PAR in Prison: Reflections on Structuring a Participatory Process Under Surveillance

In institutions like prisons where “(in)justice reigns, where human spirits are being mangled, in the name of education or correction or youth development” (Fine and Torre, 2006, p. 256), significant hurdles obstruct the co-creation of knowledge. When the burden of risks and vulnerabilities falls disproportionately on those who are limited by the walls of the institution being scrutinized, research design and the roles of all involved need to be carefully examined. Fine and Torre expose the “intimate details” behind their work, allowing us to see the messy, risky and rewarding aspects of conducting PAR in institutions with severe power imbalances. Their observations provided me a framework for analyzing some of my own professional experiences of trying to design participatory processes in prisons.

Fine and Torre’s research on the impact of college education on incarcerated women provides a useful lens for deconstructing my own experiences for two reasons. The first and perhaps obvious reason is that many of my team’s projects, and in particular the one I want to analyze here, were conducted in prisons with similar limitations. Fine and Torre’s descriptions of always being watched, of being hyper aware of body language, of being careful about eliciting emotions that could be observed through a glass wall, are eerily familiar.
The second reason that Fine and Torre’s research is helpful is that their project had a similar scope to ours. Greenwood and Levin would characterize both efforts to be closer to what they call “action research”, as opposed to “participatory action research”. Since the projects being discussed here (mine, as well as that of Fine and Torre) deal with improving conditions in incarceration settings without directly challenging the existence of such institutions altogether, Greenwood and Levin would categorize us as “action researchers”. In their framework, participatory action researchers believe that “significant social change occurs only if power has changed hands and reduced inequality”. Action researchers in comparison,

“do not deny the existence of power differentials but believe that much can be done to improve the quality of life and functioning of organizations and that these improvements are also liberating” (Greenwood and Levin, p.52).

This is not to say that we would not like to challenge the existence of the system of mass incarceration, or to categorize our approaches and ourselves permanently. This discussion is useful to the extent that it allows me zoom in on some nuances and similarities in the scope of, and motivations behind, our projects.

**Developing an Implementation Plan for Improving Secure Juvenile Facilities in Illinois**

Working with the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York based non-profit that focuses on improving justice mechanisms around the country, I was part of a team that was charged with the development of a new vision and mission for Illinois’ Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). This agency oversees the juvenile detention (youth version of jail), placement (youth version of prison) and aftercare (Illinois’ youth version of reentry) systems in the state. Deeply troubled by the large number of youth who were entering the
justice system, the culture and conditions in secure detention and placement facilities, and
the high recidivism rates for this population, the new Director of IDJJ hired us as
consultants to investigate opportunities for change. Her goals for this process consisted of
the following:

1. Improving the case planning process for incarcerated youth to ensure
coordinated access to adequate resources and services for rehabilitation.

2. Increasing access to education and other programs to help youth
develop skills that they could use after release.

3. Rethinking the aftercare system in the state, to ensure that every young
person leaving a secure facility had a supportive counselor with
resources to facilitate successful reintegration.

4. Developing new data and communication systems within facilities
and between facilities to track and improve outcomes for youth.

My colleagues and I were tasked with gathering information from a number of
different stakeholders to produce an implementation plan for the Director of IDJJ, with a
focus on the priority areas listed above. With a short timeline to accomplish this task (we
had a month and a half to collect data), we set out to design a process that would
encourage participation from as many stakeholder groups as possible. In particular we
wanted to prioritize the inclusion of incarcerated young people, knowing that any
changes would have the greatest impact on their everyday lives. The short time frame and
specific goals of our partner prevented us from doing the kind of open-ended
participatory action research process where the questions might have been co-created.
With these limitations we tried our best to pay attention to the needs and vulnerabilities of our stakeholders, particularly the young people who were involved.

Our project design included three-day visits to each of the five secure juvenile placement facilities that were scattered around Illinois. Upon arriving at a facility, we interviewed the superintendent to get a sense of the facility’s culture, and learn what they perceived to be the biggest problems within their institution. We then conducted focus groups with incarcerated young people, administrators, educators, corrections officers and clinicians at the facility. At this stage, we kept these groups separate and small (8-14 representatives) to create a safe space for discussion.

For the focus groups with facility staff, we began with an open-ended question like: “what do you enjoy most about working here?” From past experience, we have found that introducing a positive question at the beginning helps to break the ice and build a sense of trust in the group. Most people shared that they enjoyed working with young people, and having a chance to break the cycle of violence that pervades the lives of many youth from poor communities. After a discussion on this subject, we introduced other open-ended questions such as: “what are your biggest challenges in this environment?” We had a list of guiding questions to help us gather information related to the priorities of the Director of IDJJ, but we purposely left the discussion somewhat unstructured to allow for the emergence of other priorities that might be critical to change. For the focus group with young people, we began with the question: “if you had unlimited resources, what would you improve about this facility?” We facilitated a discussion about the biggest challenges that youth faced in the facility, and the resources they needed to feel stable and supported in an environment of perpetual turmoil and fear.
After facilitating these separate focus groups, we brought together 2-3 volunteers from each session for a workgroup meeting, to allow people with different perspectives, responsibilities and characteristics to engage in a conversation about change. At the beginning of the session, we divided the large group into teams to propose solutions to the problems that were brought up during the focus groups. These randomly assembled teams consisted of four “local” stakeholders and one member from our research team. Each team was put in charge of tackling one problem (education, programming, aftercare, etc.). Some of these problem areas were the Director’s priorities and others emerged from our earlier group discussions. We asked the teams to think big and temporarily disregard current limitations in policies and resources. We explicitly highlighted the importance of each stakeholder group’s perspective in this process and members of our team facilitated the discussions to ensure that each person (particularly the young person on the team) had a chance to participate.

After allowing teams a chance to brainstorm, we reconvened the larger workgroup to share what we had discussed. Each team came forward and presented the ideas that they had jotted down on flipchart paper. At this point, members of our team stepped back to allow the “insiders” to share insights with each other. We were heartened to see that for the most part, each group encouraged the young person on the team to present their ideas.

Our team listened carefully to the ideas that were proposed, parsing out the quick fixes from the long term, and perhaps more complex issues. We brought notes from these meetings back with us to New York to develop an implementation plan for the Director of IDJJ. The final report that was produced in our office ended up focusing heavily on the
initial goals of the Director. We tried to sneak in other important priorities, innovative ideas, and surprising discoveries from our conversations and observations, but our partners wanted information to be structured in a specific way to help them organize and implement some immediate next steps. Ultimately I felt that an important opportunity for sustained collaborative learning and transforming was compromised.

**Using Fine and Torre’s Work to Rethink Methods and Outcomes**

A year after the end of our project in Illinois, I still think about what we could have done differently. Working intensively with young people was my favorite part of the project. I was impressed by the specific, innovative ideas that they proposed and was completely in awe of their ability to sustain a sense of optimism in extremely bleak living conditions. I felt frustrated that we were not able to work with them to define the scope of the project, and elevate the particular issues that were of concern to them. I was also troubled by the way the project ended, with minimal follow up. For people who work in prisons (or live there), the feeling of being studied is a familiar one. Their frustration with being subjects yet again was apparent throughout the project. At the every focus group we fielded questions about how this process was different from the one they had gone through the previous month, and how the data we collected might be used.

During all our facility visits, the biggest issue that youth consistently raised was that significant barriers prevented them from maintaining connections with their loved ones. Many young people told us that letters from their families were often delayed or lost in the system of surveillance. Mail was confiscated for reasons that did not seem logical. One young person told us that a letter from his mother was confiscated because it contained a crayon drawing from his little sister, which violated ambiguous and unclear
mailing restrictions. Youth were only permitted to make one free call a week, which was wasted if the person they were trying to reach was away from the phone. Visiting restrictions also prevented young people from connecting with their loved ones. Youth reported waiting long periods of time before receiving a visit because background checks for their family members could take several months. Moreover, the restrictions around who could visit were extremely limiting. Many youth wanted the administration to expand the definition of “immediate family”, since their support networks consisted of people beyond their biological parents, like their grandparents, cousins, or close friends. One young pregnant woman that we met in an all-female facility wished that the father of her child could visit to provide emotional support.

Besides being a matter of human dignity, we knew from our work in criminal justice that maintaining healthy social connections is critical to the success of young people when they reenter their communities. The young people that we met had immense clarity, not only on the problems but also on solutions that could address some of these issues. They envisioned, for instance, a system where mail would be sorted and distributed by the counselors on each housing unit (instead of central administrative staff) in order to increase accountability and efficiency. They also proposed that mailing regulations be proactively clarified to reduce the chances of a letter being destroyed or sent back. They also believed that specific aesthetic improvements to the family room would help them have more meaningful visits with their loved ones. These are just a few of a large list of ideas that were generated on this subject, but that unfortunately didn’t make their way into our official report.
Walking away from this project, I could not help but think that a project like this could have had a greater positive impact on the lives that revolved around these institutions. While we were able to produce a deliverable for the Department of Juvenile Justice that will hopefully lead to system change on a macro scale, an important opportunity for co-creating knowledge, sharing perspectives and increasing social control was lost.

Fine and Torre’s research provides some ideas for consideration regarding research methods and outcomes. The participatory action research approach and longer timeline allowed them to collaboratively reflect on the purpose of the research, carefully define their research agenda, and negotiate the appropriate methods to collect, analyze and distribute information. The PAR lens facilitated “laughing, discussing, disagreeing, gossiping and writing, negotiating what was important to study, speak and hold quietly among ourselves” (Fine and Torre, 2008, p. 409). Each individual knew that her perspectives and opinions mattered, and that she had control over the information that was shared by the collective. Open discussions about relative vulnerabilities created a space where co-researchers felt safe to share personal experiences and delve deep into the issues that mattered the most. Applying a PAR lens could have allowed us to explore topics that emerged, like maintaining family and community connections, which were important to the young people that we worked with.

Fine and Torre also provide tangible examples of how the relative roles of the insiders and outsiders can be considered and clarified. Insiders “know more, know better and in more depth how an organization, community and indeed a prison operates” (Fine and Torre, 2006, p. 261). Outsiders in contrast “have the freshness to ask the deliberately
naïve questions, and have the relative freedom to speak a kind of truth to power that may provoke new lines of analysis” (Fine and Torre, 2006, p. 261). In this framework, insiders and outsiders bring different strengths, knowledges and epistemologies to the process of inquiry. Fine and Torre go even further to describe the different ways in which these different positions, and the related forms of power and legitimacy, were harnessed to enhance this process. Insiders, because of their relationships and “local knowledge” played an important role in data collection and analysis, and outsiders used their power, mobility, and reputation to disseminate information where it might have the greatest impact. This deliberate division of labor allowed each group to see how they fit into the process, creating an atmosphere of accountability and mutual respect.

Fine and Torre’s research, and Greenwood and Levin’s AR framework, highlight the importance of thinking about learning and democratic control not just during a participatory process but also as it ends. Greenwood and Levin encourage us to think about what might be left behind in a community as AR comes to a close. Have insiders gained a greater sense of control over their surroundings? Are they empowered to raise and explore new questions? Do they have a deeper understanding of how research can be used to better their lives? Fine and Torre explain in great detail how they arrived at the decision to craft certain products that would best represent their research and reach appropriate audiences. The insiders were completely involved even at this stage of decision-making. In my own work, this attention to meaningful participation could have helped the insiders feel less exploited and allowed them to see how their perspectives, knowledge and opinions influenced reform.
Looking Ahead: Imagining a Better Participatory Process

The writings of Fine and Torre, as well as Greenwood and Levin, provide useful insights on designing participatory action research projects in a variety of settings, including prisons. After facilitating a somewhat traditional research process where both the researchers and the researched walked away wanting more, I am excited to imagine a different way of collaboratively learning and doing. Good intentions regarding inclusion only go so far. To achieve change that targets the heart of messy problems, it is critical that we work with those at the margins to question why research is needed, how it should unfold, and who should benefit from it. In prisons, power dynamics and institutional culture make it difficult to introduce PAR. Success, however, might be achieved if those in power could be made to see the enormous potential for improvement through a PAR processes.

References

