Between the ideal and the real: using ethnography as a way of extending our language of change*
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Abstract

The following paper is a critical examination of participatory action research in practice. By looking at two different narratives of this methodology in practice the aim of the paper is to initiate a discussion around the ways in which we\(^1\) talk about participatory action research - our *narratives* of participatory action research- and how these forms of expression constrain our theorising of people, interaction and change. The first narrative discussed follows the conventions of action research. I describe this narrative as a formal narrative that highlights the ideal dimensions of participatory action research. The second narrative follows ethnographic conventions. I describe this narrative as an informal narrative that highlights the ‘real’ (or lived experience in the language of ethnography) dimensions of participatory action research. In comparing and contrasting the two narratives I aim to demonstrate the narrative conventions that govern change experiences. I conclude by suggesting that on the one hand we need to maintain a tension between the ideal and the real but at the same time acknowledge that sometime narrative conventions of the ideal are difficult to break away from.

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\(^1\) By ‘we’ I am referring to researchers and practitioners –‘experts’- of action research.
Participation, as a strategy for addressing ‘social ills’ and correcting the consequences of power asymmetries that leave a large number of people on the social margins, has steadily grown since the 1930s. As a strategy of involving people in the decision-making processes of social development, participation is by now an established approach to change. Likewise in many areas of the social sciences the trend towards creating methodologies that include – rather than scrutinise - people in the research process is a growing endeavour. One such approach, and the focus of this paper, is known as participatory action research.

Action research, a research tradition with many influences, has been described as ‘a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes […] It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2000:1).

The analysis of participatory action research presented here was initially inspired through the author’s experience of working on a collaborative research project with a corporate organization and was later developed through her experience of working on the participatory evaluation of a social welfare programme. Specifically during the time spent on these projects I became interested in what might be described as a gap between formal and informal ways of talking about the change that each project was trying to bring about.

The gap between formal and informal ways of talking has been variously conceptualised in sociological and social psychological literature. Goffman (1959/1990), for instance, in his analysis of the presentation of self in everyday life, used a theatrical metaphor to refer to the way we present ourselves to others (front of stage) versus the way we might think of ourselves in private (backstage) in our quieter more personal moments. In presenting ourselves to others we seek to manage their impressions and expectations of us, we seek to
present a stable and coherent self. Meanwhile, it is in our more private moments that we grapple with the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions of the self.

The accounts emerging from these two moments are necessarily different. The former provides us with a formal register of language and coherent descriptions of experience. The latter preserves a less polished, less certain account of the self and events. This analogy between formal and informal is, I suggest, also prevalent in the ways we talk about participatory action research and by extension change.

In participatory action research, there is not only a gap between formal and informal ways of talking about the research – so for example, the way we write about it in a paper versus the way we might talk to our colleagues about it - but also a preference to remain in a formal register. My own experience had been that most texts on participatory action research that I had come across, as well as my own research training, had not prepared me for being in the field. In other words, our narratives of participation, and ultimately our narratives of change, present our change efforts, our experiences of working with communities or organisations, as a seamless and unproblematic process.

What is less commonly found in the literature is how participatory action research develops in practice. While existing literature on participatory action research is full of advice about what needs to be considered (e.g.: who to include), ways in which to interact with community/organizational members (e.g.: interviews, focus groups) and how things ought to develop (e.g.: analysis of the ‘problem’ and thinking up possible ‘solutions’ collaboratively), once in the field these manuals become obsolete because it is of course impossible to determine what might happen from the outset – having that possibility would indeed defeat the purpose of doing participatory action research in the first place as part of the premise and expectation is that ideas and ways of change will emerge in the collaboration between researchers and community/organisation members. What is missing is the
documentation of participatory action research as it is being conducted ‘in the field’, to use
the anthropological term, of the research unfolding and the researchers making their way
through the day-to-day, working with organisations or communities, with the responses and
reactions of those we work with and our thoughts, feelings and responses to the field ‘talking
back’, told as a story, as part of the process of working in a participatory way and not as an
obstacle to initial grand intentions for change. This, the messiness of participatory action
research, is the intended meaning of the terms ‘informal’ and ‘real’ which are used here
interchangeably: the mundane, the everyday, the ‘irrational’, the ‘other’ to our well-
thought out methodologies and intentions.

Of course, one might argue that all this comes with experience and I would agree. At
the same time however this is a frustrating, and somewhat exclusive response for a novice or
new researcher to participatory action research. There are also theoretical problems with such
a response. Ignoring the informal dimension of participatory action research has
consequences for the ways in which we theorize the changes that we are trying to create. I
argue that by looking at the everyday, the mundane, the research process as it unfolds, we not
only make the practice of participatory action research more accessible by sharing what goes
on between the ideal and the real, but also by focusing on what actually happens in
participatory action research we can extend the way we theorise and practise change.

**An example to set the scene**

An example will help to further illustrate the point. I first became aware of the
importance of taking the everyday, informal aspect of action research on board when
theorising change during a collaborative action research project. The project’s aim was to
understand and support cultural integration in a large engineering company after a merger
and acquisition. To do so the research group worked with 14 ‘volunteer’ researchers from
the organization, a group of company ‘high flying’ middle managers seconded onto the 
action research project and trained in social research methods (e.g.: interviewing), and 
together we interviewed 44 senior managers across the acquirer and acquired companies.

Following the interviews we –university researchers and the company senior 
managers who were sponsoring the action research project- organised a big workshop with 
the aim of all the researchers coming together to discuss our interview findings and 
brainstorm ideas for ways in which this material –knowledge about the post-merger 
integration\(^2\), or lack of it in this case- could shape company wide courses of action that would 
in turn help with the integration efforts which the company had been struggling with.

In one of the breaks, I casually asked one of the volunteer researchers how he was 
finding the process and how his interviews had gone. I was hardly prepared for his an 
swer when he told me that on one occasion he and his team had travelled quite a distance to 
interview one of the CEOs – one of the major sponsors of the action research project - only to 
find that the CEO had cancelled the interview and seemed less than apologetic for doing so – 
all this in a climate of complete support, encouragement, and positive discourse around the 
project. This volunteer researcher, and company middle manager, was less than impressed 
with his senior managers and told me straight out that he thought the workshop was a waste 
of time, no one was being critical, nobody was interested in exploring all the possibilities for 
change before moving forward, they were only selecting data that more or less supported 
their existing ideas for integration. I still remember not quite knowing how or what to 
respond.

The conversation – till now – has never been formalised as it occurred beyond the 
formal parameters of the research project and cultural integration. Occurring outside the 
workshop space and time, during a break, in the corridor by the coke machine, the exchange

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\(^2\) An analysis of the merger can be found in Garcia-Lorenzo and Nolas (2005).
made visible the power relations of participation and the project’s formal and informal discourses. The exchange was conducted outside of the dominant discourse and sphere of influence, characterised by the relationships between the company project sponsors and the more senior member of the research team. There was a middle manager talking to the novice researcher, both entities relatively powerless in their respective spheres but the latter, despite her inexperience, perceived to be in a more powerful position, as an outsider with direct access to the company’s senior managers: a conduit for a message perhaps. As it happens, and despite my best efforts to have this somewhat different experience of the project considered, the ‘powers-that-be’ decided that the experience was just not relevant. Such a result is perhaps not surprising given that, as Eden and Huxman (1996) note, action research projects in organisations often have to accept the dominant managerial ideology.

This initial observation – the gap between the formal and the informal discourse on participatory action research – lead me to thinking about the ways in which these ‘beyond-the-boundaries’ exchanges could be studied which in turn led me to consider ethnography as a suitable approach. Ethnography is best suited for answering the question of what happens when we say that we are doing participatory action research and how participatory concepts translate into practice. My own experience of feeling lost in the field while doing participatory action research had also led me to seek solace in those few anthropological texts that described participatory approaches to change and which took the everyday life of projects as their main setting (Ferguson, 1990; Crewe and Harrison, 1999; Mosse, 2005). I wanted to be able to go beyond the boundaries of the formal participatory action research narrative and ethnography made room for that. As such, I found that the ethnographic tradition, both as a theoretical position and a methodological approach and with its emphasis on gaining an ‘intimate familiarity’ (Prus 1996) of the research context, was useful for
highlight the actions, interactions and practices involved in participatory action research and in particular the informal dimensions of participatory action research.

Furthermore, I have chosen to frame the presentation and comparison of the action research and ethnographic perspectives, in terms of stories, following a postmodernist approach to research that sees social research as a form of storytelling (Usher, 1997). In this perspective, theories and theoretical frameworks are seen to provide us with genres which constrain the way we talk about experience (Hawkes, 1997). At the same time, and relevant to the argument being made in this paper, talking about stories, instead of theories, reminds us that stories are rooted in experience (Riessman, 1993) and in this case experience of participatory action research that we, as much as our participants, are central to.

In the following section I introduce the participatory action research project from which I draw my empirical examples and I discuss both the project methodology and my own methodology for documenting the participatory action research process. Section three will then discuss the participatory action research process using the narrative conventions provided by action research while section four will switch to the narrative conventions of ethnography and explore the participatory action research project as an everyday experience. The final section reflects on the value-added by taking an ethnographic approach to document our change efforts and the possibilities of bringing the two narratives together in the context of talking about change.

The case study I draw my data from

In October 2004, having worked on the aforementioned company action research project, I joined a different action research team within the same academic department that was commissioned to evaluate a national youth inclusion programme. The new ‘change’ programme maintained a participatory focus but this time in a very different context. Cultural
integration was replaced with a concern for youth inclusion, my managers were substituted for vulnerable young men (predominantly) who had been excluded from the social institutions, like school and family, that most people take for granted, and the organisation exchanged for a community context. The ethos of youth inclusion programme was very similar however, a concern for achieving change, this time from exclusion to inclusion. The evaluation research project I worked on for the next 18-months, and which forms the case study that underpins the present article, espoused a similar philosophy of inclusion; it was a participatory video evaluation working with a selected group of youngsters on various local youth inclusion projects. The national programme funding these local projects and the evaluation was called Play On (a pseudonym) and the evaluation I was involved with was the Play On Young People’s Views project (POYPV).

Play On was a sports-based, drugs education, youth inclusion programme (henceforth, youth inclusion programme) funded by the UK government and targeting ‘marginalised young people’ in some of the ‘most deprived neighbourhoods’ of England. By engaging these young people through sporting and other physical and cultural activities, the programme attempted to introduce young people to alternative lifestyles and support them in making alternative lifestyle choices beyond some of the ones afforded to them from a situation of social exclusion.

A substantial part of the programme’s overall strategy was an integrated and regular, both quantitative and qualitative, monitoring and evaluation plan. The increasing importance that is placed on children’s rights and the children as citizens discourses (Jans, 2004) are reflected in research practices through the involvement of children and young people in the research process (Dyson and Meagher, 2001; Clark, Dyson, et al, 2001; Clark, 2004). As such, one aspect of the overall evaluation, and the dimension I was involved in, was to research young people’s views and experiences of the programme.
The *POYPV* project used participatory video as an evaluation methodology, as a way of giving young people a voice in the evaluation process, as well as hoping that that process would be empowering for the young people involved. Colleagues I was working with had developed an approach to using participatory video on a previous project working with young people on the topic of reproductive health in Peru (Humphreys and Brezillion, 2002; Humphreys and Lorac, 2002; Ramella, 2002).

Participatory video (and photography) is sometimes used in action research projects as way of engaging a community or group and where documentation can enhance the reflection process. It draws on the principles of action research –of developing ways of thinking differently about and involving people in addressing communal problems and taken to its extreme enabling people to organise themselves ultimately without external support—and introduces the video camera as a way of documenting and reflecting on a given situation (for a more detailed outline of the approach used see Ramella and Olmos, 2005). The particular participatory action research approach that was used by the *Play On Young People’s Views* project shared similarities with other social action research projects (de Block, Buckingham and Banaji, 2005; Rich, 2004; Wang, Morrel-Samuels *et al*, 2004; Lykes, Blanche, *et al* 2003; Williams and Lykes, 2003; Rich and Patashnick, 2002a; Rich, Patashnick, *et al*, 2002b; McIntyre, 2000; Wang, Cash and Powers, 2000; Lykes, Mateo *et al*, 1999; Rich and Chalfen, 1999; Furman, 1990) in the sense of involving young people in the evaluation and using a visual medium (in this case digital video) as a tool with a dual aim of both documenting and empowering.

One of the most associated claims regarding participatory action research relates to the empowerment of those who participate and this is the characteristic that I will concentrate my analysis on. By breaking one of the scientific method’s greatest taboos: intervention, and by involving others in the research process, not just as experimental subjects or objects of its
science reacting to its inputs and stimuli, but as ‘co-researchers’, ‘partners’ and ‘equals’, participatory action research is said to provide the opportunity to reflect on and take control of ones current life situation as well as ones future. Freire, who is widely acknowledged as one of the forefathers of the participatory action research approach with communities, talks about empowerment as critical thinking (or conscientization). Conscientization, according to Freire, is the process through which one discovers that they are “in a situation” (Freire, 1970:90), it is the process through which the ‘why’ of an experience of suffering is unmasked (Freire, 1994:23). The main vehicle for such realisations to take place is dialogue.

In these terms, empowerment is the fundamental change, at least from a social psychological perspective, that participatory action research seeks to bring about. The POYPV project, through the use of participatory video, aimed to empower participants to reflect on and define for themselves their situation of ‘exclusion’, and where possible envision and realise alternative ways of approaching and changing that situation. While the overall evaluation of the Play On programme is beyond the scope of this paper, I will be reflecting on how the different narratives of change that I present here could be included in evaluation research more generally. Instead what the analysis focuses on are the empowerment claims of the participatory methodology. In sections three and four I use the concept of empowerment to guide the analysis of formal and informal discourses of change.

Methodology

As my own interest in participatory action research was to look at both formal and informal discourses of such a research practice, I needed a methodological approach that would involve documenting the informal, everyday dimension of the participatory action research. I also wanted to be able to situate the participatory action research in a broader socio-economic and cultural context. Ethnography would enable the collection of data
relating to both the informal as well as formal aspects of the participatory action research through the integration of three data sources: observation, participant-observation and interpersonal communication (Prus, 1996) (summarised in the table below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Research Action</th>
<th>Research Materials</th>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Voice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programme Arтеfacts</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Policy documents; internet; project documents and news reports (primary data and analysis)</td>
<td>Public discourses of exclusion &amp; inclusion</td>
<td>Policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>Formal and informal interviews with project workers; participatory video and group discussions with young people (secondary data and analysis)</td>
<td>Programme stories of inclusion &amp; exclusion</td>
<td>Practitioners &amp; young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>Participant- Observation</td>
<td>Direct involvement (action research) and documentation of involvement in fieldnotes (primary data and analysis)</td>
<td>Research stories of inclusion &amp; exclusion</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
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Table 1: Summary of research interests, methods used, and resulting level of analysis

*The participatory video methodology*

The evaluation project took place over a period of 18 months, between October 2004 and April 2006. During this time, and in collaboration with colleagues, I worked with four

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3 Prus refers to ‘interviews’ as a third data source; I would suggest that ‘interviews’ is the method resulting from the research action of interpersonal communication.
groups, two groups in Area One, one in Area Two and one in Area Three\(^4\). For the day-to-day running of the evaluation I collaborated closely with my colleague Ernesto (a pseudonym), with whom I shared responsibility for the participating groups. Our roles and ‘hands-on’ involvement in training young people to use the video cameras or contacting youth workers and young people varied depending on the group. As a research team we would initially make contact with a local coordinator (adult) who would then suggest and organize a group of young people we could work with. The size of the group varied, for example in one case we ended up working on a one-to-one basis whereas in other cases we had groups of 3, 4 and 6 young people. Once introductions were made we would explain to the young people who we were and what we were doing and what we wanted them to do. We would show them how to use the camera and give them tips on how to collect and shoot footage, and provide them with a broad topic guide (‘brief’\(^5\)) to steer their footage collection (we called this process ‘training’). Sometimes I would lead the training, other times Ernesto led the training and I took more of a supporting and observational role. Our efforts were greeted by a variety of responses from the young people ranging from curiosity and enthusiasm to scepticism, boredom and dismissal. The training conducted, young people either on their own or in a couple of cases with our assistance, were given a couple of weeks to collect their footage (interviewing friends, family, neighbours or anyone else they thought important, shoot activities and images of their areas). Footage collection was followed by a few weeks worth of editing sessions were the researchers would provide the technology for editing the footage and young people would decide on the story they wanted to tell using the collected footage. The final stages of the process involved a screening of the finished product.

\(^4\) The different geographical locales of the groups have been omitted to preserve the groups’ anonymity.

\(^5\) The brief read as follows: tell us about your community, what are the positive and what are the negative things about your community, what would you change about your community, where do you see yourself in five years time and finally, what do you think of the \textit{Play On} programme.
to the group and a focus group to both further reflect on the themes of the digital story, as well as reflect on the participatory video process.

The ethnography

The written record of my time in the field was compiled into a set of fieldnotes. As there is no prescribed way of taking fieldnotes, and advice and stories from experience tend to vary, I chose to follow the advice set out by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) who provide one of the more clear and ‘demystifying’ accounts of the process of taking ethnographic fieldnotes. Most of my notes were made after carrying out the research activities. During a visit I would make ‘mental notes’ (Emerson, Fretz, et al, 1995) – mental bullet points that would help me remember important conversations or sequences of events. My handwritten notes, bullet points and any other recollections describing the day, the people, conversations, events and activities, were made on trains and buses while returning home or to the office. Full length descriptions of the visit, based on these notes, were written up on the computer the following day. This is when I would spend more time filling out the detail indicated in, but missing from, the handwritten notes. These fieldnotes could be anything from 3,000 to 5,000 words and often took more than a day to write up in narrative form. The final fieldnotes record comprised of over 400 (typed) pages. The notes were organized in chronological order and entries were written in much the same style that one might use when keeping a diary.

All the material was analysed using a set of questions proposed by Emerson, Fretz, et al (1995:147) (see table 2). The questions are derived from the symbolic interactionist tradition of ethnography and give priority to processes (instead of ‘causes’ or ‘internal psychological motives’) allowing the researcher to develop interpretations or analytic themes as opposed to causal explanations. The questions also give priority to ‘practical concerns,
conditions, and constraints that actors confront and deal with in their everyday lives and actions’ and help to specify ‘the meanings and points of view of those under study’  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS USED TO GUIDE ANALYSIS</th>
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<tr>
<td>What are the people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes? (for fieldnotes specifically)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why did I include them? (for fieldnotes specifically)</td>
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Table 2: adapted from Emerson, Fretz and Shaw’s (1995) advise on questions to guide (fieldnote) analysis

Taken as a whole the material gathered provides five different perspectives on the youth inclusion programme and its evaluation (government, media, youth workers, young people and researcher). Some of the themes that emerged from the analyses had to do with the way in which the youth inclusion programme was constructed as a social innovation, what that meant and to what such a construction was responding; what it meant to do youth work at the beginning of the 21st Century, how the youth workers supported or subverted the aims of the youth inclusion programme and how they used the participatory evaluation; how youth workers and young people made sense of the participatory evaluation; and finally, an analysis into the craft of doing youth work and participatory action research.

In the next two sections, the discussion I present draws on the material collected through participant observation and interpersonal communication only and focuses on the analysis of how young people made sense of and responded to the participatory evaluation.

**The action research story: a formal story of change**

Action research, as a social psychological story, usually starts with Lewin’s original formulation of the approach which was derived from experiments looking at the relationship between different forms of educational practices (e.g.: lecturing and small group discussions).  

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and behavioural change (Lewin, 1946; 1958/1961). His conceptual inspiration was derived from physics led him to describe change in the language of thermodynamics as a process of ‘unfreezing-changing-refreezing’ (Greenwood and Levin, 1998:17). Subsequent adoption of action research methodologies by, for example, researchers at the Tavistock Institute, followed a psychoanalytic approach instead. Here researchers concentrated on the reduction of stress and anxiety in organizational and community life by using the psychoanalytic model of building relationships of trust with the client. Once such relationships were established real problems could emerge and be addressed (Trist and Murray, 1990). More recently Whyte (1991:5) has written about action research as ‘a strategy in which professional social researchers go beyond treating members of the organization studied as gatekeepers and passive informants in order to involve some of them as active participants in the research process’, while the Norwegian industrial democracy project tries to find alternatives to hierarchical ways of working and stresses the importance of work being designed around psychological demands (Greenwood and Levin, 1998:28-29). In the context of community work, Freire’s project in adult education, outlined in the publication *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is perhaps the most celebrated and most widely cited of all the action research texts. His work draws on a broad range of influences from humanistic psychology to psychoanalysis and Marxism (ref).

It is common in the literature to treat the various strands of action research as separate projects on the basis of their different philosophical concerns (Cassell and Johnson, 2006). For my purposes here I would like instead to focus on their similarities. What all these approaches have in common is a direct and intended engagement with the field in an effort to improve the lives of the people they are engaging with. What we find in all the action research writing is a real commitment to work collaboratively with practitioners and community members to improve practice and community life, respectively. The nature of
such inquiry makes it different to a more ‘traditional’ research approach, which often strives to avoid ‘contamination’.

In community social psychology, Freire’s work has been hugely influential in the development of thinking around participation and participatory action research and most analytical and theoretical attention has built on the most psychological of concepts in his work, the concept of conscientization (Campbell, 2003; Jovchelovich, 2007; Lykes, Blanche, et al, 2003: Rappaport, 1987; 2000). While the more theoretical roots of ‘empowerment’, as a psychosocial concept, can be traced to psychoanalysis and other therapeutic practices (Frosh, forthcoming 2007), the more personal origins of the concept of conscientization are explained in Freire’s later book *The Pedagogy of Hope* where he reflects on the events, encounters and conversations that lead him to formulating the pedagogy of the oppressed. There he reflects on his own psychological and mental health, in particular the bouts of depression that he would periodically suffer in his twenties and the process he went through (‘the archaeology of [his] pain’ p.22) in order to pin-point the origin of his depression: ‘the unmasking of the “why” of my experience of suffering was all that was needed to overcome it’ (p.23). Freire talks of this unmasking as a ‘revelation’ and his early thinking is later captured by the phrase ‘conscientization’: ‘the gradual awakening to the full determinants of ones psychological and social circumstances’ (Jovchelovitch, 2007:153).

*The action research story*

The ancestry of action research is embedded in the way we write about action research. So for example, echoing the influences of Lewin and the physics metaphor of change, we find that action research stories start with the existence of a (social) problem and the subsequent arrival of the researchers on the scene followed by the description of the research activities undertaken. As such we have beginnings of the ‘unfreezing’ and change
metaphor underpinning the writing. In the previous section, I have already described what the social problem was that the youth inclusion programme sought to address (youth exclusion). By implication and also intent, the evaluation that I was involved in was also concerned in addressing the same social problem. I also described how we made contact with the young people we worked with, how we provided cameras, trained young people and supported them where necessary to collect footage and edit their video stories. I also spoke about the focus group that we conducted at the end of this process in order for the young people to further discuss the issues affecting their communities, as well as to reflect on the participatory action research process.

The action research story then focuses attention on moments of group collaboration and conscientization. These are after all the processes that are responsible for change. For the theme of group collaboration we are looking for examples of when the process initiated by the research gathers momentum and group members start to take ownership of the externally (researcher) initiated process. For the conscientization aspect of the story we are looking for moments that we either observe or that are reported by young people as being critical moments that lead to a change in the way they understand their world.

The research I was involved in provided examples of both conscientization and group collaboration. The actual production of digital stories with all of the groups we worked with is one example of group collaboration. Without group collaboration it would not have been possible to create the final product of a digital story and the process of collaboration involved young people collaborating with peers, youth workers and researchers. In terms of the process gaining momentum and the young people taking ownership over the direction of the research, there are examples from two of the groups. Both groups decided that after making one digital story they wanted to make a further digital story and both groups took complete control over the content of these stories. They proposed making stories on issues that went
beyond the initial abstract evaluation brief (i.e.: ‘tell me about your community’) focusing on themes that they found to be directly relevant to them (e.g.: friendships, gangs, religion and sexuality)\textsuperscript{6}.

In terms of the theme of conscientization our formal and informal interactions with the young people provide a wide range of examples. In the group we worked with in Area Three, a group of three young men between the ages of 13 to 15, one of the young men had a tendency to describe everything as being ‘shite’, almost irrespective of the question being asked. ‘How’s your day/week Rob?’, ‘Shite’, ‘What was the Sports Challenge like (an activity)?’, ‘Shite’:

“Rob kept saying 'everything's shite' and I asked him if anything wasn't shite, just so we know what the standard is – Arthur (the youth worker) laughed - he said 'no, everything's shit, only Artbur's car isn't shit' (I guess because that's how they get around).” (fieldnotes, Area Three, May 12\textsuperscript{th} 2005)

“When we arrived Arthur (the youth worker) asked us if we would like something to drink and I asked for a cup of tea. I asked the guys how their week had been and Rob replied 'shite', so I said to him 'I'm going to throw a party the day you say something other than shite'. He smiled and Arthur laughed. Arthur said that they had been talking about that this morning, about how Rob could be more positive…” (fieldnotes, Area Three, May 19\textsuperscript{th} 2005)

\textsuperscript{6} These concerns echo findings from the antecedent research project conducted by my colleagues in both Peru (Ramella, 2002) and England (Humphreys and Olmos, 2003).
Then later the same day while we were working with the guys on editing their video, Rob, caught apparently unaware when being asked about whether or not a particular song would suit the video soundtrack, changed his standard answer:

“I think one of us must have checked with Rob about using (music) track 7: ‘What do you think Rob?’ and he said ‘It's alright’ without flinching. As soon as he said this I realised he had just said something positive and so I went ‘Yeah, you've just said something positive and you didn't even realise it!’ Rob looked down at the floor shyly and smiled slowly - like someone who has been caught unaware but who is not embarrassed by that they've been caught doing or saying - he then said with a mischievous grin ‘Nah, it's shite’, but to me he looked pleased.” (fieldnotes, North of England, May 19th 2005)

During the focus groups when we asked directly about their participation in the video activity, young people spoke about conscientization in their own words. Some of the young people had enjoyed the interviewing component of the activity, finding out what their friends, peers and other adults in their life thought about the area they lived in. Other young people preferred the editing component when they could turn this footage into stories. Young people also told us that they had learnt something from both aspects of the production process. Skills relating to both technical and artistic uses of video were valued by the young people, while perhaps more importantly, young people found that being involved in the video project had ‘made us think’ and discover different perspectives to their own:

SMN: … And how is it different to other things that you do or are involved in?
Esme: [inauditable] camera. The thing about going around and interviewing people personally we don't get to know about...

Elaine: ...people's views...
Esme: ...yeah, people's views.
Elaine: ...you get to see what they say...

(Focus Group Area One (group two))

“And you made us think like what's happening in our environment cause if this never happened, then I wouldn't been thinking about where I have to go to get leisure centres and stuff like that…It helps us to realise because if we never done this project I don't think we would have thought about how the government works in our area.”

(Focus Group Area One (group one))

Young people’s views were echoed in the interviews conducted with the youth workers. One youth worker juxtaposed the skills that young people picked up while working with video as complementary but sufficiently different at the same time to the literacy skills learnt at school. In this respect the project was also able to engage young people by not being school-like and offering a different, more informal, learning environment. Another youth worker commented on how the video project helped young people to express themselves, while the video activity was also described as presenting young people with a challenge and being a good way of charting and demonstrating change over time:

“And you made us think like what's happening in our environment cause if this never happened, then I wouldn't been thinking about where I have to go to get leisure centres and stuff like that…It helps us to realise because if we never done this project I don't think we would have thought about how the government works in our area.”

(Focus Group Area One (group one))
we were seven months ago, can you see where the changes are and I think the video
definitely will help with that kind of process and I think that is quite an important
process especially you know in a community and society where…it seems to be that
lots of young people seem to want things straight away its almost as if they expect
they will come in to the gym and do four weeks work and their bodies will develop
within that four weeks and that their mind would have developed in that four weeks
where they will come and do four weeks volunteering and then expect to sort of
become an assistant director or become a project coordinator within that four weeks
so I think the video should be able to actually break that down and sort of show them
look this is the progress you made in seven months. This is the progress that has been
made in 12 months and give them a realistic kind of timeframe to how long it actually
does take people to progress to change and to develop and to evolve.” (Youth Worker,
Area One)

“I mean one positive thing was it gets them to express how they feel and express what
they really do think, mmm, it takes a lot to get kids to do that but I think for some
reason when you put the video camera on they see a point to it almost, you know,
maybe someone will see or it might get used for something. I think it's good and the
result of that was that the kids said they should buy a video camera and make our own
video diaries and stuff.” (Youth Worker, Area Two)

The second quote provides evidence for the final aspect of the action research story:
leaving part of the newly introduced practice (in this case making digital stories) behind. The
different perspectives on the video activities do indeed provide support and further entrench
the action research story, namely claims of empowerment, of inclusion and of different, non-
hierarchical ways of working. At the same time, working on the evaluation and talking to young people and youth workers, I found that there were other perspectives and experiences that take us beyond the action research story.

Although analytical frameworks have been put forward to document the possibilities, limitations and consequences of change actions, and therefore potentially challenge the monopoly the action research narrative has on change – see ‘prefigurative action research’ (Kagan and Burton, 2004) – there is still ‘more writing about action research than documentation of actual research studies’ (Herr and Anderson, 2004:6). These stories tend to be seamless in their description of the actions undertaken, filtering out the ‘noise’ that no doubt is present in the many interactions that make up such stories. These stories also take for granted the assumptions of participatory action research. Action research stories do not often problematize the disadvantages of the approach and while they may refer to things not always ‘running smoothly’ they do not tend to elaborate on how this might challenge the assumptions of the approach. As such, action research stories contribute to the formalised discourses, which I referred to in the opening of this paper.

In the next section I turn to the ethnographic tradition as a way of trying to move beyond the action research story of change.

The ethnographic story: an informal story of change

I understand ethnography to be not just the methodological approach of participant observation and keeping fieldnotes, but an entire philosophical approach that gives value to the minute detail, to everyday life and interactions in situ and at a very intimate level. With roots in both anthropology and sociology, ethnography has been associated with the study of cultural ‘other-ness’ and is described as being an approach ‘founded on the human capacity for participant observation’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:21). It is a way of producing a
'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the social world through ‘the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of others’ (Van Maanen, 1998). Drawing from symbolic interactionist roots, at least in the microsociological tradition, ontologically such an approach to research understands group life and lived experience as being inter-subjective, and therefore characterised by multiple perspectives, inherent reflexivity, activity, negotiation and relationships. Epistemologically ethnography focuses on process and aims to achieve an ‘intimate familiarity’ with the research context (Prus, 1996).

Interestingly, despite the existence of key ethnographic studies in qualitative social psychological research (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1996; Jodelet 1991; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, et al, 1972; Whyte, 1943) contemporary research in the discipline tends to be based on experimentation, interviewing, focus groups, and media analysis (for a recent exception see Bradbury, 1999). Where participant-observation is used it is normally used as a way of peppering the overall methodological approach without drawing on the philosophical debates that characterises the ethnographic tradition in both anthropology and sociology and which by-and-large remain unresolved (see for example Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Moore, 1994).

As such, the anxieties of the field (access, negotiation of roles and relationships and departure) and the dilemmas of representing the field through writing, all of which are rich and insightful sources of knowledge about the social and cultural organization of the research setting while also being tightly interwoven with the researcher’s own subjectivity and thus with implications for how we construct others as well as ourselves and our discipline, are addressed as methodological difficulties and not incorporated into the empirical discussion. Such an approach to participant-observation, and by extension ethnographic research, deny the socially situated nature of the research practice, something of particular importance in participatory action research.
Patterns of interaction and everyday practice, which make up participatory action research, evolve and develop over time. Such patterns of interaction become difficult to access through interviewing and focus groups alone. Furthermore, patterns do not always form part of our conscious/explicit knowledge of a culture but may only be manifest through the interactions and practices we engage in with others. As such, interviewing and focus groups are limited, to a certain extent, to accessing explicit cultural knowledge whereas the longer engagement through participant-observation can provide insight into the practiced dimensions of a culture’s knowledge systems. In the context of participatory action research this can be a particularly beneficial approach, which would allow us to discuss what have been described as the politics of participatory action research (VanderPlaat, Samson et al, 2001) and what, here, I am trying to capture by the term ‘informal’.

In my own work, and in order to think about the informal dimension of participatory action research, I have drawn conceptual inspiration from the symbolic interactionist tradition and cultural theorist De Certeau’s ethnographic project on everyday life (1984a; 1998). Symbolic interactionism stresses the importance of appreciating human group life and lived experience as being intersubjective, (multi)perspectival, reflective, activity-based, negotiable, relational, and processual (Prus, 1996:15-18). Symbolic interactionism allows us to problematise the action research narrative that guides participatory action research. By taking a symbolic interactionist approach we start with the assumptions that we inhabit a multi-dimensional world and so the study of participatory action research can focus on the processes of interaction between various social, cultural and emotional ‘selves’ seeking to attain differently defined notions of development and change. Here we can conceptually appreciate the context and the people that we work with as being fluid and dynamic and necessarily responding to and transforming our intentions and actions in the participatory action research process. The result, and the way we talk about change, is necessarily
different and extends to include the ambiguities, tensions and contradictions that we experience in the field.

Furthermore, de Certeau’s (1984) work allows us to deal with some of the issues surrounding our use of theory in practice and our interactions with the field. According to De Certeau, theories act as disciplinary grids and he explores ‘how an entire society resists being reduced to [them]’ (1984:xiv). In this respect, his approach seeks to chart ‘the network of an anti-discipline’ and in particular:

“the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate […] the purpose of this work is to make explicit the systems of operational combination (les combinatoires d’opérations) which also compose a “culture”, and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term “consumers”. Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways of the property of others” (de Certeau, 1984:xi-xii).

The interaction between discipline and anti-discipline is embodied in the distinction de Certeau makes between strategies and tactics – strategies are the institutionalised forms of practices, the practice of the status quo. Tactics are the way ‘ordinary people’ adapt/respond ‘make do’ with strategies. Accordingly the ‘ordinary person’ does not just become a copy of the strategy but maintains difference through these tactics.

An illustration of an operational model of popular culture is the French practice of ‘la perruque’ (the wig), defined as “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (De Certeau, 1984:25). Unlike pilfering or absenteeism, nothing material is stolen and the
worker is physically present. What is diverted is time from one domain – increasingly shaped by the contours of capitalism – into another domain – which in the spirit of enlightenment one might be tempted to describe as being confined to the past, the countryside or primitive peoples. However, de Certeau maintains that this is not the case, instead “far from being a regression toward a mode of production organized around artisans or individuals, la perruque re-introduces ‘popular’ techniques of other times and other places into the industrial space (that is, into the Present order)” (1984:26).

The ethnographic story

Most people who have ever been involved in participatory action research, at least those who I have had the opportunity of talking to, would not describe such work as being linear, seamless or smooth. In this section I concentrate on de Certeau’s concept of tactics in order to understand how the conceptual apparatus of participatory action research changes in practice.

While working with the young people I noticed that our carefully planned activities were often adapted in both subtle and blatant ways. At the level of the methodology itself, young people often joked around with the equipment and the brief, in more or less constructive ways. For example, one group used their skateboard to wheel the camera around and get moving shots, a similar concept to a ‘dolly’. Conversely, another group in a more mocking way adapted one of the brief questions from ‘if you had the power to make changes in your community what would you change and how?’ to ‘if you had the power to fly anywhere where would you go’.

Young people were also aware of the power of the camera as both a tool for documenting as well as creating realities (Turner, 1992). For example, one young man gave
a very serious on-camera ‘performance’ answering questions to our brief7 and once we finished the recording of the interview the young man turned to his friends putting his finger in his mouth in a gesture indicating that he is going to vomit, and saying, ‘Where's the bucket?’.

With another group while working on the editing of the video one of the young women describing a night scene she had shot interviewing two young men in a car, explained that she had waited for a police siren to go off before filming the scene in order to better illustrate what the young men were talking about: being unnecessarily harassed by the police.

Other reactions to our research took the form of resistance. For example, when we worked with a group of four young men in year 8 in an inner city school in Area One progress, in terms of collecting footage for the group’s film, was slow. The guys did not seem interested in cooperating with our research focus – namely telling stories about their respective communities. In fact, they resisted most of our suggestions to this effect. The school it seemed had been undergoing a transformation of its own and the guys preferred to tell the school’s story. The short video ‘Football and our Community’ ended up being just that and despite our best encouragements and suggestions we never got to hear much about their communities.

The experience of resistance described here, drew my attention to a further aspect of this type of participatory action research, namely different representations of problems by different stakeholders. For example, it became clear that, for the group of young men we were working with in Area One, their school and in particular its improvement, was a far more important and pressing story for them to tell than the community focus of our research. A similar experience occurred with a second group in Area One. We worked with this second group for over six months and while starting with a research brief that focused on

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7 This was filmed by one of the guy’s friends while another friend acted as the interviewer and read the question. We were present during the filming as this was one of the first attempts this group had made filming and we were helping them.
young people’s views of their area, when the opportunity arose for making a second video we discovered that our initial research focus had been somewhat restrictive for the young people:

SMN: I guess one of my main concerns is that maybe we missed something because we were doing a particular type of research, so I'm wondering if someone gave you this to do again how would you do it differently? D'you see what I mean?

Esmie: What d' you mean do it differently?

SMN: OK - like for example, okay let me ask this in a different way what would be, what is the most important things for you at the moment, like in your life?

Esmie: School, friends, things like that. Everything really, innit?

SMN: OK so maybe would you, if we had given a broader kind of brief would you have taken it to school or...

Esmie: Yeah!

Brian: That's why I didn't do it because it was like about our area

Esmie: ...Islington innit...

Brian: ...I can't take it to Camden...

SMN: OK...

Esmie: ...I had a few people that I wanted to be in from different boroughs but just Islington so they ain't gonna be in it...

SMN: OK so in some ways was it restrictive?

Esmie: Yeah.

Brian: Yeah.

SMN: OK - I was a bit worried about that.
Esme: Mmm

(Focus Group Area One (group two))

...

SMN: …OK so if we did it again what sort of things would you change?

Esmie: I'd have more people in and more areas, it was more about the area
[inaudiable] I would have liked to interview people that don't come here.

(Focus Group Area One (group two))

Finally, when it came to gaining access to the local projects and setting up the participatory action research project with the youth workers and coordinators, I often found myself engaging in ‘exchange and barter’ language in negotiating and securing access. One youth worker explained to me, at a much later stage, that because of changing pressures in youth work and the shift from a ‘access for all’ to a more targeted type of youth work (Smith, 1999; 2002), it was vital for youth work to be seen as producing outputs. As such, our participatory evaluation was now part of a much big exchange network where youth workers had to resort to tactics (de Certeau, 1984) in order to continue doing the youth work they believed in:

Octavio: Yeah, it’s an open club but increasingly youth work targets, increasingly in everything that works with young people outside of regular school, increasingly money is targeted to engage those that might be disengaged. So the pressure actually, its to move us away from this open type of youth club into much more projects that will connect particular targeted young people. (Interview, Youth Worker Area One)

...

SMN: So in what sense, what sort of ways or what sort of strategies do you use to get around this?
Octavio: Well, okay I’ll tell you how I do it. I have to make sure that enough of our youth work is recorded, so for example two of our football coaches are very good at recording so I make sure that at least two sessions a week are recorded work, I can record so I keep recordings the whole time, when I take the group away to the farm, it’s ideally set-up to satisfy learning outcomes, so I can do those sorts of things. So I get around it in all sorts of ways. But you can do other things, so for example, if you let me have a copy of Esmie’s video [I suddenly remember that I have a copy for him in my bag and go to my bag to fetch it] then that’s proof, of an exceptional, you know, a very good educational project with young people, which one young person learnt a heck of a lot. You see that’s an outcome, yeah, this is an outcome, so if I got inspected I could say [slams hand down on dvd, on counter] there you got, there’s an outcome, what more do you want? So it’s little things like that... (Interview, Youth Worker, Area One)

Then there are the reactions of the researcher herself. I mentioned in the previous sections how most action research manuals become inadequate once we enter the field and how I myself often felt lost in the field. Having no idea how others, in similar positions, before me had felt about working with participatory methodologies made me fell even more anxious, the tensions and dilemmas of the field taking on a more threatening dimension than might perhaps be warranted. The excerpt below –taken and adapted from my fieldnotes-describes one of the groups we worked with in Area Three:

*Today’s session started with repeated enquiries of ‘is this going to be done today?’ I think the guys are totally bored of us, I got that impression towards the end of our last visit but know I’m sure that they can’t wait to see the back of us! They were totally playing up,
telling racist and sexist jokes which makes me feel very uncomfortable- the racist jokes are awful and Arthur doesn’t say anything to them, and we’ve been made well aware by Mary that there are racial tensions in the area, and we’re a bunch of white people in a room and the kids are telling racist jokes and the adults aren’t saying anything, and I don’t know whether as the researcher I should say anything...and the sexists jokes...and I’m the only woman in the room and I’m not saying anything, just trying to ignore them, they’re only doing it for attention etc etc, sometimes I wonder what I signed myself up for...the fact that Arthur doesn’t say anything, really bugs me...During the focus group, Greg continued with his verbal abuse (this week I’m a prostitute just like his teacher...I suppose that’s an upgrade from being a ‘bitch’ last week?) and then Rob and Mark gave us a piece of their mind re: the activities, they think it was all too controlling... When we finally finished the focus group (yeah!), I was left in the room with Rob who was playing with the legs of the tripod. As he did that he kept saying ‘bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch etc’ (to the tripod, in general who knows?). By this point, I’d had enough of the swearing and said ‘do you know that that’s actually really offensive?’ Arthur walks in at this point and Rob asks Arthur ‘is it offensive?’ ‘What?’ says Arthur. ‘Bitch’ Rob says again. Arthur tells him it is very offensive and Rob argues back that it’s not. I decide to intervene (the voice of reason, yeah, right). I thought that maybe if I explain to Rob why I –the woman, the referent- think it’s offensive he might stop: ‘It is, particularly if you use it to refer to a woman’ (not earth-shattering explanation I must admit...). Rob insists its not but then asks me why? Arthur jumps in again and (I still can’t quite believe this explanation, makes mine look half decent) says that it’s offensive because ‘it’s an animal and not a human’ (huh??!!) While I’m trying to make heads or tails of Arthur’s explanation I also add, and I choose my words carefully, that it is a very derogatory term. I know that Rob won’t know what the word derogatory means and he can’t pronounce it either. I elaborate on the word’s meaning ‘when you say something
bad about someone, look down on them, it’s disrespectful’ (another ace explanation, if only it was possible to eat the dictionary) and then I syllabalise (sp???) it in a very patronising way. Rob repeats ‘derogatory’ and I respond ‘that’s right’ and ‘there you’ve learnt something new today’ (I’m hating saying this but by this point I was so pissed off, tired and fed-up with everything, I really just wanted to get out of there, go home…)

In retrospect, I can of course make sense of the tension and confusion I describe in the excerpt above. As we might have suspected and our focus group discussion with the young men confirmed, these young men we were working with had found the activities restrictive. Restrictive activities, and the frustration they create for the young people, are associated with a formal educational environment, authority figures and exclusion. It is no wonder that they reacted to me (and my colleague) in the way they did. If I stand back, I can see that my role in the group was ambiguous. We were there to find out what the group thought about the Play On programme, we were evaluators in this respect and that was made clear and everyone knew that. On the other hand, I was also showing the young men how to use cameras, suggesting what they might like to shoot, how they might like to edit their footage (from a technical not content perspective) and how to use the editing software. As such, I might have been loosely perceived as a youth worker. However, these activities took place in a small room with a whiteboard. The setting and our instructive role therein bore a distinct resemblance to school, classrooms and teachers, though there was no curriculum as such. Furthermore, in the context of group work and in the presence of other youth workers the boundaries of already ambiguous roles became even more blurred. In that situation it was unclear who, if anyone, was in a position of relative authority.

The racist and sexist banter could be analysed as a reflection of the young men’s broader environment. Grace and Tobin (1998:48) have interpreted such instances of
darkness (in children’s video projects in particular but their insights are also useful here) using Bakhtin’s concept of the *carnivalesque* – the carnival, a world of pleasures, of hierarchical inversions and bad taste – to understand both the light and darker side of merriment in children’s videos. They argued that the darker, less palatable aspects of children and young people’s videos is a reflection of the cultural resources, such as events and conversations that children and young people are exposed to. It is a way of making sense of these cultural resources. Given such an analysis, and in retrospect, I might have done well to distance myself and depersonalise the banter. While this might have helped me make sense of it faster, it still does not do away with a more ethical dilemma and tension of participatory action research: intervention yes to create conscientization and group collaboration but when and to what extent should local knowledge be respected and when and to what extent should it be challenged? Williams and Lykes (2003) also reflect on similar ambiguities, contradictions and tensions from a gender perspective:

‘I often questioned my hesitancy to break their ‘cultural silence’ about, for example, domestic violence and war rape, oscillating between self-criticism for my colluding in their silence and self-congratulation for my cultural sensitivity and refusal to impose a western feminist agenda. Living through such contradictions deepened my understanding of local rural women’s lives and my recognition of the limitations of theories that positioned western feminism over Maya Ixil traditionalist views’ (Williams and Lykes, 2003: 288).

What is also clear is that drawing on other sources (e.g.: Grace and Tobin or Williams and Lykes) in order to make sense of my experience is, itself, a tactic which leads me to construct a narrative that approaches the action research story. Grace and
Tobin (1998), for example, conclude that working through these carnivalesque moments can open up a space for the transformation of dominant and/or oppressive discourses. By drawing such a conclusion we are back in the action research story of empowerment, of problem solution and of coherence that dissolves the problematic nature of the experience. In conceptualising similar disruptions to their intentions of change in a different action research project, VanderPlaat, Samson, et al (2001:80) also end up back in the action research story – ‘a reciprocal empowerment process’. They write:

‘we expected [project] parents and staff to participate in the evaluation and decide what was important and effective about their experiences with [the project]. We also assumed that parents would find the process to be both a positive experience and an empowering one. However, the management team and researchers did not expect a reciprocal empowerment process where their disciplinary discourses and basic assumptions about collaboration and participatory action research would be seriously challenged’ (VanderPlaat, Samson et al, 2001: 84).

What perhaps the action research story does not allow for is the acknowledgement that some things are and remain problematic. I still find my experience of working with those young men highly problematic and if anything, it is perhaps the words of Foster writing in a different context to action research, that best captures the nature of the problem without seeking to resolve it: ‘the difficulty with discussions about crime, the underclass and marginalized groups is that they involve value judgements about behaviour and attitudes-
which for those eager to empathize rather than pathologize poor communities and their problems is deeply problematic’ (2000:319).

Reflections

The aim of the paper was to initiate a discussion around the ways in which we talk about participatory action research and how these forms of expression constrain our thinking on people, interaction and change in the action research context. I have discussed the gap between formal and informal discourses in participatory action research, using examples from a case study of evaluating a youth inclusion programme. Drawing on an ethnographic tradition informed by symbolic interactionism, as well as De Certeau’s writing on everyday life, I have tried to look at ways in which the action research story, that usually frames our narratives of participatory action research, may be extended by including the mundane and irrational aspects of everyday life.

Identifying and analysing the everyday life of change initiatives, including moments of resistance, tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities, is useful on two dimensions. Firstly, the extended analysis locates change efforts within a broader social and cultural context. In short, change efforts are contextualised and can begin to be viewed in relation to existing actors, activities and processes in a given situation. This form of contextualisation is useful for theory development with regards to understanding the discourses that shape our participatory action research and change efforts. On a different level it also challenges our assumptions about those we work with and the possible interactions we can have with them.

In the case of empowerment, the social psychological change that participatory action research and participation more generally strives for, and the analytical concept that I used to guide my analysis of formal and informal stories of participatory action research, there seems to be an implicit assumption that helpless situations correspond to helpless individuals that
need to be empowered. Such a reading negates the possibility that those we work with are able and do respond creatively to our plans of empowerment. By taking an ethnographic approach, and using De Certeau’s concept of tactics, I suggested that we need to consider that perhaps what we call ‘critical consciousness’ is already in existence when we arrive on the scene (see also, Humphreys and Brezillion, 2002).

Beginning with such an assumption has various implications for how we interact with our participants. Take for example my experience of working with the young men. My story demonstrates several things. In the first instance, there is the classic observation about power asymmetries. We were working along various asymmetries including adult/young person, researcher/researched, privileged/disadvantaged and not only were we not equals, as a researcher I was suppose to have considerably more power. But, from a gender and contextual perspective, I also felt powerless. The young people with their particular experiences of school and education, which they had found problematic, made them savvier with regards to how to protect themselves from oppressive adults. In the episode described above, the young men and I pushed each other into situations that none of us were fond of and we exercised the respective power resources we had available in order to escape the constraining positions we had manoeuvred each other into. Wittingly or unwittingly we playing the gender and age ‘cards’ respectively. While I don’t feel apologetic about using this power, I felt a need to protect myself much in the same way the young people were protecting themselves, I wonder whether given more stories about doing participatory action research –more informal discourse- I might have been able to feel less threatened and use my position as an adult and a researcher in a more constructive way.

The second dimension in which capturing the informal side of participatory action research is useful relates to collecting stories of practice. Recounting ‘tales of the field’ (Van Maanen, 1982) has I believe, the potential to help those entering such work, to better
understand the practices of this way of working. My experience with the young men described above is a story I have told and re-told in both formal and informal contexts, in an attempt to make sense of what happened. I have had many interpretations and responses to the story ranging from statements of the obvious (that I failed to adequately comprehend the situation in other words) to more helpful suggestions about how I could have responded differently.

On one of these occasions when I presented the story to an audience at a workshop a colleague mentioned that I ‘should have just told him his trainers suck’. The latter comment is perhaps insightful with regards to thinking about the incident itself as well as the forms of available interaction. Banter was the main way in which the young men communicated amongst themselves and the comment suggested by my colleague is also banter. I believe that such a comment would have provided me with the banter that would have been necessary to continue the interaction with the young man instead of locking myself, and the young person, into pre-defined positions (of ‘teacher’ or of ‘patronising adult’ and of ‘pupil’ or ‘errand youth’). My own initial reaction shut down interaction with this particular young person; the banter may have opened the interaction up again. By telling this young man that his ‘trainers suck’ (or some other retort along the same lines) I could have perhaps indirectly communicated with him without coming to a grid lock.

Talking about the informal side of participatory action research has the capacity to demonstrate to the reader that change, and the joint efforts that go into creating it, is not necessarily a smooth and seamless process on a day-to-day level. In this respect, extended stories of participatory action research that look at the interactionist and everyday dimension constitute a sort of ‘sensitivity training’ and can be used in teaching and training. My assumption here is that knowing how other people felt or acted in similar situations is, if not

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8 I would like to acknowledge Professor Patrick Humphreys for pointing this out to me.
empowering or inspiring, at least consoling in breaking the silence the lies in the gap between the ideal and the real. In sharing such experiences stories can become resources that can be used in practice (see for example Orr’s (1996) ethnography about the role of stories in the photocopy service profession or Garcia-Lorenzo, Nolas and de Zeeuw, 2008).

Of course, the equation of ethnography with the ‘real’ is itself problematic. Anthropologists have been debating the limitations of the ethnographic narrative, as a representational form for a couple of decades (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Moore, 1994). Indeed here the fact that I have chosen to focus on ambiguities, contradictions and tensions is not a-theoretical. But compared to the action research story, ethnography as an approach forces us to listen to and include the voices of all involved and to ask about and analyse the socially constructed nature of our change efforts. This in turn creates a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of change forcing us to be more reflexive about of our tools (Gergen, 1986).

Is it possible to bring action research and ethnographic narratives together when it comes to writing evaluation or other research stories? While I would, as others are doing (Frosh, 2007), like to suggest that that one of our best bets for maintaining a critical participatory research practice is to juggle these two stories side by side, maintaining the necessary tensions their co-existence implies, without letting either subsume the other, so that both coherence and fragmentation are made visible and are put into dialogue, in practice this is a challenging (and exhausting) task. I have found it difficult to discuss the everyday of participatory action research without returning to the action research story. Even as I concluded my previous section with the thought that some problems are intractable and should be engaged with as such, in this section I have supported the idea that sharing stories of these intractable problems can be empowering. In drawing such a conclusion I have returned the ethnographic story to the conventions of the action research story through
recourse to empowerment. It seems that after all genre—the organizing principles that allow us to distinguish one type of creation (text in this case) from another and that orient us towards the text thus producing certainty with regards to our expectations of that text—is more powerful than the writer’s efforts to resist it\(^9\). On a more positive note, while genres are very powerful they are also unstable and can, through time, change. It is my hope that in time the action research story may change to be a less formalized, a more inclusive and a more accessible narrative of change.

\(^9\) The genre is stronger than the writer’s ability to resist it’ (Toby Litt quoted in Time Out, April 4-10, 2007)
References


