ON SOLIDARITY AND METHODOLOGICAL INNOCENCE IN YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

The methodological overrepresentation of moral dilemmas in recent Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) discourse has culminated in a critical stalemate—a methodological paralysis brought on by an overly cautious fixation on personal moral hazards. As critical YPAR scholars, we honor these necessary interventions but are also concerned that this trend may discourage participation and stagnate innovations in YPAR praxis. Furthermore, YPAR has also been part of a broader process of modulization within universities, which attempts to produce sterilized modules that discount the challenges of relationships and accountability. Thus, we explore how solidarity, as a concept and a practice, might address this double bind and push beyond these critical stalemates. We assert that solidarity is a necessary launching point for YPAR, acknowledging methodological tensions as part of a collective struggle with youth collaborators and navigating the uneasy dichotomy between an ethic of care and paternalistic impulses often present in youth-adult partnerships.

On Solidarity and Methodological Innocence in Youth Participatory Action Research

We write this essay to reflect on our experiences as early-career scholar-practitioners who have been simultaneously learning and facilitating youth participatory action research (YPAR). For those of us committed to engaging in participatory approaches for knowledge creation and social change with young people, YPAR is both a powerful and a fraught program. Over the past decades, YPAR has grown in popularity among social scientists as a means of establishing a more responsive and democratic social science praxis. YPAR scholars have written eloquently about how YPAR can be an important tool for advancing larger justice projects rooted in disrupting systems of oppression, and for making social science research more relevant and accountable to the communities with which we work (Fine & Torre, 2004). At the same time, researchers have also highlighted how YPAR, as a methodology, can be co-opted by

institutions to enrich corporate profits and further extract value from structurally vulnerable communities (Fine, 2009). Other scholars have highlighted specific dilemmas for YPAR practitioners related to navigating issues such as paternalism and the challenge of sustaining genuine relationships with youth collaborators (Lac et al., 2022; Ritterbusch, 2019). Even well-meaning practitioners may act in paternalistic ways and inadvertently hijack the direction of youth-led projects (Clay & Turner III, 2021). We acknowledge the importance of critically interrogating these issues as they relate to YPAR praxis. At the same time, we are concerned with the ways these issues are sometimes treated as discrete, siloed topics, rather than as part of the larger portrait of YPAR practice.

Because these issues are multilayered, complex, and depend on the nuances of context, this literature sometimes becomes mired in critique, leaving YPAR scholar-practitioners with few digestible lessons to put into practice. We refer to this impasse as a *critical stalemate*—or the feeling of paralysis brought on by the desire not to harm youth collaborators. While we empathize with this impulse, we argue that this over-fixation on harm may inadvertently encourage scholar-practitioners to perceive and approach the YPAR process through deficit-based lenses. We see a danger in this positioning, as it may uphold simplistic narratives where adults and researchers can only make things worse, which forecloses opportunities for meaningful collaboration such as YPAR projects. Furthermore, we argue that treating all of the aforementioned dilemmas of YPAR praxis as discrete and separate issues leads to what we call *methodological innocence*. This impulse is a desire to uncover or achieve an imagined and pure form of YPAR praxis that is unattainable. This concept of innocence has been explored by Indigenous scholars to highlight the logic of settler-colonial societies to elaborately distance or absolve themselves from the moral culpability for ongoing injustices, which does little to change the reality of settler colonialism and other systems of oppression (Mawhinney, 1998; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Similarly, we see methodological innocence as a way for scholar-practitioners to assuage their guilt and misdiagnose the issue at hand, which we argue is solidarity.

In this essay, we contend that the dilemmas of power and control within YPAR collaborations need to be repositioned, not as subjects to dread or fear, but as integral to the process of cultivating solidarity amongst scholar-practitioners and youth researchers. First, we highlight contemporary dilemmas that scholars and practitioners encounter within participatory inquiry, especially those that are concerned with interpersonal tensions between researchers and youth interlocutors. Second, we build upon the insights of several scholars who engage with conceptualizations of solidaristic praxis, and discuss how a focus on solidarity may offer YPAR practitioners and scholars a limited yet useful avenue to invigorate existing conceptualizations for practice and theory. Next, we share our personal and political commitments and YPAR work within different settings and contexts. Thereafter, we introduce two autoethnographic vignettes that illustrate the lessons we gleaned within the contact zones (Bettencourt, 2020) of our respective YPAR projects. These lessons are used to reflect on how solidarity—for better and worse—permeates our work as YPAR practitioners. In closing, we argue that solidarity as a guiding ethos offers constructive guideposts for research practitioners to contend with methodological tensions in participatory inquiry.

Navigating Power and Control in YPAR Praxis

YPAR seeks to move youth from serving as the subjects of research to instead being engaged as co-researchers (Langhout & Thomas, 2010), enabling young people to use their insider expertise to conduct research projects of

their own design and create change within their communities (Ozer, 2017). As a type of participatory action research (PAR), which has historically held goals of emancipation and critical consciousness-raising (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017), YPAR seeks to be a form of resistance, transformation, and social change for young people (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Schensul & Berg, 2004). Despite these revolutionary aims and values, institutional pressures, of both the academy in which academics inhabit and the settings in which youth are placed (such as schools or extracurricular activities), often result in *lite pedagogies*—watered-down, highly-regimented service-learning modules that limit YPAR's full capacity (Ritterbusch, 2019). Moreover, YPAR literature can privilege the *success stories* and *end products*, which often neglect the relational and political tensions of the process (Lac et al., 2022).

As such, academics facilitating YPAR are faced with several challenges and tensions to traverse, a primary one being how to approach their role in working with young people (Teixeira et al., 2021). Those conducting community-engaged research with communities they are not a part of must always navigate insider-outsider tensions (Minkler, 2004), which can be amplified when researchers hold privileged identities that their collaborators do not, such as if they are White scholars collaborating with a community of color (Chavez et al., 2003). It is also of particular importance for YPAR facilitators wishing to conduct projects that are explicitly anti-racist (Toraif et al., 2021). Even if researchers facilitating YPAR have shared identity characteristics with their youth collaborators, as adults, they are outsiders and are privileged due to adultism, the belief system that states adults are more capable than youth (Bell, 2010). Thus, adult facilitators of YPAR must be intentionally and continuously reflexive of their identities and internalized adultism, to meaningfully collaborate with young people (Bettencourt, 2020) and to resist possible urges to control the work of their youth co-researchers (Clay & Turner III, 2021), impeding the expression of their voices in the process.

While this shift in YPAR scholarship toward focusing on the complexity and challenges of conducting such work ethically and in alignment with radical goals is a novel and needed one, there is also the potential that, without a roadmap through such tensions, these conversations may unintentionally lead to a stagnation of YPAR praxis. Traditional research can also cause harm (Tuck & Guishard, 2013) and typically only engages youth as subjects of research (Langhout & Thomas, 2010), so we fear that a sole focus on the possible harms of participatory research may lead scholar-practitioners to feel such projects are too fraught, and instead default to status quo paradigms. Without indulging in ideas of innocence that erase these very real tensions, we seek a way forward in YPAR scholarship that attends to difficult terrain without abandoning possibilities for just research relationships with youth.

Addressing Adultism and Fostering Youth-Adult Partnerships

The privilege adults hold due to adultism, education level, or professional status can be capitalized upon to act in solidarity with young people. Researchers conducting YPAR must be conscious of how they can and should leverage their relative power to support youth's goals and opportunities to create action (Oto, 2023), as well as facilitate a developmentally appropriate space in which young people are able to thrive (Suleiman et al., 2021). Though facilitators must take care not to dominate the YPAR projects they lead, they are tasked with supporting their youth co-researchers in learning about research and conducting studies (Bettencourt, 2020). Adult

facilitators of YPAR also need to use their privilege and lived experience to help youth navigate complex social settings and systems of oppression (Lac et al., 2022), both in how they internally structure the YPAR group to enable full participation of historically marginalized students (Toraif et al., 2021), and in how they support youth to interact with a potentially hostile community setting (Lac et al., 2022). When adults can address their adultism and find ways to act in solidarity with youth, such as through providing material resources and confronting adults behaving in oppressive ways, meaningful youth-adult partnerships can be made (Oto, 2023).

Adult researchers should therefore balance the need to let youth lead in YPAR projects while also taking on an appropriate responsibility of caretaking and support (Lac et al., 2022). To appropriately navigate this tension between domination and abandonment, caretaking and paternalism, scholar-practitioners must be clear-eyed about these realities and our own imperfections as we traverse an unjust world. Some scholars have labeled YPAR as a *contact zone* (Pratt, 2012), wherein those with mixed levels of power come together and attempt to collaborate, explaining that "rather than assuming that it is possible to create an environment free from the larger social systems within which it operates, framing YPAR as a contact zone ensures that researchers center the issues of privilege and oppression within collaborations" (Bettencourt, 2020, p. 159). Such a framing offers bounded expectations for adult facilitators of YPAR, wherein we can seek to unsettle hierarchies while understanding that we cannot necessarily dismantle them. Envisioning YPAR as a contact zone provides a helpful tool to YPAR facilitators for how they can continue to collaborate with youth, while also addressing mismatched power dynamics. However, further exploration is needed regarding how adults facilitating YPAR can take on appropriate responsibilities to youth while also attending to complex personal and political realities.

Hart's (1992) "ladder of participation" is one of the early touchstones of adultism within educational praxis. The ladder metaphor has resonated widely with both scholars and practitioners as a schema critically examining the genuine affordances for youth participation in educational spaces and projects. Within this ladder model, the bottom rungs represent forms of non-participation, where young people's inclusion is represented by hollow symbolism and tokenism. Conversely, the higher rungs represent substantive forms of youth participation, where the ascending rungs of the ladder indicate increasing degrees of youth initiative and decision-making power. At the same time, Hart (2008) has expressed regret about how some scholars and practitioners have interpreted the ladder by overly fixating on the top rungs of youth participation. In turn, the other rungs on the ladder are sometimes seen as less valid or not *truly* participatory. Practitioners and scholars who adopt this view may be in danger of prioritizing their personal vision of youth liberation while overlooking the desires and agency of young people who themselves may not want the responsibility required within a youth-centered and -led project. Instead of a hierarchical conception of youth participation, it sometimes may be more suitable to interpret the ladder metaphor as a spectrum of youth participation. Rather than sustaining a commitment to a specific mode of youth participation, the improvisational demands of YPAR practice often require dynamic shifts in youth participation through the life of a project and as the unexpected realities of life emerge (Renick et al., 2024). In other words, confronting adultism within YPAR practice is as much about navigating the complications of institutions, structural inequality, and modern life, as it is about upholding the most utopian vision of youth participation.

We draw upon the work of critical community organizers and thinkers to inform this perspective. Mariame Kaba has advocated for having an *abolitionist imagination*, stating "None of us has all of the answers, or we

would have ended oppression already. But if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge" (Kaba, 2021, p. 4). Similarly, as adrienne maree brown states, "all organizing is science fiction, by which we mean that social justice work is about creating systems of justice and equity in the future, creating conditions that we have never experienced" (brown, 2017, p. 160). However, creating a new world, while living within all the constraints of the old one, is a fraught endeavor. Thus, we employ the *fractal principle,* understanding that all large systems are made up of smaller ones and that individual-level change can create upstream forward movement (brown, 2017; Ritchie, 2023). Such a framing allows us to imagine new ways of relating to young people on a "human scale" (Ritchie, 2023), wherein we may try to disrupt adultism in individual classrooms or relationships, despite still living in a larger system of adultism. As we continue to move the field of YPAR forward, we seek to imagine new visions of collaboration and solidarity between youth and adults, while still being conscious of our current, limiting reality.

Solidarity Pedagogies, Mutual Recognition, and YPAR Praxis

Confronting the realities of adultism within YPAR practice requires a deep understanding of solidarity, which can be a powerful starting point for mitigating adultism within our collaborations with young people. While solidarity has often been implicated within YPAR discourse, the concept has been either limited to vague gestures or completely overlooked within scholarly YPAR literature. One exception is a work by Torre et al. (2017), exploring the socio-political relationships between YPAR practitioners, youth collaborators, local communities, and social justice movements. In their chapter, the authors highlight the need for YPAR practitioners to move beyond the simplistic binary of *researcher* and *researched*. They position practitioners, researchers, and youth collaborators through a lens of mutual recognition, recognizing that power relations among collaborators are multidirectional and fluid rather than static (Torre et al., 2017). Torre et al.'s advocacy for mutual recognition reflects how YPAR can be a venue for political action, community organizing, and transformational struggles (Kelley, 2002; Oto, 2023). While there are undoubtedly power imbalances in this arrangement, focusing on mutual recognition makes the assets and agency of all YPAR interlocutors visible. This shift in perspective reminds us that YPAR practice should not be fully defined by adultism or conflict between adult scholar-practitioners and youth researchers: the power of YPAR is also reflected in its potential to cultivate solidarity.

Building on the contributions of this existing literature, we argue that focusing on solidarity is significant because it offers YPAR practitioners a way to productively engage with the emergent contradictions, tensions, and other unpredictable phenomena that rise to the surface of our collaborations with young people. A fruitful starting point for this discussion is Gaztambide-Fernández's (2012) conceptualization of a "pedagogy of solidarity", which describes solidarity as consisting of three intertwined dimensions: relational, transitive, and creative. First, a pedagogy of solidarity is relational, attending to social differences and recognizing the substantive impacts those differences—particularly racial differences—bring to bear historically, interpersonally, and structurally (Hooker, 2009). As such, solidarity also requires that we recognize an epistemological position in which "[w]e can begin to understand not by simply imposing our own selves but by stepping *outside* of ourselves" (Kelley et al., 2019, p. 582). Liu and Shange (2018) focus on how race complicates solidarity practice and theory within

multiracial social justice movements. A *thin* solidarity may be motivated by genuine empathy, but the simplistic rhetoric of racial unity can mask the realities of how racism and capitalism impact racialized communities differently (Sexton, 2010). Their theorization of *thick* solidarity reminds us that social justice movement work requires engaging across layers of difference, especially race and age. As such, solidarity entails cultivating bonds through struggle that are strong enough to endure both internal and external threats to social justice movements. Thick solidarity requires an ongoing dialogical exchange where solidarity can withstand the stress of critique, contention, and friction (Abad, 2021; Abad, 2023). Despite the challenges that race poses to solidaristic praxis, a deep investigation of the processes that create racialized differences can also serve as a catalyst for building affinities and camaraderie across differences to oppose domination and move toward a broader vision of liberation (Lowe, 2015). While we may imagine solidarity in relation to broader ideological and political projects, it is also often born out of circumstance, and a recognition of social differences, mutual interests, and linked fates.

At the same time, Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) notes that a strict fixation on social differences is incomplete and, on its own, may lead to a sense of paralysis and nihilism. It is not sufficient to bear witness to systems of oppression such as ageism, racism, and sexism and the suffering that they produce. A pedagogy of solidarity requires another element: transitive solidarity, which "insists on praxis" and "it demands that we act in the world" (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 55). In other words, solidarity is an active process through which we build empathy and power through collaboration. For YPAR practitioners, we are often unable to forecast how adultism may emerge within a project. Adultism can manifest as ad hoc phenomena that may emerge despite ideal planning and circumstances. In that same thread, a pedagogy of solidarity can help us anticipate these critical moments and position them not as topics to fear or avoid, but as productive tensions that are collectively resolved—for better and worse—by adults and youth collaborators.

Furthermore, a pedagogy of solidarity requires recognizing its creative and imaginative dimensions. In other words, solidarity and social transformation are made tangible by both collective action and imagination. Philosopher Lewis Gordon's (2020) description of "political commitment" illustrates this dynamic. "Political commitment requires acting without knowing the outcome and acting for those whom one ultimately will never know. ... No political act offers guarantees save one: it will affect others whom one would ultimately never know" (Gordon, 2020, p. 19). Solidarity requires that individuals and groups transcend a politics of personal morality and engage in collective efforts toward social transformation, even with the knowledge that those ripple effects may not bear fruit in our lifetimes (Kelley, 2002). Considering all of this, we see a pedagogy of solidarity as a fruitful starting point that can better position all interlocutors to confront and mitigate the manifestations of adultism in our collaborations with young people.

Practical Syncretism and Engaging with the Messiness of Solidarity

Seasoned practitioners become accustomed to the messiness, uncertainty, and improvisation that are commonly part and parcel with YPAR projects. As such, a pedagogy of solidarity often necessitates what geographer

Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2008) describes as "practical syncretism": a recognition of the contradictions that are concomitant with YPAR and other solidaristic projects. Gilmore (2008) highlights the ways in which scholars who engage in activist forms of research with community members operate within situations and environments where prescriptions and "how-to guides" do not exist. Practical syncretism is an approach that foregrounds "the general practice through which people use what they have to craft ad hoc and durable modes of living and for giving meaning to ... life (Gilmore, 2008, p. 37).

A syncretic posture encourages practitioners and scholars to engage with the contradictions of YPAR not from a position of ideological and political purity, but from a recognition that the decisions and actions we make and take with young people are forms of creative experimentation. As with all experiments, they are carried out with incomplete knowledge and often lack the benefit of hindsight. As such, a pedagogy of solidarity reminds YPAR practitioners that collaborations with young people entail degrees of syncretism as young people, adults, and scholars come together to generate material impacts in local communities, and cultivate meaningful relationships with each other (Ritterbusch, 2019). Put differently, a syncretic perspective reminds all YPAR interlocutors that both adults and young people have assets, talents, and skills to contribute to a collaboration. For example, it is crucial to recognize the assets that scholarly training affords YPAR practitioners, especially scholars' "opportunity to think in cross-cutting ways and find both promising continuities and productive breaks" (Gilmore, 2008, p. 31). In other words, a syncretic perspective is not about posturing as scholars and adults as if we possess all the answers, nor is it about simply "getting out of the way" of youth collaborators. A syncretic perspective offers a collaborative framework for moving beyond the insufficient researcher/researched dichotomy and enabling a solidaristic praxis based on mutual recognition (Torre et al., 2017). That is, syncretism provides a starting point for all interlocutors to recognize the assets each individual brings to the table, as well as collectively making the difficult choices necessary for navigating the material realities of any collective endeavor.

Study Settings and Methodological Approach

We write this essay together to take stock of the generative potential of the concept of solidarity, especially for those of us who are invested in advancing social justice praxis and take the role of participatory research praxis within these projects seriously. Initially, we generated this essay based on the respective YPAR projects in which we were involved. Moreover, we were drawn to collectively think through how we might move past the limitations of the contemporary scholarly literature of YPAR praxis. This article has also been inspired by our positions as scholar-practitioners and the solidaristic work we have both engaged in within the academy, other educational institutions, and through grassroots organizing. While solidarity as a concept is not without its limitations, this essay represents our attempt to demonstrate how a solidaristic ethos offers generative vantage points for conceptualizing common dilemmas and future directions for participatory inquiry.

We utilized an autoethnographic approach (Denshire, 2014) in which each author generated reflective memos based on facilitator field notes throughout their partnership work with young people. These reflective memos were then collaboratively discussed and analyzed between the two of us to identify themes inductively,

as grounded in the data (Saldaña, 2016), to generate central components of our solidaristic praxis. Once these themes were solidified, we merged our reflections together, to offer a 'layered account' (Denshire, 2014, p. 843) that wove our collective experiences with theoretical literature into a cohesive narrative (Denshire, 2014). We also adopted a critical, self-reflexive stance (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009) that allowed us to reflect on our practices, identities, and beliefs in recognition of broader systems and structures, as a key aspect of our analysis.

Miguel draws from his participatory action research work with transitional-aged youth who have participated in a non-profit career development education program based in San Francisco and Oakland. This collaboration focused on implementing youth participant-driven inquiry and changes to the program's structure. Miguel's ethnographic vignette highlights how focusing on solidarity can remind practitioners of the importance of their role in promoting youth agency and pedagogical lessons on the complexities of engaging in social change. Jennifer shares about a YPAR project embedded as a part of a research practice-partnership (Coburn & Penuel, 2016) with a Title 1 middle school in a coastal city in Southern California. This project emerged to address a goal to increase student voice on campus, which school stakeholders had expressed but were unsure of how to advance. The group was loosely focused on school climate, with students being able to select any area of their school they wished to improve through research. Jennifer's ethnographic vignette showcases how striving to act in solidarity can help practitioners imagine new ways of relating to and engaging with young people that resist paternalism, while also attending to complex social realities.

As collaborators, we approach the concept of solidarity both as scholars and youth practitioners. Miguel comes to this essay as a Filipino cisgender man, a youth worker, and a scholar of youth resistance and social justice movements. As such, solidarity is a matter of praxis that he has conceptualized through his work with young people in the academy and within local communities of the San Francisco Bay Area. Jennifer's interest in YPAR and solidarity is deeply influenced by her identity and history. Her desire to elevate youth agency in the decisions that impact their lives is informed by her own experiences as a youth activist, particularly the lack of support and attempts at punishment for such efforts she experienced in high school—circumstances that led to her being awarded a Targeted Activist Youth grant by the Rosenberg Fund for Children. Her focus on solidarity is informed by her work as a cisgender, White woman seeking to act in solidarity with communities of color to advance anti-racism, specifically as a long-time member of groups based in Los Angeles that focus on supporting White people in developing anti-racist identities through education and action.

Autoethnographic Vignettes

Solidarity Means Taking Sides

For over three years, Miguel has worked with Opportunity Knocks (OK), a Bay Area-based non-profit organization, on a YPAR collaboration. OK offers employment training and internship placement services, particularly for Black and Latine transitional-aged youth in San Francisco and Oakland. The initiative involved Miguel, two youths from OK's youth leadership council, and two adult advisors from the organization. In this project, the

YPAR collaboration revolved around youth-driven inquiry to identify problems in OK's programs and making meaningful youth-led interventions in the organization. Conventional research and practice models of career development education have traditionally been structured—implicitly and explicitly—around racialized and deficit-centered tropes of BIPOC communities and neoliberal economic perspectives (Kantamneni & Fouad, 2023). In contrast, the youth leaders at OK operated from vastly different premises and raised different questions. As a team led by Black and Latine youth, they acted from a perspective that BIPOC young people in the Bay Area have ambitions and desire opportunities to reach their individual potential, as well as uplift their communities.

Through a YPAR inquiry, the youth research team held focus group dialogues and surveyed their peers in the program. Their research process revealed that deficit-centered and racialized tropes of BIPOC youth participants at OK were unfounded. Moreover, the youth leaders concluded from their data that the real problem lay in the negative experiences that youth encountered in their job placements. As such, the direction of the YPAR project would focus not on schemes to better *professionalize* OK youth participants, but on highlighting the need for internship providers (e.g., local businesses and organizations) to become more responsive to the needs and experiences of the youth interns. The dilemma that emerged was how OK's leaders would react to such a project. The organization relies on voluntary participation from local business partners to place OK youth in job opportunities and internships. As a group, we discussed the dilemma and the aspects that could complicate the youth leaders' ability to carry out the project, including potential hostile reactions from different parties. As the adult facilitators, we deliberated together, agreeing to present the potential challenges and pitfalls of the project. At the same time, we assured each other that we would stand by the youth researchers and their decisions regarding the direction of the project.

The deliberation was short, as the ten youth researchers were essentially united in their desires for the project.

"I'd rather that we do the project the way we want to do it and it fails than having to do it a way that's not what we wanna do. At that point we're just wasting our time" shared Angela, a 17-year-old Black young woman from Oakland.

"I agree", Marcus, a 19-year-old Black young man from Oakland added, "We gotta do it our way, and if people don't like it and they try to stop us, then that tells us they were never about to listen to us anyways".

"Listen, we're all doing this project cause we're trying to make things better. It's not really for us who are here. We already did the program. We're doing this for all of the other youth. We're doing it more for them, so that they don't have to deal with shit we did", said Lupe, a 20-year-old Chicana woman from San Francisco.

This vignette highlights how solidarity mediated the ethical dynamics and power relations between me, other adults, and the youth researchers in this project. For Angela, Marcus, and Lupe, the project was bigger than any of them and signaled a collective desire to change an important piece of how OK functioned. As such, their political commitments revealed that they were not interested in vanity projects, even if the current direction of the project moved them closer to conflict and the broader contradictions of the nonprofit industrial complex. Moreover, as Lupe noted, the project underlined their political commitment to making material changes in OK. Her comment illustrates a politics of solidarity and a desire to make meaningful changes in the program even as those changes would not directly benefit them, but future young people. It reveals that for YPAR practitioners, solidarity requires labor that goes beyond the conventional prescriptions found in YPAR scholarly texts and training modules, in

order to authentically listen and respond to youth perspectives. As a university-affiliated researcher, I chose to follow the lead and insights of my youth collaborators and value the questions that were important to them rather than the questions that I had initially perceived as the most pressing in the academic literature. I also came to understand that the OK youth leaders' concerns reflected a desire to promote social justice principles in a field of study and practice that has been too often treated as an afterthought in the academic literature (Ali et al., 2022).

As researchers and YPAR practitioners, our value within community collaborations lies not only in our technical expertise, but also in the opportunities and space we have as scholar-practitioners to think in cross-cutting ways; having a foot inside and outside of institutions affords me the ability to observe the multiple dimensions and layers of power, history, and social forces at play (Gilmore, 2008). A pedagogy of solidarity provides invaluable reminders for YPAR scholar-practitioners to attend to the relational dynamics between them and youth collaborators, as well as to emphasize the need for practice to be at the heart of solidaristic praxis (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Specifically, I was practicing relational solidarity as part of a broader pedagogy of solidarity. My knowledge of the academic literature on career development education helped to reveal how many of the questions being asked in that field did not adequately address the sentiments and needs of my youth collaborators. My collaborators, who were Black and Brown young adults from Oakland, were experiencing the downstream effects of this conventional academic literature through their participation in career development programs. In these moments, I began to recognize how their positionalities offered invaluable insights into the everyday issues they faced as they attempted to enter and navigate the labor market. Their personal experiences and knowledge as BIPOC youth in the job market, combined with my grasp of the academic literature, illustrated the syncretic quality of the project. In other words, our collective decision to move forward with the project was made possible by the contributions of myself and the youth participants. Practicing a pedagogy of solidarity in our case did not simply mean "getting out of the way" of the youth collaborators. Rather, the lesson of this moment was that despite our contrasting positionalities and the forms of knowledge we each held, navigating this impasse in our research project required the expertise and leadership of both adults and young people.

For the adults on the research team, it required us to brainstorm with the youth researchers about how we could best utilize our research to effect tangible changes in OK. Within this project, solidarity existed as a generative ethic rather than a reactive one. As adult collaborators, practicing a pedagogy of solidarity also meant identifying and understanding our roles as educators in supporting our youth collaborators' agency by positioning them as not only leaders, but also as historical actors who can make changes in our work (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). My position as an academic and practitioner provided me with insight into the ways institutions operated, and how some youth-serving organizations discount the viewpoint of youth participants without a second thought. A pedagogy of solidarity necessitated supporting my youth collaborators in engaging in strategic thinking. This meant collaborating by conducting power-mapping activities, discussing how to systematically design a research project, gathering and synthesizing data, and developing program recommendations based on our findings. We supported the youth leadership group as they presented research to adult decision-makers within the organization, laying out their research findings and recommendations for changes in the OK youth program. This experience illustrated the channels of pedagogical solidarity we practiced (relational, transitive, and creative) through our time together. Throughout this two-year-long collaboration, I came to understand a pedagogy of solidarity through the roles and

assets we all brought to the project, the camaraderie and community we developed, and the creative resourcefulness we collectively demonstrated as we navigated challenges and confronted tensions.

Solidarity Entails Wrestling with Tensions

The YPAR project Jennifer facilitated started two and a half years after beginning her collaboration with the participating middle school. As the first YPAR project was considered successful by school stakeholders, and because Jennifer would be continuing to work with this middle school for another year, the plan was set for a second YPAR cycle to take place in the next academic year. In the first cycle of this project, the students had opted to focus their research on improving school food, which led to a partnership with a Nutrition Specialist in the Food & Nutrition Services of the school district (see Renick & Reich, 2023 for more information). At the end of the first YPAR cycle, Jennifer was approached by this individual about a potential grant that could be applied for.

The grant was topic-specific, provided by a state agency to support research on youth nutrition and nutrition education. Our district collaborator encouraged us to apply if we were interested, as the district was an eligible grantee. In considering whether the group should apply for this grant, I wrestled with a number of tensions. To start, the grant would provide funding to move the students' ideas into action— potentially greatly increasing the impact their research could have at their school. Because of this, applying for the grant could elevate the students' voices on campus by giving them a larger platform and increased resources. Following this perspective, I felt compelled to facilitate the students' application for the grant, as it seemed like an appropriate way to leverage my own power and privilege (as an adult with prior grant writing experience, trust from the school district that enabled me to draft an application they'd be willing to submit, etc.) to help the students access more power. At the time, students did not have a say in the school budget, and this would give them the opportunity to direct the use of funds on campus, increasing their agency and influence.

However, I also had concerns about how the grant might diminish students' autonomy. If we received the grant, the group would be locked into our current plan, to meet funder expectations. One of the strengths of the first YPAR cycle was that students had no limitations on what topic they could research, giving them full control over directing the focus of our research. If we received this funding, that freedom would be lost in the second cycle, as we would have to focus on school food again, and follow a specific study plan we proposed in our grant application. Should the students want to adjust their plan in the upcoming school year, they would have limited capacity to do so and they would also be unable to switch their research topic, as the grant was topic-specific. Due to these factors, receiving the grant also had the potential to limit students' agency by making them answerable to a funder and decreasing their role in decision-making. As someone who also had caretaking responsibilities for the youth involved, I was concerned about bringing this opportunity to them, only for it to end up being a negative experience. Given the importance of YPAR as a space where youth lead, I worried about bringing in new adults to whom the students would be beholden, especially considering how strict this funder was.

In my role as a YPAR facilitator, I struggled to determine which approach would be best for the students: do we apply for the grant or not? Not wanting to fall into paternalistic ideas of caring for young people, I opted to bring the choice to the group in a way that was conscious of the power dynamics present in our collaboration,

acknowledging the reality of YPAR as a contact zone. I remained cognizant of the responsibilities I held as the adult facilitator but felt this was a decision the students could and should make collectively, as safety was not a concern. I presented the opportunity to the group, laying out the pros and cons as I saw them, but was mindful to continuously create space for the students to develop their own opinions.

The students ultimately decided to apply for the grant as they were excited about the potential resources to support their ideas in the upcoming school year. For example, one student, Catherine, a Multiracial seventh grader, shared her rationale for why we should apply for the grant: "I think we should try to do something with our data... I would want to. Maybe we could do something about the water situation at the school, like maybe put that money towards water bottles for kids or water to be handed out at lunch". As we discussed the possible funding opportunity as a group, it became clear that the students saw it as a way to broaden their actions and address aspects of the school that were less malleable to change without additional resources. Through their research, the students found that their peers were drinking little water during the school day. When they asked their school's cafeteria manager about providing water as a beverage option in the school lunch, we learned that USDA regulations required offering milk as part of school meals. As such, under the current conditions, the cafeteria could not shift its beverage options, regardless of the student feedback provided. However, the students saw the resources the grant could offer as a way to increase their ability to create change on campus, especially in areas where change seemed unlikely without funding support.

Once the students reached a consensus to apply for the grant, they provided feedback on the budget and deliverables to ensure that if the group was locked into a certain plan, it was one they decided upon collectively. Students proposed different, more experimental studies they could implement based on their initial, more descriptive research, with the support of grant funding. For example, Mia, a Latina eighth grader, suggested a study that involved "implementing more food for a short period of time and see how the students like it and then switching foods". As students were guided through the expectations of the grant, they worked together to design a study and a budget that were aligned with their own goals and interests.

In deciding whether to bring the grant opportunity to the YPAR group, I sought to act in thick solidarity with my youth collaborators, attending to difference by helping them understand the potential limitations receiving the grant would bring, based on my insight from previous experience with grants, while also giving them space to make the final decision, as the leaders of the project. This became a teaching moment for my adolescent collaborators. Through our discussions, they wrestled firsthand with the complexities of the bureaucratic hurdles in research, as well as the challenges individuals and communities face when attempting to create material change in institutions in an imperfect world. In this way, solidarity involved both the participating youth and adults engaging with the tensions of trying to improve conditions in flawed systems. Such learning and application are an important aspect of solidaristic praxis, as they enable us to truly treat young people as partners who can make important decisions and promote their agency, even if there is a risk of harm, such as in this case with the potential problems receiving the grant may cause.

Relatedly, I tried to adopt an imaginative approach to what it could mean to receive a grant, rather than being limited by my own perspectives or experiences of rigidity and limitations, and to consider how to leverage my power as an adult for the purposes of solidarity. All YPAR involves the creation of something new (e.g., a project,

community, action, etc.) and I sought to extend that to how we approached external funding as well. In my decision-making process of whether to bring the grant opportunity to the group, I considered the fractal principle, understanding the nested sub-systems that compose the overarching societal structure of adultism (Ritchie, 2023). In my role as a YPAR facilitator, I could not change the inherent systems of schooling or research funding, but in this project, with these youth, we could try to create a space where things were different, where youth could lead, and youth-participatory budgeting could occur. This decision also involved considering opportunities for youth participation as a spectrum, rather than as a clear hierarchy (Hart, 2008), and as another nested structure. I felt excluding youth from the decision about whether to apply for the grant or not would have been aligned with the lowest rungs on the engagement ladder (Hart, 1992), even if the intention was to prevent a future situation in which youth autonomy was lessened. I felt instead that the more appropriate decision was to explain the situation to the youth and allow them to make a choice, even if the outcome of that choice may have situated the future, possibly grant-funded YPAR project on a lower ladder rung (Hart, 1992). Ultimately, solidarity within YPAR involves engaging directly with, rather than shying away from, the inherent tensions of trying to enact imaginative futures within a limited present and incorporating that messiness into one's facilitation practices.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, we have reflected on the ways in which we grappled with a pedagogy of solidarity, and how it informed our ad hoc efforts to navigate issues of adultism within our respective projects. Furthermore, we were concerned about the ways that the narrow emphasis on tensions and moral hazards has become overrepresented within YPAR, which often can inadvertently and unproductively position scholar-practitioners through deficit-based lenses. We empathize with scholar-practitioners who viscerally experience these critical stalemates as they work to prioritize the well-being of our youth collaborators. In many ways, critical stalemates are a function of practitioners' active reflexivity, caretaking impulses, and commitment to social justice. At the same time, we also recognize the impulse to retreat to a position of methodological innocence and attempt to conceptualize how to alleviate harm within our respective YPAR collaborations. The lessons we carry from our respective projects are that these questions are cultivated more holistically as part of the process of developing solidarity with youth collaborators. Taking a pedagogy of solidarity as a starting point offers scholar-practitioners a pathway to interrogate adultism and power disparities, not as exceptional issues in and of themselves, but as part of a larger collective process of forging bonds and working towards something bigger than ourselves. To put it another way, the essential lesson of a pedagogy of solidarity for YPAR practitioners is the sober concession of knowing we are all imperfect, that things may go wrong, adults may likely overstep their authority, and our youth interlocutors may experience harm in the process. Yet, a pedagogy of solidarity also reminds us that the story does not end there. Adopting a syncretic perspective allows us to understand that YPAR practitioners and our youth collaborators are resourceful; we make do with the conditions that are in front of us and with the assets we have on hand. Solidarity is the messy process through which we forge deeper bonds in the face of the setbacks, challenges, and harms that occur within our collective efforts at creating material change. Furthermore, we learn that it is not a failure to acknowledge that we require a degree of "wiggle room" within our collaborations and experiments with our youth interlocutors.

Our two autoethnographic vignettes provide examples of what a pedagogy of solidarity might look like within a YPAR collaboration. The collective lesson of our experiences is that these interpersonal conflicts over power and control are not issues to flee from or fear within YPAR projects. Rather, they are the unavoidable and necessary tensions that are concomitant to a pedagogy of solidarity. As Miguel recounted, engaging in a pedagogy of solidarity required that he actively accept his role and responsibilities as an educator and scholar-practitioner, supporting his youth collaborators' decisions and helping them to navigate the anticipated institutional challenges and pushbacks. They had important knowledge and perspective that needed to be shared even if that information could influence the direction of the project. For Jennifer, solidarity required allowing youth to decide between two seemingly imperfect choices, while recognizing her role in assisting them through the possible difficulties that may emerge as a result of their selection. We found commonalities in our approaches of directly confronting flawed systems, identifying our ability to enact change, and planting seeds for imagining a new way forward. In both of our experiences, the process of cultivating solidarity was illustrated through the challenges we navigated in partnership with our youth colleagues. Our vignettes also reflected the syncretic dynamics at play within YPAR projects. We and our youth partners made do with the respective situations and circumstances that confronted us, which required diverse modes of collective leadership, problem-solving, and creative experimentation. In both of our experiences, adultism was not an issue that we could separate and solve in isolation. Navigating our respective dilemmas revealed that potential issues of adultism were entangled with other circumstances such as organizational and institutional forces, and our responsibilities as educators and caretakers. While we both were self-aware and cautious about the power and privilege we held as adults and scholar-practitioners, we understood that these critical interrogations were part of a larger pedagogy of solidarity. In this framework, we worked to develop meaningful relationships across differences, build each other up, and conjure a degree of social transformation.

We hope to stimulate more curiosity and interest in our colleagues and fellow travelers who have a commitment to better their practice and advance YPAR theory past the present critical stalemates. Existing examples include Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine's notion of a "multigenerational" critical participatory action research, which further challenges YPAR practitioners to work to unsettle the power differences between adults and youth, not only within a discrete project but in the world (Fox & Fine, 2015). Moreover, other scholars have reminded us of the need to attend to the intersubjective and interpersonal commitments of YPAR practitioners. Amy Ritterbush speaks to the importance of social justice-oriented academics to prioritize building and sustaining genuine relationships. This aspect is often overlooked within modern YPAR training and devalued in the academy. We believe that a solidaristic conceptualization can further advance these interventions in YPAR praxis.

While we believe that solidarity stands as a generative position to approach YPAR praxis, we also recognize the inherent challenges that solidaristic work entails. For example, there is a need to explore the challenges of solidarity within YPAR praxis not only between adult and youth researchers, but also in working across the layers of difference and political contradiction among young people. Furthermore, how might solidarity enable YPAR projects to better connect with, and support, the ongoing struggles of local social justice movements? As such,

these struggles of solidarity are not neatly or easily captured for consumption within institutionally sanctioned curriculum modules. For YPAR scholars, the goal of the work has also been to position young people and other interlocutors as holders of sharp analysis, critique, and action. Solidarity reminds us that this is only possible through an ethos of personal and collective struggle where we do not retreat from difference, but instead, we utilize it as a spark for learning and transformation.

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