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ARTICLE

From consent to mutual inquiry

Balancing democracy and authority in action research

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ABSTRACT

The Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program is a joint endeavor between the Ford Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. This paper focuses on the experiences of the Research and Documentation component of LCW – lead by a research team from the Wagner School – during the initial implementation phases of the research. This component formed an inquiry group consisting of both academic researchers and social change practitioners to collaboratively explore and discover the ways in which communities doing social change engage in the work of leadership. We used group relations theory to understand a series of critical dilemmas and contradictions experienced by the co-researchers. This paper identifies four such paradoxes that center around issues of democracy and authority.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- group relations
- leadership
- paradox
- social change

Just as the ideal of democracy animates political life but is often not fully realized, the democratic aspirations behind action research are much harder to achieve in practice than in theory. In particular, the participative dimension of action research presents certain challenges when members of the inquiry process come from different social worlds and do not share the same identities. These contexts provide excellent arenas to explore how we might better attain the democratic aspirations of action research, one of five dimensions Reason and Bradbury cite as critical in their *Handbook of Action Research* (2001).

In this article we tell the story of our decision to invite a group of award recipients of a leadership program, called 'Leadership for a Changing World', (LCW) to be co-researchers in a national, multi-year, foundation-funded research project to study leadership for social change. The program is a partnership between the Ford Foundation, the Washington DC-based Advocacy Institute, and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. The broad goal of LCW is to change the conversation about leadership in the US so that the work of the award recipients, and others like them, becomes more recognized and supported. Our role is to contribute to this broader goal by generating new knowledge about leadership, working with the award recipients and their communities. Our guiding question is: How do communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership?

As a group, the award recipients bring a diversity of knowledge and experience of social change leadership to the research effort. For example, one is an AIDS policy advocate who is working to empower African-American communities to tackle the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS. Another organized a coalition of 17 immigrant and refugee groups in Chicago and helped them hold the Immigration and Naturalization Service accountable. There is a team of women fighting mountain-top removal mining in rural West Virginia; an organizer of taco vendors in Phoenix; a team helping welfare mothers bring their voices to the policy arena; and a team of janitors in Los Angeles involved in a national campaign to organize their fellow building service workers. They are diverse in race, ethnicity, nationality and gender. They share a commitment to bring justice to vulnerable communities, and each has a complex story to tell.[2]

Our invitation produced a research community whose members generally come from very different social worlds and different social and professional practices: practitioners involved in social change efforts in vulnerable communities and researchers from a private university. In the spirit of reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), we note that, while there are some significant differences between us and the award recipients, there are some similarities that have helped to bring us together. The initiating research team consists mostly of women, who are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and country of origin. We all have some connection to community-based work, either through the university or other aspects

of our lives. In joining with the award recipients, we aspired to form an inquiry group that would generate mutual benefits for all.

This article focuses on our experience during the initial implementation phase of the research, particularly design, invitation to do co-research and early co-researcher encounters. We start with the assumption that social and group life are paradoxical (Smith & Berg, 1987), as are the contexts in which human beings try to understand their experience, including action research. This is true particularly when issues of power become evident in an interaction (Benson, 1977). According to Pool and Van de Ven, a paradox, loosely defined, is 'an informal umbrella for interesting and thought-provoking contradictions of all sorts' (1989, p. 563). It is a puzzle that grabs our attention and calls for a solution.

In this article we identify four paradoxes that emerged at the intersection between the democratic theory of our action research and what happened when the theory 'hit the road' during implementation. These are:

1) How can you co-design a plan for funders in advance of actually working with the co-researchers?
2) How can you hold out the expectation of having everyone participate while believing in the importance of voluntary engagement?
3) How do you negotiate being challenged by practitioners based on association with an academy that you also see as challenging?
4) How do you open a democratic process to invite new voices without letting your own voice be silenced?

Our research practice is influenced not only by the theoretical foundations of the research, but also by the larger institutional context in which the project is embedded and the power dynamics that flow from it. The participative dimension of action research is also inherently linked to the dynamics of the group as it develops and takes on a life of its own. Therefore, we use group relations theory (Bennis & Shepard, 1974; Bion, 1961; Colman & Bexton, 1975; Klein, 1985[1959]; Miller, 1965; Rioch, 1975; Wells, 1990) to suggest that doing action research democratically means going step-by-step through a process of negotiating authority, clarifying tasks and roles, and setting boundaries among the group members. In this process, nothing and no one can be taken for granted. The democratic aspiration of action research involves developing authentic relationships over time, and attending to the power dynamics within which they emerge. Acknowledging power dynamics, group participants must authorize each other to contribute their expertise to the service of the group, while at the same time agreeing to own their authority in making sure that those contributions are taken seriously.

Even though this article primarily reflects the point of view of the initiating research team, it is punctuated with the voices of other co-researchers. The reflection started internally to make sense of the initiating team's experience

encountering co-researchers and implementing the research design. However, participatory research implies ownership of a project from beginning to end, including ownership of the products of the research. In this spirit, the initiating team shared their reflections with two award recipients – Joan and Salvador – with whom we have developed a deep research conversation.[3] We invited them to respond to our ideas, as well as to bring their own voices to the document as co-authors.

The article is structured as follows. We first explore the theoretical foundations of our research and its direct implications for the research design and implementation. We then proceed to identify and analyse the constellation of relationships that constitute the social context of our practice and its impact on the research process. Next, we identify and explore the four paradoxes that emerged at the level of the group as we strove to live our democratic aspirations.

Our experience will raise important questions for several audiences: newly formed action research teams who are launching their first inquiry together; action researchers whose work is embedded in the context of a larger non-research-based project; partnerships where the relationships are being worked out among the partners at the same time that the inquiry is taking place; and those working in communities created for special purposes rather than in long-standing communities of practice.

Theoretical foundations and methodology

We adopted a particular lens to study leadership, one that views leadership as a social construction. This means that people carry mental models (deeply ingrained assumptions or images) of leadership (Gardner, 1995), but it also means that leadership is itself a shared act of meaning making in the context of a group's work to accomplish a common purpose (Drath & Palus, 1994). Our choice of lens has clear implications for both *focus* – what to study – and *stance* – who defines what's important and does the work of research (Ospina & Schall, 2000; Ospina, Godsoe & Schall, 2002).

In terms of focus, a social construction lens led us to pay attention to *the work of leadership* more than the behaviors of people we call leaders. If leadership is about meaning making, then it is inevitably relational and collective, and therefore, the experience of leadership as it is expressed in the work of the group must be studied. In terms of stance, once we decided to focus on the work of leadership, it made sense to involve the people engaged in the work. Hence, we decided to invite a group of 'leaders' to stand with us to inquire together about the meaning of leadership from the inside out. Our stance then, is one of co-production, where we as co-researchers do research with leaders on leadership. A true process of *co-production* requires that each member place his or her

strengths and expertise in the service of the group, similar to what Chataway calls 'mutual inquiry' (1997).

Our stance is also appreciative. Our original motivation was to have a design that offered participants an opportunity to think about the future of their communities, articulated in their own voices, so as to mutually gain insights about their leadership practices at their best (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). In hindsight, this stance provided additional contributions relevant to this article. As Cooperrider and Srivastva describe it, appreciative inquiry 'is a way of living with, being with, and directly participating in the varieties of social organization we are compelled to study' (1987, p. 131). In this way, appreciative inquiry is *mutually generative*: through relational process geared toward creating positive images of the future, co-researchers – from the university and from communities in our case – can learn together about leadership, but also understand their experience of co-production in a new way. If action research 'provide[s] the intellectual rationale and reflexive methodology required to support the emergence of a more egalitarian "postbureaucratic" form of organization' (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 130), then appreciative inquiry provides the tools to (re)create and (re)enact the co-researcher relationship. As Gergen (2003) noted recently, appreciative inquiry has the potential to democratize human relationships.

Given this lens, focus and stance, certain *methods* follow naturally. Our research meets the criteria articulated by Brooks and Watkins (1994, see also Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000) for action inquiry: the goal is new knowledge to inform action; people who comprise the population of the research are active participants in the process; data is collected systematically and comes from participants' experience; and the research aims to improve professional practice, organizational outcomes, or social democracy. Framing our research within the broad tradition of action inquiry, we designed a multi-modal research project that includes narrative inquiry, ethnography and cooperative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993) is the core of our research design. In this stream, all participants engage with the core team to create a leadership story about the work in each community. Co-production occurs through iterative rounds of conversations based on appreciative protocols, created around themes the award recipients identified as key to their leadership stories. The initiating team also does 'horizontal analysis' (Kelchtermans, 1999) of the transcripts to develop themes across stories.

The second stream, ethnography (Jessor, Colby & Shweder, 1996; Stringer, 1997), also gives award recipients authority to set the direction of the inquiry process. In this stream, five participants are exploring their work in-depth and over time. As an example, two participants who met through the program decided to work together to explore the role of the Black Church in the fight against HIV/AIDS through an original theatrical production. An ethnographer is

working with them to document and draw lessons from their collaboration. In the third research stream, co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001), two small learning communities of award recipients have formed. Each group developed its own question to be explored through cycles of action and reflection. As an example, one group is asking the question: 'How do we create space/opportunities where individuals can recognize themselves as leaders and develop their leadership?'

This design gave award recipients the opportunity to choose the degree of participation within each stream, although all were expected to participate at least in the narrative stream. Of the 20 award recipients in the first group of the program, 16 representatives are doing either co-operative inquiry or ethnography, and one is doing both.

The social embeddedness of our research project

Two important and somewhat distinct 'practical spaces' represent the social context of our research, and clearly affected our inquiry practice. The first space points to social relationships we engage in outside of the direct research process, so we call it the 'outward space'. This space is defined by the broader goals of LCW that require us to manage relationships with actors whom we originally did not imagine being involved directly in the research. The second space involves the newly formed research team, composed, in theory, of the core university team and the award recipients who we invited to be co-researchers with us. This space points to the management of relationships with actors directly involved in the research process. We call this the 'inward space'.

Through our conversations with co-researchers, we have come to see that conceiving of these two spaces as separate was getting in our way and that appreciating their interconnectedness and interdependency would be more productive both for our learning and for the project. While we have taken this learning to heart, and the discussions that follow reflect this, we have kept them analytically distinct for clarity.

Outward space of the social context

Our project represents the research and documentation component of a larger signature program sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The foundation set important initial parameters for this component that matched our own preferences and established a strong basis for collaboration going forward. These included a mandate to respect and use practitioner knowledge as a source for understanding leadership; and a request to propose a research agenda that would go beyond traditional leadership paradigms, paying particular attention to the variety of

forms leadership may take. As a signature program, however, the foundation is more engaged in the project than traditionally expected for funded research.

As we face outward in the social context of this project, we encounter the context of our school and the program partnership. Some of the design choices we have made depart significantly from those of our colleagues in the school of public policy and management of which we are a part. There the dominant tradition of legitimate research has been positivism, even for qualitative projects. In this context, deviations from the orthodox canon are often challenged. As we present our work both within our institution and to other academic audiences, we find both great interest and great skepticism. Will we be able to generalize our findings, given issues of 'sample size' and 'selection'? By what standard of validity can our research be judged? We keep these questions in mind as we recognize that the answers, based on the internal consistency of our framework, may not satisfy all our colleagues.

With respect to the partnership, all three partner institutions devote a considerable amount of time to managing and sustaining the partnership. We each started with different tasks: one partner providing the funding and the broad vision, another administering the program (selection, award money, and program-wide meetings). In turn, our task was working with the program's award recipients to generate new insights about leadership, and to disseminate their stories so others could learn about leadership through them. While these distinct roles remain intact, we have evolved an understanding of a common program-wide goal – to facilitate a new conversation about community leadership – that has moved us toward collective ownership of the whole enterprise.

The common assumption is that a public conversation acknowledging community leadership – its existence, attributes and contributions – will translate into more support for the efforts of the awardees, their organizations and others like them. However, the 2001 Program Award Recipient Salvador Reza reminds us that the need to acknowledge this type of leadership through an awards program, and the desire to change the conversation about leadership, also reflects the logic of the larger social system and the power dynamics that sustain the status quo. Thus, he argues, this goal is not neutral and it affects the nature of the program.

To illustrate the pervasiveness of these power dynamics, Salvador quotes the Latin American intellectual and philosopher, Roberto Fernández Retamar, in an essay about the role of intellectuals in the region. In response to a question posed by some European intellectuals about whether 'culture' exists in Latin America, Fernández Retamar (1989, p.3) writes:

> The question seemed to me to reveal one of the roots of the polemic, and hence, could also be expressed in another way: 'Do you exist?' For to question our culture is to question our very existence, our human reality itself . . . since it suggests that we would be but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere. This elsewhere is of course the metropolis, the colonizing centers, whose 'right wings' have exploited us and

> whose supposed 'left wings' have pretended and continue to pretend to guide us with pious solicitude – in both cases with the assistance of local intermediaries of varying persuasions.

This logic, Salvador believes, could be applied to LCW. Society's disregard for social change leadership is parallel to the disregard for the people who live in the communities where this type of leadership occurs. Salvador claims that the act of studying this 'other' type of leadership may contribute to questioning its validity rather than making it more legitimate. The risk is that the independence of this kind of leadership, in other words its strength, will be lost or invalidated. Similar potential risks mentioned by other program participants are that the study may just serve to advance the leadership literature or that it may contribute to set apart social change leadership as exotic. Both scenarios would work against community leaders and program goals. Salvador's analysis highlights the importance of defining social change leadership not in contrast to corporate or traditional leadership, but by its own merit.

Inward space of the social context

The relationships in the inward space stem directly from the original decision to engage in co-production of knowledge with the award recipients. We work with each award recipient as a co-researcher in at least one of the three streams that constitute our research design. As 2001 Program Award Recipient Joan Minieri says, 'the research, in conjunction with the program-wide meetings, creates opportunities for awardees to clearly identify how they do their work, then gain insight into the effectiveness of their actions by engaging together in intentional reflection'.

The democratic and participatory aspiration behind our research design is consistent with the broader program goals, with the political philosophy of award recipients, and with our theoretical framework about leadership. Our first encounter with award recipients, however, did not result in automatic endorsement or positive engagement for co-research. Instead, we experienced a large degree of distrust, frustration and conflict. While it was a disappointing experience at the time, in retrospect we understand that the initial clashes came from specific sources.

Here Salvador's power analysis is helpful. He acknowledges that relationships have developed positively since the first meeting, and that we are far from where we started. But he also argues that the basic issues that produced the initial tension will never be entirely resolved because they relate to the broader context that frames the program. The tension has less to do with the quality of the work or the intentions of the core research team and more to do with power relations that make the type of work that social change leaders do invisible.

Power at the societal level, he argues, affects the nature of the triangle of relationships that emerges within the program:

1) those who provide the funding;
2) those who administer the awards program and those responsible for the research activities mandated by the funder; and
3) those who are the 'objects' of the program and the research.

In his words:

> No matter how much trust develops among award recipients and partners at a personal or group level, the existing power correlations do not change. These are correlations between those who cut the cheese [and others who help them in the process] and those who struggle for the crumbs that fall from the table.

Hence, some award recipients have felt the need to challenge this correlation of forces from the very beginning. As Salvador says: 'unless people's organizations [such as some participating in LCW] can speak of power analysis with the "powerful", this study will not be more than a top-down study'.

The effects of this dynamic became evident in other ways too. As Joan reminds us, at least during the first year of the cycle, the awardees as a group had not fully explored the practical implications of embracing the program's goal to change the conversation about leadership: what impact could this process actually have on their work and in their communities? How is their participation the same or different from what they already do as part of their leadership? This, she believes, affected the nature and quality of the relationship among the program partners and the award recipients as co-researchers.

In retrospect then, we associate the initial tension to four factors linked to the social context of the program. First, we were working with people committed to questioning authority and yet we assumed they would not see us as authorities to be questioned. Second, we know on the one hand that co-research requires trust and that trust comes only from relationships built over time, but on the other hand, we moved too quickly without taking the time to build the relationships. Third, group relations suggest that a lack of coherence in a whole group leads to splitting in the group, but we went ahead as a partnership to engage award recipients without working through the issues that divided the partnership. Finally, we understand now that these dynamics are intrinsically linked to the power configuration within which the program in general, and the research design in particular, are embedded. It is precisely by paying deliberate attention to contradictory institutional arrangements and their implications for power relationships (Benson, 1977) that we find the creative force to address them.

Ultimately, the questioning and resistance of award recipients has pushed us to look at the assumptions behind our design and to reconstruct with the awardees how we do this research. The intense energy they brought to the early

encounters has shifted into energy that has given life to the project. We have slowed the pace of the research to allow for relationship building, which has strengthened the research. Some underlying contradictions will continue to exist through the course of LCW. The paradoxes we discuss below reflect the hopes and principles of co-research as a collaborative and democratic inquiry process, but also issues of power, authority, autonomy and ownership that cannot be ignored.

Hitting the road: paradoxes of putting action theory into practice

In the next sections we explore four paradoxes that stem from the group dynamics generated within the described social context. The following core definitions from group relations theory frame the analysis. *Task*, or primary task, is what a group must achieve to insure its survival, in other words, the group's reason for being. If a group cannot work on its task, it will likely be dissolved. *Boundary* defines the limits of a group – who is 'in' and who is 'out' – and the identities of its membership. Without clear boundaries a group is at risk of never really coming together to address its primary task. *Authority* refers to who has responsibility for doing certain levels and types of work on behalf of the group. A group may authorize an individual to do certain pieces of its work, or conversely, an individual may authorize him or herself to do the work. When a group lacks clarity around authority, it may become associated with an autocratic method of organizing that runs counter to democratic principles. Finally, we use *role* to describe the different ways in which individuals within a group take up the work of the group. When roles are not clearly defined a group may become stuck on its primary task, and it may also be difficult to achieve genuine engagement (Colman & Bexton, 1975).

Behind these paradoxes is an underlying and unresolved tension between democracy and authority as it has been played out in the context of our research practice. Specifically, there is something in each of these paradoxes that relates to a lack of clarity around issues of task, boundary, authority and role, which in part stem from the following factors: the outward and inward relationships shaping the social context of our research; the original lack of acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of those relationships; and the unspoken reality of their embeddedness within a broader set of power relationships that ultimately co-researchers do not control.

As Pool and Van de Ven (1989) argue, paradox forces us to ask new questions, to find answers that extend the limits of our imagination, and to stretch our current thinking. It is thus a positive force. In recognizing the paradoxes of our work we hope to come up with creative ways to further the democratic aspira-

tions of this action research project and to offer insights helpful to others pursuing similar efforts.

Paradox 1: How can you co-design a plan for the funders in advance of actually working with co-researchers?

The foundation asked us to develop a research plan a year and a half before we would meet the first award recipients. We agreed that engaging in a research process without a plan could result in a lack of clarity about the nature and purpose of the research (Schroeder, 1997). Submitting a research plan before the award recipients were selected put us in the paradoxical position of believing in co-design but proceeding without participation from award recipients. In effect, we made what McGuire calls a unilateral design decision while promoting democratic participation (1993) and made it impossible for the co-researchers to join in true 'mutual inquiry' (Chataway, 1997) with influence over the original design of the research. Our partners (the Ford Foundation and the Advocacy Institute) granted us the authority to design the research agenda, but the award recipients did not. This runs contrary to the principles of participatory research (McGuire, 1993) and obscures our role and task.

Integral to this paradox is the idea that co-research demands a significant commitment of time by all involved to develop trusting relationships (McGuire, 1993), and to negotiate who has authority and responsibility for taking on (or sharing) certain tasks. The program design, which included four program-wide meetings over the two year cycle, set certain expectations and limits for award recipient engagement in research tasks and other aspects of the program. Time for relationship building was not factored in. The busy schedules of the award recipients coupled with the limits on our time together as a coherent group worked against the opportunity to make progress toward joining fully as co-researchers in mutual inquiry.

When we first began our work with the award recipients, we hit the consequences of this paradox. We were asking award recipients to be co-researchers with shared authority but we also presented them with a blueprint for how the research would be done. The group's reaction was one of distrust: our discourse was democratic, but our actions seemed imposed. Since our intentions were genuinely participative, we felt misinterpreted. We thought our blueprint would facilitate their ability to define the type and degree of participation that felt right to them. But even choice – 'you do not have to participate if you do not feel like doing it' – was heard as antidemocratic – 'either take it as it is, or leave it'.

One way in which we attempted to negotiate this conflict was to frame the various methods (narrative, ethnographic and cooperative inquiry) as 'containers' for the research. We presented the three streams of inquiry and the allocation of funds for them as open containers within which participants could decide the

content and direction of the research, a strategy that we found had been successful in other contexts (Chataway, 1997). We stressed the fact that we saw these streams as tools at the service of the award recipients. Addressing the conflict forced us to make more explicit our commitment to ensure that specifics such as what questions would be asked, and what sense we would make of our learning, would include considerable input from co-researchers (McGuire, 1993; Stringer, 1999).

In hindsight, some of the problems we encountered were due to anxiety – both theirs and ours. Our anxiety was rooted in the hope that our research design would be embraced by the award recipients and the fear that we would not be able to effectively communicate our approach in a convincing way. We knew that our co-researchers would come to the group with trepidations about working with 'researchers' because of their previous experiences with more traditional forms of research, and we hoped that our design had sufficiently addressed their potential concerns. Their anxiety came from a lack of clarity about roles and the task we were proposing given the 'charged' social context. It was compounded by the unspoken power relations underlying the first encounter of all members of the newly formed program community – partners and award recipients. The circumstances may have heightened awareness of these power dynamics for some awardees, as Salvador suggested earlier. All these factors together help explain why members of the first group could not trust our invitation, misunderstood what was expected of them, and therefore resisted taking up the task.

Joan helps us understand how award recipients experienced this anxiety during that first encounter. She says:

> It may also be useful to place the original introduction of the research component into the introduction of the overall program. Although the research team provided awardees with written information and the invitation to ask questions before the first program-wide meeting, a great deal of information about various aspects of the program had been distributed. Also, from an awardee perspective, being named as an awardee was the result of a long, intensive process. This all likely contributed to most awardees waiting until the meeting itself to try to understand the goals and process of the research. In addition, the first program-wide meeting itself included a broad range of stakeholders and was the culmination of great anticipation on the part of all involved. This all may have contributed to an early sense of being observed, not just by the NYU partners. This substantially eased by the second meeting, once relationships, all around, had a chance to form and develop.

As Joan notes, some of the anxiety that caused early tensions has subsided. We still see the value in beginning with a broad plan, especially given the limited time our co-researchers have to engage with us. But we have learned that we need to move more slowly and that we must address the interpersonal and group dynamics of the first encounter between members from very different worlds.

Finally, if we had not seen the research component as separate from the

other parts of the program, we would have presented research and reflection as integral aspects of the overall program. The paradox of co-design would still have existed, but it could have been acknowledged; this might have made it possible for the group to work through the paradox in creative ways and not leave group members feeling isolated or misunderstood. These insights placed us in a different position as we encountered the second group of program participants. With them, we first engaged in an appreciative conversation about their previous research experiences. This conversation allowed us to imagine a different way of engaging in research thus helping to shift the power relations between us.

Paradox 2: How can you hold out the expectation of having everyone participate while believing in the importance of voluntary engagement?

The program holds certain expectations of its award recipients. One such expectation is attendance at the four program-wide meetings. Another is participation in all the aspects of the program, including the research, at least the narrative stream. The voluntary nature of participation is further clouded by the US$100,000 award participants receive. Parallel to these expectations, we seek the voluntary engagement of the award recipients in the research. Voluntary engagement has to allow for the possibility that some will choose not to participate at all. This option, however, was not feasible within the larger social context of the program. Had prospective award recipients signaled lack of interest in the research or in attending the program-wide meetings, their chances of selection would be diminished.

We have attempted to manage this paradox with the first group by tailoring both the process and the products of the research to be immediately and practically useful to them. Joan describes the interests and concerns of the award recipients in the following way:

> Social change leaders, under constant pressure to produce a lot with a little, generally tend to assess whether or not to invest in something based not only on what they can learn, but also significantly on what they will be able to do. They are more likely to devote their time based on their direct self-interest or that of their group, as well as on seeing a potential impact in their community.

She adds, 'If awardees more fully see the benefits of being co-researchers, more may choose to increase their engagement.' We hoped that by meeting some of their immediate needs for action, we would position the research as a tool to strengthen and support their work, thus making mutual inquiry appealing to them.

In group relations terms, this paradox relates to the question of what task the award recipients believe they have signed up for. Clearly, voluntary participation, let alone full engagement, requires clarity about the task in which one is

invited to engage. In this case, a task that is relevant to forwarding their work is more appealing to award recipients. However, given the 'charged' social context, that clarity did not exist for the first group. In general, award recipients expected the program to recognize their good work, to provide the award money with no strings attached and to go on to spend the funds in ways that they determined would further their work. But this has not been their experience. Members of the newly formed 'community' had to negotiate their diverse expectations and work together to agree on the meaning of each program feature and the tasks associated with it.

Until recently, the program did have competing primary tasks: to 'recognize, strengthen and support leaders'; to 'highlight the importance of leadership in improving lives'; to deepen 'our knowledge of how leadership is created and sustained'; and to demonstrate the variety of the 'leadership that abounds' in American communities, as stated in the nomination brochure. Recently, these competing tasks have been organized into a broad overall vision and this may reduce the tensions resulting from competing tasks and unclear vision for the next groups.

Despite the challenges this paradox presents, we have achieved our desired level of participation in the research and have made progress toward our goal of doing research that is useful to the awardees. But the ambivalence still persists. As Joan says, 'all the award recipients have agreed to be, if not co-researchers, then at least willing subjects'. Consistent with this statement, we have also accepted now the legitimacy of having different levels of participation in the research activities among the group, from basic consent to full engagement. The fact that representatives from 16 of the 32 individuals who received the awards (individually or as teams) are participating in co-operative inquiry or ethnography on a voluntary basis, and have found the process quite helpful, indicates that we have come a long way from consent to mutual inquiry.

Paradox 3: How do you negotiate being challenged by practitioners based on association with an academy that you see as challenging?

We approached our relationship with the award recipients conscious of the problematic relationship between the 'ivory tower' and people doing social change work at the grassroots level. We were clear about the well-deserved distrust many marginalized communities have for traditional researchers (Chataway, 1997). In part, we chose participatory forms of research for this reason – to signal a respect for practitioners as people who could usefully reflect on and research their own experience, not just be subjects of research. At the same time, we were also aware that our basic research design challenged conventional and prevailing paradigms and methods in the academy, at least our academy. We tried to bridge two worlds and risked rejection by both.

Paradoxically, we knew we faced being marginalized within the academy for our unorthodox approach to research (Schroeder, 1997) while we were trying to overcome the possibility of being marginalized by practitioners for our links to that very same academy. In the academy, the reasons for marginalization are all too clear – participatory and other forms of action research are often considered not 'objective', because they are usually not quantifiable, and do not adhere to some of the traditional rules of 'scientific' research. There is no immediate resolution to this tension. We can only hope that the quality of our design and implementation, and the quality of the knowledge developed, will speak for itself as we engage in conversation with our colleagues and contribute to making the academy more pluralistic.

In the world of practice, the rejection came as more of a surprise. In our first encounter, it became painfully obvious that simple claims to be different, to invite participants to join with us in mutual inquiry and share authority for the research were not enough to undo this distrust. The fact remained that we came from a university and the recipients came from, or were working on behalf of, marginalized communities. In other words, our role was loaded. We had difficulty escaping being seen as traditional researchers.

We are overcoming this barrier slowly and more so with some award recipients than others. Our plans to engage each award recipient as individuals has proven much more successful in terms of sharing authority over the direction of the inquiry, and aligning our 'espoused theories' with our 'theories in use' (Schon, 1983). Our appreciative stance was useful in many ways. For example, in the narrative inquiry we spent time with each recipient defining the areas of their work that they wanted to explore before designing protocols for group conversations in their communities. This stance encouraged them to feel safe enough to invite a variety of individuals to the interviews, including thoughtful critics in some cases. During the interviews, the wheels of conversation were greased by questions like, 'Can you tell me about a time when you were particularly proud of the way you handled conflict in your organization?' A potentially contentious issue like conflict, which had been defined as a central dimension by one of our co-researchers, was easily discussed by organizational insiders and outsiders alike because of the appreciative way in which it was framed. We have been gratified with the way in which our appreciative stance helps our co-researchers' colleagues jump into the conversation in such a natural and passionate way to tell us how they feel when things are at their best. The process itself helped to develop rapport, and through it we have begun to clarify our roles in a way that respects the importance of bringing together the contributions of scholars and practitioners.

We also invited two award recipients to join us for the preconference sessions of a scholarly meeting focused on action research. Together we participated in a workshop where we shared our experiences with co-inquiry. Other

action researchers joined the dialogue and provided useful feedback to our group. A group of co-researchers will also attend a conference on participatory action research to talk about their experience in one of the co-operative inquiry groups, and we hope to engage in more of these activities in the future. Finally, we have invited our co-researchers to get involved in the writing of the insights and collective learning generated throughout the work, as we are in this article, while remaining aware of the complexity of addressing issues of ownership over the results.

Paradox 4: How do you open a democratic process to invite new voices without letting your own voice be silenced?

In trying to make space for voices that have been lost in traditional research, we realized that for a while we had lost our own voice. We entered the work with the idea that in order to value practitioner expertise and create practice-grounded knowledge, we needed to underplay our role or the 'privilege' we had as members of academia. Our invitation to the award recipients to join us as co-researchers was one example of our effort to give up some privilege. In addition, we purposely took a back seat to them in conversations about leadership, not explicitly sharing our point of view to avoid imposing it. However, as we worked to give up our privilege and bring new voices into the conversation about leadership, we came to see that we were devaluing our own expertise and silencing ourselves, what Chataway (1997) calls self-censorship (see also Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila and Wallerstein, 2003). This paradox reveals critical issues about role, authority and power.

One example of this phenomenon has been our experience with the subset of award recipients who formed a group they call 'the Council'. They are community organizers who have joined together to build a wider movement through collective action. In forming a co-operative inquiry group, they insisted that they regularly engage in cycles of action and reflection in their daily practice and questioned the relevance of our expertise or role in facilitating their inquiry. However, they had not had a chance to see us in the role they questioned, nor had we had the opportunity to observe them taking up the cycles of action and reflection independently.

Our sense of the group and their goals created some concern that stepping out of our roles as facilitators would reduce the probability that the group would commit to the research task and to the type of reflection originally envisioned to accomplish the program's research goals. We also believed that this group devalued our potential role as expert facilitators and in doing so de-authorized us within the context of the group's work. This tension has diminished over time, but, as Salvador argues, its underlying causes remain in place. As we learned to relax our expectations of what our co-research relationship would look like, we

were able to make room for the Council to take up its inquiry work on terms that suit their needs while still holding them accountable for making a contribution to the larger project. We are now able to see more clearly the value of the work the Council is doing and we hope, and have some reason to believe, that there is some mutuality in this appreciation. In fact, in their self-organizing, creating their own inquiry question, and driving the process with great energy, the Council members are modeling the best of what action research hopes for.

Aside from this experience, there are other ways in which we allowed ourselves to become silenced in the early stages of the project, which we are still working to resolve. We felt that with all the privilege of social change leaders' perspectives there was little room for other legitimate roles. This was played out very clearly in the second program-wide meeting. We remained quiet throughout the meeting, generally not sharing our thoughts on leadership, thereby mistaking self-censorship for a sincere attempt to create a context of shared authority. All of this contributed to a lack of clarity for participants about our role as researchers. We realize we missed an opportunity then to build the community of learners required to do authentic co-research, and have learned the importance of taking the time to work through relationships.

We also recognize that shifting existing power dynamics requires that both sides rethink their assumptions and actions. We could have contributed to this shift by owning our expertise, and by challenging awardees' knee-jerk reaction based on their assumptions about us (Reason, 2000). In other words, we could have taken more steps to work out issues of authority at the micro-level of interaction, where power manifests itself. The awardees could have contributed by taking a less impulsive, more strategic approach. This means recognizing that efforts to balance power may vary according to context. As Reason puts it, 'the skilled exercise of the balance of power is *essential* for the development of social systems toward greater justice and effectiveness' (2000, p. 334). This work is the responsibility of all involved, not just those who have power.

Discussion: action research, group dynamics and power

Running through the four paradoxes is evidence of a common group defense mechanism referred to in group relations theory as splitting (Klein, 1985[1959]). This is the process of dividing feelings into differentiated elements, as pure black and white, good and bad, for example, by seeing self as all good and other as all bad. In our case, both the award recipients and the researchers engaged in this defense during our first encounter. We divided the small world of our program into action, valued as good and useful in this context, and inquiry, devalued as bad and not useful in this context.

Splitting can happen when, in response to anxiety, group members project

conflicting emotions onto different members of the group, in effect asking one person to carry the adolescent need for independence and another the need for limits. It can also happen between groups in a system, where each group feels that it represents something good and other groups represent something less good. Professions do this to one another; so do units within an organization (Halton, 1994).

At the macro-level, splitting could also be viewed as a group's reaction to a situation where power disparities are present but are either not acknowledged or are contested by one group and resisted or ignored by another. Splitting may be a defense against the consequences of the taken-for-granted assumptions about social stratification and inequality that help reproduce existing power dynamics in society.

A reading of the action research literature suggests that splitting is a common subtext in action research too, particularly participatory action research. The splitting may stem from a need to address the original tension between the roles of the researcher and the researched, in recognition of the linkage between knowledge and power (Bray et al., 2000; Chataway, 1997). Schroeder (1997) noticed the same split between action work and 'university' work in the Canada–Asia Partnership that took place within a traditional academic context. Paying attention to this phenomenon may be helpful to disentangle the way power and authority interact at the micro-level of group dynamics, and the role these realities play in strengthening or undermining democracy.

We entered the research space with an aspiration to engage in a truly democratic process involving all participants. We understood this to mean privileging practitioners' experience and knowledge. We implicitly expected that our co-researchers would also respect what we were bringing – research expertise. We hoped that we would authorize each other to bring something of value to the research process (i.e. mutual inquiry). In practice, we encountered a significant challenge to this aspiration, and to our own expertise.

We reacted in a way that minimized our own voice, hoping to create a more democratic environment. In doing so we undermined our authority and undervalued our expertise as initiating researchers. Concerning our relationship to the award recipients, the aspiration of mutual inquiry was slower to materialize because action had been given greater value than reflection within the project. In the context of our partnership, we allowed the research to be split off; in effect agreeing to retain the group's ambivalence and negative projections about research in relation to privilege and power. This exacerbated the tensions in the inward space of the co-researcher group and initially denied us the context in which to address these tensions. The more the group exerted their voice and tried to unveil some of the underlying power dynamics in the program-wide meeting, the more we fell under the spell of a 'false' tension between authority and democracy as action researchers.

Conclusion: balancing authority and democracy

Action research is an approach to inquiry that is essentially participative and grounded in experience (Reason and Bradbury 2001). The theoretical assumptions that underlie this approach highlight issues of agency and power, but leave relatively untouched issues of authority. Authority is a loaded concept with many negative connotations. Within certain participatory traditions, authority has a bad name because it gets confused with autocracy and authoritarianism. In this context, authority is viewed as a concept which is opposed to democracy. This confusion has important implications for understanding tensions inherent in the democratic aspiration to communities of inquiry that challenge the use of privilege and power in the process of knowledge generation.

In our case we understood early on that the authority inherent in the research process had to be shared. As academic researchers this meant giving up the privilege automatically conferred to our role of experts, and creating the democratic space for participation and for mutual inquiry. Yet we have learned that giving up privilege is not the same as giving up authority. In the tradition of group relations theory, authority is about permission to work on behalf of the group. For groups to function both effectively *and* democratically each member must feel authorized by the group and they must take up their own authority in the service of the group. Upon reflection, group relations theory and power analysis helped us understand that we needed to find ways to recover our authority, not reduce it.

This process of authorization, as well as task clarity and boundary setting, are necessary aspects of organized group life. We argue in this article that, in addition to affecting group effectiveness, working out these group processes is directly related to the realization of democratic social practices. In groups with mixed membership, building trust requires acknowledging the need for each member of the group to be 'authorized' to do some of the work in the name of the group. It also means taking up the authority that comes from one's expertise to do so, whether this expertise is practitioner- or researcher-based. Finally, in the context of action research, it means clarifying issues associated with broader power configurations that affect interpersonal relationships.

Ultimately, the group represents the most immediate social context within which larger power relations get worked out. Efforts that suppress the authority a person or a subgroup needs in order to do the job they are accountable for, may threaten the potential for democracy to flourish at the micro-level of interaction.

Originally perplexed about how we could regain our authority and begin to contribute again to the program goals, particularly in the shared context of the program-wide meetings, the process of reflection involved in writing this document has given us our voices back. Paying attention to the way issues of power, privilege and authority play out in the implementation of a participatory and

action research project offers us insight to pursue our democratic aspirations given the social contexts we inhabit.

In reflecting upon these dynamics, we have come to understand that even in action research there is a difference between giving up privilege (a democratic aspiration) and giving up authority (a suppression of one's voice). There is a false tension between democracy and authority that is at the heart of the four paradoxes we have discussed. These insights have driven us to engage differently both with our partners and with the program participants. We continue to work hard to find ways to offer our views as well as listen to those of others. And we are exploring ways to avoid losing our voice with the next group of award recipients. We have learned that a mutual inquiry space requires a very honest conversation about roles, tasks, boundaries, authority and power in the context of each particular project and as relationships are being built. In fact, we are learning that owning and taking up one's authority is *necessary* to create a truly democratic space to engage in co-production.

Notes

1 Authors are listed in alphabetical order with the exception of Sonia Ospina who is the first author.
2 Their profiles are available at: www.leadershipforchange.org
3 Other award recipients and members of the partnership may not agree with the positions of the authors who claim full responsibility for the ideas expressed here.

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