

**Toward a Methodology of Arts-Based Participatory Action Research:  
Evaluating a Theatre of the Oppressed Classroom Site**

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“Unpredictability is an act of grace”  
- Helene Shulman Lorenz

### Introduction

In recent years, researchers in the liberation psychology, trauma studies and communications fields have argued that social science researchers should engage in participatory approaches, becoming actively involved in their research projects and interventions (see Young-Chan and Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Watkins and Shulman, 2009; Israel, Eng, Schultz and Parker, 2005). This new paradigm, known as participatory action research (PAR) asks that scholars, activists and artists focus not only on acquiring knowledge about their research subjects, but also **contribute in practical ways to the needs of the community they are studying**. Such an approach places ethics at the forefront of academic research.

Research on the validity and impact of PAR approaches has just begun to emerge in communication, psychology and other social science fields, particularly in relation to the practice of Entertainment Education (see Usdin, Singhal, Shongwe, Goldstein, Shabala, 2004; Singhal, Rao & Pant, 2006; Sood, 2002). Research evaluating participatory approaches, however, especially those involving arts-based projects and endeavors, is few and far between. Few scholars have offered assessments of PAR projects that also provide theoretical inroads into PAR as method. Thus, the goal of the present research was to conduct a validity analysis of a participatory community-based approach using a theatre of the oppressed (TO) classroom site as a case study. Using **Watkins and Shulman’s parameters for PAR validity (2009)** as guidelines, I sought to evaluate the practices offered in a TO classroom site at the University of Southern California and their potential impact on members of two Los Angeles community-based organizations.

The findings showed that while the methods of the TO activities were consistent with the parameters for validity offered by Watkins and Shulman, **problems emerged relating to issues of agreement, consensus, voice and silencing**. A contradictory logic is at play between the methodological application of some TO techniques and the **tenants** of



liberation psychology, which seek to override what Martin-Baro outlines as epistemological constraints of the US-based, positivist-oriented psychology field (1996: 21). I observed tensions regarding issues of group agreement versus individual subjectivity, the construction of antagonists versus dissolution of difference, and the need to better clarify student practitioner roles. These tensions may provide important information about the struggles encountered by advocates in tandem with those faced by the “subjects” of their interventions. The analysis is intended to advance an understanding of the delicate and ever-deepening nature of participatory action research, and contribute to future arts policy research endeavors.

### **Prior Research: Liberation Psychology and PAR**

The field of liberation psychology provides an important framework for a discussion of the ethics and purpose of participatory action research. It is within this framework that a validity analysis of PAR’s effectiveness may be conceived and implemented. Participatory action approaches to research speak to what liberation psychology has termed “collective trauma,” a phenomenon in which the “the victim is not a sole individual but a whole group” (Watkins and Shulman, 2009: 14). Since such forms of cultural trauma are not merely rooted in individual suffering, but in social processes, they can only be remedied, according to the authors, by “psychological practices that can repair the bonds among people as well as the narrative threads of an individual life history” (p. 14). It is within this context that participatory action research approaches to research become vital possibilities for collective healing within the fabric of social processes. Smith (2010) discusses the nature and goals of PAR as involving the creation of a space in which researchers and participants can, as Linda Tuhawai Smith has suggested, “research back,” taking active part in the research analysis while discovering new inroads into indigenous people’s experiences (1999: 8). The purpose of such an engaged critique is to involve the community in a process of self-reflexivity, engaging analytically in their own struggles and circumstances. As Smith explains,

As people whose sociocultural realities have not primed them to explore their problems for a set period of time with an expert stranger, people living in poverty risk being labeled as resistant or unsuitable for psychotherapy. I believe they are suitable—for a model of psychotherapy that also empowers and leads them toward social change (p. 22).

In line with Martin-Baro's discussion of liberation psychology (1994), which asks that psychology address social and cultural processes rather than focusing on individualistic behaviorist-based models (p. 37) and Augusto Boal's discussion of theatre of the oppressed (1979), which seeks to re-position the role of the audience to performers, Smith concludes that accepting the limits of traditional psychotherapy is akin to accepting the conditions of oppression (p. 23).

Traditional academic and scientific research, as Watkins and Shulman point out, has parallel roots in such conditions. Based in positivistic approaches which position researchers as “experts” reaching “on” subjects (p. 270), academic and scientific research often reinforces issues of difference and hierarchy rather than horizontalism and trust. By contrast, the authors explain, participatory action approaches seek to “democratize the generation of understanding” (p. 270) by allowing research “subjects” to engage in a critical evaluation of their own experiences. Such research “is ‘critical’ when it... engages in careful self-reflection regarding the possible shadows of its research presence and processes. This reflexivity involves researchers in a critical stance toward the processes and uses of research in the history of their discipline(s), and asks them to be willing to dis-identify with aspects of their training and practice that reinforce the divides a critical participatory action approach questions and works to heal” (p. 269). Martin-Baro makes a parallel assertion regarding positivistic approaches to psychology, problematizing the dominant US-based epistemologies of positivism, individualism, homeostatic vision, hedonism and ahistoricism (p. 21-22).

Martin-Baro directly fuses liberation psychology with participatory action approaches to research, asserting, “Thus to acquire new psychological knowledge it is not enough to place ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is but also about what is not” (1996:29). Citing Fals Borda (1988:88), he explains, “only through participation do we get the voluntary and living ‘rupture’ of the



asymmetrical relationship of submission and dependence implicit in the subject/ object binomial” (Martin-Baro, 1996: 29).

Given the rich context of this prior research and the important conceptual links between PAR and liberation psychology, I argue that a robust validity analysis of PAR must consider liberation psychology as a framework for understanding and evaluating PAR projects.

### Conceptualizing PAR Validity

The goal of the present research was to evaluate whether the practitioners in a TO classroom site effectively integrated aspects of contextual, interpretive and psychopolitical validity into their methodological approach. Brydon-Miller and Tolman (1997: 805) discuss the need for re-assessing validity analyses based on the recognition of “multiple, contradictory realities” within field sites (p. 805, in Watkins and Shulman, p. 294). Shulman and Watkins interpret this to mean that a project’s validity can be ascertained through an analysis of various phases of the research process (p. 295). Using measures of contextual validity (Sung, 1995; Tandon, 1981), interpretive validity (McTaggart, 1997) and psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003), I sought to assess the degree to which the TO activities, practices and outcomes were congruent with the intentions of the practitioners. On a broader level, I sought to assess how such intentions and outcomes contribute to a PAR-based approach to community engagement in the arts.

This evaluation serves as a companion to Helen Shulman Lorenz’s class on *Liberation Arts and Community Engagement* at the University of Southern California as part of the Applied Theater Arts Masters’ program in fall, 2011. According to Shulman, “What we don’t want is for research about the sites to lead to a doleful catalogue of the facts of patriarchy” (Class lecture, October 4, 2011). In instructing the student practitioners to conduct field analyses of their community sites, Shulman explained, “Research for and with your site should lead to an opposition to the facts you discover.” Ideally, she noted, such research leads to resistance, pushback, analysis and alternative themes. I interpreted my own goal, therefore, as one of simultaneously evaluating the



methods being employed by the TO practitioners, as well as whether these methods were having an impact on the community members. While some aspects of this parallel agenda were realized, several obstacles, including limited time and access to community members prevented me from conducting an ideal analysis. This research is therefore intended as the starting point to what should be considered a longer project evaluating TO implementation both in and out of classroom settings.

### TO Classroom Site as PAR Project



In this section of the paper, I will describe the TO classroom site, the participants, and the objectives of the project.

The objectives of the theatre of the oppressed classroom site examined in this study were to address the collective trauma of the participating community-based organizations in Los Angeles: LA Community Action Network and TRUST South LA. Through a series of TO interventions and techniques designed to raise awareness about the collective trauma that members of these communities endure on a day-to-day basis, the class employed members of the student master's program, as well as the TO "joker," or classroom leader, as both "researchers" and practitioners of the TO techniques. In other words, the students were playing a dual role: they were both practicing the TO techniques alongside their community partners, as well as being asked to analyze the situation with a critical "research" eye.

The techniques used toward this end involved playing theater games with the participants and conducting theatrical exercises designed to engage participants in a self-assessment of their community, as well as their position within the social fabric of greater Los Angeles. Community members were encouraged to construct scenes about the conditions of their lives-- scenes that often included poverty, violence, isolation, racism, and classism. Community members were also encouraged to identify "protagonists" and "antagonists" in various life-situations and scenarios, as a way of situating themselves within a larger "drama" of their subjective experiences.

The TO exercises and techniques employed in this class also serve as the foundation of the Applied Theater Arts Master's Program at USC. In tandem with TO-in-action, the classroom site served as a hands-on learning experience for the students in the masters program preparing to become TO practitioners. Led by Brent Blair, a TO expert and veteran of Boal's technique, the USC students participated in the exercises along with community members, in order to gain a first-hand understanding of the TO praxis.

It was within this context that I sought to analyze whether the classroom-as-PAR project met with the standards of validity offered by Watkins and Shulman. My methods of analysis included participant observation within the TO classroom site: I participated in three class sessions as an active observer to assess the work being done and conduct a validity analysis. As the classroom was to be my site of evaluation, and as this evaluation was intended to be, in itself, a form of PAR, I quickly realized that it would be important to engage in the classroom exercises myself. Hence, I did not take notes directly during the research process but rather, experienced the class and paid attention to my observations and responses while doing the work. I later wrote up my own experiences as a form of field notes.

In addition to participating in the classroom activities, I attempted to conduct detailed interviews with the students who were working with the community members (the individuals who visited the site from Trust South LA and LA CAN) outside the context of the classroom. Due to time and schedule constraints, only one interview was possible. The intention of the interview was to better understand the strategies, goals and experiences of the students' dual role as researcher and practitioner-participant.

### **Findings and Analysis**

I will now describe the standards of validity for analyzing PAR approaches and discuss how (and whether) the techniques employed in the TO classroom matched the goals and values of PAR from a theoretical standpoint. I will focus this discussion on three aspects of validity: contextual, interpretive and psychopolitical.

## 1. Contextual validity

The first standard of validity that I seek to analyze addresses the way research efforts and questions are identified, and whether research questions and processes engage with the true issues faced by research “subjects” in the context of their realities. In the case of the TO classroom site, the activities introduced by Brent, the TO “joker” addressed honest aspects of the community partners’ realities. These exercises were designed to evoke the conditions of the participants, and successfully met with the standards of contextual validity: The TO activities were designed to speak to the needs and experiences of the participating community partners, TRUST South LA and LA Community Action Network (LA CAN). The goals of the class were to engage participants from these communities to identify voice and give theatrical life to issues that arose in their lives and communities. While these goals were achieved and met with the standards of validity offered by Watkins and Shulman, issues arose around the contextual nature of the student practitioner’s experience.



In a class discussion, one of the APA students, Freddy, narrated the experience of the community members at TRUST South LA. He described the “struggle” inherent in the community members’ attempts to develop solidarity and self-analysis, and suggested that this struggle occurs “because they’re dealing with non-citizenship issues, and lack of access to political structures. No legal status” (Classroom discussion, October 4, 2011).

According to Shulman, the community members at TRUST South LA were embedded in a “zone of exclusion” (Lecture, October 4, 2011) — that is, a physical zone around which policy makers have determined that those living within it will have fewer rights than those living in other geographical areas. An example of such zones would be the garment industry in downtown Los Angeles, noted for being a target in “red-lining” processes, in which banks draw a red line around certain neighborhoods and don’t make any loans available.

The community members of LA CAN and TRUST South LA struggle under conditions of hegemonic neoliberalism that, as David Harvey (2005) explains, serve to criminalize members of impoverished classes who aren’t able to conform to the marketization and commodification standards used in the dominant model. In a neoliberal



model, Harvey explains, the poor suffer enormously: “The rise of surveillance and policing and, in the case of the US, incarceration of recalcitrant elements in the population indicates a more sinister turn towards intense social control” (p. 165).

In addition to reinforcing class stratification, neoliberalism promotes a “do it yourself” mentality, which in turn reinforces the idea that if an individual is poor or impoverished, it's his or her own fault. This “blame the victim” mentality was evoked in my interview with the student practitioner and member of the APA class, Michele.

Michele described the challenges faced by members of the LA CAN community, explaining, “The powers that be are always trying to come up with new ways to get them out of the buildings because of gentrification. There's a city battle over rent increases... a twenty-eight day shuffle where there was a law in the books that said that a landlord could kick the person out of their rooms before the one month point to avoid them becoming legal 'tenants' and receiving certain rights under state law” (Interview with Michele Harrell, Nov 1, 2011).

While the exercises designed to mirror these and other experiences of community members did meet with the standards of interpretive validity in numerous ways, **issues arose around aspects of agreement about context, and expressions of truth.** In the following section, I will describe the TO practices and show how validity was realized as well as challenged.



### ***Voice, Silencing, and the Problematics of Agreement***

In a lecture on community building, Shulman reminded the class that liberation psychology is, in fact, different from community building in that it allows for heterogeneity. “You can't demand agreement,” she explained, “you have to do what you can. Listening to pluralistic voices might be enough-- it might cultivate a hopeful path for building alliances.” Shulman's lecture emphasized that a practitioner (though whether she was referring to a practitioner of liberation psychology or of TO, was unclear) should never suppress minority views, never silence them, but instead, try to find a path forward after airing the contradictory points of view (Shulman, class lecture, 2011).


In contrast to this ethic, within the TO classroom setting agreement and consensus were sometimes reached through silencings, rather than pluralistic difference. If not addressed carefully, such silencings have the potential to contribute to reinforcing class and social divides between participants in the classroom setting.

Such silencings were experienced in the context of creating a vehicle for expression on the part of the community partners. In one exercise focused on constructing the antagonist, Brent (the TO “joker”) raised the issue of “agreement” around identifying this character. The concept was to use the exercise to help the group collectively identify a character that the group agreed represented conditions of oppression within the community. While finding agreement among the members of TRUST South LA and LA CAN was easily reached, extending this agreement to the student practitioners and vice versa, was not always easy. The problematics of agreement are exemplified in the following field notes:

When we started creating antagonists, I noticed something more pronounced occurring: while the LA CAN and TRUST South LA members were very vocal and adding lots of opinions about who the character was, what he’d say, etc., the rest of the class—that is, the students-- felt silent to me. When I expressed *my* version of what a landlord would say (“Tom Gilmore,” I was thinking to myself—my landlord and one of the primary culprits of gentrification of downtown Los Angeles), I offered what I saw as being a more complex version of a landlord: a person who, out of one side of his mouth would say, “Where’s My Rent?” while on the other side, pretended to be your best friend. Contrary to the reaction to the community member’s example (a dominant, one-dimensional landlord who stomped his foot and demanded, “Where’s my rent?”), my example was rejected as a clear antagonist. The group expressed that they didn’t recognize my landlord. In that moment, I realized that the exercise wasn’t really about expressing all of our experiences. Rather, it was geared toward the experiences of the “oppressed” people in the room. This, subsequently, must have been why the student practitioners remained silent for this portion of the exercise—they weren’t experiencing landlord problems, because they are in the economic position of being able to pay their rents (a likely assumption, given the high cost of tuition and the availability of student loans). I began to feel an interesting—and subtle—divide taking place in the class, which lasted throughout the rest of the night. The content of the work was about fostering the voices and experiences of the “oppressed” community members, but not of the student practitioners. The others—we—remained silent.

The dilemma I encountered in this experience speaks to issues of voice and silencing, and the role of the student practitioners in the TO classroom setting. Such a dilemma also raises questions of interpersonal validity and issues of trust building between members of the group. While all members of the class appeared to be adopting a positive, supportive attitude toward the work-- imperative in PAR practice-- I couldn't help but notice that the student practitioners appeared to be inhibited, reluctant to express their experiences or opinions. Their body language and quiet observation indicated feelings of caution, almost detachment. In their detachment, they were likely attempting to allow the voices of the community members to come through. In other words, *we were helping the others perform their experiences.* While on one hand the performance of experience is at the heart of TO praxis, the divide created between the community members—who had legitimate things to say, versus the student practitioners, who did not, served to reinforce difference between these two groups. *Without being allowed to express oneself, and to voice one's own experience, the student practitioners were, in effect, silenced. This silence, I argue, poses a danger to the work as a whole: enabling the student practitioners to not be fully present in the room, to not have to express vulnerability, or risk having their life situations questioned, evaluated, diagnosed.* As I wrote later in my field notes, “If every scenario we act out is merely about the problems faced by community members, *rather than about the intersections between our worlds*, then how are any of us to undergo change?” The questions raised here point to possible obstacles in contextual validity; that is, an honest portrayal of issues that are relevant to all the participants in the room.

As Watkins and Shulman explain, “Martin-Baro envisioned a psychology that would acknowledge the psychological wounding caused by war, racism, poverty, and violence; a psychology that would support historical memory and critical reflection; a psychology that would aid the emergence of the sorts of subjectivity through which people felt they could creatively make sense of and respond to the world” (p. 25). Central to this vision was the idea that psychologists are not “experts,” but rather, “truth” is democratized. While this vision speaks to the need to recognize a more holistic approach to trauma, one in which indigenous voices are heard as “experts” in their own lives, the practical application of this model warrants clarification in the context of TO praxis. I



caution practitioners in the danger of treating “truth” democratically and instead ask, why not approach the concept of truth subjectively? Why not allow for diversity in voice, for dissolution of “othering” in the acceptance of disparate points of view, and for multiple shades in understanding the conditions of oppression? A need exists for a more post-modern, subjective approach to oppression, in part because of the ironic fact that in democratizing such experiences, we inadvertently render them subject to expertise. In other words, many viewpoints and experiences get buried and disallowed even in the process of democratization. The real nexus-point worth examining is the place where contrasting experiences and subjectivities (even radically different ones) intersect, collide and merge. A truly revolutionary vision of liberation psychology-- and corresponding TO praxis-- would allow for divergent interpretations of suffering to come to the fore.

## 2. Interpretive

Interpretive validity engages a dialogic approach in which researcher and community members “experience themselves as free to discuss possible meanings of narratives and to propose alternate interpretations to one another” (Watkins and Shulman, p. 296). Applied to the context of the TO classroom site, interpretive validity involves community members and student practitioners formulating a dynamic analysis of each others’ experiences as a way to approach a more engaged research process.

Interpretive validity was well-demonstrated in several of the TO techniques and exercises. Of particular relevance was the exercise of forming scenes and having other members of the community (as well as students) “step into” the scene to offer even more detailed and accurate approaches to the character of the antagonist.

An example of this scene work was demonstrated in Freddy (a student practitioner) and James’ (an LA CAN community member) scene about abusing women. Freddy and James enacted roles of protagonist and antagonist, with Freddy playing the role of the “wife beater,” and James playing the protagonist arguing for an end to violence against women.

Mid-way through the scene, Brent stopped the actors, and asked the audience to make suggestions as to how the antagonist could be improved—that is, become an even


more difficult and formidable obstacle against which the protagonist would fight. Bobby, another student practitioner, got up from the audience and stepped into the scene, offering a suggestion. Playing the role of “Freddy/ wife beater,” Bobby toughened the character up, made him even difficult to argue against. Once Bobby had demonstrated this change, Freddy re-entered the scene and mirrored the same actions and lines that Bobby had dramatized. The same process was repeated with Deborah (a community member) and Lakaysha (a student practitioner). The ability of diverse members of the classroom setting to step into the scene and re-dramatize the character demonstrated that an authentic sense of trust was taking place in the room. In addition to representing aspects of interpersonal validity, interpretive validity—that is, a dialogic approach to the experiences of all participants—was achieved in the ability of diverse group members to enact similar characters and situations.



***Constructing antagonists or dissolving difference? Clarifying the goals of TO praxis***

The dialogic approach to the work was problematized in an important question raised earlier in the evening by one of the LA CAN community members, Joe. In the context of a discussion as to what the “final” performance piece would consist of, Joe raised his hand and said that in addition to the stories of the community members being dramatized in the final piece, he would like the stories of the *students* reflected, as well. According to Joe, “The system affects all of us, whether we’re part of the LA CAN community or part of the USC community. I’m sure many of these students have gotten a ticket before. I’d like to see the play reflect their stories and show how the system is at fault” (TO class, November 11, 2011).

Here, Joe expressed an interest in showing how all members of the community were being oppressed by a system in which we all participate. Joe was attempting to see the group of students and community members as *partners in the process of creating a theatrical work*. He did not, in contrast to much of the seeming goals of the TO praxis, simply want the final piece to reflect “his” community’s interests, problems, and concerns. Instead, Joe requested unification. He sought to take a truly interpretive, dialogic approach to TO.



This suggestion/ request speaks to the question of “othering” and difference within the praxis of TO. What are the goals of this praxis? Do they seek to dissolve difference between practitioners and community members, and between joker and student? Or is the dissolution of difference secondary to the goal of identifying and dramatizing oppression within the confines of whatever community is being “researched?” Does the inability to dissolve difference in TO praxis conform to the ethics of PAR? And, perhaps more important question, do these practices correlate, or are they fundamentally opposed?

Other examples of the TO work reinforced these questions. Several of the TO exercises were geared toward helping the community partners identify the antagonist, or “oppressor” in their daily lives. As described in the following field notes:

Tonight, Brent talked about what we’re learning in the class currently- the idea of logos, the expression of an opinion. He explained that we’re constructing the “antagonist.” one person went into the middle of the room and was the antagonist (“Jan Perry,” a politician). Kimiko was first. She went into the center and said one line, as the character of Jan. Then we all repeated it. Then another person went into the center and said another line, as Jan. Kimiko repeated that line, then hers and theirs together. Then we all repeated both lines. This continued for about 4-5 lines, until as a group, we had many lines as the character of Jan, and we were all saying them together. Then Brent asked Kimiko to use the lines as a jumping off point, and construct a monologue as Jan in her own words. So she did-- and instantly, the character’s authoritarianism, political savvy and other aspects of sliminess came out. Throughout the exercise Brent asked the group: “Do we all recognize this character? Do we agree that these are things she might say?” Generally there was consensus, but sometimes opinions differed. When they did, Brent invited another member of the group into the middle to play Jan. We repeated this exercise with three or four versions of Jan. Then we repeated the same character developing exercise with another Antagonist- a landlord. (Kamler Field Notes, 2011)

In his essay, *Strategizing for a Living Revolution* George Lakey (2004) argues for the need to heighten contrast between protestors and the establishment against which they are protesting. Lakey argues for the need to create “simplicity of contrast between the protestor’s behavior and that of the police” (p. 149). This tactic is exemplified in the practice described above, which involves the construction of a “stock” antagonist. In TO technique, such a construction serves as a way of clarifying, for the community members,

the dynamics of their oppression. The antagonist gives oppressive conditions a “face,” and in the sketches being developed in the class, is meant not to be a fully fleshed out character, but rather, a caricature of the embodied practices and conditions of the community’s oppression.

While this technique seems an important starting point for raising consciousness about the conditions of oppression that underlie a specific situation or cultural pattern, the technique in itself seems to contradict liberation psychology’s theory of collective trauma, as well as the deeper theory of bystanding. Liberation psychology, which calls for a complex understanding of *all* conditions of a community’s oppression, seeks to problematize oppression of everyone in the drama-- not just a select few. The focus on abusers as bystanders offers a more nuanced way of approaching trauma in that it accepts that trauma underlies not only the experiences of those being overtly oppressed, but also the experiences of those doing the oppressing.

The issue of inclusivity was, I believe, what Joe was trying to express in his attempt to bring the students’ stories into the theater piece: the idea that collectively, the students and the community members make up a larger community of LA residents/ Americans/ fellow citizens; each affected in different ways by the oppression of the hegemonic structures in which we live. In requesting that the students’ stories and experience be exemplified in the work, Joe attempted to address a larger need for inclusivity in TO praxis. Such inclusivity, I argue, potentially conflicts with the objective of the TO exercise designed to identify the “antagonist,” or “oppressor” in a community members’ experience. The danger of such a stark construction of antagonist involves the possible disengagement from liberation psychology’s holistic approach to collective trauma. By separating the experiences of one segment of the community from another, in this case, the “victim” from the “oppressor,” this exercise may, in fact, reinforces differences between these actors, rather than treating them as diverse aspects of the larger condition of collective trauma. Furthermore, the tendency in this exercise to apply a positivistic stance on what constitutes oppression (i.e., “landlord as oppressor,” “government official as oppressor”) risks a “re-objectification” of community members and poses a challenge to the goal of dissolving difference that is at the heart of the theory of liberation psychology.



### 3. Psychopolitical validity

Prilleltensky (2003) discusses concepts of epistemic psychopolitical validity and transformative psychopolitical validity, suggesting a difference between our “understandings of the psychopolitical dynamics of oppression in the issue at hand,” and “our interventions toward liberation” (Watkins and Shulman, p. 296). The former asks us **to engage with an understanding of the conditions that underlie oppression, while the latter addresses questions of engagement with solutions.**

Within the context of the TO classroom site, epistemic psychopolitical validity was demonstrated to a greater degree than transformative psychopolitical validity, in that the circumstances and experiences identified and dramatized focused on scenarios of oppression. Less evident was the use of transformative processes; indicators for how the situation could be changed. I hypothesize that the discrepancy between the two involves the short amount of time in which the work was expected to occur: at two hours per week, and often consisting of various different community members in each session, the TO class simply didn’t offer enough time to address both aspects of psychopolitical literacy during the course of the semester. Some of the successes of psychopolitical literacy and validity, however, can be summarized as follows:

#### *Testimonial Practices*

An important aspect of PAR includes engagement with testimonial practices. As Watkins and Shulman explain, “testimonial practices” involve the process of moving from speaking “for” to speaking “with” in a research framework (p. 293). Possible goals of such practices may include:

- “Testimonies” - “an indigenous literary genre motivated by the narrator’s goals of representing a collective experience” (Brabeck 2003: 522 in Watkins and Shulman, p. 293).



- Oral history—collecting histories and narratives that contradict or confront dominant cultural stories, expressions, ideologies (Watkins and Shulman, p. 293).
- Bringing forward of experiences that have been silenced.
- “The provision of testimony to truth and reconciliation and human rights commissions” (Watkins and Shulman, p. 294).

While the TO praxis was successful in fostering testimonial practices, as I have already explained, a tension often occurred in which “speaking with” was positioned against “not speaking” on the part of student practitioners. Again, the issue of difference in the intention of TO praxis came into question. While the community members were encouraged to tell their stories vis-à-vis testimonial practices, the student practitioners were not. Additionally, due to time constraints, the testimonial practices that did surface were fairly superficial. The objective of the praxis was not to encourage community members to tell a complete story; rather, it was oriented toward showing a snapshot view of community oppression. While this is certainly important in the context of collective trauma and consciousness raising, a problem arises in that the exercises reinforce a one-dimensional view of an oppressive condition, rather than evoking the characters’ more complex, subjective experiences.

### *Role ambiguity of student practitioners*

Finally, in relation to the overall validity of the TO classroom as PAR site, the ambiguous nature of the role of the student practitioner created difficulties in understanding the goals of the classroom site. The community partners were assigned clear objectives: to identify and locate the sources of their collective trauma through participating in the TO games and techniques. The student practitioners, however, were faced with balancing multiple roles and objectives: on the one hand, they were asked to participate in the games, exercises and praxis, involving themselves and, to an extent, their own experiences in the content of the TO class. Simultaneously, the classroom was intended to serve as a learning tool for their own study of “joking;” that is, leading the TO exercises and techniques. These dual goals would have been enough to occupy any student practitioner;

however, overlaid onto this agenda was a research agenda, articulated by some members of the faculty but, as far as I could tell, not others. The research agenda involved conducting an analysis of the community partner organizations and what impact the TO exercises were having, if any, on their experiences. While such variance and complexity of objectives comprises an impressive agenda, without a clear articulation of goals and strategy for accomplishing each of these individual tasks, the students may be left feeling overwhelmed and only vaguely aware of what it is they must accomplish. Thus, it is my conclusion that the goals of the student practitioners must be more clearly articulated and agreed upon by all members of the faculty overseeing this project, lest the students be left unable to clearly accomplish the multiple tasks they are expected to simultaneously perform.

### **Limitations**

This study was affected by several notable constraints. Foremost among the limitations of this study was the organizational challenges of the program, and communication and coordination between the program facilitators, instructors, site coordinators and students. I was not brought into the classroom setting until well past the first half of the semester. This was mainly due to the difficulty in integrating auditors or “observers” into a program that, in only its second year at the University, is just beginning to find its feet. I experienced a degree of confusion and communication overlaps in my correspondence with administrators, program coordinator, facilitators and even students. While all seemed more than willing to involve me in the work, each week the scenario changed. Often, schedules could not be coordinated until the last minute, and once a plan for the week had been set in motion, it was undermined by a logistical constraint.

I was able to participate in the TO classroom site three times before the end of the semester. This qualitative assessment, therefore, is deep but it is not lengthy. My observations were limited to a few short sessions—sessions that, while engaging and educational, were challenging for me to contextualize within the broader context of a semester-long class. The challenges I faced in conducting this research, merely from a logistical standpoint, provide important data-points in themselves: they demonstrate that in order to be effective, an organizational strategy should facilitate active communication

at all levels-- between students and faculty, faculty and student evaluators, and across the board to members of the participating community organizations. The obstacles to creating such an organizational infrastructure seem numerous: working with multiple community partners who have ever-changing schedules, needs and availability can be a harrowing process. This is, however, not a robust excuse for disorganization within the program. Care should be taken at the beginning of the semester to better understand and anticipate the needs of student observers and evaluators—needs that, at their most basic level, involve having access to their research subjects. These obstacles and challenges demonstrate the difficulty of formulating and carrying out participatory action research in the TO classroom setting.

### Conclusion

This case study serves as the basis for a broader discussion of the social value of community-based arts engagement. While the goal of the present research was to conduct a validity analysis of a participatory community-based approach using a theatre of the oppressed classroom site as a case study, such a study could prove useful for arts research and policy in other local and international contexts. Indeed, similar questions as to **role identification, PAR ethics versus praxis, and questions of difference and subjectivity might arise in contexts in which inter-cultural understanding, language barriers, student roles and divergent perceptions of social/ cultural differences are at play.**

Additionally, in regard to arts policy, the findings indicate that while well-intended, **problems in the divide between graduate training in such PAR skills and the community members' leadership role in practicing, adopting and ultimately owning Theatre of the Oppressed techniques remains a challenge.**

Despite the overall validity of the TO classroom as a site for PAR practice, I identified three main challenges, which should be considered in the construction of future theatre of the oppressed classroom project designs. These challenges included: **issues of group agreement versus individual subjectivity, the construction of antagonists versus dissolution of difference, and the need for role clarification.** I found that a contradictory logic is at play between the methodological application of some TO techniques and the

tenants of liberation psychology. It is my hope that the tensions and contradictions observed here may advance our understanding of the challenges that come with embarking on participatory action research, and further shape the goals of those engaged in this important and nuanced new method.

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