Participatory and Action-Oriented Dissertations: The Challenges and Importance of Community-Engaged Graduate Research

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Graduate students commonly experience isolation and estrangement when conducting their final research projects, which can contribute to difficulties in completion. A creative and socially beneficial way to offset academic isolation is for graduate students to engage in participatory and action-oriented research projects with local communities. Facilitating a research study with a local partner can be a richly rewarding experience. This article argues that students who enjoy working in collaborative environments and want their final research projects to lead to beneficial social change can find fulfillment in action research (AR) methodologies. Critiqued by some for its lack of tangible and practical methods and its over-reliance on ideology, others, including the author, argue that the benefits of participatory research far outweigh the challenges. Key Words: Action Research; Participatory Research; Community-Engaged Research; Graduate Student; Dissertation.

Even under the best of circumstances, completing a graduate research project can be a daunting task. Between 40 to 50% of doctoral students drop out of their graduate programs in the United States (Smallwood, 2004). The numbers are similar in Canada where 43% of all university students do not complete their degree (StatsCan, 2005). Canadian graduate student attrition statistics can vary depending on the program of study, ranging from 48% to 76% (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies [CAGS], 2003). Academic isolation has been identified as one of the key causes of this high attrition (CAGS, 2003; Lovitts, 2001).

A possible way to mitigate academic isolation and alienation is for graduate students to engage in participatory and action-oriented research projects. The involvement and participation of the local community can provide for a more fulfilling and less estranged experience for students, which may lead to higher completion rates. Additionally, students who engage in community-driven action research can acquire the benefits of partnership and collaboration with the knowledge that the study can lead to valuable social, policy, and/or organizational change. Since participatory research projects are based on community-identified needs with the goal of contributing to and expanding local knowledge and competencies, students can benefit from the research process while simultaneously assisting and supporting a local community.

This article will begin with a brief introduction to the history of action research (AR) by tracing its development and growth in academic contexts. It will then discuss the ways in which AR is currently conceptualized as well as the ways in which it is currently critiqued. Praised by many as a democratic and progressive alternative to conventional research methods, others have criticized AR for its lack of tangible and specific practice,

its over-reliance on ideology rather than methodology, and its gender and race-blind politics. Feminist and anti-racist scholars in particular have presented compelling recommendations to incorporate more socially just standpoints and perspectives into action research practices. This section argues that in order to engage with action research principles in one's graduate research project, one must first have a basic understanding of the methodology as well as the common critiques and challenges that it faces.

Next, the article will situate AR in the context of graduate student academic requirements to determine if and when action research methodologies pose obstacles and/or rewards. For example, students may be faced with dilemmas regarding the production of original and independent thesis proposals and chapters as well as struggles around publishing and co-authorship. Since this article is about the challenges and importance of community-engaged graduate research, it will only address student experiences and not those of faculty. By looking at the specific requirements of the graduate research process, this section suggests that AR, while at times institutionally challenging, comes with a particularly rewarding set of benefits and advantages, not the least of which are heightened feelings of connection and commitment to the research project. Indeed, despite potential obstacles, the benefits and rewards of an AR dissertation far outweigh the drawbacks.

The arguments in favour of community-engaged graduate research are based on my personal experiences in such a project. I pursued an action research methodology for my doctoral dissertation and found the process to be extremely rewarding. As many of my fellow colleagues became estranged from their academic departments and the university as a whole, I found that my involvement in the community and my relationship to a local organization increased my drive to complete the study, and therefore to finish my degree. I believe that building bridges between graduate student researchers and local communities can lead to benefits for both; graduate students can develop a greater sense of purpose in their research projects and communities can participate in studies that seek answers to questions they themselves deem as important.

Action Research: Loaded with Principles but Short on Practices?

What is currently understood to be AR grew out of a number of academic disciplines over the past 80 years (Pain, 2004). At the end of the 1930s, social psychologist Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of action research and the person often cited for coining the term, began to incorporate action-oriented activities into his field experiments on experiential learning and group dynamics (Burgess, 2006; Koliba & Lathrop, 2007; Marsick & Gephart, 2003; Minkler, 2004; Whitehead, Taket, & Smith 2003). In Lewin's early understanding of action research, the relationship between the research process, the results, and the outcomes becomes one that is intertwined and leads to further social action (Minkler, 2004). In other words, an action research methodology is one in which theory can be articulated *through* and *in* action.

In the 1970s, decades after Lewin's action-oriented psychology experiments, Fals-Borda (2001) and some of his colleagues in sociology, anthropology, education, and theology were becoming disillusioned with conventional research methodologies and the little beneficial impact their research was having on the communities in question. According to Fals-Borda, left-wing academics were "increasingly preoccupied with life

conditions which appeared unbearable in communities…" (p. 27) and they wanted their research to have more tangible results. He explicates the upsurge of participatory and democratic methods of research in the 1970s as academics made increasing efforts to research with marginal communities as opposed to on them. He writes, "Efforts at institutional reconstruction of this type went on independently and almost simultaneously… without any one of us being aware of what our colleagues were doing. It was like telepathy" (Fals-Borda 2001, p. 27). Where Lewin's action research of the 1930s and 1940s advocated that there should be action outcomes with the aim of solving social problems, Fals-Borda's participatory action research of the 1970s promoted participatory methods and design that actively included community members in the research process.

In addition to bridging theory, practice, and action, AR's progressive principles suggest that communities themselves should identify what sorts of studies would be most beneficial to them. Further, communities are fully capable of conducting their own research projects, analyzing their own data, and implementing their own action-oriented solutions (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason, 1999). In an AR study, therefore, the local community participates in the design and research process, the analysis of the data, the announcement of results, and the implementation solutions (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Pain, 2004; Whyte, 1991). According to AR principles, the research process, results, and outcomes should have tangible benefits for the community involved (Flaskerud & Anderson, 1999; Reason, 1999). Action researchers suggest that this process leads to the production of more valid and convincing results because "expert research and local knowledges are combined" (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 25) and the local stakeholders are involved in the creation of action-oriented solutions.

However, action research is not without its critiques. In some ways, its flexibility and insistence on participatory and democratic processes facilitates a research environment where issues of power can be analyzed and addressed. In other ways, the lack of specified methodological practices can leave the researcher with questions about how to actually conduct the study. Some have critiqued its lack of a rigid framework as contributing to a blurring and confusion of methodological stances and an "inability to establish a coherent constructive methodological discourse" (Chiu, 2003, p. 166). Further compelling critiques of AR come from feminist researchers who argue against its "gender-blind politics" (Reid, 2000). Some feminist researchers have long argued against conventional research practices that do not sufficiently examine relations of gendered subjugation and have instead supported methodologies that better represent and reflect on women's diverse experiences and knowledges (Harding, 1987a; Hartsock, 1987; Smith, 1987).

Notable feminist researcher and founder of feminist epistemology Harding (1987a), for example, has argued in favour of incorporating feminist analyses that go beyond simply "adding women" into research practices. In her discussion of the distinctiveness of feminist research from more traditional social science research, she asserts that feminist research not only stems from women's experiences but is also designed *for* women insofar as the "goal… is to provide for women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need" (Harding, 1987b, p. 8). Harding argues that the "subjective" element of researcher inclusion in the research process actually increases the

reflexivity of the research and contributes to the "best feminist analysis" (Harding, 1987b, p. 9). This positioning of oneself in the research project, or "standpoint" as Hartsock (1987) contends, opens the entire process up to scrutiny and analysis.

While many action researchers have been inspired by feminist research principles and practices (Maguire, 2001), few have acknowledged these linkages and have made systematic attempts to create an action research *with* feminist practice (Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006). Women's voices have tended to be marginalized within action research when they have not been specifically addressed (Pain, 2004). Indeed, Maguire (2001asks us to consider, "Without grounding in feminism, what would action research liberate us from?" (p. 66). Recently, notions of a feminist action research (FAR) have developed in an attempt to transform the male dominated structures of action research itself and to infuse it with critical feminist theory (Reid, 2000; Reid et al., 2006). Feminist action researchers argue that it is through feminism and action research *together* that research can become a potential able-ing factor in challenging systems of oppression (Boontinand, 2005; Maguire, 2001; Reid, 2000; Reid et al., 2006).

Boontinand (2005) similarly argues in favour of a methodology that incorporates the basic principles of feminist research (focusing on the lives of women, the possibilities for change, and the accessibility of knowledge production) with the basic principles of action research (combining investigation, evaluation, and action). Indeed, the inclusion of feminist praxis in action research methodology is important if action research is to achieve its stated goals of social change, especially in women's lives.

Where feminist research puts gender and sexism at the forefront of inquiry and shifts control of the research process from the traditional hands of male academics into the hands of female researchers and female participants (Lennie, Hatcher, & Morgan, 2003; Maguire, 2001), anti-racist research puts race and racism at the center of its inquiry and practice (Varcoe, 2006). Anti-racist activists and scholars have explicitly critiqued the absence of discussions of race and racism within action research contexts (Bell, 2001; Varcoe, 2006). Similar to action research gaining inspiration from feminist politics, American civil rights and Black Nationalist movements have been "firmly rooted in action research tradition" (Bell, 2001, p. 49) yet rarely, if ever, credited as contributors to its early theoretical development. Bell (2001) argues, "in the USA where the fight for racial equality has historically dominated the landscape, an eerie silence lurks when it comes to discussing action research techniques to dismantle racial oppression" (p. 49). The understanding that *both* sexism and racism, and therefore feminism and anti-racism, work to determine our lives, led Phillips (1997) to create a feminist *and* anti-racist participatory action research, FARPAR. She argues, "While PAR researchers understand that research can be a tool for social change, addressing imbalances of power, mostly around issues of economic marginalization, FARPAR researchers can use the research process to address power differences related to race, class, and gender" (p. 102).

Reid (2000), as a self-described first time researcher, admits to being seduced by the promises of equality and inclusivity outlined by AR. In her study with low-income women she found that "…power imbalances were often enforced and that the research site often *inhibited* a truly collaborative research environment" (p. 169, *emphasis added*). Through her reflection on the completed study, Reid began to understand her complex position as researcher and her unwitting reproduction of some of the dynamics she originally set out to undermine. Akin to other action researchers, Reid struggled

throughout the action research process, from logistical constraints at the design and implementation stage through to imbalanced power relations during data collection. Despite these challenges, however, Reid continues to endorse participatory methods and the greater inclusion of stakeholders in research processes. Since power relations are inescapable and since it is often the case that there is an imbalance in who benefits from the project, feminist action researchers like Reid have taught us that it is important to work towards mitigating the possible discrepancies and disparities created through and during the research process, while at the same time critically reflecting on our power and privilege as researchers.

Action Research in the Field and the Academy: Putting it to the Test

For her doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto, Baker Collins (2005) used a participatory action research model in her study of community poverty. She argues that participatory research serves a number of key goals, including: incorporate voices from marginal populations, honour community knowledge, shift the role of researcher to listener, work towards social justice, and fulfill basic human needs. While on the one hand, these goals and objectives are highly valuable, on the other hand they can be difficult to accomplish. For example, students who endeavor to follow action research principles and utilize action research tools for their graduate work are confronted with a variety of complications and challenges. As Baker Collins attests, "engaging in participatory research as part of a doctoral dissertation brings with it a specific limitation regarding participation at each stage of research" (p. 12).

Prior to conducting a graduate research project, students are required to produce a comprehensive research proposal to be approved by the student's supervisory committee and his or her academic department. The research proposal generally includes details about the project design including the area of research, the goals of the study, the theoretical perspectives that will be drawn on, and a detailed description of the methodology (Burgess, 2006). If either the supervisory committee or the departmental review committee does not endorse participatory methods in the student's research design, they might not support the proposal moving forward. In a best-case scenario, both committees support participatory methods and will give the proposal to the university's Research Ethics Board (REB) for institutional approval. The REB has the ultimate decision-making power and can accept, reject, or recommend amendments to proposals.

As noted above, in action research, decisions about the project should happen in collaboration with local stakeholders (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Whyte, 1991). If the proposed research design identified by the stakeholders and developed through a consultative process with the community members does not align with the regulations and requirements of the student's supervisory committee, the departmental committee, or the Research Ethics Board, the student might not be institutionally sanctioned to participate in the project for his or her graduate study. Students do, of course, have the option of designing the research project without consultation with the local stakeholders and then working to incorporate participatory and action-oriented methods after it has been officially approved. However, since the study would have been designed without the participation of the local community, it would be a stretch to say it was an action research project. While this option is not the most

egalitarian, given the layers of potential barriers and university protocols on dissertation proposals, it may be the only viable possibility for some students.

In my own graduate research experience, I found the creation of the dissertation proposal to be a challenging yet meaningful process, one in which I developed a heightened sense of responsibility to the project and a much stronger commitment to seeing it through to fruition. In action research style, the topic of the study was created in collaboration with a local sex worker organization (van der Meulen, in press). Since I had previously been involved with the organization in a volunteer capacity, I had already built a relationship with the community. This meant that the involvement of the local partner was established prior to the research design stage. I met with the community stakeholders on a number of occasions to develop the research goals and priorities in a collaborative context. All suggestions and comments from the organization were incorporated into the proposal prior to seeking approval from my supervisory committee. Fortunately, my supervisory committee was highly supportive of action research methodologies and knowledgeable about the AR process.

Since both the sex industry and participatory action-oriented methodologies are contentious topics, I had concerns that my university Research Ethics Board may decide to not approve the study. As sex work researcher Sanders (2006) posits, "ethics committees have treated the sex industry as a problematic area of inquiry, which can sometimes result in projects failing at this initial stage" (p. 451). Sanders summarizes the three primary areas of concern that ethics committees have regarding sex work research: the methods proposed (specifically, that interviews would be conducted with sex workers); the location of the fieldwork (for example, if the research were to take place in an illegal brothel); and institutional reputation (for instance, concerns over media headlines exposing the student's research topic). In my case, I was extremely fortunate that a colleague had recently gone though the research ethics process, which meant that I was able to review the comments she received from the REB. While not utilizing action research as her methodology, she was similarly conducting research on sex work and the REB identified a number of questions and concerns about interviewer safety and more concretely defining the language used ("sex workers" as opposed to "prostitutes").

Knowing their concerns, and knowing that action research projects may not be as highly valued as conventional research projects, I structured my proposal in such a way as to pre-empt the possible ideological or methodological challenges. For example, in addition to outlining the interviewer safety protocol (simply that interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and location) and a description of the political and historical significance of the term "sex work," my proposal included a detailed discussion of the importance of community-driven and participatory research as well as a discussion of the important of research *with* sex workers, not *on* sex workers. In the end, my proposal passed very quickly through the Research Ethics Board, with no revisions.

Baker Collins (2005) argues that one of the advantages for students who wish to engage in action research is that the project is less likely to be bound by time or other constraints as imposed by a funding body. On the one hand, this can allow the student researcher ample time to develop the partnerships and conduct the research. But on the other hand, with the rising cost of tuition and general living expenses, many people cannot afford to remain a student for extended periods. Additionally, departmental completion guidelines (for example, timelines for completing coursework or completing

comprehensive exams) are often imposed which can limit the length of time one can take at each phase of her/his degree. Further, graduate students are often required to submit their dissertation proposals weeks or months in advance of conducting the research to allow for it to travel through the various institutional channels and committees. Conflicting expectations can arise over timelines in action research projects when local stakeholders may not be willing or able to postpone the research, in which they participate, to such an extent (Benoit, Jansson, Millar & Philips, 2005; Minkler, 2004). Indeed, it may be difficult for local stakeholders to wait while the student's proposal receives university ethics approval or conversely, local stakeholders might not be willing or able to complete the research project within the tight timelines as specified by the student's department.

Time and other logistical restrictions put on students by their home institutions can contribute to significant barriers early in the action research process. However, if the community partner does not have a timeline within which the research must take place, waiting for ethics approval might not be an issue. It can instead be turned into a highly productive period where the graduate student can become more involved with the organization, can network with other community partners, can initiate discussions and work out the details about the ownership of the data, and can begin to collaboratively determine who will be interviewed during the research phase. The time spent developing a solid relationship and building a partnership with the community can mitigate the sense of alienation that many students face after they have completed their coursework and are conducting independent research in isolation.

Once the REB has approved the research proposal, students can begin to engage in data collection, which often includes one-on-one interviews. Since marginalized communities have frequently been denied participation in research studies that contribute to the production of knowledge on their behalf, community involvement in discussions over the ownership of the interview transcripts is particularly important. Indeed, working in collaboration to jointly decide where and for how long the transcripts will be stored helps to facilitate a more democratic sharing of responsibility and possession of the data. In my community-driven action research graduate project with sex workers, I sent the completed transcript to each interviewee for approval and modification within one week after the interview. This ensured that the interview was still fresh in their minds and it allowed them to add or subtract from the document anything that they were uncomfortable with. Community participants were additionally informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point and all of their interview materials would be destroyed. Also, the Informed Consent document, which was discussed with each interviewee at the outset of the interview, included information about how the data would be stored and used, as well as when it would be destroyed.

Once the interviews have been conducted and the local stakeholders have confirmed approval of their transcripts, it comes time to analyze the results. In my experience, this stage of the study was the least participatory. However, other community-driven research projects have successfully employed various kinds of collaborative coding and analysis techniques (Smylie, Kaplan-Myrth, McShane, 2009). One such example is when both researchers and stakeholders review the data in order to create lists of important themes and topics that arose from the interviews. The full group then meets to "present, discuss, and adapt themes and finally to categorize and synthesize

them. In keeping with the participatory action research approach and the commitment to supporting, rather than marginalizing… in the rare case that academic and community researcher interpretations differed, the community interpretation [is] adopted" (Smylie et al., 2009, p. 440). I found, however, that my community partner had neither the time nor the desire to participate in such an activity. One way that I endeavoured to mitigate the lack of participation during analysis, and to cross check that I was accurately representing the voices of the local stakeholders, was to send drafts of my written work to participants for feedback.

Further logistical and practical challenges can arise when students are preparing to write their final projects and publish the results. Issues of intellectual property and copyright legislation as well as questions of authority and ownership over the research results are particularly important and should be resolved well in advance of the study (Bournot-Trites & Belanger, 2005). Specifically regarding publication and dissemination rights, students who conduct participatory research projects will encounter different kinds of challenges than those conducting more conventional studies. The common phrase "to publish or perish" is especially relevant for graduate students who want to eventually become faculty members; publications are often the key to a successful academic career (Louis, Holdsworth, Anderson & Campbell, 2008). However, when researchers are working in the spirit of collaboration and partnership, decisions over the dissemination of data, as well as how and where articles are published, should happen by mutual agreement between researchers and stakeholders.

In the context of my graduate research project, I found that co-authorship and the collaborative dissemination of the results at conferences and other venues was a highly rewarding experience, one that dramatically reduced my feelings of isolation and alienation. Publishing and presenting at conferences with the individuals that I interviewed provided for a more grounded experience where I felt a heightened sense of responsibility to the study and to ensuring that the results were widely disseminated. On multiple occasions, I worked with interview participants to co-draft journal articles and manuscripts for publication as well as to propose conference panels based, in part, on the research results (van der Meulen, 2008b; van der Meulen & Gillies, 2007). Since publication is more relevant for my future career than the careers of those with whom I was studying, not all interviewees wanted to participate and not all publications have been jointly authored (van der Meulen, 2008a; van der Meulen, 2010). For example, this article was drafted independently because at the time of writing, no stakeholder was interested or able to participate. The lack of participation of the local community in some aspects of the study and dissemination did not pose an issue as the *option* of participation was always present (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998). As Wang et al. (1998) question, "should we strive for full participation at each stage of a… project?" (p. 85). Rather, encouraging participation but not forcing it can be a more successful tactic.

Attempts at co-authorship are not always so successful, however, as the manuscript writing and publishing process may be imbued with a series of complications. Digiusto (1994) identifies that due to power imbalances within the research setting, graduate students and junior scholars are more likely to be disadvantaged when authorship order is assigned in publications with tenured faculty and research scientists. This can lead to resentment on the part of the junior academic as well as other problematic dynamics when individuals feel as though their contributions as not as

respected. Similar power imbalances can occur between graduate student researchers and community partners in the action research project when it comes time to co-author publications and disseminate the results of the research. Bordeaux et al. (2007) discuss some of the additional challenges of publishing manuscripts from action-oriented and community-based studies. First, they argue that editors and others who review the article manuscript might not be familiar with community-driven research projects and therefore the study design might be unfamiliar to them. Second, there could be issues related to the writing of the manuscript as the community partners and academic researchers need to balance highlighting the compelling and unique features of the project with "the more traditional manuscript elements in a way that leads to a clear, compelling manuscript that will be enlightening for readers" (Bordeaux et al., p. 281). As a relatively recent doctoral student graduate, I have fortunately not faced the kinds of challenges that Bordeaux et al. outline. However, I expect that as I continue to engage in action-oriented and participatory research studies over the coming years, this could become an increasing issue.

Conclusion

The action research dissertation has the potential to be a highly rewarding experience for both the graduate student and the community partner. Working in a collaborative context on a project that could result in beneficial social, policy, and/or organizational change can help to offset the all too common graduate experience of isolation and alienation. However, community-driven and participatory research contexts that utilize action research methodologies are not without their challenges. The critiques brought forth by feminist and anti-racist scholars and activists in particular present significant challenges to action research. They contend that AR needs to actively incorporate feminism and anti-racism into its tradition so that it does not simply become a methodology that is loaded with principles but short on practices. Action research could greatly benefit from the inclusion and participation of diverse and frequently marginalized communities, perspectives, and experiences as these experiences could help to ensure that the methodology is practically grounded in the community as opposed to ideologically focused.

While action research presents important participatory ideas on collaborative research for social change, there are many logistical and practical questions that arise about how one actually goes about doing this. Is it possible to have an AR project that truly supports equal participation with researchers and stakeholders where collaboration and self-reflexivity are central? If so, is it possible for a graduate student to engage in this process for his or her thesis or dissertation? Prior to beginning the research, graduate students must seek approval from a number of institutional bodies that may or may not support the proposed design and methods of the project, which can make it difficult to include the local stakeholders in the design phase. In my own experience, I tried to pre-empt the questions that the Research Ethics Board might pose by addressing the common concerns that ethics committees have about both action research and sex work research.

Additional complications can arise during the research process as it is not uncommon for the researchers and community partners to have different needs and expectations from the study, which can lead to an imbalance in power (Minkler, 2004).

Complications can also surface once the study is complete and manuscripts are being drafted for publication. In my experience, while there were no specific complications regarding differing expectations, my community partner did not have the time, resources, or desire to participate in all aspects of the study. This was an important lesson as it taught me the benefit of encouraging, but not forcing, participation. Indeed, while some argue that action research has the potential to be a truly libratory model for social science research, graduate student researchers may find it a difficult methodology due to practical and logistical concerns related to dissertation proposals, ethics review boards, time constrains, varying degrees of participation, and rights of publication.

Despite the difficulties some researchers may face, action research's principles and tools are important in considering how to engage in participatory and collaborative research processes. In the context of my dissertation, I found that the challenges I had related to the participatory nature of the study made for a far richer and more rewarding research experience. I was able to facilitate a study that was designed and supported by a local community: my community partners identified the research goals and topic; participated in the creation of the interview questions; had complete control over their interview transcripts; and together we co-drafted manuscripts for publication and presented at conferences and other public venues. Unlike other graduate students who work in isolation, the participatory and action-oriented nature of my dissertation made for a fulfilling community-engaged research process.

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