Conflicts Between Activist Research and Academic Success: Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies

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The article compares participatory research and alternative activist approaches, based on the literature on participatory research and interviews with nine successful sociologists who use alternative approaches. Participatory research, distinguished by high control over research by community members, equalizes power within the research process, but often retards academic publication and career advancement. The interviews show that successful academics retain control over their research, experience mild to severe conflicts with departments, and develop various strategies for combining activism and career success. All types of activist research are more effective in challenging inequality if they involve activist community organizations.

Activist research often conflicts with academic standards. "Activist" research as I define it aims at challenging inequality by empowering the powerless, exposing the inequities of the status quo, and promoting social changes that equalize the distribution of resources. Such research is "for" relatively powerless groups, and often involves close social ties and cooperation with these groups. In contrast, academic research aims at increasing knowledge about questions that are theoretically or socially significant. Academic research is primarily "for" colleagues. It involves close ties with faculty and students, and emotional detachment from the people being studied. Sociologists who do activist research and want a successful academic career thus have to bridge two conflicting social worlds.

This article analyzes participatory research and other types of activist research and evaluates their usefulness both in challenging inequality and in advancing

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one's academic career. I evaluate academic success by conventional criteria such as the prestige of where researchers are employed and where they publish. Success in challenging inequality is much more difficult to evaluate. I assume that researchers will be more successful activists insofar as: 1) they emphasize major changes in equalizing power, as opposed to improving services for the disadvantaged within the existing power structure, and 2) they incorporate collective action into their research instead of restricting themselves solely to academic analysis, i.e., they include "practice" as well as "theory."

My analysis of participatory research is based on a survey of the literature, informal contacts with numerous participatory researchers, and my own experience with this method. Interviews with nine sociologists who combine activist research with a successful academic career are the basis for examining alternative strategies.

The major issue that emerged in my analysis was that most activist researchers with academic careers face many difficulties in balancing the social worlds of academia, policy makers, and the public or "the community." (The term "the community" tends to romanticize disadvantaged people and to cover up their internal differences and conflicts; but I will use the term, since I have no better alternative.) To do activist research, researchers must have stronger ties with the community and/or policy makers than is typical for professors, and they must hold their work accountable to both activist and academic standards. But these commitments usually impede academic success and create conflicts with academic departments and colleagues. Participatory researchers typically have strong ties to the community, because of their emphasis on community participation and collective action, but their relations with academia are often very strained. In contrast, successful academics usually have difficulty in developing strong ties in the community.

Another important issue is the role of activist and research organizations in supporting activist research projects. Participatory researchers often lack the full support of academic organizations and need other sources of institutional support for their research. Successful academics, on the other hand, typically need activist community organizations to sustain their ties and their commitment to the community.

I begin by presenting the basic features of participatory research projects, and describing the conflicts between participatory and academic research. Then I examine alternative strategies of activist research used by the professors I interviewed, emphasizing the professors' ties to activist community organizations, and their conflicts with their departments. I conclude by comparing the costs and benefits of different strategies of combining activism with an academic career.

Participatory Research: An Overview

Participatory research is a radical type of activist social research in which the people being studied, or the intended beneficiaries of the research, have sub-

stantial control over and participation in the research. Combining scientific investigation with education and political action, participatory researchers challenge inequality within the research process, as well as in the wider society. In contrast, the successful sociologists I interviewed gave community members little control over the research, and often did not include political action in their research projects.

Participatory research was developed in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily by third world researchers who challenged conventional economic development projects and sought to empower poor rural and urban communities (Freire, 1970; Huizer, 1979; Tandon, 1981 and 1988). In the United States, the Highlander Center in Tennessee supported grass roots projects on workers' education, racial justice, and rural development, and became a major center of participatory research (Gaventa and Horton, 1981; Horton, 1990; for reviews of the field and bibliographies, see Cancian and Armstead, 1991; Maguire, 1987; Park et al., n.d.). Feminist approaches to research and teaching, which often closely resemble participatory research, have also contributed to the field (Cancian, 1992; Maguire, 1987; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1992).

Participatory researchers focus on power relations and are oriented primarily to community groups, not to policy experts or academicians. The concern with underprivileged communities and power underlies the four major characteristics of participatory research: 1) participation in the research by community members; 2) consciousness raising and education of the participants; 3) inclusion of popular knowledge; and 4) political action.

One of the hallmarks of participatory research is that its intended beneficiaries—who typically are members of relatively powerless groups—participate in all phases of the research as much as possible (Freire, 1971; Tandon, 1981). Projects that study "the oppressed" encourage participation by the people being studied. Projects that investigate "the oppressors" encourage participation by the people that the researchers intend to benefit. The degree of participation may be very limited, or participants may have substantial power in all aspects of the project.

Secondly, teaching research skills and raising consciousness about power on the individual and social level are part of most participatory research projects. For example, there may be group discussions that attempt to increase participants' confidence and leadership skills, and try to relate personal problems to unequal distributions of power in the community and the society. Another distinguishing feature of participatory research is valuing the popular knowledge of community members. Personal experience and feelings as well as artistic and spiritual expressions are valued as useful ways of knowing.

Finally, participatory research includes political action, especially actions that cultivate "critical consciousness" and are oriented towards structural change, not towards adjusting people to oppressive environments (Brown and Tandon, 1983). Some scholars argue that "real" participatory research must include actions that radically reduce inequality and produce "social transformation." How-

ever, many projects include little or no collective action, and are limited to changing the behavior of individual participants, raising consciousness, and strengthening or creating community networks (Park, 1978).

An example of a successful participatory research project is a study of the working conditions of bus drivers in Leeds, England. As a result of greater pressure at work accompanying government deregulation, bus drivers were experiencing increasing stress, accidents, and conflicts at home (Forrester and Ward, 1989). With the help of professors from the University of Leeds, a group of eight bus drivers decided to do some research that would investigate stress at work and motivate the drivers' union to take action. They designed and carried out a survey of drivers and their families, studied accident records, and measured physical signs of stress.

The results of the project were mixed, which is typical of participatory research. The report presenting their findings, failed to produce the desired action by the union. However, workers' stress became part of the agenda for the union and the national government, and the report was used by workers in other countries to document the need for improved working conditions. The participants in the research gained research skills and knowledge about work stress, and the professors produced academic papers on work stress and participatory research (Forrester, 1989). The professors had a dual accountability (as they put it) to both the bus workers and to the university; their projects produced results that were valuable to both groups.

The support of a long-term organization was a critical element in the success of their project. An adult education program for workers at Leeds University had been organized by the researchers and unions several years before the project. The education program focused on work-related issues and accomplished a great deal of consciousness raising, education and training for both the professors and the workers, before the research project began. The program also gave the professors institutional support and academic legitimation for their participatory research (Forrester and Ward, 1989).

Ideally, participatory research produces progressive social change on three levels (Maguire, 1987, p. 241). For individual participants, it develops confidence and critical consciousness. For the local community, it strengthens activist organizations and improves living conditions, and for the wider society it helps to transform the power structure. In fact, this ideal is usually unreachable, or the degree of success is unknown. I believe that a project should be judged a success if it leads to progressive change on one or two levels.

Participatory research can be very effective in empowering participants and bringing about social change, especially if it is supported by an organization and if researchers stay with the project for a long time. Without these supports, participatory research achieves more limited goals: it teaches participants critical thinking and research skills, and significantly increases their confidence and self-esteem; it also offers participants the rewards of intense social contacts and personal change.

Conflicts Between Participatory Research and Academic Success

While participatory research can be very effective in meeting activist goals, it is difficult to integrate with a successful academic career. In particular, sharing power over the research with community members makes it very difficult to produce frequent academic publications that meet academic standards, and incorporating social action into the research slows down and complicates research projects, and may antagonize academic colleagues and administrators. Because of these conflicts, many participatory researchers argue that their approach cannot be integrated with conventional academic standards; in their view, good participatory researchers must give up trying to succeed in academia.

My own limited experience in doing participatory research illustrates these conflicts. In a project on conflicts between work and family, I organized a group of secretaries at my university to discuss stresses at home and work, and to consider ways of improving their work situation. I began with the goals of doing a collective, participatory project that would improve working conditions for the secretaries, raise consciousness, and also result in academic publications for me. The group discussed problems at work and home, and eventually decided to survey all the secretaries in the school about pressures at work. The survey, which was initiated, designed and administered by the secretaries, consisted of two questions, and showed that there was widespread agreement with the group's analysis of work pressures: the main problem was pressure from professors to complete last-minute work in a hurry. The survey succeeded in getting useful information, legitimating and publicizing the group within the school, and helping members feel more competent and powerful so that they could go on to take more ambitious actions. But the survey clearly was too limited to be an academic study. I decided not to argue for a more ambitious survey, because that would increase my power in the group and decrease their participation in the survey.

Over the nine months of this project, I became more involved with the group and more detached from my original academic goals. The survey led to meetings with the secretaries' supervisor to address problems at work, and I heard rumors that some colleagues outside my department disapproved of my activism. I produced some talks but no academic publications from the project, even though I had learned a lot about work and family conflicts, and usually published something from my research projects.

In retrospect, I believe that this lack of academic productivity stemmed in part from my anxiety about the reactions of local colleagues. A bigger factor was my confusion about my goals in the project and how they differed from the secretaries' goals. For the secretaries, participating in a support group and improving their working conditions were the main goals. I shared their goals, but also wanted to produce research that would interest my colleagues, benefit my career, and contribute to general knowledge. I avoided seeing the differences between my goals and the secretaries', both because of my personal involvement with the group and my acceptance of the ideal that the only legitimate purpose of participatory research is to benefit community groups.

I now believe that this ideal does not fit people like myself who value their membership and standing in academia. Therefore, I am explicitly planning my next participatory research project so that it serves multiple goals, oriented to both the community and academia. Another departure from the ideals of participatory research stems from my observation that most nonresearchers are not interested or skilled in many aspects of academic research; therefore, I plan to separate some of my academic research from the participatory components of the project, and retain control over the research process, although part of the research agenda will be collectively controlled. I also will try to set some guidelines for myself and other participants about our involvement in political actions that conflict with academic norms.

In sum, participatory research usually is so strongly oriented to the community that it is difficult for researchers to maintain adequate ties to academia and have a successful career. It is especially difficult to produce the publications required by a research university on the basis of projects that follow the ideal form of participatory research. However, research that uses some elements of participatory research can be integrated with an academic career, as several sociologists I interviewed illustrate.

Alternative Strategies For Activist Sociology

My interviews with nine successful professors of sociology identified several strategies for combining activism and an academic career. For systematic studies of different types of applied and activist research, readers should consult the literature on applied research (Freeman, et al., 1983; Fritz and Clark, 1989), action research (Lewin, 1946; Tichey and Freedman, 1983) and other approaches (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Whyte, 1991).

In the interviews, I asked respondents to describe their activist research projects and the conflicts they experienced between activism and academic success. Eight interviews were by telephone, one was face-to-face, and they lasted for twenty to forty minutes. The individuals were selected informally, and overrepresent my feminist network, but they are fairly diverse in age, ethnicity, methodological style, and research area. The criteria for inclusion were that the individuals defined themselves as doing activist research, or social change-oriented research that challenged inequality, and were academically successful in the sense of having a position at a major research university, and/or publishing extensively in mainline sociology journals and prestigious publishing houses. I am using their names, with permission, because I believe it will make my analysis more interesting and useful to sociologists who know them. Nancy Naples and Stacey Oliker are assistant professors (as of Spring, 1992 when I did the interviews); the others are tenured: Pauline Bart, Edna Bonacich, Mark Chesler, Troy Duster, Heidi Gottfried, Mary Romero, and Gary Sandefur. I will briefly describe some of the recent research of these sociologists, starting with studies that are most similar to participatory research and most community-oriented.

The researcher whose work is closest to participatory research is Mark Chesler,

from the University of Michigan. He studied fifty self-help groups of parents of children with cancer, and has published several papers describing his personal and professional experiences (Chesler, 1991; Hasenfeld and Chesler, 1989). The project was aimed both at advancing scientific knowledge on volunteer agencies and support systems, and giving immediate help to parents and local groups by providing information on how to recruit new parents, run effective meetings, and work with the medical establishment. Mark Chesler is a parent of a child with cancer, and is an officer of the national organization of the self-help groups, the Candellighters' Childhood Cancer Foundation. Thus his research raises important issues about being an insider vs. an outsider to the community with which one is working (Naples, 1991).

Chesler's project includes many elements of participatory research. The project has several action components; for example, Chesler gives workshops for group leaders and consults with them, using findings from his study (and collecting new data). In addition, many of the questions that he researches were proposed by the organization or particular self-help groups. His research differs from participatory research in that community members do not have control over or participate in doing the research.

Two other sociologists that I interviewed also work closely with community organizations or unions. Edna Bonacich, from the University of California at Riverside, is studying the international garment industry by interviewing corporation executives, and surveying manufacturers. She works closely with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' union, and a major goal of her project is to contribute to union strategy. As part of her volunteer work with the union, she meets with the director of organizing to plan needed research, and participates in the union's Justice Center where workers and union leaders conduct adult education sessions and try to develop a mass movement among workers. Her project is an example of studying "the oppressors" and encouraging the participation of the people whom the researcher intends to benefit, not the people being studied.

Heidi Gotfried, from Purdue University, does research on the labor movement from a feminist perspective. Her research is interwoven with her long history of union involvement, which includes being a labor activist and serving as a delegate for the Madison, Wisconsin Central Labor Council. The results of a project on technological change affecting clerical workers, that she developed out of her own intellectual interests, were used in a union organizing drive. She also works as a *pro bono* consultant for labor unions, for example, by doing a demographic analysis of clerical workers to help the organizing drives of the "9 to 5" union, and by reviewing union reports so that they would be defensible from attacks by economists.

Three other researchers—Nancy Naples, Pauline Bart and Mary Romero—are less connected to particular community organizations or unions, but do research that is intended to benefit particular groups. Nancy Naples, from Iowa State University, is studying community responses to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, in rural towns. Currently she is surveying the extent to which

service providers are aware of sexual abuse or deny its existence. The research questions guiding the survey were identified "in dialogue" with a group of incest survivors and an organization of service providers, the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault. The multiple goals of the study include providing evidence to support the Coalition's advocacy efforts on behalf of sexually abused women, and possibly designing a new training program for service providers. In another project on low-income women in two rural towns, Naples developed her research agenda in consultation with an activist organization focused on rural inequality and with several individual activists and community workers in the towns.

Pauline Bart from the University of Illinois at Chicago is evaluating Illinois' sexual assault laws, in a project that involves extensive contact with individual rape victims, including lengthy interviews and observations of court proceedings, and often expanding into giving material and psychological support. Mary Romero, of the University of Oregon, states that all of her research has been a response to "being part of the ((Mexican-American)) community and being active in it." Her current project explores the educational and career experiences of Chicano academics and identifies the nontraditional avenues they have taken when faced with structural barriers. The goals of the study are to provide models of success for Chicano youth, and identify policies that would increase the number of Chicano students and faculty in higher education.

The work of Troy Duster, from the University of California at Berkeley, falls between these six respondents and the two (Oliker and Sandefur) who give less emphasis to community organizations and are most different from participatory researchers. As director of the Institute for the Study of Social Change at Berkeley, he is involved in many kinds of projects. The Institute supports progressive social research, emphasizing the areas of poverty and racial/ethnic minorities, and supports graduate training of minority students. Faculty at the Institute try to "straddle the thin line" between activists working for immediate change and academic researchers investigating inequality with the hope of encouraging long-range change, according to Duster. In one of the more activist projects, researchers are surveying the health care needs of children in poor families and also are consulting with state legislators on improving health care policies.

The research of the final two respondents—Stacey Oliker and Gary Sandefur—is oriented to long-term changes in public policy and does not involve close ties with community organizations or collective action. Stacey Oliker, from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, is studying the welfare system, doing a traditional ethnography of the personal lives of low-income women on "workfare," and interviewing welfare workers and administrators. Her research challenges the prejudices of policy makers and she hopes that publications on the project will be widely read and will help to improve government provision of goods and services. She is currently keeping a moderately "low political profile" in order to maintain trust with the welfare administrators she is interviewing, but will intensify her work with the media and with local welfare rights organizations when her fieldwork is completed. Gary Sandefur, from the University of Wiscon-

sin at Madison, studies racial inequality and poverty, using mainstream quantitative methods. He is currently helping to organize a conference and volume on inequality in income and living standards: "Poverty and Public Policy: What Do We Know? What Should We Do?" Academics, policy makers and media representatives have been invited to this conference, as well as representatives of activist organizations. He has been active in community organizations, but sees this work as separate from his role as a scientific researcher.

In comparing these nine professors to each other, to participatory researchers and to more traditional sociologists, three issues stand out: the researchers' connections to academia, policy makers and the community; the special importance of connections to activist community organizations; and the conflicts of researchers with their academic departments. I will now discuss each of the issues.

Ties to Academia, Policy Makers, and the Community

As one would expect from successful professors, all nine respondents had strong ties to academia, and these ties seem to explain many of their departures from the ideal model of participatory research. All the professors retain control over the research process, probably so that they can meet academic standards and/or produce frequent scholarly publications. Community members do not participate in designing or doing the research, although they do heavily influence the research agenda of several respondents. Most of these researchers also avoid a radical orientation to social change that would alienate their colleagues. However, several of their projects did include collective action directed at challenging power relations, such as Bonacich's work on union organizing.

Compared to most sociologists in academia, all nine professors are more connected to community organizations and policy groups. Most of them also write for nonacademic publications. Edna Bonacich has helped write a pamphlet for workers describing the organization of the garment industry, Nancy Naples has described research findings in publications aimed at activists, and Gary Sandefur's volume will be written in nontechnical language to make it accessible to the educated public. Many use the mass media extensively, appearing on local TV, writing letters to the editor, and being interviewed for the newspapers. With the exception of Mary Romero, who focuses on change within higher education, all the respondents insist that social change-oriented researchers must communicate with people outside the university.

Activist Community Organizations and Dual Accountability

Given the relatively strong ties of sociologists to academia, it can be difficult to maintain connections to the community and to understand the needs and interests of different community groups. Becoming involved with an activist community organization was a strategy used by several respondents to achieve these goals.

A fundamental proposition of social theory and research is that groups con-

struct knowledge and beliefs that reflect their own interests and experiences (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Mannheim, 1936). Elite professors and policy makers tend to construct research agendas that reflect their own interests and experiences, and that reproduce inequality. Therefore, the concerns of disadvantaged groups are best articulated by members of those groups and "their" organizations. Unions and community organizations obviously do an imperfect job of challenging existing inequalities and representing the interests of different, conflicting segments of a community, but on the average, they do a better job than elite organizations.

According to this perspective, ties to activist community organizations or unions are extremely valuable in helping sociologists to do research that benefits disadvantaged groups and challenges inequality. For example, building on his ties to the self-help organizations, Chesler's research assisted parents of cancer patients and challenged the medical power structure.

Another important benefit of doing research in cooperation with activist organizations is that it makes it possible to challenge the traditional relations of domination between researchers and the disadvantaged people they study or intend to benefit. Activist organizations also provide opportunities for doing activist research, and support the researcher's commitment to activism. On the negative side, involvement with community organizations can be costly. For example, to become accepted by union members, it is taking Edna Bonacich several years of working as a volunteer, attending meetings, and learning Spanish so she can communicate with rank and file workers.

Instead of working with an activist community organization, an alternative way of achieving dual accountability to both community and academic groups is to participate in a university organization dedicated to both activism and research, such as Troy Duster's Institute for the Study of Change or the Leeds Adult Education Center. However, university organizations probably will experience more pressure to avoid radical statements or actions than many community organizations.

Troy Duster described the "healthy tension" between the Bay Area activists who want to use the Institute of Social Change as a base for movement activities, and his obligation to act as a "neutral researcher" in charge of an official university research organization. Most of the time, the Institute maintains good relations with both activists and academics. But during a few politically "hot" times, the distinctions got blurred, he commented. "Some of them felt we had crossed over the line and critical eyes were cast by colleagues."

Conflicts with Departments

For many of the sociologists I interviewed, the "healthy tension" between activism and academic research became a major conflict between themselves and their departments. I will not identify respondents by name in discussing this sensitive topic, except for the published account of Mark Chesler (Hasenfeld and Chesler, 1989).

Chesler's account describes several conflicts with research and academic units at Michigan. For example, in the 1970s, Chesler helped create the Educational Change Team, a research and social action organization focused on racism in high schools which was part of the Institute for Social Research at Michigan. "With a staff of scientists and practitioners and a communal and representative decision-making structure, the team received substantial federal and foundation funding for research and action projects." But "leaders of the Institute for Social Research argued that these projects contained an inappropriate balance of social research and social action, and 'invited' the team to locate its action work outside of the institute." (Hasenfeld and Chesler, 1989, p. 503). Several years later, "colleagues in the Sociology Department decided not to promote me to full professor status. The principal reasons involved . . . the appropriate balance of scholarship and action in my work, and the general relevance of my work for advancing the intellectual frontiers of sociology as a discipline" (1989, p. 504). Since then, the department has become more tolerant of diverse types of research and Chesler has completed some research "that more nearly conformed to existing sociological research priorities" and published two books and several articles in "more 'mainstream'" journals. "Eventually I was promoted, and the disrespect and stigma now seem much diminished" (1989, p. 505). These are recurring themes of conflict for activist sociologists: the exclusion of social action from respected academic research, the narrow definition of what is sociologically significant and what kinds of publications are valuable, and the threat of heavy sanctions if these standards are violated.

Academic standards for posing research questions and writing are difficult to integrate with social change-oriented research, according to most of my respondents. One respondent remarked that most "theoretically significant" questions "are so narrowly defined that your work can't have any impact" on social change. Several respondents were in departments that discouraged graduate students from social change-oriented research, and one respondent described her department's successful campaign to pressure a tenured activist colleague to shift his research towards more positivist, conventional projects. Only one respondent reported no conflict between doing social change-oriented research and department expectations.

Publications are another arena of conflict between career advancement and activist research. Seven respondents mentioned writing different articles for academic and change-oriented audiences. Publications in nonacademic outlets count as "being a good citizen" and are accepted only "as long as I keep the other (academic) stuff going" commented one professor. To maintain professional standing, "At times I do alienating writing for sociology journals," commented another. A woman who wrote a book on preventing rape because so many women asked her about this topic found that a leading academic journal would not review the book because it was not theoretical enough.

In most sociology departments, academic standards devalue essential elements of activist research: advocacy of particular social goals, social change projects,

and active involvement with community groups. But these elements are compatible with other academic subcultures, and are valued in other disciplines such as Social Work and Medicine. For example, medical school faculty advocate reducing infant mortality and become involved in community health care projects. In the long run, if activist research is to flourish in sociology, departments will have to change (Cancian, 1992). In the short run, activist sociologists in traditional departments will have to develop strategies for adapting to academic demands.

Several respondents seemed to be using the strategy of having a second career oriented to social change on top of their academic publications and activities; they were very productive in both arenas. This "two career" strategy was successful but very demanding on the researchers' time and energy. One childless woman observed that if she had children, she would not have the time to be an activist as well as a successful professor. Other respondents gave up publishing in mainline sociology journals and focused on social change-oriented publications, or they published almost exclusively in mainline journals and gave up nonacademic outlets.

The conflict that professors experienced with their departments varied from extreme, bitter, mutual attacks to harmony and integration. The stronger the researchers' connections to activist community groups or unions, the more conflict they tended to have. But several other factors also influenced the degree of conflict.

The strongest indicators of conflict with departments were the lack of mainstream publications and integration with the department (which is both a consequence and a cause of conflict). One of the people with the highest conflict rarely published in sociology journals or attended ASA meetings, and was marginally involved in department affairs. Another high-conflict person was well integrated into the profession on a national level, in terms of publications, meetings and personal connections, but extremely alienated from the department, which disapproved of the activist topics of this person's research. Another respondent with a similar pattern of very high national integration and high department conflict commented: "I'm so alienated in my department that I don't care what they think of me." Two of the professors with high conflict were harshly treated by their departments, denied promotions and/or raises, and cut off from close contact with department graduate students.

The intellectual stance of the department on the value of applied or activist research also had an important impact. Three respondents were in departments or official department subgroups that specialized in urban problems, social services, or social change. These respondents received department support for doing research linked to progressive social change, and had many graduate students who wanted to work with them. But even these researchers experienced tensions between academic and activist allegiances; one commented on the problem of "being seen as a local politico, not a serious academic."

Evaluating Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies

How effective are participatory research and the alternative strategies used by my respondents in accomplishing the twin goals of academic activists: challenging inequality and having a successful academic career? Let us first consider the goal of challenging inequality.

Participatory researchers and my respondents who are closest to this approach seem to be the most effective in challenging inequality, if we focus on the research *process* and not the research *product*. By sharing control over the research with community members, by consciousness raising and education of participants, and by valuing participants' knowledge, the process of participatory research empowers community members. Participatory research projects also challenge inequality in the wider society by incorporating social action within the project, and by focusing on changing power relations, as opposed to providing better services within the existing system. Except for Mark Chesler, and Edna Bonacich and Heidi Gottfried's involvement in union organizing, my respondents did not discuss doing research that included acting to challenge the existing power structure. Their activism centered on the findings or products of their research rather than the research process.

If we focus on research *products* as traditionally defined—the impact of research findings on promoting progressive social change in the wider society—it becomes more difficult to evaluate the different research strategies. A highly democratic process can have very little effect on inequality in the community, while a traditional, nondemocratic research process can have a powerful social impact. For example, demographers and sociologists who use mainline quantitative methods like those used by Gary Sandefur have documented the increasing income gap between rich and poor Americans over the past decade, and seem to have increased the willingness of elected officials and voters to consider distributing resources more equitably. We know very little about how to produce long-term social change, i.e., how different kinds of evidence, arguments, books, or collective actions will help to create a more or less equal society. Therefore, the long-term effectiveness of alternative strategies of activist research are very difficult to evaluate.

On the other hand, there are many reasons to believe that research done in cooperation with activist community organizations will be more likely to produce findings that benefit the relatively powerless and challenge the existing power structure. Activist organizations will articulate the interests of disadvantaged groups more effectively than elite groups of academics and policy makers, on the average. Given the importance of working with activist organizations and the overall uncertainty about how to create a more equal society, I conclude that sociologists committed to challenging inequality should encourage many different types of social change-oriented research, and should pay special attention to research strategies that involve cooperating with activist community organizations.

Turning to the effectiveness of alternative strategies in contributing to aca-

demic success, the rank ordering of different strategies is the reverse. Participatory researchers and the sociologists I interviewed with the strongest ties to community groups tend to be the least successful in academia and to have the most conflict with their departments. The major requirement for academic success in research universities—publishing regularly in academic journals—is incompatible with doing research that is controlled by community members and that includes radical social change. Academic success also depends on being socially and professionally integrated with colleagues at a departmental and national level, a requirement that can conflict with developing close ties to activist community organizations.

To adapt to these conflicts, the sociologists I interviewed developed several successful strategies that enabled them to be academically successful while doing effective activist research: 1) participating in an organization that is accountable to both academia and activists, like the Berkeley Institute; 2) using the "two career" strategy and having one career oriented to academic colleagues and another oriented to activism; and 3) working in a sociology department that values activist research. Sociologists who cannot use these strategies will have to develop alternative compromises.

Combining activism with an academic career means "swimming against the stream," Mark Chesler observes. But it also brings opportunities to do nonalienating research that contributes to social justice and public welfare.

Note

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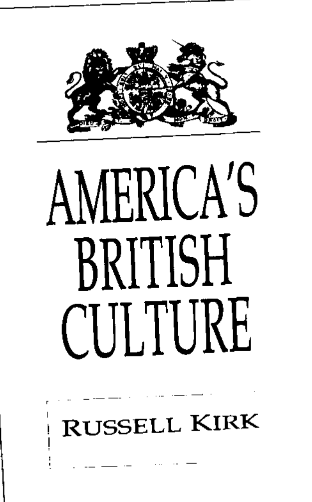

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