendations to the city.

At the beginning of the meeting, the Assistant City Manager explained that she was eager to collaborate with the group, but at the same time she was concerned about the possibility that within the context of a public city council meeting a PAR presentation would create a dynamic of "us" versus "them," or that after the meeting the

local newspaper would create the perception that residents had to fight with the city to get resources for their neighborhood. In fact, she assured me, the city was looking for opportunities to say "yes" to the community. Moreover, while the city certainly did not want to take away from the presentation of residents' stories or lived experiences, she wanted to avoid what she referred to as a "gotcha moment"—that is, a presentation that blamed and publicly shamed the city for its failure to provide the community with basic services (fieldnotes, January 6, 2022).

By the end of the meeting, we both agreed that partnering together on the project to build relationships and trust between the PAR group and city council members could only advance the goals of the residents, and that an adversarial presentation at a city council meeting would not be very productive. We ended the meeting by committing to continue the conversation as the project developed over the next months.

In the weeks following our meeting, the PAR group finalized our preparations for the February street fair and successfully held the event. Afterwards, I focused on organizing the transcription of the collected residents' testimonials with the undergraduate students and translating the transcripts into English. I also began planning for how to best lead the women through the process of qualitative data analysis. However, as I read through the transcripts myself, it struck me that the stories in the transcripts were stories that the women already knew—in fact, they had been telling me the same stories about the consequences of inadequate lighting in the community all year. I realized that the people who really needed to read the stories of the residents were the city officials and the local police department who held positions of power that could create significant change in the community. Given the expressed interest from the city government and police department in collaborating on the project, I asked the PAR group if they would want to collectively analyze the data with public officials. The PAR group agreed, and with much support from the Director of Dominican's Center for Community Engagement and the Assistant City Manager, we arranged a four-hour collaborative data analysis session with all of *Voces del Canal* members and undergraduate students working on the project, representatives from the city government and police department, members of the non-profit organization supporting the project, and a few faculty members in the University's service-learning department. The date was scheduled in March, leaving the PAR group with only a few weeks to prepare for the collaborative data analysis session.

Fragile Footing: Securing a Stance as a Community Leader and Political Actor

Over the course of the academic year, the women working on the PAR project increasingly identified themselves as community leaders as they participated in the process of designing the street fair, contacting local organizations to publicize the event, presenting their photovoice posters to community residents, and soliciting their testimonials. During their interview at the end of the project several women explicitly identified themselves as representatives of their community. For example, one of the women stated, "*Estamos representando con mucho orgullo nuestro vecindario del Canal"* (We are representing our Canal neighborhood with much pride). Another woman, while reflecting on her emergent identity as a community leader, commented, "*Nunca imaginé que*

estaría haciendo esto" (I never imagined that I would be doing this). Equally important, the women also understood that members of their community had begun to identify them as advocates for change in the community. One woman confided that her neighbor had recently told her, *"Yo estoy orgullosa de ti, porque yo no sé cómo tú lo puedes hacer, yo no sé, yo no tengo ese valor de pararme allí"* (I'm proud of you, because I don't know how you can do it, I don't know, I don't have the courage to stand there). The women in the PAR group were proud to be recognized by their neighbors, which was central to their emergent identity as community leaders.

Yet while developing a stance as a leader and political activist within the community was critical, it was a significantly different process than securing equal footing with public officials who spoke English fluently, possessed advanced educational and professional credentials, and occupied a different class position. Within the context of the collective data analysis session, there were also racial and gender differences the women needed to negotiate. Half of the public officials participating in the event were men and several members of the group in positions of power were White, including the Assistant City Manager, the Director of Public Works, and the Police Lieutenant. During their interviews at the end of the project most of the women remembered experiencing feelings of uncertainty, apprehension, or nervousness about interacting with public officials. One woman explained that *"Al principio me costó mucho porque yo soy un poco seria, creo lo que más me cuesta es hablar en público"* (At the beginning it was very difficult for me because I am a bit serious, I think that the thing that is most difficult for me is to speak in public), while another shared that *"A mí me cuesta hablar con las personas, decirles cosas, me pone nerviosa"* (It's difficult for me to talk to people, to tell them things, it makes me nervous).

In order to ensure that the women were prepared to participate in the collective analysis on equal footing with public officials, the week before I organized a two-step training with the group on qualitative data analysis. First, the women and bilingual undergraduate students met in person to learn how to code a transcript and to practice coding testimonials together in Spanish. During the two-hour training session each woman in the group was partnered with a Dominican student who answered individual questions and modeled the coding process. After learning the basic steps for coding a transcript, the women worked in small groups with the undergraduate students to practice organizing codes into relevant themes through the process of concept mapping. Second, after the training session each woman was assigned to 12 specific testimonials to code with her student partner. Most of the group coded Spanish transcripts, and one member who was fluently bilingual agreed to code a transcript translated into English so that she could later be placed in an English only group at the collective data analysis session. The students were responsible for setting up a one-on-one Zoom meeting with their partner during the week before the collective data analysis to answer questions, complete the coding for the assigned section of the transcripts, discuss potential themes that were emerging in the data, and generally ensure that the woman was confident with her coding results. The advanced training was critical to the women's ability to later participate in collective data analysis on equal footing with public officials. One woman reflected that during the training, *"Trabajar en equipo, en esos grupos que lo hizo, al principio me costó un poco entender que eran esos cuadros de...las cuadras [post-its], no sabia, pero cuando usted llegó a la mesa y me explicó parte por parte se me hizo bien fácil."* (Working as a team, in those groups that you made, at first it was a bit difficult for me to understand what those

pictures of... the blocks [post-its] were, I didn't know, but when you came to the table and explained to me part by part it became very easy for me.)

Meanwhile, I supplied each of the public officials who had agreed to participate in the data analysis session with the entire set of testimony transcripts in either Spanish or English, depending on their language ability, and written directions for how to code the testimonials. They were encouraged to read the entire set of transcripts and come to the data analysis session with a specific set of 12 testimonials already coded.

The day of the data analysis session began with participants working in monolingual small groups of three to five people to discuss the codes that they had identified in their assigned set of 12 testimonials and create concept maps using these codes. The assigned groups were composed of a mix of community residents, university students and faculty, and representatives from the police department, city government, or non-profit organization. Five small groups worked in Spanish, and two groups worked in English.

Table 1

Language	Members
Spanish	*Voces del Canal* member, Dominican University student, Civic Engagement Manager from the non-profit organization, Representative from the City Manager's office
Spanish	Two *Voces del Canal* members, Dominican University student, UC Berkeley graduate student supporting the non-profit organization
Spanish	*Voces del Canal* Member, City Council member, Dominican University faculty member
Spanish	Two *Voces del Canal* members, Dominican University student, city police officer
Spanish	Two *Voces del Canal* members, Dominican University student, Director of the non-profit organization
English	*Voces del Canal* member, Dominican University student, Assistant City Manager, City Product Manager, Dominican University faculty member
English	Dominican University student, City Director of Public Works, City Deputy Director of Public Works, City Police Lieutenant

After the small-group discussion, the participants were invited to share a meal together while continuing their conversations. Then, the small groups were assigned to one of three larger groups to share insights from their concept maps with one another. Two groups were Spanish-speaking and one group was English-speaking. Finally, using the concept maps, the three monolingual groups each created a list of findings and recommendations.

As I checked in with each of the groups that evening, several public officials commented on how emotionally moving it had been to read the entire set of 86 testimonials from residents and learn how the lack of street lighting personally affected their daily lives. The police lieutenant, for example, told me that while she had previously understood that the lack of street lighting was an issue in the community, she had a new depth of understanding for the challenges residents were facing with public security after reading the entire set of transcripts (fieldnotes, March 23, 2022). In their testimonials, many people shared stories of theft or physical assault that they had personally experienced in the dark, empty streets of their neighborhoods. People explained that they avoided being out after dark at all costs, and many discussed how this took a toll on their mental health. Parents were especially dismayed that their children could not leave their crowded apartments after dark and often spent their evenings on electronic devices. For women who worked long hours, it was particularly terrifying when they arrived home after dark and had to walk long distances alone through the streets to reach their apartments.

While the city officials and police were already committed to creating policies and practices to support social justice in their city, the small group process for data analysis created a rare opportunity for them to actively collaborate on an activity and communicate directly with residents in a small group. Since the groups were monolingual, and with their prior training and preparation with the bilingual Dominican students, residents could fully participate in the coding and concept mapping process on equal footing with government officials and members of the police department. In addition, the data analysis session created a space for residents to publicly position themselves as political actors in their community. They were not simply reporting their observations to public officials with the hope that those in power would create change for them, but rather active participants in the decision making process. When reflecting on her experience collaborating with city officials during data analysis, one of the women described it in this way, *"Ahora actualmente nos están escuchando más la ciudad. Están trabajando con nosotros, nos están dando importancia, cuando hace muchos años no lo hacían....ahora estamos trabajando mano a mano"* (Now the city is listening to us more, they are working with us, they are giving us importance, for many years they did not....now we are working hand in hand).

Once everyone had finished concept mapping their ideas, one person from each of the three monolingual groups shared their findings and recommendations with the whole group in the presenter's dominant language, while another bilingual member of that group translated into the other language (i.e., some presented in Spanish with English translation, others spoke in English with Spanish translation). After each group presented their findings and recommendations all participants were invited to reflect on their experience with the data analysis process. A recurring theme in their reflections was that the data analysis session had created an avenue for the participants to begin to connect with one another through meaningful dialogue—despite marked differences in language, class, and cultural backgrounds. One woman later described the harmony achieved between the various groups that evening with a metaphor, *"Fue fantástico porque todos estaban en la misma sinfonía"* (It was fantastic because we were all in the same symphony). The public officials also greatly appreciated the opportunity to work together with community residents. The Assistant City Manager later reflected on her experience by sharing that, "It was one of the best community meetings I've ever been a part of," and the City Director of Public Works agreed that it was a "terrific opportunity to get to know each other" (fieldnotes, May 2, 2022). From the perspective of the director of the non-profit organization, the PAR group's collaboration with city officials that evening was essential to the ultimate success of the project. During a meeting a few days later he noted that the earlier PAR project conducted in the community in 2012 had not led to any significant changes for residents because this project had not been properly situated within the structure of the city government (fieldnotes, April 1, 2022).

Working from the lists of findings and recommendations created during the group data analysis session, the women created a presentation that they delivered to the City Council later that spring. After the data analysis session, the Assistant City Manager actively supported the group's preparation for this presentation and invited the women to a dress rehearsal a few weeks in advance—a crucial step that allowed them to practice their footing in the official government space of the City Hall Council Chambers. One of the women explained that before she practiced her part of the presentation she wasn't sure if she could do it. She recounted how nervous she felt

when it was her turn to practice, but as she returned to her seat after taking her turn at the podium another woman in the group reassured her, *"ella me dice, ves, ves que si podías"* (she told me see, see, that you could do it). She added, *"El día de la presentación estaba un poquito nerviosa pero no igual como el día que practicamos"* (The day of the presentation I was a little nervous but not like the day we practiced).

Each of the nine community residents who had participated in the project was responsible for presenting one section of the presentation, which again positioned them as political actors in the community and reinforced this emergent identity. One member of the group later reflected that, *"Todas hicimos muy profesional, cada persona sin miedo, la voz bien fuerte, bien preparada."* (We were all very professional, each person without fear, with a strong voice, well prepared.) The evening of the presentation was a huge accomplishment for the group, and many later reflected on how this experience shifted their perception of themselves. One woman said, *"El mas logro que me pasó, el dia que me presenté pues que, que como que lo hice un poco más natural sin sentir tanto nervios, miedo. Entonces para mi fue mucho porque yo soy muy nerviosa para hablar....muy vergonzosa...Para mi me cuesta mucho...yo me puedo congelar, los nervios me ganan entonces...pero pienso mejorarlo y para mi fue un logro como paso muy alto que subí al lograrlo."* (The greatest achievement that happened to me, the day I presented, well, I kind of did it a little more naturally without feeling so nervous, afraid. So for me it was a lot because I am very nervous to speak...very embarrassed...For me it is very difficult....I can freeze, nerves get the better of me then... but I think I am improving and for me it was an achievement like a very high obstacle that I surpassed when I achieved it.)

The presentation was also unanimously applauded by the members of the city council at the meeting. Not only had the project successfully avoided a "gotcha moment," but given the advanced collaboration the city was prepared to commit $100,000 that evening to improving public lighting along the routes initially identified by the women. One of the city council members responded to the presentation that evening by commenting, "I sit here inspired by your presence and words. I am deeply persuaded by what you are asking for, safety, quality of life—which is what you deserve. I hold us accountable to assuring that people feel safe. You have shown up for your community and all of San Rafael. This is the type of city we want to be" (fieldnotes, May 2, 2022).

Several months after the project ended, I was invited to speak about our collaboration at a training designed to cultivate leadership among professionals working in the city. I took the opportunity to ask the Assistant City Manager if she thought the city would have eventually addressed the lighting issues in the community, even if the PAR project had never occurred. She explained that from her perspective working within the city government, the PAR project had prioritized the community's need for increased street lighting and focused the government's attention on this particular issue. She also shared that reading the 86 testimonials from the residents and hearing the women speak personally about their experiences allowed public officials to better understand how the lack of public lighting was seriously affecting their quality of life (fieldnotes, November 15, 2022). Thus, although the city had been aware of the public safety issues caused by the lack of street lighting before the project even began, the PAR process had centered the community's voice and knowledge in the city's decision making process of how to allocate public funds.

PAR as a Methodology for Community Organizing and Collective Action

During the nine-month PAR project, I often felt conflicted about my position of leadership within the group and my inability to share power in a way that equally included the community residents in the development of each stage of the research process. I was also dismayed that our weekly meetings only focused on the logistical aspects of designing a methodology for data collection to achieve a practical goal since I had begun the project with the assumption that the Photovoice process would ultimately lead the group to identify a research question that explored processes and relationships pertaining to social inequality or systemic racism. Yet since one of my central aims was to co-design a research project with community residents I did not enter the collaboration with a specific research question in mind, and I came with only a suggestion for using Photovoice as a methodology for gathering the perspectives of community residents about their lived experiences. I quickly found, however, that while the women were willing to spend their Wednesday evenings working together for the specific goal of increasing public lighting in their community, they could not afford to give up evenings with their families to explore the types of theoretical research questions I initially imagined. Therefore, instead of insisting that the project start with a focus on the co-development of a research question, the project followed Tuck's (2009) plea to university researchers to begin with the desires of the community—in this case, to increase public security through improved street lighting in their neighborhoods.

My findings suggest that my early conceptualization of the project was drawing from a romanticized theory of Participatory Action Research that assumes residents will want to spend scarce time and resources to "fully" engage in each step of the research process. What emerged during the academic year, however, can be better understood as a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which novice researchers (i.e., community residents) entered the research collaborative with the desire to learn how to use the research process to advocate for themselves and their community. As such, it was natural that they often looked to me as the experienced researcher for guidance on how to design and implement a qualitative research project and how to analyze the qualitative data they collected. Moreover, I found that all of the women were highly motivated by the opportunity to learn together how to advocate for their community and, as Ginwright (2018) suggests, to tap into the aspects of a life that make us human—our creativity, our curiosity, and our ability to form a community with one another. I believe it was these aspects of the project that motivated all seven women who first gathered together on an evening in early September to continue to show up each week until the final presentation of the project findings and recommendations to the City Council in May. Even when two of the seven women faced major hardships in their life—the death of a family member due to COVID and a serious operation requiring a hospital stay—they returned to our Community of Practice to finish the project.

Conceptualizing this PAR project as a Community of Practice not only emphasizes the learning process that occurred throughout the project, but also draws attention to the trusting relationships that were essential for community residents to successfully move from the periphery of the Community of Practice to the center. That is, it was these trusting relationships that allowed space for the community residents to offer suggestions and guide

the project in unanticipated ways. In hindsight, it was within these emergent moments that power was shared between members of the research group and the project began to move in novel directions—even though this was not how I originally envisioned sharing power within the traditional steps of the research process (e.g., when developing the research question, selecting research methods, creating a process for data analysis). It is important to note that these points of true collaboration—such as when the women took the lead in organizing the street fair or made the decision to invite key public officials to participate in the project—were not incidental to the project, but critical to its success. These decisions stemmed from the women's cultural understandings of what was necessary for the project to succeed in the local context and based on insights that I lacked as an outside academic researcher. Thus, by centering the development of trusting relationships within the research collective and remaining open to emergent research, opportunities inevitably arose to share power in the decision-making process.

The development of relationships built on trust and respect also allowed the women to take the necessary risks to try out new ways of being in the world. As the project unfolded and the women took the lead at pivotal moments during the project, they began to develop a stance as political actors and community organizers in alignment with the work of the group. During this process it was critical for them to have social contexts that provided opportunities to practice the necessary footing to maintain this novel stance, particularly in contexts in which they were differently positioned in relationship to people in power according to race, class, gender, citizenship status, language ability, or educational level. The women were able to practice their stance as community leaders and political actors on multiple occasions, including during the street fair, the data analysis session, and their final presentation of findings and recommendations to the City Council. At these public events, the women not only began to identify themselves as leaders in the community, but were also recognized by others for their leadership abilities. These findings suggest that when designing community engaged research, special attention should be given to the social contexts that allow participants to practice their footing in relationship to people differently positioned from them in existing power structures in society. Since the various footings people take throughout an interaction often reinforce existing social identities and power relationships, community residents working to position themselves in ways that challenge existing social roles and redefine their social identities must have safe and supportive opportunities to do so.

A final implication of this project is that PAR collaboratives should consider where community and institutional interests are converging in order to seek opportunities to collaborate with social institutions that enact public policies and make decisions affecting marginalized communities. If one of the goals of Participatory Action Research is social transformation, then PAR collectives must be attuned to how power operates at the local level and how public policy decisions are made that directly affect the community. Articulating PAR collaboratives to existing power structures opens possibilities for centering community voice and knowledge in decision making processes, thereby providing a counter-narrative to current hegemonic discourses that advocate for policies based on principles of color-blindness, equal opportunity, or merit standards. In this project, Participatory Action Research directly affected public policy by centering the residents' lived experiences in the city's decision-making process of how to allocate public funds. Rather than working outside of the existing power structures in the community, the residents were able to successfully advocate for change by working in

collaboration with city officials during the PAR project and avoiding a confrontational "gotcha" moment at the city council presentation.

Despite the success of the PAR project and the drastic improvements to public lighting that were made based on the recommendations of the residents, today the community is still facing inequitable living conditions in many areas, including housing, policing, and education. In my final interviews with the women after the end of the PAR project, I asked each one what they hoped the organization *Voces del Canal* would achieve in the future, and what they wanted for their community. As they articulated their hopes and dreams for the future, it struck me that they were fighting for what many of us take for granted—the socially just living conditions that we all want for ourselves, our families and our communities. One of the women articulated her dreams for the future in this way:

> *Queremos una comunidad segura, una comunidad limpia, una comunidad con salud, una comunidad que haya recibido mucho beneficios de salud mental, a donde los niños pueden andar corriendo libremente, jugando donde sea, sin correr ninguna clase de peligro, y que la comunidad de Canal se nos toman en cuento en las decisiones gubernamentales que tiene que ver con cambios en nuestra comunidad.*
>
> We want a safe community, a clean community, a healthy community, a community that has a lot of mental health support, where children can run freely, play wherever they want, without being in any kind of danger, and that the Canal community is taken into account in government decisions that have to do with changes in our community.

If university researchers hope to partner with community residents to advance these or similar goals through community engaged research, I argue that conceptualizing the research collaborative as a Community of Practice will allow for a better understanding of the relationship dynamics, personal motivations, and social contexts that empower community residents to create social change. As such, university researchers planning to undertake such a project should begin by asking themselves if they can afford the deep investment in time necessary to develop the trusting relationships that undergird any Community of Practice. The research findings shared above also invite researchers to consider the following questions: How will the research process foster curiosity, creativity, and community during the learning process so that residents are motivated to sustain their participation in a lengthy project? How will the research collective create safe spaces for residents to practice their footing and take on new identities, particularly when these new ways of being in the world require residents to challenge existing social roles and long-standing power relationships? And, how can the research collective include government officials and policymakers that have the potential to make decisions affecting community members' lives? While these are not easy questions to answer, this project illustrates one possibility for creating a Community of Practice in which university members and neighborhood residents successfully advocated for the needs of the community using Participatory Action Research.

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