

Why Civically Engaged Research? Understanding and Unpacking Researcher Motivations

Jenn M. Jackson, *Syracuse University*

Brian Shoup, *Mississippi State University*

H. Howell Williams, *Western Connecticut State University*

Civically engaged research (CER) lends itself well to researchers motivated by a desire to address inequality through what Norton (2004, 68) called “problem-oriented political science.” Despite its methodological diversity, CER seeks to solve social problems by engaging community partners. The participants at the American Political Science Association’s Institute of Civically Engaged Research in June 2019 shared this vision, and it provides a through line across the contributions to this symposium. Surveying examples of quality CER reveals a number of shared motivations that inspire researchers to undertake engaged research. Although we appreciate the “big tent” approach to CER (see Dobbs, Udani, Bullock, Hess, and Bullock and Hess in this symposium), our review identifies work that explicitly collaborates with vulnerable groups to build agency and improve political efficacy. In highlighting the importance of researcher embeddedness, we diverge from other authors in this symposium. For example, Bullock and Hess’s definition of CER allows for engagement with partners who may not be geographically bounded or demographically homogeneous, including government agencies and corporations. We acknowledge that some CER might take place among these groups; however, we identify a desire to work among place-based community members navigating unequal power relations as a key motivation for undertaking CER. As such, we endorse a CER model that seeks to disrupt embedded power relations and imagines different political and social futures for community partners. Understanding researcher motivation in these projects is a crucial first step toward achieving future-oriented CER in the discipline.

This article identifies four reasons why social scientists might use CER as a part of their toolkit. First, when CER is guided by a concern for marginalized populations and unequal operations of power, it can improve the quality of research questions by directly incorporating the underspecified perspectives of communities whose voices often are assumed to be articulable by researchers. For this reason, we highlight the Black Feminist and queer theoretical roots that can motivate many CER approaches as a means of centering marginalized communities and improving the ways that research questions are framed.

Second, and building on this claim, we argue that CER allows researchers to apply their grounded knowledge to their research. Although not all civically engaged researchers come from marginalized communities, CER provides an opportunity for scholars to be intentional in using their own experiences to build community and guide the research process. An advantage of CER is that it can enable social scientists to frame their theories in a way that is more relevant to the lived experiences of citizens.

Third, CER emphasizes respect for community members as partners in collaborative research. Such collaboration can illuminate how people navigate relationships with power, resulting in more accurate assessments of how government operates. In this way, a commitment to justice for marginalized communities can deepen ties between academia and the social world, resulting in higher-quality scholarship.

Fourth, we conclude that CER can produce quality, public-facing research that increases the public relevance of social science. CER can result in better, more grounded, and more accessible political science because it derives from and is responsive to audiences beyond the discipline.

CENTERING THE MOST MARGINALIZED

When social science research places the researcher (i.e., the outsider) in close contact with the researched (i.e., the insider) (Hill Collins 1986), those research participants whose identities and experiences grant them expert knowledge in a particular subject matter become the primary focus of large- and small-scale research agendas (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Moreover, these groups are representative of the puzzles that researchers create, the theories that they develop, and the methodological approaches that they derive. In many ways, research participants are the most fundamental component of empirical research because they determine the direction and substantive outcomes of the research agenda. Historically, however, research participants from vulnerable or minoritized populations traditionally have been excluded from many research agendas or, when included, seldom reflect the fullness of those communities’ experiences (Cohen 1999, 2010; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). A key facet of CER is engaging in forms of research that do precisely this type of work. By

focusing on the myriad experiences of vulnerable research participants—especially those rarely acknowledged and regarded in mainstream social science research—researchers work to interrupt the status quo within our disciplines that reinforces and reproduces the exploitation of multiple mar-

LGBTQIA+ and feminist movements often share insights and critical methods for engaging in community-based, deeply rooted work. These community-led movements frequently work to ensure that their efforts encapsulate the underlying causes and mechanisms that reproduce harms against their primary

[C]entering vulnerable research participants involves the practice of valuing and regarding existing networks, collectivities, movements, and the autonomy and agency that already exist within these groups.

ginalized, underserved, and underrepresented populations. Borrowing a phrase from public health literature, we more accurately might describe hard-to-reach populations as “hardly reached” (Sokol, Fisher, and Hill 2015).

Theoretically, we identify with exemplary research that comes from Black and Brown women and queer scholars. For example, Black Queer Feminist theorists and thinkers have long highlighted the importance of research that centers the experiences of those most marginalized in society (Combahee River Collective 1983; Jackson 2019). This research entails decentering white, heteronormative, cisgender, middle-class, and able-bodied populations in the production of scholarship and centering those whose identities place them outside of these normative characteristics.

“Centering” these participants requires three critical components. First, it means that these groups and their experiences must guide the research questions, theories, and methodologies chosen rather than the converse. Research agendas that prioritize method and theory do not fully account for the complex lived experiences of vulnerable populations and marginalized groups (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Second, centering typically excluded groups requires the intentional decolonizing of scholarship to develop research that actively addresses social inequities (Bhattacharya 2016). Thus, CER is not an exercise only in research production but also in actively challenging systemic limitations and boundaries that isolate vulnerable groups and reproduce injustices against them. Third, centering vulnerable research participants involves the practice of valuing and regarding existing networks, collectivities, movements, and the autonomy and agency that already exist within these groups. In particular,

communities of interest. Efforts toward fixing long-standing sociopolitical issues represent “transformative solutions,” and they work not to simply reform existing issues and problems facing vulnerable communities but instead to address the structural processes that promote injustice (Bassichis, Lee, and Spade 2015). Moreover, these movement leaders and organizers develop real-world-based theories and tactics through which academics can better understand the complex processes that orchestrate inequalities among groups. For example, activist and organizer Charlene Carruthers (2018, 10) defined the Black Queer Feminist (BQF) lens as “a political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups seek to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression.” In defining the BQF, Carruthers offered both organizers and non-organizers a framework through which to approach the work of being civically engaged and committed to facilitating systemic change.

The dialogic nature of embedded research and the role of both community members and researchers in shaping the research trajectory confronts disciplinary expectations that researchers should be detached from the subject matter. Rooted in norms borrowed from the natural sciences, the presumption of researcher objectivity presumes that most rigorous social science research entails researchers disinvesting from the issue and community under analysis. Recent scholars have highlighted the race and gender biases undergirding criticisms of so-called me studies or mesearch (Ayoub and Rosa 2016; Ray 2016). As Hill Collins (1986, S21) noted, the subject position of marginalized people provides crucial insight into the operations of power from below. In contrast to universalistic, “ahistorical values,” she wrote, Black women’s experiences place “greater

The dialogic nature of embedded research and the role of both community members and researchers in shaping the research trajectory confronts disciplinary expectations that researchers should be detached from the subject matter.

movement groups and community-based organizations that already serve vulnerable populations can be considered peer groups in the work of producing CER.

APPLYING GROUNDED KNOWLEDGE

Movement and community-based organizations regularly engage in their own forms of CER. Activists and organizers in

emphasis on the role of historically specific political economies” in the perpetuation of particular forms of race/class/gender oppression (see also Harraway 1988). CER rejects the premise that researchers must remain removed from the problem under study, arguing instead that “the viewpoints through which people interpret the political world have merit” in their own right (Walsh 2009, 180).

ENGAGING COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS RESEARCH PARTNERS

CER implies a recognition of and respect for our research partners, and it allows researchers to work collaboratively with community members to develop a deeper understanding of the problems they face (Frazer 2020). Working closely with people as they engage in political activity contributes to a fuller sense of how actors understand political processes as well as the ways that affected populations seek redress (see “How to CER” in this symposium). A key rationale for CER, then, is embedding researchers in communities that are engaged in political activity to gain “on-the-ground” knowledge. By researcher embeddedness, we mean that researchers work closely with members of a community of research subjects to develop, articulate, and refine the research project in all stages of the process.

On a basic level, researchers can embed with their research subjects through open-ended interview questions examining their experience of political life. This type of research can deepen our collective understanding of how government action shapes people’s political views (Cramer 2016; Green 1999; Michener 2018). Other scholars have used ethnography to “question political relations and political sites that are generally unseen, or ‘unidentified,’ by mainstream political science but which are nonetheless meaningful for local political actors” (Jourde 2009, 201). By embedding themselves among the people most intimately impacted, researchers can “glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009, 5). Other scholars are motivated by a desire to collaborate directly with research subjects in crafting solutions to inequalities through participant action research (PAR). By fostering alliances between researcher and researched, PAR results in grounded knowledge about and actionable solutions to political problems (Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram 2009).

Highlighting embeddedness places us at odds with other authors in this symposium. For example, Bullock and Hess’s definition of CER allows for engagement with partners who may not be geographically bounded or demographically homogeneous. Engagement with government agencies or corporations that invites stakeholders into the research process might qualify as CER under their definition. In theory, we acknowledge that some CER might take place among these

also is sometimes difficult for scholars trained in more deductively oriented research-design methodologies to adapt, for two reasons.

First, political science is traditionally interventionist in that it seeks to explain collective-action problems that, presumably, are invisible to the subjects experiencing them. Dominant research-design models assume that the underlying sources of political dilemmas are unsolved precisely *because* publics cannot deduce them (Rorty 2005). With this approach, communities are puzzles to be explained rather than individuals with expert knowledge of their own life experiences. Indeed, conceding expertise to the subjects can be seen implicitly as evidence of a lack of academic merit.

Second, political science uses a top-down mode of knowledge production that seeks to minimize risks to theoretical parsimony. As a discipline, we are published and promoted according to a near-universally reified model that demands a kind of sanitization of research subjects. Surveys eschew open-ended questions in favor of Likert scales or discrete values regardless of whether our categorizations are reflective of others’ experiences; responses that do not fit predetermined theories are discarded as “outliers”; and content analyses are conducted to glean out responses that speak to a researcher’s own predispositions. CER inverts this process by viewing the expertise of individuals—especially individuals who experience marginalization—as essential. Individuals are not blind to the sources of their marginalization or to the underlying dynamics that can disempower them. Indeed, we know that they often devise their own strategies for navigating these social situations (Scott 1985). CER views this knowledge as a powerful asset.

CONCLUSION: A COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE

Scholars conduct engaged research for many reasons. For some, the research question requires identifying and consulting community partners who have on-the-ground experience with political phenomena. For others, the commitment to justice for a community necessitates including that group in the pursuit of new knowledge. Although not mutually exclusive, these motivations entail different justifications for CER with different normative implications. For example, consulting community partners with experience relevant to the research question can provide important insight into political

Quality CER ideally shifts the focus of who should benefit from our research.

groups; however, a desire to work among and respect for place-based community members navigating unequal power relations is a key motivation for undertaking CER.

LISTENING TO EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

If CER rejects that researchers are to remain agnostic from the impacts to the populations being studied, it similarly rejects that subjects have no expert knowledge to provide. This centering of the lived experiences of subjects as part of the crafting of research questions is central to CER. That said, it

problems, but it also can leave intact—or, indeed, exacerbate—power imbalances between researcher and researched. Such an extractive model of research allows researchers to take from the target populations without consulting them or inquiring about their views on the original research question. Experiences provide researchers with a thick description of on-the-ground circumstances, but the general research framework remains unchanged by contact with affected populations. We view this extractive model as incomplete at best and harmful at worst because it fails to account for the expert

knowledge produced among marginalized communities that are closest to the problems we study. Researchers should not presume to understand political circumstances better than those on the ground. Instead, research on marginalized communities should be flexible enough to accommodate changes to the research design as recommended by those affected. For these reasons, the best examples of engaged political science research are grounded in and motivated by a commitment to justice for those with whom we work.

Quality CER ideally shifts the focus of who should benefit from our research. Involving affected communities in the research process makes scholarship more meaningful to wider audiences, which is an important first step toward marshalling the resources of academia to improve our social world. We hope that by explicating some of the rationales that undergird successful CER in the discipline, more scholars will take up the charge to pursue political science research with a commitment to justice for the communities we study. ■

REFERENCES

- Ayoub, Phillip, and Deondra Rosa. 2016. "In Defense of 'Me' Studies." *Inside Higher Ed*, April 14.
- Bassichis, Morgan, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade. 2015. "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got." In *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, 21–46. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Bhattacharya, Kakali. 2016. "The Vulnerable Academic: Personal Narratives and Strategic De/colonizing of Academic Structures." *Qualitative Inquiry* 22 (5): 309–21.
- Carruthers, Charlene. 2018. *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 2010. *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Combahee River Collective. 1983. "A Black Feminist Statement." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 234–44. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.
- Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frazer, Michael L. 2020. "Respect for Subjects in the Ethics of Causal and Interpretive Social Explanation." *American Political Science Review* 114 (4): 1001–12.
- Green, Linda. 1999. *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=1Q7d2XcqpLcC>.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–99.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33 (6): S14–S32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800672>.
- Jackson, Jenn M. 2019. "Breaking out of the Ivory Tower: (Re)Thinking Inclusion of Women and Scholars of Color in the Academy." *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* 40 (1): 195–203.
- Jourde, Cédric. 2009. "The Ethnographic Sensibility: Overlooked Authoritarian Dynamics and Islamic Ambivalences." In *Political Ethnography*, ed. Edward Schatz, 201–16. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Michener, Jamila. 2018. *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, Anne. 2004. "Political Science as a Vocation." In *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics*, ed. Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek E. Masoud, 67–82. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ray, Victor. 2016. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Meseearch." *Inside Higher Ed*, October 26.
- Rorty, Richard. 2005. "Justice as a Larger Loyalty." *Ethical Perspectives* 4 (3): 139–51.
- Schatz, Edward. 2009. "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics." In *Political Ethnography*, ed. Edward Schatz, 1–22. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shdaimah, Corey, Roland Stahl, and Sanford F. Schram. 2009. "When You Can See the Sky through Your Roof: Policy Analysis from the Bottom Up." In *Political Ethnography*, ed. Edward Schatz, 255–74. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sokol, Rebecca, Edwin Fisher, and Julia Hill. 2015. "Identifying Those Whom Health Promotion Hardly Reaches: A Systematic Review." *Evaluation & the Health Professions* 38 (4): 518–37.
- Walsh, Katherine Cramer. 2009. "Scholars as Citizens: Studying Public Opinion through Ethnography." In *Political Ethnography*, ed. Edward Schatz, 165–82. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zuberi, Tukufu, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. 2008. *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.