

Chapter 17

Research as Resistance: Activist Research as a Framework and Methodology for Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of activist research and how it is used in various fields 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 (YPAR) is examined to identify how activist research can be situated into the methods and outcomes. Finally, a YPAR study is examined to illustrate how activist research can serve as a guided framework.

EMBRACING AN ACTIVIST-SCHOLAR IDENTITY

Like the proverbial chicken and egg, I cannot be certain which developed first for me: being a scholar or being an activist. I was in graduate school working on my doctorate when I attended my first rally. I just completed my first year as a tenure track professor (still ABD) when I began to speak out against the privatization of public education. I was a Preparing Future Faculty Fellow at an HBCU in Washington, DC when I attended the Save Our Schools March and Rally in 2011. By the time I finished my dissertation, I had been invited to speak at several rallies, authored several blogs, and joined a couple grassroots teacher organizations. When I was invited to speak at the Occupy the Department of Education 2.0 in 2013, I remember thinking I should not let my colleagues find out. I was no longer a fellow, but was not in a tenure track position and thought it would be best to keep my activism a secret. Fortunately, the dean at the time found out and was very delighted that a representative from the school was speaking at the event. I knew several colleagues, who also engaged in activism and did not receive the same level of support from their institutions, so I was grateful to know that my activism was not only allowed but encouraged.

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Once I was ready to embrace the identity of an activist-scholar, I was eager to learn if other researchers found a way to combine their scholarship and activism, why they made that 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. Reporting about achievement gaps that had more to do with opportunity than individual merit, attending conferences where the goal was to share findings instead of solutions, and reading about grandiose theories that had no relevant application to the day-to-day life of teachers and students made me question my decision to become a scholar. I wanted to write about education for liberation, expose the neoliberal assault on public schools, and develop critically conscious social justice teacher advocates, but I doubted this research agenda would lead to tenure. 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.

I quickly learned that there is a 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) systematic multi-level collaboration; (2) combination of knowledge production and transformative action; and (3) challenges to power. The rest of this chapter will explore how each characteristic is utilized in activist research. Then, I will review youth participatory action research (YPAR) to identify how activist research can be situated into the methods and outcomes. A developing YPAR study is examined to illustrate how activist research can serve as a framework and methodology. Then, I will discuss implications for theory and practice and limitations of using activist research as a framework and methodology. Finally, I will attempt to respond to the most basic question- what is activist research?

Systematic Multi-Level Collaboration

Activist research embraces collaboration at every step of the research process. Hale (2001) notes beginning with the research question and objectives, activist research is organized collectively with the people who are subject to the conditions under study. He suggests that prior to the selection of a research design, the researcher must undergo “a process of dialogue and collective work with the subjects of study...” (p. 14). The goal is to ascertain what knowledge or problem the people want to gain or work toward solving. Instead of the researcher identifying the goals and the selecting participants who share the same goals, the objectives “coincide at least in part with what actors in the process under study think it is important to know and to understand” (p. 14).

In traditional research, the researcher collects and analyzes the data. Even in qualitative participatory research that uses naturalistic forms of data collection, the researcher is often the sole interpreter of the data. Although we may ask our participants to review our analysis as a form of member checking, rarely do we have them collect, interpret, and analyze the data. In activist research, the participants actively engage in data collection, interpretation and analysis.

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