

Practicing Ethical Activist Scholarship for Sustainability Transformations

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Introduction

The context for this report is on the ethical considerations of activist scholarship aimed at sustainability transformations. Two core questions set the stage for this discussion: *1.) What are the main ethical challenges and responsibilities in activist research for sustainability transformations? 2.) How do we best prepare for these—especially in work with more marginalized/vulnerable communities?*

Background: Why Ethics?

Engaging in activist scholarship for sustainability transformations is both a moral and political process of knowledge making and application that begs the questions transformation of what, to what, for whom? Answers to such questions are based upon deeply embedded yet highly contested value-judgements around what constitutes sustainability/sustainable development and what is needed to get there. We enlist personal and societal ethics (i.e. moral principles) to make these judgments. In the process, we tend to prioritize certain perspectives, interests, and pathways over others.

The more embedded we become in activist scholarship for sustainability transformations, the more likely we are to come across ethical challenges. Underlying the value-judgements we make in research and practice are fundamental ethical concerns related to power, privilege, and accountability, among others. Yet too often pressures to produce results lead to an overshadowing of the ethical dimensions within activist scholarship. The purpose of this report is to begin to bring to the forefront these ethical dimensions. Doing so is the first step in building our capacities to practice ethical activist scholarship in support of plural transformation pathways to sustainability.

Note: The following sections draw upon the ideas, questions, and narratives that emerged throughout the STEPS Summer School 2016 program, including a facilitated discussion dedicated to the core questions introduced above. This report is meant to be an entry point for what we hope

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will become an ongoing dialogue among a growing network of current and potential scholar activists/activist scholars working toward sustainability transformations.

Key Ethical Challenges and Responsibilities

- ***Setting and Implementing the Research/Action Agenda***

One of the first things we should be asking ourselves before engaging in activist scholarship is what is the purpose or intended outcome(s) of our work? Setting an agenda without consultation from the participants/partners (i.e. stakeholders) with whom we plan to work presents the ethical challenge of balancing our personal objectives and privileged authority (warranted or not) with those of the various stakeholders involved. A large part of the challenges to including stakeholders in agenda setting and implementation comes down to the constraints that govern activist scholarship. These include, but are not limited to, funding, time and scope of projects/initiatives, disciplinary or sectoral boundaries, stakeholders' conditions of involvement, and more. All of this raises ethical concerns around representation, accountability and power inequalities within decision-making and action.

- ***Representation and Privileging Knowledge***

One of the chief ethical challenges we face in representation is deciding whose knowledge counts. This is the case of privileging knowledge. In working toward sustainability transformations, it is tempting for scholar activists/activist scholars to seek out solidarity partnerships with those who share our goals or visions for change. This can lead to a closing down of alternative transformation pathways. As certain perspectives or interests get prioritized, others are excluded or silenced. On the other hand, in attempts to achieve greater diversity, we may fall into the ethical trap of tokenism whereby meeting a certain quota of representation is considered doing our due diligence. Furthermore, attempts to engage with opposing forces can undermine our credibility with those we have established solidarity partnerships. It can also put us in danger of co-optation by those in greater positions of power.

The ethical challenges of representation also emerge in how and to whom we choose to disseminate the knowledge produced. This points to the issue of honestly capturing and representing the narratives of the different stakeholders involved. Determining what is "on or off the record" is especially difficult when dealing with highly sensitive issues, or when working with stakeholders who may have competing interests.

- ***Integrity and Accountability: The Principle of "Do No Harm" vs. "Do Good"***

Activist scholarship involves a constant balancing act between simultaneously respecting, protecting, and promoting the wellbeing of individual participants/partners as well as the wellbeing of the socioecological systems in which they are embedded. Maintaining integrity while upholding accountability to diverse stakeholders is a major ethical challenge when working toward

sustainability transformations. A question that gets at the heart of this challenge is, “Are we doing more harm than good?”

In many cases activist scholarship necessitates delving into serious injustices or personal suffering faced by our participants/partners. Doing so can trigger unexpected physical and emotional stressors or crises. Is it our responsibility to intervene? If so, are we prepared to do so? What happens once we leave? To whom or what we are accountable and to what magnitude are greatly determined by the expectations we personally hold as well as those we raise—intentionally or not—among our stakeholders. It is not always feasible to meet all expectations in a “fair” and “just” way, especially when considering more long-term impacts. As a result, we run the risk of perpetuating activist scholarship that is overwhelmingly extractive and exploitative, rather than co-produced and mutually beneficial.

- ***Objectivity Vs. Embeddedness? Working With and Through Contradictions***

While objectivity is touted as the “holy grail” of rigorous scientific research, activist scholarship pushes us to embed ourselves more fully in the processes and intended outcomes of sustainability transformations. The more embedded we become, the greater the likelihood we are to face internal and external contradictions. The more obvious contradictions arise in cases of competing interests between diverse stakeholders. These are typically downplayed by “trade-offs” in sustainability science. What is less commonly acknowledged is when scholar activists/activist scholars feel pressured to compromise our personal values and moral principles in order to achieve “greater impact” or follow through on promised deliverables.

Perhaps one of the most vexing ethical challenges is that of being a part of the very problems we are seeking to address. Awareness of the contradictions can result in cognitive dissonance, which may cloud our judgement, undermine our roles in the project/initiative, erode our capacity to uphold integrity and accountability to our stakeholders, and accelerate burnout. Further complicating matters is when we fail to realize the ways in which we may be implicated in the problems we are fighting against. If we are unable or unwilling to critically examine and confront these contradictions, our work may reinforce the injustices and inequalities we strive to change.

Potential Strategies for Addressing Key Ethical Challenges and Upholding Responsibilities

The following are some *potential* strategies proposed for addressing the key ethical challenges and upholding the ethical responsibilities highlighted in the previous section.

- ***Setting and Implementing the Research/Action Agenda***
 - Find ways to engage stakeholders at the start of a research project/action initiative.
 - Be flexible and adaptive throughout the life of the project/initiative.
 - Understand and be forthcoming about the constraints governing the project/initiative and work collectively with stakeholders to overcome or mitigate these together.
- ***Representation and Privileging Knowledge***

- Value participants/partners as experts in their own lived experiences.
- Create an environment where diverse narratives can be respected, heard, and honestly presented.
- Offer opportunities for stakeholders to regularly review information (i.e. data) before dissemination.
- Avoid promoting an “anything goes” attitude by constantly questioning the integrity and representativeness of the information collected and employed.
- Critically engage with and consistently reflect on the politics and injustices at play when determining whose voices are heard and whose are excluded.
- ***Integrity and Accountability: The Principle of “Do No Harm” vs. “Do Good”***
 - Be transparent about what we can offer and honest about our capabilities and limitations so as not to raise false hopes or unreasonable expectations.
 - Seek out synergistic partnerships with other actors whose added capabilities can build our capacity to facilitate co-produced, mutually beneficial activist scholarship; this helps moves us beyond the principle of “do no harm” to “do good”.
 - Expect the unexpected and employ common sense and compassion.
 - Aspire toward practicing empathic and authentic activist scholarship.
 - Remember that we are humans first, professionals second.
 - Enlist the guidance of trusted and locally respected informants to hold us accountable in both the processes and outcomes of our work; they can also serve as gateways to long-term engagement that will enable tracking future impacts.
- ***Objectivity Vs. Embeddedness? Working With and Through Contradictions***
 - Practice reflexivity throughout all stages of a project/initiative; this entails critically examining the ways in which our decision-making and actions shape and our shaped by our identities, perspectives, and values—as well as the broader socioecological systems in which we are embedded.
 - Create an environment that encourages ongoing critical reflection, personally and professionally.
 - Utilize different mechanisms for reflexivity and engage fellow stakeholders whenever appropriate.
 - Take active steps to rectify the contradictions wherever possible; critical awareness is only half the battle.
 - Be open to personal transformation and growth as we work toward sustainability transformations.

Concluding Thoughts and Points for Discussion

Ethical activist scholarship is not about achieving some moral perfection or having all the solutions. Rather, it is about scholar activists/activist scholars embracing our own continued growth and transformation. It also means holding ourselves accountable to our personal values and principles, as well as to the greater struggle for socioecological justice, that motivate us to engage in activist scholarship. The more we can employ and embody ethical tools such as transparency, authenticity, reciprocity, integrity, humility, and empathy, the greater our capacity to facilitate “just” plural

transformation pathways to sustainability. As Pulido puts it, “it takes fortitude and wisdom to live such a life” (Pulido 2008 in Hale, ed. 2008; p.362). Activist scholarship may be rife with vulnerability, uncertainty and ambiguity, but we must remember that we are not alone and that asking for help is a good thing. It is when we stop questioning that we should be alarmed.

Follow-up Questions to Further the Discussion:

- How do we prepare ourselves for handling crisis situations? What are helpful psychosocial or health-related skills to have?
- In activist scholarship for sustainability transformations, are “win-win” situations realistic? How do we achieve greater equal distribution of benefits/impacts?
- When considering compensation (financial or otherwise), how do we determine what is “fair”?
- What happens when our participants/partners are resistant to change, or worse, are committed to change that could negatively impact other stakeholders not involved in the project/initiative?
- Are there justifications for compromising our morals/values in activist scholarship? Where should we draw the line and who decides?
- What are strategies for achieving meaningful collaboration among diverse stakeholders?
- Are there common norms by which to assess the quality of activist scholarship?
- What are the benefits and risks of fully embedding ourselves in the transformation process?
- What are strategies for preventing scholar activist/activist scholar burnout?

References

Pulido, L. 2008. Frequently (un)asked questions about being a scholar activist. In Hale, (Ed.) 2008. *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: Global, Area, and International Archive (GAIA)/University of California Press. Pp. 341-365. Online access via <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z63n6xr> .

Additional Suggested Resources:

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