Situating an Art-based Action Research Study within Social Justice Theories

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Background Action research (AR) inherently claims social justice practice in many aspects. This underlying goal of AR reflects the concept of 'civic friendship' in terms of finding a solution through collaboration and mutual respect between researcher and researched; thus, it emphasizes a democratic process. By employing an experimental writing style, this paper explores on the issue how research can contribute to social justice as well as to the lives of research participants through an art-based, action research study.

Methods The paper aims to answer two main questions through the critical reflections on an art-based, action research study: (1) what does social justice look like, particularly in the arts? (2) Do art-based, action research studies contribute to social justice for the participants? The case study is designed to use community arts as a means to empower the women (n=16) who were domestic violence survivors and homeless. Using their art works as the women's voices, an art exhibit was held to initiate civic discussions and engagement on a community level. To investigate the social impacts of community arts, audience surveys (n=74), informal and formal interviews, participatory observation, and journaling were employed as the research methods of this case study.

Results The collected data strongly indicates that art can be an exceptionally powerful tool for communication and healing, especially when words and discussions fall short. In addition, art appears extremely effective to elicit not only emotional but also intellectual responses among the research participants regarding the subject matter, domestic violence. In particular, the main theme that occurred from the collected data was 'mutual respect and compassion' between the women and the audience through their shared experience, the women's art exhibit. In essence, the themes of the collected evidences indicate civic friendship as the outcome of the case study that falls into the pluralistic view of social justice theories.

Conclusion The case study that was used in this paper exemplifies the potential artist in all of us, and the need for policies and resources to support the integration of the arts into all of our lives. More importantly, we argue for the potential for the arts to be integrated into society in a way that builds community, heals wounds, and communicates problems as part of cultural policy practices.

Keywords Action Research, Art-based Research, Social Justice Theories, Community Arts, Experimental Writing

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1. Introduction

This paper is written in a different manner in terms of setting its tone. Instead of employing a single academic voice that dictates and dominates the flow of entire discussion, this paper is composed with two people's voices as a teacher and a student in a doctoral level. This is done so to reveal the process how our discussions and experiences have led to certain thoughts, use of theories and critical reflections on the collected data. It is important because we believe that one of purposes in doing action research is to share richer visions of texts and composing processes by employing an honest and candid voice, instead of disguising ourselves with an elitist approach. For that reason, we occasionally take turns to share our thoughts and interpretations by separating our own voices into Karen's and InSul's as the two authors of this paper.

The discussions are the results of our countless meetings while InSul was working on her final stage of her doctoral dissertation on an art-based, community action research study for domestic violence survivors, who were also homeless[1]. The study was designed to use community arts as a means to empower the women who were considered as the major research participants. To do so, at the early stage of the study, the women had been asked to participate in fourteen art workshops that were given in weekly basis. After the fourteen workshops, the women's art works were exhibited at the Fresh A.I.R. gallery located in downtown Columbus. During the art exhibit, Window of Hope: Come & Share the View, the audience (n=74) were also asked to participated in surveys and interviews to see if there were any meaningful perception changes toward the women as well as the very issue, domestic violence.

This paper begins with the voice of Karen who introduced action research methodology to InSul as a mentor and co-chair of her dissertation. The paper begins with the philosophical underpinnings of action research and its relation to the notions of social justice. By adopting the women's art exhibit as a case, the collected data from the audience are analyzed and juxtaposed within social justice theories. In summary, we argue for the potential for the arts to be integrated

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into society in a way that builds community, heals wounds, and communicates problems that will ultimately lead us toward more 'just and better' society.

2. Karen's Voice: Raising Questions about Social Justice Research in the Arts

"Action research is social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network (stakeholders) who are seeking to improve the participants' situation"(Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 3). In short, action research is about taking 'actions' to improve the lives of research participants. The concept of action research strongly reflects critical theory in its concerns with injustice and inequity within our society, including the hierarchical relation between researcher and researched.

As I considered my own contribution to this call, I immediately returned to a question I have been asking myself for a while: What does social justice look like, particularly in the arts? I often look to practices that I might claim as social justice, my own as well as those of others. What ties these practices together? What is at the heart of social justice theories that might bind as well as differentiate various practices and perceptions of social justice? Does social justice look different to various people? As a teacher, researcher, and advisor of graduate student researchers, I wonder to what extent I contribute to socially just practices. My work in action research, for instance, inherently claims social justice practice in research studies. But do these studies contribute to social justice for the participants?

As a faculty member who now works with student researchers, I have had the opportunity to advise and mentor several graduate students whose (often unstated) interest in social justice through research has inspired my own work. The work of one of these students, in particular, impressed upon me the potential for action research to impact social

justice on a larger scale through implications for cultural policy. InSul's dissertation study in Arts Administration, Education & Policy at The Ohio State University has implemented a research study framed on art-based action research in a manner that solidifies the potential for the arts and for research to contribute to social justice, yet she initially avoided claiming social justice as part of her research.

When I asked her how she views social justice, like me, she stammered for a precise answer. Through InSul's dissertation research, we attempt to establish a social justice perspective from which we might define our social justice understandings and practices in the arts. In the process, we raise more questions than we find answers. However, we find in those questions opportunity to critically engage in continually redefining our own perceptions of social justice and its great complexity. InSul's research serves as one example of what social justice practice in arts research might look like at a local level as she also considers implications for cultural policy.

3. InSul's Voice: Social Justice as a Concept to Approach the Case

2 Ontology is "the concern about whether the world exists, and if so, in what forms" (Potter, 1996, p.36). Some explain ontology as "theory about the nature of being, of reality, of what exist' (Glesne, 2006, p.6). It is how a researcher perceives the world and reality. Epistemology is the philosophical word used to describe the nature of knowledge or how we know what we know. A researcher's epistemology is greatly influenced by her/his ontological belief, because one's view on reality leads one to have different ideas about how to obtain knowledge (Glesne, 2006; Potter, 1996).

The term, "social justice," at least to me, is one of those sticky words like "hope," "happiness," and "dignity." When Karen, my mentor and co-chair of my dissertation, asked how I define social justice, I was bewildered by the vagueness of my own understanding of the very concept, which I thought I 'knew' all the time.

That is probably due to my ontological and epistemological perspective as a researcher who has been heavily influenced by critical theory and thus to action research methodology[2]. In retrospect, I might answer her question far more easily (whether the answer was wrong or not) if I was a novice researcher who is only accustomed to positivists' views. Yet, from social constructivists' views, which treat one's belief and value as mere productions of social constructions, social justice seems to bear infinite definitions based on one's culture, identity, and value including his/her

religious and political beliefs. Because of this, I was hesitant to adopt the term in my dissertation study, although some concepts and discourses in social justice theories are closely related to what action research is about. At the same time, I also felt somewhat overwhelmed to use the term since it sounded too divine to adopt in my study and inappropriate to apply to my research as I was originally and predominately serving my own interests in the research.

From Utilitarianism to Contractarianism, and from Marxism to Feminism, David Smith (1994) introduces in his book, Geography and Social Justice, how the concept of social justice has been transformed and reshaped from time to time. He suggests how postmodernism contributed to skepticism concerning truth has also affected how one approaches ethics as well as social justice (Smith, 1994). Scholars who hold this skeptical view of social justice, including Friedrich Hayek, who disapproved the notion of social justice, criticized how the term merely became "an instrument of ideological intimidation for the purpose of gaining the power of legal coercion" (Novak, 2000).

However, I could not agree with the skeptics (although, in some degree, I think their assertions are very legitimate). I have always 'believed' social justice must bear some canonical ideas that every human being should uphold. Otherwise, I could not explain my feelings toward unjust behaviors or incidents, even though I had nothing to do with those unjust outcomes. More importantly, the notion of social justice is fundamentally engaged in every aspect of society, and consequently in social science and arts. After all, social justice –a collective judgment on what is "just" or "fair" –is itself a focal standard of society which lies at the heart of people's feelings, attitudes, and behaviors in their interaction with others (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998). That is to say, social justice research, akin to the purpose of doing action research, may "provide a bridge between theory and practice" (D. M. Smith, 1994, p. 116) and allow us to understand "the dynamics of oppression while situating ourselves as social actors" (Rozas & Miller, 2009, p. 24).

4. Three Meta−Approaches to the Concept of Social Justice

In The Antinomies of Social Justice (1993), Thomas Spragen analyzes scholarly debates, offering three competing theories on social justice (i.e. hegemonic, skeptical, and pluralistic) in terms of how scholars have viewed social justice differently based on their philosophical notions of what should be regarded as 'just' in society. I found the pluralistic view the most appropriate to situate my own study in social justice research due to my subjectivity as well as epistemology. I will summarize and analyze these three perspectives in situating myself within the pluralistic view.

4.1 Hegemonic Theory of Social Justice.

In Spragens' terms, the hegemonic theorists of social justice are the idealists among the three. They believe in the possibility of universal principles of social justice, or at least, believe their account is plausible to "all who inhabit the moral universe of Western liberal modernity" (Spragens, 1993, p. 194). Rawls (1999), for example, who viewed social justice as fairness, writes "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (p.3). Similar to Rawls' account, Smith (1994) noted that "justice as equalization should apply wherever and whenever inequality is an issue, whether geographically, among socio-economic groups, by ethnicity, the more urgent the application of the principle" (Smith, 1994, p. 124). This belief in universal acceptance of social justice (i.e., hegemonic) is the most widely adopted (Spragens, 1993) and optimistic among competing views, and has significantly led to recent policy implications.

Social Justice Grantmaking II: Highlights, published by The Foundation Center in 2009, reports social justice-related funding in the United States has evolved around the discourse based on "rights," such as civil and human rights. The report continues "human rights" is yet a dominant framework in the social justice philanthropic field in the U.S.; nonetheless, the use of the term has obviously increased over the years. And this trend is certainly intentional, as it may bring more affirmative

enhancement such as "global standards and enforcement mechanisms" (Social Justice Grantmaking II, Highlights, 2009, p. 9). From a cultural policy perspective, this trend also places art and social justice as cultural rights in the family of human rights. As recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, cultural rights are concerned with the fairness of one's cultural activities and participation (Goonasekera, Hamelink, & Iyer, 2003).

According to the report, the trend has also influenced funding for the 'art, culture, and media' category since it has been doubled from 2005, although the category is still a small share among others. However, this hegemonic view of social justice and its central notion on its universality often fails to provide enough explanations on real world situations, especially when one's values and standards conflict with one another.

4.2 Skeptical Theory of Social Justice

The skeptical theory of social justice treats 'justice' as a civic, social convention. Unlike scholars with the hegemonic view, the skeptics believe social justice is a concept that is socially constructed and maintained by a constant bargaining process (Kelsen, 2000). Moreover, the word 'skeptic,' implying a certain level of cynicism, is portrayed in their description of social justice as "an illusory concept, customarily deployed in a hypocritical fashion to give a cover of fraudulent legitimacy to actions based on self interest…[because] everyone calls 'just' what he or she values most, and people have different values" (Spragens, 1993, p. 195). For example, a murder is a socially unjust behavior for it violates one's pure human right. However, killing enemies during a war can be viewed as a socially just, even honorable act for serving one's nation and her people.

Based on this perspective, one can only respond to the question "What is justice?" by compromising different values and standards with other members of society. In other words, social justice is the outcome of "pluralist equilibrium" (Spragens, 1993, p.196) among contending interest groups. In this vein, social justice serves as a social order that is based on compromise and tolerance among members of society – usually, among the powerful members of society.

4.3 Pluralistic Theory of Social Justice

The pluralistic theory of social justice contests and compromises both the hegemonic and the skeptical views of social justice, referred to "antinomies of social justice" as Sparagens describes it. That is, the pluralists see the importance of justice for promoting a healthy society (hegemonic), but they also perceive it as not a sufficient source of social consensus due to various values among people (skeptic).

What is useful about the pluralistic view is that it does not require one to settle with an absolute, singular definition of social justice. Instead, it attempts to define a sense of justice, or social justice as a collective notion of just, as "the bonds of civic friendship" (Spragens, 1993). The logistic of this term is to find a middle ground between 'morally valid imperatives' (hegemonic) and 'self-interest' (skeptic). From my understanding, 'morally valid imperatives' cut across micro and macro levels that are introduced in such categories as distributive justice (i.e., focusing on the fairness of the portion in social goods), procedural justice (i.e., taking responsibility and using ethical procedure to allocate resources), and redress justice (i.e., attempting to repair wrongful acts of the past) (Cortese, 2003; Johnston, 2009; Tyler, Boeckmann, J. Smith, & Huo, 1997).

Spragens (1993) maintains that the notion of civic friendship allows us to find a solution together as a member of society through "the trust, moral respect, and mutual concern that permit people to engage in genuine deliberation"(p. 216) because in real-world situations, people hold different views on what should be regarded as just. Not only that, too often the patterns of suffering are not equally distributed or fairly allocated. That is, some suffer undeserved deprivation; others, without particular reasons, manage to escape (Spragens, 1993). As an example in support of the pluralists' view on social justice and the patterns of seemingly unfair suffering in the world, I have found the line between what is just and unjust, as well who is a domestic violence victim or a perpetrator are often gets blurry as one who were once a victim often turns into a perpetrator.

This has caused me to wonder who deserves social support and who deserves punishment. At the same time, although many people commented that my dissertation study has promoted justice in the

community, I struggled to see the connection between my work and social justice. Due to this complexity imbedded in the nature of my study, I found the pluralistic view is the most useful concept among the three.

5. Discussions of the Case:

Methodology & Research Methods   The case study for this paper was about restoring a connection: one between individual victims of domestic violence and the community through a visual narrative form, community arts. In the context of domestic violence, the response of the community is one of the greatest factors in determining success of the victim's recovery process, and restoring her sense of order and justice (Herman, 1997). However, these connections are often breached due to social isolation and public assumptions of the victims. As it also uses art-based approaches, I particularly interested in investigating the instrumental function of the arts as a means to produce social capital and its impact on individual domestic violence survivors. Also, I was deeply interested in the outcomes of produced social support and social health by building shared norms and values with members of the community. In this vein, at least from the pluralists' view, this study supports social justice because it attempts to achieve a sense of civic friendship between individual victims of domestic violence and their community members through art.

As one of the methods to collect the data, I employed the women's artwork as a form of storytelling to communicate their wounded pasts and difficult journeys. Simply put, I made art with my research participants who lived in extreme poverty as all of them were the residents of a housing facility for homeless women in Columbus, Ohio. The exhibit, Window of Hope: Come and Share the View, which was held at Fresh A.I.R. Gallery in downtown Columbus from August 24th to 28th, 2009, was the product of the women's artmaking process.

The art exhibit was introduced as a means to initiate civic discussions on the consequences of domestic violence among the members of the community (i.e., residents of Columbus).

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, while action research methodology was used to design the entire research process. The scholarly aim was to find emerging themes that arise along personal (the women), organizational (staff), and community (audience) levels through the women's artmaking and the art exhibit, as well as to make valid inferences for cultural policy implications. In order to enhance the validity of the study, the research was designed based on a triangulation model in three areas: (1) data source triangulation (a. the women n = 16; b. the staff n = 6; c. the audience at the exhibit n = 74); (2) research methods triangulation (a. visual document analysis – i.e., the women's artworks, b. participant observation, c. grounded-survey for the women, d. formal and informal interviews, e. open and close ended survey for the general audience); and (3) theoretical triangulation (a. social capital, b. sociological perspective on the arts, c. psychological perspectives on the workshop participants – i.e., the women). In this paper, the data collected from the community level (i.e., audience at the exhibit) is mainly used for the analysis in terms of situating its result within the social justice theories.

6. Juxtaposition I: The Results and Social Justice Theories

The collected data strongly indicates that art can be an exceptionally powerful tool for communication and healing, especially when words and discussions fall short. Also, art appears exceptionally effective to elicit not only emotional but also intellectual responses among all the research participant of the three levels about the issues on domestic violence.

The one of most significant themes that I found among these three groups was 'mutual respect and compassion' (i.e. civic friendship) that grew out of their shared experience, the women's art exhibit. In particular,

the audience who came to the exhibit showed a profound compassion toward the women, although most of them had no personal relationship with them. In terms of finding emerging themes at the community level (i.e., the audience), informal interviews and the audience survey were used. The survey was designed with three sections: (1) Demographic questionnaire, (2) Closed-ended questionnaire based on the Likert scale, and (3) Open-ended questionnaire. During the five-day exhibit, seventy-four answers were collected. To control potential biases that may work favorable toward the women and the women's artworks, the audience who were closely associated with the women, the YWCA (the women's residency), the Fresh A.I.R. Gallery, and myself were not asked to participate in the survey.

The characteristics of the audience population (n = 74) was quite diverse in terms of age, educational background, and the rate of cultural activities, except sex and race. The age of the audience appeared well balanced and divided into five groups: Twenties (30%), thirties (20%), forties (15%), fifties (22%), and sixties and above (13%). Not as balanced as the age groups, the educational background of the audience turned out to be of fairly higher degrees: High school graduates were only 8%, whereas a college associate degree (24%), BA degree (24%), and MA degree (31%) scored for the majority of the audience population. Among the audience population, the people who held a PhD or equivalent degree were 7%. In terms of sex and race, female (68%) and white (67%) were the most common features of the general overview of the audience's demographic background.

Overall, the results of the survey show (1) the audience felt that the exhibit was highly successful in terms of conveying the theme of the exhibit (86%), (2) raising awareness of domestic violence (93%), and (3) understanding how the domestic violence survivors felt about their ordeals (99%). In addition, the audience showed extremely favorable preference for the exhibit; seventy-two people responded they would like to see more art exhibits of this kind (i.e., community arts) (97%) (see Table 1).

Table 1 Overall Audience Reaction to Exhibit (N= 74)

Closed–ended Survey	Extremely Clear	Very Clear	Somewhat clear	Somewhat unclear	Not clear
How clear was this exhibit in conveying its major theme (i.e., domestic violence)?	51 69%	20 27%	3 4%	0 0%	0 0%

Closed–ended Survey	Yes	Somewhat	No
Where you able to "transported" into another world, becoming immersed in the train of thought of the artists?	54 73%	19 26%	1 1%

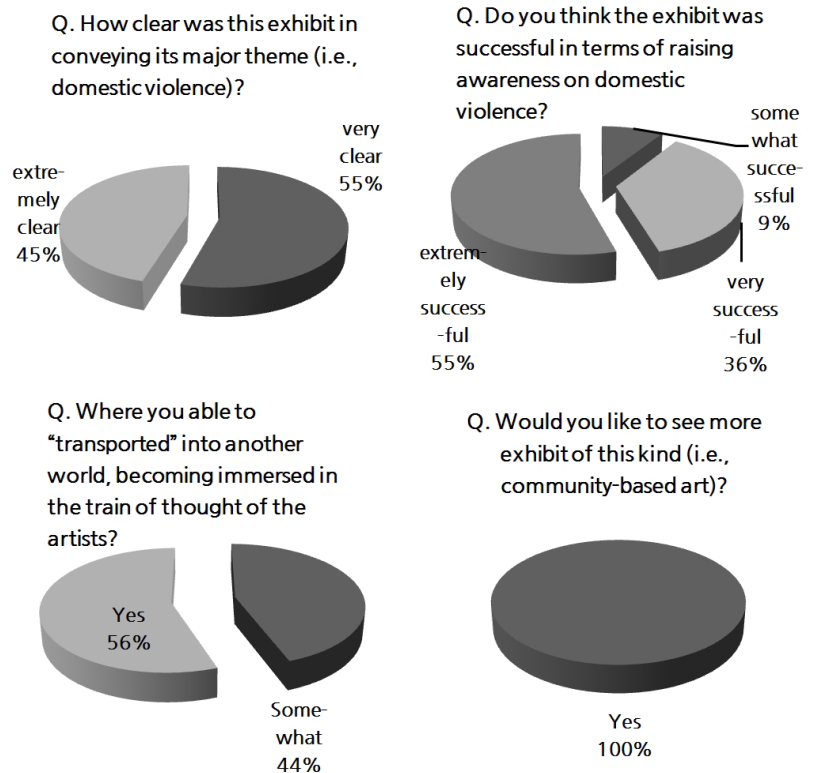| Closed–ended Survey	Extremely Successful	Very Successful	Somewhat Successful	Somewhat unsuccessful	Not successful
Do you think the exhibit was successful in terms of raising awareness on domestic violence?	37 50%	32 43%	5 7%	0 0%	0 0%

Closed–ended Survey	Yes	No	N/A
Would you like to see more exhibits of this kind (i.e., community–based art)?	72 97%	1 1.5%	1 1.5%

Another noteworthy result of the survey was that 85% of the audience (n = 74) replied they knew at least one person who was a victim of domestic violence (see Table 2). Then, how do we know that these figures can be inferred as solid evidence for promoting social justice in terms of reducing or at least supporting domestic violence victims? Also, how do we know civic friendship, the pluralist view of social justice, has been produced by building compassion and understanding among members of the community? What if the audience was already favorable to the women and the exhibit, and aware about the consequences of domestic violence, because 85% of the audience personally knew at least one individual who was victimized by domestic violence?

Table 2 Exposure to Domestic Violence (N= 74)

Closed–ended Survey	Many (More than three)	Few (One to three)	None
Have you ever known someone who was a victim of domestic violence?	32 43%	31 42%	11 15%

In order to clarify this doubt, I have disaggregated the data based on those respondents who replied that they never heard or knew personally anyone who was victimized by domestic violence. Among seventy-four people who participated in the audience survey, only eleven people (15%) replied that they never knew or heard of someone who was a domestic violence victim. The results showed the women's artworks yielded positive impact on this particular audience group about instances of domestic violence (see Figure 1).

Q. How clear was this exhibit in conveying its major theme (i.e., domestic violence)?

very clear 55%

extre-mely clear 45%

Q. Do you think the exhibit was successful in terms of raising awareness on domestic violence?

some what succe-ssful 9%

extrem-ely success-ful 55%

very success-ful 36%

Q. Where you able to "transported" into another world, becoming immersed in the train of thought of the artists?

Yes 56%

Some-what 44%

Q. Would you like to see more exhibit of this kind (i.e., community-based art)?

Yes 100%

Figure 1 Evidences of Produced Civic Friendship (N = 11)

The results in Figure 1 imply that the women's artworks served as an effective communication tool to (1) convey its major theme (i.e., domestic violence); (2) raise awareness about domestic violence; and (3) understand the ordeals of domestic violence victims (i.e., the women) –even for those who never heard or experienced domestic violence indirectly. Applying the pluralistic theory of social justice as civic friendship, these results indicate that there are potential for community arts in terms of promoting social justice and community development for socially marginalized groups. Based on the collected qualitative data,

these implications become more evident. Some comments include:

It brought me to tears, to imagine the horrors these women had survived. It filled me with hope to see that they've been able to face so much of their past, and begin to look toward a better future.

This show definitely enlightened me about the issues of domestic violence. Unlike other tactics that are used to talk about such a serious issue, this exhibit definitely provided an optimistic point of view and "hope" as it relates to the issue.

It becomes even more clear how the art influenced the audience by allowing them to open up and become more honest about their past to each other. On one of the open-ended questions, 'What do you know that you didn't know before?,' the audience responses include:

How powerful art can be.

Learned that I am not alone [as a victim] there. That there is hope in the future.

A friend I attended the opening with shared for the first time that she was the victim of domestic abuse, as well. She felt comfortable telling me in this situation.

Furthermore, from the audience replies, I could see not only a sense of understanding and compassion, but also new ideas with respect to these women and all domestic violence survivors. Some responses include:

These women are strong and they did well representing others that have experienced domestic violence. Thank you for your bravery and beautiful art! The pieces represented what words cannot say. I hope to see more.

I'm very grateful to everyone who put so much time and energy into this project, and into getting it displayed at the gallery. And glad that I was able to view the exhibit, and even better to be able to attend the opening reception, where I could have more of a sense that I was sharing

this very intense experience with other members of the community.

I am committed to educating men about the proper management of feelings; raising my daughter to not tolerate abuse or mistreatment; turning into the pain of the domestic survivors I will help.

Many of the artists were very brave in putting their inner feelings on display for the public and showing that it isn't only male/female domestic abuse that impacts lives. I was impacted by how far the artists had come in their lives to be able and willing to share such a private piece of their lives, BRAVO!!!

The audience remarks also deeply inspired me as researcher, coordinator of the exhibit, and leader of the art workshops for the women. The experience, especially with the audience, largely affected me in terms of becoming a strong believer in action research and made me ponder the role of intellectuals in society. The most change was, however, in my own attitude toward the community, Columbus, Ohio, where I had never felt that I was part of the community due to my position as an international student back then who had been always categorized as an 'alien' in my Visa status. This exhibit and the journey I took with the women largely influenced my own subjectivity not only as a researcher, but also as an individual and community member.

7. Juxtaposition II: Myself as Researcher and Social Justice Theories

The social justice theories view 'self-interest' as an important element. Self-interest is directly related to one's values and beliefs, thus to one's view on what is just in society. Similar to this 'antimony' as Spragens (1993) describes its nature, for a long time I was unsure if I could adopt the term 'social justice' in my study simply because I selected the topic,

domestic violence as one of social epidemics.

During the workshops and the exhibit, many people, including the participants, staff, and audience, thanked me with many encouraging words, making me blush as they told me how this research project changed and transformed them deep inside. Some audience members wrote their personal thank-you notes to me by using email and cards. Others wanted to donate money, to buy the women's artworks that were displayed, and to bring some food for the opening reception of the exhibit. In particular, one audience member's response to the question 'What do you know that you didn't know before?' made me contemplate about myself as a researcher, the motivation that led me to conduct this study, and what it means to become a member of a community:

There is a young woman who is willing to invest her time and energy into helping the women residents. That she has made a difference in these women's lives [...] I hope this program continues to spread across this country, and the world.

Did I make the difference as this person wrote? I had to ask myself. To be honest, I felt that I was the one who transformed and who benefited the most from the process. That feeling held me back from adopting the term 'social justice' in my study, because I knew what motivated me to conduct this action research was, for me, promoting my own interest – earning my doctoral degree after all.

However, I realized that we grew together: the women, the staff, the audience, and me. On the opening night of the exhibit, I asked the women to give a public speech in front of the audience and several agreed to do so. What was stunning about their speeches was that although I never told them what to say or speak about, they spoke about the importance of building civic friendship for others who suffer from domestic violence. Some of their comments include:

From me to you all, my daughter, she went to the end of the road for domestic violence and was murdered. So today, I say to each and every one of you, do not stay where you are, and that fear, that sadness, and that pain; but rejoice that you have hope to help someone else making it

through their time of pain.

Unless you been through abuse you can never imagine what it feels like [...] We laughed together, we cried together, and we listened to each other's stories [...] And we never failed to encourage each other [...] I learned that hope is attainable. And I hope you can live with your own voice and my voice, saying that abuse in any form is not acceptable.

Their speeches were inspirational, emotional, and educational. The whole experience somehow altered us and made us more aware of others' pain and feelings, to go beyond our own self-interests. That moment represented to me what social justice looks like: the process of becoming more compassionate and understanding. I hope, in return for my research participants' trust and support, my voice as a researcher as well as the women's and other community members' voices can bring new ideas in the policy making process and in the field of cultural policy studies.

8. Karen's Voice: Concluding Thoughts

Working closely with InSul over the past two years, I have come to know her as an incredibly compassionate and caring person whose intellectual pursuits might have, at first, contradicted her personal beliefs. When she first entered my office with an interest in exploring action research, I offered her several books to read on the topic (Stringer, 2004, 2007; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). We met every week for the next quarter, and I came to realize that her ability to develop sound scholarship from literature was immense. But I also realized that she wasn't asking me to guide her in literature analysis or to offer her more books to read. She wanted to know how to implement a research study that would make a difference, in some way, for herself and for others.

The difference between a traditional study InSul might have

conducted, and the action research study she did conduct, is in the impact it had on those who participated and those who attended the exhibit. An important product of her research was the civic friendship (i.e. pluralistic theory of social justice) that was manifested among the women participants and audience of the exhibit's opening night. Her study exemplifies the potential artist in all of us, and the need for policies and resources to support the integration of the arts into all of our lives. I see it as an important study questioning the professionalization of artmaking and the elitism of arts spaces.

Her research also has implications for cultural policy as it highlights the potential for the arts to be integrated into society in a way that builds community, heals wounds, and communicates problems. Promoting competence, self-efficacy, and coherence between the individual and society were the strongest emerging themes that I found in this art-based, action research study. Accordingly, policy making needs to be understood in a broader framework of social justice, and action that involves grassroots civic participation and not just government legislation. Yet, the instrumental functions of the arts have not been fully discussed in the field of cultural policy as a means of promoting social change and justice, particularly in embracing socially marginalized people in the community.

I locate my position within the pluralistic view of social justice due to the complexities I see as inherent in seeking social justice. As partially a skeptic, I sometimes believe that one person's justice is another person's injustice. I think of the African Olympian runner whose gender was called into question due to her muscular framework and incredible running times. In order to seek fairness toward the other runners, her gender was scrutinized publicly in a most humiliating way. Seeking social justice for the other runners led to an unjust exploration of a person's personal space. However, also holding a hegemonic view of social justice, I (almost have to) believe in the opportunity for equity and fairness in order to carry on with my work with lower-income, marginalized, and oppressed communities. In essence, I view research such as InSul's as a necessary vehicle toward considering the potential role of higher education in promoting democracy and equality. Education and the arts, similarly, are means by which we can explore and address the complex unjust situations evident in our society.

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