

# Activist Research Contributions To Shutting Down A Welfare Snitch Line

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## ABSTRACT

An approach to activist research is presented, illustrated, and evaluated using three criteria. Did the research promote change, help participants learn, and theorize change processes?

## RÉSUMÉ

Présentation, démonstration et évaluation d'une approche de recherche activiste selon trois critères. La recherche a-t-elle encouragé des changements, aidé les participants/tes à apprendre et a-t-elle favorisé l'émission de théories concernant les processus de changement?

## INTRODUCTION

This paper emerged from a nagging uneasiness that stemmed from experiences I and other activist researchers encounter using the feminist, collaborative participatory action research approach to social justice practice (Ng, 1990; Pulkingham, 1993; Shakespeare, 1993). In activist research, researchers lose the privileged position to control method, timing, and interpretation of data and action. This leaves us less certain of what we are responsible for, or how to evaluate success. We can be pulled in several directions, and placed in conflicting situations, unclear how best to discharge our responsibilities. What do we actually do? What can we best contribute? What did research add? Could not the social justice practice have carried on just as well without research? Alary (1990) wonders if

activist research is just a sophisticated form of good works. Even when activist research is relevant and trustworthy, I am troubled by how little is generalized or written up for community or refereed academic journals: elephantine effort for such mousy results.

This paper explores the practice and value of activist research, developed during a decade of anti-poverty work. I work from my position as a white, female social work professor in a regional university serving a geographically dispersed, multicultural population. After presenting an approach to the practice of activist research, the approach is illustrated with the examples of research initiatives made during a successful effort to shut down a welfare snitch line. The paper ends with an evaluation of this case of activist research using three criteria.

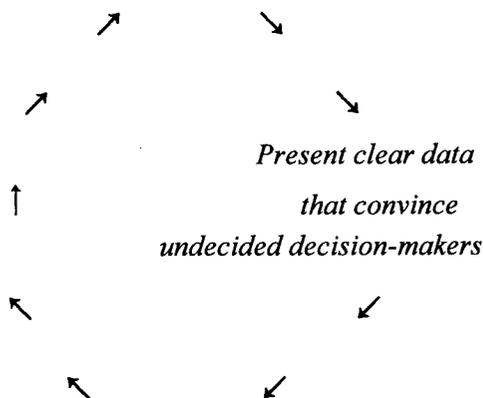
## AN APPROACH TO ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Research is about asking questions, collecting data, and proposing explanations to make sense of the data. Activist researchers, however, search for particular questions, data, and explanations: those that promote liberating action for the dispossessed. The approach I use to action-promoting questions, data, and explanations is summarized in the figure below.

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### An Approach to Activist Research

*Pose timely questions  
that mobilize activists' energy*



*Propose competing explanations  
that demonstrate value conflicts*

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One element of the approach is to select timely questions that can mobilize the energy of a particular group of people who may find the energy to act. What are simple but sharp questions that do not just shock people but go

deeper to shatter ethical "frames" that people use to make sense of their world and place within it (Argyis et al, 1985, p. 79)? How can one avoid those paralyzing questions that are too big or horrible to face in one chunk, or too dense, hiding the ethical debates about justice that spur people to engage in action? Activist researchers pose questions that not only disrupt the status quo but also release energy to think and act differently.

To maintain the energy released by mobilizing questions, the activist researcher uses another element of research: collection of data from many sources and several time periods. To promote action, the data need to go beyond reliably demonstrating injustices. The data must demonstrate that the status quo is not inevitable, and the situation can change (Townsend, 1993). There are variations over time and place, and the situation could change again provided decision-makers act. When trying to abolish injustices or create alternatives it helps to collect reliable data about policy variations within the influence of a group of decision-makers. What is within someone's control that could make a difference? Action-promoting data needs to challenge undecided decision-makers about the wisdom of the status quo, and to suggest the value of exploring new possibilities.

Action-promoting questions and data need to be debated by those who make decisions, and by those who can push decision-makers to act differently. But, energy for action can stall if the debate stays at the level of description. "Isn't it awful" and "it used to be better, or others have it better" must be replaced with "we could make it better here."

Activist researchers add depth and

creativity to the debates by a third element of research: uncovering competing, but equally plausible explanations for the injustices and the variations over time and place (Dobash & Dobash, 1988; Mathieson, 1974). If there are several explanations for welfare fraud, for instance, then decision-makers cannot avoid debate that evaluates the value of one explanation and its implications versus another explanation. The status quo is only one option and it can no longer be taken for granted; there are other options that may be better.

Explanations can challenge the orthodox, victim-blaming, apolitical understanding of poverty or welfare fraud, by revealing the values upon which the competing explanations are based. It is important to unmask who are the few that benefit and who are the many who pay in the different but equally plausible explanations of an injustice. Debating the fundamental value conflicts within competing, contradictory explanations for injustices helps to maintain energy needed for action by opening up the space to imagine remedies for the injustice (Jenson, 1993). Thus, activist researchers work to uncover the competing explanations and values within most people, a struggle that is the source of creative debate and imaginative options.

#### A CASE OF ACTIVIST RESEARCH: SHUTTING DOWN A WELFARE SNITCH LINE

The elements of this approach to activist research are illustrated in the following case study on shutting down a welfare snitch line in a Northern Ontario district with over 160,000 native, francophone, anglophone, and immigrant citizens. Shutting down the snitch line did not begin as a research project, nor did

an established group formally invite a researcher to help out. The case exemplifies the evolving (and unfunded) nature of activist research in social justice practice and possible points of entry for activist researchers to contribute action-promoting questions, data, and explanations.

In January 1994, the administrative board responsible for municipal social assistance approved the installation of a "fraud hotline." The hotline, labelled a welfare snitch line by its opponents, is a telephone line with a widely advertised phone number dedicated to receiving reports from citizens willing to report, often anonymously, cases of suspected welfare fraud. Each report is investigated by welfare authorities.

Within two months, vivid street protests of a new coalition of welfare recipients and professionals, two pieces of investigative journalism, letters to the editor, and radio and T.V. talks by myself and others broke open the dominant discourse (St. Louis, 1994). Was the snitch line just? Was welfare fraud a problem? Why do "dozens of welfare recipients live under [a] cloud of suspicion?" (Lowe, 1994a). What about the "cost of running [a] welfare snitch line adding to burden on taxpayers" (Lowe, 1994b) and to "destroying solidarity of community" (Plouffe, 1994). Why were citizens asked to snitch anonymously on each other, especially when trained professionals could not easily establish eligibility given the complicated mass of rules? The language in the popular media had shifted by the fall of 1994 from discussing the hotline as an efficient, rational activity that recovered taxpayers' money to a moral debate about a snitch line that could divide a community and prey upon the poor.

A network of anti-poverty professionals under the guidance of myself and the Laurentian University School of Social Work timed the release of an in-depth, longitudinal research report on poverty in the area to feed the poverty and welfare fraud debates. In November and December of 1994, we used press conferences, radio engagements, and speaking occasions to publicize the variations in poverty rates over time and place. To challenge the arguments of snitch line proponents we focused on the competing explanations for the high costs of welfare, such as high poverty rates and women's low wages, and presented research results that disproved the efficacy of anti-fraud measures, like snitch lines (Reitsma-Street, 1994). Despite the need for complex responses to poverty, we looked at some simple, inexpensive solutions within the power of local people, including shutting down the snitch line and voting for politicians who worked for social justice.

Early in 1995, I convened the first meeting of an ad hoc group committed to the line's abolition and representative of a wide range of professional, anti-poverty, and cultural groups. At the same time a class of 33 upper year social work students under my supervision chose to prepare position papers for and against the snitch line as a term assignment. Several students who strongly opposed the line chose to add their research and energies to the ad hoc group.

At this point in the story research contributions included a search for who had the power to abolish the line and what opportunities were there for shutting it down. The next step was to research how to get a review on the decision-makers' agenda. Clear, prompt answers to these questions quickly

mobilized and focused energy. The anniversary of its installation was selected as a natural date, and letters and briefs were sent to the chair and members of the administration board to argue the review was timely and in the community's interest. Data on the inhumane costs and procedures comparing alleged income tax evasion and welfare fraud were selected to help convince those decision-makers most opposed to the line that a review was necessary. After hotly debating whether to put a review of the snitch line on the agenda, the board finally did so in their February 16, 1995 meeting.

This done, the activist researchers among the ad hoc group members gathered solid data that might sway the wavering or undecided decision-makers, including the powerful bureaucrats who served the board. The ad hoc group broadcasted the evidence and the morality underlying explanations of fraud to the decision-makers, and to individuals and organizations, including the press, with the suggestion that decision-makers be made aware of community concerns before the March meeting.

Another wave of letters and briefs were sent to decision-makers; the papers carried new investigative media reports (Lowe, 1995); undecided decision-makers were visited. The research in these broadcasting strategies focused on the ethical debates behind the explanations for and against a snitch line. We also broadcast research that compared the lack of savings before compared to after installation of the snitch line, and the absence of differences in rates of welfare abuse in those communities with versus those without a snitch line. In addition, we clearly exposed the systematic, false inflation of

savings and the invisible financial as well as human costs associated with a snitch line. On March 16, 1995, the board passed a motion to discontinue the welfare snitch line.

#### EVALUATION OF ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Did the research contributions to mobilizing questions, comparative data, and competing explanations help shut down the snitch line? I am not sure how much the decision-makers would admit to being swayed by the data. Without pressure from citizens and organizations using the data and arguments, however, the issue may not have been put on the decision-maker's agenda.<sup>2</sup> The questions, data, and alternative explanations were used to support first a coalition of recipients and professionals, and later to mobilize an ad hoc group and a class of social work students. The activist research focused limited personal and non-existent financial resources on strategic actions that put pressure on decision-makers.

But an uneasiness about activist research remains. There are standards to ensure the validity and reliability of activist research including the familiar triangulation of sources, audit trail of procedures, and repetitive participant check of data (e.g. Kreftig, 1991). Feminist, cross-cultural, and postmodern researchers have proposed other intriguing standards such as the relevant, catalytic, ironic, and voluptuous tests of validity (Brown, 1994; Lather, 1993). But even if activist research is valid and reliable, is it always necessary and worthwhile? How can its value be assessed? Three criteria may help in evaluating the worth of activist research contributions in this case, and in others.

If we accept that "social change is the

starting point of science" (Cook & Fonow citing Mies, 1990, p. 80), then the first criterion is whether the activist research contributes to changes in policies, programs, and individuals. Does the research promote social justice? Is the welfare snitch line abolished?

Even if the answer is yes, and in this case the activist research helped to close the snitch line, more study is necessary to understand precisely how the specific research contributions assist social change. It is hypothesized, for example, that without extensive dissemination of research, or what Sutherland (1994/95) calls broadcasting, the questions, data, and explanations of activist research will not make significant contributions to social justice. Greenberg and Mandell (1991) compared the powerful impact on American decision-makers of the successful broadcast strategies of work-for-welfare researchers to the unsuccessful, muddled dissemination efforts of those evaluating progressive income assistance experiments. In this case study on the welfare snitch line, participants thought carefully how to broadcast mobilizing research questions, data, and explanations in clear language, not only for popular multi-media venues, but also for the newsletters and occasions accessible to bureaucrats and professionals. Sommer (1987) hypothesized that when senior policy-planners participate in designing and disseminating research, they are more likely to implement research implications compared to those who do not participate. In this case study, the researchers connected to the November 1994 poverty reports sought and accepted invitations for meetings with social assistance bureaucrats and other decision-makers to look

at poverty and solutions.

The second criterion to help evaluate activist research is transferability of knowledge and skills to participants and other communities. In activist research, the transfer must first be to people within the community that is being researched, especially to those most on the margins, to help with future struggles (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Fetterman & al, 1996). Cook and Fonow state unequivocally that knowledge from activist research may not be withheld from participants (1990, p.78). Later, if research results are valid and reliable, they may be shared with other people in other communities who will pick what is helpful and congruent with their situation (Krefting, 1991).

Even if the first criterion of change has not been met--as is all too common given that many social justice struggles go on for years--the second criterion stands alone. Activist research is valuable if it brings change to at least some of the research participants. Evaluation of this criterion means exploring the extent to which participants in the activist research absorb sufficient information, skills, and confidence to engage more fully in liberating activities, within their own families and communities. In this case study, members of the Bleeding Heart Coalition and the ad hoc group fighting the snitch line used the November 1994 poverty report and snitch line fact sheets prepared with the help of the activist researchers to build their arguments, legitimacy and confidence. In one instance I was called by a woman who said she represented the low-income mothers in her housing unit. She told me how important the anti-snitch line talks in the popular media were to them.

We are afraid of the snitch line, and you big shot professors in that university up the hill made us feel not so stupid and alone.

Seven of the 33 students decided to send their term assignments to decision-makers, stating their opposition to the snitch line backed up with evidence and arguments. The brief of an eighth student ended up as an editorial in a local newspaper. The work of a ninth student was used by the board of directors of the organization in which she worked on placement to send a protest letter. Six of these nine students had never done something like this before. In their evaluation of the course, students spoke passionately about the welfare snitch line assignment. One student said:

I hate you. We talk all the time about the snitch line. Before I knew what I thought, but now I am not so sure the line is a good idea.

Another student added that she had not known municipal politics was important, or that "me, a poor mother, could meet a politician and help to change her mind."

These changes in participants exemplify the second criterion. I am not certain that the activist research contributions to shutting down the snitch line met the third criterion relevant to the evaluation of activist research--understanding change processes to feed the imagination about alternatives. Good activist research not only uncovers difficult facts but also helps participants enter what Westkott calls a "dialogue with a future...free of domination" (Westkott, 1990, p.65). Once injustices are uncovered, it becomes less important to dig up similar types of facts, and more important to discover how systems or individuals change. Understanding the change

processes promotes the possibility of moving towards an alternative to the current injustice.

To analyze how unjust initiatives emerge, and to imagine alternatives, it is necessary to engage directly in change, or be very close to the action.

If you want to know a thing, you must change it.... we have to start fighting against women's exploitation and oppression in order to be able to understand the extent, dimensions, and forms and causes of this patriarchal system (Mies, 1993, p.40).

What are the privileges, and resistances woven deep in the bowels of a person or a system? One encounters them when trying to change the rules, as we found out in trying to end the snitch line. Thus, action is absolutely essential to understanding deeply, and to constructing new theory.

Participation and empowerment of the dispossessed is a core concept that activist research can help to understand and to imagine alternatives (Heyworth, 1991; Fetterman et al, 1996; Stanley & Wise, 1990; Whyte et al, 1991). An approach to theorizing empowerment is to reflect on initiatives that increase the engagement of marginalized people within their various cultural groups--in learning about injustices, fighting them, and imagining other possibilities (e.g. Kuhlmann, 1992). Another approach theorizes how serious participation in community work or political arenas is systematically discouraged, constrained, limited, even punished. The processes that create, and those that resist repressive constraints, such as the snitch line, cry for investigation. As Chruikshank (1994) argues, activist research would search for alternative conditions that energize people and

groups to resist the systematic forces that disempower an increasing number of women, men, and children.

In sum, key responsibilities of activist researchers are to pose questions, collect data, and suggest explanations that mobilize energy for social justice practice. There also needs to be a commitment to participate from the beginning to the end of a particular phase of social justice practice, caring enough to monitor the impact of research processes, and making adjustments when necessary. It is not yet clear under which conditions activist research can best occur, nor when it is least helpful. Posing the criteria of promoting change, helping participants learn, and theorizing change processes may assist in evaluating the practice of activist research.

## ENDNOTES

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2. See also minutes of the District of Sudbury Social Services Administration Board for March 16, 1995. Attached to the report on the snitch line by the bureaucrats were many of the letters, briefs, and newspaper articles, mostly opposing the snitch line.

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