Researching Change and Changing the Researcher

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In this article, Concha Delgado-Gaitan describes her experience as a researcher in Carpinteria, a predominantly Mexican-American community in California. After collecting data about family literacy practices through ethnographic observations and interviews, she began meeting regularly with parents to share her findings and solicit their input. These meetings became a turning point for Delgado-Gaitan, redirecting the focus of her research from literacy activities to the process of community empowerment as she learned from these parents about their own understanding of literacy and about their concerns regarding communication with schools. Through these meetings, the parents organized as a group, in order to demand that the school respond to their needs.

The situation challenged Delgado-Gaitan to redefine her role as a researcher. After much internal debate and reflection, she decided to become involved in the empowerment of parents as an informant and facilitator. This article is the story of how this research project supported the process of community empowerment in Carpinteria, and how that process challenged the researcher to examine her own identity, to refocus her research, and to change.

Over the past twenty years or so, anthropological researchers in education have employed interpretive ethnographic theories and research tools to study learning processes from a cultural perspective. Their primary task has been to provide an adequate contextualization of the cultural phenomena related to education.

More recently, interpretive anthropology has been enriched by the convergence of such approaches as phenomenology, structuralism, transformational linguistics, semiotics, critical theory, and hermeneutics (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). This cross-fertilization has been especially useful in providing a new perspective on the "native point of view," and on the problem of depicting cultural realities in social interaction. Through critical theory analysis in particular we find a language of possibility to understand change. Critical theory allows for

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discussion regarding the interaction between researcher and researched in the context of the researched community. Discussion about the researcher's viewpoint has in turn been important in raising questions regarding the outsider/insider position of researcher/researched (Hirschkind, 1991; Thomas, 1991).[1]

How we perceive our role in the communities we study matters greatly because it impacts the nature of the research we conduct (Elliott, 1988; Peshkin, 1982; Podermaker, 1967). The way we, as researchers, relate to ourselves and to the people we study was the focus of Dorinne Kondo's (1990) ethnography of the Japanese company as a family. She describes how notions of her identity as a Japanese-American woman anthropologist changed throughout her research. Kondo's thesis is that the researcher shapes his or her research and is, in turn, shaped by it. Smadar Lavie's (1991) anthropological study with the Mzeina people, a Bedouin tribe in the South Sinai Desert, also illuminates how the researcher's identity is changed through her work. In her study, Lavie depicts the Bedouin struggle with the military occupation as she tries simultaneously to define her own identity vis-à-vis the Mzeinis, who were like family to her, a Jewish-Arab woman trained as a western anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley. Based on critical inquiry of the Mzeina, she composes a written ethnography that retraces the process by which the Bedouin identity emerged through the performances of seven allegory-telling characters; within the ethnography, Lavie's own identity is fused with the personas of these characters. Both Kondo and Lavie use their ethnic identities as a tool for participating in the cultural communities that they studied, in order to involve the research participants in constructing their ethnographies.

In the United States, Michael Apple (1993) expands the discourse of the researcher's role in local communities by building and rebuilding a space where the researcher and the participants collectively raise questions about the meaning and power of knowledge through text. Apple emphasizes the importance of the researcher/researched relationship in questioning the source of knowledge in established canons. His role in the communities he researched exemplifies the possibilities of conducting research with socially disenfranchised groups in the United States.

I am a woman of Mexican immigrant heritage. My working-class family valued education and provided me with a strong foundation for learning and succeeding in school. My ethno-cultural identity was a key motivation for my studying family-school interconnections in the Spanish-speaking community of Carpinteria, California, where I engaged myself as a researcher. I set out to understand the nature of Latino family interactions involving literacy. The question of family literacy led me to further explore family-school relationships, including communication between family and school, and community empowerment.

In this article, I describe the Carpinteria study in order to discuss my role as an ethnographic researcher. I reflect on my evolving role as an observer of the

[1] The term "position" is used in academic discourse to refer to the oppositional role we researchers assume as we conduct ethnographic research. Cast in this binary oppositional framework, the researcher is considered the outsider while the participants — the researched — are the insiders.

people's daily interactions; as an active participant in family, school, and community activities; and as a facilitator in a conscious, reflective process undertaken by community members and between the researcher and the community.

The Participant Researcher: A Relational Perspective

Sharing the same ethnic background as the participants does not necessarily make the researcher more knowledgeable about the meanings of the participants' feelings, values, and practices. Researchers often hold misperceptions about participants' feelings, values, and practices based on influences such as assumed cultural knowledge. Therefore, interpretive fieldwork strategies that bring together theory and process through dialogue between research participants and researcher promise to yield a more complete interpretation (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Heath, 1983; Macias, 1987; Moll & Díaz, 1987; Spindler, 1970, 1974; Spindler & Spindler, 1970; Spradley, 1979; Suárez-Orozco, 1989).[2]

Given that basic tenets of critical theory presuppose a commitment to the emancipation of groups that have been socially, economically, and politically disenfranchised in society, researchers espousing this theoretical orientation enter the field with a notion about the insider-outsider relationship that includes a commitment to change. Henry Trueba and I have developed a framework called the Ethnography of Empowerment, which provides a broad sociocultural premise and possible strategy for studying the process of disempowerment and empowerment of disenfranchised communities (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). I understand empowerment as an ongoing, intentional process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and collective participation (Barr, 1989; Barr & Cochran, 1991). Through this process, people become aware of their social conditions and strengths: they determine their choices and goals, and thus unveil their potential to act on their own behalf. Implicit in this process is a conscious responsibility on the part of disenfranchised communities for their own behavior and a willingness to shape their behavior as they desire through social processes. The Ethnography of Empowerment framework calls for the construction of knowledge through the social

[2] Interpretive fieldwork strategies have, nevertheless, been criticized regarding researcher bias from several different epistemological paradigms. Questions of objectivity have been a continuing point of contention between positivists and qualitative researchers, including ethnographers. Positivists have argued that if the ethnographer becomes involved with the group he or she is studying, the ethnographer ceases to identify with the professional subgroup as his or her dominant reference group. The conventional premise here is that the ethnographer has to maintain an interpretive stance congruent with the professional group he or she represents. In contrast, the relational position attempts to depict the complexity of the relationship between the participant and the researcher. For further discussion on this aspect of interpretive research, see Chow, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Spindler and Spindler, 1987; and Wolcott, 1981.

A criticism against participant observation is that the participant and the researcher usually belong to different cultures. Critics argue that through researcher participation, such as the researcher engaging in community activities, the setting may be transformed and the goals of an "objective" field study may be altered by changing the power relations in favor of the subordinate group or of the dominant groups. Critical theorists refute this criticism by maintaining that value-neutral theories and research are nonexistent (Habermas, 1974).

interaction between researcher and researched, with the fundamental purpose of improving the living conditions of the communities being researched. Thus, this kind of ethnography redefines the fundamental priorities of anthropological, educational, and social science research.

Consistent with Paulo Freire's critical theory premise, our construct of Ethnography of Empowerment establishes the process of ethnography as a theory and method applied in disenfranchised communities that addresses the question of the insider/outsider perspectives (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991).[3] Ethnography of Empowerment rests on two fundamental premises about the nature of learning. First, learning among humans occurs across cultures, primarily in the home or in sociocultural units in which individuals are socialized. Second, learning ideally is purposive, and should ultimately be directed to the enhancement of cultural values. This ideal is possible when learning is embedded in the context of the learning community (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). These notions of social and cultural self-awareness attempt to develop a description of the ethno-historical and cultural context that makes it possible to understand the nature of oppression experienced by disenfranchised people and communities. This kind of context and description can be developed when ethnographic researchers practice dialogical research processes.

In the Ethnography of Empowerment framework, not only does the ethnographer effect and/or affect change in the communities as a result of being a participant-observer, but he or she is also influenced by the community being studied, such that the direction and orientation of his or her research may be changed.

It is within this theoretical orientation that I discuss my role as an ethnographic researcher in Carpinteria.[4] Central to this discussion is my relationship with the participants — in particular, how that relationship helped me understand myself, and how it informed my role in crafting the study and influencing change in the Carpinteria community.

Action: Establishing a Relationship

During the first five years of the Carpinteria study, I was a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and lived twenty minutes from Carpinteria. My initial interest in the Carpinteria Latino community was as an extension of research that I had conducted in other Latino communities in northern Cali-

[3] A central theme in Paulo Freire's work with Brazilian indigenous groups is his portrayal of community learning, in which the relationship between educators and students is a phenomenon involving a certain permanent, although not antagonistic, tension. It is this same tension — which exists between theory and practice, and between authority and freedom — that renders teaching and learning inseparable. I have extended Freire's relational thesis about learning and critical practice into my research methodology framework. Freire would assert that, through active involvement of the learner, critical theory seeks practical solutions for structural problems that are social and cultural constructions. For additional discussion on Freire's critical theory, see Freire, 1985; Shor and Freire, 1987.

[4] Except for "Carpinteria," all names used in this article are pseudonyms. The real name of the school district is used because I received permission from the school district to use it in publications.

fornia and Colorado. In particular, I wanted to observe a setting that provided successful educational programs for Latino students.

My eight years of research in Carpinteria began with an ethnographic study on family literacy in the Spanish-speaking Latino community. It evolved to encompass the parent involvement process in the Carpinteria school, which had been one of shared power between families and the school. The parent-school empowerment process, through the Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA), illustrated a difficult but doable approach taken by a community interested in Latino children's education.

Part of the impetus for this study was my reaction to much of the research literature that focused on devastating educational conditions in culturally different communities. My observations of children and their families in ethnically diverse California communities where I had been an elementary school teacher and principal convinced me that Latino people could be more than the helpless victims characterized in many studies of school failure. I observed members of the Latino community being active participants in the day-to-day shaping of their lives, which convinced me that active participation is for them a source of strength and empowerment.

This optimism impelled my study on family literacy (involving oral, reading, and written text in daily family life) in Carpinteria, and encouraged me to try to shatter the monolithic portrayal of Mexicans as ignorant, powerless failures in U.S. schools. My own background as an immigrant from Mexico, who grew up in California from age eight and attended school in various Los Angeles communities, further impelled me to understand the complexity of these immigrant families' lives and their relations with the schools.

I negotiated my initial entry into the Carpinteria community through the school district in order to observe literacy abilities in the Latino households and in the community, including the schools. This topic was of serious concern to the schools because many Latino students were reading at levels below school expectations. The issue of literacy was especially important for me in that literacy occupies a far more complex and important place in the Mexican community than schools sometimes understand. This discrepancy between the place of literacy in the Mexican community and the schools' understanding of its place is not unique to Carpinteria; it has, in fact, been documented by various researchers (Ada, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Goldenberg, 1987; Moll & Díaz, 1987). School personnel, however, often do not have the time to examine family and community literacy practices. I am familiar with school personnel time constraints through personal experiences in the schools and through interviews in the Carpinteria study.

I collected data through systematic ethnographic observations of literacy activities in the household, school, and community, and through interviews of family members over a two-year period. I recorded these observations in written field notes, and in video and audio recordings. I found that although families shared common literacy activities, such as oral storytelling by parents to younger

children, letter writing to relatives in Mexico, and storybook reading of popular trade books in Spanish, variation existed in parent-child interaction around homework-type literacy tasks (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Observations showed that children who were placed in novice reading groups in the classroom generally faced stricter rules in the home and received more direct instructional assistance from parents. These parents believed that their children needed supervised assistance, since the teachers' reports stressed negative behavior and low performance. Children who were placed in the advanced reading groups in the classroom tended to enjoy more freedom in the way they did their homework because parents usually assisted them only indirectly by assuring completion of the task. These parents seemed to trust their children and to believe that they were responsible and knowledgeable enough to do their work; they also communicated more frequently with the teachers and received pointers on ways to assist their children.

Part of the ethnographic method I employed involved sharing data with nearly one hundred Latino families to elicit their input and insight about their own literacy practices in the home and in relation to the school. The intent of the data-sharing sessions was to solicit the insider's perspective and to make meaning of their experiences. An unanticipated outcome of this relational process (which I will discuss later) altered the course of my research, while forcing participants and myself to reexamine our perceptions. Friday evening meetings at the Aliso Elementary School were the setting where the families and I analyzed their experiences; these meetings eventually redirected the study.

In Carpinteria, every noon during lunchtime, the tables in the Aliso Elementary School auditorium were filled with children who swallowed their lunches as quickly as possible before running outside to play. On some Friday nights, many Latino families came together in that same school auditorium to discuss topics related to family education as part of the Migrant Education Program. The meetings were held on a monthly basis (occasionally more often) and were already taking place when my study began. The purpose of the Program was to share information with families about immigration laws, AIDS, and other pertinent issues, such as health care for preschool children. For example, on one particular Friday evening, over seventy people, including men, women holding young children on their laps, and older children, listened attentively to a guest speaker who discussed legal rights for immigrants.

I selected those Friday night meetings as the forum to share with the families the ethnographic data on literacy activities that I had collected in their homes. At six consecutive monthly meetings, I spent over one hour of their two-hour meeting sharing my data and soliciting comments from the parents. The data included findings about parents telling stories to children, reading to children at home, and assisting with schoolwork. I presented my findings while attempting to maintain a warm and friendly, yet somewhat distant, posture; generally, parents who attended the meetings talked with me about the study findings. Their insights and meaning provoked my interest and, periodically, both confirmed and challenged my interpretations.

I began my first presentation by commending the parents for their commitment to and interest in their children's education. However, I also pointed out that some parents did not read much to their children, even in Spanish, and that a connection existed between parents who read to their children and the school's expectations and perceptions about Latino children's performance. The issue that I intended to raise with parents was diversity in family literacy practices; I believed that parents' familiarity with such ideas would provide insights about their children's performance in schools.

In presenting my data to this group, I wanted them to recognize that literacy practices at home — particularly their interaction with written text — affected their children's school performance. I was not, however, advocating that they change their reading practices as a result of my data. At that point, I merely wanted to share my findings with them and to solicit their perspective about my data. When I began studying literacy activities in the homes, my understanding of literacy practices in the Latino community conformed to those of the schools in that I believed literacy to be primarily the act of decoding written text. As the study unfolded, my understanding of literacy transcended those of the school. I expanded my understanding of literacy to include oral literacy activities, as well as the critical interpretation of the "word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). During the process of data collection, I learned that parents demonstrate their concern for their children's success in school in ways other than reading to their children in the households. The following parent's comment illustrates one of the alternative ways in which parents expressed their concern for their children's success: "My husband and I remind our children that they have a great opportunity to go to school and they should take advantage of it so they can have the opportunities we did not have."[5]

At these meetings, parents listened attentively to the speakers, even when distracted by their young children, who often ran in and out of the auditorium. I talked about the stories that some parents read to their children. The question I posed to them was, "Do you read to your children, and if so, what kind of stories do you read?" Parents raised their hands enthusiastically and related their experiences:

> I never read to my older children, although I did encourage them to read to each other. When we moved to Carpinteria, my youngest daughter went to preschool and the teacher always told us to read to our children in Spanish so that they would learn to read in their own language. It didn't make sense to me, but I did it anyway, and now that my daughter is in the second grade I see that she likes reading much more than my other children. I think it has to do with the fact that I still read to her.

Other comments were made:

> I think it's good to read to our children like the teacher has told us, but neither my husband nor I read either in Spanish or English so it's hard to help our children.

[5] All of the participants' quotes in this article have been translated by me from Spanish.

> What we do is to encourage our children to stay in school and to learn. They can be educated in a way that we never could.

At the Friday meetings, during my exchange with the community, parents generally shared information about their literacy activities with their children. They reported on a variety of interactions, which included adults and children reading popular storybooks such as *Snow White,* analyzing legal documents, and writing letters to their relatives in Mexico. Occasionally, parents helped their children with particular homework assignments.

Combing through piles of field notes and tape transcripts, I identified types and contexts of literacy activities in the home and in the classroom. I analyzed video tapes to define further the nature of the literacy events. Who, when, and how parents helped their children with schoolwork emerged as an unexpected salient issue in what began as an exploration of literacy in the Latino community. This issue emerged in the process of data analysis about a month before I began to meet with parents on Friday nights, and convinced me of the need to reflect with them. The parents' immediate purpose, which was to have their children succeed in school, dominated most of their literacy practices.

I pursued the theme of the home-school connection because I was perplexed by the differences in participation of parents in their children's education that emerged during my Friday night discussions with the families. Some parents interacted more actively with their children to help them complete their homework, while some felt less able to assist their children. Regardless of the parents' level of engagement with their children's homework, most parents felt incompetent in communicating with the school. Most of them had received only a fourth-grade education in Mexico, and they blamed their lack of formal education for their *ineffective exchanges* with the school, by which I mean those attempts parents made to relate to the school, but which in fact left them more confused. For example, in one case a boy was being retained in the first grade and the mother went to the school to talk to the teacher. The teacher told her that the reason for the child's retention was his low reading ability, and that the parents needed to help him read at home. Without further clarification, the mother assumed that her son's failure in school was her fault. Essentially, this example indicates that some parents did not know what questions to ask because of their lack of familiarity with the school system. As parents repeatedly explained to me, they often felt that they did not know what questions to ask; moreover, when they knew the questions they wanted to ask, they did not know how to ask them or of whom. Led by the developments of this phase of the analysis, I probed further into the question of how parents learned to help their children do their homework. Most of the parents who were active in the school responded that they had been taught by the preschool teacher to communicate with educators. The undereducated parents, whether or not they were active in the schools, felt isolated because they believed that as a result of their limited formal schooling, their children might not have access to the best education.

As they responded to my research questions about parental participation in schools and in their children's schooling, angry emotions flared as some parents

told of going to the school to make an appointment to talk with their child's teacher, and finding that they could not communicate with anyone in the office. Not knowing how to connect with the schools had clearly traumatized some of these parents. The identification of this issue expanded my research focus from describing literacy in the Latino community to understanding its meaning to the parents, including their communication with schools.

Change: Redirected Role of the Researcher

At the third Friday night meeting with the parents at Aliso Elementary School, a father, Mr. Reyes, stood up and said that he had been listening to me present information about the Latino families in Carpinteria over the prior weeks. In his opinion, many families felt isolated, not because they did not care, but because they did not have the necessary experience to communicate with the schools. He proposed that those parents who had more contact with the schools should organize and teach those who needed it. At that point, as a I stood in front of the parents, I found myself fighting to remain in the "neutral" research role. I tried to resist the temptation to advocate for forming the parent leadership group that Mr. Reyes proposed, which I could see would be instrumental in achieving their cultural adjustment goal — that is, effective, cooperative, family-school relationships. It was clear to me that some type of support group could benefit the families in their communication with the schools.

Following the meeting, I approached Mr. Reyes and asked him about his intent to organize the parents. He lamented that most administrators did not have the time to work with the community, and that those who were interested, like the Migrant Education Director, had quite an overload of work imposed on them. I asked him what might prevent him from organizing the group himself, and he responded that he could not because he didn't have a list of people to call. He questioned his own skills in organizing the group. He said that he knew other people's names, but did not have their phone numbers. Mr. Reyes looked around as if he were looking for someone, and then he said that possibly the Director of Migrant Education had a list. Instinctively, I wanted to convince him to ask the Director for a list of parents' names and phone numbers, but I refrained. Mr. Reyes indicated that he wanted to get the parents together if their phone numbers were available. His response made me question again the nature of my role as a researcher. I evaluated the appropriateness of my intervening, and I contemplated the possibility of suggesting to him how to obtain the list of parents' names and organize a meeting.

At this point, I remembered the voices of some of my teachers, who had reminded me that the ethnographer's work entails only observing and describing. However, another voice resounded even more loudly and defended the role of the researcher as politically weighted. Such a position seemed to obligate the researcher, me, to intervene when it might lead to favorable results for the participants or even when it involves a question of the researcher's moral conscience. Freire (1970) advocates for direct intervention as a way to learn about the communities' needs. These internal voices intensified my quandary about

whether or not to intervene directly as an advocate. Paulo Freire's literacy work in community organizing for literacy and empowerment had long governed my research pursuits. Now I had to determine if my intervening in these families' *concientizaçao* (consciousness raising) would influence the integrity of their process of change, as well as my process of traditional "objective" research, which seemed necessary to protect, given my academic training.[6] The decision to refrain from encouraging Mr. Reyes was a difficult one.

Traditional ethnographic methodology asserts the researcher's privileged position, leading one to participate in the culture in covert ways for the mere purpose of obtaining data. Under this premise, we are still led to believe that the research process can be removed from any human contamination (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Strauss, 1987). Thus, I confronted an ethical question as to what my real intent would be if I participated as a facilitator in the parents' emerging organization. By now I was convinced by praxis that no research is neutral, yet the realization was academic in that I still had to consider what it meant in the context of this setting, with real human beings who were working to change their lives.

At a subsequent parent meeting, I approached Mr. Reyes and asked him about the progress that he had made in convening a meeting of Latino parent leaders. After pondering the question during the previous two weeks, I had decided to initiate this topic with Mr. Reyes. By the time of this meeting, I had reconciled my intervention with my role as a researcher. He shrugged his shoulders and said that he had not mobilized parents because he did not have their phone numbers. I asked, "Why don't you ask the Migrant Education Director to provide you with a list of parents you can call to a meeting?" I then suggested to him that if he called together a meeting of parents, I would like to attend. I invited myself to the meeting with the understanding that I would not act as their leader, because it was their community. I did, however, offer to share my data with the parents at their leadership meetings. By this time, I had collected a large amount of data on the literacy activities and learning contexts in the home and the schools in this research site, data ranging from bedtime stories to superintendent administrators' meetings.

The following week, Mr. Reyes called me at my home and announced that he had reached several parents who were interested in attending a meeting to discuss how they could support each other on issues of educating their children. He had arranged with the Director of Special Programs (the Migrant Education Program was part of these Special Programs) to have the meeting take place in the faculty room of Aliso Elementary school that coming Friday, when there was no Migrant Education Program meeting scheduled.

On that Friday evening, I made it a point to arrive at the site on time to observe how the event unfolded. Although I normally arrived on time, it had never been as crucial as this night, since now — with my decision to intervene

[6] My academic training was rich in ethnography; I learned to structure rigorous and systematic observations and interviews that did not include intervention in changing the setting I was studying.

— my purpose included studying the process of the meeting. Eleven parents gathered in front of the school's faculty room, which apparently had not been unlocked as the parents had requested. One of the parents went to the public phone to call the District Director of Curriculum. He learned that there had been a misunderstanding about the time at which the door had to be opened, since the school's regular custodian was out ill. Evidently no one had keys to a classroom, so a couple of the men moved a large lunch table with benches from the playground to the inner courtyard. People sat and talked about their concerns as Mexican immigrants raising children in Carpinteria.

Mr. Reyes convened the meeting by asking people to introduce themselves. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to try to get some Latino parents together to see how they could help other Spanish-speaking parents who needed to communicate with the school about their children. He emphasized that they had been called together because of their experiences with the schools so that they could share ideas on how to organize Latino families to support each other.

At that point, I began to notice a shift in my research focus from concerns with literacy activities and processes in home and school to the process of empowerment. Parents took turns talking about their heartfelt desire to have their children get a good education so that they would have greater economic security than their parents experienced as Spanish-speaking immigrants from a low socioeconomic level. Their primary concern was with their perceived distancing of the children from the family culture. This distancing was created as children learned American values that were different from their family traditions. Mrs. Ortiz was choked by her words as she disclosed her ordeal with her daughter, who did not want to speak Spanish to them because she felt ashamed:

> Our insistence to have her speak to us in Spanish is overshadowed by her need to be liked in school. She's just in the sixth grade, but English is more important to her and her friends. We need to speak Spanish, that's the language of our family. There's nothing wrong with English, but the school's not teaching them Spanish, so we should, because we will always speak it.

Such words captured me. I was also captured by the support that participants in the meeting gave each other, which in turn created a safe environment that permitted them to express their feelings. Parents' love for their children was mixed with fear and frustration because, in their efforts to help, they were still faced with unknown results and expectations. The parents shared their experiences in relating to the White, European-American community and the schools, and also told their stories of challenge and commitment to their families. Their contact with the school had been more active than that of other Latino parents in the Carpinteria community, yet these parents felt the pressure of not meeting the school's expectations, such as speaking English and being familiar with the way the school operated. As Mr. Soto noted:

> I always go to the school when my son's teachers call me and want to talk to me about his problematic behavior. One day the school called me, and as usual I had

> to leave work and take a pay cut for that release-time to help out my son. When I got there [to the school] I waited almost an hour and no one knew where my son was or what the problem was. As it turned out, it was not my son who had been in the fight. I was quite upset and I didn't even get an apology from the school. I find this degrading and humiliating. I don't think they would do it to someone who could defend himself in English.

Mr. Soto's humiliation was addressed by others in the group who believed that although he did not know English, Mr. Soto certainly deserved more respect than the school had extended.

Stories such as the one shared by this parent consumed much of the time during this initial meeting. The underlying message to each other seemed to be that they, as parents, tried very hard to do the best for their children, and that they had the desire and commitment to support their children in their education both at home and at school. The fact that they cared about their children and their education was understood by them to mean that they were "good parents."

Mrs. Mora, who would later become the group leader for the Latino parents, stressed that the parents' life experiences were of much value and should be shared with their children. For example, Mrs. Mora was a part of the Latino Spanish-speaking immigrant community. Her educational experience was somewhat more advanced than most Latino immigrants in Carpinteria, whose formal education in Mexico did not exceed elementary school. Mrs. Mora's words — "We came because *we can*, not to see *if* we can" — frame the quintessential statement for this study of family and community, since her statement reflects the perceived reality of power by Latino families. The meaning of this claim became clear as the process of community organization unfolded. Mrs. Mora's reminder to parents of their responsibility to communicate pride and struggle to their children resonated in her statement, "Many of us do not have the formal education necessary to help our children with their demands in school, but we value and respect the family. Through our family we help our children value their own lives and education."

Her words impressed me as being important, but still left me doubting how knowledgeable parents were in actually helping their children succeed in school. My findings had shown that parents who actively communicated with the school had children who were more advanced readers. But here were parents who perceived their own experience as the power base of their family and, in spite of their limited schooling, recognized the importance of transmitting their cultural values and beliefs to their children. Given this opportunity to listen to parents represent their views of what education means to them, I questioned my initial analysis of the family-school relationship study, which minimized the parents' experience as a value transmitted to children and its importance to their children's overall attitude about schooling beyond their placement in the classroom reading groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1989).

At a subsequent meeting, parents agreed to select a leader for their group. Their approach to selecting a leader demonstrated their respect for each others' abilities while recognizing their need for a person to help them make contact

with the schools. The choice of a president of this parent group occupied most of the discussion. Parents described a person who could speak at least some English because she or he would have to talk with administrators who might not speak Spanish. This criterion was subsequently dismissed, as they decided that someone could have leadership skills without being English-speaking. Another practical qualification desired in their leader was that the person be able to drive a car so that she or he could attend meetings at the schools. That notion was also readily dismissed because parents felt that if the person who assumed the position of president had good communication skills and wanted the position but did not drive, she or he could find transportation.

Their expectations for leadership qualifications were defined by the collective group through a process of turn-taking, in which each person shared his or her views. The person in the leadership role had to commit to the group's position. Pragmatic qualifications such as bilingualism, knowledge about the schools, availability of time, and transportation became secondary as the commitment to the group became the primary factor that the Latino parents wanted upheld.

Mrs. Mora was nominated by a parent, and the nomination was supported unanimously. It was noted that she had been a teacher in Mexico, and that her expertise in working with schools could assist the group in their communication with the schools. Mrs. Mora was also the eldest member of the parent group and no longer had children in the school district. Although she did not drive a car or speak fluent English, parents recognized her experience as an educator in Mexico and sought to utilize her skills.

It was unclear to me why they dismissed their need for people who could communicate more effectively with the schools through the use of English. Although their recognition of Mrs. Mora's teaching experience made sense from their point of view, it seemed impractical to me to have a leader who could not communicate with school personnel. However, her position as a teacher and the group's respect for her knowledge were considered high priorities by the group. Recent interviews with the COPLA leadership have clarified this question for me further. Their decision to select Mrs. Mora as their leader was not a disqualification of individuals who were more competent in English, but rather an affirmation of their interest in being represented by someone who would articulate their values and vision as concerned Latino parents.

Parents took turns complimenting Mrs. Mora's strong and positive spirit that so inspired them all. As Mr. Soto stated, "Mrs. Mora shares our vision of how we view our responsibility to communicate with our children and with the schools. We want to put our best foot forward because we know how much it matters." The group believed that the way she spoke about family cohesiveness, interdependence, and the motivation for education reflected the Mexican community's goals for their children.

The selection of a president clearly held a different meaning for this parent group from what I had expected, given my general concepts of leadership, which were based on a model of organization and participation that was different from that which oriented this group. I was under the impression that the parents

would elect a president for the purpose of attending to logistical tasks, such as scheduling meetings with the principals. My teaching, administrative, and academic experience had taught me that the president's role in an organization meant representing the group, deciding the agenda, and defining the membership of the group by its voting privileges. Yet, how this organization — eventually named Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA) — was organized revealed an obvious cultural difference between me and the Latino families.[7] However, this difference became apparent only after I discussed my observations with them. For example, the data on family systems and interaction that I shared with them at the Friday night meetings indicated a strong sense of unity and respect for one another that transcended the immediate nuclear family and extended to relatives and other members of the community. Yet, as the parent organization evolved, I failed to account for the cultural linkages between family values and those shaping the organization.

COPLA parents' division of labor at the Canalino Elementary School — the first school they approached — showed that as organizers they wanted every participant to have an active voice in the process. COPLA parents spoke to the issue of wanting more input from a larger group of Latino parents about this new organization.

During this initial part of their organizing efforts, Mrs. Mora, now COPLA president, called me. She wanted me to address the group about the overall structure and curricular programs in the Carpinteria schools, so that I could begin to show the parents how to initiate organizational contact with the schools. I had offered my facilitator services to the parents as a way of sharing the data that I had collected, but I continued to experience a great deal of consternation about moving away from my role as researcher. I asked Mrs. Mora what it was that the group wanted to know and why they believed I could help. She said that COPLA parents considered me knowledgeable about the schools, and that they trusted me and considered me to be an advocate for them. Furthermore, I was qualified to inform and teach them, in Spanish, about the way that schools worked in the United States, enabling them to communicate better with school personnel.

The parents' request for my services forced me to delineate my role as a researcher and focus on whether I could participate in COPLA and maintain my role of observer without compromising the integrity of the research. Would I

[7] Space limitations prevent me from expanding fully on more recent developments of COPLA. The organization has continued to mobilize in Carpinteria. It has now been active for five years, and has established a structure in each school by which one teacher provides systematic linkages between the school and the parents. With formally written by-laws, they have organized a district-wide committee, as well as satellite school-site groups in all of the elementary, junior high, and high schools. COPLA holds monthly meetings for their district-wide committee on the first Friday of each month. The school-site COPLA meetings are held on alternate Fridays so as not to conflict with those of the district COPLA. Each school has two parent representatives on the district committees, who report to the group about their activities. For additional information about more current developments in the organization and its role as a community support group, see Delgado-Gaitan, 1991.

abandon the study and just act as a facilitator? Was it possible to act as an advocate, or broker, while researching the change process? If I was going to educate parents about schooling in Carpinteria, how would it change the direction of the study? Could I, as Rosalie Wax (1971) says, "step in and out"? Again these questions surfaced, forcing me to clarify how to participate without interfering with the parents' process.

Driven by the work of Freire and the Cornell University Empowerment Group (Allen, Barr, Cochran, Dean, & Greene, 1989; Freire, 1970, 1973), I transcended my qualms and decided to involve myself as the parents requested. In Freire's work, the principles of community empowerment recognize the researcher as an active participant who acts as a facilitator in the community's change process. One week after Mrs. Mora's request, I called her and committed my services to the group. I made my position clear to the group — I would be an informant to them, but I would not be responsible for COPLA's goals and direction.

Mrs. Mora instructed me to inform the group about the way the schools operated. I asked her what the parents knew about the schools. Although I knew something about their knowledge of the education system by having sat in on the initial COPLA meetings, it was nevertheless important to hear it from her. Mrs. Mora felt that the parents wanted to learn about school programs and about how they could help their children succeed in school.

I considered how I would share my data with them regarding the schools' organization and the classroom learning setting. We first met in the teachers' room at Aliso Elementary School. About thirty parents were present, including the eleven members of the original district-wide COPLA group. I outlined the structure of the Carpinteria school system, from preschool to high school level, as well as the academic expectations at each grade level. I described what the schools expected of children, with particular emphasis on methods to achieve high grades, and presented data that I had collected in their homes and schools. In relation to parental tasks in the home, the data that I presented illustrated that as students got to the upper grades, parents lacked the language or formal academic preparation to be able to help their children directly.

During the second COPLA meeting, I assumed that Mrs. Mora, as group president, would identify the eleven formal COPLA members as those who would make the decisions. However, when it came time to vote on questions such as whether to continue to organize COPLA at Canalino Elementary School, Mrs. Mora called for a vote from all thirty people present. Everyone raised his or her hand, and I found that everyone's vote was recognized. No distinction was made between members of the COPLA group and the parents who were attending for the first time. By doing this in her role as president, Mrs. Mora defined the importance of all the people's voices, not just COPLA members'. Everyone in the room seemed satisfied with the decisionmaking process. Mrs. Mora entertained comments from non-COPLA members about the need for an organization like COPLA, then one member parent circulated a sign-up sheet and invited parents to participate in the organization. The president's message, as well as

that of other COPLA members, encouraged the other parents to learn together and to accept the challenge of this new experience for themselves and for the benefit of their children. Everyone present signed on as a new COPLA member.

The COPLA group continued inviting me to their subsequent weekly meetings to talk to them more about education in Carpinteria. A slightly different group of parents attended each meeting.[8] Twenty-five parents attended the fourth meeting of the district-wide COPLA meeting. The original eleven-member COPLA cohort was present, along with five parents who were present for the first time and nine who had attended the previous meeting. Mrs. Mora opened the meeting and introduced me. She told the gathering that COPLA parents were trying to learn how to better help their children in school by having the parents support each other, which made these meetings very important. All parents present concurred, and talked about the need to spread their message to more Latino parents.

I presented what I perceived to be a distance between the school's academic demands and what the parents provided for their children. The group then discussed the ways in which they had worked with their children. As one parent recounted, "I never know whether helping my son benefits him because there's much I don't know." Another parent recommended having a dialogue with school district administrators about their needs, so that they could agree on the best way to educate Latino children. As in previous meetings, when a vote was taken to decide whether to invite school administrators to subsequent meetings, Mrs. Mora counted everyone's vote. Consistent with COPLA's concept of inclusion, she made no distinction between parents who had attended previous meetings and those who were attending for the first time. They agreed to invite school administrators to the following meeting. I juggled feelings of optimism and apprehension. I was optimistic that the empowerment process was advancing because they had plans to include educators in COPLA. On the other hand, I was apprehensive about the sharing of power between parents and school personnel. My optimism was rooted in my belief that involving school personnel seemed to indicate progress, in that families and educators could begin a dialogue to improve learning conditions for Latino students. My apprehension, however, had to do with my knowledge and experience in communities where schools try to work with families, but often ultimately distort the power relations so that the school dictates the agenda and goals for the group.

Even though parents had voted to invite an administrator, the strategy for extending the invitation was not addressed, and they did not decide who would contact the administration. Before Mrs. Mora closed the meeting, she invited everyone to return the following week to continue the discussion about the

[8] Essentially, every Latino parent in the Carpinteria community was a COPLA parent by virtue of the name of the organization. There were no formal requirements to become a member. As the Central District leadership committee began to organize satellite COPLA groups in every school, school personnel seemed to identify only those parents in the leadership as COPLA parents, distinguishing them from parents who only attended meetings. However, the COPLA leadership stressed that every Latino parent was part of COPLA and thus needed to become actively involved.

children's education, and encouraged them to bring a neighbor or friend since these topics were important. One COPLA member pointed out that COPLA could not speak on behalf of all Latino families unless they had the whole community's support. As people were leaving, Mrs. Mora asked for a volunteer to accompany her to the district office to speak to the Director of Special Programs. Mrs. Alonso, a member of the original COPLA group, volunteered to go because she knew the Director and she spoke more English than Mrs. Mora. I was impressed with their commitment to negotiate their needs and combine their strengths in order to communicate in a different language and culture.

Interpretation: A Question of Perception, Reflection, and Voice

My relationship with COPLA as a facilitator haunted me. I feared that what I shared with them would inevitably define the direction of their organization, regardless of how neutral I intended to be. I experienced deep concern as I realized that I had abandoned my neutral, non-influential position. In reality, what I had to do was to interpret my actions along with theirs in the change process.

I constantly reminded COPLA of their progress as a group. I consciously made my presentations at their meetings less didactic and more reflective by raising questions to the group. For example, when discussing bilingual programs, I suggested to the members that they think about questions that were important to them. They wanted to know why Spanish-speaking children did not have teachers who spoke in their language, but taught in bilingual programs. They also wanted to know why schools did not send out communications in Spanish to Latino families and why their children learned limited English in bilingual programs. These concerns provided a framework for discussing with them the observational data I had regarding the district's bilingual program. I suggested that they invite the Director of Special Programs to their meeting to deal with the part of the programs I could not address. COPLA members did invite administrators and teachers to talk to them about the District's bilingual program and other curricular matters.

To make sure that the school district was aware of my extended role as a facilitator with COPLA, I informed the administration of my changing status. My emerging role as a facilitator became a test of the community's and the school district's trust in me. The school administration felt that my role as a facilitator with the Latino families could support the District's educational goal of forging closer communication with the Spanish-speaking Latino community. The administration became even more supportive of my role in COPLA when the District Director began attending the meetings and witnessed the power of the organization.

COPLA's continued practice of acknowledging all parents who attended the meetings, without defining or limiting membership, illustrated the organization's egalitarian character and its commitment to involve everyone in the discussion. When the group and I reflected on my observations of their organizational meetings, they clarified to me the importance of the collective voice in

their decisionmaking process, as expressed by one parent in this statement: "We cannot be an authoritarian elite group making decisions for others."

This attitude revealed to me a cultural gap between the parents' analysis of the situation and my own. I offered information about the way the dominant school culture might expect this parent organization to operate; that is, that a formal organization meant that the leader of the group had authority over the rest of the group. COPLA in fact had a different dynamic, one rooted in more egalitarian ways of relating to each other.

At an early COPLA meeting held to organize Latino parents at Canalino School, the parents suggested that they should meet with the principal as a group. That way they could support each other, and they would present a strong united force. COPLA parents then strategized their mobilization of the school's Latino community. I felt that their efforts were designed to involve as many parents as possible in their meetings with the school administration, and that their need to involve a large number of parents represented fear about their lack of experience. I later learned that my interpretation was clearly based on my expectation of how an effective organization should operate.

The parents interpreted their behavior during meetings in two significant ways: 1) their interactions at the meetings showed respect for each other's voice and viewpoint while minimizing the authority of the leader, and 2) their collective effort to solicit input from as many families as possible represented a commitment to a democratic voice among Latino parents. Respect and democracy defined their interaction with each other and shaped COPLA.

How was I to reconcile the difference between my insider/outsider interpretation of their mode of relating to one another and their reality? Following several meetings with the parents in which we analyzed their process, I recognized that it was not fear or ignorance of the school system that motivated their mode of organizing. Rather, it was their respect for each other's opinions, insights, and experience that defined their interactions. Even though I had observed the parents empowering themselves through the process of sharing their experience as Spanish-speaking immigrant families in Carpinteria, my outside academic and social perspectives biased my interpretation. These parents' interactions with each other were not as I had initially perceived them; that is, as "ignorant" of the mainstream ways of organizing and communicating with the schools. Rather, the parents joined forces democratically in order to resolve their problems with the school system.

Building on this sense of empowerment, and despite the insider/outsider relationship, both I as the researcher and the parents as the researched moved toward change in Carpinteria. In the dilemma of being a member/non-member of the ethnic group, I recognized that I had to remain conscious of the insiders' perspectives since, even though I belonged to the same ethnic group as the subjects of this study, I could not insure true understanding of the culturally bound practices of the parent group. My lack of understanding was due to both my acculturation into the dominant culture and my academic training.

Once I understood their way of constructing meaning in their organization, I came to understand and respect the particular process and perspective that gave their organization credibility. As an outsider, I had relied on empowerment theories advanced by Freire and the Cornell Empowerment Group to guide my facilitator activities. Those theories dictated that I could not intervene in the participants' change process unsolicited (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). Although my involvement in their meetings unquestionably influenced their orientation and knowledge base about the schools, the COPLA parents themselves defined their organizational goals and their sociopolitical awareness and identity. My interpretation of the empowerment process in COPLA, in which I was a participant and observer, an insider and outsider, underwent its own transformation. The experience strengthened my connection with the families. The insights I gained about the process of empowerment reframed what I initially thought to be merely a set of activities conducted by a group of Latino immigrant families who were ignorant of the dominant institutional culture, to be instead a meaningful construction of literacy that included their ability to read not only written text, but also their world as text (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Some Final Reflections on Research for Empowerment

The Ethnography of Empowerment framework, supported by critical theory principles, involves methodological strategies that engage the community in the research analysis. The researcher participates concurrently in the transformation of the setting being studied. Conducting the Carpinteria study taught me that a researcher can only be an outsider; however, with insight, the researcher can encourage and foster the relational process between researcher and researched. In the Carpinteria study, the reflective analysis between the parents and the researcher impacted the direction of the study; the researcher provided the community with specific data to develop their organization, while the parents changed the researcher's perception of the meaning of their activities.

The concepts of enduring self and situated self, introduced by Spindler and Spindler (in press), provided me with a psychosocial framework to look at the nature of change experienced by the COPLA parents and myself. The concept of the enduring self permits us to understand the continuity that exists in our lives, and the way in which our beliefs, values, and practices are constructed through our cultural communities. The situated self is a conception of the self that evolves, develops, and transforms, given specific contexts and activities.[9] Our situated self represents the shifting of those values, beliefs, and practices as a result of new knowledge and new contexts. These constructs are interconnected, not dichotomous.

[9] The concepts of enduring and situational self seem appropriate in this analysis, because both the Latino parents and I seemed to test our notions of self and perceptions of personhood. For a discussion of these theoretical representations, see Spindler and Spindler, 1990 and in press.

The relational nature of change between myself as the researcher and the researched was characterized by steps that revealed the cultural center of the enduring self of those involved by: 1) transcending fear, 2) liberating our voices through self-acceptance, and 3) transforming the situation through the situated self; that is, the self that shifts from context to context given new knowledge. In the case of the Latino parents who felt fearful and insecure because they did not know how to interact with the schools, I noticed how honest and sincere they were in sharing their feelings and confronting their fears by going beyond the perceived limitations — in other words, in how they encountered their enduring selves. They confronted their enduring selves through continuity with their social history. The Latino parents realized that they were whole and complete as they shared their life experiences with each other. Thus, they found continuity in the midst of a fractured immigrant experience. As parents discovered their strengths and developed new ones, they became more capable of articulating their situated selves in their new contexts, as evidenced by their formation of COPLA.

In my own case, I believed initially that COPLA parents' collective organizational behavior was based on their ignorance of political organizations. I subsequently revised my interpretation as I understood how they shared power and voice among themselves. Essentially, COPLA parents interacted with one another in ways familiar to them based on mutual respect for each other's opinions and experiences in the traditions of their own culture. I learned how important self-reflection was to COPLA parents through my own introspection about my role in their organization. Simultaneously, my personal need forced me to understand my gestalt while reevaluating my learned methods. I learned that there were no guaranteed outcomes and no failsafe methods to achieve objectives. I then understood what the process of organization meant to COPLA members, which enabled me to interact in their discourse of change. COPLA moved from conceptualizing change as a list of outcomes, to a list of books they could read to their children, to interacting with each other, to learning the process by which to inquire and access information that would lead them to obtain the resources they desired.

The relational nature of the study was evident in practice. For example, when COPLA's first president had to leave the organization, members called me to help them decide how to select another president. I met with them to reflect on why they chose a president for COPLA the first time and they thought about the reasons they needed a president. I asked them what leadership meant to them, and they were able to assess their needs in the new situation and make their own decision accordingly.

The tension between the insider/outsider perceptions raised questions about diversity and the need to understand the phenomenon in its specific context. A key lesson for me was that, as a researcher, the way I perceive the world of education is shaped by the culture in which I mainly participate, and thus is based on European-American cultural constructions of self, research, and edu-

cation. A broader issue that emerges from this tension is what happens when the ethnographer participates in the change influenced by the research?

When the setting is transformed in some way, as occurred in Carpinteria, empowerment is affected in favor of the community if and when the researcher can reconcile the duality between the researched and the researcher. Conceivably, a danger for the underrepresented community would exist if the researcher failed to recognize the needs of a different culture when the cultures and perceptions of the researcher and researched interact. If this is the case, we need to examine just how the value system of the researcher influences the study. Ethnographers have entered communities as participant-observers with seemingly well-grounded theories for conducting research. Knowledge of the people's language and culture may facilitate research; the researcher's own cultural background, however, may conceal biases that shape ethnographic insights about a given community. As Alan Peshkin (1982) reminds us, a close association exists among four aspects of research: the researcher, the actual research, the act of researching, and the results. To counter our own ignorance and biases as researchers, we must integrate into our research rigorous and systematic joint analysis with our participants.

The role of the researcher in relation to the researched is particularly significant when disenfranchised communities are attempting to exercise their own power. Disenfranchised groups in the United States are being rediscovered through ethnographic study, which enhances our understanding of people's real conditions in their respective communities. These groups deserve a voice as the architects of their own changing historical circumstances. Ethnography of Empowerment connects the researcher to the insider's point of view in constructing new paradigms for explicating change in the education of culturally different, underrepresented groups in our post-traditional and postmodern world.

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