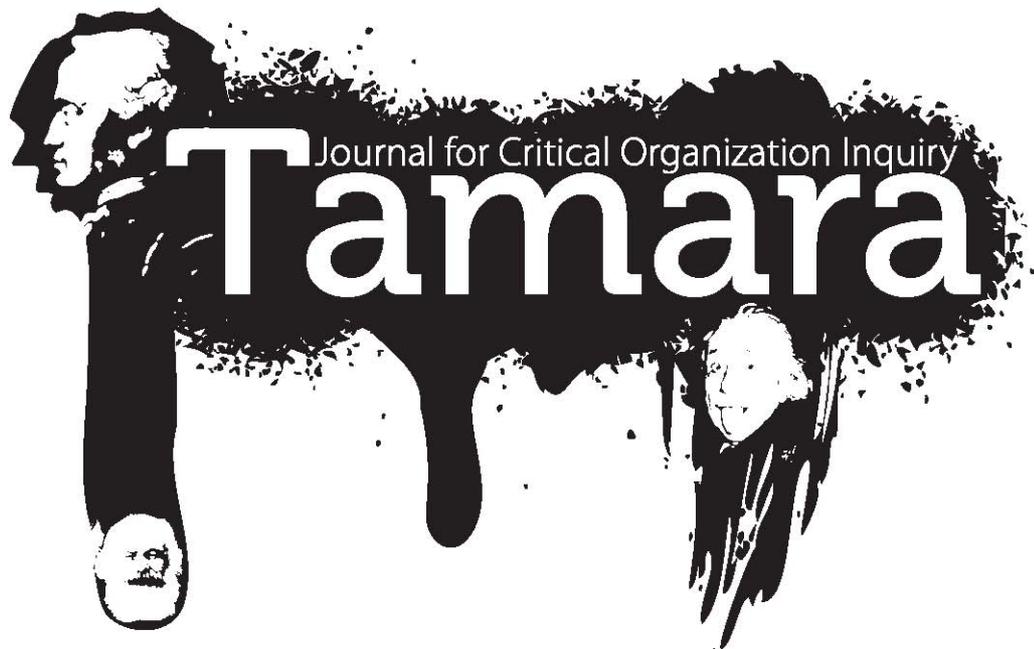


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Community-Engaged Scholarship: Creating Participative Spaces for Transformative Politics

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Setting the stage

We are pleased to offer this special issue on community-engaged scholarship. As scholar-activists working for social justice alongside youth of color (Pat) and critical arts activists engaging with stigmatized communities (Ester), we began this project with the intent of gathering a collection of essays operating against the traditional colonizing methodologies that have been the hallmarks of social/science research for centuries (Smith, 1999). In organization studies, this tradition includes Kurt Lewin's 20th century research studies that laid the groundwork for participatory approaches to system change, but which offered no critique or analysis of the broader societal structures of power that embed such change (Adelman, 1993). For this special issue, we called for essays that would attend to issues of power in the participative research process, and with a conscious aim toward decolonizing research that exposes and challenges inequalities in the production, outcomes, and sharing of research content. Also, our intent was to collect essays that would highlight the ways scholars are grappling with some of the "prickly" issues (to use the apt term provided by one of the contributions to this special issue, Schaefer & Rivera) in community-engaged scholarship—issues that emerge at the *intersection between the political and the theoretical* and which are at the forefront of conversations both inside and outside the traditional boundaries of academe.

For example, one of us recently participated in a four-day workshop entitled "Counterweight," involving seventeen diverse participants, including artists, cultural managers, not-for-profit professionals, literary critics, and academic researchers. The participants were representing networks, leading organizations, and cultivating methods to mobilize civil society and constitute an alternative voice to the established one in their respective societies. For the Egyptian woman, this means advocating for cultural policies that bring the arts to citizens and respect dissident voices. For the South African man, it means setting a pan-African cultural network that builds information infrastructures as well as human capacity within the arts field across the continent's countries. For the Scottish woman it means defending the cultural rights of disenfranchised communities against the roll back of the welfare state. For the Swedish man it means challenging organized nationalistic intolerance. Grounded in our experiences, participants at this workshop debated and raised

questions about: the challenge to an increased neo-liberalization of economies; the role of representations in shaping society; the responsibility of acting as spokespersons for people that may, or may not, recognize the demands of the organizations we work in; the democratic management of differences of opinion; the handling of messages; the instrumentalization vs. essentialization of the arts; the material and social conditions of possibility of political engagement; or the way in which privileged positions frame knowledge of co-citizens. These are, as it were, questions that are parallel to discussed in academic circles: the shaping of society; the challenge to an increased neo-liberalization of economies; rationalities of government; representation (in both its political and visual/textual sense) and identity.

Academics traditionally deal with the political-theoretical twosome inside the academy (e.g., in the classroom and in journals). Community activists do it through the organization of civil society forces outside the academy. Engaged scholars attempt to do it both inside and outside academia, exploring models through which to bridge the “bifurcation in [one’s] political-academic life” (Blomley, 1994), and also expanding and bridging the spaces where transformative politics can emerge. The contours of community-engaged scholarship are not easily mapped and need to be critically explored (and re-explored) within an ever-changing political, social, and discursive landscape.

Tracing the Interstices and Intersections of Community Engaged Scholarship

Engaged scholarship is an umbrella term that has recently gained popularity, following the plea from Ernest L. Boyer. The former president of the Carnegie Foundation urged scholars to “connect the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities...” (Boyer, 1996:19-20). Particularly in North America, Boyer’s plea sparked a movement of scholarly efforts to engage with the most disenfranchised communities beyond university campuses. (See for instance “Imagining America,” a collaboration of about 100 universities and colleges promoting engaged scholarship through research, teaching and learning). However, engaged scholarship points to a diversity of ways to define and address social issues and a variety of methods in use (Barker, 2004). For example, not all engaged scholars claim to value participative methods, or offer critiques of power, and perhaps far fewer embrace notions of decolonizing research. Thus, Boyer’s call for scholars to “connect the resources of the university to...our most pressing...problems,” does not necessarily signal a challenge to the possibilities of re-inscribing the sometimes harmful role universities have played in their engagement with communities, particularly communities of color.

Therefore, we think it is important to stake a claim for tracing Boyer’s (1996) call to the decolonizing, participative, and transformative methodologies that predate it. We advocate a form of engaged scholarship, which can be linked to the influences of Paulo Freire (2010/1970), Orlando Fals-Borda (1985), and Mohammad Ansur Rahman (Fals-Borda & Rhaman, 1991), who laid the ground work for what is variously referred to as participatory action research (PAR), participatory research (PR), and action research (AR). Of special importance is Freire’s understanding of critical consciousness (*conscientizacao*) as a method of tapping into and engaging local knowledge systems toward emancipatory practices. Feminisms, also, should be acknowledged in this context, for pioneering perspectives on women’s diverse experiences as critiques of patriarchal power, and the development of critical feminist methodologies that tap into women’s agency toward activism and social change (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012).

Our emphasis in this special issue is on the decolonizing participatory action research approaches that stress activism (Giardina & Denzin, 2011) as well as the critical and transformational importance of co-constructed research involving knowledge producers located both within and outside the academy and occupying established and subordinated positions in the socio-economic landscape. Besides PAR, PR, and AR, there are many related terms and practices linked to this view of engaged scholarship, including “community-based participatory research” (CBPR; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003); “critical”, “post-critical” and “reflexive ethnography” (Madison, 2004; Noblit et al. 2004); and “activist scholarship” (Hale, 2008; Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009). However, these diverse approaches are by no means a monolith and offer a wide range of perspectives that differently attend to important issues of engaged scholarship.

This special issue enters into this vibrant debate on the practical convergences, epistemological divergences and political complications in the field of engaged scholarship. The authors in this issue offer exemplars of an increased awareness of the role of researchers in reproducing or challenging power differences in the research process. Collectively, they attend to three concepts that have become central in the discussion and development of a decolonizing participatory approach to engaged scholarship: a) Reflexivity; b) Positionality; c) Performativity/Intervention. These concepts spell out the practical, epistemological and political challenges we as scholars face in our work.

Reflexivity: Awareness of Dominant Discourse

Reflexivity refers to a researcher's critical relation to the assumptions she brings to the topics she studies, to the methodological decisions she makes, as well as to the research practices she engages in. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of approaches ranging from Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 2010/1970) to Bourdieu's collective intellectual (Wacquant, 2004a), engaged scholars start from "a methodological reflection on the [social science's] act of objectivation itself, its techniques and its social conditions" (Wacquant, 2004b:389).

Reflexivity may take several forms within the academy. The most basic "form of reflexivity is the self-critique, the personal quest, playing on the subjective, the experimental, and the idea of empathy" (Marcus, 1998:193). This form of reflexivity "exposed the epistemological and ethical grounds of [...] knowledge to full critical discussion" (Marcus, 1998:193). A sociological form of reflexivity, on the other hand, "makes an object of that which shapes one's own knowledge, never giving way into a romantic subjectivist fantasy" (Marcus, 1998:193)

That is, out of either a concern for the subjectivity of the researcher (Marcus' basic reflexivity) or of an anxiety for the symbolic violence inherent in the researcher-researched relationship (Marcus' sociological reflexivity), a reflexive research praxis has become quintessential with any true desire to understand those who we make the object of our studies. The challenges are summed in the questions 'What kind of knowledge is being developed? What are the assumptions it makes and the limits it poses on our view of the world and our world-making power?' Reflexive scholars have learnt to recognize that the set of problems we pose and the series of practices we put to work shape (and limit) the ontological horizon of the reality we aim to capture, thereby moulding our understanding of what is possible and shaping the form of our engagement (see Schaefer and Rivera, in this special issue).

To be sure, reflexivity, in engaged practice, does not refer merely to one's critical relationship to the assumptions and methods brought to our studies. Rather, the engaged scholar is utterly concerned with overcoming the objectification of people living and working at the site of research inquiries, by moving from making them "objects of study" and transforming ourselves into subjects who can see them as having agency in the production of situated knowledge (see D'Enbeau in this issue). It is here that an appreciation of one's positionality comes in.

Positionality: Taking a Position in the Discursive Landscape

A decolonizing/participatory approach to engaged scholarship situates the researcher within partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (Haraway, 1988:584). As a starting point, engaged researchers maintain an awareness of the tight connection between power/knowledge and identities/subject, and then try to move beyond a critique of the value-laden assumptions of our knowledges towards methods that are able to advance situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Researcher positionality, then, emerges through a critical self-reflexive interrogation of personal and cultural biases and recognizes the continuously shifting nature of power relations across methods and research sites (Hess-Biber & Piatelli, 2012:563).

Authors in this special issue variously attend to several issues related to researcher positionality in engaged research. One rather foundational issue is whether, or to what extent, a researcher interrogates the self and connects that interrogation to an activist research aim. These days, it is not unusual to find in an essay, a seemingly isolated or randomly placed section titled, "subjective positioning," in which the writer discloses all sorts of details about herself, but with no apparent connection as to why this disclosure was relevant to the research process. Madison (2005) reminds us that there is, indeed, a politics of positionality for researchers, and it is fundamentally one of representation. She asks, "How do we begin to discuss our positionality as ethnographers and as those who represent Others?" (p. 6). As a useful framework, she follows Michelle Fine (1994), who outlines three positions in qualitative research:

1. The ventriloquist stance that merely "transmits information in an effort toward neutrality and is absent of a political or rhetorical stance." [nonexistent self]
2. The positionality of voices is where the subjects themselves are the focus, and their voices carry forward indigenous meanings and experiences that are in opposition to dominant discourses and practices. [vaguely present self, but not addressed].
3. The activism stance in which the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives. (Fine, 1994: 17)

Clearly, our emphasis in this issue is writing against the first stance (the nonexistent self). However, the essays do not all fall on the activist end of the spectrum. For example, some fall somewhere between the first two (e.g., Silka et al.) and between the second and third stances (e.g., Mattson & Clair, in this issue).

Another important issue relates to the ways in which activist researchers come to hold statuses as “insiders” or “outsiders” relative to co-citizens we are working alongside. In this sense, Fine’s typology is related to the processes through which an activist researcher negotiates her relationship to the field. Or, paraphrasing Haraway (1988), the issue is how the researcher negotiates her dual position (a) in the dominated community in which one exercises her activism; and (b) among the dominating intellectual positions that legitimate language use (Haraway, 1988) (see Schaefer & Rivera, this issue).

Alongside issues of representation and relation to the field, positionality’s acknowledgment of power differences in the research process directly speaks to concerns on the co-construction of knowledge. Collins (2000) work on the matrix of domination suggests that researchers and people in the communities they engage with are situated within an array of interlocking identities and social locations, such as race, gender, and class. These influence how people come to see power differentials and can influence knowledge production. The danger comes from participants (from either angle) assuming commonality in, for example gendered or racialized experience, where there is none, or establishing distance (for example across class statuses) that reproduce the very barriers we want to deconstruct. Some of the contributions to this special issue offer strategies to navigate power differentials through reflection (e.g., D’Enbeau et al. in this issue) and openly conversing about difference (Sprain & Carcasson, in this issue).

Performativity: Intervention in the Discursive Landscape

An ethics of engagement – be it inside or outside the academy – takes its point of departure from the insight that social reality is not given, a forever present and unchangeable reality, and that the positions we occupy shape the world we view and reach. Engagement builds on the understanding that the realities we inhabit are continually created and re-created “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (Butler, 1990: 270). Often influenced by speech act theory, activist scholarly engagement recognizes the world-making (or performative) power of the words we speak, the texts we write, and the methods we use. In this sense, scholarship becomes a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, 1993: 13). Taking this as a possibility rather than a constraint, moving beyond the cynicism and negativity of the critical approach, the performative ambition of the community-engaged scholar welcomes a movement to actively challenge existing inequalities (Alvesson et al. 2009) through participatory methodologies that contribute to creating transformative spaces.

Further, engaged scholars recognize that the mere fact of uttering those words, texts and terms from our privileged intellectual positions grants them a symbolic power that facilitates them to perform what they name (Bourdieu, 1992). Butler (1999) calls this “performativity’s social magic.” It is here that such a scholarship is utterly political, for it mobilizes the symbolic resources of the academy for the re-shaping of our socio-cultural realities. Through a positioned engagement with disenfranchised communities outside the academy, scholars legitimate these subordinate subjects’ claim for the dominant discourses of equality and democracy. That is, the scholar’s academic status and dominating social position are put to work into re-signifying the stigmatizing terms that interpellate the subordinate subject into existence. Or, putting it differently, scholarly engagement compels collective recognition of those that are denied the right to be heard.

Thus, although engaged scholarship may take a wide range of forms (of which the articles in this special issue are testimony), the sphere where the symbolic resources of the academy might be used most efficaciously is at the discursive level. Either working for the empowerment of girls (see article by Way in this issue) or for the recognition of the impaired community (Mattson and Robin, in this issue), the scholar contributes to these communities’ political contestation and symbolic reformulation. The scholar’s engagement in particular disempowered communities becomes an effort to transfer the status of the academy into those communities, thus collaborating in the community’s attempt to re-appropriate discourse in the definition of themselves.

Toward a Reflexive, Positioned, and Performative Approach to Engaged Scholarship

A reflexive practice that actively takes a position to intervene in and deliberately perform social reality has practical, epistemological and political consequences. Practically, engaged scholarship implies reciprocal, collaborative relations with the public that aim at the amelioration of communities, the co-production of knowledge, and the articulation of university practices embedded in the localities outside the campus. Through dialogue, community service, civic

engagement, advocacy, mobilization or community building – that is, through participation in the organization of civic forces—scholars are part of progressive efforts to carve spaces for political engagement. Challenging traditional forms of scholarship, community-engaged scholarship stresses the transformational significance of research co-produced with members of disempowered communities.

Epistemologically, efforts at involvement on equal terms have added nuance to discussions on representation. Acting simultaneously as activists and researchers, community-engaged scholars travel the “blurred boundary when Other becomes researcher, narrated becomes narrator, translated becomes translator, native becomes anthropologist” (Noblit et al., 2004:166). Overcoming the objective, neutral observer of traditional ethnography, and moving beyond the individual, subjective selves of phenomenology and postmodern ethnography, activist researchers are forced to critically reflect on how one’s subjectivity continuously informs and is informed by one’s relation with and representation of the Other (Madison, 2004).

Politically, questions of symbolic violence preoccupy the engaged scholar: How can we learn from organized civic forces without silencing the voices of those we work with? How can we contribute to progressive struggles without imposing academic problematics on them? How can we be part of a political dialogue without reproducing the symbolic and economic distance between the academy and civil society? How can we develop pedagogical strategies that recognize grass-root activists as teachers instead of objects of study? In other words, how do we escape the ideological, institutional and class interests of academia and avoid misrepresentation, objectification, and monologue?

Such epistemological and political concerns have a direct implication into the criteria used to evaluate activist research. These criteria need to look into the research praxis to consider the extent to which power differences are addressed throughout the production and sharing of knowledge. Paraphrasing Speed (2008) some questions that might be helpful in this respect include: (a) What is the extent to which neocolonial power dynamics are addressed in the research process? (b) To what degree do research practices engage, rather than analyze, research subjects? (c) Does the research maintain a productive tension between critical analysis and everyday politics? (p. 229)

Contributions to the Special Issue

All the contributions to this special issue attest to the ways in which community-engaged scholars are negotiating the tension between the political and the theoretical through a heightened reflexivity, as well as through a positioned and performative awareness. The articles, however, come to focus on different implications of this heightened sensibility, and suggest a variety of methods, approaches and notions that may serve us to navigate the at times contradictory demands of the academy and the communities we work with.

Sprain and Carcasson suggest that in doing engaged scholarship tied to deliberative democracy, scholars can play a passionate, yet impartial role that in some ways temporarily suspend the problematics of being dually positioned inside and outside the academy. They offer a nuanced account of what it means for scholars to negotiate the tensions between claiming an “impartial,” process-focused role in public discussions, while also (passionately) upholding democratic values of equality and inclusion. They explicate the epistemological and political commitments of doing impactful political work without advocating for a particular political position.

In somewhat of a counter example to Sprain and Carcasson’s essay, Mattson and Clair provide a richly textured account of how a scholar’s own subjective positioning connects them to a particular issue in ways in which they directly engage partiality as central to advocacy. Grounded in the experience of the first author’s tragic motorcycle accident, and her subsequent commitment to motorcycle safety advocacy, the essay introduces a four-phase conceptualization of “ethnographic engagement,” which takes up what engaged activism means, how it is activated, sustained, perceived and reflected upon.

Silka and colleagues offer an excellent example of how scale and interdisciplinarity intersect with questions of positionality. They present a case study of Maine’s Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI), a multi-year project involving scholars, representing multiple disciplines and most of the higher education institutions in the state, working with community partners to address problems related to landscape change, specifically urbanization, forest ecosystem management, and climate change. The essay underscores the importance and complexities of the ongoing negotiation of stakeholders’ positionalities in sustaining collaborative efforts.

In this line, D’Enbeau et al. suggest a post-research reflection interview as a method to enhance reflexivity over the implications of one’s position in the research process, particularly regarding questions on the researcher’s power and

identity. Building upon the first three authors' experience of conducting communication evaluation of the Community Alliances to Promote Education (CAPE), a community program to promote children's school readiness and healthy development, the essay stresses four particular researcher power tensions community-engaged scholars need to navigate.

Recognizing the conflicting demands between academic careers on one side and community engagement on the other, Schaefer and Rivera admit that their engagement has transformed their understanding of what matters in academic research. The essay approaches the academy-political conundrum through the question "What does it mean to produce *valuable* research?" and realize that the academic answer to "valuable" may limit a community-engaged scholar's academic career. What is valued *by* the academy is not necessarily of value *for* and *with* the community. And what is valued *by* the community is of no value *for* academic promotion.

Finally, Way's is an effort to connect theory and practice in community-engaged scholarship through a revision of the idea of empowerment. Deeply involved in a not-for-profit "program encouraging pre-teen girls to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles through running," the author highlights the different experiences these girls have of empowerment efforts. As the author's engagement informs a re-theorizing of the notion of empowerment, the essay illuminates the productive relationship between deep community-engagement and academic theoretical discussions.

Concerned with the connection between theory and politics, the community-engaged scholars in this special issue ground their engagement both inside and outside the academy: from academic conferences to workshops for activists, from the classroom to the community center, from the journal to the street. Although attractive, this "double grounding" is difficult to sustain as it forces the scholar to constantly navigate "between the opposed perils of academic elitism and political disengagement" (Blomley, 1994:31). Yet, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, these efforts are leading to alternative models of teaching and learning. Developing dialectical practices, scholars are both advancing a politics of possibility (Giardina & Denzin, 2011; Olesen, 2011), as well as providing a broader and more vital meaning to scholarship.

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