

PARTICIPATORY ORIENTATION IN GSL RESEARCH TO HEAR THE COMMUNITY

Who and How Matters

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Abstract

In this article I analyze postcolonial theory as a critical framework to improve understanding of global service-learning (GSL) partnerships. Although research on student learning outcomes from participation in GSL has grown dramatically over the past decade, scholarship on community outcomes and perspectives in GSL continues to lag. Just as participation in GSL does not necessarily result in global learning outcomes for students without intentional programming, I argue that GSL research on community perspectives does not necessarily result in ethical community-university partnerships without interrogation of who is involved and how that research happens. In this article, I pull back the curtain to describe my positionality (who) and the methods utilized (how)—including the cautionary tales and challenges encountered—to provide an example of a participatory orientation to GSL research.

Introduction

Demand for internationalization of higher education (Gao, 2015) and global learning outcomes for students (Hovland, 2014) has led to the growth of global service-learning (GSL) (Hartman, Kiely, Boettcher, & Friedrichs, 2018) as a pedagogy and the associated GSL community-university partnerships (Lough & Toms, 2018). Although research on student learning outcomes from participation in GSL has grown dramatically over the past decade (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011), scholarship on community outcomes and perspectives in GSL continues to lag (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Crabtree, 2008; Larsen, 2015). Recognition of this gap calls for increased GSL research specifically focused on community perspectives and outcomes in order to pursue ethical community-university partnerships. Just as participation in GSL does not necessarily result in global learning outcomes for students without intentional programming (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012), I argue that GSL research focused on community perspectives does not necessarily result in ethical community-university partnerships without interrogation of *who* is involved and *how* that research happens.

This article was part of a larger research project (Reynolds, 2016) that explored community perspectives about a multi-year GSL partnership between a rural municipality in Nicaragua and a College of Engineering in the United States. To better understand the perspectives and experiences of multiple stakeholders in GSL partnerships, participatory methods help us hear the community. Informed by postcolonial theory, which draws attention to history, context, and power, I seek to increase understanding of GSL partnerships by analyzing them as North-South relations. Too often, in GSL partnerships (especially involving research) the assumption is that expert knowledge—teaching—flows from North to South/university to community and raw data for research to help flows from South to North/community to university. Pulling on postcolonial theory works to flip this tendency in order to pursue ethical engagement.

In the following sections, I analyze postcolonial theory as a critical framework to improve understanding of GSL partnerships. In this study, postcolonial theory shaped the origin of this study, researcher positionality, and participation in the research process. When I embarked on this research study, my original research questions focused on *what*—tangible project outcomes from a GSL partnership (Reynolds, 2014); however, the research journey taught me to refocus on *who* and *how* our GSL partnerships and research happens. By pulling back the curtain to describe my positionality (*who*) and the methods utilized (*how*)—including the cautionary tales and challenges encountered—this article provides an example of a participatory orientation to GSL research.

Postcolonial Theory

Since universities engaged in GSL frequently partner with communities in the Global South, issues related to ethical engagement with and representation of the Other are critical. Andreotti (2015) describes what she calls the *single story* influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and evident in the positivist epistemology that continues to shape higher education, North-South relations, and international development discourse. This single story privileges universalism, stability, consensus, and identities based on hierarchies (Andreotti 2010). Alasuutari and Andreotti (2015) describe the “modern/colonial global imaginary,”

Humanity is divided between those who perceive themselves as knowledge holders, hard workers, world-problem solvers, right dispensers, global leaders; and those who are perceived to be (and often perceive their cultures as) lacking knowledge, laid back, problem creators, aid dependent, and global followers in their journey towards the undisputed goal of development. (p. 65)

This false binary between “us/them, have/have-nots, developed/developing” (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015) supports notions of charity because of a moral responsibility to help. Stein and Andreotti’s (2017) modern colonial global imaginary draws from Spivak’s “worlding of the West as world” (1988), which projects Northern/Western ideas as *global* and therefore “justifies development of the Other as a ‘civilizing mission’ ” (Stein and Andreotti, 2015)—a responsibility to help. These ideas are not only evident in international development

discourse but clearly reflected in GSL marketing materials where universities and even groups of students on one-week trips change the world by teaching the Other who lacks the knowledge to help themselves.

In contrast, postcolonial theory highlights the history of,

colonialism and the interrogation of European cultural supremacy in the subjugation of different peoples and knowledges in colonial and neocolonial contexts ... it highlights the flow of capital and resources from the “Third” to the “First” worlds, while the flow of expert knowledge, intervention packages and rights-dispensing initiatives (based on the interests of donor countries) take the opposite direction. (Andreotti, 2010, p. 238)

GSL, situated within North-South engagements, reflects many of the same patterns critiqued by postcolonial theory. Too often in GSL (especially involving research), the assumption is that expert knowledge—teaching—flows from North to South, or university to community, and raw data for research flows from South to North, or community to university. Although service-learning (SL) represents a pedagogy used in higher education, GSL, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, is informed by histories of North-South engagements and representations and commonly reflects these problematic patterns, which are critiqued by postcolonial theory (e.g., HEADS UP, Andreotti, 2012).

Kapoor (2004) provides an accessible description of Spivak’s writings and describes specific steps to take to increase the likelihood of an ethical engagement with the Other that can inform research on GSL: (a) acknowledging complicity, (b) unlearning privilege, and (c) learning to learn from below (p. 641). Learning to learn from below necessitates humility, time and interactions, and language and communication. Kapoor explains unlearning as,

Stopping oneself from always wanting to correct, teach, theorise, develop, colonize, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten: “the impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination.” (Kapoor, 2004, p. 642)

He calls for extended time and face-to-face interactions with the Other and challenges university faculty to have engagement with the disenfranchised that “is as thick as the engagement with [their] students” (p. 645).

In Kapoor’s (2004) exploration of Spivak’s writings, he describes the importance of examining the language that surrounds representations of the Other as part of learning to learn from below: “[b]y doing so, we begin the process of not defining them, but listening to them define themselves. We lay the groundwork for a two-way conversation and non-exploitative learning” (p. 642). Language is not only a logistical consideration in the research process but also a critical aspect of questioning power and an important element of ethical representation of the Global South. Responding to postcolonial theory, I framed this study as an examination of power and history, based on my unique positionality as both practitioner and researcher. This positionality has brought me extensive face-to-face interaction over time and fluency in the local language and has worked to shift the power dynamics of traditional research through the use of participatory methods.

Research Study

This article was part of a larger research project (Reynolds, 2016) that explored community perspectives about a multi-year GSL partnership between a rural municipality, Waslala, Nicaragua, and a college of engineering (CoE) in the United States. Although the CoE has numerous GSL partners, they describe their partnership with Waslala as their “most successful partnership.” It is their longest continuous partnership (initiated in 2002), and over 250 CoE students and faculty have traveled to Waslala. The partnership includes several different departments in the CoE and several local community organizations in Waslala, so it is not heavily dependent on one person. I selected to focus on this “successful” partnership because: (a) it offered a case where my positionality could provide understanding of the partnership in a unique way, and (b) it allowed me to learn about characteristics that are important for success and examine possible missing elements or areas for improvement from the community participants’ perspectives that exist even in a successful partnership.

The participants were composed of members of both the university (Villanova University’s College of Engineering) and the community (Waslala, Nicaragua). The participants of the study included university administrators (3 participants), faculty (3 participants), students (12 participants), community organization representatives (11 participants), and community residents (15 participants). In Waslala, community organization representatives were from the four different community organizations that have worked with the CoE, and community residents were from three different rural villages selected according to several criteria. The university group visited certain villages during the break trip that occurred during data collection, and these villages provided an opportunity to interview village residents both before and after recent interaction with the university participants. The following additional characteristics were considered: length of participation in the partnership with the CoE and distance from town (how remote or rural). In each of the villages, I interviewed several community residents who had directly interacted with the university students. This study utilized multiple sources of data to explore the community participants’ perspectives of the projects and partnership: participant observation, interviews, and document review.

In addition to the interviews, for purposes of triangulation, I also asked a local community organizer to conduct two additional interviews without me present to explore whether community members shared different ideas and perspectives. The local community organizer had worked in this community for over 20 years and had close relationships with community members. I shared specific interview questions with her ahead of time, and she recorded the interviews so I could listen to them later.

I initially planned to conduct member checks—when data, initial analysis, or interpretations are tested with members of the group from whom the data was gathered to ensure accuracy, credibility, or validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, when I returned to Waslala to do so, this process led to much more in-depth conversations with community organization representatives. The conversations developed into processes of co-analysis, which shifted my thinking on certain initial findings and added depth to the findings overall. In total, I had these co-analysis meetings with five community organization representatives. The participatory analysis explored the following four areas or topics: (a) outcomes—positive and negative, (b) learning—student and

community, (c) motivations—of university and community, and (d) characteristics of a desirable partnership. After initial analysis, I created documents that included these four main topics, themes or findings within each, and evidence (examples and quotations) that supported each finding. These documents were shared with the community partner representatives, and then we went through them together and discussed interpretations of the evidence and responses and ideas about the findings.

In the next sections, I explore the origin of the study, my positionality, and the methods utilized during the different phases of the research study. Foregrounding these sections is guided by the “belief that decolonizing research ethics is ultimately about place, and position, and how these two things lay the groundwork for ethical relationships” (Whetung & Wakefield, 2019, p. 156). Together these sections share publicly (some of) my own mistakes, describe ways I have worked to check myself or course correct, and advocate for an embrace of insider-outsider/practitioner-researcher positionality as a strength in this work.

Origin of the Study: Practice

In 2002, as a 21-year-old recent college graduate, I traveled to rural Nicaragua with a group of 10 friends and ended up starting an organization, Water for Waslala, which has now raised over \$600,000 and built 18 community water systems serving over 5,000 people. In 2015, Water for Waslala was acquired by WaterAid and El Porvenir to form the Program Alliance Agua Para Waslala, which continues the work to ensure that all Waslalans have access to clean drinking water. Since 2005, Water for Waslala and Villanova University’s College of Engineering (CoE) have worked together to create international service experiences for engineering students. Over the past 12 years, Villanova Engineering Service Learning (VESL) has sent over 250 engineering students and faculty on trips to Waslala to work in projects related to water distribution, mobile healthcare, and microhydro electrification (Reynolds & Ermilio, 2015).

When faced with the daunting question of a dissertation topic, I asked my collaborators of many years for ideas. Initially, Villanova University’s CoE was interested in student learning outcomes associated with international engineering service experiences. During a trip to Waslala around the same time, I was sitting with an old friend who leads one of the community-based organizations in Waslala that works in partnership with Villanova University’s CoE. The excerpt from my research journal below describes the conversation that sparked this study:

As we sipped our afternoon coffee, [we] chatted about a new project. [The community organization representative] told me that a university project initiator had won a grant to pilot a new technology and had come to [him/her] with funding and asked [him/her] if [s/he] could write up a proposal about potential uses for this new technology. So...[s/he] did.

As a non-profit practitioner, this comment did not surprise me. We continually struggle to secure funding for project costs and team salaries, and this grant represented an opportunity for them to do just that. However, as a PhD student contemplating a dissertation focused on student outcomes in international community–uni-

versity partnerships, I was concerned and said so. Having studied and worked in international development for years, I had observed numerous failed projects because they were not community-driven. In this story, I heard this same pattern reflected in a university-community partnership—a top-down, outside “expert” driving a project and determining program priorities and decisions. I asked my friend a number of questions and requested his/her ideas about re-focusing my research on how to share the community perspectives of partnerships between universities and international host communities instead of exploring student outcomes.

When I returned from that trip, I dove into the literature focused on the community outcomes and perspectives in GSL. There was very little that was specific to global and, especially, international service-learning. When I broached the new idea with my colleagues in the CoE, I was met with openness and interest. The Dean of the CoE commented,

It’s hard for me to assess what Waslala has gotten out of it. I guess that’s kind of one of the things I don’t know and am a little uneasy about: have they gotten what we’d like to say they’ve gotten out of it?

In the case of the partnership between Villanova University’s CoE and Waslala, the university administration and faculty were confident that the university and the students were benefiting from the partnership but wanted to understand more about whether and how the community was benefiting. Although this study does address a glaring gap in the GSL scholarship, it initially emerged from continued conversations with colleagues and collaborators both from community-based organizations in Waslala and Villanova University CoE’s administrators, faculty, and staff. It emerged from practice.

Who Matters: Researcher Positionality

Hesitant at first about my existing role in the partnership and relationships with both university and community participants, I found that my involvement over the years allowed me to adopt a participatory orientation where my colleagues of many years were now also my research collaborators. During my data collection, my initial hesitation quickly evolved into confidence that my insider-outsider positionality actually enabled me “the possibility of crafting uniquely complex understandings of the research question” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 46).

Acknowledging her previous writing about being an insider or an outsider in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Smith (2012) writes,

When I am teaching about insider/outsider, I make clear that it is a very kind of crude binary if you think about it. It is much more complicated in terms of what is the outside, what is the inside, and whether there are really sides anyway. More and more, we are teaching our own students about positioning and positionality, the responsibilities of yourself as a researcher, but also understanding that you can position yourself in different ways when you understand that context. (p. 12)

Aligned with Smith’s push against the binary of insider or outsider, Herr and Anderson (2005) provide a

useful framework for exploring researcher positionality as a continuum. This continuum highlights both the ambiguous and shifting nature of researcher positionality and includes five categories: (a) insider, (b) insider in collaboration with other insiders, (c) insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s), (d) reciprocal collaboration, and (e) outsider(s) studies insider(s) (p. 31). I will never truly be an insider or native Waslalan because of my citizenship, race, language, and other social identifiers that are linked to power and history in many ways. However, having worked in the area for over 12 years, my relationships with research participants have shifted on the continuum more in the direction of insider, and my past and current roles as both an NGO practitioner and a researcher make it difficult to categorize my positionality.

In 2002, I was certainly an outsider when I arrived in Waslala on a two-week trip, speaking limited Spanish, meeting every person for the first time and having a limited understanding of the history or current context of Nicaragua and the US's role in that history. Now, 12 years later, I am bilingual, have immersed myself in learning about the history and current context in Nicaragua and Waslala, and have traveled to Waslala more than 30 times for a total a more than a year spent there. Some of my closest friends live in Waslala; when I arrive for a visit and pop my head into the window of their house, I hear shrieks of "Norita!" as a child comes running to the door to greet me with a bear hug. I have seen these children grow up. My positionality is complicated by my dual role of practitioner and now researcher, shifts over time and even during the study, and changes depending on my different relationship with each research participant. In the subsequent sections, I discuss strengths and challenges of my unique positionality, how I worked to "make the familiar strange," and the important role of language in the study.

Insider/Outsider: Strengths & Challenges

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe the opposite challenges faced by outsiders and insiders in research projects:

Academics (outsiders) want to understand what it is like to be an insider without "going native" and losing the outsider's perspective. Practitioners (insiders) already know what it is like to be an insider, but because they are "native" to the setting, they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider's perspective. (p. 47)

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe both benefits and challenges inherent in multiple positionalities and call for intense and honest self-reflection to pursue trustworthiness in research. Working in rural communities of Waslala for 12 years to design and implement gravity-fed water systems, I have developed many close relationships with community members. Especially in a post-civil war context, trust is vitally important in order for people to speak openly. Because of power imbalances inherent in community-university partnerships, it could be uncomfortable for community representatives to openly share concerns. In this respect, my years of work and the relationships I have developed represent a strength. Numerous comments gathered during my research process suggest that community representatives felt comfortable sharing honest assessments.

Throughout data collection, community representatives commented specifically about my positionality as

they shared concerns, recommendations, and even specifically spoke about their discomfort sharing openly. As one community organization commented, “*You* know, having a piping hot cup of coffee together. With a hot cup of coffee, people will respond and tell you what they really think.” After asking to meet me for coffee to share some past experiences with research, another community organization representative told me, “I feel so badly saying things because I can tell they have such good will so it just makes me scared to say anything negative.” At this point, I had known both community organization representatives for over 10 years; we had cooked together, had disagreements, and helped each other cross rivers after heavy rains.

Alongside strengths resulting from years of work experience in this context, I also already have many ideas and opinions about GSL projects and partnerships in Waslala. I always believe that researcher bias is present in the overall research questions that we ask and in the more specific questions that we ask during the research project. What questions are asked gives certain ideas more power than others. The pre-existing ideas could influence the questions asked and therefore the answers provided, in addition to my interpretation. My hope is that the participatory orientation of this research helped to decrease this bias.

Making the Familiar Strange

When a researcher has insider status, they may have the benefit of more tacit knowledge, but this is accompanied by a tendency toward potential bias or taking aspects of reality for granted. Insider status requires the researcher to work in intentional ways to make the “familiar seem strange” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 46). Having spent over 12 years working in this specific context, I have noticed many ways in which the previously “strange” have become familiar to me even in this cultural context so different from my own in Philadelphia. Although I am not native and will always have some degree of outsider status, over the years I have moved along the continuum through close relationships, prolonged engagement in the field, and face-to-face interactions. During data collection, I intentionally built in steps for self-reflection such as memos and a research journal to encourage reflexivity. The following example from my research journal makes explicit not only the ways in which the very different cultural context in Waslala has become familiar to me but also the importance of this research journal to aid me in identifying these elements of the context.

One evening, after dinner at a friend’s house, several of us hung around to continue our fierce foosball competition. After I lost yet another game amidst calls of “Norita, what happened?” a friend asked about my departure date. I responded with the date and someone else chimed in, “we need to plan a party for that night. Who wants to kill the goat?” A flurry of activity followed—fingers to the top of noses (a universal “not me” sign) as each of us tried to avoid responsibility for providing the meat for everyone. We chuckled and assigned the task to Carlos ... before I sat back and realized that this had not caught me by surprise—I imagined trying to explain this scene to my friends and colleagues in Philadelphia.

These steps—memos and a research journal—represented differences from all of my other trips and time spent

in Waslala for work as a practitioner and illuminated ways in which the “strange” had become “familiar” and helped me reverse some of that pattern and highlight some of the “familiar” to again make it “strange.”

Language Is More than Translation

Since I am bilingual and have worked in the region, I conducted all data collection without need for a translator. Even when using in-country translators, Nieuwma and Riley (2010) acknowledge challenges to communication. They report “some clarity on what was *said*, but [there was] often disagreement or confusion about what was *meant*” (p. 38) and warn that, “when language is viewed merely as a logistical concern rather than a critical site of power relations, the consequences for process, project, and social justice are likely considerable” (p. 53).

One example from my fieldwork highlights the difference between a translator who speaks both languages and a cultural mediator who understands the context. A community organization representative recommended that an outside researcher works directly and continually with a cultural mediator throughout the research process. S/he proposes,

If the researcher has a sheet with English and Spanish translation, then they send it to us and we help to revise the questions to ensure relevancy for our local community participants. Later, when the researcher has the data and is analyzing it, the best way would be to again ask for help from the cultural mediator. They will be able to interpret the data and I think in this way, the research will be more valid. It will respect both the local reality and the goals for the research. It is not just Spanish to English translation. It is translation to the language used by community participants and communicating in ways that everyone will understand.

Another community organization representative described a situation where university participants went off with a translator from the university to conduct interviews without communicating ahead of time with the community organization. Later that evening, the community organization representative starting asking about the results and concluded, “so, there was a misunderstanding in the translation of the question and a misunderstanding in the translation of the answer!” Language is a crucial consideration in communication in international partnerships but also vitally important as we consider how research is conducted on GSL. Language is not only a logistical consideration in the research process but also a critical aspect of questioning power and an important element of ethical representation of the Global South.

Limitations of My Positionality

My unique, changing, and complicated positionality in this study presented both strengths and weaknesses. While trust and relationships developed over time with participants can serve as a strength, my tacit knowledge and past experiences can also create researcher bias. Although I have described efforts I made to mitigate and check biases, such as the research journal, I can never pretend that these steps created a completely objective

research project, nor do I believe that such a possibility exists. Instead I made efforts toward researcher reflection and shared openly and honestly here about who I am and how I approached this research study. I have also intentionally utilized participatory methods as another effort to ensure multiple interpretations are present especially as I conducted research in a language and culture different than my own.

Also, community members were well aware that my work with Water for Waslala has the potential to bring clean drinking water to a community, and I worried about this influencing people's answers to questions. They may have told me what they think I wanted to hear as they have an idea about my work and goals of my organization. Generally speaking, I worry about participants in research studies answering questions as "performance." In this case, I worried that my work in the region may have influenced "performance" even more heavily than in research in general. Despite my initial concerns, I did hear numerous critiques and recommendations during my study.

How Matters¹: Methods

Because the purpose of the study was to better understand the perspectives and experiences of the stakeholders with a focus on the community, qualitative, participatory methods can help us to "hear" the community (Hausman et al., 2009, p. E23). A number of terms are used to describe some of these research approaches—participatory action research, community-based research, etc.—but, overall, they point to an orientation that is "community-driven, systematic, participatory, and oriented towards community and social change" (Minkler, 2000, p. 193) and focuses on "collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied" (p. 192). Ravitch (2006) describes the potential of practitioner research as a way to "develop counter-narratives ... to make arguments grounded in data for other ways of thinking and doing that push against expert-learner dichotomies" (p. 9). Instead of the common expert-learner dichotomy present in traditional research, participatory methods aim to disrupt this power dynamic. Maguire (1987) writes that participatory research should assume "we both know some things, neither of us know everything. Working together we will know more and we will both learn more about how to know" (pp. 37–38).

Trustworthiness

Evaluating validity of a qualitative research involves what the study is about (internal validity) and its potential application to other settings (external validity); however, the action orientation of this study calls for a focus on trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide strategies to achieve trustworthiness, including prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. Having worked in the research

1. <http://www.how-matters.org/>

setting for over 10 years, my past experience contributed to prolonged engagement. During the time period of the current study, I utilized triangulation of methods and data sources, thick description from fieldwork, and member-checking/participatory analysis to pursue trustworthiness. Participatory methods help to pursue validity through a particular focus on reflexivity and triangulation (Özerdem & Bowd, 2010). Reflective practice is “a deliberate process of becoming unsettled about what is ‘normal’—and of acknowledging that there are many concurrent ‘realities’” (Eyben, 2004) and acknowledges the influence of history, power, and relationships.

Although this study does not comply with all aspects of action research, its action orientation points to additional validity criteria that are specific to action research to inform the research design. Two additional criteria are local validity and catalytic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 12). Local validity draws attention to the fact that the problems and solution must relate to the specific context and relates to “ecological validity,” which requires that the research be relevant to the participating group (Tandon, Kelly, & Mock, 2001). Describing past experiences with outside research projects implemented in Waslala, one community organization representative wrote,

In Waslala, Nicaragua, there have been multiple rigorous research projects done to explore different topics including water, coco, coffee, cattle, climate and community organization. However, despite all these efforts the majority of the results of these research projects have not been used by local organizations and residents. (Reynolds, Hunt, & Muñoz, 2018, p. 27, translated by the author)

Catalytic validity is defined as “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1986, p. 272). One example from my journal after the data collection was complete demonstrates one way in which catalytic validity can emerge even in unanticipated ways. Several months after data collection was complete, I was spending some time back in Waslala in my role of practitioner—I was meeting with various financial institutions to discuss possibilities for micro-lending for water and sanitation products. Over pizzas one evening, one of the community organization representatives who had previously participated in the study brought up the topic of the Villanova student trips. The university spring break trip had taken place just a few weeks before my trip. S/he turned and commented,

I realized during this trip that many of the students knew very little about the continued work of the community organizations here. One evening a few of the students were at my house with me and I had the opportunity to ask them a few questions to gauge what they knew—it was very little. With their lack of response to any questions about the work of the local community organizations, I suddenly understood why you were asking some of the questions you were asking last year. I know I was pushing back on some of those questions, but it now makes sense to me and, since then, we’ve shared some of those concerns during the trip planning with the university.

During this research study, community organization participants described their past experiences with outside university research projects. Below I share examples from different phases of the research process—data collec-

tion, analysis, and dissemination—that highlight the importance of participatory methods in GSL research to ensure trustworthiness.

Data Collection

One community organization representative drew attention to concerns about validity and told a story about a time that s/he intervened when a university faculty member was leading a training for community health leaders. The community organization representative recounts the situation and how s/he believes that intervening led to different research findings,

For example, in a workshop the first question was, “what are common sicknesses? The participants said tuberculosis. The next question was, “how long does it take the ministry of health to respond to you when you contact them about a case of tuberculosis?” But, from my perspective, they needed to ask, “how do you know it is tuberculosis?” When we did this together in the workshop for each sickness, the professor ended up shocked at how much the community health leaders knew! The professor learned that the health leaders know how to recognize sicknesses, the symptoms of each sickness, what they should do if they see a case of tuberculosis, and how it is diagnosed.

As the interviewer, I responded, “S/he was shocked? But these community health leaders have been working in community health for years!” The community organization representative responded, “Yes, but if you assume that they don’t have this knowledge, you don’t even ask them the questions.” As s/he continued to tell me the story, S/he commented,

If you (as an outsider) arrive and you go and give the same training ten times in a row, the community health leader will be very attentive, they will listen and they will not tell you that they already know this information. They will listen and when you finish and at the end you do an evaluation, they will thank you and tell you they learned a great deal.

His/her interpretation reflects how power differentials can influence research findings and calls for the participation of cultural mediators in every phase of the research process.

Analysis

Trustworthiness is a “demonstration that the researcher’s interpretation of the data are credible, ‘ring true’ to those who provided the data” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, pp. 50–51). Although I initially planned to conduct member checks after initial analysis, when I returned to Waslala to do so, the process developed into co-analysis conversations. Renato Rosaldo (1993) presents an argument for multiple positions of analysis: “Each viewpoint is arguably incomplete—a mix of insight and blindness, reach and limitations, impartiality and

bias—and taken together they achieve neither omniscience nor a unified master narrative but complex understandings of ever-changing, multifaceted social realities” (p. 128).

One critique of member checking and having participants included in the analysis process relates to the possibility of different interpretations by the researcher and the participants or among the participants themselves. The possibility of different and disagreeing interpretations can lead to clarity or, in the case of this study, more in-depth and nuanced understandings of the research questions. In the process of involving community organization representatives in the data analysis, some of them pushed back on an initial finding related to using the community as a laboratory being categorized as a negative outcome (Reynolds, 2014). Although they all acknowledged the negative potential of the community as laboratory, they also focused attention on the importance of *how* the project is initiated, planned, and implemented.

The weakness of the participatory analysis process in this study connects back to questions of participation: who participated could lead to elite capture and heavily influence the participatory analysis process. In this case, I conducted participatory analysis conversations with only community organization representatives as opposed to community residents who occupy very different power positions within the community of Waslala. Even though I only conducted participatory analysis with a subset of the participants, this process added a great deal of nuance and depth to the analysis and findings. Not only did participants correct minor details related to language and culture (since I am not a native speaker and I’m not from Waslala), but multiple participants pushed back on how I interpreted certain quotes or themes in the initial analysis. Our conversations added additional details, data, and interpretations to the overall study.

Dissemination

While I conducted data collection for this study in Waslala, one of the community organization representatives came to me with a published article s/he had found online about her program. S/he asked me what it said about the organization that s/he leads. I was shocked at first, but this example helped push my own thinking about how to intentionally build in processes to share findings and ensure that all research participants could have access to the study in which they had participated. When we (as researchers) feel confident that research participants are unlikely to read our research, it may influence how we tell their story.

Even when this example was etched in my mind, I myself encountered my own discomfort when I worked to translate and share research findings from this study with community participants in Waslala. After I published my first article from this study (Reynolds, 2014), I translated the full article and sent it back to one of the community organization participants. The excerpt from my research journal describes how I felt:

When I hit “send” I realized that a feeling of nervousness hit me. Since my dissertation had utilized a participatory orientation, I had shared initial findings with [community organization representative name], gone through analysis and interpretation of data with him/her, discussed disagreements about interpretations during analysis, and even changed some findings based on this co-analysis process. Somehow, translating and sending what was

a “finished product” felt different. As this nervousness sank in, I knew it was my own uneasiness with a lack of participation at the dissemination stage of research. (Research journal, October 2, 2014)

Despite having heard the cautionary tale referenced above in which a community organization representative could not read what was published about his/her organization and despite my initial reaction of shock upon hearing that story, my research dissemination process was not so different! Because of how the research process is structured, it is all too easy to fall into these traps of traditional research unless we intentionally build in checkpoints and requirements to work against these tendencies.

After I sent that translated version of the article, the community organization representative responded with a long reflection. The overall reaction was alignment with the findings; however, he also added additional analysis about some of the themes. From this email exchange, we decided to co-author a chapter about both of our perspectives working in the same GSL partnership for 10 years (Reynolds & Gasparini, 2016).

More recently, I worked with two other colleagues from work in Waslala to explore the question: When an outside university enters, what are key characteristics to pursue participatory research? We wrote an article in Spanish in which we analyzed our own past research projects undertaken in Waslala that aimed to be participatory in order to identify (and share publicly) areas where we fell short. We were able to publish this article in Spanish (Reynolds, Hunt, & Muñoz, 2019)—a critical (and rare) aspect of work if we hope to encourage participatory research in our field.

Implications

This study serves as an example of participatory methods in GSL research. Informed by postcolonial theory and responding to concerns about the ethics of research (representation and relevancy), participatory methods flip the traditional research paradigm. There is increasing acknowledgment of the importance of “participation” in both SL/GSL and international development; however, there is ambiguity about the term and an increased tendency to critique it in international development efforts (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). These challenges highlight the need to explore specific characteristics and approaches to GSL partnerships that encourage genuine participation.

Question #1: How can we create checkpoints for ourselves, as researchers from the North, engaged with communities in the Global South, as we conduct research “on” or “with” our partners? How can we remember that each of us only has one perspective, one understanding, and together we can co-construct a *more* complete understanding of the situation or question?

Recommendation #1: Utilize participatory methods at all stages of the research process. Consider ways that participatory action research can be implemented in research on GSL partnerships. Seek ways to collaborate with local researchers or partners as co-researchers.

My multiple and complicated positionality in this study was formative in shaping its participatory and

action orientation. During the formulation of my research proposal, continued communication with university faculty/administrators and non-profit leaders in Nicaragua continued to shape and re-shape the research questions, research plan, and goals and objectives of this project. I have also intentionally utilized participatory methods as another effort to ensure multiple interpretations are present especially as I conducted research in a language and culture different than my own.

The participatory analysis in this study illuminated my desire, as a researcher from the North, to categorize outcomes as positive or negative. This desire to define right or wrong, the answer, or the truth reflects ideas of the Enlightenment and positivist epistemology. This desire stands in contrast to postcolonial theory, which stresses the importance of context. My initial research question was focused on positive and negative outcomes of the partnership and sought to categorize, to answer, to define in a generalizable way. The process of co-analysis alongside community partners highlighted just that—my own way of understanding and interpreting the world was influencing my interpretation of the data and findings in this study and this GSL partnership. If we want to truly better understand the multiple perspectives in our partnerships, particularly between international host communities and universities in the United States, we must seek ways (methods) to intentionally push against this tendency.

Question #2: Does lack of participation lead to inaccurate research findings when research on GSL partnerships is often carried out in a language and culture that is different than that of the researcher?

During data collection, discussions about past experiences in research with community organization representatives identified concerns about accuracy of research findings. They recounted numerous examples when they believe that the university left with inaccurate information that they would later report in findings. In one example, the university representatives actually conducted interviews with a different group of community leaders than they intended because they did not communicate effectively with the community organization. As the community organization representative described this example to me, s/he concluded, “imagine what a distortion of reality there was talking about the results when you were talking to the wrong people!”

The cautionary tales about past experiences with research pointed to the importance of a participatory orientation in research working closely with local community organizations and ensuring the presence of “cultural mediators.”

Recommendation #2: In addition to utilizing participatory research methods, ensure that feedback loops or sharing with host community participants are built into the research process. In research on GSL partnerships, many times this would require translation of research into a language other than English to ensure that research participants have access to read the research reports or findings. I would recommend that this question should be built into IRB applications when research is conducted with participants who speak a language other than English in order to ensure access for all participants.

Conclusion

In a *Suspending Damage: A Letter for Communities*, Eve Tuck (2009) calls communities, researchers, and educators to re-envision research and re-imagine how research “might be used by, for, and with communities” (p. 410). In discussing the initiation of new research, she cautions,

It is important to ask, when considering a new community research project, “What can research really do to improve this situation?” The answers might reveal that research can do little in a particular situation or quite a lot in another. Or they may reveal that it is not the research that will make the difference but, rather, who participates in the research, who poses the questions, how data are gathered, and who conducts the analysis. (p. 424)

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework to shape GSL programming and scholarship and encourages a shift away from *what*—tangible project outcomes—to *who* and *how* GSL partnerships and scholarship happen.

In this study, I worked to shift the power dynamics of traditional research—objectivity, an expert-learner dichotomy, and what counts as knowledge—by embracing an insider-outsider/practitioner-researcher positionality and the use of participatory methods. I argue that we must seek ways to ensure participation at all stages of the research process—formulating the research question, data collection, analysis, and dissemination—in order to pursue ethical GSL scholarship and engagement. My hope is that by “pulling back the curtain,” this article provides an alternative example of *who* and *how* GSL research can happen and, therefore, encourages others to embrace the “messiness” (Russel y Rodriguez, 2007) that can enable deeper exploration and understanding of GSL partnerships in order to pursue ethical engagement.

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