ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN ACTION RESEARCH: GETTING OUT OF WESTERN NORMS TO FOSTER EQUITABLE COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss a pervasive ethical issue when undertaking action research (AR) projects with communities that have been historically marginalized: how outsiders’ learned, normative Western thinking makes building equitable relationships difficult. I then offer strategies for researchers coming from privileged, outsider positionalities to develop their reflective capacities in order to decolonize their thinking. The strategies are based on ten years of reflexive AR work with Quechua community members in rural Peru. The strategies offer guidance on how individuals might begin to transform their internal frameworks when thinking about “the other,” in order to be able to build equitable relationships during action research projects.

KEYWORDS: Action Research; Ethics; Education; Positionality and Power
INTRODUCTION

Action research (AR) was developed to be a fundamentally participatory, collaborative, and ethical approach to gaining knowledge of real-life phenomena, while also making a contribution to improving the lives of the people with whom a researcher works (Boser, 2006; Brydon-Miller, 2008; Eikland, 2006; Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; Robertson, 2000). The social justice oriented ideals of AR also mean that there are unique ethical tensions within the practices and philosophies of this methodology (Morton, 1999). For example, when working with communities that have been historically marginalized, deep issues about positionality and power—issues that cut to the foundation of AR as an ethical, democratic, and participatory process—have yet to be fully understood (Bat & Fasoli, 2013; Janes, 2016; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Snow, et. al., 2016). This article contributes new insights about the issues of positionality and power, and how an AR researcher might build more socially just relationships with their collaborators. I address the question: How are mutually respectful and equitable relationships built and maintained during AR research if an action researcher is from an outsider positionality? The realities and history of Western colonialism and imperialistic thinking make this question quite difficult to answer. Addressing this question also has a multitude of ethical implications. In this article I seek to start a conversation about the processes in which action researchers from outsider positionalities can think about and develop thinking practices for ethical relationship building during AR projects.

Although not always the case, action researchers often come from different backgrounds than those with whom they work (Janes, 2016), and as a researcher, they hold a relatively privileged position in most contexts (even if they embody identities that are not as privileged in mainstream society) (Eikeland, 2006). Being a privileged outsider performing AR raises deep and complex questions of power, interpretation, and voice on top of the already challenging enterprise of collaborative work and inquiry. In this article, I discuss a few of the deeper tensions and nuances of ethical relationship building in practice through reflecting upon my learning experiences when working with Quechua-speaking (Indigenous) communities as an action researcher since 2009. I focus specifically on three aspects of ethical relationship building practice as an action researcher: 1) the relational and power dynamics of voice and representation when making decisions during a project; 2) how action researchers’ learned ways of thinking may inhibit communication, interpersonal understandings, and equitable relationship building; and 3) the ethical implications of interpretation when coming from a privileged positionality and working with marginalized communities.

The article is divided into five sections. First, I briefly discuss some of the more prevalent literature on ethics and biases from the standpoint of a privileged outsider when performing AR with marginalized communities. I highlight the need for more research on practices during AR projects to facilitate active learning on the action researcher’s part, in order to address some of the more subtle issues and tensions that could negatively affect an AR project. I then describe the context and AR projects from which my argument and approaches were developed, as well as my positionality. Third, I discuss reflexive processes in AR, which is the starting point for the strategies I present in the fourth section. The
fourth section is a discussion of strategies towards getting out of a purely Western mindset, recognizing one's biases, and engaging in a set of thinking practices for planning purposes and in situ considerations for socially just relationship building during AR research that I offer to the discussion about ethical relationship building in AR projects. In this section I focus on the subtleties and nuance of ethical tensions within relationship building, utilizing narrative reflection from my work and my learning processes as examples. I then discuss the limitations of these reflections, potential ways forward, and implications for action researchers in the concluding section.

**Literature Review**

AR principles are geared towards democratic and socially just practices, as they were created in response to the hierarchical, dehumanizing, and unjust research practices present in some of the more “traditional” research paradigms (Brydon-Miller, 2008). Because AR is founded on being an inherently more ethical approach to research, it is important to explore the nuances and subtle ethical tensions that exist within AR processes, such as the power-dynamics within relationships during a research project. It is especially important to think about relationship building when working with non-dominant groups, no matter the research paradigm. There is a long history of dehumanization and abuse from researchers who wish to “study” historically marginalized groups, such as Indigenous communities, visible minorities, gender and sexual orientation minorities, and many others (Assembly of First Nations, 2009; Ball & Janyst, 2008; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; South African San Institute, 2017; Smith, 1999). Many Indigenous communities have created their own ethical frameworks for working with them in response to this abuse. One of the key points of their ethical guidelines is that respectful and reciprocal relationships are essential (Assembly of First Nations, 2009; Australian institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; South African San Institute, 2017). For AR, socially just relationships are a cornerstone of its ethical principle of research (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Springer, 1996). Yet, it seems many Western educated researchers from all disciplines (including AR) still have trouble understanding how to develop socially just relationships, as they often make mistakes, particularly about how to distribute power to ensure that everyone is a collaborator on equal footing. In this article, I hope to partially address this current gap in knowledge.

Barriers to ethical relationship building often come from researchers’ implicit biases, and implicit theoretical assumptions about how things should be done (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Holroyd, 2012). Implicit biases are defined as unconscious or semi-conscious (implicit) associations between an identity construct (such as race) and negative associations about that construct. Implicit biases are often ingrained during an individual’s acculturation and formal education (Rorty, 1999). In Western society, research has found that implicit biases foster inequitable power dynamics and relationships, amongst many other unjust or inequitable behaviors (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006; Jost, et al., 2009). I will discuss implicit theoretical assumptions below.
There are five forms of biases affecting equitable relationship building discussed in the literature. The first bias that researchers might have internalized is that they see individuals from non-dominant groups and communities as primarily the stereotypes (or even archetypes) that they have heard about, which could mean romanticizing and/or tokenizing non-dominant cultures and ways of life. Romanticizing communities includes not “seeing” the complex individuals and communities who make up those cultures and ways of life for who they are, and not seeing the complexity of life in that community. An individual may see people from marginalized communities as one-dimensional representations instead of complex individuals with their own agency and uniqueness (Anzaldúa, 1987; Smith, 1999). A second bias is deficit model thinking, seeing non-dominant communities and individuals only as poor, oppressed, and without resources. This way of thinking leads to the false conclusion that “they” (marginalized peoples) need “our” (Western individuals) patronizing help, goods, values, culture, and so on because “they” are lacking (Esteva & Prakash, 2014; Friere, 2000; Smith, 1999). It also contributes to the privileged person guilt phenomena, which is equally patronizing, as it lacks understanding and nuance. A third dehumanizing implicit thought pattern, (which is less common for academics today, but still happens far too often) sees individuals from non-dominant communities as inferior, “less than,” weaker or less intelligent than the dominating groups (Esteva & Prakash, 2014). And a fourth pattern sees non-dominant communities, and the history of the abuses by Western peoples, as less important than other issues, such as the economy or global politics (Banks & Banks, 2010).

Very few researchers would consciously espouse overtly biased or bigoted ideas in this day and age, especially not action researchers. However, there is a fifth implicit bias that I have often seen in contexts of AR work with individuals from marginalized communities: it is the strong adherence to a theory (such as critical theory or postcolonial theory) that may not accurately represent the realities or values of the community one is working with. This largely implicit bias (implicit theoretical assumption) I call theoretical orthodoxy. Theoretical orthodoxy is a Western construct developed by the academy (Klein, 2012). Theoretical orthodoxy can harm relationships, as a researcher views all phenomena through the interpretative lens of their preferred theory, without reflecting upon and amending that theory to integrate new or competing evidence or perspectives from their collaborators. An action researcher may then marginalize the ideas and theories of their collaborators. This may include enacting certain practices (such as decision-making practices) a certain way, without understanding how others from the community might do it. Theoretical orthodoxy could also mean that the action researcher sets up systems and forms of communication that go against the values of the community, hurting relationships. In the following sections I offer a few strategies that may support work to overcome the biases that romanticize, patronize, stereotype, create guilt, and trap individuals in theoretical orthodoxy.

The five biases mentioned in this review developed historically from centuries of Western imperialism. These biases have been ingrained in textbooks, patterns of speech, and popular culture for centuries, so overcoming and breaking out of Western-created “soft bigotry”, which exists in addition to the overt bigotry researchers often decry, requires significant
learning, time, as well as engaging in certain habits of thought to overcome the insidious and restricting mental norms and frameworks implicitly cultivated and implicitly taught (Apple & King, 1983; Iseke-Barnes, 2008).

The viewpoints of Western imperialism are instilled in Western born and bred individuals through popular culture and schooling that tokenizes and stereotypes non-dominant peoples in history and humanities classes, if marginalized communities are discussed at all (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Freire, 2000). Western textbooks and schooling can do significant harm to the way Western (and non-Western) students think (Stonebanks, 2008). More than facts, they teach implicit thought patterns and Western norms (part of the “hidden curriculum”) that Western individuals then carry with them, even if they do not want to (Apple & King, 1983; Giroux, 1983; hooks, 2003). These implicit thought patterns then subtly influence how relationships are built and maintained when Western educated researchers engage in research. Even AR researchers who focus on ethical and socially just practices are not immune to the influences of our colonial history. Good intentions and ethical principles do not guarantee that ethical practices occur.

Though it is not the “fault” of those of us who were raised with Western norms, at this historical moment individuals who have been brought up with implicit biases within their cultural milieu have a responsibility to break free from these Western norms and habits in order to engage on a human-to-human level with their collaborators, instead of carrying a false consciousness that impedes authentic and ethical relationship building (Friere, 2000). This is not to say that all Western norms are problematic, but instead that being trapped in Western norms affects how one engages with others who may not be living in that paradigm, so cognitive and emotional freedom is essential for action researchers, yet it is difficult to achieve.

At this point it is important to note and acknowledge that marginalized groups, such as Indigenous communities, continue to face overt, systemic, and covert violence and abuse at the hands of Western individuals, including researchers. Out of respect for the many individuals affected, I wish to cite articles that speak about the historical injustices perpetuated by individuals on marginalized groups. In the case of Quechua speaking communities, I acknowledge here and cite articles that discuss overt and covert violence reported elsewhere that continues to bring to light the many issues faced by marginalized communities. (see e.g., Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Ames, 2012; Archuleta, Child & Lomawaima, 2000; Crivello, 2011; Huaman, 2013; Lomawaima, 1999; and Trask, 1999 to name a few). In this paper, it is my assumption that if an individual is reading the article they are interested in developing just relationships and would not perpetuate violence on others, but are working against violence. So, I am going to focus on potential positive learning approaches for Westerners to not do subtle harm, create annoyances, or build inequitable relationships. To do so, I reflect upon some of the subtleties of my learning process to break out of the Western norms society foisted upon me—particularly the fifth bias, theoretical orthodoxy.
CONTEXT
Since 2009, I have worked on two education initiatives in the Peruvian Andes, which have included AR projects. Coming from a Western, privileged, outsider position, I have learned many hard lessons about ethical AR relationship building practices when working with my Quechua colleagues. In this section I describe the context of this work, and briefly discuss my positionality as an action researcher.

In the Peruvian Andes, many Quechua-speaking households still do not have electricity or potable water. Accessible schooling is also limited to primary-level education in one- or two-room multi-grade schools, and only a few of the individuals who teach in Quechua-speaking communities speak Quechua (Valdiviezo, 2009). Additionally, after primary school, Quechua-speaking youth in rural communities (particularly girls) do not have access to secondary schools, as the nearest schools are often hours away.

Because of these issues, in 2009 a friend asked me to collaborate with him and other colleagues on an initiative to support his Quechua-speaking goddaughter’s dream to go to secondary school, and support the dreams of other Quechua-speaking young women like her. My friend’s goddaughter lived in a remote rural community that was an approximately 2-hour walk from the nearest secondary school. The trip was too long to be feasible as a daily commute. So, the founders of the project built a dormitory and education center close to the nearest school. The dormitory supported girls’ access to secondary school, as they could stay in a safe place to attend school, and then go home on weekends. The dormitory has a Quechua-speaking housemother to supervise the students and ensure their safety, and also hires professional tutors and educators to provide supplementary education, with a specific aim to hire Quechua-speaking tutors, as the dorm and education center’s goal is to be community grounded and culturally grounded. The mission of this initiative is to provide access to quality education so that girls from remote communities can have choices in life and become strong leaders in their communities and beyond.

Rural Quechua-speaking students, like these girls, face a number of social and academic challenges when they attend the Spanish speaking secondary schools (Ames & Rojas, 2010). Their situation prompted us to engage in an AR project with our students and their parents to make the dormitory and education center better suited to facilitate the students’ empowerment, learning, and success, as well as to ensure that students’ identities and self-concepts are healthy and strong, through culturally-grounded education practices (for more information about this project see: Levitan, 2015, 2018).

The second initiative was started in 2016. The idea came from discussing the reality of schooling for rural Quechua-speaking students with friends and colleagues in a rural highland community. The challenges rural families face to send their children to schools away from their communities are immense, so members of the first initiative, along with other colleagues within the Quechua-speaking community, used an AR approach to explore how to bring quality education to the communities, instead of having students attend school far away from their families. This sparked the idea to create culturally-grounded education centers (Yachay Wasi del Allyu) in communities. In these centers, the community
would collaboratively decide what learning is necessary and important. The leadership for this new initiative facilitates learning opportunities based on the community’s ideas, values, and goals. Currently, the first education center in operation has a computer lab and two classrooms. This education center supplements primary and secondary education, and also serves adults who wish to learn. The education center works to ensure that community identities and values are promoted in response to the question: how can we better create learning opportunities and quality education with a community, building on the community’s strengths and addressing community defined areas for growth?

Working and learning with community members on these projects has taught me a lot about pitfalls in the explicit and implicit mental frameworks I hold. I have learned about many assumptions in my thinking, and I have learned a few efficacious practices when developing a social justice oriented project with communities from different ways of being than how I was acculturated in my youth. My positionality is as a white male, U.S. citizen/4th generation immigrant who has Russian Jewish ethno-religious roots, as well as German Catholic ethno-religious roots. I speak Spanish and English, and am learning Quechua. When I first arrived in Peru, I had narrow, postcolonial/decolonizing and democratic outlooks on this work. Based on the theoretical orthodoxy I was acculturated into, I also had a number of misconceptions due to generalized and learned Western thinking patterns and principles that were not connected to the lived human realities and cultures I was engaging with and learning from. I learned a lot from the colleagues and friends I gained through this work, and I share some of this learning because of its implications for ethical relationship building when performing AR. I discuss the process of my learning to date, and the strategies I developed based on what I learned in the following sections. First I will discuss the foundation to these strategies, reflexive processes, and share a short story about reflexive processes during an AR project.

REFLEXIVE PROCESSES AND ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
Although debates about the means and ends of ethics are common among Western academics, the principles of ethical, just, and fair processes are inherent in AR philosophies (Brydon-Miller, 2008; Morton, 1999). Reflexivity is one of the core practices inherent in ethical, and high quality AR (Brydon-Miller, 2008). Here, reflexivity is defined not only as personal reflection as a means to ensure that the work is happening properly, but also that the action-researcher is uncovering and questioning their assumptions and implicit values as part of the process (Finlay & Gough, 2008). Reflexivity is an ethical stance in which one is constantly acknowledging and reflecting upon the implications of one’s thinking, actions, and choices as well as others’ words and actions. Reflexivity can also provide avenues for improved intersubjective understandings, so that people are not unknowingly hurt or marginalized during collaboration. AR, performed in close alignment with its principles, incorporates a rigorous and theoretically informed reflexive process (Robertson, 2000).

In order to engage in a reflexive process for ethical relationship building during AR, it is important to regularly ask questions about what is going on between individuals as well as
within the project. There are a number of questions that are useful to ask regularly. Below are six such questions that are often applicable and might be asked in AR contexts:

1. Definitions of “good” and objectives of the project—who is making the definitions and who is creating the objectives?
2. How might objectives unwittingly oppress or harm individuals who do not have much power?
3. What are the power dynamics between different groups and/or individuals?
4. Who is afforded a louder voice? Who might not be heard? Who is important to listen to?
5. Are decision-making processes just? If so/not, in what ways?
6. How are ideas interpreted and put into action?

These questions can be asked both for individual self-reflection and with AR community collaborators to ensure that relationships are built in a cooperative way that pays attention to power dynamics and focuses on equitable voice. I found explicitly asking these questions to be very important to my process of building positive relationships and breaking out of my own theoretical orthodoxy.

For example, when we first started the dormitory project, my colleagues and I thought that access to education would be enough to ensure that the girls would grow to be powerful women, become leaders in their communities, and gain access to opportunity. Although we were aligned with decolonizing and postcolonial theories, and knew that schools were often spaces of marginalization, we also thought that since the students were going to go to a public school with local teachers, those issues would be avoided. Students and parents shared this idea, but soon all of us realized that access to schooling was not enough, as the school marginalized the students, and teachers treated the girls as inferior. The girls, who were from rural, remote communities, did not have the same academic preparation as their peers, so the teachers and administrators did not spend the same amount of time teaching them academic subjects. This clearly hurt the students academically and emotionally, so we had to re-think what our definitions of good meant, and what our objectives were going to be, developing and then asking questions one and two. We thought the local education was going to be “good,” and we thought that our objectives were a clear path towards the students’ success.

Some of the parents thought that the girls would just need to struggle through this marginalization, as that was a sacrifice they had to make to gain access to opportunity. Parents are often in a position of more power than their children, so if we had simply listened to the parents, instead of asking questions three and four, the students would have been stuck in a school that negatively affected their wellbeing because the well-meaning, but ultimately hurtful, ideas of parents. As part of this AR project we thought carefully about how to maintain trusting relationships with the students and parents, asking questions five and six to the parents and students, to make sure that we developed productive and honest communication, which allowed us to then find a new school for the girls that was culturally grounded and more supportive, but in a different town than we had originally planned.
During the process of negotiating the education of the students we would discuss the educational implications of the parents’ and students’ goals. We conversed with parents and students both separately and together so that each group could formulate their own ideas and then think about how to communicate their ideas to each other. This was our response to questions three and five, though in other contexts that answer may be different. We would also ask shy students if they would like to speak to the house mother in private to make sure that all voices were heard. As the power dynamics in this space were such that adults had more power than children, and older children had more power than younger children, reflexivity was essential. Thus, engaging from an outsider positionality that could ask questions that were reflective enabled us to point out a few assumptions within the discussion, allowing us to hear from students and parents who had different power. We wanted to ensure that decision-making was as equitable as possible through asking the above six questions during the conversations we had.

However, as outsiders we also had our biases from postcolonial and decolonizing orthodoxy to contend with. We thought that the school was a colonizing space for the students and some of us thought that we should just educate the students away from any formal school. However, both the students and parents were absolutely against this idea. They wanted access to the wider world and economic opportunity, so it would have been patronizing to tell them that “we knew better” to say that they would not get the educational opportunities they sought out. Instead, we thought together, collaboratively, to deal with the problems that the students were facing. Through learning to ask the above reflective questions, this AR project led to a constant refining of the initiative’s objectives, which are now updated regularly (Levitan, 2018). The personal and group reflexivity allowed me, as well as my colleagues from outsider positions, to re-position ourselves as co-learners alongside the parents and students (who were now explicitly colleagues), so that the work and learning was more transparent and collaborative. This process also created an outwardly spiraling iterative action research orientation to the project.

The reflexive questions above are only a sample of questions that might be asked. I found them to be particularly important in ethical AR relationship building practices, but other questions are also important. Constantly developing new and more nuanced questions can make for more ethical relationship development with collaborators. For example, question three— “What are the power dynamics between different groups and/or individuals?” — can develop into “In what contexts do certain individuals hold power, and in what contexts do others hold power? Is power distributed justly based on who is doing the work and who is affected?” The process of constant reflexive question posing, answering, reflecting, and refining during my work with the community members in the Peruvian Andes allowed me to learn from mistakes, and led to the following strategies for ethical relationship building.

**Strategies for Ethical Relationship Building during AR Projects**

The three strategies below are offered as a starting point for developing an AR ethics framework that specifically focuses on changing habits of thinking when coming from an outsider positionality to build ethical relationships when working with non-dominant
communities. These strategies contribute to and complement literature on opening a communicative space (Wicks & Reason, 2009) as well as privilege and power (Boser, 2006; Eikeland, 2006; Janes, 2016; Lundy & McGovern, 2006) in AR research. These strategies are not necessarily new or different from common AR ethics principles. Instead, the description of how these strategies are enacted offer some of the nuance and meaning behind them based on prior action research projects.

Each strategy is stated below, followed by a story from my AR work experience that describes how it might be put into action.

Do not make the project’s goals or objectives static. Instead, think of them as part of an iterative, interactive process.

One of the ways in which thinking from an outsider positionality can lead to unethical and/or harmful action is when AR practitioners focus too narrowly or rigidly on one goal—based upon implicit biases and a theoretical orthodoxy about how one “does” development or research work. Similar to the reflexive questions above, I have found that the pursuit of fixed or narrow objectives often leads to problems. These problems occur when individuals in charge of a project do not meaningfully consult community members when formulating goals, and instead develop projects that they think are “good” for those people based on their own frameworks, or based on incomplete information. This lack of consultation is problematic for a variety of reasons, but here I will focus on one issue.

Democratic processes are built into the frameworks of AR, though how that process is carried out can lead to vastly different consequences (Janes, 2016). If an outside AR practitioner does not change their goals (even slightly) during a consultation process, then it is likely that the AR practitioner is falling into the trap of fixed, narrow-minded, and potentially unethical objectives. It is essential to consult deeply with community members as full partners when doing ethical AR work. Otherwise, the project will likely create major problems.

The example of a fixed goal for simply facilitating access to secondary school in the “Reflexive Processes” section above is a case in point. Though that objective was developed with the community, as the work continued, the students, parents, and outsider colleagues realized that our original objectives needed to change. Not doing so would have hurt the students.

Another, positive case-in-point occurred during the iterative development of community objectives generated during the first years of the community education center. Members of the community—collaboratively and with equal power amongst community members—selected learning objectives, first deciding that computer skills and Spanish and English language classes, along with leadership and recycling classes would be the main foci for the center. However, community members quickly learned that, while computer skills and language classes for Spanish and English were important, there were deeper learning objectives that needed to be met. By the second year, parents and students recognized that learning how to read and write in Quechua was something missing in schools and in their
own education, so they decided to change the focus of the literacy classes to Quechua, while also learning verbal English, instead of Spanish, as the students learn Spanish in schools. The community, through this iterative process, developed this reformulation.

This decision happened to be in alignment with my personal decolonizing/postcolonial stance, so I felt personally gratified to hear this objective. But, if I had tried to push this objective onto the community before the first year, I would have been patronizing and acting out of accord with the community. In learning to give up my own proclivities so that I could deeply listen with and be responsive to community members’ goals, I was able to work harmoniously with the community leaders, parents, and students, instead of causing problems by pushing a certain framework.

Once the idea of teaching Quechua literacy came up during a community consultation process, I was gratified to hear it, so I was happy to work to find a good teacher of Quechua. Instead of trying to be “right” I tried to be collaborative, which is a subtle but important difference. I did express my opinion, but I was happy to take it off the table when other parents said no. I did continue to practice and learn Quechua from the students, and if I was teaching a class in English I would ask to exchange words in Quechua so that I could learn as well, but that was the extent of my language revitalization/decolonizing approach.

The above case is one more example of how those who articulate flexible objectives, and follow through with their flexibility, can avoid problematic relationships, which may allow project goals to develop in their own time and with full community self-determination and buy-in. This education center case demonstrates the issues with rigidly defining and not changing goals or objectives. Ensuring flexibility through building trusting relationships while providing space for communities to make their own decisions during an AR project ensures relationships are respectful and reciprocal.

In general, ethical AR relationship building practitioners would consult with community members at the very beginning to create a project that is community grounded (Burns, Harvey, & Aragón, 2012). However, some of our Western biases might cause us to feel that we need a single defined and set goal, which should not be changed once agreed upon—this is part of our Western bias. Getting out of that bias can allow us to engage fully with collaborators. Ethical relationship building during AR requires updating and changing project goals as problems arise, so that the project can adapt to the community’s realities. This strategy also breaks out of the patronizing implicit framework of someone who wants to “help.” Instead, utilizing this strategy develops relationships as someone who wants to work with or alongside.

**Think about issues from multiple theoretical frameworks, in addition to including multiple perspectives**

As an outsider, one of the most significant dangers in AR work is misinterpreting the voices of colleagues and potentially acting based on a misunderstanding that goes in a different direction than what colleagues mean. As our Western norms bias us towards relying upon implicit or explicit theories of the world, one way of beginning to break out of those
theories is adopting a multi-theoretical habit of thought. This would create epistemological space as an outsider to become more reflexive and nuanced in their thinking, and allows an action researcher the ability to uncover their assumptions when interpreting colleagues’ words. Thinking from multiple theories also allows an action researcher to reflect back one’s thinking to their colleagues so that intersubjective understandings can be better developed (Levitan, 2018).

In my experience, when I have tried to ensure understanding in complex work spaces such as at the dormitory or at the education center, I have found that it is more effective to present thoughtful, multiple interpretations when trying to make decisions that are going to be my responsibility, and ask which interpretation is closer to what is meant. I find this strategy to be more helpful than asking open-ended or yes/no questions for clarification. It also allowed me to make my assumptions explicit, so that those unchecked assumptions do not cause problems in the future. Engaging in the practice of mental flexibility to interpret ideas/voices from multiple theories builds more quickly towards intersubjective understandings. This strategy is especially helpful if one is coming from Western normative thinking that relies upon theories.

Because of their collaborative and democratic nature, I find AR projects to be ideal for my multi-theory interpretative work. However, the multi-theory approach depends upon the circumstances and relational dynamics between individuals. I always consider context and who I am speaking with when engaging in this practice. The communicative process is fraught with miscommunication, and in the context of working as a cultural outsider, it is the responsibility of the outsider to check that their understanding is close enough to their colleagues’ understandings to ensure that the action researcher is not doing something that goes against the goals and values of the community. In my experience many of the problems, both ethical and relational, are due to misunderstandings (especially misunderstandings of the implications or connotations of someone’s words). These misunderstandings often come from implicit mental traps because of the action researcher’s Western schooling.

I experienced a clear example of the need for this strategy when working with the students at the dormitory to develop more culturally-grounded educational opportunities. When talking to the students about what they wanted to learn and what their goals were, the students’ stated that they wanted to become professionals, which created a lot of interpretative space, especially as the students were not exactly sure what professionalism meant or looked like. So, instead of interpreting the students’ words from a Western, development perspective of a salaried employee, we interpreted their ideas in multiple ways. We then reflected those interpretations back to the students. We found it particularly valuable to reflect back their goals with concrete examples, to better understand what their goals meant beyond our limited and Western-biased understanding of the word “professional”. We interpreted students’ ideas from development, feminist and post/de colonial perspectives. What we learned when discussing our interpretation with the students was much different from what we had originally assumed (Levitan, 2018).
Students pointed to the feminist options of talking to women leaders, and focusing more on their home communities as spaces for learning and professional development. If we had followed our assumptions and created projects that focused on learning from the more obvious development lens of test preparation for more competitiveness in applications to university—which would assist them on their path to becoming “professionals” in the Western sense of a salaried job—our decision would have been oppressive and would have gone against their understandings.

**Analyze and understand power, positionality, and relational dynamics: Be able to transform them within yourself in order to contribute to their change in the context of the action research project**

This is the final, and perhaps most important strategy for ethical habits of mind in AR. This strategy consists of two parts: 1) the ability to understand the dynamics of power, positionality, and relationships; and 2) the ability to utilize that knowledge as part of an internal and external transformational process. Each part has its own practices and skills to master.

Understanding the dynamics of power and relationships is partially an observational skill. One needs to be able to see and interpret non-verbal communication, to understand who is taking up most of the decision-making space, and if there are ideas that are not being shared or heard because members are not given the emotional or temporal space to speak.

It is also possible to observe power-dynamics if impractical ideas are considered more deeply or even approved because of the positionality of the person or people offering those ideas. For example, during the creation of the community education center, the *junta directiva*, (the president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer of the community) were running the meeting to discuss where to house the education center. One of the community members without a title, but who owned a trout farm, was the person who presented ideas that were considered the most deeply, even though some of the ideas were the least practical, such as getting a building from the Ministry of Education. Without deeper knowledge of context (which the action researchers did not know, but knew to ask about) the idea made sense, but the reality for those who knew how the Ministry worked was more complex. However, the people who knew the inner workings of the Ministry did not want to question him in public. Fortunately, before we started to engage in the lengthy process of working with the Ministry, we asked people who did not speak much during the meeting about their thoughts.

Understanding the power dynamics allowed our AR team to speak with others, particularly mothers, in spaces where the trout farmer was not present. The trout farmer was a well-respected man and a supportive parent, but because of his standing in the community he—perhaps unconsciously and unintentionally—caused people to not question him, even though he was fine when I said that his idea was not going to work. When asking around, someone who was silent during the meeting told me that the Ministry would not provide the classrooms they had built, even though two were not in use. The Ministry charges astronomical rent for their building’s use, as per their policy. So, it is important to
understand that silence is not necessarily agreement in certain circumstances (depending upon power dynamics). Using different forms of communication when attempting to work democratically is important and useful for getting as many voices heard as possible.

Reflecting upon positions in society and their power—particularly to silence others unknowingly—is especially important to consider when attempting to be democratic as an action researcher during times of self-reflection. Coming from an outsider positionality, often with a title and funding, an action researcher who is working towards ethical engagement with a community would benefit from thinking about when agreement may only be due to their position and not due to the merits of an idea. Coming from a positionality of power, an action researcher’s idea may get more superficial consideration because individuals do not want to be rude. They may also get their way even if community members do not agree with them. This is true for decision-making both for the action and research phases. People might disagree with your writing and conclusions, but may not feel like they are in a position to contradict you, unless you are able to change the dynamics of power that are likely to develop when coming from an outsider positionality.

Getting past systemic/positional power dynamics first requires understanding potential issues and then recognizing when, for example, there may be “passive resistance” (Scott, 1985/2008), such as when someone says yes to an idea, but then does not perform the tasks necessary to accomplish that idea. Reading the communicative actions as well as the words is essential for ethical behaviors. The communication process when coming from different worldviews is fraught, and so the observational skill of understanding what actions communicate, as well as words, is very important. These observational and analytical skills in context are especially important because power dynamics may prohibit certain individuals from expressing knowledge or opinions that are likely to be extremely important for the overall value of the AR project. So, asking in a variety of circumstances and asking collaborators to seek out opinions from others who may be more willing to share without the outsider present is a helpful practice. This strategy also helps shift the habits of thinking from attempting to convince people, to trying to listen to people as a decision-making process.

In order to change power dynamics, a different skill set is required. For example, transforming one’s own attitudes and positional roles from a “provider-partner” to a “collaborator-partner” is a subtle but profound way for action researchers to be more democratic in their work. The distinction is subtle but important. Being from outside of the community, an ethical action researcher’s default role is often (intentionality or not) as a provider-partner. Action researchers are often working with a community to offer or provide funding, know-how, connections, or knowledge in order to do a project, as well as studying what can be learned in action. This provider role and positionality, especially as an outsider, is tension-filled, however.

First, the action researcher can leave at any time, so they inherently carry certain power. They can pull out of the project (along with the funding). I remember one mother asking very eloquently that I not move the education center to another community, because that
other community had more children who were of school age. The implicit threat, and therefore, power of an AR outsider is difficult to change. I tried to convince her that this project was in fact the community’s project, so I would not be able to move it if I wanted to. I am not sure if she fully believed me.

To transform these dynamics one can engage in certain practices. The most immediate is changing one’s assumptions and attitudes about your role through the strategies mentioned above. This third strategy does not mean trying to “let go” of your power, but instead ensuring that all community members who take on the work of a project, as well as all of the individuals who are meant to benefit from the project, have equitable voice alongside the action researcher. This kind of work requires transforming how one thinks about and relates to others. Instead of the hierarchical Western biases, an action researcher might be able to honestly and authentically see their colleagues as experts in their experiences. Deeper relational transformation can then follow.

Relational transformation can lead to much more trusting dynamics and better work among collaborators. Building trusting relationships means making sure that the community has access to or choice in all aspects of the project. Including, for example, how funds are spent. Providing community ownership of funds and setting up a method of transparency and co-ownership is a practice that is valuable. But again, this needs to be done with careful consideration; creating shared rules about how money is to be spent, and how long the funding needs to last are two starting points. For example, the community education center has a shared budget, but there are now approval processes for the use of the funds because of past issues. One father used 20% of the center’s monthly funds to purchase a large banner for a district wide parade, which meant that we had to cut classes short that month. Nonetheless, this kind of ownership is valuable, so finding the right balance of trust with responsibility and oversight transforms power dynamics, but also ensures that wise decisions are made through consultation. However, this kind of shared budget may also go against some Western norms of handling money for an AR project, so, careful consideration is very important.

**FURTHER CAVEATS AND SUBTLETIES**
In this article, I have presented and discussed three strategies for developing habits of mind that contribute to more ethical decision-making and relationship building in AR, as well as brief narratives about my learning process to develop these strategies. There are, however, a few caveats and subtleties that must be explained. First, these strategies are general and broad because they will look different in practice in different situations and contexts. Each space where an action researcher finds themself will require different thinking, so the specific instances mentioned here are not representational of any other context, but meant for consideration as compared to one’s own context.

Second, listening is an essential practice, and it is equally important to listen to what is going on between the lines to see if other motives or objectives are underlying the content of the words, which is important to figure out. Listening well is a tricky skill to learn.
Listening does not necessarily mean agreeing with, but instead carefully considering. Finally, these strategies are based on ethical principles of respectful relationships, and learning in action. The ethical framework of listening and building socially just relational dynamics is a never-ending process, which means these strategies may lose their relevance as the learning continues.

I want to reiterate that these strategies may not be relevant to every context. Therefore, I am not attempting to create a normative ethical framework for relationship building in this article, but instead I wish to provide examples and ideas for consideration about how to put the foundational ethical principles of socially just relationships, which is a foundation of AR, into practice.

**CONCLUSION**

In this article, I have argued for and elaborated on three strategies that I find to be useful for building socially just relationships during AR projects. The first strategy (and ethical stance) is to not know exactly what the best objectives are, or the best ways to reach them, but to have ideas that can change and evolve through interaction and discussion with colleagues/community members. Second, if an action researcher is coming from an outsider positionality, interpreting voices from multiple theoretical orientations can open the mind to be better able to develop intersubjective understandings that may be missed because of a lack of cultural knowledge. Within an iterative framework, the action researcher’s awareness of their positionality and the ways in which their positionality might marginalize, misinterpret or misrepresent voices is crucial. Finally, it is essential to ethical relationship building and AR practice that power, positionality, and relational dynamics are understood, and that the action researcher becomes able to transform those dynamics within themself to contribute to their change in the context of the action research project. Equally important is having the socio-emotional and dynamic capacities to transform their positional power for more just, equitable and iterative interpretation, action, and reflection with colleagues. The above strategies are just a few preliminary ideas for exploration; future work needs to continue to explore the process of ethical relationship building and engagement in relation to implicit mental frameworks more specifically, as that is where most of the roots of ethical or unethical practice begin.

In the context where I work, it took years to develop an understanding and relational dynamic towards making scholar-practitioner work coincide with being a valuable contributor to the community, and it is still a constant source of work and reflection as relationships change. The narratives above are short snippets that do not show all of the time sitting and listening as well as telling stories, debating, reflecting, and sharing meals. Taking time to open one's implicit mental framework up to new possibilities and sharing real human understandings and connections with the people one works with goes a long way, though is not the only necessity for ethical AR. Nonetheless, respectful and reciprocal relationships is a cornerstone of AR, and more work is necessary to ensure that the process towards developing socially just relationships is well understood in the field of action research.
REFERENCES


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Dr. Joseph Levitan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). In his work, Joseph examines the intersections of education, identity, and social justice through working with youth, parents, teachers and educational leaders from marginalized communities. He focuses on collaborative, participatory action research methods to work towards socially just, high quality, and responsive learning environments. His recent articles have appeared in Action Research, Teachers College Record, and Leadership and Policy in Schools.