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Autoethnographic engagement in participatory action research: Bearing witness to developmental transformations for college student activists

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Abstract

This article documents and analyzes autoethnographic engagement in participatory action research (PAR)—a reflective, irritative, and dialogic writing and team-discussion process which documents researcher-activist experiences and contextualizes them within the action research process. We document autoethnography as implemented in a research partnership between HMoob American college student activists and education researchers, to study the systems of oppression and inform advocacy to support HMoob American students at a predominantly white university. Autoethnography informs all aspects of the PAR project, from the development of research questions, to data collection, analysis, and writing, to the implementation of plans for action. We provide evidence from selections of the team's autoethnographic journals, of the role of autoethnographic engagement as a PAR research technique that can facilitate and bear witness to the developmental transformations for emerging PAR activists—specifically, the cultivation of critical consciousness, the critical re-framing of issues of cultural-community identity, and the formation of an identity as a researcher-activist. We argue that autoethnography provides a practical technique for PAR teams for engaging in iterative cycles of critical self-reflective praxis (Freire, 2011), facilitating the development of critically-engaged researchers and the formation of analyses that are epistemologically grounded and action-oriented, addressing issues of power asymmetries within research.

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Introduction

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a partnership approach to research that involves engagement between academic researchers and community actors to gain a more grounded understanding of a given phenomenon with the goal of actionable social change. Community members are regarded as co-researchers rather than research participants or subjects and are given equal power to make decisions through every part of the research process, including research questions and design, data collection, analysis, and distribution of findings (Anderson, 2017; Fals-Borda, 1987). Moreover, PAR projects set out to empower communities to use their indigenous knowledge and to equip co-researchers with the tools necessary to collect, analyze, and distribute information (Selener, 1997). As such, PAR foregrounds the establishment of socially-just research partnerships—especially partnerships with communities and individuals who are systematically marginalized from decision-making processes that impact their own lives (Appadurai, 2006; Freire, 2011). The ethical ideal of PAR collaborations involves a decentering of the authority of research professionals to dominate the goals and conduct of research. (Anderson, 2017; Fals-Borda, 1987).

Because of the imbalance of power and privilege between researchers and participants, traditional research inquiries involving minoritized communities may be exploitative and harmful, replicating the relationship between colonizers and indigenous peoples (Paris & Winn, 2013). The positivistic framing of "science" bases its claims to objectivity and authority on the subject-object dichotomy, opposing objective "reality" and our subject knowledge or "theory" of reality (Wolfgram, 2016). In the social and anthropological sciences that emerged in the colonial period, a key feature of this positivism was the opposition between the researcher—who was almost always white and male—and the indigenous colonized people who were the subject of research (Smith, 2012). Critical research methodologies, such as PAR, have been developed in an effort toward decolonizing research methodologies by working to reorganize the asymmetrical power relations imbedded in social science research, by coordinating the goals of research with the justice and flourishing of the community, and by critiquing and transforming the dominant epistemologies (Smith, 2012; Torre et al., 2012).

PAR is sometimes considered a research methodology because the commitment to socially-just research partnerships can have mirid consequences for design and conduct of research, as well as for the work of theorizing and dissemination—however, PAR is also often framed as an ethical commitment, an approach to community engagement, and an epistemology (Fine, 2007). Many scholars have written about the various principles and theoretical underpinnings of PAR (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kemmis, 2007; McIntyre, 2008; Torre et al., 2012) that make it unique from traditional research inquiries; here, we outline four common principles of PAR projects:

1. Collective inquiry of a problem, phenomenon, or situation;
2. Centering of and relying upon indigenous knowledge to inform all aspects of the research process;
3. Emphasis on actionable steps towards transforming the world for a more just society;
4. Involvement of critical reflexive practices throughout the research inquiry (through both collective as well as individual reflections) as a way to interrogate issues of power and privilege that arise from the very nature of research.

It is the fourth principal of PAR regarding critical reflection that we focus on in this manuscript. Specifically, we are concerned with how autoethnographic journaling can be used as a method in PAR to facilitate critical reflection.

An important critique of participatory approaches is that they may provide cover for exploitative research relationships, exacerbate already existing power relations within communities, and be employed to induce community participation with powerful institutions (e.g., the World Bank)—with the potential to constitute a "new tyranny" rather than a strategy of critical emancipation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The response to this critique has involved work to clarify the ethics and values of participatory research teams (Nelson, 1998; Ochocka et al., 2010), and the development of technical procedures for naming, identifying, and managing power-relations on PAR teams (Littman et al., 2021). However, more research and theory are needed on the procedures for engaging ethically on PAR teams and for involving community participants in all aspects of the research.

PAR in Higher Education: Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub

While PAR approaches have been used in a variety of social settings, including youth organizations (Ventura, 2017), K-12 schools (Green et al., 1995), and prisons (Fine & Torre, 2006), they have not often been used in university settings with college students (Anderson, 2017). We contend that PAR offers an exciting and necessary approach to studying contemporary issues in higher education because it not only includes the perspectives and experiences of higher education students—those who are often excluded from policy debates—but it also positions students in a researcher role to guide the research questions, approaches, data collection, and analysis. This approach produces theory that is conceptually innovative as well as action-oriented, which can inform activism, pedagogy, policy debates, and policy implementation. Furthermore, participation in PAR projects can contribute tremendously to student development, helping students gain invaluable skills, such as communication, leadership, critical thinking, and writing (among others) that prepare them for post-graduation opportunities (i.e., graduate school and careers).

The Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub research project is a collaboration between educational researchers from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) and student activists from the HMoob American Studies Committee, a student-led activist initiative founded in 2015 at UW-Madison to advocate for HMoob American Studies as well as for more equitable educational experiences of HMoob and other minoritized students. After facing considerable

struggles to have their experiences recognized by administrators in their advocacy for policy changes on campus (such as having their personal testimonials dismissed as being isolated incidents), HMoob student activists began this research partnership in the fall of 2018. In this paper, where we refer to the student activists on our team, we will use the term "activist-researchers."

Our research aims to add to our understanding of issues of inclusivity and belonging in higher education by qualitatively examining the educational experiences of a particular minoritized population at a midsize, Midwestern university. Specifically, we research the experiences of HMoob American college students at UW-Madison in order to better understand issues of inclusivity and belonging at this large public flagship, research-intensive, predominantly white institution (PWI). In the first phase of this study (2018–2019) our research team interviewed and observed 27 enrolled HMoob American students. The second phase of our study (2019–2020), included 36 current students, 31 former students (which included alumni as well as students who left or transferred out), and 4 faculty, staff, and/or administrators who work with HMoob American students (Smolarek et al., 2021). This second phase of data collection was interrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, although we were able to conduct follow-up interviews with our current student participants about how the pandemic was impacting them. To date, we have conducted over 98 interviews. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we engaged in participant observations at events and workshops that HMoob American students hosted or attended, conducted observational fieldwork in spaces that were frequented by HMoob American students, and compiled artifacts, such as photos, documents, and news articles, for analysis. Finally, team members also kept autoethnographic journals, which we analyzed as data and will be focusing on throughout this paper.

The scope of this manuscript will focus less on the findings of our research investigations, and rather, will focus on our PAR research process. We illustrate how our research team utilizes autoethnographic journaling to inform every aspect of our PAR project: from the development of research questions and methods, to data collection, analysis, and writing, to the development of research-informed advocacy for policies to support HMoob American students on campus and beyond. Moreover, we describe how autoethnographic data bears witness to and engenders the developmental transformations of activist-researchers, including the cultivation of critical consciousness, the reclamation of HMoob identities, and the critical self-reflections regarding researcher positionality, power and privilege.

Contextualizing HMoob American Educational Experiences

The HMoob are an ethnic group with histories tracing back to southern China and displaced throughout China and Southeast Asia from centuries of colonization. During the U.S.Vietnam War, HMoob people were recruited by the CIA to serve as soldiers on the Vietnam-Lao border. To escape persecution after the U.S. pulled out of Southeast Asia, leading to the communist takeover of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Vang, 2010), the HMoob first fled to refugee camps in Thailand, and then resettled in third countries,

including the United States (Desbarats, 1985; HMoob Resettlement Task Force, 2005). The three U.S. states with the largest HMoob populations are California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Pfeifer et al., 2013).

Like other immigrant and refugee groups in the United States, HMoob Americans have been subjected to a process of racialization since their arrival. Current research suggests that Asian Americans are characterized by two dominant racialized discourses: the "model minority stereotype" and the "perpetual foreigner" (Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2017; Ngo & Lee, 2007). On the one hand, the model minority stereotype portrays Asian Americans as intelligent, self-sufficient, law-abiding citizens whose academic and economic successes can be attributed to their hard work. The model minority stereotype makes invisible the experiences of Asian Americans who face academic and economic difficulties. On the other hand, the perpetual foreigner discourse characterizes Asian Americans as outsiders whose cultures are diametrically opposed to that of mainstream white Americans. Asian Americans can simultaneously be stereotyped as both model minorities and perpetual foreigners as their supposed "foreign-ness" is sometimes used to explain the model minority success and other times used as an explanation for failure. These racialized discourses reinforce one another in ways that continue to marginalize Asian Americans. Since their arrival to the United States, HMoob Americans have generally been positioned as "failed model minorities" in which their "failure" is often blamed on their culture rather than on problematic refugee policies and institutional barriers that create the conditions of poverty and struggles within HMoob American communities (Lee, 2022). The histories of HMoob displacement, resettlement, and struggles with educational attainment illustrate the need to investigate the factors that impact the educational experiences of HMoob, so that more intentional interventions can be provided.

Theoretical Framework: Engaging Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Many PAR scholars have written about the influences of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, on PAR processes (McIntyre, 2008; Torre et al., 2012). Freire (2011) advanced the framework of problem-posing education, a part of what we now term "critical pedagogy," to describe a pedagogical approach that facilitates the development of literacy and investigative skills that allow students to interrogate and interrupt systems of oppression and power. Specifically, Freire's concept of conscientização, or critical consciousness (Freire, 2011), is important in our work with undergraduate activist-researchers. Freire describes conscientização as the act of learning the world around oneself, of understanding the social, political, and economic systems that create the conditions of oppression so that one can act to transform the world. Tilley-Lubbs (2018) contributes to Freire's discussion of critical consciousness by contending that critical consciousness is not a static state that one arrives at. In fact, "conscientization is a fluid state, one that can only occur when we are willing to constantly confront our power and privilege" (Tilley-Lubbs, 2018, 13–14).

As both a research approach and a pedagogical tool, PAR employs critical pedagogy, empowering students to become critical inquirers of their lived experiences. It enables students to become producers of knowledge, rather than just consumers of knowledge.

Participation in PAR requires activist-researchers to interrogate issues of power and privilege in order to better understand how systems of power and oppression work at the university. The purpose here is to create more just, equitable systems and institutions with this knowledge. In addition to transforming the world in which we live, participation in PAR should also be transformative for all those involved—especially the activist-researchers themselves (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kemmis, 2007).

In the Freirean tradition, we contend that transformational growth from participating in PAR can only be achieved if actions are coupled with critical self-reflection (Freire, 2011). To aid in this reflective component, our team engaged in autoethnographic journaling. Autoethnography as a research method is an introspective examination and analysis of one's identity and lived experiences to understand broader, cultural phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2018). Autoethnographic journaling is a crucial method in PAR to help facilitate the cultivation of critical consciousness (Tilley-Lubbs, 2018). In the next section, we will describe more in-depth how autoethnographic journals were kept and used to inform every aspect of our research process.

Methods: Autoethnographic Journaling

In addition to the various forms of data that we collected as described in the introduction of this paper, activist-researchers kept autoethnographic journals wherein they were asked to write weekly about topics or themes emerging from the data, their experiences, thoughts and feelings while in the field, thoughts and engagement with the literature, or reflection on anything from the research project that resonates with them. For the most part, journaling was more or less of a free-write. However, sometimes, students were given prompts (especially in the beginning of the project) to respond to in their journals as a way to guide their reflections. These prompts included questions such as: (1) Who are you within the HMoob American College community at UW-Madison? How does that affect how you see and interact with this community? What does that position mean for you as a researcher in this study? (2) What does it mean to be HMoob? How have you come to terms with your HMoobness? (3) What were your personal experiences with the K-12 ELL system? How might these experiences relate to the experiences of other HMoob students? What sorts of interview protocol questions would enable us to ask our participants about this?

Autoethnography is both a process and a product in which researchers connect their stories and lived experiences to wider cultural, political, and social meanings (Ellis et al., 2011; Campbell, 2016). Ellis and colleagues (2011) define "autoethnography" as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (p. 273). Autoethnographic journaling, then, exceeds the self-focus of the autobiography genre per se, in that autoethnographic writing engages with life histories, literature, the research process, and the evidence of the experiences of others through research data. As such, the ways that we employed autoethnographic journaling with activist-researchers on our team is similar to that in which Jack Whitehead's (2009; 2015) employed living-theory in the UK with teacher education students and education practitioners who engage

in action research. In his model of "living theory research," Whitehead (2020) had teachers (i.e., activist-researchers) reflect on "the educational influences in their own learning, the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understandings" (p. 57) and to understand the values underlying these influences. These reflections were used as data to improve practice. In this way, practitioners are viewed as knowledge creators who have the ability to change things with their knowledge.

In our work, we also contend that using autoethnography highlights other ways of knowing. It legitimizes personal experiences as valuable knowledge and provides a structured and intentional space for researchers to engage with and reflect on tensions related to the research. PAR research teams often engage in intimate conversations, sharing personal experiences, and reading and reflecting upon texts such as poetry, scholarship, and hip-hop—in a process of group dialogue that scaffolds participatory engagement and production of research questions, protocol, and analysis. PAR research by Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre with incarcerated women (2006), and by Andrea Dyrness (2020) with Guatemalan activists is Spain, describe the intimate details of such team dynamics. Autoethnography is a procedure to make explicit and document these intimate team dynamics/relationships/discussions and to translate them into andinform the research process (i.e. protocol), to cultivate the research and advocacy skills and voice development of activist-researchers. It aligns with the intentions of doing PAR work, which are to center community voices and stories and to move towards a socially-just method of engaging in research (Campbell, 2016; Chawla & Atay, 2018). Autoethnographic journaling involves the constant practice of reflecting and writing in a critical voice that is important for building critical consciousness.

Engaging in PAR can be a transformative process for young people. When autoethnographic journaling is used in coordination with PAR, it provides a space for students to reflect on their research experiences as well as to unpack their complex thoughts and emotions engaging in PAR. As such, autoethnographic journaling becomes a tool that is capable of documenting the ways in which PAR can be transformative. Students' reflections often included expressions of vulnerability and emotions, and the formation of the personal as political. Additionally, activist-researchers were asked to read one another's journals and provide feedback. This process allows us to engage in dialogue (Freire, 2011) about our lived realities and our visions for transforming it, fostering radical love and team trust.

Developmental Consequences of Engaging in PAR for Novice Activist-Researchers

This section presents evidence from activist-researchers' autoethnographic journals of the developmental and transformational impacts that participation in this PAR project has had on their lives. We aim to demonstrate how autoethnographic journaling aids in the facilitation of these developmental consequences, which include: the development of critical consciousness, contending with and unpacking one's ethnic identity, and cultivating one's researcher identity.

Building Critical Consciousness

The student-activists of the Paj Ntaub Research Team had already cultivated a critical consciousness of the racial dynamics and power relations on campus through their years of discussion, reflection, and activism at the institution prior to engaging in this project. Still, the autoethnographic engagement of this PAR project provided a process and a context to amplify *and* enrich this emerging critical consciousness.

In her last year on the team, one of the activist-researchers wrote in her autoethnographic journal about how her own experience with PAR, her journaling and writing of a report on the benefits of critical ethnic studies for students of color at PWIs, and reading and learning about the PAR team featured in Andrea Dyrness's book Mothers United (2011), was a context that "helps build critical consciousness":

> When my fifth year started, people told me that I radiated happiness. I loved it. I loved myself and the person I was becoming. […] I don't think any of this would happen if I didn't participate in CBPAR. This internal transformation and gaining critical consciousness happened because of CBPAR..*Mothers United* made me realize that CBPAR also helps build critical consciousness. I learned from my peers, I learned from research mentors, and they learned from me. CBPAR allowed me to have a voice, allowed me to learn, allowed me to critique my HMoobness and the University, and allowed me to advocate for change that actually benefits my community. (November 1, 2020)

Autoethnography proved an opportunity for activist-researchers to reflect upon and document connections between their own experiences as community members and PAR team members, and the experiences and ideas documented in the literature, enabling researchers to sharpen their critical consciousness and cultivate their voice and writing for social justice. Through iterations of readings, discussions, critical self-reflections, and autoethnography, as well as their involvement as trained researchers in every step of the PAR research process, activist-researchers were able to experience such transformations as the cultivation of critical consciousness.

Another indicator of a developing critical consciousness that autoethnographic journaling allowed us to witness were the ways that activist-researchers reflected on and considered their own relationship to privilege and the forms of privilege that they held relative to others—especially the student participants that they interviewed. One activist-researcher reflected on the general interviewing process and writing:

> Interviewing participants made me realize that I was also blind to HMoob student struggles. I didn't know that some participants felt a certain way. I thought everyone thought like me since we're all HMoob. We definitely share the same struggles but the differences in struggles definitely stood out to me the most, such as feeling excluded in the Business School. I can't relate to those people and I can't imagine how I would feel if I were in their shoes. It definitely puts things into perspective for me and made me realize my privilege. (January 11, 2019)

The activist-researchers' autoethnographic journals commonly documented—and thus, cultivated, clarified, and expanded through writing—transformations of critical consciousness that emerge in the context of PAR research, in particular, through interviewing and observing the research participants who are their peers, fellow HMoob American college students at a PWI. Such changes in critical consciousness involve decentering and questioning one's own prior assumptions, attitudes, and experiences, as occurred for one Paj Ntaub Research team member after an interview with a participant who was born in a refugee camp:

> I was born in America, so when someone asks me "where are you from," I have to explain the migration of HMoob folx because I am from Wisconsin. I and other American-born HMoob Americans often get frustrated each time we have to give a history lesson to explain our ethnic origin. Oakley, on the other hand, was born in the refugee camps of Thailand…her life starts with the history that we get so angry having to repeatedly tell. […] I feel like when it comes to talking about where we come from, us American-born HMoob are not mindful of the (younger) HMoob Americans who are not American-born. We get frustrated when we have to explain that HMoob don't have a home country and whatnot; yes, it's because we feel like this history should already be known, but it's mostly because we're angry that we still have to tell it. HMoob Americans like Oakley are forced to embody it...As American-born HMoob, we are privileged. *(December 23, 2019)*

A central feature of the processes of cultivating critical consciousness is the shift in perspective from interpreting experience from an automized and individualized perspective, to critically contextualizing experience within larger, systematic, institutional structures (Tilley-Lubbs, 2018). The role of PAR and autoethnographic journaling in this developmental process is illustrated by one activist-researcher's change in perspective about the conditions that impacted her sister's decision to leave of college:

> I am super proud of [my sister]... I also feel a little guilt because I was one of the people who did not understand her decision for leaving (college)…. She felt judgement and assumptions of her being lazy from us. Coming to college, I actually understand the forces that pushed her out. It was the institutional racism accumulating in so many ways like this facade of productivity culture and colorblindness that led to her to spiral into exhaustion. The interview I did with a Madison graduate, who graduated in Biology, made me think that her story is not that different from my sister. They both were miserable here and faced a lot of messed up situations. I really thought I would be hearing two different narratives with graduates and stop outs but both people were suffering. Whether people stop out or graduate, the experience here is a heartbreaking one. People are not forgiving enough to us, when we often don't create the conditions we are in. That is what I am learning when doing these interviews. (March 3, 2020)

This journal entry illustrates the activist-researcher's shift in understanding of her sister's decision to stop-out of college, moving from victim-blaming explanations of "being lazy" to a critical understanding of the context of "institutional racism

accumulating in so many ways like this facade of productivity culture and colorblindness that led to her to spiral into exhaustion."

(Re) Claiming HMoob identity

As students developed critical consciousness, they also contended with what it means to be HMoob. Autoethnographic journaling provides a structured space for activist-researchers to grapple with and reflect on what it means to be HMoob. One activist-researchers wrote in their journal:

> My whole life, I've grappled with what it meant to be HMoob. I don't know how to speak HMoob well, I don't know many cultural traditions, and up until college, I really didn't hang out with HMoob people unless they were family. My classmates often made fun of me saying that I wasn't HMoob because I didn't know popular HMoob songs or I didn't speak HMoob at school. Often times, I was ashamed because my classmates and family members would speak to me in HMoob and I would always respond in English. […] However, throughout my educational journey, I've realized that we all have different qualities that make us HMoob. (October 10, 2019)

Moreover, through journaling about what it means to be HMoob, reflecting on their identities, and dialoging with one another, activist-researchers decided to spell HMoob as we do with a capital *H* and a capital *M*. The capital *H* and *M* aim to be more inclusive of the two common HMoob dialects spoken by various HMoob communities. That is, Hmoob Dawb (Hmong White) dialect that pronounces *HMoob* with an aspirated *H* and the Moob Leeg (Mong Leng) dialect that pronounces *Moob* with no aspiration. We had researchers on the team that identified as Moob Leeg as well as those that identified as Hmoob Dawb so this intentional spelling felt more representative of the team as well. Students felt that this change was necessary to recognize the multiplicity of HMoob identities and communities and to challenge the dominance of HMoob white presence in written U.S. texts. Moreover, we borrow the "oob" in this spelling from the Hmong Romanized Phonetic Alphabet (RPA) as a rejection of the Anglicization of our ethnic name. Activist-researchers felt that this spelling was more reflective of our mother tongue and allows them as HMoob people to reclaim and embrace HMoob identity, history, and heritage.

Another example of how autoethnographic reflections and team dialogues informed our research project is in the title of our research project: "Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub." This title holds great significance for the activist-researchers who came up with it. While "paj ntaub" is an umbrella term for the skillfully-crafted, intricate textiles and handiwork found on HMoob clothing, wall-hangings, and bags among other household items, it has become the term used to describe one of the most well-known HMoob artifacts: the HMoob story cloth. When HMoob men and women fled from Laos due to persecution in the 1970s, they were displaced into Thai refugee camps where this new form of paj ntaub, or story cloth, emerged. HMoob refugees began depicting their experiences of trauma, displacement, and resilience through paj ntaub, sending these story cloths to the U.S. to sell for their livelihood (Peterson, 1988). Rather than a physical story

cloth, "Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub" is a symbolic way to continue this art form and pay homage to our families' experiences of displacement and survival. While our symbolic paj ntaub is different in that it takes place in the U.S., it tells of paralleled stories of trauma, displacement, and resilience in higher education. One activist-researcher reflected in her journal about "Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub" writing: "Our HMoob American College story begins with our family. Our hopes and dreams. We have some help (ie. pre-college programs) but like our family members did 40 years ago, when we move out of our homes in search for bigger and better things, we are faced with sustained struggles" (January 11, 2019). For our team, "Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub" is a living text that has only just begun to weave together the counterstories of HMoob American college students at UW-Madison, sewing a collective of stories about HMoob American experiences in higher education.

In sharing these two examples of how discussions, readings, and self-reflections informed our research project, we do not mean to romanticize the navigating of one's ethnic identity. Our activist-researchers wrote in their autoethnographic journals about their own (sometimes painful and long) journeys of coming to terms with their HMoobness. Even in their proud declaration of HMoob identities and embracing of HMoob culture, our critically-conscious activist-researchers were critical of those harmful practices that made them reject HMoob culture in the first place. One activist-researcher wrote that:

> Often, I don't take pride in being HMoob because long ago, we endorsed things that I now condone. I often feel like that's a huge reason why some HMoob Americans don't like to take pride in being HMoob as well because older HMoob folx, especially older HMoob men, still uphold old HMoob patriarchal values and traditions today. Yes, older generation problems affect young HMoob pride because it could literally be your grandpa, your aunt, your uncle, and your dad up against you. *(October 4, 2019)*

In the same entry reflecting on what it means to be HMoob, she added:

> But set aside old patriarchal traditions, and being HMoob is symbolic of group effort and group love. One of the most famous HMoob quotes is "Hmoob yuav tsum hlub Hmoob," which translates to, "HMoob has to love HMoob." We are a group of people who has collectively refused to be colonized by anyone who has tried to rewrite our identity. At the end of the day, we realize that we are a small population relative to the rest of the world, but we are scattered across the globe. In order to preserve our culture and our population, we must look out for each other and love each other from wherever we stand. Because if we as HMoob people don't love HMoob people, then who will? *(October 4, 2019)*

This activist-researcher recognized that embracing her HMoobness and loving HMoob people means she must also critique the harmful practices that continue to plague the community, but this does not mean that she is any less HMoob for doing so. Another activist-researcher critically reflected on the conditions that may affect how HMoob youth relate to HMoobness:

> Growing up, I was always in limbo, because I felt like I was a part of the leftover HMoob women and girls that could no longer be a part of the community, due to social ostracizing. Not being taught how to do things that were culturally HMoob, I often blamed myself for not being able to do so many things like speak HMoob comfortably/smoothly, cooking certain meals, etc. Often, I feel like when people see HMoob youth like me, there is an automatic assumption that we rejected our roots. But I believe it is more complex than that. It is because we come from so many different family households that have been broken through genocide and displacement, that has contributed to our identities. And there isn't a culture where HMoob youth can be unapologetically themselves, unsure/"incompetent" and still embraced or loved by the community. *(September 16, 2019)*

Through her heightened critical consciousness, this activist-researcher was able to name larger, sociopolitical conditions that impact HMoob youth's identity navigation, such as community ostracization, genocide, and displacement. She offered really crucial insight as to why youth may appear as if they are rejecting aspects of their HMoobness—that perhaps, these are not just internal decisions but that there are outside forces that influence how young HMoob people relate to the HMoob culture and community.

In the same vein, many activist-researchers shared similar lived experiences of being made to feel devalued in school spaces as a HMoob person, leading to their painful grappling of coming to terms with their HMoobness. An activist-researcher named schooling experiences that had a big impact on her ethnic identity development:

> […] there came points in my life where it was hard to embrace being HMoob. Starting in middle school, I started to feel like my HMoob identity was not important. I was always just "one of the Asians," but I'm not even THAT type of Asian. I learned that Southeast Asians were nothing special, especially when the Vietnam War would only be talked about for 5 minutes out of the whole school year. In addition to that, I tried creating a HMoob language class in high school to count towards the language requirement, and the higher-ups said that the class couldn't be a language class because only HMoob students were taking it. White fragility was real at my school. That was some real bullshit. And when HMoob students started finding a home with the high school Multicultural Club and filling up the room during meetings, White people starting calling it "HMoob club" and only supporting the club for our eggrolls. That made me feel like HMoob people were only valued for their food, which is also freaking bullshit. There was a Japanese club that never got disrespected, and for a while I envied them, but then I realized that they had Japanese food every day. Then I thought "Well, shit. Asians really are only valued for their food." So as you can see, my grade school experience didn't really help me embrace my ethnic identity. Being HMoob really didn't feel important. *(October 4, 2019)*

In reflecting on her pre-college schooling experiences, this activist-researcher was able to pinpoint moments in her educational journey that made her feel devalued as a HMoob person. She recognized that as a young person, she internalized these messages of inferiority, which led to her difficulty in embracing who she was as a HMoob person. In writing and reflecting in their autoethnographic journals about coming to terms with their

HMoobness, our researcher-activsts also shared moments of awakening critical consciousness that allowed them to realize that there is nothing inherently bad about HMoob people that make them unimportant, but rather, it is the conditions of the racist world that we live. One activist-researcher wrote about an anti-racist campaign which helped her to understand her own internalizations:

> For a time, I hated myself for being Hmoob because I didn't blend in with the whiteness of the campus. I internalized all the negative things about being Hmoob. I started to believe in the stereotypes made about me and my people. I don't know what clicked for me. I think it was #TheRealUW that made me realize that I wasn't the problem, it was the campus. *(October 18, 2019)*

Freire (2011) contends that when marginalized people develop their critical consciousness, they also start to see that something can be done to transform the realities that they live in. As such, while activist-researchers on our team can relate with participants who share stories of being ashamed of being HMoob when they were younger, the difference between our activist-researchers and the peers they interviewed lies in where the blame was placed and what they feel can be done about it. Activist-researchers recognized that deficit portrayals of HMoob people by outsiders and lack of HMoob studies curriculum in schools contribute negatively to young HMoob people's identity navigation. An activist-researcher critiqued schools as a place of cultural identity erasure:

> A part of schools is this erasing of who we are such as the languages and traditions we have, in order to essentially eradicate anything that resembles our resistance to imperialism. Because I spoke English so much, I neglected HMoob, and began to feel ashamed for not knowing HMoob, displacing myself from my community even more. In the end, to use diversity, to use inclusion, to see HMoob people in a deficit lens, instead of looking at white men as the problem, we see how this reinforces the system's goal to continue to erase who we are, to disconnect us from our families. *(September 26, 2019)*

This activist-researcher, along with other activist-researchers, used their autoethnographic reflections and participants' experiences as evidence of why ethnic studies is so important in schools. In this way, their participation on the PAR team continues to provide valuable contributions to their activist work in advocating for HMoob American studies at the university.

(re) Search for Oneself and for One's Community: Cultivation of Voice and Developing a Researcher Identity

One feature of PAR, which may set it apart from other community-based approaches, is the potential to increase community resources and capacity to conduct research by training novice researchers and by providing them with practical research experience. In her reflection on students' role in our PAR project, an activist-researcher writes:

> We as HMoob students are in every part of the research process. In particular, we pay real close attention to the methods, because that is integral for the integrity of our participants' voices…we carefully create questions that matter and will honor our communities' stories. […] Our own voices as HMoob researchers are also important to note in fieldnotes because research is personal to us. […] we can decide how the results will support the participants and not enact recommendations that will retraumatize and reharm HMoob people. […] [We can disrupt] deficit narratives and use research to actually honor our community members' voices. When we can do so, our lived experiences of our pain is not use as a tool to shame us, but rather to confront colonized narratives and recommendations. *(June 16, 2020)*

The activist-researchers employed autoethnography to reflectively document their research activity and develop critical perspectives on their own and others' experiences, which are key processes in the cultivation of skills, voice, and identity as a PAR activist-researcher. Thus, they used the journals to reflect upon their positionality as activist-researchers who are simultaneously members of multiple HMoob American communities.

A major concern for the activist-researchers was to reflect upon the constraints of their research, which is situated within hierarchically organized and capitalist institutions. One activist-researcher posed the question of what it means to do research:

> Scientific method of knowledge is part of an agenda that delegitimizes other cultural ways of knowing. I resisted the idea of getting involved in research for most of my undergrad years because I felt stuck by the system. I was in a trance of "can I truly be free of the system, can I truly decolonize and unlearn" at the same time of perpetuating and contributing to the system? […] While doing research, I want to be intentional with my work, but also mindful about what I put out there. Is this for the better or will it cause more harm? (September 16, 2019)

However, some activist-researchers became frustrated during their interviews with peers at what they viewed as inaction and complacence towards the racism HMoob students experience on campus that many of them viewed as a form of internalized racism. One activist-researcher reflected on his frustrations in his autoethnography: "[...] all of my interviewees all acknowledge the racial disparities on campus, but they don't really want to do anything about it.... So, I find it quite interesting because I see this kind of behavior with a lot of HMoob people everywhere I go. ... I find it quite limiting for change in the HMoob community (November 28, 2018)." Despite the disappointment and frustration that activist-researchers sometimes felt towards the words and actions they saw their HMoob peers exhibit, through the time and reflection associated with this project, they developed a much more compassionate understanding of the root cause of internalized racism. This is a crucial aspect of developing a critical consciousness. In one of her last autoethnographic journal entries after a semester of interviews, an activist-researcher reflected:

> At UW-Madison, HMoob American students are in unwelcoming spaces where they experience macroaggressions, microaggressions, and exclusion. HMoob American students deal [with and] respond in many ways but the most prominent is ignoring and moving on. They feel like the university can't help... for some students, the oppression manifests in some students in the form of internalized racism. Other students try to avoid suffering and marginalization by limiting their interactions with White people, sticking to safe spaces, finding mentors and forming communities/friendships. Student support programs, racial/ethnic specific student orgs assist in this community-making process. (January 11, 2019).

Through their reflections and deeper consciousness of why their HMoob peers might be understanding their experiences of racism differently, activist-researchers determined that more students of color needed the opportunity to engage in similar research inquiry – so that they would have the opportunity to analyze and critique their experiences. Because of this, the research team participated in a set of meetings and presentations with our research funder to advocate for PAR research possibilities for more higher education students and advocating for PAR as something that "helped open my eyes to a lot of different ways of looking at things" and an opportunity to frame their own community through an asset-oriented lens.

Discussion

The autoethnographic journals from the activist-researchers of the Paj Ntaub Research Team provide a rich illustration of the process of autoethnography, involving documenting and theorizing the life-historical and emergent experiences of PAR scholars by connecting those experiences with larger communities. The autoethnographies also provide evidence of important developmental transformations which are associated with the empowerment of PAR activist-researchers, including the cultivation of critical consciousness, the critical re-framing of issues of cultural-community identity, and the formation of an identity as a activist-researcher. The autoethnography provides the evidence of these developmental transformations associated with PAR work, but importantly, we argue that it is through the process of autoethnographic writing that consciousness is made critical and identities are reformulated. Autoethnographic writing documents but also articulates the process of empowering PAR activist-researchers. The use of autoethnography on the Paj Ntaub Research Team incorporates the students' perspectives and experiences into all aspects of the PAR process, from the start of research with the formation of research problems and questions, through data collection, analysis, writing, and action.

Autoethnography is thus one strategy towards decolonizing the asymmetries of research relationships which often replicate colonial processes that continue to oppress minoritized communities (Tuck, 2009; Smith, 2012). For example, research with HMoob participants often invites them to speak about their pain, making them relive their traumas. Traditional approaches to research often retranslated those experiences in a way that are palatable for the colonizing audience, often framing with deficit narratives that represent HMoob people as backwards and as the problem, instead of recognizing how systems of

oppression like white supremacy and colonialism create our conditions. PAR approaches, by engaging in ethical and symmetrical research partnerships with HMoob and other minoritized groups, can counter colonial, re-traumatizing, and deficit narratives. However, the use of PAR as an ethical commitment and research approach does not automatically mean that issues of "representation, voice, consumption, and voyeurism are resolved" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, 230); and in fact, participatory approaches might just as well provide ideological cover for power relations as they are to expose and critique them, which critics have called the "tyranny of participation." (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). As a corrective to inauthentic and potentially exploitative uses of participatory approaches, we propose that autoethnography is a practical process to incorporate the perspectives of activist-researchers, who are members of the community, not only in the formative aspects of research, but also in the analysis, theorizing, and writing. Autoethnography, if employed consistently as a decolonizing research method, can foster authentic participatory engagement, which is one effective way to challenge tokenized or superficial participatory approaches.

Conclusion

Many PAR research teams are based upon equitable and decolonial research partnerships. The majority of research on the dynamics of PAR teams focuses on the ethical values that underlie PAR (Nelson, 1998; Ochocka et al., 2010) and strategies to identify and manage power-relations on PAR teams (Littman et al., 2021). More research is needed on the dynamics of PAR teams, in particular, focused on practical strategies such as autoethnography towards socially-just research processes. For example, it is less common for the community researchers in PAR projects to engage in the written dissemination of the results of PAR. This asymmetrical participation in the authorship of PAR products may in part be the result of a lack of interest on the part of activist-researchers in academic writing, it may be a consequence of material constraints such as the need for time and other resources to participate in authorship, or the participants may be non- or semi-literate or novice writers who are uncomfortable with their skills and identities as writers. For some PAR participants, we suggest that autoethnographic writing is one research practice that can be employed to scaffold novice PAR activist-researchers' authorship in larger multi-authored dissemination. We recognize that perhaps engaging in autoethnographic journaling is not an accessible method when working with every community. While there is preliminary research that indicates the importance of carefully considering issues of authorship in both community-based and PAR projects (Castleden et al., 2010), our autoethnographic research suggests a need for more research and methodological theorizing to identify processes and models of authorship for PAR research.

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