

Subject: Challenging the authority of both researcher and activist

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The issue I would like to raise is the need to challenge the authority of both the researcher and the activist. Is it possible to use a researcher's critical perspective and insights to question activist agendas and practices and at the same time use the activist's involvement and commitment to challenge research practices?

The point here is that both research and activist practices:

- a. are based on an understanding and *interpretation* of social reality that is not objective, but situated,
- b. testify to a particular *investment* which is tied to our positions and identifications
- c. involve an unavoidable process of *objectification* that puts us in positions of authority,
- d. are *androcentric* and *racialised* in content (who participates), style (how one participates) and identification (particular styles are tied to particular identities).

So neither researcher nor activist are 'innocent', both are continuously implicated in practices of power. It may be possible to use one 'identity' to interrogate the other. Practicing either unreflexively, i.e. without questioning our involvement and gains and partiality, seems to me to be problematic for both. Most importantly it is necessary to question identifications as *discursive practices* rather than qualities. In relation to this, I would like to point out that both research and activist practices are gendered and/or racialised and this serves to establish/legitimate a gender and/or racial hierarchy. This means for example, that a common assumption in both academic and activist circles that women are more emotional or relational than men needs to be questioned as to how this identification is first constructed and then used to discredit, disqualify and prescribe women's participation. It is not a question whether women are (or not) more emotional vis-à-vis men. It is rather an issue how this identification is used to secure a privileged and authority position for men, in a hierarchy that values rationality, task-orientedness and 'productivity' more *and* identifies these as primarily male qualities. Alternatively, one could try to see both men and women as more complex actors, holding multiple, even contradictory, positions in relation to dynamic and contingent circumstances.

Of course what I am saying needs to be qualified in the context of the different social status and legitimation that research and activism hold respectively. While research is commonly understood as a highly respected and valued practice, activism is considered at best as marginal, at worst as 'terrorist' (unethical, crazy, evil). In this sense using research critically to question activism should clearly be placed at the service of activism and activism should be used to radicalize research.

An example from research for my master's dissertation:

*Title of the research:* "Mirroring the 'self': racialised, classed and gendered representations of greek muslims in Athens".

*Description of the research project:* The object of this research was to collectively analyze how representations of greek muslims, that can be found in contemporary, 'progressive', liberal-humanist discourses in Greece, a. reflect ongoing preoccupations of greek society and state with national identity, and b. reproduce rather than challenge racialised, gendered and class discriminations. In other words how liberal multiculturalism reinstates racism and classism through the back door, by establishing the cultural and ethical superiority of the 'progressive' middle class against both working class christians ('greeks') and poor muslims ('turks'). I chose to focus on a documentary film that was commissioned by greek state television. This film portrays the role of the primary school, in the area where the muslim population is settled, in its 'heroic' efforts to combat racism and discrimination and to promote social integration and social change, through the implementation of an intercultural education program.

Two discussions were held with a group of teachers from the school, that also took part in the film, about the serious problems with the film and about their own changing relationship to the muslim population. This group of teachers and I had a long previous relationship, working together in the context of the Network for the Social Support of Refugees and Immigrants, an initiative for direct social and political intervention, to set up a language school for foreign immigrants in Greece. My own engagement with the muslim population began through my employment as a sociologist by the intercultural education program.

The purpose of this research was for us (teachers and myself) to use the film as a mirror through which to question our own involvement and relationship with the muslim population, to understand how we too – even as we take an activist position – need to question how we are implicated in dominant representations and reproduce them, mainly through figuring our relationship with the muslim population as a relationship with an 'other' who is not 'us', but whom we want to help or liberate. Gaining critical awareness would mean that we start to explore how we construct the muslim population as 'other' and what this construction serves. One interesting insight we gained is that 'muslim' refers to many different things (eg religion, ethnicity, culture), depending on the context and the political questions at hand, so that it is more useful to understand its evocation as a discursive category rather than an identity category.

At the same time this research was an attempt to question mainstream academic practices where research is considered and practiced as an individual project for which one is rewarded with a degree signifying that we now rightfully 'belong' to an academic community. My concern was to try and practice research collectively and find ways to represent this in writing, or other forms.

Questions and problems that came up during the research:

- Are we co-researchers, or do I have greater authority over the outcome of the research since I designed it? How is this research useful for me (part of a university degree) and how is it useful for the teachers (awareness of issues and own investments)?

- Can this analysis in any way influence a more critical approach in teachers' practices in the context of growing diversity in schools with the growing number of foreign immigrant children that enter the greek national educational system? How can we challenge a hierarchical, liberal educational system such as the greek one?

- How do our identifications of 'others' reproduce relationships of domination and exclusion? What are our own 'blind spots' even as we feel committed to initiate emancipatory and critical practices? How do we get recuperated by the system (education, dominant discourses) even as we try to challenge it?

- What is our own investment in identifying ourselves as 'activists' or 'researchers' or both?

General 'research' issues for discussion:

1. How to conceptualize and actualize research as a collective practice
2. Multiple interpretations vs the authority of the researcher
3. Dialogic representation of research
4. Unavoidable objectification
5. From identities to discourses