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Activist Research: Real-World Reciprocity—A Provocation

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Abstract This chapter invites the researcher to reflect on the question: “Where do I stand in relation to those I interview?” (Saeed, Between research and activism: The role of ‘organic intellectuals’ [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://blog.oup.com/2016/05/research-activism-organic-intellectuals-academia/>, 2016). The answer is particularly relevant to those employing qualitative methodology and most especially to those investigating marginalised groups. The relationship between researcher and participant shapes an investigation and legitimises the production of knowledge. Philosophical assumptions related to subjectivity, value and truth enable the researcher to understand human decision-making and the consequential actions that arise from these decisions. Once cognisant of the constraints and the freedoms of these assumptions, the researcher is then able to enhance the rightful and appropriate agency of all stakeholders involved in the investigation.

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Introduction

It is my contention that academia no longer supports a linear process whereby data is collected, theorised, published and neglected by all but a chosen few. Contemporary real-world scholarship demands a manifestation of responsibilities not only to the funding provider but to the world at large, including the direct participants of the study. Before, during and after the study, researcher reflection on their positioning in this climate of social change is an essential element of an authentic and rigorous investigation.

This chapter invites the researcher to reflect on the question: “Where do I stand in relation to those I interview?” (Saeed, 2016). The answer is particularly relevant to those employing qualitative methodology, and most especially to those investigating marginalised groups. The relationship between researcher and participant shapes an investigation and legitimises the production of knowledge. Philosophical assumptions to do with subjectivity, value and truth enable the researcher to understand human decision-making and the consequential actions that arise from these decisions. Once cognisant of the constraints and the freedoms of these assumptions, the researcher is then able to provide rightful and appropriate agency for all stakeholders involved in the investigation.

Each of the contributors in this book has wondered at a particular phenomenon, or wicked problem, unfolding within their social/academic environment. They have chosen to articulate voices of previously silenced speakers. As such, these researchers have emerged as “organic intellectuals” (Saeed, 2016) who represent the specialised interests of these marginalised cohorts within their locational geography. In doing so, they provide representation and validity to those individuals and groups that mainstream society has deemed unworthy of sustained public attention. So often, in our increasingly small global neighbourhood, these voices, although seemingly isolated and excluded from the local public domain, have found a home in the greater international environment and economic structure through strategic investigative enquiry. Research into

these phenomena and publication of the findings therein have provided an avenue of social change, in essence the enactment of activism. At the basic level, researcher reflections and recommendations provide a meaningful pathway into the public conscience.

As ever, healthy research requires a balance between the interplay of the researcher and the researched. The performance of reciprocity is one that may be enacted through the giving and receiving of wisdom and truths between participant and researcher and vice versa. Too often, research becomes a one-way street wherein the scholar utilises knowledge gained from the participant with a lack of accountability in the provision of the reverse occurrence. Such relational inequality may damage the reputation of scholarship and completely misrepresent the positive opportunities afforded to all stakeholders.

The Axiology of Activism

Conventional notions of activism conjure up contentious images of police barricades, weaponry, protestor arrests and, at worst, the endangerment of lives. Such concepts exclude a major proportion of the population who have a desire to act for the 'greater good' but who are not interested in involving themselves in such extreme circumstances. Mallet (2017) suggested that the world needs a new, more inclusive definition of activism. She proposed that contemporary activism should include those of us who recognise the importance of their individual actions on the world at large and/or the localised area we inhabit. Recognition should be given to individuals who intentionally work towards the betterment of the world through a platform of their own choosing.

What constitutes activism in social research? Couture (2017), citing Hale, labelled activist research as having a three-pronged approach. Such research must enable the reader to grasp a better understanding of the problem and its causes; it must directly communicate and collaborate with the target group; and it must work alongside the target group to provide goals for the improvement of their situation (p. 143). Thus, the focus is on positive social change. This transformation is essential for the ongoing good health of society as a whole and its individual membership.

When referring to activist identity in an education environment such as a school, Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) posited that: “First and foremost an activist professional is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression” (p. 352). This statement has more widely ranging implications for research professionals in any milieu.

When this idea is applied in a research setting, the scholar may attempt to balance the scales of social justice through the research process itself, culminating in the publication of findings and/or an ongoing relationship with the target individual/group. This process insinuates a moral responsibility on the part of the researcher to the participant. Such scholarship must be reflective, genuine and negotiated. “activist professional identities are rich and complex” (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002, p. 353). The undertaking of authentic and rigorous engagement with marginalised and vulnerable cohorts is laden with elements of trust and reciprocity.

Is the notion of reciprocity embedded in activist research? It is an academic truth that reciprocity involves a mutuality in the beneficial exchange of ideas. Ethical researchers build the foundation of trust when according full and comprehensive consideration to the giving and taking of information. “Essentially trust is a quality which demonstrates a confidence in the behaviour of another person, group or institution” (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002, p. 342). The concepts of expectation and reliance feature heavily in reciprocity and trust. The two authors posited that it is through the enactment of these generally underrated elements of human interaction, interpersonal relationships and organisational ethos are enhanced.

The notion of trust may be described as a type of social glue that bonds social connections. The twin relational concepts of trust and social glue have been explored by a number of scholars (Cranston, 2011; Govier, 1997; McClimans, 2013). Fransgaard (2011) defined social glue as “the ability to take all the individual parts and stick them together as one single vehicle taking the whole company forward at the same speed” (n. p.). The element of moving forward together as one entity can be transmogrified to one of the essential factors when building community connectiveness and establishing social capital. Effective and trustworthy research on marginalised groups within our communities raises awareness and has a beneficial impact on society as a whole. This is especially so when that research is publicised through networking channels.

Anderson and Jack (2010) defined social capital as the glue which binds the networking process and also the oil that smooths facilitation of the networking experience. Even though these authors focussed on entrepreneurial networks, there are parallels which can be drawn between their hypothesis and that of social capital as a manifestation of the dimensions of trust and reciprocity in qualitative research. Specifically, Anderson and Jack (2010) asserted that: “social capital is not a thing, but a process that creates a condition of social capital” (p. 193). The same “process” can be applied to the researchers’ quests for authentic relationships with their participants. Rich and genuine findings rely on the engagement of trust between stakeholders created during the course of the research. The resultant manifestation of the findings in the form of a published document creates an avenue for social capital in that it brings public attention to a social inequity. Activism at its most basic constitutes a public awareness of a previously unexplored or misrepresented concept such as marginalisation.

In his investigation into the efficacy of development schemes in third world countries, Scott (1999) referenced a “geography of trust” (p. 273). Simply put, this term referred to the understandings (or lack thereof) of reciprocity mirrored in the exchanges between multinational corporations and the local cultural traditions in which they attempted to operate. Scott examined two features—(1) the merit of the rationale behind the actions of the corporations and (2) the ‘otherness’ created by two disparate groups operating side by side. In this way he highlighted the two elements of purpose and trust as essential ingredients in a social “glue” (p. 275). This glue characterised a reciprocal interchange that formed the bond for positive action between the two groups. He further stated: “How we judge the activities that this social glue makes possible is another matter” (p. 278). This notion of the navigation of a “geography of trust” (p. 273) may be considered as one of the essential traits of a successful research project.

Qualitative researchers are morally required to ask themselves particularised questions about their topic that relate to existence (ontology), ethics (axiology) and truth (epistemology). Whilst undeniably, each of these elements are of strategic and equal importance to the rigorous enactment of research, at this stage, it is timely to discuss the concept of ethics as it

relates to academic activism. Somekh and Lewin (2011) defined axiology as referring to “philosophical questions relating to the nature of values” (p. 320).

Values are a slippery slope in terms of a qualitative researcher’s identity and assumptions. They are inherently peculiar to the individual and may change at any given moment during the research process when exposed to previously unknown information. Values are also the moral standard to which we hold ourselves accountable. How much ethical weight we apply to certain issues becomes a researcher-centric issue in terms of the paradigmatic schema employed; the context of the investigation; and the personal and academic nature of the research.

Activist identities may be personified by elements based on transparency of ideas; a willingness to constructively engage with the unknown; positive interactive expectations; effective evaluative and reflective practices; a sense of care and responsibility for others; and a readiness to appreciate ‘otherness’.

During an enquiry, decisions must be made around the degree to which individual and societal values should be placed on certain topics or aspects. Based on the paradigm utilised, the researcher must pose questions such as:

What are the facts as I know them?

How much does society value my target cohort?

How much does my target cohort value themselves?

How do I position myself as a researcher vis a vis my moral compass?

What are my unconscious biases and assumptions, and how do I allow for them as I conduct my research?

Having negotiated this ethical maze, the researcher is then tasked with documenting the application of findings by way of publication in a chosen format. But is there a life for this topic after that? What responsibilities does the researcher owe to the stakeholders, primarily the participants, who have invested their own axiological ideals into the research?

I would argue that after the investigation is completed, it behoves the researcher to ask him/herself—“How strongly do I feel about my findings?” Inherent values are significant, particularly in the area of social

injustice. Having asserted the strength of the impact of the research findings the following question may be posed: “Am I driven to partake in any direct or indirect social action or activism as a result?”

What Is Activism in the Twenty-First Century?

Ernest Boyer’s (1996) seminal paper entitled “The Scholarship of Engagement” is presented as a useful focal point around which to build a conceptual framework for activism. Boyer’s paper focused on higher education and the relationship between teachers and students, and colleges/universities and schools. He argued that: “the academy must become a more rigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement” (p. 13).

Boyer (1996) called for a “new paradigm of scholarship” (p. 16) and argued for more open communication between student and teacher that would, in turn, significantly enhance the wellbeing of society. He advocated the mutual intentional exchange of speaking and listening as a method of providing agency between all actors. This is an intriguing idea and can be extrapolated to include reciprocity between participant(s) and researcher(s). In his theory Boyer (1996) hypothesised four elemental factors that mesh together to produce a Scholarship of Engagement (p. 16). These are represented diagrammatically in Fig. 19.1 below.

Discovery, according to Boyer (1996), involves the research conducted at universities and their mission to expand the boundaries of current knowledge as experienced by academics and the world at large. The element of integration utilises current knowledge and involves an interwoven model of multidisciplinary practices. He further called upon higher education to create a paradigm of new knowledge that is relevant to both contemporary and future societies. Finally, he urged scholars to share their knowledge with others for the greater good of the community (p. 16). Boyer (1996) argued that it is only through the utilisation of these four functions that knowledge becomes pertinent and purposeful. “I have this growing conviction that what’s also needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity

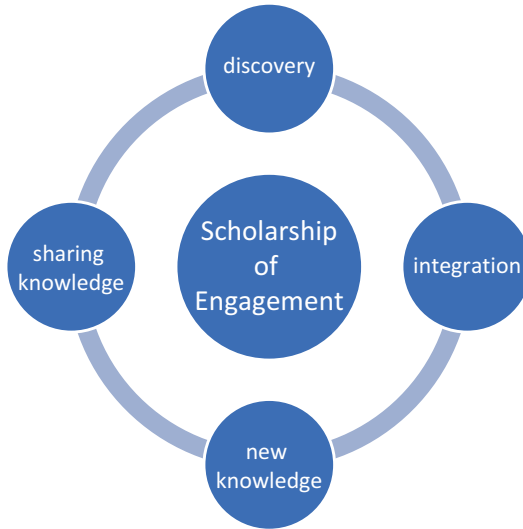


Fig. 19.1 A diagrammatic representation of Boyer's (1996) "Scholarship of engagement"

of direction in the nation's life as we move forward" (p. 20). A visionary sentiment.

With the ongoing notion of 'moving forward' in mind, I would add a twenty-first century, fifth element to the functionality of Boyer's "Scholarship of Engagement" framework—that of activism. It is no longer morally and ethically sustainable to practice the sharing of original contributions to knowledge with a chosen few. I would argue that Boyer sensed an impending smaller global neighbourhood that encompassed not only scholarship within one nation but that impacted the international scene as a whole. I propose that his egalitarian attitude to scholarship could embrace the element of activism. Figure 19.2 reconfigures Boyer's (1996) original Scholarship of Engagement.

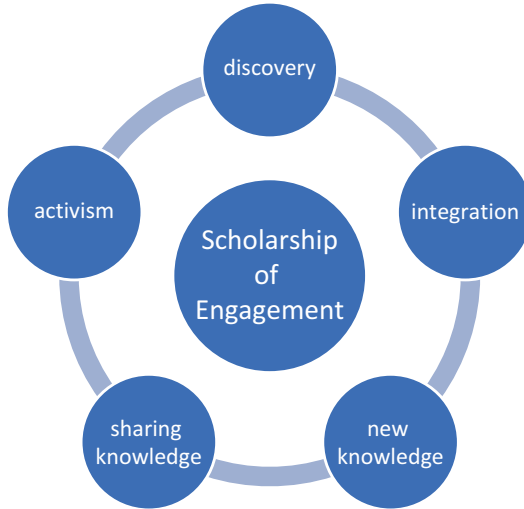


Fig. 19.2 Boyer's (1996) "Scholarship of engagement" reconfigured

Discussion

- Who owns knowledge? The researcher? The funding body? The participants? The audience? Does anyone actually own knowledge?
- Is knowledge merely the culmination of a scientific (quantitative/qualitative/mixed method) investigation? Or is it, in fact, the investigation itself?
- Does the formation of knowledge rest in the hands of the researcher? The participant?
- Having uncovered knowledge, how much agency does the acquisition and the receiving of knowledge allow?
- Having examined the axiology of activism and the inherent values therein, what of the roles of epistemology and ontology?

The answers lie somewhere in the philosophical positionalities of the researcher, the funding body and the participants.

The intricacy of conducting reciprocal research that benefits both participant and scholar is complex and many faceted. Layered over these

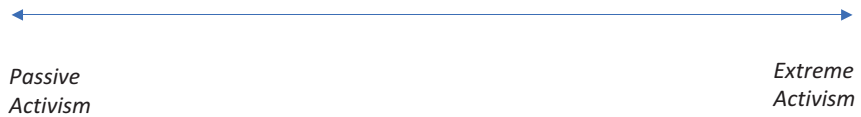


Fig. 19.3 A continuum of activism

complexities is the issue of trust and respect. The researcher is tasked with the ideological convolutions of acting upon the findings of the study. Is it enough to merely reproduce results in the form of a document, or series of documents? What are the researcher's responsibilities in terms of acting upon these findings in a more proactive manner? Enlisting activism as a reciprocal arrangement can benefit both researcher and researched.

Activism can be fluid in nature and can be constructed in a spectrum of behaviours. The different levels of activism can be imagined on a continuum with passive activism at one end and extreme activism at the other. This is diagrammatically represented below in Fig. 19.3.

Within a research community, passive activism may constitute the one-off publication of an article in a journal/newspaper/book/website, or the delivery of a one-off oral presentation in the local community centre. Extreme activism may occur when the researcher, having investigated a social phenomenon, may decide to take a more visceral/active approach to alerting a wider public audience to their findings. An example of this may be the researchers putting themselves in harm's way and risking their life to save an animal species or rescue abused children. Thereby making a more proactive and wide-ranging statement about the results of their investigation with the hope of drawing a larger, more global audience.

The essence of conducting authentic social research is the researcher's interrogation of the meaning of the investigation. What is their ethical response to the findings? Danaher and Danaher (2008) described the notion of ethics as: "fluid and transitory [in] character, as well as the intersection with myriad other forces of power and meaning making" (p. 61). They referred to the "transitoriness and unpredictability" (p. 62) of framing values within a research project. The authors (2008) posed the question: "Which assumptions, attitudes and values on the part of the researchers have been or are likely to be revealed by the design and conduct of their research projects?" (p. 67). This is a valid question when

conducting social research. The values of the researcher are all important in determining authenticity and rigour.

What about when the research is complete? Is it enough for the researcher to take an objective stance and present (or not) the investigative findings to the funding body and then wash their hands of the topic altogether? Under certain circumstances this is a most valid form of action—particularly if that is all that is financially required of the researcher.

What are their ethical responsibilities to the participants that they enlist to help them in their study? “How can and should educational researchers position themselves in relation to the research projects?” (Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 67). This may be extrapolated as a consideration upon completion of the enquiry. I would argue that the positioning of ethics/values is as important post-research as it is during the actual research process.

“What are the implications of recognising researcher identities for contemporary debates about the significance and utility of educational research?” (Danaher & Danaher, 2008, p. 67). This is the ‘before’ and ‘after’ subjective question. Is a research project still significant after publication and with no further action taken by the enquirer on behalf of the participants? The answer is complex and nuanced. Is there an obligation on behalf of the researcher to act beyond the final product on the printed page? What benefit does research have to the wider community if it is hoarded by specific actors or the learned elite?

Maxey (2005) explored the notion of activism in its capacity to liberate the researcher and provide an avenue for personal growth. “The social world is produced through the acts each of us engages in every day ... activism [is] the process of reflecting and acting upon [these actions] ... it gives rise to a continual process of reflection, challenge and empowerment” (p. 201). He supported the ideal of activism as a boundaryless construct and one that included every person. Maxey (2005) suggested the configuration of a new discourse around activism that challenges assumptions of social exclusion. “activism is not a fixed term, but it is actively constructed in a range of ways” (p. 199). He enlisted the strategic element of personal empowerment as an inspiration for activism. A reflexive researcher may choose to view their findings as a “performative”

(p. 202) contribution to knowledge. Such a contribution to agency on behalf of the researcher and the researched may find a place at any point along the continuum of activism.

Flood, Martin, and Dreher (2013) stressed the notion of “ideological commitment to social and personal change” (p. 17) when contributing to scholarship. They interpreted a four-pronged approach to academic activism which included the responsibilities of the researchers as well as the academic establishments. They concluded that research should inform and add to the quality of knowledge for the advancement of social transformation and that the performance of the process of the investigation itself should be enacted in such a way that is beneficial to social change. Academic institutions should not only lead the way as a bastion and caretaker of progressive strategies that enlighten social change, but they themselves should be challenged to reinvent best practice.

The nature of the compelling personal and professional benefits of research activism has also been posited. “Activist academics can find meaning and comfort in the sense that their work contributes to the greater good, nourishing a sense of personal and collective purpose” (Flood et al., 2013, p. 18). The sense of researcher growth and purpose is an important one that points to identity and authenticity in research. The researcher who is personally invested in the outcome of the study as a means of social benefit is more committed to the genuine process of developing rich and meaningful data. Nourishing the collective psyche makes for healthier communities and more individual commitment to social growth and combatting marginalisation within society.

Qualitative research, and the effects it has on the researcher, is a subjective phenomenon. Klein (2000) discussed conversations overheard between various hierarchies of a nursing fraternity at a particular hospital. He hypothesised a “We They Dynamic” (p. 3) that involved a conflict arising from lack of understanding about a particular situation between existing factions within the hospital. This then led to a misrepresentation of reality on behalf of both groups. He asserted that each group brought their own subjectivity based on personal and collective axiological foundations to the circumstance around the conflict. This co-creation of reality within groups led to the formation of opposing ethical viewpoints,

that is, the “We” against “They” mentality. Klein (2000) claimed that collective identity formed when like-minded individuals with similar cultural histories align and form groups. These individuals bring to their chosen social group embedded social assumptions around values, morals and ethics. “This pervasive ‘We They Dynamic’ affects virtually all our relationships, especially those involving differences in social status, roles, and positions” (p. 3).

Klein’s “We They Dynamic” (p. 3) could be transmuted to the world of scholarship engagement and activism. I contend it could be rebranded as an ‘Us Them Paradigm’ whereby researchers distance themselves from the topic they study in order to maintain objectivity or for other personal/professional reasons. This could have dangerous ramifications for the impact of their research as far as application to the notions of social capital and social cohesion, or social glue. Klein utilised social glue discourse when referencing aspects such as rights and responsibilities of local communities to the individuals within them. He utilised terms to do with mutuality such as “recognition” of others; “connectedness” to others; “responsibility” and “concern” for others (p. 5).

Traditionally, universities and similar institutions of higher learning have been considered as the rightful custodians of academic research. This narrow perspective assumes a certain elitism and a hoarding of knowledge that is unavailable to those outside or removed from the field of scholarship. Atkinson (2013) contested the notion of academic gatekeepers and posited that such conventions have no place in the reality of today’s academic world.

Scholarship should be available to all members of a society should they wish to access it. This is the only way in which it can evolve into a creature of contemporary merit. Qualitative studies should allow for locational relevance and real-world significance. If the opposite situation occurs, knowledge growth is stunted and remains archived and unrecognisable. Research should add new, contemporary dimensions of understandings to significant perceptions that fill in the societal gaps and silences. It should also be reciprocal in nature, thereby allowing the participants to feel that they play a necessary and active role in the formation of findings that shape the study.

Academic activism is an important aspect of collective learning and collective wisdom. It is generally agreed that the conservation, dissemination and generational succession of information is vital. Social justice activism can be manifested in multiple arenas from a passive offering of a thesis and the resultant journal articles to investing in more interactive action to alter the status quo. However, it is my contention that we need to move beyond the mere act of harvesting knowledge for the sake of it. As academics, and most particularly qualitative researchers, we stand at the coalface of truth (however many multiple forms it may take) and data impact. We interview our participants and gather material about their lives. Are we then duty bound to monitor the effect of this information on humanity? This would include both the marginalised fringe dweller cohort that we set out to examine and the society as a holistic entity. Therefore, our efforts guide the marginalised from learning on the educational and societal edge to full mainstream acceptance by not only the community in which they live as well as the wider national and international community, but the marginalised individuals themselves.

Conclusion

Are research participants more than just a means to publication? Where is the moral obligation of the researcher and the higher education institutions positioned in terms of contribution to this social glue? Should a researcher, after having uncovered an unacceptable societal fault such as marginalisation or prejudice, be duty bound to do more than simply publish findings? Are they ethically obliged to involve themselves in the implementation of more direct activist behaviours?

In summary, it is my belief that researching within educational margins demands authenticity and rigor in order to effectively communicate and articulate these marginalised voices. Researchers are tasked with the following moral conundrums—Who am I? What do I believe in? How can I ensure the validity of representation of my research participants? It behoves responsible researchers to reflect on these three key questions throughout their research journey from conception to publication and beyond.

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