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Rethinking Race and Power in Design-Based Research: Reflections from the Field

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ABSTRACT

Participatory design-based research continues to expand and challenge the “researcher” and “researched” paradigm by incorporating teachers, administrators, community members, and youth throughout the research process. Yet, greater clarity is needed about the racial and political dimensions of these collaborative research projects. In this article, we focus on how race and power mediate relationships between researchers and communities in ways that significantly shape the process of research. Using the notion of politicized trust as a conceptual lens, we reflect on two distinct participatory design projects to explore how political and racial solidarity was established, contested, and negotiated throughout the course of the design process. Ultimately, this article argues that making visible how race and power mediate relationships in design research is critical for engaging in ethical and sociopolitically conscious relationships with community partners and developing theoretical and practical knowledge about the repertoires of practice, tasks, and sociocultural competencies demanded of university researchers.

It was early in my (Nasir’s) career when I learned about how race and power were integral to the conduct of research. The year was 1995, and I was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), hoping to conduct a study that would become my master’s thesis. As a young African American woman, this project was more than just an initial piece of independent scholarship. It was an opportunity to bridge worlds that for me had been too far removed over the first few years of my graduate career: the world of the university and my academic and intellectual life, and the world of urban neighborhoods, of Black students in schools, and of community.

The study I had conceptualized focused on the game of basketball and sought to highlight the mathematics that youth basketball players learned as they played their sport. In what felt like an unimaginable stroke of luck for a young researcher, I stumbled on a basketball-centered after-school program in a middle school in the Crenshaw district. I approached the African American director of the program and explained that I was a student and that I wanted my research to highlight the intellectual work that *our* kids did in the context of informal practices like basketball. The way I positioned myself in these early meetings reflected and was received as a shared racial solidarity with these young people and this potential community partner. In this way, I was able to establish an initial sense of trust that allowed me to gain the approval of the director of the program.

Back at the university months later, a White female professor asked me about my study. I shared the topic of my study and named my site. She was incensed. She had previously approached the same

director and was denied access to the site. This incident highlighted that while she was clearly more powerful in the university setting, I held a kind of power associated with a shared racial identity, social positionality, and mission around supporting the education of Black students that allowed me to build trust quickly enough to be allowed access. Her outsider status, and the relative (racialized and politicized) mistrust that may come with that, meant that the power she wielded at the university was of no import in the community. These dynamics signal that university–community partnerships, especially those in the service of design research, are complex and must take into account race, racialization, and power if we are to understand them fully and enact them successfully. Yet such issues are rarely the subjects of scholarly inquiry, leaving the critical dynamics of how to negotiate potential threats to trust unexplored.

The opening vignette illustrates some fundamental issues around race and the navigating of research relationships with communities. It is not a simple story that purports that a shared racial identity makes entry into sites easier. Rather, it is a story that causes us to question the role of “objectivity” in research relations, the responsibility of the power and privilege universities wield, and the nuanced ways that race and power enter into research relationships—in part through dynamics of trust.

In this article, we examine the dynamics around race and power between researchers and the researched in two studies. Drawing on ethnographic reflections, the analysis focuses on two distinct participatory design research (PDR) projects. The first arose out of a student group’s desire to document and take action on a high school closure in a working-class African American and Latino neighborhood; the second was founded on shared concerns between researchers and a school district office about the district’s history of racialized disparities in disciplinary and academic success rates for African American students. Through these projects we explore the racialized and politicized aspects of our relationships with community partners and how these relationships shaped the projects. Because racialized relationships are often ignored or left out of the scholarly literature, we take this opportunity to identify key relational tasks at different phases of the PDR projects, how these varied across the two cases, and the implications for the research process and, ultimately, the ability to complete a research project. As we do so, we trouble common assumptions about research objectivity, trust between researchers and the researched, and race and power in design-based research (DBR).

The evolution of DBR

With origins in the work of Brown (1992) and Collins (1992), DBR is an increasingly common methodology among learning scientists. Design researchers aim to create interventions that promote learning and contribute to theoretical knowledge on cognition and learning. This typically involves a process that begins with researchers identifying an educational problem, proceeding to design a tool, curricular, or pedagogical approach that will intervene on the identified problem, studying the intervention in practice (sometimes in collaboration with the teachers), and finally, refining and iterating both the intervention and the underlying theory that gave rise to it (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Design research, then, marks an important departure in the educational sciences toward investigations of cognition and learning that recognize the centrality of context.

Another crosscutting feature is a goal of generating theory from design experiments. The nature and purpose of these interventions (and accompanying units of analysis) encompass a variety of research efforts taking place in diverse contexts that include co-teaching experiments in classrooms (Cobb, 2000; Gravemeijer, 1994), district restructuring experiments (Confrey, Bell, & Carrejo, 2001), designing learning spaces in museums and other out of school environments (Rennie, Feher, Dierking, & Falk, 2003), and technology-enhanced learning environments (Lee, Linn, Varma, & Liu, 2010), among others.

Implications for equity

With a fundamental commitment to improving both theory and practice, DBR has the potential to substantively improve the quality of educational experiences made available to students from historically nondominant communities. Its focus on learning ecologies (as opposed to individual learning) marks an important step toward eschewing deficit perspectives often tied to individualized and narrow

conceptions of learning and achievement. However, constructs such as race and power are often absent from design research. Engaging these issues is critical for DBR to fulfill its potential to contribute toward equity and realize its potential as a democratizing methodology that can intervene in educational practice.

In particular, we focus on the under-theorization of how race and power mediate researcher-researched relationships within DBR projects. Despite context being a central construct for design research, the social positionality of researchers and our relationships with participants is generally not made visible in our theory, methods, or data in design experiments. These omissions have important ethical, theoretical, and practical consequences, particularly with research conducted in nondominant communities. In order to provide accurate accounts of learning, identity, agency, and development in designed contexts, it is critical to collect and analyze data about the nature and history of human relationships involved in the genesis of design projects, as well as on the negotiation and contestation that occurs between researchers and participants throughout the course of a design process. These processes are always racialized and political and significantly bear on how and why the design project came into existence, how it was sustained, and ultimately what was studied and learned. Finally, design research is complicated, and being “good” at this work entails learning how to construct and navigate positive relations with community members and study participants. Making visible this relational work will allow the research community to better understand the sets of skills and competencies required to engage in theoretically rich, ethically sound, and hopefully equitable design research.

Existing critiques and alternative approaches to DBR

We ground our argument for making explicit the power-laden and racialized dimensions of researcher-researched relationships in existing critiques of, and alternative approaches to, DBR. Equity-oriented researchers have challenged the field to expand the purposes of design research (e.g., beyond narrowly defined notions of disciplinary learning) and have problematized the “how” of design research to scrutinize what are often hierarchical relationships between researchers and participants. To explore how design research has been challenged and reconceptualized, we focus on three specific approaches: Gutierrez and Vossoughi’s (2010) social design experiment, Bang and Medin’s (2010) community-based design research, and Engestrom’s (2011) formative interventions.

Toward socially transformative agendas

A central critique of DBR is the narrow focus on learning that is oftentimes tied to notions of cognition within researcher-defined disciplinary areas, such as scientific reasoning or mathematical thinking. Gutierrez and Vossoughi (2010) articulate a radically different approach to design, the “social design experiment,” that maintains interest in learning by individual participants yet also appreciates that “change in the individual involves change in the social situation itself” (p. 101). In this way, the social design experiment defines itself as a form of “interventionist research” with clearly articulated political goals around agency and social transformation. Similarly, Bang and Medin’s community-based design research rearticulates the larger purpose and driving motivation for science-education related interventions. Partially motivated by calls for increasing diversity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and specifically the underrepresentation of Native youth in science, they begin with the recognition that mainstream science education reflects Eurocentric epistemologies that are often disconnected from the cultural practices and ways of knowing of Native communities. In this way, the aim of design becomes less about the individual acquisition of science-related content knowledge and more focused on creating learning contexts in which Native youth can leverage their ancestral and community-based approaches to science.

In his analysis of recent reviews of design research, Engestrom (2011) argues that terms such as “agency,” “resistance,” “struggle,” and “power” are “conspicuously absent in recent literature on design experiments” (p. 603). Here, Engestrom develops and researches the “formative intervention” design methodology, an approach toward improving work practices that begins with practical problems experienced by practitioners in various settings. In this approach, the “object” of design and the aims

of the intervention are anchored in the specific challenges experienced by the research participants, not the researchers' prior assessments of needs. In this way, the formative intervention aligns with the activist orientation of the social design experiment and community-based design approaches. These approaches share the interventionist philosophy of traditional DBR, yet they articulate more expansive goals that focus on new types of activity in schools and communities.

Democratizing the design process

Closely related to the theoretical critiques that challenge the narrowly defined purposes of design are methodological concerns that problematize how design research has been traditionally carried out. Drawing on participatory, community-based, and action-research approaches in education (Noffke, 1997; Whyte, 1991), a growing number of researchers have pushed back against hierarchical power relations common in DBR by directly engaging communities and participants in the research process itself (Bang & Medin, 2010; DeBarger, Choppin, Beauvineau, & Moorthy, 2013; Kirshner & Polman, 2013; Tzou & Bell, 2010). For example, Gutierrez and Vossoughi's (2010) formulation of the epistemological aims and political agenda of their work is tightly linked to the "side-by-side" manner in which they engaged with teachers in the UCLA UC Links/Las Redes teacher education program (Erickson, 2006). This is also true for how Bang and Medin's efforts to support epistemological perspectives on science held by indigenous communities connect to a research process that involves community teachers, youth, and elders in the design and research of learning environments. The notion of conducting research alongside and with, rather than on and for, has deep roots in critical approaches to educational research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

We align ourselves with the participatory methodologies articulated in social design experiments, community-based design, and formative interventions research in order to push ourselves to rethink top-down approaches to conducting DBR that begin with the ideas and priorities of researchers. Our own design projects have sought to be in partnership with (not just in service to) marginalized communities of color. However, we recognize that conducting what we perceive to be democratizing and humanizing forms of research (Paris & Winn, 2013) does not automatically relieve the inherent tensions of design research. Racialized relationships and hierarchical power dynamics are still in play and shape how research is conducted. Our perspective is informed by a rich qualitative research tradition that calls for the explicit examination of racialized and political dimensions of researcher positionality (Fine, 1994; Lather, 1991). Particularly within ethnographic traditions in education research, calls for a race conscious lens are rooted in ethical concerns as well as an awareness of what Erickson (2006) refers to as the "social situatedness of perceiving," calling attention to the ways that race, gender, and class shape how we come to interpret and understand the lives of our research participants (p. 237). We argue for a similar project in the context of PDR. Such a move necessitates that relationships and interactions among researchers and the researched (and their racialized or politicized dimensions) in DBR and PDR projects also become a focus of analysis. We argue that failing to take into account the racialized nature of relationships between researchers and participants throughout the design process obscures the nature of power relations that can compromise the ethical integrity of research and makes invisible the repertoires of practice, tasks, and sociocultural competencies required to successfully conduct a design research project.

Conceptualizing race, racialization, and power in PDR

We are in a historical moment marked by both extreme forms of racialized violence as well as a surge of race-specific forms of political resistance. The energetic and highly organized grassroots coalitions of #Blacklivesmatter and other racial justice organizations have renewed, recentered, and elevated discussions of race in public discourse in ways that are reminiscent of the Civil Rights era. Yet, our public discourse often frames race and racism as individualistic and disjointed from sociohistorical relations of power, subjugation, and oppression in the United States. We draw on a conceptualization of race that understands the United States as a racially organized society and suggest that race is simultaneously a social construct and an everyday tangible reality (Omi & Winant, 2014). In particular, our study builds on the idea that "race is a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types

of human bodies, to the perceived corporal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to these differences” (p. 112) that has a way of “making up” people (p. 105). Race therefore operates as a *master category* that constantly structures our society via our interpersonal and institutional interactions and practices even as the realizations and realities of race shift over time.

Omi and Winant (2014) utilize this idea of race as a master category to introduce the process of racialization or “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (p. 112) and to explain how race organizes large- and small-scale activities and interactions in explicit and implicit ways in American society. For educational researchers, the notion of racialization illuminates how interactions with research participants are always racialized, regardless of the object of the design experiment, the race of researchers or participants, or the participatory or equity goals of a design project. The racialized nature of our society gives rise to the assumption that any study primarily involving non-White students is effectively a study about race whether or not the idea of race or the effects of being raced are understood or explored. However, we argue that studies involving dominant communities or students (often termed White or Caucasian) are also always racialized and likewise benefit from considering the racialized power dynamics within and around them. The presumption that such projects are not racialized because they do not involve non-White participants reifies the myth and privilege of Whiteness as normal and therefore nonraced.

From this perspective, it becomes critical to assess not “if” but “how” PDR projects are racialized. Exploring how racialization occurs may entail attending to how priorities are set and projects take shape, how relationships develop and are sustained between researchers and community members, and ways in which race can become a proxy for exerting power within interactions in PDR projects. If the idea of racialization suggests that the recognition of an individual or group’s race serves to locate them “within a socially and historically demarcated set of demographic and cultural boundaries, state activities, ‘life-chances,’ and tropes of identity/difference/(in)equality” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 125), then its conceptual opposite is *colorblindness*. Colorblindness, the ideology of not seeing or recognizing racial distinctions, often hinges on the belief that the mere act of noticing race is problematic and perhaps racist. However, colorblindness is a myth that cannot be sustained intellectually, politically, or interactionally. To enact colorblindness, one would have to subvert their cognitive tendencies as a social being to take up visual and social cues that guide us (Kang & Lane, 2010). Colorblindness also effectively erases individuals’ and groups of people’s social and political histories and contemporary identities, practices, and everyday experiences that are linked to their racialized realities. In so doing, colorblind policies and practices operate under an abstract liberalist ideal that seeks to move us “beyond” race but effectively (and perhaps unintentionally) perpetuates and encourages racially disparate outcomes (Bonilla Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2014). For these reasons, a colorblind approach to design research is both undesirable and impossible. Instead, we argue for the acknowledgment of the ongoing presence and significance of race, and other dynamics of power, in design partnerships.

Given the history of White supremacist policies in the United States, racial difference also overlaps considerably with differences in power. Because a complete treatment of power, ranging from its political to discursive expressions, is beyond the scope of this article, we focus here on power as it shows up in language and interaction, such as who speaks, how they speak, who is heard, and who decides on a group’s courses of action (e.g., O’Connor, Hanny, & Lewis, 2011). Unequal expressions of power based on race, age, gender and sexuality, class, and language should be expected even in collaborations intended to be democratic or horizontal. For example, communication scholars have shown how variations in cultural norms for meeting behavior can impede the productivity of groups (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2012). Likewise, O’Connor et al. (2011) showed how a community-wide effort in Rochester to empower “community resident” leadership was derailed by the inability of some members, despite being schooled in the discourse practices common to nonprofit and foundation-driven strategic planning, to successfully listen to or accommodate the perspectives of community members who had less formal schooling.

Conceptual lens: Politicized trust

In the design projects we reflect on in this article, we focus on trust as a key dimension of our relationships with research partners. We found that the establishing and maintaining of trust was fundamental to our research endeavors and, moreover, was a key site of racialization. Underlying our conception of trust is a recognition that our available discourse about relationships—and related constructs such as care, mutuality, respect, and trust—tend to be silent about the political dimensions of those relationships. Here, by political, we refer to the ways in which relationships are power-laden, “preconstructed by history,” and “weighted with social gravity” (Erickson, 2006, p. 237). Just as sociocultural theorists acknowledge the ways that human thinking is mediated by cultural and historical tools that precede actors’ arrival on the scene, human relationships are shaped by histories of race and differential power that set the stage for partnership formation. Yet, we also assert that relationships are sites of contestation, constantly negotiated and managed through moment-to-moment interaction and activity. In this way, we draw attention to the political dimensions of relationships but also to how they are politicized through purposeful collective activity. Drawing on a recent study where we identified the *politicized caring* of Black male teachers for Black male students in an alternative educational setting as an interactional accomplishment (McKinney de Royston, Vakil, Nasir, Ross, Givens, & Holman, *in press*), in this article we describe how *politicized trust* was established, contested, and sustained between researchers and research participants in two PDR projects.

We begin with the premise that establishing trust with community partners, especially in communities that serve students from nondominant groups, requires not only a personal working relationship but also a political or racial solidarity. This is particularly urgent given the historical tensions that exist between communities of color and university-based researchers (Bridges, 2001; Minkler, 2004; Sullivan et al., 2001), as well as the current climate of high-stakes testing and monitoring that is prevalent in urban school districts (Lipman, 2004). Therefore, we argue that neither trust nor solidarity is gained (nor should it be) by the assertion of good intentions, nor is it accomplished merely once and then set aside. Instead, politicized trust calls for ongoing building and cultivation of mutual trust and racial solidarity. It is thus a trust that actively acknowledges the racialized tensions and power dynamics inherent in design partnerships. In certain contexts, such as cross-racial partnerships, it may begin on highly fragile ground and be susceptible to undoing throughout. In other contexts, where shared racial identification provides the basis for initial solidarity, it is also susceptible to undoing and calls for ongoing attention. In the remainder of this article, we draw on the idea of politicized trust as a lens to reflect on how race and power mediated relationships in two very different PDR projects.

Case studies: Principles and tensions of design for insider–outsider researchers

In this section, we examine the role of race and power in the construction of research relationships across two projects. Our analysis focuses on two processes in PDR where critical tensions come to the fore: gaining access and establishing trust. Our two cases offer a behind-the-scenes narrative about the accomplishment and negotiation of politicized trust in two different sets of racialized circumstances. The first, the Tracing Transitions Study at Jefferson High School, is a case between a White researcher and African American and Latino community members where such trust was not assumed but negotiated and re-accomplished over time. In the second case, the Manhood Development Program (MDP) Study, politicized trust was assumed given prior interactions between the African American researchers and African American community members and was iteratively re-accomplished in ways that shifted traditional university–community power asymmetries and created new pathways for research and collaboration. In each case we highlight the ongoing fragility and negotiation of race and power dynamics between the researchers and the researched (especially salient given the history of abuses in such relationships), as they worked to establish and maintain politicized trust. We begin with background context about each case told from researcher first-person perspectives. We alternate between each research context, drawing attention to the specificity of ways that race and power mediated relationships in each setting.

Research context: Tracing transitions at Jefferson High School

The experience of Jefferson High School, in a large midwestern city, reflects a number of national trends facing urban schools in communities of color since the end of desegregation policies in the 1990s. In 1996, the end of court-ordered busing shifted the school's enrollment boundaries and the population of families who sent their kids there. Over time, enrollment numbers had diminished, middle class families, many of whom were White, "choiced out," and the population shifted to Latina/o and African American students from working-class and low-income families from the immediate neighborhood. Soon after, when Jefferson's test scores were rated unsatisfactory, reformers tried on a short timeline to convert it into three small schools, much to the surprise of students returning from summer break. Scores on state achievement tests remained low. A spiral of inadequate resources and declining enrollment fueled problems at the school, culminating in the school board's decision in 2006 to close Jefferson's three small schools for 1 year and reopen in 2007 for ninth graders only (for more details about the closure decision see Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). I (Kirshner) became involved through my prior relationship with a student activism group that included Jefferson students.

Research context: MDP

In the fall of 2010, a new superintendent, Tony Smith (a White male and Oakland native), took over the reins of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Fresh from a state takeover, the district was in flux, and the superintendent provided an expansive and ambitious vision for what a reimaged OUSD could be and accomplish. Smith led the district through a strategic planning process and out of that created a number of ambitious district-level reforms, including the creation of the African American Male Achievement Task Force (AAMA) to increase the attendance rates, lower suspension and expulsion rates, promote self-awareness, and help cultivate healthy identities among African American male students. Not long after the initiative was conceptualized, Smith appointed a well-respected African American leader in the community, Christopher Chatmon, as the director. Chatmon had served as a principal of a continuation school in San Francisco and had longstanding ties to Oakland's youth development network. This new initiative focused on the needs of African American male students and was a rich site to study racialized processes in teaching and learning for my (Nasir) research team, especially since one of the first programs started by Chatmon was the Manhood Development Classes, elective courses taught by Black male educators to Black male students. The MDP classes focused on African American culture and history and leadership training, with the goal of fostering positive identity development and academic engagement.

Gaining access and (re)establishing trust

At the beginning of these partnerships, members faced two key tasks: clarifying shared goals and establishing trust and racial solidarity. Tracing Transitions began with relatively clear objectives but had a great deal of work to accomplish and sustain a sense of solidarity and trust. MDP, on the other hand, started in racial solidarity but it took time to clarify roles and mutual goals. In both cases, the establishment and maintenance of politicized trust was key to the research process.

Tracing transitions at Jefferson High School

I (Kirshner) first heard about the closure of Jefferson High School because I had been in the nascent stages of a research partnership with a youth organizing group, Students United (SU), to work with students to document resource inequities across different public high schools in the region. Just a few months into this project, the members, most of whom were from Jefferson High School, learned that the school would be shut down at the end of the year, and this led to a refocusing of their efforts on fighting the closure. After it became clear that their protests and counterarguments would not change the district's decision, SU staff expressed interest in finding someone to do an impact study, and I suggested we partner to do a participatory action research (PAR) study in which Jefferson students would be core members of the

research team along with me and SU staff members. This initial phone conversation catalyzed a complex relationship that saw many twists and turns, including a summer pilot interview study followed by a more extensive mixed methods study with additional student researchers the subsequent year. Alongside a graduate student, Kristen Pozzoboni, I worked with a coalition of student groups, which ultimately called itself *Tracing Transitions*, to critically and systematically make sense of displaced students' experiences and share their findings in policy settings.

A core task early on was establishing trust with all of the members of the research team. Because I was a White male researcher, relatively unfamiliar to the area, from a campus known to be inhospitable to people of color, I remember expecting it could take time to achieve trust and that members of the group would likely have questions about my values and intentions. During this time, I focused on developing a relationship with the new executive director of SU, Patrick, who was an African American man. Our first step was to get the permission of the district for our proposed research. This was not a requirement for SU, but it was for me; as an untenured, second-year assistant professor, I was mindful of institutional review board (IRB) commitments and knew that I would not be able to access data without permission. We reached out to a senior administrator (who was White) who saw great value in the project because of its potential to track the impact of the closure but wanted assurances that it would be a genuine open-ended inquiry and not just an effort to discredit the district. The meeting with the district senior administrator revealed the adversarial history between SU, which had publicly opposed the closure, and the district. I faced a narrow space between taking a clear side in this conflict, which could undermine the integrity of inquiry, and remaining aloof or trying to claim impartiality, which also lacked integrity and could undermine my relationship with SU.

Navigating this narrow space required deeper discussion; Patrick and I went out to lunch to debrief the meeting and discuss our interests in the project. Patrick deconstructed certain interactional features of the meeting, particularly the ways that the district administrator, while verbally positioning SU as a powerful critic of the district, assumed power in the meeting through control of the agenda and ending the meeting unilaterally. Although my field notes do not indicate whether Patrick offered an explicit racial analysis, he identified the power dynamics at play and said that he felt he was treated as a "peon" in the meeting. Consistent with a community-organizing lens, we also talked about each of our self-interests in this project (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). This was important because it allowed us to move beyond a discourse of "good intentions" and toward a candid discussion of what we wanted to get out of the partnership and an implicit conversation about our social positionality relative to this work. Patrick saw the research partnership as a way to potentially gain some leverage and power with the district and to raise broader awareness nationally about the struggles of students of color with school closure. In an effort to establish my political solidarity and shared orientation to racial justice as a White scholar, I shared a story about how I had become interested in activism among youth of color and the work I had done in the past. I also discussed the ways in which I might benefit professionally from writing about the findings from our study.

This early opportunity to break bread and speak candidly about our professional and politicized goals and dynamics enabled us to see where we had a shared sense of solidarity and shared interests and how we could work together. What I did not fully appreciate at the time, however, was that PAR with youth demanded that I also put in similar relational work with the students themselves. One misstep during this early phase was that I unintentionally and implicitly delegated the trust-building process to SU staff. I was operating from the maxim in ethnography that the right gatekeeper can open up all kinds of doors to the researcher. But PAR is different from traditional ethnography in its relationship demands. This error was exacerbated by the typical kinds of mobility among youth members, such that earlier relationship building from the school year did not transfer to the summer with the addition of several new members.

The consequences of this lack of attention to sharing my story or discussing youths' project goals became evident toward the end of the summer, when I heard *Tracing Transition* referred to as "my project," which called into question the sense of shared goals and solidarity. Another memorable exchange occurred when a youth leader said that she did not want to continue the research because it was not "having a solution" and was "just for a book or whatever." This was precisely not the intent of PAR as I conceptualized it, and the comment stung. Here, too, I did not hear an explicit reference to

race, but, consistent with this article's framework, it was relevant to the interaction. In her critique, the student identified what she saw as an extractive or colonizing project. Although race was not mentioned, this critique was racialized in that it invoked a longstanding tradition of White researchers writing about the suffering or negative experiences of Black people (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Kelley, 1997). This student did not continue to participate, but most of the other students from Students United did. This experience led to a shift in how I approached the building of a participatory research team with young people during the subsequent year.

These examples highlight the racialized dimensions of our early efforts to make sense of what we were doing together. Understandings of race that eschew colorblind perspectives (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2014) illuminate that although race itself was rarely named, related topics that index race were named, such as power, extractive versus collaborative research, and how to form a project that met mutual interests. All of these topics carry racial significance and therefore are instances of racialization. They also show the politicized features of trust—namely, that trust is not only about good intentions but also about achieving some level of solidarity. The fact that some students continued with the project and others did not shows that this is an interactional accomplishment that will vary across people and relationships.

MDP study

Contentious politics was also a part of the terrain for the AAMA initiative. The African American community in Oakland was skeptical of the creation of AAMA on many levels. Some felt that Chatmon was being set up to fail: that the problems in Oakland were simply too vast, that the resources for AAMA were too thin, that the goals were not realistic. I (Nasir) watched this process from afar. As a scholar and university professor, I was interested in such a targeted initiative intended to address the needs of African American students. I did not know Chatmon well, although his wife and I had been undergraduate students together, and our children went to the same preschool. At their house one warm Saturday afternoon for a child's birthday celebration, as my family and I were leaving, I offered my support to Chatmon. "I know this is a challenging thing you are taking on. It's exciting. Let me know if there is any way I can help." This offer was made both in the context of seeing ourselves as having a shared community and, indeed, a shared mission to support the education of African American students—in other words, a shared politicized trust.

Not long afterwards, Chatmon and I met to think about how I might bring my status and resources as a university researcher to support Chatmon's work in Oakland. This partnership was born from a sense of shared mission and trust and an attention to how AAMA and Chatmon might leverage my resources, in being connected to a high-status university, to foster greater visibility for AAMA. The shared trust was not a personal one, *per se*, but rather a trust that was rooted in a common community and a shared racialized identity and mission around educating young people and opening up pathways to educational access. This shared mission was discussed explicitly early in the project and was evident throughout in our language (e.g., references to "our" children/boys, drawing connections between our own children and those in the schools we worked in/studied, and in discussions about the plight of Black children in schools). Again, race itself was not explicitly discussed (as it rarely is), but racialization occurred in the subtlety of interactions, word choice, and gestures.

However, there were underlying tensions to be resolved around key issues. These included clarifying roles and the purpose of the research (were we evaluators or researchers?), getting clear on the potential value of research to the work of AAMA, and negotiating what successful outcomes or products might be from the research. Thus, the project of leveraging our politicized trust in a concrete way and designing a research project we both found utility in was yet to be accomplished.

Sustaining solidarity

In both studies, the work of maintaining trusting relationships, and a sense of solidarity, while still having integrity as scholars was ongoing work that occurred over the life of the projects. In this section, we detail some key challenges around race and power that arose as we worked to sustain solidarity and recover

from potential threats to trust. This is a kind of research work that we rarely discuss or attend to explicitly but that has critical implications for the successful conduct of research.

Tracing transitions

One of the conditions that the district placed on the partnership was that we open up the opportunity to young people from additional leadership groups, not solely SU. As it turned out, there was a Jefferson student leadership council, itself made up of students from a few groups, which the district was sponsoring. Its goals were to track how students were doing and offer social and emotional support to displaced students. With the endorsement of SU, I (Kirshner) went about building a new relationship with this council.

Having learned that summer to engage youth directly rather than solely the adult staff, my colleague Kristen and I asked if we could “pitch” the project to the youth, even after the adult staff coordinator had expressed his support. We asked the students to interview us and then talk with each other about what they learned and whether they could work with us. This gave us a chance to locate ourselves for the students—our biographies, values, and relevant expertise—and through this act of vulnerability try to disrupt the history of university relationships where the gaze is solely from researcher to researched. Students asked what I would “get out of” the process, what I had learned in prior research that changed me, and if I thought I understood youth (and, if so, what made me think so). These were difficult for me to answer. The adult facilitator of the leadership group, Anthony, who was African American, later told me that they were looking for “soldiers, not missionaries.” Here his use of the term “missionaries” harkens a very raced, colonial notion of an outsider coming in to “save” a non-dominant population while his use of “soldier” offers a counter position based on solidarity. Although I remember trying to be clear in positioning myself as not a savior, finding words for what I actually was trying to be was challenging. Here too, achieving a sense of political solidarity with students was a key task. This caused me some discomfort. What if the data were to show that students were relieved to be at their new schools or felt they were higher quality (in whatever way they might define it)? How would I reconcile my assertion of solidarity that the closure was wrong with the possibility that I might change my mind? This was a difficult dance, which became an explicit object of discussion among Tracing Transitions members, especially when we were making sense of our data and identifying findings.

My effort to build strong relationships with the members of the team was further complicated by my racial positionality as a White person. In this early phase I did not feel entitled to mobilize, exhort, direct, or inspire the youth. I was perhaps hyper self-conscious about deferring to Anthony’s leadership and to reinforcing democratic decision making in the group at the expense of its pace in making progress. This posed ongoing dilemmas because, on one hand, I knew that sociocultural theory would suggest that members of the group might need an expert or veteran who could model mature practices and even model an “identity” for the youth. But I did not think I was that person, precisely because of my outsider status and Whiteness. The following year I discussed this dilemma with Anthony while talking about how the project had gone. It was not until this point that Anthony made an explicit comment about how our racial frames about the project were different. In Anthony’s view, the students needed a more directive leader who framed the work in explicit racial terms: as a chance for the African American and Latina/o students of Jefferson to show White people (whether at my university or in the district) what they were capable of. He suggested that I should have mobilized this frame early on in my interactions with the youth. I countered that I did not think I had earned the right to speak with such candor, to which Anthony replied, “You were wrong.” He went on to say:

It’s true, if you come in with something inauthentic or manipulative you wouldn’t have that leverage, you need to earn their trust. But your project was authentic. You were bringing something that they really needed to learn. It’s incumbent on people with access to that kind of power to use it. ... You could have said “we’re going to a school where there’s not really been people like you” and “They need to hear from you ... We’re a gift for them (the university).” Then say how they don’t think we’ll be able to do it but that you know we can, how we need to show them. That way, you’re not the “missionary,” you’re the “soldier.” Then the youth are thinking, “let’s show these motherfuckers.”

Anthony's commentary, recorded in my field notes, offers a different lens, on how we might have motivated the youth. Perhaps it is not surprising that his candor about the racial dynamics at play did not come up until 1 year into our work together. His use of pronouns reveals the ambiguous role of my membership in the group, complicated by the fact that this was a retrospective account. For example, he primarily relied on "you" to refer to what I needed to do, even calling it "your project." But then in the hypothetical speech I could have given he allows me to use a "we" ("We're going to a school...") and to invoke a "they" (the university) in solidarity with the students. This excerpt speaks directly to the way that race and power played into the relationship with members of the Tracing Transitions team, in that it highlights the ambiguity and fragility of solidarity in the relationship. My interpretation of my positionality and my assumptions about how youth would view me shaped how I interacted with the group.

MDP

While the project had beginnings rooted in a shared sense of racial solidarity and subsequently a certain level of initial trust, it also meant that there were many details about roles and the process of working together that had yet to be defined. Underlying some of the tensions was not having a shared understanding of the purpose of research, as well as not having previously agreed upon the parameters of the collaboration. Maintaining trust was an ongoing effort, which involved purposefully attending to issues of power when they arose and continually examining our values, beliefs, and skill sets. This tension took many forms: determining the appropriate and pressing focus for the study and research questions (and whether those were rooted in practice or in theory), navigating the all-male program and classroom space as a team of mostly women scholars, and determining how research assistant support would be funded (ultimately by Nasir as a way to prove she had "skin in the game"). For example, the decision to focus on the outcomes and processes of the MDP classes was in part because it provided a clear focus and scope of research; it allowed the research work to have the possibility of informing the design of the classes, and it was the least politically problematic for Chatmon (as compared to a potential focus on the way AAMA activities and priorities took shape and were funded in the context of district politics).

But even once we determined the focus on MDP, the issue regarding the nature of the project outcomes involved ongoing negotiations of race and power as we worked to maintain trust and solidarity. We began the project with a vague sense that we would produce something that would be helpful to the program administrators and to the design of the MDP classes, and that we would help document the work that they were doing in ways that might support them seeking future funding and also that would help them "get the word out." Yet, we did not specify the specific form this would take.

As a research team, we were mindful of the history of research on African American communities, where community members were critical of researchers coming in and taking from them—taking data, taking people's ideas, getting the story only partially right—and building careers on the backs of people who never see any benefit from the research. Notably, this is a particular version of the way that racialized power can play out in research on communities. We were determined not to engage the research in this way. Thus, we were eager to think with our community partners about the potential products of our project beyond the scope of research articles for scholarly journals.

However, this work of thinking about alternative products was complicated by a number of factors that pushed on traditional power dynamics often present in university–community partnerships. For example, early in the first year AAMA hired its own in-house researcher, who was primarily trained as a quantitative researcher. He became the liaison to our project. He came to our weekly project meetings and served as a voice for the AAMA's emerging needs. In that way, his participation in our meetings disrupted traditional power dynamics by creating a feedback loop where AAMA was aware of our work and vice versa. Late in the first year, he raised the possibility of our group producing a "report" of our findings for AAMA and for the district. We readily agreed. The challenge came when we tried to get aligned around the content of the report.

One idea involved AAMA providing some quantitative data, with our team supplementing with the qualitative data. However, that did not work because the scope of the quantitative data mainly

focused on grades and attendance outcomes, while the scope of the descriptive findings spoke more to the experience young men were having in the classes; thus the quantitative and qualitative did not speak to each other very well. In the second year, we made a proposal to create a series of reports that reflected the ways our research team was thinking about the data: one focused on issues of discipline, one focused on relationships between instructors and students, and one focused on the teaching philosophies of the instructors. AAMA agreed that that was an acceptable focus, but in reviewing the drafts, they found that the content did not align with their expectations of more practitioner focused best practices material. Instead, we had focused on describing the processes by which relationships were built between instructors and students and how discipline was handled in the classes. We struggled to make revisions, and they struggled to articulate how we might revise the reports to be useful for them. After several iterations of this, the endeavor fizzled. Eventually, AAMA hired an outside consultant to write a set of reports, with Nasir as a distant collaborator. This approach was more successful; a report was released that met their expectations and spoke to a broad audience of educators and community members, and the team learned that our skill set was perhaps more narrow than we initially thought.

This issue around the project outcomes in moments threatened the politicized trust we had established and required us to maintain a conscious foregrounding of the trust, even as we struggled to come to terms with how the power of our university affiliation could be leveraged for the good of AAMA and the MDP program. Although our collaboration did not terminate as a result of this interaction, and we are continuing to work in solidarity with AAMA, it marks an important and sobering moment in our work that speaks to the real challenges that can plague partnerships, even ones rooted in racialized and political solidarity. In essence, the challenges we have described bring up key issues of power around who benefits from the research activity and whose needs are privileged. In other words, solidarity in practice involves determining a shared project and shared outcomes or product and bringing them to fruition; in that task, the differing expectations between the world of research and the world of practice somewhat collided.

Concluding thoughts

In analyzing the two cases—Tracing Transitions at Jefferson High School and the MDP Study—we examined how race and power showed up in our interactions and were negotiated by research collaborators. The ebb and flow of relationships in each case speak to the complexity of maintaining a rigorous program of research while having the integrity to ensure that the research activity will be useful to community-based partners, particularly when broader objectives of the community as well as the research team are rooted in shared notions of social transformation. Using politicized trust as a lens on our relationships as researchers with our community partners, we observed how a sense of solidarity was necessary but not sufficient to engage in participatory-based design research. Politicized trust was racialized in how relationships started, evidenced by the initial skepticism exhibited by Jefferson High students and the initial readiness by AAMA to collaborate with Nasir and her team, yet was subject to continuous contestation throughout the design process. As research projects got underway, we saw how relationships, always mediated by power and race, continued to be vital to the various “tasks” required of participatory design projects, sometimes leading to situations where central tensions surfacing in the course of design projects remained unresolved.

This article has focused on how politicized trust was created and sustained in two PDR projects, and how the racialized and politicized aspects of our relationships played into and shaped how trust needed to be established and continually managed. We attempted to draw out the key relational tasks at different phases of these PDR projects and examine how these varied across the two cases and had varying implications for these research projects. This aim necessarily required us as researchers to rethink our assumptions about objectivity, about the role of trust between researchers and the researched, and to critically examine the role that race, racialization, and power play across the arc of DBR projects.

Politicized trust is a concept that DBR and PDR researchers need to consider as we advance our work and our field. Our ability to actively and consciously engage this concept has implications for our contributions towards supporting greater equity in educational research and practice. Among these pivotal dynamics that we have to interrogate are our university–community partnerships. Given the sociohistorically checkered nature of these relationships, we need to understand how race, racialization, and power can distort or enrich our projects and interventions and how to tap into their underrealized social and political potential.

To conclude, we would like to briefly draw some attention to something we have not yet discussed. The final bookend of most PDR projects involves negotiating endings and exits from projects. The remaining tensions referenced in our two case studies leave us with a set of questions around how to appropriately transition out of PDR projects. What are the tasks for the researcher as projects “end”? The intentionality that may have gone into collaboratively deciding on starting the project should also go into collaboratively deciding on what the end should look like. How will the group decide when the partnership is over? Will it be driven by a grant or a different reason? Who gets to decide? Although the ethical and relational aspects of concluding “fieldwork” or “data collection” is a lacuna in education research, some ethnographers have acknowledged that this is an important phase of research that calls for intention (Gobo, 2008).

In many cases of participatory design research, concluding one project does not mean leaving the shared social network or geographic area of the study. As Ginwright (2015) said, some scholars see themselves as members of the community who have jobs at a university, whereas others see themselves as members of the university who are temporarily embedded in a community. For the former group the term “exit” is inapt. Second, because of PDR’s common emphasis on action, the project does not end when data collection ends, nor does it necessarily end when findings are shared, because findings may feed back into an ongoing cycle of action and reflection. If the issue that mobilized the PDR project did not go away, then why would the project end? Our two cases raise some of these issues and questions.

In the Tracing Transitions case, “Whiteness” was proxy for a set of other “outsider” qualities that shaped the approach to endings, including the fact that Kirshner’s university and home were not in the place where the research took place or the participants lived, and Kirshner was not liable to run into his collaborators at a social event or grocery store. These conditions meant that in certain ways the traditional relations of researcher to researched were in place. On the other hand, this outsider position may have made more visible or explicit the active work that needed to be done to manage the “end” of the project in an ethical and collaborative way. Kirshner sought to manage this by extending the ending by writing a small grant to continue working directly with a smaller subset of young people so that they could present their work at national conferences and network with other social justice oriented youth research groups. For the MDP Study, the racialized and politicized relationships that were a core part of launching the research stayed in place, which meant that consistent with Ginwright’s notion of scholars as members of the community that have jobs at the university, the “project” did not end but rather morphed into the next phase of the collaborative work. The research team launched a new phase of the research, building on what we had learned in MDP to focus on other aspects of the work with African American students in OUSD, and widening our partnership while still lifting up the important work of AAMA.

We would like to close by pointing out that the tensions and challenges around maintaining politicized trust do not end with the close of data collection, or even with resolving ways to maintain ongoing professional relationships. As scholars, the issue of what gets written, for which audiences, and with which data is also key. In both cases, we were mindful to incorporate our community partners in the feedback loop as we produced papers for publication and to consider the political implications for our partners with respect to what we wrote about and how that might get used in the world. Thus, our responsibility to be aware of the power of our university privilege continues as we make ongoing decisions about writing and publication. It is critical that we engage in these explicit conversations about power, race, and privilege in the conduct of DBR, and that in doing so we continue to challenge ourselves to disrupt the ways researchers, purposefully or unwittingly, further marginalize community partners or abuse our privilege for our own gain? We hope that this reflection further supports all of us in this effort.

Summary of implications for theory and methods

In this article we have argued that relationships between participants and researchers (at least in the United States) are inherently racialized and that they should be subject to a similar degree of scrutiny as other elements of an intervention because they shape how interventions play out. The shift in the unit of analysis to the researcher–practitioner relationship highlights how the dynamics of race and power between the researcher and community partners are perpetually in negotiation within an activity system and mediate the design process from a project’s genesis to its eventual closure or evolution. In making visible these dynamics we improve our ability to understand tensions, agency, and reformulations of researchers and practitioners individually and in relation to one another, and therefore improve our ability to generate more accurate accounts of learning, identity, and development.

This shift in analytical gaze is essential not only to sustain an ethic of respect and solidarity while working alongside historically marginalized populations, but also to fulfill DBRs commitments “to investigate the possibilities for educational improvement by bringing about new forms of learning” (Cobb et al., 2003, p. 10). Our core insight is the conceptual and methodological implications of politicized trust. As learning scientists, we view the emergence and negotiation of politicized trust as essential for the study of learning and identity in practice. In other words, not only do we view the human relationships that are at the heart of participatory design projects as instruments of the research, but as mirrors through which aspects of the truths sought in the research endeavor are reflected.

The questions at the heart of the MDP research project centered on issues of race, learning, and identity in a beleaguered urban district; many of the findings that emerged from these learning settings (Mckinney de Royston et al., *in press*; Nasir, Snyder, Shah, & Ross, 2012; ross et al., 2016) reflect the dynamic nature of the race-conscious political clarity of the instructors vis à vis the students. We see this constantly evolving clarity and negotiation of solidarity as phenomenologically inseparable from the dynamism and fluctuation of Nasir and her research team’s engagement with members of the MDP community.

In *Tracing Transitions*, research questions about the impact of school closure surfaced a host of related questions about what kinds of learning environments young people craved. The research group itself become a site for these questions; in order to succeed the group needed to embody the kinds of values and aspirations espoused by members, such as respect, trust, intellectual challenge, high expectations, mutual accountability, and relevance. In this sense, doing participatory work became a reflexive site for generating new ideas about learning.

Treating relationships as sites of data collection and analysis is a way to explicitly attend to activity systems in which hierarchies of power mediate learning itself, but also mediate the ways in which learning is understood, studied, and interventions are designed. Consistent with recent calls to move from sociocultural to sociopolitical analyses of learning (Booker, Vossoughi, & Hooper, 2014; Kirshner, Hipolito-Delgado, & Zion, 2015; Nasir & McKinney de Royston, 2013; Varelas, Martin, & Kane, 2012), we understand everyday activity and meaning as fundamentally connected to the exigencies of the real world. This insight attends to the human relationships that are inextricably tied into the research process, in particular in settings marked by participatory methodologies and ambitions. Theorizing about trust, in particular politicized trust, is critical in this effort.

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