HOW CAN RESEARCH NOT BE ACTIVISM?
An Editorial

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In the grand tradition of ivory tower research, humans continue to push the limits of our knowledge and discover new innovative ways to survive and thrive, from rehabilitation of post-op kidney cancer patients to developing technologies that improve privacy in personal finance. The goal is clear: making the world a safer, healthier and better place.

At times, this begs the question: For whom? In traditional research, making the world a better place tends to focus on generating new data, information, and knowledge among elite experts in academia, who then publish and disseminate their findings in technical jargon to a similarly elite portion of the world’s population. The discoveries yielded from this sort of research tend to directly benefit those who ‘discover’ it, often taking and reappropriating knowledge and information from the masses and seeing fit that it is held in the hands of a dominant few.

In the context of critical social community-based action research, there has been a clear call to turn this pattern on its head. The call for activism glistens brighter than ever as researchers are called upon to engage in research that brings about political and social change toward a more equitable society. Activist research seeks to validate and incorporate minoritised knowledge systems (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016), blurring the lines between researcher and researched (Choudry, 2014). It seeks grassroots social movement founded solutions to societal problems, taking the side of the oppressed to empower them to transform their lives and experiences (Freire, 1970; Hale, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014).

There is no doubt that the contributors in this issue are galvanized towards an activist agenda. Each of the articles in this issue conveys a decisive drive in solving problems and engaging participants as co-researchers. An article by Liza Lorenzetti and Rita Dhungel exemplifies community-led social transformation that results from Praxis, a central principle of PAR, in two studies: The first centers on the role men play in domestic violence in Canada, and the second focuses on the experiences of women survivors of sex trafficking in Nepal. Alternating between the two settings, the authors skillfully illustrate how critical reflection
leads to transforming social structures and relations, as well as empowering co-researchers and transforming their thinking.

A timely submission by Meagan Call-Cummings, Melissa Hauber-Özer, Lonnie Rowell and Kate Ross endeavors to explore how research networks can respond in a time of global crisis. Their Social Solidary Project initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic aligns with principles of knowledge democratization to decentralize the powerful elite as the primary source of knowledge and information, and to value popular knowledge and the socially constructed nature of knowledge production, giving space and agency to those on the margins to determine their own trajectories. An article by Jack Whitehead discusses how action research can lead to activism through his Living Theory research framework. His article collates important examples of recent Living Theory research, in which researchers are driven by a set of values that carry hope for improving human lives.

An article by John Gruver and Janet Bowers centers on the use of action research in professional development among teachers. Through an analysis of how the questions teachers asked in action research inquiries changed over time, their study revealed teachers’ deepening understanding leading to changes in their perspective and in their practice. Barbara Pollard’s article explores how university professors’ use of critical pedagogy with preservice teachers impacts the development of critical consciousness. This important contribution urges educators reconsider how to create learning environments that meet learning outcomes that better develop critical consciousness so that preservice teachers can see the transformative potential of their roles.

The articles in this issue are rooted in reflexivity, and they each uniquely demonstrate community-led value-driven transformations in localities across North America and around the world. As you read them, like myself, you may find yourself become more and more convinced that research without activism is impossible, or at least woefully lacking.

REFERENCES


