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Research as a Social Justice Tool: An Activist's Perspective

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Abstract

The congruence between social work activism and transformative research resonates with those who are looking to change the root causes of oppression. This article reflects the journey of integrating the identity of activist practitioner and researcher. The process of becoming a social justice researcher includes the discovery of a new set of lenses, emerging tools, and new pathways while maintaining a critical perspective rooted in antioppressive praxis. Research becomes an extension of one's own identity as a human rights activist, which requires leveraging the skills and capacities of research as a strategy to move to a more socially just world.

Keywords

social justice research, social work, qualitative

The Disconnect

I remember attending a community conference on domestic violence where researchers presented on their research projects with community partners. I recognized one of the academic presenters from a project that my community agency collaborated with some time ago. I had participated in several aspects of the research: from negotiating the design from the agency perspective, to recruiting participants, and having ongoing input in the project as the data were collected. The research project concluded, and the agency resumed its work of counseling and crisis intervention. It was not until almost 2 years later, at the time of the researcher's presentation did I realize that I had no idea about the outcomes of research that I had worked on to facilitate in my agency. As I came to realize that the presentation unfolding before me was about that very same research, I was excited that I would finally have the opportunity to see the results. At the same time, I experienced another feeling: why was I not informed?

The presentation was fantastic and informative. The words and experiences of marginalized women who were study participants enlightened the service providers in attendance. At the end of the presentation, the researchers quickly mentioned the support of the partnering community agency. There was no mention of my name as the main agency collaborator nor the countless hours that I had contributed. The names of the participants, my clients, were not mentioned either.

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Although I understood the need to protect the confidentiality of the client/participant, I was still bothered. The act of protecting participant confidentiality was also an implicit act of separating each one of them from their story and, fundamentally, their identity within it. With the participants "protected" and invisible, it is the researcher who gains the right to speak of their experience—to almost, own it. I was reminded of the few among my clients who would have relished the opportunity to have such an audience with whom to share their experiences. It was all very uncomfortable. I remember leaving the room wanting to say to anyone who would listen "Hey, I was a part of that."

Research as Oppression

There are numerous compelling critiques of research practices that are rooted in White, British, and northern-western European cultural traditions. Many of these offer alternatives to dominant methodologies, from reformist philosophies that "tweak" existing theory to radically different approaches that confront the internalized dominance of traditional approaches (Brown & Strega, 2005; Swingonski, 1994; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

In some of my various roles as a social worker, feminist, mother, activist, and a community member reflecting on my surroundings, I have been involved in research. I never realized my positioning or my involvement because "research" was something that happened to the community when researchers were present. The researchers spoke a different language and played by different rules. As a social worker in the community, I often felt disempowered in their presence. I could only imagine what the clients experienced.

My experiences as a PhD student have prompted the reflection that the parallels between research methodologies and all the ways that we act and behave outside a research context now appear seamless to me. Methodology is influenced by structures rooted in hegemony. Choice of methodology is connected to one's worldview or epistemological and ontological convictions, which are shaped implicitly and explicitly by domination. For this reason, the values and convictions that one brings to any research undertaking will naturally position this research as supporting or countering an oppressive paradigm.

I suspect that I had been involved in the debate of research as a tool of domination or liberation long before I even realized that there was a debate. Until recently, the academic vocabulary and the packaging of both concepts and spokespeople on the continuum of thought from positivism, postmodernism, and critical and decolonizing theories (and beyond) were unknown to me. Long before I heard about emancipatory or transformative research, I was positioned in alliance with the underpinnings of this concept.

What Resonates Is What Makes Sense

When I moved from Montreal to Calgary in the 1990s, my first 2 years as a counselor at a local shelter for abused women consisted of the "night shift." Sometime between the wee hours of 4 and 7 a.m., I would blurrily perform the task of collating the information from the day's client intake forms. I remember the time when, while summarizing these forms, it occurred to me that a majority of our female clients noted that their abusive male partners had witnessed or experienced domestic violence in their families of origin. I remember that this particular statistic was meaningful to me, allowing me to further understand the multiple factors that influenced a person to engage in intimate partner violence.

From what I now understand from a research perspective, this intake form was a mixed-methods tool with both qualitative and quantifiable questions. The quantitative question regarding abuse in family of origin was enlightening, but, despite my early morning exhaustion, it left me with more questions: Did anyone intervene in the childhood cases of these now abusers? What types of

supports were beneficial for a child who witnessed abuse? Why do some childhood victims become adult abusers, while others do not? And most importantly, what recommendations could be made on how to put an end to the cycle?

Of course, with the whole shelter asleep and no police at the door, my midmorning musings were endless. Despite all that, one thought remained: It would be a good idea to sit down and have a conversation with a person who was exposed to childhood domestic abuse and ask questions about these experiences. At the shelter, the percentage of women who indicated that their abusive partners had witnessed violence in their family of origin was high. This statistic, although compelling, was not enough.

Qualitative Research: The Power of Stories

My own entry into social activism and eventually social work was prompted by stories. These lived experiences came to me via the narratives about the lives of people like Gandhi or Steven Biko. Steven Biko, an antiapartheid activist, was one of countless Black Africans who was murdered by the White colonialist apartheid regime in South Africa.

Apart from Biko's special qualities as a leader, organizer, and spokesperson, he was one of many—a number or a statistic in a brutal racist campaign of imperialism and genocide. But someone decided to tell his story. And it was this story that resonated with me, as I'm sure it did with millions of others across the globe. Biko's story and the stories of the many activists that I would meet during my involvement in the antiapartheid struggle formed the cornerstone of my activism. It was these personal experiences, the human experiences that connected me to the bigger picture of land rights, Bantustans, and racist policies that privileged some and dehumanized others. These human experiences and my solidarity with them created a platform of courage that compelled me to break free of complacency. This became evident when I, along with a small group of activists in Calgary Canada, barged into a Shell Canada annual shareholders meeting to disrupt their meeting and distribute pamphlets condemning the company's collusion with the racist apartheid regime. Since that time, I have engaged in many more of these career-limiting acts of social responsibility.

At the time of my involvement in the antiapartheid movement, or even recently, I would not have thought that the telling of Biko's story was a powerful piece of qualitative research. It has only been in the last few years that I have come to understand qualitative research as a vehicle for the expression of many things in very diverse ways. Patton's (2002) perspective that qualitative research uncovers data that are "information rich" (p. 230) resonates with my belief in the richness and value of lived experiences.

With the development of technology and a push from the margins for feminist, antioppressive or emancipatory research approaches, stories, or lived experiences are now being shared in ways that are more meaningful and empowering to those who own them. Traditional qualitative tools such as interviews have expanded to include other forms of research interaction. The value of videos, blogs, photos, e-mails, websites, theater, quilting, art, and artifacts are now being highlighted. For example, decolonizing approaches to research, such as "tiaki" or "whangai" within Maori communities, are processes by which researchers are either mentored or incorporated into the community (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Recently, my Filipino-Canadian friend Cesar Cala informed me of an action research project that he was part of in rural fishing villages, where the main methodological tool was a fishnet. This net was symbolically used to weave the stories and experiences of the participants. Participants re-enacted their daily lives and their roles in the global market, from catching their fish, to having it sold to marketplace "middlemen" who would cheat them of a fair price for their labor. Stories of individual hardships were shared and, through this process, repositioned by the participants as systemic oppression. Community-led collective actions flourished through this process. Like the telling of Biko's story, I have come to understand the power of narratives in changing minds, inciting collective action and, potentially, altering the course of history.

Social Work and Qualitative Research

In Padgett's (1998) appraisal of the congruency between social work practice and qualitative research, she comments on the various ways that qualitative research is compatible with practice in the field. Some of her points include the parallel approaches of client sessions and research interviews as well as the capacity to address the complexities of practice through qualitative research.

At the risk of generalizing, I believe that the possibilities engendered through qualitative research naturally resonate with many social workers and activists who have spent years in the field. There are several reasons for this, and I will relate these to my own experience. First, after more than 20 years of practice, I find myself less dogmatic and less apt to commit to particular "immovable noncontextualized truths" with regard to the human experience. I am more open to possibilities, multiple and changing perspectives, and the humility of not being able to quickly attribute a cause–effect equation to all behaviors. Beyond what has now become a well-developed capacity for me to analyze the impact of power and oppression in all aspects of my social work role, I would venture to say that most social work practitioners who have been working in the field for a long time have more questions than answers. It is not that we haven't developed a greater understanding of human interaction, it is that our questions become more complex. Theories learned through formal training become living models in the field. The practitioner is both mindfully and serendipitously gathering her own data and analyzing findings throughout her time in practice. This form of research may produce multiple theories, most of which might never be further or formally investigated.

An additional rationale for social workers' interest in qualitative research, and particularly transformative methodologies, is that we want to know about the hidden agendas. Given the complexities of working with human beings and systems, one learns that things are not always as they appear. In many instances, a person's motivations are more important than actions or behaviors. Social workers should understand that systemic oppression flourishes with collusion that often goes unrecognized or is overtly denied. With this analysis of the unjust realities that impact humanity on a daily basis, it is both conviction and the urgent need for social change that would predispose us to want to uncover and eventually eradicate obvious barriers to social well-being. Research tools and approaches that are positioned to assist and promote this change respond to the core purpose of social work.

Connected with uncovering hidden agendas and the complexities of human interaction is the development of the authentic self. Qualitative research, emancipatory, and critical approaches, in particular, resonate profoundly with this objective because they present opportunities and encouragement to identify, detail, and discuss one's social positioning. I believe that the emphasis on reflexivity, or *honesty* in regard to one's own biases, struggles, and intent is a fundamental discussion within the realms of qualitative research and is not as apparent in the quantitative field. As noted by Swingonski (1994), it is not possible to engage in research that is free from human values nor is it desirable. This statement, glaringly evident in the field of practice, is also accurate in other domains where humans exist, particularly in research. It highlights the reality that everyone is "positioned," whether they choose to disclose this or not.

Carter and Little (2007) emphasize the point that, "A reflexive researcher actively adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher implicitly adopts a theory of knowledge" (p. 1319). This powerful assertion underscores the existence of human ethics and values in all human interaction, whether consciously or unconsciously adopted. In our daily human interactions, with the diverse roles within social work practice, or the research that we engage in and support, there is no apolitical fence to straddle. I believe that a qualitative researcher is more encouraged, if not compelled, to step off the fence and to disclose biases and uncover that which has been dismissed as inevitable.

A third rationale for the appeal of transformative qualitative research methodologies for social work practitioners is the *potential* for people to be self-empowered to speak for themselves and provide guidance on how to address social issues from the standpoint of having lived the experience that

is being studied. Qualitative research that specifically promotes, and is positioned to develop an "action agenda," resonates with the International Definition of Social Work that emphasizes that "principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (International Association of Schools of Social Work/International Federation of Social Workers, 2001, p. 1). Research, as a platform for social justice, is fully congruent with social work philosophy.

Social Work Activism and Research: My Search for Congruence

In my journey as a social activist, I embraced social work practice as one of my methodological approaches to addressing injustices in society. With strong ethical foundations, definitions, and applicable tools, the social work philosophy enshrined within our legal and professional code of conduct is mostly congruent with my values and convictions. In contrast, my arm's-length observations of and experience with research has not been congruent—at least until recently. It was only after many years of involvement in social justice work through social work and volunteer approaches that I was compelled to conduct my own study. I too would become a researcher, but I never saw it that way. I viewed myself as a community activist—a term that I often use synonymously with social worker—who was going to do a community project on something that mattered.

The questions connected to everyday practice are those that led me to the decision to write a thesis for my master of social work (MSW) degree. As a counselor, I found myself supporting strong and resilient women who were at the same time forced migrants, displaced, disenfranchised, traumatized by war and family violence, and having experienced a life where there was no haven from violence (Lorenzetti, 2006). This reality formed the basis for my thesis. It became evident that I needed to ask the question, "Was I, or anyone, supporting survivors and impacting systems in ways that were appropriate and transformative?"

I did not begin my thesis with, nor was I even particularly aware of, a methodology that would assist me to best address my question. It was the process of discussing my thoughts, questions, and interests, which led me to choose a grounded theory methodology. I found this methodology inadequately represented my ideology and aspirations as I moved forward with my study, so I incorporated a feminist antioppressive lens. I also completed my approach by connecting the methodology to the core principles of action research.

At the time, a sizeable body of literature in my area of study did not exist. I strongly believed that there was a need to delve into the issues to develop a greater understanding and ability to act on the issues identified by survivors. It was a completely natural process for me to think "I will ask them about their experiences, and listen to what they say." Qualitative research provided me with a means to open the space for the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. Grounded theory, with the inclusion of a feminist antioppressive lens and an action agenda, brought the study to life.

Now several years later, as a PhD student, I find that the numerous decisions I had made about my research had unknowingly positioned me within an epistemological debate. These decisions were not made because I claimed to be acting in accordance with, or even understanding, concepts such as postmodernism or critical theory. Rather they were choices based on social work ethics and the core values related to human rights and social justice.

Becoming a Social Justice Researcher

> Hunger! Thirst! You walk for miles, there's no water . . . In the jungle . . . All this walking, remember you walk past the living and the dead people. If you find places where there's water, which means there are a thousand of them dead around this water. Some, they don't even have the energy of even taking the *water* . . . to their mouths. And one woman, I remember she . . . drank the water with a human skull. Just

> picked the skull and fetch the water and drank, while speaking that: ''lucky you, who is dead.'' Then she poured the water and to get for her—to live. (Participant from Sudan)

Whenever Raida Dada Juan stands up and reads this quote from my MSW thesis—a quote that she identifies as her own—there is silence in the room. In academic conferences and community forums, participants who have come to hear about my study of the multiple impacts of war and domestic violence on refugee women are both appreciative and transformed through documented words and the presence of Raida as a copresenter. In fact, they are much more impressed with Raida than they are with me. Raida's words are the words of a real human being not a number or a statistic. It is important to recognize that millions of people around the world have endured a reality similar to Raida's, and it is even more important to do something about it. However, I believe that it is the individual narrative of a person, a human being whom we can consider as human as ourselves, which can transforms us. It should compel us to solidarity and to action. It should make us ask the question, ''How can we stop this?'' The power of transformative and antioppressive qualitative research, I realized, can transform the observer to participant and move us to realize that yes, this indeed could be our story.

The tensions between oppression and liberation—stratification and equality—continue to function in all aspects of society. The field of qualitative research is not exempt. There is much ''internal'' debate and divergent views on theory, methodology, and the practical application of research. My brief exposure to the margins of academia has provided me with the opportunity to read and reflect on some of this diverse positioning. New researchers such as I may sense or actively experience the pressure to commit to a methodology, and within that, an interpretation or school of thought within that methodology. Traditional methodologies that are widely accepted within Western philosophy are likely a safer route for newcomers. However, some of these may feel partly or wholly incongruent with one's fundamental beliefs about the world. It is my view that the new researcher must balance all the compelling factors within her new environment and focus on the importance of ethics, integrity, and intuition, as transferable skills that she brings from the field.

It has become evident to me that the new information and deepened perspectives I am gaining within the realms of academia are becoming integrated with my evolving model of myself as a social work activist. It does not resonate with me that I am aspiring to become one day or even label myself or one day become a walking methodology. I believe that it is counterintuitive for me to commit to a particular school within qualitative research or within the broader paradigm of research itself, categorizing myself as ''grounded theorist,'' or ''action researcher,'' but becoming a social justice researcher is altogether a different thing.

In my assessment, a social justice researcher is an activist who has discovered a new set of lenses, evolving tools, and pathways. It is not a separate self now called ''an academic'' but an extension of one's role as someone invested in human rights, social change, and collective well-being. It is a journey with no particular end point, but many opportunities to reflect, grow, and share one's learnings with others. Developing this new role requires humility and an open mind as well as a confidence in the value of everything that exists outside of this role.

When I first entered the PhD program, I carried a looming feeling of someone who had abandoned the trenches and run off to find safety in a cozy and detached place, far from all the screaming. Perhaps that feeling was more a reflection of my exhaustion than the absolute disconnect between fieldwork and academia. Now, after a few months of balancing both my studies and my fieldwork, I see a new perspective emerging. I have had the opportunity to meet others within academia who are passionate about social justice and who are using their skills, creativity, and influence to forward a humanizing agenda. Seeing myself as becoming a social justice researcher has been an inspiring thought. The breadth of emerging critical, antioppressive, and decolonizing methodologies provides a vast array of new routes, pathways, and backstreets that a social activist could take along the way.

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