

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PORTAL (STUDENT PORTAL)

Getting Uncomfortable with Difficult Knowledge: A Reflexive Account of a Community-Based Research Project

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The article provides a critical reflexive account of a community-based research project from the perspective of four undergraduate students and their professor. The project came out of a partnership with a local nonprofit organization that has long offered social justice-focused camps to high school-aged youth. Student-researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with former participants to better understand the camp's potential longer-term impacts on their social justice knowledge and actions. Findings underscored the sometimes unsettling nature of social justice education as evidenced in how campers grappled with critical understandings of race, class, and gender. The paper presents student-researchers' reflections on their own struggles in the development of critical consciousness as sociology majors. Utilizing complementary frameworks that encompass how student-researchers engage "difficult knowledge" (Britzman 1998) in the classroom and "uncomfortable reflexivity" (Pillow 2003) in their research, our account captures the sometimes messy, unfulfilled, and alternative possibilities of social justice education and community-based research.

Keywords: Community-based research; social justice education; reflexivity; qualitative research

Focused on orienting education towards application, social impact, and student engagement, models of community-based research and learning continue to provide opportunities for academic growth and connection among students, professors, and community partners (Mayer, Blume, Black, & Stevens, 2019; Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo, & Donohue, 2003). In higher education circles, proponents of community-based and service learning have long sought to demonstrate the vital contributions to student success (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kuh, 2008; Bringle, 2017). In accordance with the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AACU) guidelines, the California State University system—encompassing 23 campuses including our own and enrolling nearly half a million students—has adopted service and community-based learning as one of several high impact teaching strategies that faculty and campuses are encouraged to implement (O'Donnell et al., 2011). However, when discussing the approach in terms of "best practices," we may not adequately comprehend or respond to the challenges inherent in using community-based models to engage undergraduate students in research. In the place of teaching and assessment practices that emphasize measurable outcomes related to social justice or applied learning, our work presents a case that creates room to explore ambivalence, discomfort, and dynamic approaches to community-based research.

The article provides a critical reflexive account of a community-based research project from the perspective of four undergraduate students. The research project was developed through a partnership between the university and a local nonprofit organization that has offered social justice-focused camps to high school-aged youth for many years. Student-researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with former participants to better understand the camp's potential short and longer-term impacts on their social justice knowledge and actions. The research project underscored the sometimes unsettling nature of social justice

education as evidenced in how campers grappled with critical understandings of race, class, and gender. The paper presents student-researchers' reflections on their own respective struggles in the development of critical consciousness in their sociology classes. Utilizing complementary frameworks that encompass how we engage "difficult knowledge" (Britzman, 1998; Sonu, 2016) in the classroom and "uncomfortable reflexivity" (Pillow, 2003) in research, our account captures the sometimes messy, unfulfilled, and challenging aspects of social justice education and community-based research. The study presents a unique opportunity for such reflexivity as student-researchers and study participants shared similar backgrounds and concerns for social justice.

In the following sections, we begin by introducing our research team and providing an overview of our community-based project and its limitations. We also touch on a few broad themes that arose from our study that came to inform the student-researchers' reflexive accounts detailed in later sections. Instead of concluding with a clear set of recommendations, we end with a series of guiding questions and takeaways for practitioners of community-based research and learning. Our work moves between what Corte and Irwin (2017) describe as the "form" (traditional) and "flow" (disruptive) aspects of qualitative research that together enrich our understanding of what is possible through systematic study. As a result, our piece captures the often unpredictable and circuitous path of the qualitative researcher working in community settings. While their professor facilitated the process of developing this piece and refining its central themes, it is the students' voices and lived experiences that are centered in the analysis. Moreover, students also played vital roles in all aspects of writing, including reviewing literature, editing, formatting, and making revisions. Given that this piece is the result of a community-based, social justice-oriented project collaboratively written by professor and students, we also shift between different pronouns and voices throughout the following sections.

Introducing the "Research Collective"

Student-researchers co-authoring this work all previously completed a qualitative methods course with the professor who later invited them to work on a community-based research project. The Research Collective, as we came to call ourselves, was made up of non-traditional students, students of color, workers, immigrants, LGBTQ folx, first-generation college students, a former "juvenile delinquent," and those of diverse religious backgrounds. In many ways, we reflect the emerging demographic portrait of our campus. In addition to students of color making up the majority, over half of the study body are identified as first generation-educated and Pell Grant eligible (Urizar et al., 2017). Below, each student-researcher provides a brief introduction, which we will expand upon further in subsequent sections:

Domonic, a Salvadorian-Mexican-American, first-generation college student
 Karmina, a Mexican-American student with a learning disability
 Mahindra, a first generation South Asian immigrant
 Nikki, a half-Japanese, non-traditional student

Given their diverse backgrounds, the student-researchers add vital voices to the broader literature on service and community-based learning. Scholars have long struggled with attempts to outline the differences and unique characteristics of each approach (Mooney & Edwards, 2001), but we emphasize a few key distinctions between service and community-based learning as it relates to the identities and experiences of student-researchers. Traditionally focused on the experiences and perspectives of more privileged students, service-learning has historically been defined by charitable notions of engagement rather than those oriented towards social justice (Cipolle, 2010; Mtawa & Wilson-Strydom, 2018). Research has also called attention to challenges with measuring whether communities actually benefit from service learning and whether these forms of engagement may even reinforce deficit notions more privileged students may hold of community settings where they work (Butin, 2010; Conner & Erickson, 2017). Structural or systemic forces that maintain race, class, and gender inequality often go unnamed in service learning contexts, as does the acknowledgement of the power and privilege that college students often wield in these spaces (Brewster, 2019). As a result, while service learning is at times used interchangeably with community-based learning or research, we emphasize our commitments to the latter. By adding our voices to the literature and scholarly record, we also hope that the practice of community-based learning may evolve to become more inclusive and critical in its outlook.

It is equally important to recognize that the makeup of Research Collective members is relevant in relation to our study participants and their backgrounds. The participants in our community-based research project all took part in our partner organization's social justice-themed camps. As college-age youth living

in Southern California with diverse racial, class, and gender identities, the participants were a near mirror image of the varied identities of the student-researchers themselves. Before and after interviews and focus groups, student-researchers and participants swapped similar stories related to work and school experiences. Beyond demographic similarities, the two groups shared another similar experience: exposure to social justice education. As sociology majors in a diverse and critically-oriented department where an emphasis on inequality and social change are built into the curriculum, students are regularly subjected to issues, theories, concepts, and research that forces them to reflect critically on their lived experiences. Despite these similarities, student-researchers never attended the partner organization's camps, and thus did not have insider knowledge of that unique experience. Neither complete insiders nor complete outsiders, student-researchers occupied the "space between" themselves and their participants who shared similar life experiences and backgrounds (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The Research Process

In order to better understand the ideas put forth in this article, it is important to explain where our inquiry began and how our focus shifted over time. Our study comes out of a community-based partnership that was formed under the auspices of university's Center for Community Engagement in order to build a toolkit for campus stakeholders interested in developing research projects with local organizations. As a result, we carefully documented our process and compiled resources, such as student reflection logs and partnership agreements, to promote the practice of community-based research on campus. Headquartered in the local community, the partner organization we worked with has been active in confronting bias and discrimination in Southern California through various educational and training programs for decades. The professor was introduced to the organization through a former student in the sociology department who worked in one of their programs. In initial conversations months before we began the project, organizational staff voiced their eagerness to cultivate stronger ties with the university and develop a pilot study to understand the impact and effectiveness of their programming.

Through a series of conversations between the professor, student-researchers, and partner staff, we ultimately decided to focus on studying the impacts of the organization's social justice camps. As one of their flagship programs, the organization designed the three-day camps for high school-aged youth with the goal of introducing them to oppressive structures in society so that they may find ways to transform those inequities individually and in community. The organization estimates over 10,000 young people have participated over the camp's 30-year long history. Geared toward understanding and combatting various "-isms" in society like racism or sexism, the camp is built around several activities that facilitate discussion on challenging topics. Before leaving camp, attendees also make pledges for how they plan to act on what they have learned. Campers are primarily recruited through schools, but court-involved youth may also be referred to the program. Our study entailed holding interviews and focus groups with former camp participants to learn about what they took away from the experience and how their lives may have changed since attending. As a community-based action research project, the partner group was involved at every stage of the process from outlining the research questions all the way through to the analysis and reporting on findings (Strand et al., 2003). Member-checking and "think aloud" sessions with organizational staff were built into our research process to elicit partner input and ensure that the findings were of greatest use to them (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). IRB approval was secured at the outset of the study. We continued to meet on a nearly weekly basis for on and off-campus meetings during the Spring 2018 semester. During the course of the entire project, student-researchers maintained digital journals and wrote reflections in response to prompts pertaining to each stage of the research process.

Limitations and opportunities for reflection

While it was important for the student-researchers to gain knowledge of each stage of the research process, it was also crucial for them to recognize the challenges that may arise despite having a strong community partnership. We developed a robust recruitment plan, and reached out to hundreds of former campers by phone, e-mail blasts, and social media posts. While 23 people eventually signed up to attend the focus groups held at the partner organization's office, only six former campers attended. In two cases, focus groups became one-on-one interviews as we only had one participant show up. Pseudonyms are used below when referring to participants to maintain confidentiality. A common issue cited by the no-shows related to transportation and work or school schedules. The focus groups and interviews covered various points pertaining to their experience at the camp and asked participants to consider what impact it may have had on them. We collaboratively coded transcripts from the focus groups and interviews and intermittently shared findings with our partners along the way.

Instead of a final list of recommendations for the partner organization, we posed reflective questions that could provide their staff insight into campers' experiences. Based on our analysis, we also developed profiles of camper archetypes and placed them along a spectrum ranging from those who were resistant to the camp's teachings to those who now are actively involved in the organization. Despite the low turnout, we were intrigued by some of the study's emergent themes and eventually came to see our project in a new light that went beyond its initial objectives. Through additional discussion and reflection, the Research Collective decided that we could use the project as a platform for reflection on our own experiences as sociology students who have similarly been exposed to challenging course material. Before discussing our own reflections, we first present central themes from our community-based research project focusing on the campers' interaction with social justice education.

Emergent Themes: An Uncomfortable Experience

Despite challenges in recruitment, one overarching theme that arose from our discussions with campers opened up new possibilities for inquiry. Participants consistently expressed how the camp experience had challenged them or at times made them feel uncomfortable. For us as student-researchers continually confronting aspects of our own identities, we readily recognized and empathized with those sentiments. Campers noted that the experience was jarring in part due to the relatively mundane expectations they held prior to participating. Before arriving at camp, one participant said they expected that camp would be an idyllic or fun experience, like those featured in popular TV shows or movies. Andrea, a camper, stated that her motivations for attending were focused on getting a true camp experience. "I'd just never been to camp," she said, "and I'd always wanted to go to a camp with cabins and food and all that. So that's kind of just what drew me in." Clearly, prior commitments to social justice were not the driving force for all campers to show up.

Once they arrived, it did not take long for participants to realize that this was not just an ordinary camp. In particular, they discussed a sense of discomfort or uneasiness that came with the activities that forced them to engage intersectional aspects of their identities and learn about the various "-isms" in society that perpetuate oppression. This discomfort is in part by design. In our discussions with organizational staff, they acknowledged that the camp has a reputation for getting emotional at times, in some cases even bringing some young people to tears. For example, one activity known as "Forced Choice" requires campers to move to particular locations in a room based on their response to challenging close-ended prompts. One prompt asks campers to decide that if they could be any race, which would they choose. When Joyce, another camper, saw that the majority of people had chosen "White," she was shocked. "I was, like, oh, my gosh. My heart was hurting and, like, I was crying and I was uncomfortable just to see, like, how people really, like, felt on the inside, you know? It was hard." Similarly, Darius remembered how people responded to the question, "What race would your parents least like you to date?" Looking around the room during the activity, he recalled thinking, "Oh shit, your parents would keep you from being around me?... It's depressing. It gets you, and it gets you thinking. And it's also kind of uncomfortable if your friends are in opposite races, genders, et cetera."

Because each camp focuses on a particular theme like racial or gender justice, students participate in group breakout activities that correspond with how they personally identify. These activities can also force campers to come to terms with aspects of their own lived experiences and identities. When dividing up into breakout groups based on students' racial and/or ethnic identity, Andrea said:

I remembered also kind of just being uncomfortable in my racial group because it was at the camp that I realized, 'Wow, I'm not as Mexican as these Mexican [campers]...' It was a Latino group. I'm not as Latinx as the Latinx group, so I just felt really out of place.

For campers like Andrea, they may have to confront aspects of their identities in ways that may lead to challenging realizations and new insights.

In some cases, campers reflected on the challenges they confronted as opening the door to important breakthroughs. Eric, a camper who now volunteers with the organization, reflected:

I'm not really too open about my life, especially with strangers. It's something I've improved on, especially growing up as an undocumented immigrant here in the US. It's something that I didn't consider going into camp, but me sharing my experiences, it felt like a huge weight was lifted off of me, being able to share all of these things that I had been holding back for so long.

Similarly, Carl shared that, “Yeah, we were talking about sexuality and stuff, and there were some things that I personally confront. And then having to talk about that in a group is kind of uncomfortable. But I felt better afterwards.” Even for Andrea, one of the campers who voiced criticism of some camp activities she saw as “manipulative,” did observe changes in her friends. “... [T]here were some people from my group from my school that I noticed seeing change afterward,” she noted, “and I did like that the camp was able to influence them.”

Beyond how they came to see themselves, campers also mentioned the ways in which they attempted to put camp teachings into practice. For Taylor, a former camper who became an active member of the organization, shared how the camp “forced me [to see how] we’re all being the bystander. And maybe it’s time to stop. Maybe it’s time to actually do something, and that’s what changed for me...” Taylor went on to discuss how they now confront the vocabulary choices of those in their social circle:

There are a lot of comments that people make that once you know that it’s like a negative way, or once you know that it’s oppressive... it’s kind of like now I can’t be ignorant about this. Now if I use this word or now if I say this, I’m actively and openly, knowingly practicing this ‘-ism.’ So I guess that’s like something that really comes up – not only in myself but in people that I’m around with. Where before I was so kind of ignorant to the type of oppression that they were experiencing.

For the most part, participants reported that they were still trying to figure out how to enact some of the lessons from camp in their own lives. On a more interpersonal level, several discussed how they saw the camp influencing how they may interact with family or friends. But in considering how the camp’s teachings on social justice or their subsequent experiences may guide their future trajectories, campers generally remained uncertain.

While we are hesitant to draw a clear set of findings from our study, we did come to observe a variety of ways in which campers’ exposure to social justice education impacted them. In particular, they discussed the role camp played in informing how they understood their individual identities, the breakthroughs they experienced in their understanding of social justice issues, and the extent to which they saw themselves implementing camp teachings in their own lives. We turn to theory next to build on these important insights and draw connections to our own experiences.

Theoretical Frameworks: Getting Uncomfortable with Difficult Knowledge

Findings from the project prompted a reflexive response from the Research Collective. Like the campers, we see how unsettling experiences can be at once triggering and transformative. In order to explain the connections between our own lived experiences and those of the campers, we draw on complementary theoretical frameworks. We begin with how the concept of “difficult knowledge” intersects with the experiences of the campers, and by extension, sociology students. With a scholarly lineage rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, Britzman’s (1998) notion of difficult knowledge signifies the relationship between how traumatic social events are represented in curricula and how learners engage them. These encounters can be unsettling, often because the learner is experiencing knowledge that stands outside or even in contradiction to their own experience or worldview. Difficult knowledge, then, may also be recognized in those topics or discussions that are met with resistance by some learners (Britzman, 1998; Britzman & Pitt, 2004). For our purposes, we understand the challenges learners face with difficult knowledge not in terms of dissonance, but rather in terms of congruence with their biographies and lived experiences. Scholars have elaborated on how challenging topics in sociology curricula actually mirror the lived experiences of students. Martinez-Cola and her students (2018) invoked a similar concept, “painful pedagogy,” by emphasizing how charged political climates may take a particular emotional toll on both marginalized educators and learners in the classroom. Thus, we must also appreciate the emotional impact that difficult knowledge may carry for students and teachers of color (Shim, 2014). In the context of this article, campers experienced difficult knowledge during camp and student-researchers in their sociology classrooms.

Building on theories of difficult knowledge, Sonu’s (2016) work captures the struggles of an educator coming to grips with the often indeterminate impacts of social justice curricula. Based on the author’s interactions with former high school students who participated in a social justice curriculum, Sonu came to recognize slippages between the curricular objectives, what was received, and what students remembered years later. “Such inconsistencies and reversals” in the students’ recollections Sonu observed, “demonstrate that there is no promised fit between that which is desired in education and the lives that are lived, between the knowledge that is offered and the ways in which teachers and learners engage this knowledge”

(p. 485). She continues, “Difficult knowledge presents a necessary focus on the limits of teaching and learning, working towards a paradigm shift that relieves teachers from the stresses of immediate outcome” (p. 488). Rather than looking to validate social justice pedagogy or curricula in ever more precise outcome measures, Sonu asserts that we—teachers and learners—seek out alternative ways of making meaning from these educational experiences.

A complementary framework emerging from qualitative methodologies helps to situate the broader identity and reflexivity of the student-researchers. Instead of frameworks focusing on service-learning positionality that focuses on social distance between students and communities being served (Brewster, 2019), we sought a framework that may allow us to delve into the overlapping and intersecting spaces between the researchers and the participants. Pillow (2003) has critiqued reflexive practices that are often too sterile in their discussion and tend to oversimplify the complexities of knowledge-building all in the pursuit of validating research findings. Instead, she has called for researchers to engage their discomfort and contradictions by invoking an “uncomfortable reflexivity.” Pillow (2003) elaborated on the practice’s relevance to the broader field:

Uncomfortable reflexivity, then, is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better but, as Visweswaran states, “whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (p. 32) – including our own selves. This is not easy or comfortable work and thus should not be situated as such...The qualitative research arena would benefit from more “messy” examples, examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research (p. 193).

As a diverse group of student-researchers facilitating focus groups around social justice education and identity formation, the framework struck us as particularly pertinent.

The Research Collective’s explorations of uncomfortable reflexivity yielded important observations that related to our experiences as students and researchers. We focus on our role as researchers here since we discuss our uncomfortable reflexivity as students at length in the next section. As researchers, we had to navigate interactions and questions on topics that we may have only recently processed or thought through. In facilitating questions in a focus group, we had to manage our private feelings when it came to potentially challenging questions, reflecting a form of emotional labor common among research team members working on sensitive topics (Malacrida, 2007). Research Collective members also recalled an uneasy power dynamic between themselves and their participants. For example, Mahindra noted that challenging questions around racial or gender identity posed to the former campers at times felt “interrogation-y.”

Engaging both difficult knowledge and uncomfortable reflexivity requires not only holding space for such critical encounters, but also cultivating practices that can deal with the stress, emotions, and pain that they may bring up. Shim (2014) has gone so far as to suggest that critical pedagogy that does not interact with the emotional worlds of students or educators is actually being done uncritically. Scholars and practitioners have shared important lessons on how to address and learn from unsettling experiences in the classroom or community-based settings. Keddie (2012) found that outlets such as free writing and poetry may help students cope with their own oppressions and the difficult knowledge that arises from them. Koster (2011) has similarly gleaned lessons learned from teaching gender and sexuality in courses that may allow for students to make painful self-disclosures relating to their own experiences. In such spaces, Koster (2011) concluded that educators must engage forms of emotional labor as they put on their counselor hats and support students who are coping with forms of difficult knowledge. In the context of service-learning, Rondini (2015) has demonstrated that students engaging critical reflexivity may be able to develop complex analyses of the experience, but grapple with understanding their own role in social justice beyond the project. Across these examples, students and educators are finding ways to develop tools of deconstruction, contextualization, reflexivity, and critical analysis to engage difficult knowledge. However, the examples also show us that students are at times walking away from these educational experiences with a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty about how to put difficult knowledge into action.

The theory and literature discussed in this section highlights the range of ambivalence, resistance, emotional sensitivity, and transformation that we heard campers express regarding their interaction with difficult knowledge. The very same feelings and sentiments were familiar to us as student-researchers, as they echoed our own discussions and reflections throughout the research process. In the next section we take a deep dive into uncomfortable reflexivity to explore our own relationships with difficult knowledge.

Reflexive Explorations: Student-Researchers Navigate Difficult Knowledge

While analyzing qualitative data from the campers and developing a literature review, one of the student-researchers introduced the Collective to the scholarship on difficult knowledge. While the application of the concept to the campers became immediately clear, it was only later that we realized how pertinent it also was to student-researchers themselves. In this section we synthesize student-researcher reflections captured in reflexive memos over the course of the project. Because excerpts are taken from open-ended memos completed before we began the formal writing process, we include only snippets from each student-researcher's experiences relevant to the major themes discussed here. Mirroring the questions asked of campers, we note how student-researchers came into contact with difficult knowledge through their sociology classes, what impacts it has had on them, and how it has shaped their future trajectories.

As student-researchers, our respective pathways into sociology often reflected a less than critical orientation. Although he always knew he was Mexican-El Salvadorian, Domonic suggested that he "never thought too much about that part of my identity." He found his way into sociology "by accident" after enrolling in community college, only coming to appreciate subject matter related to race and gender later. On the other hand, Nikki was very pragmatic in her decision to study sociology. Growing tired of moving between different community colleges, she recalled a meeting with a counselor several years ago where she directly asked, "What degree am I the closest to getting? I don't care what it is, just tell me and I'll get it." Owing to some of her own personal experiences, Karmina was more resolute in her career path and interest in sociology, even as her ideas rested on dominant assumptions of the criminal justice system. "I wanted to put 'the bad people' away and keep 'the good people' safe from harm," she mentioned. "I wanted to stand for justice, and I thought that meant pursuing a career in law enforcement." Growing up in Kuwait as the son of economic migrants from India, Mahindra meanwhile distinctly remembered being treated as a "second class citizen" while living in the Gulf. Arriving in the U.S. as an eight year-old, there were many aspects of life that were new, but others that were all too familiar. "Coming to America, I felt that sense of identity in a different context in a post 9/11 America." By the time he got to his first sociology class in community college, Mahindra had come to see himself a "nihilist." But when his bombastic professor proclaimed that the course would "kill your fairytale dreams of what life is," he was coaxed into seeing the social world more critically and systemically. Mahindra's disposition began to transform into a more nuanced understanding of his "place in this world" as he began to engage with new sociological concepts in the classroom.

As sociology students, we were forced to confront aspects of our identities and lived experiences through our coursework. For her part, Karmina had long sought to go into law enforcement to, as she put it, "protect and serve my community." After taking a course on race, class and gender, Karmina recalled:

That is when I began to grasp a different perspective. The justice system was not built to be in favor for people of color who are not in a higher socioeconomic status. I was naïve to think everything was fair...[that] people constantly getting in trouble with the law is the result of not caring for the results of their actions.

After taking the same course, Domonic gravitated to issues of gender and masculinities as he reflected on his identity and his close relationship to his sisters. "This is where studying gender became sort of difficult for me to digest mentally," he recalled. Further explaining his experience, Domonic wrote:

I became focused on toxic masculinity specifically, which had me reading lots of articles on violence which were always heartbreaking to read. It was all a slippery slope at this point in my life. I started to read about violence, aggression, rape culture and other depressing topics related to toxic masculinity.

He further mentioned how he could not watch movies or TV or play video games as he came to more clearly see "violent stereotypes of masculinity" portrayed on the screens in front of him. Nikki, meanwhile, suppressed many of her most difficult childhood memories while navigating courses centered on inequality. In a sociology of education course, she recalled that assignments:

Allowed me to really dig down deep and understand that growing up homeless, living out of cars and shelters, and jumping from school to school worried about if someone was going to find out and take me away from my mother was a major factor in how I experienced school and learning.

Given the various transitions in his life that reinforced his marginality, Mahindra found that his sociology classes “forced me to confront the Frankenstein factors which made up my identity. I had internalized the process of othering that had taken place in my formative years.” Reminded of his perpetual status as an outsider, Mahindra emphasized that his sociology courses “helped me understand, painfully, that there were social and economic factors which have caused some groups to be uprooted from their home and others to have benefited from the long-standing effects of colonialism.” In his attempts at personal de-colonization, Mahindra has decided to identify with his full, given name as opposed to simply going by “Mo,” as he had since his early years in the U.S. As much as the student-researchers were compelled to face large-scale social problems in their courses, they also engaged in deep introspection that went beyond the classroom and seeped into their personal lives. Just as with the campers, students noted important breakthroughs for themselves amidst the difficult knowledge they encountered in the classroom.

Despite these important transformations, students also expressed a looming wariness about their futures and intended career paths. Interning as a case manager helping parents who have lost custody or could potentially lose custody of their children due to abuse, neglect, and/or substance abuse, Nikki had felt like she was making an impact by helping parents end the cycle of adverse childhood experiences that they themselves went through while growing up. However, in a sociology class on poverty and public policy:

It was brought to my attention that these parenting classes, these court mandates are specifically targeted towards marginalized communities in order to make them “good neo-liberal citizens” and turn them into what those in power deem as acceptable... I couldn’t help but wonder if I was just a pawn playing into a larger game that we just wouldn’t win.

Similarly, while Karmina remains passionate about working with law enforcement on domestic violence cases, she noted that:

I worry that I may be causing more harm than good. For example, would I truly be helping to end the cycle of domestic violence or will I just remove a piece of a major puzzle that needs to be looked over more carefully?

In the case of Domonic, he explained why he decided to forego his earlier ambition of enrolling in a graduate gender studies program:

I felt like I just couldn’t handle it in a way that I would need to for graduate school. This decision to not pursue gender studies was mostly fueled by my inability to detach myself from what I was studying in a balanced way.

In all of these examples, students wrestled with the limitations and challenges inherent in their current work as well as their proposed future career or educational pathways. This struggle was manifested in various ways as students began to consider other potential routes to create social change based upon the newfound consciousness developed over the course of the research process.

While our reporting and share-outs with the partner organization never went into such depth about our reflexive explorations, the accounts described above certainly informed how we came to understand the campers’ experiences. By participating in a process of speaking and writing about our lived experiences—at least amongst ourselves—we were able to arrive at more nuanced interpretations of the data we gathered. For example, we came to understand the ambivalence towards social justice that some campers expressed as an important outcome of the camp, as student-researchers themselves experienced similar forms of uncertainty regarding how sociological teachings would shape their futures. By turning the focus inward on the Research Collective, we cultivated a sense of solidarity and connection to our partner organization and participants. If addressing power imbalances and promoting mutual liberation are to remain critical aims of community-based research, then reflexive explorations of diverse student-researchers should become a vital component of any such project (Muhammad et al., 2015).

This We Know: Seeking the Tensions in Our Becoming

According to the student-researchers, one of the most valuable aspects of this process was the opportunity to see what it would look like to do social justice work in a professional setting. One of the most important takeaways they reported was being able to understand how developing a critical consciousness can go hand

in hand with research skills in the pursuit of social change. Moreover, instead of writing the project off as one that did not fulfill its initial data collection goals, we learned how to re-frame a project to provide useful insights to a broader audience. Instead of following a linear path, we engaged in reflection and analysis that guided us to pursue a complementary line of inquiry that provided student-researchers the opportunity to take a harder look at themselves.

A few broad lessons on community-based research and learning have also emerged from our work. Moving away from charitable notions of service-learning that position the student-researcher as “studying down” (Erickson, 2006), we may revisit and redefine core principles of community-based research and learning when taking the identities and experiences of non-traditional and marginalized student-researchers as a starting point. Educators designing these courses may consider focusing on working with peer populations that mirror students’ own diverse backgrounds. In research methods courses, we find that students often express a concern with being “biased” because some aspect of their background may be reflected in a proposed research site. By encouraging students to participate in projects that reflect who they are and the communities they belong to, we can help them interrogate dominant notions of objectivity and instead embrace various forms of experiential and communal knowledges as integral to the research process (Bernal, 2016). Seeking a fit between researchers and participants may also bring educators to diversify the criteria for students to engage in community-based research projects in ways that go beyond academic qualifications. Further, well-designed opportunities for ongoing open-ended reflection, discussion, and writing will provide students the room to reflect, at times uncomfortably, on their lived experiences. Educators should also not feel compelled to resolve immediately students’ discomfort or to quell their frustrations. Rather, those facilitating community-based research projects can share from their own experiences of dealing with difficult knowledge, demonstrating to students that such struggles are part of a lifelong journey. In this way, community-based research may also provide important opportunities for mentorship as well. While the literature on community-based research and learning often centers on how to develop relationships with organizations off-campus, we have also learned how talking through our reflexivity can support building community within our own research team. Developing tools and spaces that engender inclusion amongst diverse research team members may be particularly helpful for students who are first-time researchers working in community settings.

In addition to these lessons on the broader field, we have learned a great deal about ourselves. We end here with a few thoughts and affirmations as our respective journeys continue to unfold. Domonic, who left behind gender studies, is now working for a public health organization. Reflecting back on what he learned as a sociology major, he determined that for him the “name of the game” is to “be critical but also to not let it consume me.” Considering her intended career path, Karmina reiterated that “I struggle to find a balance” between addressing systemic issues within law enforcement and being able to directly support survivors of domestic violence. As Nikki navigates the challenges of the legal and social welfare systems, she observed:

I think the most difficult part, the most painful part of learning is coming to terms with the fact that there is only so much you can do as an individual. It will take much more than just one person or one collective to make real systematic change. It takes strength and boldness to maintain momentum and inspire others, but I take refuge in the fact that I know that that is a possibility because I've seen it, I've experienced it, and I've lived it.

After working in social work and client-based service settings while pursuing his degree, Mahindra is now looking toward research and graduate school opportunities. Looking back on his intellectual and personal development, he remarked that “sociology has provided me with tools to question long-held beliefs regarding the nature of reality; systems of inequality and oppression which subjugate marginalized peoples in every society.” Building on the knowledge he has gained, he also found that his learning as a sociology student “has empowered me to develop praxis-oriented methodology to go into society and be an agent of social justice.”

Both their sociology degrees and research experiences have allowed student-researchers to simultaneously look back at the people they were and out over the horizon to who they are becoming. They emphasize that they are still making sense of what they learned as they apply sociological concepts in the new contexts that their education and work continues to lead them. In the end, we are reminded that whether student-researchers or campers, we cannot rely only on finding precise measures of transformation or see clear “pre/post” results in social justice knowledge or skills. Instead, we may reflect more deeply on how we live with the unsettling and uncomfortable knowledge we have uncovered and how those meanings may change over time.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Center for Community Engagement at California State University-Long Beach for providing support and resources toward the completion of this article.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Syeed, E., Kumar, M. M., Lowe, N., Moran, D., & Rucobo, K. (2020). Getting Uncomfortable with Difficult Knowledge: A Reflexive Account of a Community-Based Research Project. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 3(1): 3, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.44>

Published: 21 February 2020

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