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Fox, M. & Fine, M. (forthcoming). Circulating critical research: Reflections on performance and moving inquiry into action. In (Cannella, G. & Steinberg, S., Eds.) *Critical qualitative research reader*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Circulating Critical Research: Reflections on Performance and Moving Inquiry into Action

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In times of economic, educational and racial “crisis,” as the inequality gap widens and youth of color are targeted by social policies that further erode their opportunities, we are interested in the design, analysis and activist possibilities of participatory youth studies. Thus, we start at the end, at a performance of Polling for Justice, a participatory action research project surveying youth experiences of education, criminal justice and health care across communities, sexualities, genders, race/ethnicity and class in New York City, in order to theorize how critical research can circulate through the academy, communities, youth organizing and social policy – and maybe even theatre.

The Polling for Justice (PFJ) research performance opens with a lone bespectacled academic-looking person standing on stage in a white lab-coat and fumbling through a sheaf of papers, mumbling:

Hello. My name is Dr. Researchy, and I am going to be presenting a paper to you on “The Urban Teen” and a theory I developed that is a framework for looking at one of the major

problems that growing urban U.S. city centers have been faced with – namely the adolescent. ...

Played by performing artist and PFJ Artistic Director Una Osato, the character is designed to represent traditional positivist academic research where older white men visually represent the privileged status of expert. The *Dr. Researchy* character reads his paper on “The Urban Teen” in a slow, monotonous ramble. Before long, the audience hears the voices of the Polling for Justice researchers discussing Dr. Researchy’s talk from off-stage

“This is Boring

“What is he saying?”

“I think he just said something about the “urban teen.””

“Ohhh he’s talking about you!”

“No I think he’s talking about you!”

“I got no idea what he’s talking about, all I know is this is boring.”

“No one understands him but himself!”

“You know what, I’m going to go up there and say something”

One by one, Polling for Justice youth researchers walk up on stage, interrupting Dr. Researchy by taking the microphone and insisting that Dr. Researchy sit down and listen to the results of their youth research on youth experiences in New York City. In the last moment as Dr. Researchy is being escorted off stage, one of the youth researchers, Darius Francis, admires Dr. R’s lab coat and takes it for his own, wearing it for the rest of the performance.

The depiction of Dr. Researchy was meant to critique and provoke. As a caricature of the disembodied and “objective” researcher who studies *on* but not *with* youth, he pushes audiences to re-think their assumptions about where expertise lives, troubling notions of objectivity, validity and the celebrated distance

of academic research. In their initially disruptive presence, the PFJ researcher-performers raised equally compelling questions about critical research, participation, social representations of youth and social justice. By modeling talking back and speaking out from their seats, they encouraged other audience members to do more than watch; to engage actively in the production.

We offer this chapter to introduce the notion of **circuits** into the grammar of critical research, inviting a sharp turn away from the individualism that saturates most U.S. based social inquiry – whether quantitative or qualitative in design. Instead, here, we want to argue that critical inquiry take seriously the circuits of dispossession, privilege and possibility that run between us, across zip codes and dangerous power lines, through youth bodies, connecting, in this case, youth researchers/actors and audiences of privilege.

While our research practices derive from participatory action researchers including Orlando Fals-Borda, Paolo Freire and Ignacio Martin-Baro, as performative researchers we align ourselves, as well, with Augusto Boal's recognition that there are no spectators, only spect-actors, linked in the social drama of witnessing and responsibility. We introduce circuits as foundational to our theoretical perspective on *circuits of dispossession, privilege and possibility*; to participatory methods and analytic "camps," and to our thinking about how critical inquiry travels into popular culture, social movements and policy.

Theorizing Circuits of Dispossession in Critical Youth Studies

Political theorist David Harvey writes on neo-liberalism and dispossession: “Accumulation by dispossession is about dispossessing somebody of their assets or their rights... we’re talking about the taking away of universal rights and the privatization of them so it (becomes) your particular responsibility rather than the responsibility of the State. (Harvey, 2004, p. 2) In the US, public resources, opportunities, dignity and therefore aspirations are being re-distributed by public policies, from poor communities to elites. Youth of color, those living in poverty, and youth who are immigrants are increasingly denied access to or detached from public access to high quality education and health care as their families and housing are destabilized. Shamefully, at the same time the state has invested heavily in their criminalization and surveillance.

In 2009 Fine and Ruglis migrated Harvey’s theoretical work into critical youth studies to understand how neo-liberal policies activate what we call “circuits of dispossession,” in the lives of low income youth of color, such that they are increasingly *detached* from public institutions of development such as education and health care, and *attached* to public institutions of containment such as criminal justice and the military. In the original article Fine and Ruglis (2009) document, for instance, how the simple condition of being a high school drop-out/push out cascades into a flood of negative outcomes in education and economics, of course, but also health outcomes, parenting practices, voting and community participation

and criminal justice involvement. Fine and Ruglis document that these outcomes are dramatically worse for drop outs/push outs who are Black or Latino than those who are White or Asian.

Just as dispossession *accumulates* within communities and across sectors, it is also the case that dispossession is unevenly distributed across communities. The loss of resources, human rights, dignity, legitimacy and opportunities in one community corresponds with their respective accumulation in another. As the *inequality gap* widens across communities, social outcomes worsen – for all of us. Thus we should be interested in understanding and undermining circuits of dispossession and privilege for purposes of progressive solidarity, and perhaps, even, for self interest.

British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Strong (2009) in which they argue that severely unequal societies produce high rates of ‘social pain’: adverse outcomes including school drop-out, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, lack of social trust, high mortality rates, violence and crime, low social participation. Their volume challenges the belief that the extent of poverty in a community predicts negative outcomes. They assert instead that the size of the *inequality gap* defines the material and psychological contours of the chasm between the wealthiest and the most impoverished, enabling various forms of social suffering to saturate a community, appearing natural. In societies with large gaps, one finds rampant State and socially reproduced disregard, dehumanization, policy neglect

and abuse. As you might guess, the inequality gap of the US ranks among the highest in their international comparisons.

Moving these notions of cross-sector dispossession and cross-community dispossession into critical youth studies, Maddy Fox and Michelle Fine collaborating with the Urban Youth Collaborative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and other colleagues, developed Polling for Justice (PFJ, see Fox, et al. 2010), a multi-generational, participatory action research project designed to document youth *experiences of dispossession* and *sites of youth resistance* in New York City¹. PFJ surveyed more than 1,000 NYC youth about their experiences in schools, with police and health care (see Fine, 2010) toward four ends:

1. document the *geography and demography of dispossession and privilege* by detailing empirically where and for whom social policies, institutions and practices enable and constrict opportunities for youth development across the boroughs of New York City;
2. track the *cross-sector consequences of dispossession* by investigating how dispossession in one sector (e.g. not earning a high school diploma) adversely affects outcomes in other sectors, e.g. economic, health and criminal justice outcomes,
3. chronicle the ways in which youth and adult allies *mobilize to resist*, negotiate and challenge collectively these policies and practices,
4. design activist *scholarship to “be of use”* in varied organizing campaigns for youth justice and human rights policy struggles.

And then, most recently given the radical assault on public education, the hyper-reliance on school closings and charter openings, we added a fifth goal:

5. to examine the extent to which *school closings and charter openings map onto zones of dispossession*; that is, to assess the extent to which high drop out/discharge rates are associated with heavy police

¹ Polling for Justice was made possible thanks to the Surdna Foundation, Overbrook Foundation, Hazen Foundation, Glass Foundation, Schott Foundation, Urban Youth Collaborative, and the Public Science Project and the Youth Studies Research Fund at the CUNY Graduate Center.

presence/surveillance/criminalization of youth (a link that the youth researchers emphasized and insisted that we study) and then to consider the extent to which these are communities declared educational disasters by the DOE, where schools are being closed and selective admissions/charter schools opened.

As U.S. public policy floats resources and opportunities upward toward a gentrified community of young people viewed as “entitled” to public support, social suffering anchors the aspirations and mobility of poor youth. New York City may be a caricature of these global dynamics. In our research, presented briefly below, we were interested in theorizing and documenting how the retreat of the State from social welfare, mobilized since the Reagan years, has swollen the stress load on poor and working class youth while disabling the very relationships and institutions that might provide support for youth in crisis. We were interested, further, in the capillaries that could carry critical, participatory research from the halls of the CUNY Graduate Center into theatre, theory building, youth organizing, community life and social policy circles.

Design, Methods and Analysis Camps: Circuits of Collaboration

Polling for Justice is a large scale, participatory action research project designed by a research collective of youth and adults, focused on youth experiences of (in)justice in education, criminal justice, and health. An interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty and students at the City University of New York, a committed group of youth co-researchers, Brown University's

Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the Urban Youth Collaborative², our primary methodological instrument was a (rather lengthy) text-based and internet-based survey co-constructed by youth and adults. With participation at the heart of theory, methods, crafting questions and analyzing the data, we gathered data from more than 1,000 New York City youth.

In the early spring of 2008, PFJ embarked on designing a city-wide survey. Noting the fraught political, social and educational context for youth in the City, we were interested in amassing a public archive/database of youth knowledge and experiences to speak back to neoliberal forces aimed at privatizing and/or cutting publicly funded resources. Designed with colleagues from inside and without the academy, youth and, advocates in the field of adolescent public health, we structured the work through circuits of collaboration across research, advocacy and organizing.

The PFJ researchers set out to study, theoretically and empirically, what we call *circuits of dispossession* (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) and *pools of youth resistance* in New York City, the ways in which social policies, institutions and practices systematically deny youth of color key human rights across sectors (education, criminal justice and health care) and the ways in which youth mobilize to resist, negotiate and challenge collectively these very forms of dispossession. Living with rapid gentrification, intense police surveillance in communities of color; privatization of schooling, under the guise of choice, the deportation of massive

² Polling for Justice research collective includes Niara Calliste, Darius Francis, Candace Greene, Jaquana Pearson, Una Osato, Dominique Ramsey, Jessica Ruglis, Maybelline Santos, Isabel Vierira, Jessica Wise, Maddy Fox and Michelle Fine, Brett Stoudt, Paige Taylor, and Jose Torres.

numbers of immigrants, shrinkage of the supportive public sphere and expansion of the “disciplining” public sphere, we sought to investigate how urban youth experience, respond to and organize against the profoundly uneven opportunities for development across the five boroughs of New York City in three sectors: education, health care and criminal justice. PFJ was explicitly designed to gather and funnel social science evidence into organizing campaigns for youth justice – violence against girls and women, police harassment, college access, high stakes testing, and access to comprehensive sexuality education, to name just a few.

In 2008, at our first gathering, more than 40 youth arrived, recruited from activist organizations, public schools, detention centers, LGBTQ youth groups, foster care, undocumented youth seeking college and elite students from private schools, joined by educators, representatives of the NYC department of adolescent health, immigrant family organizers, lawyers, youth workers, psychologists, planned parenthood researchers, geographers, psychology and education doctoral students, in the basement of the Graduate Center of CUNY.

We posed a single, simple challenge to the group: We would like to collectively design a large scale, citywide research project, creating a youth survey of standardized and home grown items and conducting a series of focus groups, to document youth experiences across various public sectors of the city. We explained that the youth and adults were recruited because of their distinct experience, knowledge and expertise and the young people and adults formed groups to pool their knowledge about prisons and their impact on youth, about

foster care, immigration and deportation, homeless shelters, peer relationships, access to health education, worries about feeling safe, and concern for communities. Once groups were formed, jackets and hats came off and the groups began their work. We created a graffiti wall where youth could jot down the questions they would want to ask of other NYC teens.

We organized groups across certain experiences of urban youth: In one corner was a young man whose father was in prison, a girl worried her mother would be deported and a 9th grader expressed concerned about gentrification; they designed questions about the real homeland security. In another corner, youth were reviewing standardized health items, such as the Youth Behavior Risk Survey (YRBS) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) about sexuality, reproduction, health and nutrition. Angry about these surveillance systems asking questions that are “none of their business” and equally concerned with “risky” health behaviors without accounting for questions and issues of access, resources, opportunity (educational or otherwise), and cultural differences, we worked to understand why it would be important to track the relation of unsafe sex practices with type, quality and access to comprehensive sexuality education (versus abstinence only, or none at all), or violence in a relationship, or dropping out of school. But these workgroups also helped to stimulate critical youth-full discussions on the meaning of “health”; societal fears of and judgments about adolescence; cultural influences on health; reified and racist perceptions of “urban” youth and youth of color; and about how health behaviors cannot be divorced

from opportunity structures and the social, economic and political contexts into which one is embedded.

Down the hall, yet another group was talking about where they felt safe? At home? On the streets? In school? And, a fourth group discussed youth experience with the criminal justice system. Together, in a participatory approach to survey construction, this group created a long check-list of contacts with police (see Figure 1). What grew out of this was the most politically mobilized set of questions contained within the survey. In fact, nearly all of the criminal justice survey questions were developed by the youth. It became overwhelmingly evident that existing measures of youth experiences with policing in New York City failed to capture their realities.

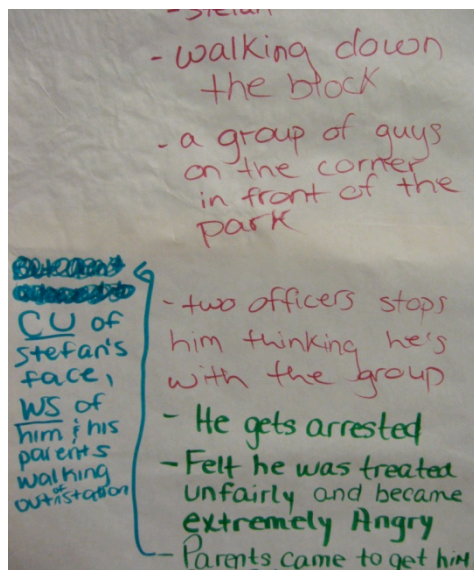


Figure 1: PFJ Research Collective group notes

Our work was designed as a contact zone (Torre, 2005) among youth from varied communities and ethnicities; between young people and adults; advocates, educators, practitioners and researchers from education, criminal

justice and public health. Within our research team, questions of privilege, power and oppression were interrogated collaboratively; youth experiences lead the inquiry and adult skills surrounded and supported; expertise was democratized and the “right to research” assumed fundamental (Appadurai, 2004). The process wasn’t always smooth, but we tried to create spaces in our youth research camps where diverse forms of experience, analysis, theory and affect could be held, and explored delicately.

Within the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center, CUNY (Torre, Fine, Stoudt & Fox, 2010; Torre & Fine, 2010) research camps have been crafted as a third space/process for building the democratic capacity of a research collective where questions of difference, power and solidarity can be engaged. We begin our first sessions with exercises designed to strip away misconceptions about what constitutes scientific inquiry and who can engage social research, democratizing notions of knowledge and expertise. We design scavenger hunts to reveal the distinct insights that differently situated researchers import. For instance, we are always amazed (and yet, by now, never surprised) that it is often the least *formally educated* members of our collectives (e.g. students in special education classes) who most astutely read between the lines of dominant storylines. We develop exercises and activities in the traditions of critical pedagogy and popular education to extract and honor multiple perspectives – not just one designated right answer. Acknowledging many forms of intelligence is sometimes resisted by students who have been “at the top” of their schools, or privileged, or professionals who believe

it is their job to teach the youth what they do not know. We spend much time helping young people explore themselves as intersectional; defined at once by culture, neighborhood, gender, class, adolescence, interest in books, music, politics, sexuality, gender, language, humor, how people treat them, how they resist and how they embody their worlds.

We read psychological theory, critical race theory and methods, newspaper articles and listen to music to “hear” how youth are represented, and to search for voices of dissent, challenge and resistance; we “take” standardized scales and try out new survey questions; we learn to conduct interviews and role play focus groups; we watch films and create questions; we spend time writing, discussing issues on the streets, in their schools, homes, meeting other youth researchers from other regions; building research skills, designing the survey, piloting items, collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data; presenting findings across NYC and at professional meetings.

In PFJ, we launched “seminars” for youth researchers and doctoral students called Statistics for the People³, a statistical collective where everyone took a set of questions to investigate the growing PFJ data. The collective was trained to approach their questions inductively using the philosophy and techniques of Tukey’s (1977) exploratory data analysis (Stoudt, 2010). And all participating researchers—both youth and adult—took on the responsibility to “train” the next generation of youth researchers on future projects that grow out of the Public

³ Inspired by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s popular series “Data for the People”

Science Project at the Graduate Center of CUNY.

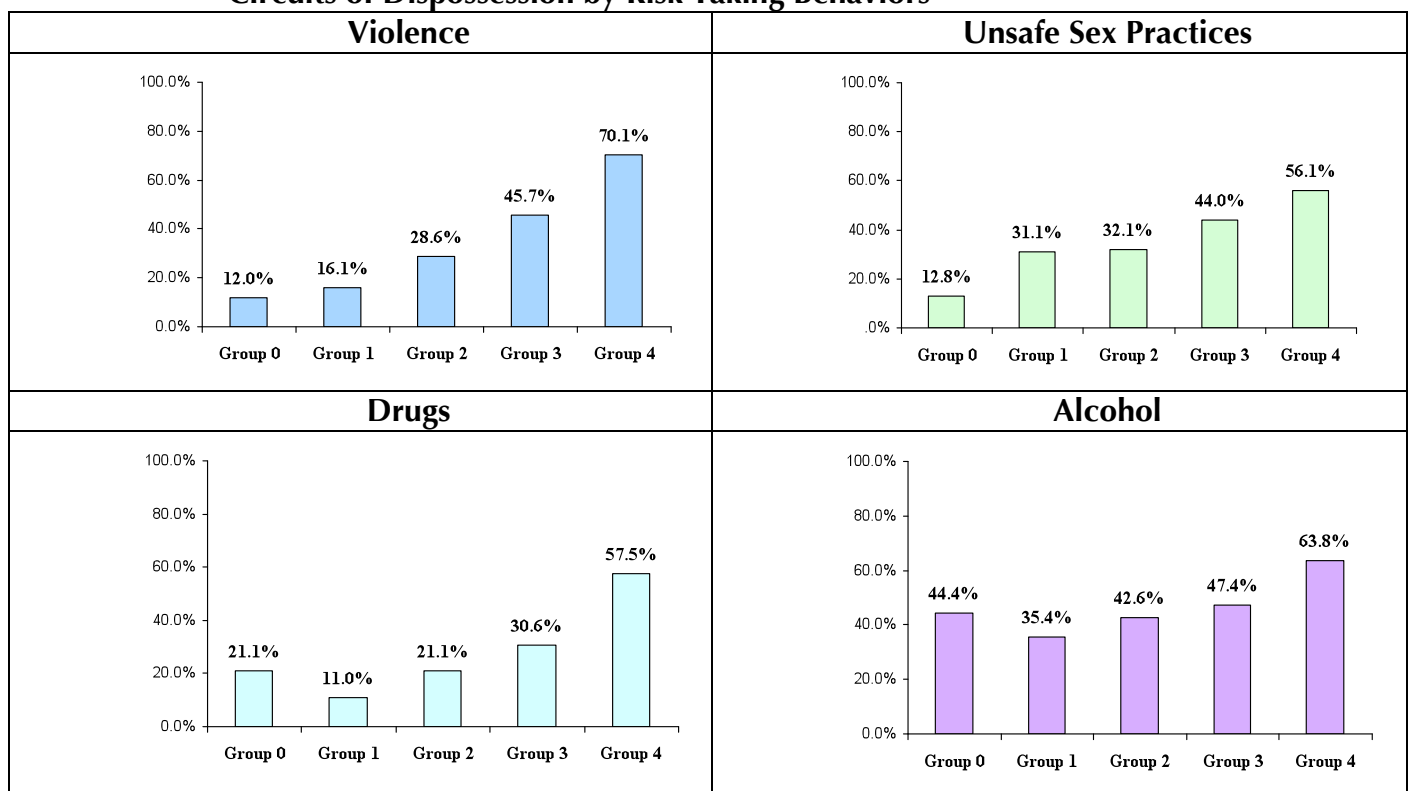
Over 18 months, PFJ organized a series of multi-generational research camps focused, at the beginning, on building research expertise, sharing readings on the issues, histories of injustice and political struggles of resistance, refining our research questions, specifying the design and sample, exploring intersectional analyses of qualitative and quantitative data and generating provocative ideas for products, actions, scholarly papers, testimony, white papers and performances.

Analyzing/Embodying the Circuits - Bodies of Data Analysis

By the time we closed the survey in August 2009 we were swimming in data. We organized the data to examine what we called *cumulative dispossession*, trying to understand the extent to which youth who have been pushed out/dropped out of schools, for instance, and also have no health insurance, have had negative encounters with police and disrupted home lives were in fact more likely to report depression, risky sexual engagements, involvement with violence, and lower levels of psychological well being. The youth researchers were adamant that PFJ **not** simply report racial “disparity” data, for they knew too well how such data were used to smear their communities, racial groups and individuals who were victims, but discursively turned into perpetrators of injustice, through victim blaming analyses. We were, instead, interested, as a collective in how policies of dispossession affect the lives, aspirations and care that different groups of youth

engage as they navigate lives in communities made treacherous by these reckless social policies. And indeed, for every indicator we studied, those youth who scored as “highly dispossessed” by educational, housing/family, criminal justice and health care policy reported much higher rates of negative outcomes (see Figure 2; for detailed findings see Fine, Stoudt, Fox, & Santos, 2010).

Figure 2:
Circuits of Dispossession by Risk Taking Behaviors



We also arrayed our survey material so as to create city-wide maps to display the dramatically uneven geographic implementation of policies for youth development and policies for youth containment. With an analytic eye on class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, immigration status, disability status and neighbor,

we reviewed the geography of police harassment. Consider Figure 3 below, our mapping of negative encounters with police by neighborhood and sexuality:

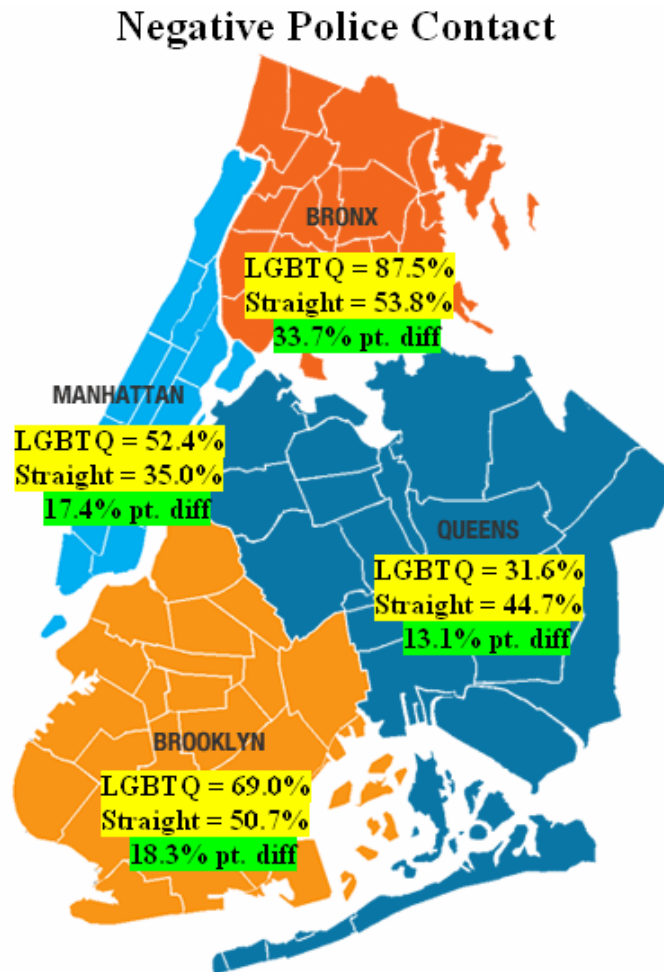


Figure 3

Once we developed a preliminary analysis of the quantitative mapping of youth experiences of cumulative and community dispossession, we launched a set of data-driven focus groups in the neighborhoods where we found “hot spots” of dispossession (e.g. high rates of school push out; high rates of criminalization of youth of color; high rates of surveillance on LGBT youth). In these focus groups, young people were asked to interpret, for and with us, the distributions and circuits of injustice we had documented. Conducting focus groups with youth who sit at

the intersections of our statistical findings, we hear that young people remain buoyant through a sense of solidarity, critical understandings of unjust arrangements to stay positive, and through actively imagining a different tomorrow.

In one focus group with youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning and/or transgender, as they pored over findings about negative youth interactions with police, they discussed their anger in response to experiences like getting ticketed on the subway for putting their feet on a seat, for sitting in a playground after dark, or getting harassed for wearing the wrong clothes (“gay wear”) in the wrong neighborhood.

They explained that outrage at these conditions is paired with an understanding of limited potential for appeal, and therefore, they find ways to dissipate their anger and move forward with their lives. As one focus group participant put it,

It's like an everyday life in the city. It's like cops are mean, we just have to deal with because it's really like, there's really not much I can do with arguing with a cop. So it's like move on and keep on going, and it's every day. So it gets to the point where you no longer, it's not as shocking to us anymore. It just goes away after a while, you know, you walk it off, you watch TV, take a shower, and then it's like, okay, just another day in New York City.

The focus group participants offered up their critique of current realities and their vision for the kind of world they wish exists, a world rich with supports, access and resources for all young people (Brewster, Billies & Hyacinthe, 2010).

The PFJ analyses provided evidence of circuitries in the form of cumulative dispossession of youth of color in low-income communities and then across communities: low-income young people of color from poor communities and

LGBQ youth have the lowest rates of graduation, the highest rates of negative interactions with police, the most experiences of violence and the most alarming reports of depressive symptoms (Fine, Stoudt, Fox, & Santos, 2010). As Jaquana Pearson, PFJ youth researcher, always makes sure we emphasize, our data shows how young people are resisting oppression, redefining reality, aspiring to greatness and insisting on change. We also see evidence of the positive impact meaningful relationships with adults and participation in youth organizations can have in young peoples' lives.

Circuits of Analysis

From our participatory stance, in PFJ, we pencil a distinction between methods for *data collection* and methods for *analysis*. Participatory action research projects make use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. When participatory projects use quantitative methods, the *collaboration* that is inherent in a PAR approach adds new dimensions to analysis. The diverse nature of our research teams means that we must take multiple perspectives into account in relation to the interpretation of quantitative data and this can sometimes pose challenges for finding approaches to collaboratively analyze quantitative data. In our case, when faced with a largely quantitative data set as a multi-generational research team, we were pushed to develop innovative methods for analysis – critical methodologies that include using qualitative (inductive, artistic, consciously subjective) methods to understanding our “bodies” of data.

As a research team, we spent time developing mathematical and statistical skills to be able to understand percentages and interpret cross-tabulation tables. It was one thing to intellectually understand what 87.5% means, however, it was another thing to make sense of *87.5% of LGBTQ youth living in the Bronx report negative experiences with police*. We decided that we would use embodied approaches to developing analyses of our largely quantitative data. In the beginning of July 2009, our research team retreated to a college campus for five days to steep in the data and learn an improvisational theatre method that emphasizes audience participation called Playback Theatre (Fox, 2007; Fox, 1994; Salas, 2007).

Circuits of affect within and across bodies

We turned to embodied methodologies in part because we needed an approach to quantitative data analysis that made room for multiple ways of knowing. However, we also used embodied methodologies because we wanted to find ways to communicate our findings that made explicit that the justice work and responsibility for action is held collectively in the bodies of both audience *and* performer, reader *and* researcher, adult *and* youth. Through drama and art, the PFJ researchers performed our findings on circuits of dispossession in a way that moved the work into the audience meaningfully – not as youth ventriloquy, but as intimate communication of the material and engagement with the audience.

We used drama and other embodied methods to make meaning from the survey data within our research collective. Our research meetings began with personal updates and physical, playful warm-ups that brought whimsy (creativity) into our research space. Without minimizing the seriousness of our roles as knowledge-producers, we played games to establish a dynamic where everyone was invited and urged to contribute – to play (Boal, 1997). In fact, the more we all contributed, the more the “game” succeeded. We found there was power in play – our approach encouraged collaboration and creativity that opened up new insights about our data. Maxine Greene writes on the powerful potential of imagination and the arts to pry open fresh awareness of what’s possible (1995). Through the warm-up process we were reminded that our data needed our brain-power, yes, but also our life-experiences, and the knowledge stored deep in the muscles of our bellies, arms, calves and shoulders. The ritual re-established our research space as collaborative and shared; and developed our capacity for thinking critically together, as an ensemble.

In order to dive into the survey data, we started in front of a large projection screen running statistical analysis in real-time, *Stats-in-Action* (Stoudt, 2010). In order to make sense of the data, we moved the data off the screen and put the numbers “on their feet”, creating scenes and human images of the data. We found that when we put the numbers in our bodies, through sculptures or scenes, we made room for differences in understanding and experience to come into our research collective.

An illustration: The survey data showed that level of mother’s education was a powerful indicator of survey respondents’ school experiences, mental health, and involvement with violence and police. For instance, of the 1,110 people who took the survey, more than half of those who dropped out also had a mother who dropped out of high school (see Figure 4).

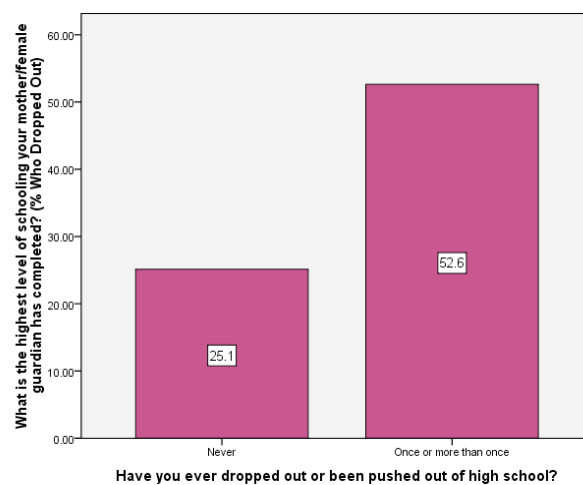
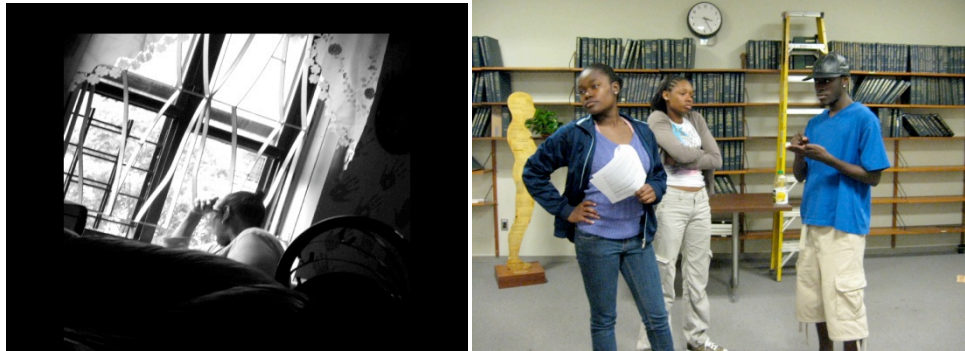


Figure 4

When we looked at the table, we could understand the data intellectually as powerful evidence of cross-generational fall-out of inadequate access to education. When we moved this data *to its feet* the analysis became more complex and delicate. As we worked data over months and through images (digital photos), personal stories, scenes, and human sculptures, we came to understand the impact of the level of a mother’s education from multiple perspectives.



youth produced images of embodied understanding of mother's level of education

Several members of the research collective could identify intimately with this finding, and as we theorized from the data, our personal experiences kept us accountable to ourselves, the survey respondents, our communities, our mothers, and our social justice goals. Embodied methodologies were elastic enough for us to be able to make sense of the survey data reconciled with what we knew from our diverse personal experiences. Through art, we found a means to uncover and express various kinds of knowledge – including affective ways of knowing. The embodied methodologies made room for pain and shame, for anger, for frustration, making visible circuitries of affect orbiting the data. As a result, our group developed a critical analysis of educational betrayal that moved blame from the individual to the structural.

Finding creative ways to dramatize the data during analysis was especially effective for creating a highly collaborative space, and for developing complex, layered analyses of the survey data. In *Polling for Justice*, we conceptualized the shift from the intimate backstage of our research space to the public stage of research dissemination as a moment of action and an opportunity to explore

together with audiences *what is* and *what is possible* (Gallagher, 2007, Greene, 1995, Salverson & Schutzman, 2006).

Circuits of Representations and Responsibility – the Performance Lab

Ignacio Martín Baró conceptualized public opinion polls as *social mirrors* designed to provide a scientific reflection of lived realities that might speak to power and disrupt injustice (1994; Torre, Fine, Stoudt & Fox, 2010). In PFJ, in line with our commitment to do social research of use (Fine & Barreras, 2001), we turned to performance methodologies that might interrupt hegemonic (mostly negative) representations of adolescence and adult complacency. We imagined our performance spaces as *labs* where we played with and dismantled the wall that can separate audience from performer-researcher. We thought of performances as opportunities for the PFJ researchers to hold up a “social-mirror-in-the-round”, making a visible the link between youth, adults, and structural inequalities.

We took this turn to drama and performance allied with social scientists who insist on doing research with social relevance and impact, and the particular community of scholars and social scientists who incorporate the arts into their research process and products. In our case, we self-consciously followed in the footsteps of the performance work of W.E.B. Du Bois⁴.

⁴ In November 1913, *The Crisis* magazine published a detailed description (nearly a script) of a pageant of African American history written by WEB Du Bois. The pageant was performed as a celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, entitled *The People of Peoples and Their Gifts to Men* (Du Bois, 1913, p. 339), produced by over 300 and performed by over 1,000 people (Du Bois, 1913; Horne & Young, 2001).

Although this line of Du Boisian work is little known, as a social scientist, Du Bois used pageantry, performance, and circus theater in order to explore alternative possibilities about African American history and reality. He conceived of art, the stage, drama and theatre as a vehicle through which to educate, inspire and unite Black audiences (Horne & Young, 2001). Through theatre, Du Bois was able to share histories, and historical figures, to audiences without reliance on literacy. Committed to theatre with Black people, for Black people, he used the stage to insert productive stories of African Americans into the public discourse and imagination (Krasnor, 2001).

Humbly following in this tradition, the Polling for Justice project turned to dramatic performances of our research project as a way to disseminate our research and engage with audiences. In Polling for Justice, our turn to art and performance grows out of a similar commitment to social justice⁵, and we build not only on the Du Boisian legacy but also the work of community art projects that make social justice claims. The discipline of community-based art has much overlap with

The sketch of *The People of Peoples and Their Gifts to Men* begins with four heralds yelling, “Hear ye! Hear ye! Men of all the Americas, and listen to the tale of the eldest and strongest of the races of mankind, whose faces be black. Hear ye, hear ye, of the gifts of black men to this world, the Iron Gift, the Gift of Faith, the Pain of Humility and the Sorrow of Pain, the Gift of Freedom and Laughter, and the undying Gift of Hope. Men of the world, keep silence and hear ye this!” (Du Bois, 1913, p. 139). The pageant continues, telling the history of the successes and strengths of African people. Through dramatic effect, Du Bois and colleagues told audiences about early African technologies, of ancient civilizations in Egypt, of old roots of modern religions, of survival, of pain, and of “ . . . Struggle Toward Freedom.” (Dubois, 1913, p.340). This pageant, later called *The Star of Ethiopia*, was “a great human festival” with a cast of 1,000 African Americans using procession, story and extravagant costumes(1915).

⁵ Du Bois was explicitly uninterested in art for arts sake; he was interested in art as propaganda (Krasnor, 2001). He turned to performance and art in order to *do* something and reach people.

participatory action research, as illustrated by Jan Cohen-Cruz: “community-based art is a field in which artists, collaborating with people whose lives directly inform the subject matter, express collective meaning” (2005, p.1). In line with these commitments, we took seriously the *performance* of our data, and as well as the *process* of encountering the data through embodied methods.

We turned to performing the PFJ data in order to incite engagement from the audience but wary of arousing a simply empathic response. Megan Boler (1999) cautions that empathic readings permit the reader to go under the false assumption that it is possible to fully imagine others, and allow for a passive consumption of the subjects experience/emotions without also having to examine the reader’s social responsibilities. She calls instead for an active empathy, or a “testimonial reading”, where the responsibility for action lies with the reader. In PFJ, as a group of mostly African American and Latina young people, we were especially concerned that we not encourage our predominantly White, adult, middle-class audiences to want to save or rescue poor Black and Brown youth. We used playful, nuanced, powerful embodiments of our data as one way to guard against portraying youth of color as suffering and as victims. We worked to avoid a performance setting where rows of comfortable audience members re-enacted the watching of other’s pain as onlookers. We understood bystanders, witnesses, and non-victims, though seemingly unaffected, as actually being in potentially powerful, liminal roles (Fine, 2002). Our hope was to facilitate our audiences to notice, that is, to incite a recognition that their contribution towards collective

responsibility could be to do a careful interrogation of their own story/future actions and recognize the cross-circuits of dispossession, privilege and responsibility coursing through the performance space. We wanted to make visible the power lines and the braiding of our collective circuits (Salverson & Schutzman, 2006).

The PFJ performances were conceived as an extension of the ethic of participation across the inequality gap. Audiences included teachers, parents, school administrators, young people, social scientists, community members, police, Department of Education officials, and policy makers. In order to activate the participation of audience members, the performances had three phases: the researchers started with a presentation of the PFJ data in embodied, visual, storied ways that employed metaphor, humor, maps, graphs, and numbers. In the second phase audience members were invited to respond and react to the data using a form of improvisation called Playback Theatre (Fox, 1994; Salas, 2007) to transform the audience members' affective responses into theatre on the spot. Finally, in the third phase, the PFJ researchers invited audience members to contribute their own expertise and experience in generating knowledge and visions for action in light of the PFJ data.

Provoking a Politic of Solidarity

According to Augusto Boal's theoretical frame, we are all actors. In Boal's theatre form, Theater of the Oppressed, no audience member simply watches; there

are no spectators, only spect-actors (Boal, 1997). Theatre of the Oppressed dramas are designed to simultaneously be productive for transforming real issues of social injustice, and as an allegory for the kind of democratic, participatory politics possible in the world outside the performance space. In PFJ we too did not want our audiences to remain passive. We wanted audience members to grasp the analyses we presented on youth social psychological experience of circuits of policy dispossession and we wanted audience members to recognize their own roles in the arrangements that produced the conditions we performed. Towards the end of the PFJ performances, once the audience had seen embodied interpretations of the survey data, we broke the fourth wall of the performance space, turned up the house lights, and explained that it was time for the audience members to take on a more active role in the performance lab. We passed a microphone around and heard audience members affective responses to hearing the data: *“That was powerful, I feel shocked by some of the data.”*; *“Amazed at how many police are in the NYC school system.”*; *“I feel frustrated and lost. How do I keep going as an educator?”*; *“I feel inspired by seeing young people full of knowledge and critique”*. After each response, the PFJ researcher-performers would turn the responses into theatre on the spot in the form of a human sculpture that could simultaneously hold multiple interpretations.



a Playback Theatre "sculpture" based on audience response

The purpose of the Playback Theatre was to make visible some of the circuitry of emotion swirling around statistical representations of life for young people in New York City. The human sculptures opened fissures in the divide that usually exists between performer and audience, researcher and reader, and youth and adult. These openings made space for more meaningful collaborations to germinate and grow.

In the PFJ performances, audiences had to make sense of the paradox between the data on dispossession and negative experiences they were hearing, and the sophisticated work of the youth researchers presenting/performing the research. Through a small scene, or a physical sculpture, the researcher-performers could quickly communicate multiple and complex perspectives. The ultimate goal of the PFJ performances was to provoke a sense of solidarity between audience, researchers, youth, and adults. In the presentations of our data, like in our research camps, we made strides to create spaces that allowed for interaction, and exposed (explicitly and implicitly) the circuitry that connects us all. With performance, we stretched the web of participation to include the outer circle, the audience, as those

who bear witness, in the hopes that we would engage. In this way, our research itself was an intervention in the institutional and policy-based production of adolescent experiences of injustice. Through PFJ performances the audience could identify with youth of color in new ways, across power, suggesting a shift in collective identity, and perhaps making political engagement more likely.

At the very end of the PFJ performance, Dr. Researchy is brought back on stage. He has been watching, thinking, and he has had an awakening. He says,

***Dr. Researchy:** Well I was just thinking that we should really ask teens what they think the questions we should ask are and find out their ideas on the best solutions to some of these problems. I mean, you all are the ones living it each day, and together we can think about we can do next—*

The PFJ researcher-performers, glad Dr. Researchy finally “gets it,” invite him into the research collective. But their final move is to turn questions of “what next” back to the audience; to re-place responsibility collectively.

Thus, in the final scene of the PFJ performance, the youth researchers explained that there is no ending to the show. Instead we insisted the audience take responsibility for imagining what should happen next. Audience members popcorned suggestions for future research, policy change, and organized community responses.

I’d like to see some opportunity for other young people to do research like this with allied adults and for it to go viral worldwide, standing up together to change policy.

Let’s show the data to police departments and police officers and figure out how to change the policies and realities.

The performances were not designed to be solutions. Instead, they were meant to expose, provoke and motivate people to contend with their own/our own collusion in the inequality gap, worsened by policies that privilege those already privileged. Theatre allowed us to collectively hold the complexity, particulars, the broad analysis, the contradictions, and the dream -- all at the same time. With policing data, we could know the numbers, the discrimination, and still communicate the need for protection, or share our aspirations to be a police officer in what could be a stable career. With education or economics, we could critique capitalism or privatization, but still explain why we advocate for our younger brothers and sisters to get into the new charter school on the block with better resources.

As an art form, our performances were at once an encounter and a metaphor – the performances slowed down time somewhat to allow for a close examination of particular realities, and through art we invited audiences and performers to experiment with what is and expand what is possible. Outside the performance space, PFJ data circulated in more concrete ways. The research findings traveled into public hearings, policy reports, community speak-outs and academic papers on education, safety reforms, and social critique. In every arena, the aim was to maintain the live-wire connection between the findings, the researchers, and audience. The PFJ data made evident how the impact of certain policies ripple out in young peoples lives along circuits of dispossession, and our

approach to disseminating the data made sure that audiences of the research felt their own location in that roughly circular arrangement we call a revolution.

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