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# Democratizing Research in Practice

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## Introduction

The term 'democratizing research' covers a range of emancipatory approaches to research such as activist research, feminist research, decolonizing methodologies, community-based research and participatory research. These approaches developed separately in the last decades of the twentieth century, so they are still comparatively new, and are not always well understood. Recognition of the similarities between these approaches is very recent (e.g. Craven & Davis, 2013: 1; Jolivéte, 2015: 6).

The terminology used to talk about these approaches to research is not fixed. For example, some people use the term 'research justice', while others prefer 'democratizing research' or 'emancipatory approaches' – and no doubt there are more terms in use around the world. The term 'research justice' seems to be used mostly by people who have been oppressed by colonialist and imperialist research practices. I have chosen to use 'democratizing research' for two reasons. First, it seems to fit best with my standpoint as a white British researcher, though I realize that 'democracy' is a culturally located term and will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter. Second, it seems to me that emancipatory approaches are not only about the ethics of justice, but also – and equally – about the ethics of care.

This chapter will begin by outlining the history and development of these approaches, and identifying their common elements. The ethical difficulties they raise will be considered. The chapter will discuss tensions between the need to operate any emancipatory approach throughout the entire research process, and the constraints which may make this difficult or impossible in practice. The key barriers and enablers to emancipatory approaches will be identified, and ways to overcome the barriers and maximize the enablers will be discussed. Consideration will be given to how and when to use an emancipatory approach to conduct research as an insider, and how and when to do the same as an outsider. The chapter will conclude with a look to the future of research democratization.

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## The History of Emancipatory Research

Activist research is a form of insider research where, for example, transgender researchers will investigate the effects of transphobia (Telford & Faulkner, 2004: 549–550). This approach to research grew from political activism and changing conceptions of human rights across Westernized nations in the second half of the twentieth century (Morrow et al., 2012: 8–10). Activist research is intended to empower disadvantaged and marginalized people. A pivotal point in activist research came from the disability movement. Paul Hunt had muscular dystrophy, which necessitated the use of a wheelchair, and he lived in the first Leonard Cheshire home for people with disabilities in Britain (Tanaka, 2007: 21). Hunt was a researcher and activist (Tanaka, 2007: 38). In the 1960s, when the then Ministry of Health commissioned some research into the participation of residents in Leonard Cheshire homes, Hunt and other residents expected the researchers to support their desire to have some control over their lives (Barnes & Cotterell, 2012: 143). Sadly, the reverse was the case, as the researchers largely supported the status quo, in which people living with disabilities were regarded as unfit to participate fully in society. The residents were understandably upset and angry, and Hunt wrote a searing critique of the research, arguing that it was ‘profoundly biased and committed *against* the residents’ interests’ (Hunt, 1981, cited in Barnes and Cotterell, 2012: 144; emphasis in Hunt).

The work of disability researchers such as Paul Hunt and Mike Oliver laid the foundations for the creation of the ‘emancipatory research’ model. Emancipatory research developed new ethical dimensions by questioning how social research is conducted and who controls its resources (Cotterell & Morris, 2012: 61). This anti-oppressive research practice spread into the fields of mental health, feminist research, community research and numerous other areas. There is increasing acknowledgement of the potential for activism and research to work hand in hand (Zeffiro & Hogan, 2015: 45) although, as we will see later in the chapter, this can also create difficulties.

Feminist research has been described as using ‘gender as a lens through which to focus on social issues’ (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 3). In the 1970s, researchers in the second wave of feminism, such as Ann Oakley in the UK and Laurel Richardson in the US, began studying aspects of society relating to women, such as housework and single women's affairs with married men (e.g. Oakley, 1974; Richardson, 1979). These and other feminist researchers around the world were asserting that the identity and context of both researchers and participants was central to the research process, and so they were challenging the traditional research principles of objectivity and neutrality (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010: 4–5).

In the 1990s, third wave feminists moved beyond using gender as a single lens, recognizing that gender interacts with other loci of inequality such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010: 4). This is known as 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1993: 1244), a concept used to acknowledge identity as both multifaceted and closely linked with its social and geographical contexts (Naples & Gurr, 2010: 24). After all, nobody is only a woman, or just someone with a disability, or solely a person of color. An intersectional approach aims to accept and reflect the complexity of identity, and to examine the relationships between different aspects of identity and their implications for power relations (Frost & Elichaooff, 2010: 60).

The intricacies of intersectionality create considerable challenges for research methods (Hughes & Cohen, 2010: 189, drawing on Denis, 2008). For second wave feminists, qualitative methods seemed most appropriate, and there is still a strong belief that this is the case, though some feminist researchers, particularly in the US, now recognize the value of quantitative and mixed-methods techniques for answering some research questions (Hughes & Cohen, 2010: 190–191). However, traditional research methods, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, are rooted in Western colonial cultural ways of knowing (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008: 18; Gobo, 2011: 423–427). Emancipatory researchers may choose to use existing community formats, such as the talking circles used by the Wikwemikong (Blodgett et al., 2010: 67), or to develop such formats for their communities, such as the sharing circles used by Oparah and her colleagues such that research can become 'as much a process of collective witnessing and healing, as one of inquiry and documentation' (Oparah et al., 2015: 133, cited in Jolivéte, 2015: 5–12).

Decolonized research is an approach that aims to separate research from imperialism and colonialism (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012: 4–5). There are many ways in which research in much of the world carries colonialist overtones. For example, the English language is dominant in research worldwide (Perry, 2011: 906–907). Non-English speaking researchers may be seen by their English-speaking colleagues and by research ethics committees as vulnerable or incompetent participants, when in fact they may be entirely able to participate in research if the research is conducted in their native language or a translator is provided (ibid.). The dominance of English within research is a colonialist situation that privileges English-speaking researchers and disadvantages those who do not speak English, no matter how clever or skilled they may be (Gobo, 2011: 419–420). Also, research in other languages can run into difficulties if those languages do not include words for all the concepts needed to describe and discuss research. For example, Ndimande conducted research in his native South Africa in indigenous languages including isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa and isiNdebele, which helped him to build rapport with his participants and enabled them to contribute more fully than if the research had been conducted in English (Ndimande, 2012: 216–218). However, Ndimande found that he had to be very careful

in translating research questions, originally formulated in English, into indigenous languages that had no research discourse (p. 219; see also Swartz, 2011: 61). Similar problems arise with cross-national surveys and are complex to solve, requiring 'multiple skilled translators and survey specialists within each country working to arrive at an optimal translation' (Smith et al., 2011: 492).

Similar difficulties can also arise for Western researchers in Western countries who are studying minority populations. For example, it is often taken for granted by Western researchers that participants should remain anonymous, and this is a common requirement of research ethics committees (RECs) or institutional review boards (IRBs). However, a researcher working in America with young Sudanese refugee boys found that some of her participants were highly resistant to having their names changed, as her IRB required (Perry, 2011: 899). On further investigation, she discovered that 'forced name-changing was a common tactic of repression by the Sudanese majority' (p. 911). Perry's participants had – and, in at least one case, exercised – the choice of refusing to take part in her research. But some would argue that the IRB should have worked in a way that enabled researchers to respond flexibly to the needs of potential participants, rather than effectively excluding some people purely as a result of its strictures.

Many parts of the world are now multicultural, yet many research methods are monocultural (Gobo, 2011: 418). Western methods are often regarded as universal when they may not be universally appropriate (Smith et al., 2011: 485–486). For example, Western researchers may take it for granted that consent should be given in writing, but this can prove problematic in cultures where oral communication is dominant and few people are able to write (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010: 335–336). It is important for any researcher to be sensitive to the potential for the cultural norms and experiences of participants and colleagues to affect the research process. Ultimately, colonized or formerly colonized people do not want their stories told for them by academics from other, more powerful cultures, even if those academics have the best intentions. Nor do non-Western people necessarily accept Western views of situations or concepts (Smith et al., 2011: 499). Indigenous people the world over would prefer to tell their own stories in their own ways. As with emancipatory research, Indigenous academics and researchers are working to redress social injustice and increase self-determination through decolonizing methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012: 4–6).

Participatory research, also known as participatory action research, is another emancipatory approach. This approach emphasizes the full involvement of participants at every stage of the research process (Bhana, 2006: 432) and should benefit the communities or groups to which participants belong, as well as the researchers (Wassenaar, 2006: 69). Where participatory research is conducted specifically within a communi-

ty, it may be known as community-based research or community-based participatory research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012: 3). Whatever the terminology, the aim is to empower disempowered groups, communities and individuals (Bhana, 2006: 432).

Participants' views on the research process may differ markedly from researchers' views, even on key issues such as the value of anonymity (O'Reilly et al., 2012: 220). Yet outside a participatory approach, participants' views on these topics are rarely sought. However, even participatory approaches don't enable unlimited participation: for example, participants' views of research governance mostly go unheard (McAreavey & Muir, 2011: 403). In fact, research governance and participatory research are somewhat oppositional in that, conventionally, work with participants cannot begin until formal ethical approval has been received, while research is not truly participatory unless participants have been involved from the very start of the research design process.

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## Commonalities and Difficulties

The main thing all these emancipatory approaches have in common is their shared aim to reduce imbalances of power within the research process, and beyond. There are notable examples of this succeeding. One is the case of critical communicative methodology (CCM), a specific kind of participatory community-based mixed-methods research that was developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Jesús Gómez (Gómez et al., 2011). The aim was to identify and solve social problems through dialogue, and the key principle of CCM, following Habermas, was that everyone has the right to participate in intellectual discussion, regardless of whether they are 'an intellectual' or can speak intellectual language. Gómez believed that everyone has critical analytic abilities, and that we can all learn a great deal from people who have different backgrounds from our own. In the early part of this century, CCM was used with Roma communities in several European countries. Romani people are nomadic, with no territory of their own; they are subject to high levels of individual and structural discrimination, and have long been excluded from social decision-making processes. The Workaló project involved Romani people throughout the process of finding out why they are excluded from the labour market, how job opportunities could be created and how individuals could be helped to become more employable (Munté et al., 2011). Academic and Romani researchers presented that research at the European Parliament. This led (among other things) to more formal recognition of the Roma communities in Europe and the development of a European strategy to ensure that Romani people can 'participate effectively in making

the decisions that affect the lives and well-being of Roma communities' (p. 263).

This is a research project that many people would regard as laudable, and one that has made a tangible difference to our world. However, it is not easy to assess how much difference it has made. It certainly did not solve the problem of discrimination against Romani people in Europe, as in 2014 an attitude survey in seven countries found that, in Italy, France, Greece, the UK and Poland, more people held unfavourable than favourable views of Roma; only in Germany and Spain was it the other way around (Pew Research Center, 2014: 30).

Using an emancipatory approach to research will not, by itself, solve any potential ethical problems. For example, it will not remove power imbalances between people of different races, genders, socioeconomic status and so on. Nor does it mean that everyone involved will have the same understanding of what is, or is not, ethical (McAreavey & Muir, 2011: 395). While feminist or disability activist researchers will have undoubtedly experienced oppression, this does not automatically mean those researchers will understand how oppression is experienced by other women or other people with disabilities (Mason, 2002: 193). An emancipatory approach to research may help everyone involved to address power imbalances and differences within the research project, but doing so will still take time and effort beyond that needed for core research tasks.

Also, emancipatory approaches to research can bring ethical difficulties of their own. For example, the idea of using a community-based approach may appeal to a researcher, but be considerably less appealing to potential participants, who have much less to gain. This becomes even more of a challenge in longitudinal research, which has to compete with demands from participants' employers and families, among others (Weller, 2012: 123). Conversely, little is written about the extent to which participants may expect researchers to continue their relationships with them after the end of a project, and the difficulty this can cause for all concerned. Ethnographers may be more aware of this than most, because typically they spend many months living and working with participants. Some have said that leaving the field was more difficult than arriving (e.g. Cohen, 2015: 141).

Ending research-based relationships can be difficult even when the research method doesn't involve complete immersion in a community. For example, a UK researcher carried out ethnographic research (as opposed to full-scale ethnography) with sex offenders in a probation hostel. For many participants, the researcher was the only person they could speak to in confidence. When she finished her research, she was unable to keep in touch with participants, because she no longer had permission to enter the hostel, and consent for meetings outside was unlikely to be granted. However, as the researcher lived near to the hos-

tel, she did sometimes run into her former participants. This caused anxiety at times, such as when she was with a female friend and they met a male high-risk sex offender, a known rapist of adult women. For reasons of confidentiality, the researcher couldn't warn her friend about the dangers this man posed. This made the researcher wary of her former participant, which left her feeling ashamed, as if she had simply used her participants for the benefit of her research. This internal conflict was resolved only very gradually as her former participants were moved out of the area where she lived (Reeves, 2010: 328).

Participants are not often involved in the writing or presenting stages of research – although again there are notable exceptions, such as Ellis and Rawicki (2013), a researcher and participant who co-wrote journal articles, and Munté, Serradell and Sordé (2011) who, as we have seen, involved Romani participants in presenting research to the European Parliament. Participants may be further marginalized, in a variety of ways, by the publication process. For example, in the long and thorough book on participatory action research by Chevalier and Buckles (2013), some participants are mentioned, such as Alberto (pp. 239–242) and the female forestry officer (pp. 300–303). However, these names do not appear in the otherwise excellent index. There are many names in the book's index, but only those of research professionals.

Structural aspects of research, such as project design, timescale and budget, may need to be in place before an emancipatory approach is implemented. This effectively sets up potential inequalities for any research encounter, with a framework being imposed on participants rather than agreed with them (McCarry, 2012: 60–61).

Also, it is important to remember that not everyone views these approaches as ideal. For example, rather than privileging decolonization, some researchers have called for cultural integration in research through a 'geocentric' approach (Li, 2014: 28). And democracy is a culturally located concept that is not universally regarded as positive. Since the last years of the twentieth century there has been an increase in the power and resources held by authoritarian governments in numerous countries across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South America (Cooley, 2015). Many people in these countries view democratic regimes as hypocritical: e.g. for carrying out military action within authoritarian countries, using high levels of surveillance within their own borders, and sharing blacklists of suspected terrorists and terrorist sympathizers (Cooley, 2015). Within these countries it is likely that emancipatory approaches to research would not find favour at all. And even within more democratically governed countries, some experts ridicule emancipatory approaches as 'not proper science'.

## Barriers and Enablers

As we have seen, one of the main barriers to emancipatory approaches is the research governance system and the requirements of formal ethical approval. This is covered in detail in Part 3 of this book, so here I will simply note two things. First, there is an argument that research governance organizations such as RECs and IRBs need to be 'decolonized' so that researchers can be responsible to participants rather than institutions (e.g. Denzin & Giardina, 2006: 35). Second, there is a call for the loci of research governance power to be shared by institutions such as universities with participant groups and communities (e.g. Jolivéte, 2015: 7). These positions indicate that there is little stomach for a complete dismantling of the research governance system, but perhaps considerable appetite for its reform.

Another barrier is conflict. This may be external conflict between paradigms, disciplines etc, or internal conflict between roles. For example, the inevitable power imbalances between academic and community-based researchers can lead to conflict (Ostrer & Morris, 2009: 74–75). Also, conflict can arise through the expression of intersectionality within the research process. For example, a black woman with mental health problems worked as an insider researcher to increase understanding of black African and African-Caribbean women's experiences of mental ill-health in a predominantly white city. She found that her participants identified as 'black women first and then as service users' (Essien, 2009: 70), while the services designed for people with mental health problems identified the people who came to them primarily as mental health service users, with all other aspects being seen as secondary (pp. 64–65).

Then there are the more mundane barriers of money and time. Using emancipatory approaches to research takes longer, and so costs more, than applying conventional techniques. For example, participatory research involves a great deal of investment in support, training and inclusion, particularly with vulnerable participants (Gillard et al., 2012: 252). In some cases, such as when researching highly sensitive topics with vulnerable groups, or perhaps when conducting longitudinal research, it may be more ethical to offer a flexible approach to participation, with options for participants to move through different levels of involvement at different times to suit their needs (McCarry, 2012: 64). While this could bring accusations of misuse of researcher power, it is also true that researchers are trained and supported to do research, and are likely to have many more professional and personal resources than most vulnerable participants, and so have an ethical responsibility to know when and how to offer involvement or participation (p. 65).

There is also 'the question of who participates and how' (Lomax, 2012: 107). Factors that may exclude potential participants include logistics (meeting times and locations, access to technology and communication systems, languages spoken and so on) and the requirements of the research, for example level of commitment and abilities required. This raises questions about the extent to which research participants are, or can be, representative of wider communities.

On the other hand, a number of factors can enable the use of emancipatory approaches to research. Political will is very helpful. Research is always a political act; even deciding not to do research is a political decision. Therefore, local political support for emancipatory approaches to research, from key communities and organizations, is a major enabler.

A second enabler is passion, within the research team, for the research topic or question. Arguably, this is necessary for all research. However, given that emancipatory approaches require more time and money, effort and energy, initiative and understanding than conventional ways of doing research, it is essential to focus on something that really matters to everyone involved.

A third enabler is a worldview, or ontological stance, that fits with democratizing research. If you believe, for example, that women are inferior to men, or that being gay is a defect or a sin, you're unlikely to thrive in a democratizing environment. This is another reason democratizing research is political: it espouses, supports, and works to expand the democratic system.

A fourth enabler is resource. If you have the necessary time and money, it will be much easier for you to use an emancipatory approach.

There are two main keys to overcoming the barriers to democratizing research, and maximizing its enablers. The first is full awareness of what is involved, what is needed, and why. The second is clear communication. These are both far, far easier to state than they are to achieve. Of course they are linked: everyone who is or could be involved in the research needs full awareness of what is or may be involved, and that can only be achieved through clear communication. Also, within emancipatory approaches, 'communication' doesn't mean 'researchers explaining'; it means a two-way process of dialogue, over time, to build the necessary conditions for the research to take place.

## Insider and Outsider

It might seem that the best, or even the only, way to use emancipatory approaches is as an insider researcher, i.e. a researcher who is also a member of the group or community being studied. Certainly insider researchers devised these approaches. However, that does not necessarily mean that insider researchers are always the best people to use these techniques in every context.

Consider a young Indigenous researcher who wants to use decolonizing methodologies for research within her home community. So far, apparently, so straightforward. However, the leaders of her community are the oldest men from three families, and she does not belong to one of those families. Also, in her community, older people command much more power and respect than younger people. Those community leaders are the gatekeepers who she will need to convince of the value of her proposed work, and that may not be easy for her; it may not even be possible.

This example highlights the fact that communities are not homogeneous, but are made up of several smaller sub-communities (Atfield et al., 2012: 79–80). This means that not every ‘insider’ has the same view of, or access to, their community. So, if a bisexual woman wants to do research with LGBTI groups, she may find difficulty in accessing a group of gay men – and a gay male researcher might have equal difficulty in accessing a group of bisexual women. Another implication of this is that research teams should not expect insider researchers to have privileged access to all members of their community, or even, in some cases, any members of that community (p. 80).

Also, all the usual difficulties faced by insider researchers will still be present when using emancipatory approaches. For example, it can be hard to see the topic clearly if you are close to it yourself, and challenging to develop the detachment necessary to ask tough questions, or to find surprises in your data. Plus the association of insider researchers with institutions, through their involvement with the research, may affect how other members of their community see them – either positively, or negatively (Atfield et al., 2012: 78). Either way, this can lead to role conflict.

Having said that, many of the usual advantages of being an insider researcher may also still be present. For a start, you will have a great deal of knowledge about your community before you begin. You will know who to go to for different kinds of help, and how to approach those people. You will already have a level of rapport with most people that will make it easier to build the trust needed for research. And your knowledge of your

community may help you to sensitize the research design and instruments to the needs of potential respondents (Atfield et al., 2012: 79).

On balance, outsider researchers are likely to have more difficulty using emancipatory approaches than insider researchers. For example, they will need to spend time learning about the community, its past and present, norms and customs. Nevertheless, outsider researchers still have value to bring, as long as they can devote enough time and thought to their work to use these techniques properly. As in other research contexts, outsider researchers bring a fresh pair of eyes to the work, and hold fewer preconceptions than insider researchers. This may lead them to ask usefully naive questions that would never occur to an insider researcher.

One potentially useful approach is to form a research partnership, or team, involving both insider and outsider researchers. One very successful example of this involved sports researchers from Laurentian University in Canada working with community researchers from the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve, also in Canada. They used a community-based participatory action research methodology which was fully collaborative (Blodgett et al., 2010: 58). The research design was approved by both the university's REB and Wikwemikong's governing Band and Council (Blodgett et al., 2010: 60). The aim was to study community members' experiences of engaging in research, both with this team and with previous researchers, and to identify factors that would facilitate research in the community. Co-researchers from the community developed a 'composite vignette' as a form of narrative analysis. Among other things, they concluded that

researchers need to take extra time to get to know the community. It is imperative that researchers are sensitive of the community's culture, language, customs and protocols before engaging in a project. A community champion needs to be identified and resourced immediately in order to begin the communication and bridging between the community and outside researchers, and to help establish appropriate bench marks and timelines for the research process. (Blodgett et al., 2010: 70–71)

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## The Future of Research Democratization

This review of emancipatory approaches to research might give the impression that activism and research are made for each other. In fact, they can be uneasy bedfellows, particularly when the evidence from research

challenges activists' political goals (Dreger, 2015: 27). But it is not, in fact, democratic to put the justice cart before the evidence horse. Those of us in this world who value democracy need to look unflinchingly at evidence and use it to support our work for justice (Dreger, 2015: 262).

Emancipatory approaches are always worth considering. However, they should not be 'bolted on' to a research project in order to put a tokenistic tick in the diversity box. They should only be used in appropriate circumstances, and always need to be used with thought and care.

Emancipatory approaches to research draw on ethics of justice in attempting to redress imbalances of power, and on ethics of care in working to make the research space safe and valuable for everyone involved. When they are effectively implemented, emancipatory approaches are among the most ethical approaches to research.

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