

Pragmatic Fieldwork: Qualitative Research for Creative Democracy and Social Action

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This paper sets the foundation for a new method for addressing social problems called pragmatic fieldwork. I developed the method while working with nonprofit organizations that serve homeless youth and young adults. The approach is informed by qualitative research, participatory action research, and the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. In this text, I lay out the methodological framework for pragmatic fieldwork. I also outline the practices associated with performing the method. By including both the conceptual and practical dimensions of the method, I hope pragmatic fieldwork serves as a specific and actionable approach to doing socially transformative scholarship. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2013 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.*]

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Socially engaged research has the promise of rejuvenating the social sciences (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011, Flyvbjerg, 2004, Levin & Greenwood, 2011, Mertens, 2007). Participatory approaches in qualitative research are on the rise. In their handbook, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) feature six chapters concerning participatory, community-based, and transformational research. Also, in Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba's (2011) most recent rendition of qualitative

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paradigms, they add “participatory” to the list of positivism, postpositivism, critical, and constructivism.

While I am inspired by the work of participatory, qualitative researchers, I often find their methods hard to mimic. On the one hand, participatory action research (PAR) write ups are often very specific about their project, but their successes and challenges do not necessarily carry to other contexts. On the other hand, PAR researchers also write about their approach to research, but often do so at an abstract, general, or paradigmatic level. Specificity and abstraction both have value. For instance, Mary Brydon-Miller, Michael Kral, Patricia Maguire, Susan Noffke and Anu Sabhlok (2011) detail individual PAR projects in particular communities, and then reflect generally how PAR is like banyan trees and jazz music. I find their project overviews inspiring, and I find their overarching metaphors instructive. Charmaz (2011) makes valuable and specific recommendations about how grounded theory can be used in the context of social justice research. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) outline a very general, three-part cycle for participatory action projects.

However, despite the richness of literature on participatory methods, there is a lack of “middle range” methodological discussions. By “middle range” I mean specific enough to be instructive and actionable, but general enough to be used in various contexts. I struggled with this dearth of mezzo-level methods in PAR while I was first learning methods in my doctoral studies. I can distinctly remember reading the Eisenberg, Baglia, and Pynes (2006) study on the dynamics of emergencies rooms and thinking that I would have loved to be a part of that study, but that I didn’t understand how they actually did the study or how they made the decisions they made during their process. While the contextual nature of PAR makes methodological outlines more challenging, I believe actionable and flexible guidelines are possible. In this paper, I will lay out a qualitative approach to PAR that I believe is both actionable and flexible and serves as a specific guide in various circumstances. This method, which I call pragmatic fieldwork, is a way of approaching social justice issues that draws on qualitative research, PAR, and pragmatism.

I conceptualized pragmatic fieldwork at the end of a three-year research and community-based project that sought to improve the organized response to youth homelessness in a major U.S. city in the Southwest. During those years, I employed qualitative and participatory methods while I worked on various projects, most of which were within StandUp For Kids Phoenix (SUFK), a homeless youth outreach

organization. My activities included qualitative investigation, improving training practices, leadership and community development retreats, problem solving facilitation sessions, direct service volunteering, leadership/organizing, and networking. Initially, I had no intention to invent a method. I simply wanted to do good research while also engaging in meaningful social action. But as I worked to achieve both of those goals, I slowly developed practices that accomplished those aims simultaneously and began to see action and knowing as a single form of labor. Pragmatic fieldwork took shape from these practices and ways of knowing.

There are parts of me that loathe suggesting a new term for socially engaged scholars. There is action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), social change scholarship (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), translational scholarship (Petronio, 1999), experimental societies (Campbell, 1973, Bickman, 2000), community-based research (Stringer, 2007), reflexive practitioners (Schön, 1983), intellectual entrepreneurship (Cherwitz, Darwin, Miller, & Groccia, 2005), *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2004), and more. However, I believe that an articulate dictionary of action-oriented scholarship has a place. There are real differences between methods, and those nuances can be captured by a detailed language.

Pragmatic fieldwork is:

- ongoing,
- qualitative,
- community-engaged,
- participatory,
- active and
- rooted in pragmatism.

These layers matter. Not all PAR is qualitative (Brydon-Miller, 1997, Defoer, De Groote, Hilhorst, Kante, & Budelman, 1998). Communities can be convened to help generate survey items, and not all PAR iteratively tacks between research and action. Likewise, there are various approaches to qualitative methods: positivist/postpositivist, constructivist, feminist, Marxist, ethnic, cultural, and queer theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). There are of course philosophers of pragmatism that do not engage in social action or research. However, I believe qualitative research, PAR, and pragmatism enhance each other when used together in pragmatic fieldwork.

I use *pragmatic* in its philosophical sense, which is to evoke the philosophies of action espoused by thinkers like James (1896), Peirce

(1903), Dewey (1939), and Rorty (1979). I also mean *pragmatic* in its common sense form, as in practical. As for *fieldwork*, I mean it both as a method of qualitative data collection, as well as “to work in the field.” I intend this dual meaning to suggest both scholarly data collection and labor. But unlike terms like “action research” where the two goals are represented by different words, I use the single term “fieldwork” to blur the distinction between action and research. Theorizing quickens social action and social action refines theory. In this paper, I offer a methodological framework and a set of practices I believe others called to this form of research will find helpful.

FOUNDATIONS OF PRAGMATIC FIELDWORK

Pragmatic fieldwork derives various resources of knowing and acting from its foundations. From qualitative research it draws techniques for creating and analyzing data, specifically strategies for observation, interviews, and writing. From PAR it draws its commitment to social justice and meaningful action and endeavors for mutuality in research. Finally, pragmatic fieldwork draws from pragmatism an attention to action as measure of epistemic success, creative democracy, and community-based epistemology. All three building blocks provide inspiration for how to be oriented to research.

FOUNDATIONS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

About six months after joining SUFK, I began a qualitative fieldwork project focused on volunteer commitments, motivations, and sensemaking. I found that qualitative strategies strengthened my connection with the organization. The interviews with volunteers deepened my relationships with them. Similarly, the need to be in the field for observations made my volunteering more reliable, which improved my relationship with the youth. It turns out that the rigors of good qualitative research are complementary to good organizational citizenship, which is why qualitative research serves as one of the foundations for pragmatic fieldwork.

Pragmatic fieldwork draws inspiration from many facets of qualitative methods. At its most basic, pragmatic fieldwork relies on qualitative research’s social modes of data collection (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). It requires the fieldworker to become a human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Kretzing, 1991) or what Roman Krznaric (2012) would call an empathic adventurer. Pragmatic fieldwork lives in the rich tradition of

qualitative research that urges researchers to go, usually with their bodies, into the places they want to learn about. This method highlights the embodied nature of knowing (Conquergood, 1991).

Pragmatic fieldwork also takes an iterative approach to inquiry (Charmaz, 2006). Iterative research usually means the dynamic movement between data collection, review of other works, and analysis. In the context of pragmatic fieldwork, iterative movement also includes social action, encouraging the fieldworker to labor toward the wellbeing of people in the field while gathering data, gathering prior scholarship, and organizing ideas. Brantlinger (1999) argues that “blending research and activism are not only valid but mutually enhancing” (p. 415). Engaging in social action while also doing research allows for ongoing adjustment in both activities. There is empirical and heuristic value in action. Just as performance calls into our bodies new ways of knowing (Spry, 2011), acting in the world challenges us to embody our ideas. Shared life/solidarity in our scene helps deepen our empathy and capacity to see the other as human. Analyzing data while involving one’s body fosters theorizing and also challenges it. Acting while researching creates tight feedback loops that inform both acting and scholarship. Finally, through networking, action increases access to varied organizational positions.

Before moving on, I should be clear about what threads of the qualitative tradition pragmatic fieldwork does not draw from. First, it denies a distinction between naturalistic and experimental research (Patton, 2001). When studying humans, there is no “laboratory” apart from the world. Social research is always done with people, and their humanity can never be isolated. Also, “naturalistic” often implies noninterference. Noninterference is not a virtue in pragmatic fieldwork, where an essential commitment is to act meaningfully in the field. Pragmatic fieldwork also rejects the notion that critical distance must be kept in order to make meaningful interpretations of a social world (Silverman, 2009) and denies that “going native” means losing the ability to be thoughtful (Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007). Rather, pragmatic fieldwork assumes that “natives” think about their lives in meaningful and productive ways, and that one should not avoid sharing one’s life with them in culturally and ethically appropriate ways. Finally, pragmatic fieldwork explicitly does not use theoretic saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as a measure of completeness. Pragmatic fieldworkers are not sponges, plunged into water and ready to be taken out when they can absorb no more. Sponges are about taking water from one place and slathering it in another. I do not abscond with the situated knowing of my

research subjects to do my scholarly labor elsewhere. I am part of the community in which I work. So I act when I am reasonably sure my or our actions are worth trying. I speak and write when I feel I can honestly represent other members of my community. But speaking and acting do not happen after theoretical saturation when there is nothing left to learn, but rather are always a work in progress.

In summary, pragmatic fieldwork is mobilized by qualitative strategies and sensibilities that include that social data collection, the human instrument, embodied knowledge/participation, and iterative inquiry while eschewing the naturalistic-experimental distinction, critical distance, and theoretical saturation. I now turn to pragmatic fieldwork's second foundation: participatory action research.

FOUNDATIONS IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Pragmatic fieldwork also has roots in participatory action and justice-oriented methodologies. Pragmatic fieldwork draws its aims, approach to research design, and commitment to mutuality from participatory methods. Pragmatic fieldwork sits squarely inside the transformational paradigm. Mertens (2007) positions axiological commitments as primary, saying that the value assumptions of transformational research are “enhancement of social justice, furtherance of human rights, and respect for cultural norms” (p. 470). Of similar significance is the position of mutuality fostered between different actors in the research process (Brydon Miller et al., 2011, Berg, 2004). Another important aspect of participatory practices taken up by pragmatic fieldwork is the improvement of practice, whether that be organizational practice (Eisenberg et al., 2006), educational practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), nursing practice (Whyte, 1992), or others.

Pragmatic fieldwork also shares the overall research design with many PAR approaches. Berg (2004) identifies cyclical or spiraling steps in research design as being found in most participatory action projects. For Stringer (2007), the three phases of community-based action research are look, think, and act. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) posit the three phases of plan, act/observe, and reflect. Although pragmatic fieldwork orients more toward practices than it does phases, it takes a circuitous as opposed to linear approach to research.

Finally, pragmatic fieldwork draws on PAR to nuance the criteria for its success. While I am guided by criteria for qualitative inquiry, PAR also comes with markers of quality. Good community-embedded research is democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing (Stringer,

2007). Good participatory action research does not merely advance knowledge, but aspires toward the positive transformation of social and material conditions. Pragmatic fieldwork seeks democracy through enabling various voices to shape the research process, which allows research to be more responsive to a diverse set of interests. It seeks equity by enabling polyvocal facilitation. It strives for liberation by enabling resistance against oppressive social, organizational, and relational structures. Finally, pragmatic fieldwork seeks life enhancement by identifying what individuals and collectives need to have full and healthy lives and striving as a member of various communities to make that possible.

FOUNDATIONS IN PRAGMATISM

In addition to qualitative methods and PAR, pragmatic fieldwork is heavily informed by its other namesake, pragmatism. Specifically, pragmatic fieldwork draws on pragmatist ideas, including the pragmatic maxim, living/dead hypotheses, ongoing knowledge, creative democracy, abductive reasoning, non-privileged representations, and epistemic communities.

Originally formulated by Peirce (1903), the pragmatic maxim states that conceptions about the world mean what their practical outcomes are. Said another way, since direct correspondence with the world is likely to be problematic (for reasons outlined by Quine [1953] and Sellars [1963] and unified by Rorty [1979]), the value of a theory rests more in its ability to enliven human action to seek flourishing than the theory's ability to mirror the world. A theory means what it gets us to do. This maxim guides data analysis by focusing on the living, active parts of social worlds and guides theory creation by highlighting traits like usability, mnemonic power, and inspiration.

Similarly, James (1896) focuses on what quickens or enlivens people to act. For James, people should worry less about the truth or falsity of a hypothesis, and more about whether it is living or dead – does it call those who hold it into action. This attention to action serves as both a philosophical justification for action and as an analytic starting point. As a philosophical justification, the purpose of research becomes focused on creating the type of knowledge that enables people to act. As an analytic starting point, it draws attention to communicated knowledge that organizes and creates action.

Pragmatic fieldwork is driven by creative democracy – the optimistic and ongoing development of a better world. Dewey (1939) says that

creative democracy should use past experience to create future flourishing. Qualitative forms of data collection help accomplish that goal. Analyzing experience rendered through interviews and observations by abductive reasoning (the process of generating possible explanations for why something occurred [Peirce, 1905]) leads to the creation of new social forms. Pragmatic fieldwork is also guided by warranted assertability (Dewey, 1941) as a criteria for knowing, which replaces theoretic saturation as a trigger for writing or speaking.

The method also draws on Rorty's (1979) deprivileging particular representations of the world and his focus on epistemic community. Rorty rejects two classic notions of empiricism, namely that 1) ideas can be founded on a phenomenon in the world and 2) a thinker can cleanly differentiate what is true by definition and what is true by evidence. Taken together, these two rejections make it difficult, if not impossible, to privilege one representation of the world over another. This questioning of representation threatens the relationship between the knower and the known. Instead, Rorty focuses on the fact that people most often know together and implores his readers to see knowledge as a social process. As a method, pragmatic fieldwork draws two lessons from Rorty. One is a deep respect for all accounts of the world. The second is an attention to the communal processes of knowing.

Pragmatism informs pragmatic fieldwork by establishing a paradigmatic frame. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) articulate, qualitative research reconstructs and probes the "situated form, content, and experience of social action" (p. 18). However, that can be done from a realist or constructionist ontology, a value-free or a value-driven axiology, or an interpretive or objectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Although less commonly invoked, pragmatism can also serve.

When a qualitative scholar draws on pragmatist concepts outlined by James (1896), Peirce (1903, 1905), Dewey (1939, 1941), and Rorty (1979), he or she operates under different criteria for success than if he or she had another stance. For example, postpositivist qualitative research succeeds when it creates a detailed picture of the social world (and perhaps triangulates with data collected in other ways [Denzin & Lincoln, 2011]). Marxist qualitative research succeeds when it reveals the critical, historic, and economic landscape of a people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Constructivist qualitative research succeeds when it credibly represents the standpoint of the actors in a social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Along these lines, I propose that pragmatic fieldwork succeeds when it identifies the living, active knowledge of a social world. Creatively

democratic, Dewey-inspired qualitative research also includes a generative aim, to imagine, articulate, and implement new social forms that improve future experience. It focuses on applications – or what works – and solutions to problems (Patton, 2001). A pragmatic approach privileges the research problem over the particular methods (Rossman & Wilson, 1985).

In summary, pragmatic fieldwork has the following commitments. It takes an ontology of optimism and immediacy that sees both embodied and ideological realities. Its epistemological commitments include a belief in the ongoing sophistication of action and experience and the connections among practical wisdom, theory, application, and polyvocal knowledge creation. It also takes a community-based approach to knowledge. Finally, its axiological commitments are toward enablement and life-enhancement, the ongoing pursuit of justice in society, and the endeavor to improve practices. I do not posit pragmatic fieldwork as an entirely new method, but rather as a subcategory. While PAR and pragmatism could frame various research designs and qualitative methods can be done from various paradigms, pragmatic fieldwork occupies the overlap between the three. Having articulated the philosophical commitments of the method, I now turn to the basic research design, which lies in facilitating inter-community knowing.

THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH AS INTERSECTING EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES

Having articulated the philosophical and methodological foundations for pragmatic fieldwork, I now turn to how pragmatic fieldwork approaches research projects. I find that many research designs hold the academic world at the center. Consider Lewin's (1951) famous assertion, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (p. 169). While I agree that good theories lead to good action, notice there is not a similar phrase running around, "There is nothing so theoretical as good practice." Consider translational scholarship, wherein the academic translates his or her ideas so they can be read by nonacademic audiences. While I applaud translational scholarship, and believe that academic writing could stand to be less opaque, the idea that knowledge rests first and foremost in the academy flounders if Rorty's critiques hold sound. If there are no privileged representations, then one community (say, a discipline in the academy) has as much knowledge to learn from another community as it has knowledge to share.

As such, an important part of doing pragmatic fieldwork is bringing together diverse epistemic communities. An epistemic community is a group of people who engage in inquiry together and provide for each other the social dynamics of justification, and in so doing, coordinate action. Epistemic communities authorize and reject claims based on how the knowledge game is played. Rorty's (1979) assertion that communities serve as the foundation of the justification process deeply informs pragmatic fieldwork. Instead of privileging the research question, pragmatic fieldwork takes a stakeholder approach. It is more relevant to pragmatic fieldwork what communities of knowing the researcher is going to move between than any particular framing of the question. The following question helps identify who should be included in the project: "Who are the communities that have a stake in this issue?"

Taking a multi-community approach also helps establish a sense of mutual footing. In many forms of research, data comes from the field, while theory comes from academic writing. From the perspective of Rorty, who refuses to favor certain representations and highlights the communal aspects of knowing, the spoken texts of interviewed people and the written texts of academics are both forms of knowing. As such, it is more meaningful to speak about bringing two epistemic communities into conversation than to suggest that one community authoritatively interprets the other.

While many research methods seek to *know about*, pragmatic fieldwork advocates for *knowing with*. The academic world is one of the communities, while the other communities depend, of course, on the nature of the study. For me, my interest in homeless issues led me to include the discipline of communication, homeless youth, human service volunteers, and nonprofit leadership communities. It is possible that a pragmatic fieldwork project could include only two communities, the academy and one other. However, I encourage fieldworkers to attend to the social dynamics of the particular place they wish to impact. One doesn't always know how the communities of knowing will parse out until the process begins, and being willing to conceptually separate sub-community structures can prove useful when gaining the language competence, trust, buy in, and other parts necessary for knowing.

Once the communities have been roughly identified, the pragmatic fieldworker endeavors to join them in appropriate and ethical ways. Bodies are sites of transformation. Experiences, relationships, and human powers serve as a foundation for methodology. As a human instrument, the researcher joins multiple epistemological communities and becomes one medium through which the situated social worlds of the various

communities pass. In my case, in addition to living and working as an academic, I served as a direct service volunteer, I served in a (volunteer) leadership capacity, and I had several short and one prolonged period of intentional homelessness. I found that seeking solidarity with each community shaped my commitment to the project, interpretive frameworks, and ability to relate to each community.

Now, social worlds do not pass through a person with unproblematic equity. Researchers may occupy one social world more than another and some social worlds hold more sway over the researcher's interpretations than others. Mutuality, even between the notions held by a single mind, is never a place perfectly occupied. I suggest the pragmatic fieldworker apply the same "work in progress" label to their role as medium as she does to her ideas and actions. Interestingly, the community model can actually clarify the process of reflexivity, since identification with different communities can serve as starting points for contemplation ("As a volunteer, I see this..." "As a communication scholar, I see that..."). Membership in communities provides critical reflexivity with some context by giving the interrogating "I" a place in which to stand.

It is quite feasible to do high-quality scholarly work without a full membership model. However, there are various advantages to being an active boundary crosser. My varied roles helped me generate interview questions. I could draw on different identities to negotiate access and foster various forms of social capital. Sometimes people from one sphere asked me about life in another. Perhaps most dear to me and still to this day, my past and periodic willingness to live homelessly helps me communicate and commiserate with the homeless people I serve. It forces me to take complaints more seriously, helps me attend to the impacts homelessness can have on mindset and mood, and provides me with ideas for creating new programs. Depending on the issue, not all researchers can simply join all of the constituent groups they wish to engage. However, I would encourage all researchers to seek appropriate and ethical ways to *share in the life* of all the communities involved.

Engaging in pragmatic fieldwork can also guard against potentially problematic research practices. Some scholars implicate qualitative research as engaging in colonialist forms of knowledge production (Smith, 1990, Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), whereby the social world of the scrutinized people is stolen, transported to the home culture, and transformed into a menagerie. Even researchers who actively try to help the studied population can fall into the colonialist trap of impinging their normative operating models on the studied population. This leads to

“improving” the lives of others by making them more closely resemble that of the researcher.

Pragmatic fieldwork tries to avoid this pitfall by broadening what counts as field. The process of pragmatic fieldwork seeks to know with people in addition to knowing about things. As such, the fieldworker should seek the mutual benefit of all epistemic communities they belong to. Now, particularly in the context of social justice issues, not all communities have the same levels of need. Therefore, a fieldworker should not pretend all communities they draw together need the same level of labor. Nevertheless, from an epistemic perspective, pragmatic fieldwork follows in Rorty’s (1979) critique of philosophy. Philosophy cannot be the “tribunal of culture,” any more than it can create a mirror to nature. Instead, the pragmatic fieldworker engages in an inter-communal project of mutual discovery and action. Earnestly joining those communities creates the epistemic landscape of the project. This is not to say that values are never imported or imposed on others. Certainly I am driven by particular ideologies that I carry as I join other communities. But fostering a position of vulnerability as a researcher and striving for polyvocality helps ameliorate some of these concerns.

Pragmatic fieldwork sees community as the lattice through which inquiry grows since social life is the mechanism that produces knowing. Having laid out the community-based approach pragmatic fieldwork takes to research design, the following section outlines the eight practices a pragmatic fieldworker can use to enjoin epistemic communities for the sake of action.

EIGHT PRACTICES OF PRAGMATIC FIELDWORK

In the above sections, I have articulated the underlying commitments and general approach of pragmatic fieldwork. I will now outline how to perform the method by describing eight practices of pragmatic fieldwork. Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley and Yazzie-Mintz (2012) articulate the importance of laying out what researchers actually do. As such, here I shift from a philosophical orientation toward a practice orientation. Said another way – these are the eight things pragmatic fieldworkers actually do. These practices are themselves not unique to pragmatic fieldwork, but rather are drawn from a variety of research methods and strategies for social action. The eight practices are: ask, envision, gather, labor, observe, present, reflect, and serve. I will first describe how each of these practices plays a role in pragmatic fieldwork. I then turn to how the eight practices are used together.

Ask

Asking people questions rests at the heart of pragmatic fieldwork. In the context of social justice work, it is all too common to assume what the other needs. By simply asking people what they need, the dynamics of philanthropic paternalism can be inverted. SUFK has a tradition of saying, “If StandUp For Kids could do one thing for you today, what would it be?” In addition to guiding organizing practices, asking is at the root of data generation. Of course, interviews are a mainstay of qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Also, Dewey’s (1939) creative democracy relies on using past experience to order conditions to improve future experience. How exactly is one to get at past experience if not by asking about it?

Envision

The work of creative democracy is, in fact, creative. Imagination is not a child’s playground, but rather, it is one of humanity’s most powerful and primordial forces – to author worlds of the mind. Critique has limited pragmatic value if it is never followed with generative envisioning of better possible worlds. Envisioning has both organizing and scholarly ends. Vision can alter the flow of organizational life. It can also produce models and schema that gird theory. In addition to generative imagination, envisioning also involves planning. Planning is often required to transform social conditions. Based on observations, experiences, and imagination, planning structures ideas in a way that makes them easier to convey and more likely to be put into practice.

Gather

Because pragmatic fieldwork is ultimately a community enterprise, gathering becomes a key practice. Pragmatic fieldworkers must gather people and resources for knowledge and action. People must be brought together in order to know together. Part of producing knowledge means gathering people. Academics are very familiar with a form of community gathering called the literature review. The academic community is diffused over both time and space, a community reality enabled by information technology (like writing and high speed internet). Gathering the writings of one’s academic community girds the practices of nearly all academic traditions. The pragmatic fieldworker can also try to gather

other stakeholding knowledge communities. Facilitating connections between relevant communities lies at the heart of pragmatic fieldwork.

Gathering people and resources also enables action. Material resources, like funding, food, and meeting places get taken up by mission-driven people. This means recruiting volunteers or staff, writing grants, and running fundraisers. Gathering creates the social and material conditions that constitute community.

Labor

Pragmatic fieldwork involves work. It is not enough to inform policy. The pragmatic fieldworker labors. Labor is a powerful part of the method. Laboring is a “rubber-hits-the-road” moment that tests, in the pragmatic fieldworker’s body, the pragmatic power of an idea – its ability to motivate action (James, 1896). Labor evaluates the cleverness of a plan or policy. It is always easy to tell someone else how to do something, but actually doing it may reveal the strengths and flaws of the technique. Labor also develops social capital and trust in a community, which enlivens the process of knowing (Rorty, 1979). Organizational stakeholders are more likely to grant access to someone who earnestly labors alongside them. Labor also develops a sense of the life within a community. Finally, labor can be profoundly dignifying, which can transform the fieldworker’s identity in powerful ways.

Observe

Related to ask, observation is another empirical foundation for pragmatic fieldwork. Observation characterizes ethnographic methods (Spradley, 1980). Fostering attentive ways of being in the world improves immediacy, empathy, evaluation, and a host of other organizational virtues. I feel the etymology of “observe” is instructive. It means “watch,” but the word comes from the Latin root *ser*, which means to protect or guard. While surveillance often is rendered in a negative light in critical scholarship, to watch over people who are in actual need of protection is a highly ethical act. This act could just as well be called “witness,” for simply seeing what others try to ignore is an act of justice.

Present

The work of a pragmatic fieldworker is also done through written and spoken words. Presenting includes varied forms of representation,

including writing, performing, teaching, training, and speaking. Presenting is done in the fieldworker's various communities. Presenting warranted assertions need not be done when the research is over. In fact, Dewey (1941) combines inquiry and truth, and makes the case that knowledge can never really be disconnected from the process of inquiry. As such, speaking in the midst of a research project is not to be frowned upon. Rather, speaking with certain knowledge after a project is over is to be regarded with skepticism.

Presentation of ideas is not merely a matter of scholarly elicitation. Researchers have an ethical obligation to speak. To know about an issue but remain silent often plays into unjust social conditions. Speaking also has transformative power on the researcher. Just as performance can alter a person's relation to the knowledge he or she performs (Jones, 1997, Spry, 2011), a pragmatic fieldworker will often internalize realities of his or her work as he or she presents it. Ultimately, presenting ideas provides resources for action and invitation into inquiry.

Reflect

Data generation and action do not flow between each other unmediated. The pragmatic fieldworker must reflect in order for the two to inform each other. Reflecting is the analytical partner to envisioning. The two mental processes work together to produce the inner world of social change. Reflecting is also key for transforming lived experience into theoretical models. As for pragmatic fieldwork, the method highlights the meaning-making power of intentional reflection. In a way, because of Dewey's fusing of truth and inquiry, the act of reflection becomes just as valuable as knowing.

Reflecting is also pivotal for sorting out practice-based abstractions (we often call them missions, policies, etc.). These are often not any less "theoretical" than academic theory. Reflection also has an ethical dimension. Without critical analysis of the state of affairs, we are unlikely to act rightly. To aid this, the fieldworker's reflections can draw on the critical work done by others.

Serve

One of the basic ways that pragmatic fieldwork differs from other academic methods is that it refuses to let the life the people it strives to help be separate from the process of research. Service is related to labor in that it embodies action for the sake of justice, but service is inherently

relational. The fieldworker serves *people*. This is based, in part, on an ontology of immediacy, that the world cannot wait for perfect understandings prior to action. Service is similar to labor, in that it tests the pragmatic value of a belief. Does the belief move you to serve?

Service also directly improves the mission of academic research. Service stretches across the relational lines of human power, which means that interpretation changes as the fieldworker grows. When I make my body, my mind, my life about others, it alters how I think about them. To care for someone, to make their needs the purpose of my life, has transformative potential. Now, service doesn't necessarily have an ennobling effect. Serving someone in need without critical reflection, without asking what they need, or without joining in their life has the possibility of reinforcing problematic interpretations of power. However, paired with the insights drawn from critical scholarship (which enters pragmatic fieldwork through "reflect"), service to others can destabilize cultural discourses and can reframe operant schema.

The Eight Practices in Practice

I cannot remember to do eight things at once. Once a grocery trip involves more than three items, I must have a list. Otherwise, I will forget something every time. Similarly, I do not wish to imply that doing pragmatic fieldwork means moving between the computer screen, the academic community, other communities, and organized life with all eight of these practices perfectly in mind. Rather, the eight practices serve as to-do list. When spooling up a pragmatic fieldwork project, identifying opportunities and objectives for each practice is a fine place to start. When engaged in an ongoing project, returning to the list to see if one of the practices has fallen away can be orienting as well.

Here are a few ways each practice can be developed. Asking can be improved by developing empathy, learning interviewing techniques, fostering respect for alternate representations of the world, practicing active listening, and learning how to probe. Envisioning can be improved by acquiring heuristic devices, imagining often and vividly, drawing ideas on paper, and learning planning/problem solving models. Fieldworkers can gather better by developing techniques for recruitment and facilitation and improving skills in grant writing and fundraising. Capacity for laboring can be improved by acquiring techniques for staff coordinating, facility maintenance, etc. and staying in active physical and mental shape. Observation can be improved by practicing fieldnote techniques, reading detective stories (Goodall, 1994), learning how to

separate description and evaluation, and being in one's senses. Presenting can be improved by studying presentational structure, practicing writing, speaking, and performing for a variety of audiences, and developing new styles of presentation. Reflecting can be improved by journaling, meditating, identifying and resisting the urge to satisfice, reading critical scholarship, developing logical reasoning (deduction, induction, abduction), and learning techniques for reflexive consideration, close reading, and coding techniques. Finally, serving can be improved by fostering hospitality, cultivating compassion, nurturing an attitude of otherness, acquiring strategies for communicating immediacy, and honing resilience techniques.

Each of the eight practices draws on our personalities and histories. Some people may even be naturally inclined to a few more than others. However, there are skills associated with each, and those skills can be improved. As Bourdieu (1977) articulates, our *habitus*, our ongoing, embodied actions, systematically shape the way we see. I believe the pragmatic fieldworker meaningfully pursues social justice by intentionally developing these eight *habitus*. This enables the fieldworker to see the life and structure of human interaction and reconstitute communities through symbols and bodies.

Action Pairs

In addition to performing these pragmatic fieldwork practices one at a time, they can also be done in what I call action pairs. The pragmatic fieldworker can engage in one action for the benefit of another. Formulated as a question, this relationship reads "How can X improve Y?" How can asking improve my serving? How can observing improve my reflecting? How can reflecting improve my labor? Each practice becomes a heuristic device for the benefit of the others. If the fieldworker needs to write an interview guide, he or she can move through the seven other practices to improve his or her asking. These couplings can also form a chain of efforts. Pragmatic fieldworkers can observe to better ask, ask to better reflect, reflect to better envision, envision to better labor... and so on. There is some temptation to lay out an objective order or step-by-step process. However, that process would be both fictive and useless. These processes move iteratively based on contextual judgment, sudden changes in situations, and external demands. I will provide an example of two action-pair chains that I followed during the course of this larger project. Each action pair represents one practice moving into and augmenting a second practice.

Serve/Observe: When I first started volunteering at StandUp, I noticed that many volunteers didn't stay. We were always training new people. I wouldn't have known this if I had simply visited the organization, so it was through serving over time that it became observable.

Observe/Reflect: Based on that observation, I began to reflect on why. Certainly there are challenges to working with homeless youth. Volunteers burn out. But it may also have been that our training needed to be improved. The training was mostly informational and lacked any real motivational component.

Reflect/Envision: Based on these reflections, I began envisioning new trainings. Ultimately, I restructured the training so it was loosely based on the extended parallel processing model (EPPM) (Witte, 1992). The EPPM argues that fear elicits action when the person thinks there is something to be done and they are the one to do it. Based on this model, the informational section of the training served as a form of fear appeal (for the sake of the youth), and the following discussion of program and practices served as efficacy building.

Envision/Labor: When I shared my new model with the executive director at the time, she decided to put me in charge of training.

Labor/Present: And so I began leading the monthly trainings for the organization and continued doing so for two and a half years.

As demonstrated in the above training example, the action pairs lead into each other. The product of one practice calls for another practice to follow. Did I know when I started volunteering that I would be leading the trainings? No. Absolutely not. Instead, I was guided by contextual judgment as I moved through the scene. The work of a pragmatic fieldworker is not unlike a plant, twisting one way then another as it reaches for the sun. The plant never gets to the sun, just as the work of creative democracy is never complete. However, guided by the aspirant ideal, the fieldworker can navigate around and incorporate different structures or challenges placed in his or her path. Here I provide another example that helps illustrate:

Reflect/Envision: I wondered why volunteers gave their time. So I envisioned a qualitative research project to help answer this question.

Envision/Serve: The research project encouraged me to be more consistent with my service to the youth. I started going on outreach regularly, which improved my ability to serve.

Serve/Observe: I began taking fieldnotes of my volunteering experiences. I was observing volunteer behavior, and being a volunteer helped open up observational avenues that were very valuable.

Observe/Reflect: As I observed, the actions and discussions of the volunteers began populating my fieldnotes. I read my fieldnotes and thought about what I saw. I started to articulate what I really wanted to know about their commitments and motivations.

Reflect/Envision: Having reflected on what was really curious, I could better envision how my interviews would go. I created an interview guide based on those reflections.

Envision/Ask: As standard qualitative practice suggests, having an interview guide improved the interviews I did. I recruited various volunteers and interviewed them on their commitments to SUFK.

Ask/Reflect: The answers to their questions became transcript data, and that, along with my fieldnote data, served as text to analyze. I started looking for themes and patterns. During this time, I also engaged in the action pair Serve/Reflect, as my own volunteering pushed my analysis forward.

Reflect/Envision: By reflecting on my textual data and embodied experience, I created a model that helped describe volunteer commitment, drawn from the metaphors volunteers had used.

Envision/Present: I shared my model with my academic community.

Present/Envision: Presenting forced me to clarify what I really meant, and the feedback I received helped me tighten both my argument and the model.

Envision/Labor: I started thinking about the organization's efforts differently and began structuring our efforts based on the model. To this day, I use the model as a heuristic device for leading volunteers, strategizing development goals, and helping youth imagine their futures.

These two examples serve as pictures of the dynamic recursion of action pair chains in pragmatic fieldwork. The fieldworker moves dynamically, even messily, through the various practices. The stories above are in fact oversimplifications. In a single week, situations arose that called me to engage various practices. But despite being impossible to model linearly, the eight practices serve as an actionable guide for pragmatic fieldwork, which I hope serves as a specific model of creative democracy in a qualitative context.

The eight practices can be used to create plans for future projects. Scholars interested in doing pragmatic fieldwork can use them as a guide to envision action. The practices are perhaps even more valuable as a

dynamic, responsive way of being in the world. There were times when I was in the midst of presenting my ideas, typing away at my computer, when someone called me and told me the youth house had been broken into. And so I found myself drilling boards across broken doors or covering broken windows. I wasn't planning on laboring that day, but situations arise. Similarly, there have been times where academic concerns are far from my mind, and I am simply helping a young adult use Google to find a house. But then he would say something profound that triggers a series of realizations. And suddenly I found myself in the midst of an ethnographic interview, asking him questions and getting answers that speak to an important issue in communication studies. Sometimes I was trying to break up a fight, and in the midst of the screaming and perhaps traded blows, I was desperately reflecting on de-escalation techniques that I could implement. In those moments, I'm never thinking, "I'm doing pragmatic fieldwork!" Rather, I draw on what practices I have developed as they are needed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined what I call pragmatic fieldwork, a method that exists at the intersection of pragmatist philosophy, qualitative methods, and participatory action. It is my hope that pragmatic fieldwork can serve as an actionable methodology in various contexts. While I have a dear love for qualitative research, PAR, and pragmatism all on their own and would advocate for their use individually, I believe that together they create a coherent and powerful resource for transformation. I hope that pragmatic fieldwork can serve others who seek to be advocates, researchers, and social actors.

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