Chapter 21

From Theorizing in the Ivory Tower to Creating Change with the People:
Activist Research as a Framework for Collaborative Action

Denisha Jones

Trinity Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of activist research and how it is used in various field including anthropology, social movements, and education. It discusses the impetus for incorporating activism into theoretical frameworks and research methodologies and the distinct aspects of activist research. Youth participatory action research is examined to identify how activist research can be situated into the methods and outcomes.

WHAT IS ACTIVIST RESEARCH?

As someone who identifies as an activist-scholar, I was eager to learn if other researchers embraced activist research, why they made the choice, and how they went about it. Like most academics, I was taught to strive for objectivity, root out researcher biases, and distance myself from the participants I studied to ensure the validity of my work. As I became more engaged in grassroots advocacy and activism, I found traditional education research limiting and less appealing. Although the shift from positivism to critical social justice oriented research gave me the strength I needed to finish my doctoral studies, it still felt as though activism should be disconnected from research. Perhaps activism could be a party of my service, but my scholarship should be based on "real" research. This thinking led me to stray from doing any research and focus on my activism, until I decided to investigate if others had found a way to bridge their activism with their research.

It turns out that there is an emerging research framework—activist research—that is inclusive of multiple disciplines including educational research (Cushman, 1999; DeMeulenaere & Cann, 2013; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Knight, 2000; Malone, 2006; Nygreen, 2006), anthropology (Hale, 2006; Speed, 2006; Urla, & Helepololei, 2014) social movements and other social science research fields (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007; Choudry, 2014). A review of the theoretical frameworks, methodologies, findings, ethical issues, and challenges has allowed me to identify three characteristics that delineate activist researcher from other types of research: (1) combination of knowledge production and transformative action; (2) systematic multi-level collaboration; and (3) challenges to power. The rest of this paper will explore how each characteristic is utilized in activist research. Next, I will review two youth participatory action research studies to provide an example how they utilized an activist research framework, and a third youth participatory action research study that does not fit the criteria for activist research. Then I will discuss implications for theory and practice and limitations of using activist research as an emerging methodology. Finally, I will conclude by providing an answer to the original question, what is activist research.

Combination of Knowledge Production and Transformative Action

The most salient characteristic of activist research is the belief that it must go farther than knowledge production; it must create transformative action. Knowledge production is the epitome of all research, even for studies that seek to expose inequities and call out oppressive systems and structures, but activist research goes further by committing to bringing about change with and for the participants (DeMulenaere & Cann, 2013; Hale, 2001, Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Nygreen, 2006). Who is changed and how they are changed is a key aspect of activist research. DeMulenaere and Cann note that critical research is not necessarily activist research if it fails to include social transformative change, "at the spaces and sites of research…" (p. 557, 2013). They stress that if the only change that takes place is through reading of the published findings, then the study would not be considered activist research.

Hale argues that anthropologists who wish to align their work to contribute to the freedom of marginalized people turn to cultural critique instead of activist research (2006). He defines cultural critique as:

…an approach to research and writing in which political alignment is manifested through the content of the knowledge produced, not through the relationship established with an organized people in struggle. Cultural critique embodies familiar progressive desires to champion subaltern peoples and to deconstruct the powerful; yet it neither proposes nor requires substantive transformation in conventional research methods to achieve these goals. (Hale, 2006, p. 98)

Hale contends that researchers who engage in cultural critique are committed to the research institution while activist researchers have dual commitments to the people and their political struggle and the academy (2006, p. 100). And it is this dual commitment that transforms the methodology beginning with the research topic and ending with the production of knowledge that is not only useful but transformative (Hale, 2001). Thus, activist research is an emerging research framework that shifts the focus from traditional knowledge production to commitment to working with others to produce transformative change. Traditional research methods such as ethnography, action research, and feminist research are situated within an activist research framework, leaving the means intact, but striving to change the ends.

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/from-theorizing-in-the-ivory-tower-to-creating-change-with-the-people/270098

Related Content

A Comparative Analysis of Educational Policy for Citizenship Following Political Transitions: A Case Study of Egypt, Nepal, and Hong Kong
Ericka Galegher, Maureen F. Park, Angel Oi Yee Cheng, Petrina M. Davidsonand Alexander W. Wiseman (2019). *Handbook of Research on Education for Participative Citizenship and Global Prosperity (pp. 108-132).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-comparative-analysis-of-educational-policy-for-citizenship-following-political-transitions/217214

Are Teachers Prepared to Educate in Citizenship?: Some Conclusions From Research in Andalusia, Spain
Francisco F. García-Pérez (2019). *Handbook of Research on Education for Participative Citizenship and Global Prosperity (pp. 409-430).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/are-teachers-prepared-to-educate-in-citizenship/217228

Teaching as We Learn: Mentoring Graduate Students in Engaged Scholarship
Mellinee K. Lesleyand Julie Smit (2020). *Preparing Students for Community-Engaged Scholarship in Higher Education (pp. 62-83).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/teaching-as-we-learn/248179

A Comparison of Resource Equalization Processes for Subnational Rural Governance and Development: Case Studies of England, Scotland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand
Tony Jackson, Etienne Neland Sean Connelly (2020). *Open Government: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 2140-2172).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-comparison-of-resource-equalization-processes-for-subnational-rural-governance-and-development/235271

Social Ecology of Engaged Learning: Contextualizing Service-Learning With Youth
Joan Arches, Chi-kan Richard Hungand Archana Patel (2021). *Research Anthology on Instilling Social Justice in the Classroom (pp. 683-693).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-ecology-of-engaged-learning/270118