

Less Dangerous Encounters: Power, Epistemic Privilege and Participatory Social Work Research

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Participatory research is well aligned with the values and practices of social work and a promising approach to democratizing the knowledge economy. The extant literature claims that participatory scholarship aims to decolonize knowledge production by engaging socially diverse communities in the research enterprise. Yet these discursive claims and their associated material practices, remain under scrutinized and under theorized, particularly as to how relations of power and privilege are reproduced and resisted in collaborations between academic and community knowledge work/ers. If social work scholars are to realize more inclusive knowledge-making alliances, then the social relations of participatory research must be interrogated to reveal how power circulates in these epistemological encounters. This paper proposes a postcolonial and poststructural framework to inquire into the full complexity of these collaborations drawing on critical reflections of the author's previous participatory projects, as well as preliminary findings from current research. This inquiry aligns with a number of conference themes including: participative co-learning, uncertainty as ethical praxis, and problematizing how participatory research may diffuse and activate political action. Specifically, this paper offers a postcolonial reading of participatory techniques that dislocate knowledge work from the historical, political, socio-economic and embodied conditions in which it unfolds. Postcolonial readings are put in conversation with a governmentality analysis to trace participatory techniques of access and appropriation of local knowledges and how they articulate to macro-practices of inclusive policy development and micro-practices of critical social work. Although this paper presents an analyses of limits of participatory research, it is not in pursuit of revealing "bad" participatory praxis or recuperating better practice. Nevertheless, this paper concludes with modest proposals for less dangerous encounters and a theoretical critique that can account for the ways in which participatory research can be both emancipatory and exploitative.

Keywords: participatory research, power relations, postcolonial, governmentality