Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research

John Rapano, Ph.D.

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the course of my experience as a doctoral student, I surfaced learnings about relationships, power, and ethics in a postpositivist university, workplace, and community. My dissertation research was a case study of an action research project conducted with human service practitioners to examine the prevalence of burnout in the human service workplace and actions that practitioners could be undertaken to address it.

The phenomenon of burnout is a constellation of symptoms commonly attributed to long term situational stressors such as those present in the workplace, although an early expression of the concept of burnout is found in Marx's theory of alienation. Throughout my career as a human service practitioner and educator I observed once highly motivated people in the human service professions experience a sense of alienation in their work. I saw further that my profession was not highly valued in my community. My dissertation research suggests that burnout can also be attributed to these factors and to the internalized oppression that occurs in power under situations.

In the course of the study I found that a web of power relationships affected every aspect of the action research process, surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community. Understanding these relationships is crucial to what it means to me to be an action researcher. In this paper I critically reflect on the action research process, and on what it means to be an academic action researcher in the community.

II.   UNDERSTANDING POWER

A.   Engagement with Theory

Since the beginning of the study of the phenomena of burnout, critical theorists have pointed to a relationship between burnout and the Marxist concept of "worker alienation" (Farber, 1983; Fay, 1987). In one of his earlier works, Estranged Labour, in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marx described work as the natural expression of and catalyst for the individual's skills (Tucker, 1972). However, under the pressure of the capitalist economic system, the worker's contribution is devalued. Because the worker's contribution is devalued, the product of labor is alienation.

In today's post-industrial workforce, Marx's theory can be seen as applying to workers in the human service professions. When labor becomes only a means of satisfying the worker's need, she is estranged from his life activity, her essential being. The worker's labor is not her own, it ruins her body and his mind, and she/he only feels human outside of her work (Tucker, 1972).

Alienation is a condition of society. Individual workers experience the impact of alienation psychologically as burnout. Marx said the political result of alienation is servitude. This is reflected in today's workplace by the fact that the human service professions are marginalized and most human service workers today are 'at will' employees. What Marx said about the worker of the industrial revolution, that

universal human emancipation becomes bound up in the emancipation of the worker (Tucker, 1972) is also true of today's human service workers.

Both the human service worker and the client experience the impact of alienation as a social condition. To paraphrase Marx in current human service terminology, the empowerment of the recipient of human service becomes bound up in the empowerment of the human service worker. To the extent that the human service worker is objectified by her relationship to the material economic system and bureaucratic method of work organization, they are more likely to treat others as the objects of their actions.

The most commonly accepted description of burnout is that it consists of three related clusters of symptoms; physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and dehumanization, and reduced personal accomplishment and cynicism (Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Leiter, 1997). These symptoms are strikingly similar to those described by Marx in 1844 and discussed above: the ruin of mind and body, alienation, and devaluation and estrangement of the worker. The clusters of symptoms, or dimensions, of burnout develop over time. For example, idealistic human service workers who suffer from emotional stress from being helpless at easing the impact of chronic poverty become progressively less idealistic and more judgmental (Pines & Aronson, 1988). They tend to dehumanize their clients, blaming them for their problems, categorizing them with diagnostic labels that take the place of the helping relationship. Such workers also resist workplace reforms.

Much research has been done, especially in the field of social psychology, to assist the worker to cope with the stressors in their workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). In many cases, this top-down, power over research has not resulted in sustainable change. The action research process suggests an alternative. If the action research approach is successful in enabling human service practitioners to take action on these systemic causes of burnout in the human service workplace, it is a strong argument for the effectiveness not only of action research but also of a paradigmatic alternative to post positivism, the participatory worldview.

The participatory worldview is the research paradigm which holds that values are as basic to the research enterprise as ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The participatory worldview poses the axiological question about values, what is intrinsically worthwhile. The ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions deal with truth, while the axiological question of what is to be valued because it is good. The participatory worldview deals with the democratic and spiritual dimensions of life systems in all of their complexity and in regional contexts (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The conceptual location for the dissertation research was in the participatory worldview.

Similarly, action research is grounded in the practical experience of the inquirer-knower-thinker (Eikeland, 2001). Action research resurrects the practical context of classical philosophy in which the philosophical concepts of science and research emerged, that every inquiry should be directed at how it is possible to live well. The role of the researcher is not only focusing on the solution of a problem but also on human development (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Action research takes into consideration Foucault's discussion of power in relationships and Habermas' theory of communicative action (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). Based on these theories, quality in participatory action research exists to the extent that the participatory action research process focuses on the good: systems change, human development, communicative action, and power. Further, action researchers embrace messes; that is, multi-dimensional intractable problems that cannot be addressed by single discipline knowledge systems.

There are many political science and sociological conceptions of power which affect approaches to empowerment practice and strategies of social change. Our subjectivities and relationships are the objects of power and are intensely governed. There is a tension between compliance and resistance. In this case, governance is not only something done to us by those in power; it is something we do to ourselves. We make ourselves governable by taking up the social goal of self-esteem (Cruikshank, 1993). Foucault's analysis of power rejects the idea that power is centralized in a single system, and suggests that mass

political movements may be less effective than smaller groups of advocates in local structures in bringing about social change (Pease, 2002).

More radical concepts of power maintain that empowerment includes the commitment to understand structural oppression and to take back some control in one's life. This creates a paradox in the human service profession. In much human service practice, being a professional committed to empowerment is that their expertise and institutional position disempowers clients.

Freire's (1993) dialogical approach to education is to challenge the dominant knowledge power connection, in which social workers and consumers work together, open to local knowledge and narratives of marginalized people. Freire's dialogical approach to education to challenge the dominant knowledge power connection is one in which social workers and consumers work together, open to local knowledge and narratives of marginalized people. Critics of action research say that it does not care about objective conditions. If social change is desired, it will require a power change. However, there are many examples of social change that emerged from advocates and local structures that result in changing social conditions.

B. *Power in the organizational context*

Since action research involves taking action in the world of praxis, researchers must be aware that in organizations there is a difference between the "espoused theories" of organizations, what they say, to their "theories-in-use", what they do. These differences come from the defenses all have learned, fear of negative reinforcement adds to these defenses. Not only are there differences between "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use", but we are also skilled at covering up those differences. This became evident as the research project opened up communicative space and relations of trust. Change will not occur until these organizational norms are brought out into the open and challenged (Argyris, 1993, Argyris and Schon, 1996). This is true both in the university and the human service workplace. While both workplaces espouse knowledge and good practice, this may be affected by theories in use. This implies that there is some risk to the participatory researcher.

From a systemic perspective, the norms of the organization's culture often restrict the worker's ability to meet the needs of those whom they serve. Attempts to circumvent these norms to benefit the client may lead to retaliation from administrators concerned with preserving their authority. Further, many organizations use negative reinforcers to maintain the level of productivity that is required by funding sources. Thus the psychosocial aspect of fear becomes an ongoing factor in organizational dynamics.

The action researcher can learn theories in use in the organizational context in which she conducts research through observation over a period of time. During that time, she may not fully understand that the values of the organizational context may differ from hers. For example, values inherent in action research, such as democracy and social justice may come in conflict with the theories in the organizational context.

C. *Power in the human service workplace*

A policy study sponsored by the Anne C. Casey Foundation (2003) found that the three million human service workers in the United States were underpaid, inadequately trained, poorly supervised, had limited opportunities for professional growth and advancement, and were restricted by rule-bound jobs with little latitude for decision-making. As a result, many qualified professionals have left the field (Maslach, 1982). Those who stay in their jobs are motivated by a sense of mission that outweighs the work's disincentives (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Although the Anne C. Casey Foundation (2003) policy study fell short of calling for a participatory approach, it suggested that the cornerstone of reform is to find out from frontline workers what they need to perform their jobs more effectively. In the course of participating in the action research group, co-researchers became more fully aware that the support that they received in their workplace was inadequate, with limited communication among the myriad human service agencies in the community.

The human service system is both hierarchical and fragmented into 'silos' by the system of categorical funding. Thus, it is necessary for committed professionals who wish to meet the holistic needs of their care receiver and her family to work through the walls of those silos in a cooperative and collaborative way. In the course of the research project, co-researchers learned experientially how a relationship of trust and a safe communicative space enabled them to plan and develop initiatives while maintaining a high level of support for themselves and others in their human service system.

A major reform in the human service professions is the empowerment movement. Empowerment moves beyond a model based on assistance to one based on partnership. This strengths perspective involves replacing a professionally based expertise model with one where the client is actively involved in learning and exercising choices, and it is being increasingly implemented by human service organizations. The strengths perspective calls for using individual and community resources to create opportunities for inclusion and self-determination (Tice & Perkins, 2002).

This concept of empowerment is based on a post positivist conception of power as a commodity, with a powerful-powerless dualism (Pease, 2002). Therefore, research on empowerment is usually done on the individual level, with no clarification of how changes in individual consciousness can lead to social change. "…Reducing social relations to the interpersonal level obscures the real power relations in society" (Pease, 2002, p. 136). Action research allows for an examination of power relationships on both the individual and the interpersonal level.

D. Power in the university

As could be anticipated by the discussion above of power as dynamic and relational, the discussion of power in the university starts with my relationship with the university. In my role as a doctoral student researcher, I was in an intermediary between the university and the community. I needed to look at existing power relationships in each of these entities, and differentiate my role in these structures from myself.

While meeting the scholarly requirements of the university to earn my degree, I planned a dissertation study in the community in which I was a practitioner and an educator. I was an inside action researcher in the community. For example, in what ways are there perceptions of power? When I used passive voice in my writing, I implied I was in a power under situation. From my personal perspective, I was an apprentice researcher, learning to apply the principles of action research. Balancing these multiple roles was more problematic because the research is action research, with its emerging design and goal of systems change.

There is tension between the student and the university, between the student and the community, and between the community and the university. Action research initiated by the university in the person of the student puts the student in the middle of these tensions. Before I finalized my dissertation question, the head of my department proposed to me that instead of initiating an action research project, I should set up an experimental and control group and conduct an intervention in the workplace, then do a pre- and post-test to determine if change in the workplace occurred. She suggested that it would be a much quicker way of doing my dissertation research, and she was right. But then I would have never surfaced most of the findings about power that are discussed in this paper.

At the same time, as the action research project facilitator I was in a power over situation, driving choices made by my co-researchers. I gradually came to perceive I had over learned my diverse roles creating internalized oppression. The use of case study methodology provided a way to identify these perceptions, and my research provided me with an opportunity to focus on participants' perceptions of power.

E. Power and ethics

Risk is one of the ethical dilemmas I faced as a doctoral student researcher. It is not enough to say that ethical issues in action research are minimized because it takes place as part of a participatory, democratic process. Following a model developed by Boser (2006), the following steps were taken to protect those

involved in the project. I minimized the risk attendant to this study by establishing guidelines and group norms in the informed consent form. I discussed power relationships among stakeholder groups during the first meeting of the group and before the research project began and emphasized that I could assure their confidentiality only to the extent that each member honors it.

What is the nature of the risk to other participant involved in the student's research design when its goal is systems change? When I established external guidelines in the research design, I could not anticipate to what extent participants would accept and internalize them. I realized that participants became co researchers at the point when they felt empowered enough to actively consider and make their own ethical decisions.

To further complicate the ethical situation, participants often represent a variety of stakeholder locations and interests. Power imbalances among these stakeholder groups may present a risk to some, especially those who work at different levels within the same organization (Boser, 2006). In addition, if the student researcher is already a part of the community she is studying, there are additional ethical risks from the role conflicts inherent in insider research.

Ethical protections were integrated into each component of research design. However, participants in the action research project did not have a voice in the establishment of these guidelines. Implicit in my establishing protocols to minimize participants' risks was the understanding that they were not able to revisit these protocols throughout the course of the project. However well intentioned that premise was, it deprived participants of the opportunity to apply their lived knowledge and values to the protocols designed to protect them from risk.

While there are costs and risks for participants in their involvement in action research in the community, they were outweighed by the benefits. I base this assertion on the fact that the majority of participants stayed with the project long after the time that they were originally committed. The relative value to participants included both the introduction of to participatory theory and approaches to support their praxis, and the creation and articulation of local, lived knowledge. I observed a synergy created in the process of the action research through which the benefits of the positive stressors of work satisfaction, engagement, and increased professionalism outweigh the costs.

F. Researcher's Insider/Outsider Positionality

When I entered my doctoral program, I became familiar the ethnographic practice of reflexivity as a method of inquiry (Bateson, 1972; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Whyte, 1957). I discovered how I am both a participant and an observer of the cultural setting I am trying to understand. I also realized that beyond reflexivity is the question of representation. I must employ my voice, the point of view from which I will report my findings. I bring a subjective, self-critical, and experiential conscious experiencing of the inquirer as the self, the 'human as instrument', to the research project, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).That is, how do I display the realities of my lived experience and observations and report it in such a way that it has interpretive validity, or makes sense, for my audience (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

My dissertation research question grew out of my positionality as a human service administrator, educator, and newly minted researcher. As I observed practitioners exhibiting the symptoms of burnout in a variety of human service settings over the years and saw that these symptoms were taken for granted in the human service profession, I became convinced that the extent of burnout was related to situational stressors present in the workplace. When I discovered the principles of action research, I saw it as providing an alternative approach to the dynamics of that workplace.

Like many other action researchers (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire (2003), I was attracted to action research because of my previous community development efforts and political advocacy activities. I believe that there is a need to transform society along more participatory lines to achieve social justice. In particular, throughout my career as a human service practitioner and instructor, I have seen the absence of

democratic and participatory principles in the structure of human services as I have advocated for "changing the system". Co-researchers in the action research project knew me from my years as a practitioner and change agent in my community. This also was a part of the dynamic of power that was a part of my role in the action research project.

III.   THE DISSERTATION CASE STUDY

A.   Research Implementation

To best assess the research question, I wanted participants who 'owned' the problem: human service practitioners who were concerned about burnout as a major barrier to the effective delivery of human services. I attempted to be purposive in developing a recruiting strategy to reach these practitioners. While my sampling strategy aimed at maximum variability, participants self selected. The target was to select a group numbering 10 – 15 participants, a group size that I considered optimum for group discussion. To assure variability, after inviting forum participants to attend, I then sent our invitations sequentially to members of human service collaboratives, and those who were contacted were given the opportunity to self select.

Invitations to participate were sent out using various mailing lists to over 100 people and elicited positive responses from thirteen initial participants. Participants who responded included five agency directors, four agency deputy directors, two university professors active in human service community, a continuing education trainer, and a public health nurse. The thirteen professionals were from twelve organizations. The majority of the group stayed together for sixteen months to examine the issue of burnout in their workplace. During that time, participants became co researchers and led a number of local initiatives. I facilitated this action research process.

It is important to note that ten of the thirteen participants were female and three male. Throughout this paper, I use the pronouns 'she' and 'her' to refer to all participants except me, to protect the confidentiality of the minority males. The role of gender in the human service workplace as well as in this project is explored elsewhere in this dissertation. Although minorities constitute 2% of the population of Fayette County (United States Census Bureau, 2002), and a higher percentage of human service practitioners, no minority practitioners self-selected to participate.

Because participants were forming a participatory action group, the final stage of the sampling strategy was to give participants a voice in the final constitution of the group. I expected that this would maximize the diversity of the group, and correct the imbalance in the groups' composition, as the group consisted predominantly of administrators and educators, with no direct service workers. However, in their first meeting, participants decided that a cross section of stakeholder groups was represented and that it was not necessary to recruit additional participants. While this may have accurately described the diversity of organizations represented, it was not true in terms of the diversity of levels of authority of the participants.

One major limitation of the research process that is important to understanding the webs of power in the workplace is the lack of involvement of non-supervisory direct service workers. Most human service workers are direct service workers, those who directly serve clients. They play no administrative or supervisory role, and have even less job autonomy than their supervisors and administrators. They did not participate in the case study. In hindsight, I became aware that the recruiting process was flawed because no direct service workers self-selected to participate in the project.

There are clear implications of the workings of power in this finding of the study. Although the recruitment strategy was based on self selection and aimed at representation from all levels of human service practitioners, it resulted in a group that was predominantly supervisors and administrators. In hindsight, I realized that by basing my recruitment to the mailing lists of human service collaboratives, I was only reaching those individuals had the discretion to commit time to meetings. Most direct service workers could not have know of the project, and those who did had less discretion to change their

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*

schedules to participate. The willingness of direct service workers to participate was demonstrated by their participation in focus groups later in the project, although they were only able to do so after arrangements had been made with their administrators.

In the study, I describe how the action research project benefitted participants. Because direct service workers were unable to participate in the project, they did not directly share those benefits. Early in the project, participants with some level of authority in their organizations spoke of benefits going to direct service workers as 'ripples of change' affected their workplace. From the perspective of the direct service worker who had no role in initiating change, the organizational changes would come from those with more authority than they, and they would not have a voice in implementing these changes.

The lack of power and voice of direct service workers is a systemic issue. Their relative lack of autonomy not only precluded them from participation in this study, but also from discussions affecting their workplace in collaboratively based interagency organizations that set the norms for the workplace. The lack of direct service staff at first went unnoticed by the other participants in the study, and then came to be seen as beneficial.

Participants at several points in the project turned down suggestions to invite new members to the group on the grounds that it would interfere with the relationships of trust that they had developed with each other. They had internalized a norm discussed that change in the human service system grows out of long term emic relationships among supervisors and administrators in collaboratively based interagency organizations. In both a formal sense, and more to the point of this study, informal sense, these individuals wielded considerable power in the local human service system.

As participants became co-researchers, they reached out to direct service workers and conducted five focus groups and presentations at countywide trainings. To encourage participation and trust in the focus groups, they decided that it should consist of persons from one staff level only, just as the researchers from the action research process themselves were from the upper levels of the hierarchy in their organizations.

.The consensus was to recruit a focus group consisting of front-line workers: receptionists, secretaries, and case workers, who could provide a prospective not represented among the co-researchers. Questions to guide the discussion in focus groups included, "Does burnout exist in the Fayette County human service system? If yes, what does it look like for you? " and "How does your organization respond to employee burnout?"

Focus groups were facilitated by co-researchers in the action research project. Even though focus groups met only met one time, much of what focus group participants shared was as deep and meaningful as what the co-researchers had been sharing with each other. The experience of participating in the focus groups had a deep impact on all of the co-researchers who facilitated a group.

One of these findings of the focus groups was that the level of burnout in the agencies which participated in the focus groups was closely related to the level of autonomy of workers in those agencies. Those agencies with a culture that empowered their workers showed less burnout and provided better coping skills to their workers, while those that operated in a more authoritarian hierarchical style exhibited more burnout and less employee job satisfaction.

Co-researchers also learned through their inquiry that finding their power and voice could contribute to systemic change. Participants in each of the focus groups articulated that the experience was a positive one for them and that they would like to see the process continue. The focus groups contributed to the creation of communicative space within their agencies, which may have many as yet unknown positive consequences, some of which we learned about anecdotally long after the focus groups were conducted.

Co-researchers also became aware of the privileges of the power that they possessed because of their level of authority within their organizations. Before they conducted the focus groups, the co-researchers in the action research project were more aware of the power that higher level administrators and funding

sources had over them. Participants in the focus groups made them aware that power flows both ways, and made them more conscious of their own power. They became more aware that many in the system lacked the privileges that they had, and that there may be more advantages to a strategy of participation rather than control.

An unanswered question was raised in several of the focus groups was could we schedule additional meetings with them. They were told that the focus groups were only information gathering for future workplace change initiatives. Focus group participants were curious about where the research project goes from here, and several wanted to continue to be involved at some level. However, there was no follow-up contact with focus group participants, and their power and voice remains circumscribed and their level of autonomy remains limited. Because of steps taken to protect the focus group participants' confidentiality, it is not even possible to contact them without going through their agency administrators.

B. *Stages of the research project*

There were at least five distinct chronological stages in the course of the project. The direction taken in each of these chronological stages was effected by relationships of power. The project's stages were: initial directions, premature conclusions, insights from interviews, restructuring the process, planning and conducting community based action research, and reflecting on new understandings in the aftermath and impact of the project. There were critical incidents and major findings of the project at each chronological stage of the project.

I called the first stage of the chronological development of the project 'initial directions'. The first critical incident in this stage was that the sampling strategy inadvertently over-recruited administrators and supervisors, as discussed in the previous section above. Another critical incident that emerged before the group even met was the difficulty in scheduling group meetings, resulting in loss of members and chronic absenteeism of other members. This was a reflection both of a lack of autonomy for participants in setting their own schedule, as well as from scarcity of resources leading to large workloads for every participant.

This led to the second chronological stage which I call 'premature conclusions. The critical incident that emerged during this stage was the development of a safe, communicative space where participants took the risk of sharing their frustrations about systemic stressors in their workplaces and used the meetings as a therapeutic support group. There was buy in from every participant in the project to the formation of a support group. The idea of a support group was not only safe and comfortable to for participants, it also was in line with the professional experience of the group members, many of whom had an academic background in social work or counseling.

While the support group was very effective in helping participants deal with their symptoms resulting from burnout, it did little to address the objective conditions in the workplace. During this stage, participants did develop a better understanding of what burnout is, and learned how to treat the symptoms of burnout in their lives. A plan was developed to replicate new support groups in the workplace.

The third chronological stage of the process was 'restructuring the process'. At this point in time, the university, in the person of my dissertation adviser, reminded me that my research question involved the study of an action research process, not the study of a therapeutic support group. It could be said that I had "gone native", adopting the values and behaviors of the other members of the group as my own as a result of the close emic relationships that I shared with them (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). This could also be seen as a negative case indicator, a limitation of the willingness or lack of understanding by participants to become co-researchers in a participatory action research process. At this point, I had to choose between changing the research question and protocols, or of using my power as facilitator to change the group direction to the original focus.

I made the decision, without prior consultation with the group, to continue the action research project rather than stop at this premature stage. I was convinced, both by my study of existing theory, and by my

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*

personal goals that grew out of my positionality, that the action research process could prove more effective in changing praxis in the human service workplace. Through reflection that grew out of my discussions with my dissertation advisor, I became more self-conscious of my views and beliefs. To employ the analogy of original sin from the participatory action research literature (Moore, 2007), I could no longer be clothed with the innocence of ignorance of the action research process or of the participatory worldview.

For several months the group argued over my attempts to refocus the project. The plan was met with indifference by some participants and with hostility by others. Those who objected to the planned restructuring were those who wanted to continue the former process of system change by the intentional creation and monitoring of new support groups. Gradually, I persuaded them to study burnout by collecting data from the workplace and by planning and systematizing changes in the human service system, to show that participants can plan, implement and reflect on the results of an effective research project. However, from the research group's perspective, the ultimate determining factor was the power of the university. As one participant stated, "We will do whatever we have to do to help you complete your dissertation".

During this time, my role as the facilitator changed from a laissez-faire style to a more pro-active leadership role. I was empowered by reflections on my dual roles to exercise my power as facilitator and academic researcher. Gradually the resistance to change eroded among the participants as the group accepted the necessity of adopting a more interactive role in the community. In doing so, they also empowered themselves to be agents of change within their systems.

This led to a fourth chronological stage consisting of planning and conducting community based action research. In the process of doing so, the critical incident that is at the core of the dissertation case study was reached: participants in the process became co-researchers in the participatory action research project. This stage was initiated by me in my role as the group facilitator. It did not originate with the participants, although they gradually acknowledged that they chose to intervene in the human service system by doing research and implementing actions in the human service workplace.

Effectively, the group raised the level of consciousness in the human service community by exploring the parameters of problems in the human service workplace. Major actions taken by the group at this time included the development and implementation of focus groups and questionnaires. What gets measured gets attention. The group proposed that we need to put the humanness back in human services and suggested an empowerment model for the human service workforce. The major action resulting from the reflection on new understandings was the planning of new iterations of the participatory action research process.

In the final chronological stage, reflecting on new understandings, the group realized that, as a result of their research initiatives, other people in the human service system are interested in this issue now because someone is paying attention to it. The group saw evidence that people can change by changing their attitudes, by having hope instead of despair. By the efforts of the action research group, hope was shared as others in the workplace realized "I'm not in it alone".

There was a more sophisticated understanding of the systemic barriers to workplace change. For example, some administrators don't think critically; they react emotionally, and some are guilty of workplace bullying. The experience of the participatory action group indicates that participatory activities can change such attitudes. Co-researchers planned a three pronged approach, planning focus groups for administrators and supervisors similar to those already conducted with direct service workers. The group came to believe they can be an entity which can be a very strong and powerful new initiative for change.

In a discussion with co-researchers at the end of the process, we reflected on the project. From their experience in the research project, they learned that both people and systems can change, and that change comes after they become aware of the problems. We learned that participation in the project and the development of critical consciousness was not sufficient to increase all participants' autonomy. In some

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*

cases, change would require a transformation of power relationships in the workplace. There is a relationship between worker autonomy and the nature of the resources, support, and communication in the culture of each specific workplace. A precondition for change to occur is engagement with agency administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers, with public officials, clients, funding sources, and other stakeholders, and with the community.

C. Relationships and power

In the analysis of my research, it was clear that relationships, power and ethics affected every aspect of the action research process. My facilitation of the project as an insider action researcher provided me with an intimate close up of the workings of power. In an inductive analysis of the research, I identified dozens of categories and patterns from which key themes emerged. Many of these can be related to the key themes as sub themes. An attempt to list the sub themes and their relationship to the key themes suggested patterns and interactions among the key themes. To determine what is significant in the data involved inductive analysis of the patterns represented in the classification schema.

The findings indicate that most workers enter the human service field with passion and commitment, only to have these challenged by the marginalization of their profession, the lack of support from the community and society at large, and the influence of the bureaucratic organizational culture in the human service workplace that negatively affects aspects of worker and organizational communication. These systematic issues are exacerbated inadequate resources available to provide effective, empowering services.

One of the realizations that emerged from the discussion of marginalization is that human service in the county is devalued and will continue to be devalued until society redefines it as a priority. And this change will not take place until human service workers develop critical consciousness at the macro level and assume the ownership of the problem and to begin the process of change in systems.

In the depressed economy of the local area in which this study was conducted, the lack of resources contributes to the scarcity mentality which many human service workers share with those they help. These pressures may be alleviated by the support that workers receive from their organizations and from their colleagues, families, and their value systems. However, many workers are without adequate support systems, and develop inadequate or self-defeating coping mechanisms that lead to alienation. After examining and reflecting on the stressors in their workplace, participants determined which actions were the most appropriate to address the clusters of adaptive behaviors in reaction to stressors known as burnout.

This inductive analysis was subjective to the extent that it was based not only on data from the project, but also on my experience of the issues confronting workers in the human service system. I organized and reduced these categories and patterns into six areas that are related to each of the key themes. These areas are systemic issues, psychosocial issues, actions taken, barriers to change, the role of facilitation, and theoretical inputs. I was enabled to further interpret the meaning that the key themes had for participants in the study through reflections on these areas.

A matrix of power relationships in the human service workplace wound through the themes that emerged from the study's data. The matrix illustrates the observation of structural influences, workplace change, and learnings about facilitation that point to the dynamics of power at the various stages of the project, as they were described in the section on Stages of the Research Process, above.

Table 1: Matrix of major findings and actions taken

Major Findings:	Structural influences	Change workplace	Learnings about facilitation
Action taken:			
Support group	Only those with autonomy self selected	Being supportive	Teaching PAR approach

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*

Research design	Methodological confusion	The 'Three-Pronged' approach	Advocating participatory methods
Focus groups	Lack of autonomy	Establish communicative space	Use participants strengths
Questionnaires / Presentations	Inappropriate supervision	Dissemination of results	Provide research orientation
New iterations	Increasing power and voice in community	Expanded community of practice	Ability to be flexible, let go

IV. LIVED KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

The research problem and the research design of this study were intended to put the ownership of research into the hands of those who own the problem. The self-selection strategy in the recruitment process started with each participant's sense of perceived need. Participants in the participatory action research project had a voice in decisions about data collection. They were in control of the number, length, and scheduling of meetings. As the communicative space, relationships of trust, and research skills of the co-researchers grew throughout the research process, and participants took on tasks relating to planning and implementing research, and taking steps to initiate change in their workplace.

In this way, co-researchers in the participatory action research project practiced autonomy and developed the critical consciousness that can lead to change. This small group of practitioners not only created a communicative space, they also took steps to enhance their research skills, co-facilitating a focus group and analyzing and reporting on the results to the research group, and developing and implementing questionnaires in several venues. The best evidence for the development of critical consciousness is the consensus of the group to continue their research and action initiatives after the end of the first iteration of the participatory action research process.

V. FINDING POWER AND VOICE

Early in the study, I envisioned that participants would empower themselves to seek greater autonomy in their workplace. Participation would free them to use their training, skills, and interpersonal and group relations to their benefit. An initial goal for the participatory action research process was to address the problem of burnout by allowing human service workers to enhance their autonomy and find their voice, and establish long term commitment to participatory action research methods of planning, action, and reflection with voice and power, in short, to change the way we do business.

A reflective evaluation of the role of power in the human service system indicates that the challenges are much more complex. The process of burnout changed and empowered the participants in the project, and how they found power and voice through their role as participatory action researchers. Co-researchers spoke of the strength and cohesion of their group, the lessons learned that they applied to their work and personal life, their identification of problem areas and their development of critical ways of thinking to deal with them.

Increased consciousness is an expected outcome of action research. Co-researchers learned that their position and feelings were not always compatible with the dominant ideology and power of the organization to which they belonged. This created an interesting dynamic in the group the organizations in question were among the major collaborative entities in the local human service system who supported the research. My intention was to bring change to this culture's dominant ideology and power arrangements. Thus, there was some risk to individual participants in the project. However, participants showed that they were aware of the risks to them in their decision not to intervene in an organization with which several of them had ongoing collaborative relationships.

As participants began to develop critical consciousness through participation in the research process, they became more confident in using their voice to address systems issues in their own organizations that contribute to the problem of burnout. However, in organizations in which there is a lack of resources, negative support, and poor communication, systemic issues must be addressed before substantive change can occur. This echoes the criticism described above about action research affecting objective conditions. The development of power and voice that grows out of critical consciousness is an important prerequisite to change.

Local initiatives led by co-researchers contributed to worker autonomy and stimulated positive and sustainable change in a local context of the human service workplace. They exhibited how learnings about continuous critical awareness of power affect relationships in the system needed to avoid the perpetuation of old relations of power. The participatory approach employed in this study was effective in identifying ways to create alternate organizational norms.

VI. CONCLUSION

As co-researchers worked their way through an iteration of an action research cycle they developed and articulated an understanding of their lived knowledge and experience, they exhibited increasing critical consciousness. Increased awareness made clear that there was an overall lack of planning and action to address the problems causing human service workers to experience burnout.

Co-researchers applied their new knowledge to change their own life worlds and those of their organizations. Although it remains to be seen to what extent they have empowered themselves to change the larger human service system in which they work, this will be determined when the participatory action researchers complete and reflect on their planned "three pronged approach" consisting of initiatives to administrators, supervisors, and front-line workers in the human service workplace.

An important outcome of this study is that through their participation in the participatory action research process, members of the group adopted a changed, more sophisticated approach, developing critical thinking that enables them to look at the problem in different ways. As the research process unfolds, participants develop a new understanding of systemic issues and their psychosocial consequences to the individual. As participants become co-researchers, they reflect on these findings and develop strategies for actions to address the problem. This corresponds to the action research cycle of examining, reflecting, and acting.

Participants stated concerns about occasions their organization acted in disregard of its avowed mission statements, or when their organizations failed to be accountable to their program's funding sources. This was of particular concern to the group because most of the organizations they represent were supported by community stakeholders and funded and/or regulated by governmental entities.

Even when individuals find their power and voice in the organization, it may not result in objective change. But even in those cases, participation in this process provided these prerequisites to change. To some extent the process empowered each participant to make a difference in their workplace.

There are practical problems doing participatory action research in the workplace. A problem that had much impact on this case study is the commitment of time that participation in action research requires from already overworked employees (Palshaugen, 2006). This was evident from the first meeting of the project with the difficulty of finding appropriate times to schedule meetings. I discussed this in the analysis in terms of the scarcity mentality that it demonstrates. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, (2006) argue that action research programs can increase pressure on employees. Their description of this phenomenon increased my concern that an unanticipated outcome of the study would be adding to the stress of participants as they studied reducing stress in the workplace.

In the course of the study, I observed that additional pressure comes from individual or group requests for more involvement in the research project, increasing the participant's workload and invading spare time

with projects. Dilemmas for the individual participant include saying 'yes' or to say 'no' to new tasks; to helping colleagues versus being burned out; and making shared decisions. All of these actions are time consuming and contribute to negative stress such as overload, absent mindedness, and fatigue, but also to positive stress such as work satisfaction, engagement, and increased professionalism. The results of the current study suggest that, overall, participation in the project resulted in more positive than negative stress when the process was understood by participants and progress was being made in achieving their goals.

I was also concerned that the local knowledge thus generated could be employed by the human service system to more efficiently achieve the outcome of more social control. This may be particularly true as the funding for human service programs filters through the office of the county commissioners, administrators who can select which programs can be initiated in the county and reject those that lead to a loss of local control. Just as in the discussion of positive and negative stress in participatory research, this implies a single sum game where human service workers were the 'winners' and 'losers'. In theory the growth of critical consciousness leads to the empowerment of all stakeholders in the system. Nevertheless, care must be taken to examine the relationships of power in the system and to avoid the potential risk of the research leading to increased social control, lest the good intentions of the human sciences once more be diverted to reinforcing the social status quo.

REFERENCES

Altheide, S. L. & Johnson, J.M. (1994). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) (Eds.). Handbook of qualitative research. (pp. 485-499). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Anne E. Casey Foundation (2003). The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce. Retrieved June 5, 2009 from http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/the%20unsolved%20challenge.pdf

Argyris, C. (1993). Knowledge for action. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers.

Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an ecology of mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boser, S. (2006). Ethics and power in community-campus partnerships for research. Action Research, 4(1), 9-21.

Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., & Maguire, P. (2003). Why action research? Action Research, 1(1), 9-28.

Clifford J. & Marcus, G.E. (Eds.). (1986) Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eikeland, O. (2001). Action research as the hidden curriculum of the Western tradition. In Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds). Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry & practice (pp. 144-155). London: Sage Publications.

Farber, B.A. (1983). Introduction: A critical perspective on burnout. In Farber, B. A. (Ed). Stress and burnout in the human service professions (pp. 1-20). New York: Pergamon Press.

Fay, B. (1987). Critical social science. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Freire, P. (1993). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Gergen, K. J. & Thatchenkery, T. J. (2004). Organizational science as social construction: Postmodern potentials. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 40(2), 228-249.

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) (Eds.). The sage handbook of qualitative research, 3rd ed. (pp. 191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kristiansen, M. & Bloch-Poulsen, J. (2006). Involvement as a dilemma. Between Dialogue and discussion in team based organizations. International Journal of Action Research, 2(2), pp. 163-197.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Maslach, C. (1982). Burnout: The cost of caring. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). The truth about burnout. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Palshaugen, O. (2006). Constructive practice and critical theory: The contribution of action research to organizational change and the discourse on organizations. International Journal of Action Research, 2(3). 283-318.

Pease, B. (2002). Rethinking empowerment: A postmodern reappraisal for emancipatory practice. British Journal of Social Work, 32(3), 135-137.

Pines, A. (1983). On burnout and the buffering effects of social support. In Farber, B. A. (Ed.). Stress and burnout in the human service professions. (pp.155-174). New York: Pergamon Press.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). Introduction: Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration. In Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds). Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry & practice (pp. 1-14). London: Sage Publications.

Tucker, R. C. (1972). The Marx-Engels reader. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*

Whyte, W. F. (1955). Street corner society: The social structure of an Italian slum. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Rapano, J. (2010). *Surfacing learnings about power in the university and the community in a doctoral student's study of action research*