



Protection, collaboration and action: Research and power

An interview with Anita Franklin

Anita Franklin teaches community workers at Sheffield University in the UK. This interview about research and power was conducted by David Denborough.

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Anita, when you approach the topic of research with community workers, I believe that one of your first topics is to try to prepare them for protecting themselves and their communities from dominant understandings of research. Is that right? And if so, how do you go about this?

Let me start by saying something about the community work students I teach. They are all mature community workers, they tend to be working part-time, and they tend to be female rather than male, although I think this gender balance is changing. Unlike many other parts of the University of Sheffield, the students I teach stand out because they're all Black or Asian and none of them have posh accents. Most of them, I would say 90%, speak English as a second language, and therefore have to take what's called an English proficiency test in order to secure their place. If a university wants to make claims about their civic engagement, one of the key indicators is the extent to which there are pathways to higher degrees for non-traditional and under-represented students. The politics of education, the politics of universities, and the politics of research, cannot be separated.

As the students I teach are both community workers and members of marginalised communities, we have a lot to talk about when the topic turns to research. The tendency for a lot of research in elitist universities these days is to emphasise research with human respondents. This means that major research projects often involve peering into and poking around at communities which are marginalised. Most research money is not set aside to look at the powerful, how the powerful maintain their power, and how this power could be redistributed. Instead, the majority of research money is about peering into the powerless, and this always risks the possibility of further exploitation. If it isn't already bad enough that you're in a marginalised community, your unemployment rate is high, your housing is poor, your children are being excluded from school, now somebody wants to come and ask you how you feel about that!

Of course, researchers on the ground know that if they are going to gain entry to these communities they will need to go through key local people because most of the researchers from the dominant group don't live in those kind of neighbourhoods, they don't socialise with those kinds of groups. Even though they may live only a few miles away, the distance in terms of social class, the distance in terms of resources, is vast. So there is a tendency to kind of 'go through' community workers in order to enable research projects in marginalised communities.

As a result, students in my classes routinely approach me to say, 'I was approached by so-and-so who wants to do research'. In these situations, where a particular Professor or Dr has approached a community worker, the student

usually feels quite chuffed about the invitation. In these circumstances, I'm in a position to ask some questions, such as, 'So what do you want from this?' and, 'How are you going to work with your community on this because you're now being put in the position of being a representative but also a gatekeeper? You're now someone with a bit of power and influence, how are you going to use this?' Part of what I try and do in the classroom is to prepare students ahead of time for these kinds of situations because it is a lot easier to respond to complexities if you are prepared for them.

For this reason, I start talking about research from the very beginning of our courses. The students read some conventional research and then we discuss how they might transform such research into something that is more oriented towards collaboration or towards action.

These preparations seem really important ... can you say more about what you mean by collaboration and action in the research context?

When I say collaboration, I mean working towards, or trying to equalise, relationships between the respondents and the researcher. That's the way I think about collaboration. And this is one key challenge. The second key challenge involves transforming pieces of conventional research into something that is more action-oriented, that is to say to generate forms of research in which action will flow that will change something. How can we use research to institute change, and then to check on, and evaluate that change? How can research be used in ways to empower communities as opposed to empowering people who are outside of that community? These are key questions we explore in the classroom.

The other thing that I feel strongly about is teaching people how to conduct research that doesn't involve human respondents. I get really offended at the overemphasis on research with 'human respondents', because generally speaking these 'human respondents' are people who are less likely to be able to say no; these human respondents are generally not members of elites. If the research is on elites, those who have genuine choices as to whether to participate or not, then that's a different matter. There are many options other than researching with human respondents. For instance, I'm interested in inviting students to rigorously examine artefacts, or documents like speeches, or historical archives, or current television and films, in relation to the politics of representation. Researching and analysing these representations in our culture can teach us a great deal. And one of the good things about doing these forms of research is you can't do any harm!

Can I ask you more about research methods that are linked to action and change in communities?

There is a whole field of action research which initially started amongst teachers who were trying to respond to the problem of why some boys were struggling to read. This was back in the 1950s and teachers were coming together as researchers around this problem. They would try out different methods, different pedagogies, to see which ones would work to improve the reading of boys. They kept on doing this and researching the effects of different methods. This was then written up by Kurt Lewin and became known as action research because the focus was not for instance on counting how many little Johnnys couldn't or wouldn't read, but on how the research process and research project could actually get Johnny to read better, hence *action research*.

This notion then ballooned outwards as Paulo Freire (1973) began to develop forms of participatory action research in connection with community work. In his grassroots work, the research-action agenda derives from the people most affected (and usually least consulted) by the issue.

These days, the term action-research is used very loosely and in ways that I think lose much of the original meaning. Sometimes the term is used as a kind of compromise that allows you to do some research if it is tied up in changing situations for the group of people who are being researched. But that's not the original intent.

Action research is not about a beginning date and an end date, it's about the beginning of a process, going through a process and then finishing that process, and this might take years. Decent action research projects take as long as they take (rather than timelines being dictated by research councils or universities). And much of what's called action-research isn't shaped by the same Freirian ethic of the research agenda and process being shaped from below.

I know you are also influenced by feminist perspectives ...

Yes, there's a person in Britain called Margaret Ledwith who is very important to me in terms of research. I'm interested in feminist notions of pedagogy and research that also pay attention to class and race relations. Margaret Ledwith has been involved in what is referred to as 'emancipatory research' (2011). Imagine a situation in which a group of young women are going through sexual relationships with their boyfriends and are being physically punched and kicked from time to time, but they're not articulating this as abuse. They don't have that language, and perhaps they want to

enter into those particular descriptions of their experience, but they are wanting to be able to say something and do something about their lives. Imagine you are a community worker and you're witnessing this and want to do something about it. Margaret Ledwith would say, and I would agree with her, that a context like this doesn't simply require action research, it requires emancipatory research, because the process will need to involve the girls learning something about the oppression that is occurring and begin freeing themselves of that oppression. Her work builds upon Freirian concepts of conscientisation but from a feminist perspective. Part of this emancipatory process will involve the creation of a group, or a collective, to have a sense that your life and the lives of others who are somewhat like you, are being influenced by broader forces and relations of power.

You mentioned you are interested in feminist notions that also pay attention to class and race relations. Can you say something more about considerations of race and culture ...

As a woman of African American descent, I carry a particular intellectual legacy from figures such as bell hooks (2000) and Cornel West (1999). Their work is related to critical race theory which I find very helpful in terms of theorising our experience in the current day. Critical race theory has been developed from Hispanic and African American lawyers (Matsuda, et al, 1993) and educators (Ladson-Billings, et al, 1998, 2005) who deconstruct what has happened since the civil rights movement. Their work exposes and articulates the ways in which we live in a profoundly racist society, and assist to explain the continuation of racism. Take for instance the recent shootings of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown in Missouri which can only be understood in the broader context of the history of race relations in the USA.

Within critical race theory there is an emphasis on the voice of the people: listening to and honouring the voices of the marginalised as they articulate their experience of everyday racism. From this perspective, emancipatory research can involve helping people to *articulate* the experience of being raced, the experience of being marginalised, the experience of being violated, and the ways in which people resist these experiences and/or hold onto their dignity in the face of these experiences.

Another aspect of critical race theory tries to examine ways of moving forward out of racism and placing the responsibility for this, and the focus of this, back onto those who are privileged.

*These considerations of race, privilege and gender ...
I imagine these all intersect at times?*

They sure do. Let me tell you a story from my own history that explains why all these issues of research and power and protecting communities from the interpretations of others are important to me.

As a kid, I grew up in New York. I remember one summer's day, I was around 12 years old, and there was a buzz in the streets because this man wearing all white had come into the neighbourhood. I kid you not, he looked like Colonel Sanders! Okay, he didn't have a mustache, but he was a white man in a white suit in a Black space. His name was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, later to become Senator Moynihan who, almost singlehandedly through his sociological research, pathologised Black communities. He described Black communities as matriarchal (with a negative connotation) and explained that 'the problem with Black people' was the 'failure of Black men to control their women'. The ideas from the Moynihan Report get regurgitated over and over again and are now woven into contemporary discourses about Black people in the USA.

The echoes of these histories continue ...

Yes this all goes deep. Can you see why I believe we must protect our communities from outsider researchers? And why I find the concepts of emancipatory research and critical race theory so exciting?

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