

Unravelling Research: The Ethics and Politics of Research in the Social Sciences, edited by Teresa Macias

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Book Review: *Unravelling Research: The Ethics and Politics of Research in the Social Sciences*

Teresa Macias, ed. *Unravelling Research: The Ethics and Politics of Research in the Social Sciences*. Fernwood Publishing, 2022, 228pp, \$30.00.

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Laurentian University Library and Archives

Keywords: *decolonization · knowledge production · postcolonialism · qualitative research · research methods*

Unravelling Research is a unique and challenging text about the political and ethical dilemmas that arise in academic research. The predominantly Canadian voices and perspectives from multiple racial and cultural standpoints offer a distinctly diverse set of voices compiled together in an edited collection. The authors are speaking together and searching for ways to decolonize and make research more ethically just.

This book is not a conventional text delineating various research methods or guaranteed strategies to avoid ethical pitfalls. The authors of the various chapters in this edited collection engage in a reflexive practice analysing their own research projects and putting their own role as researchers into question. The book challenges the presumption that researchers can occupy a space of neutrality, certainty, and objectivity, especially working within and confronting the colonial structures in academic research.

The authors demonstrate that the power dynamics at play in academic research make it challenging for researchers to claim a position of neutrality. For example, research methods that were intended to flatten hierarchies have failed to do so. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) was developed to be inclusive and give over power and control to participants, but, as Julia Elizabeth Janes demonstrates, it can result in the exploitation of community participants. Principles of informed consent have been widely relied upon to try and protect against abuses of power, but, for Anne O'Connell, this is becoming increasingly difficult in an age of Big Data where large amounts of information are collected by governments and

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corporations without consent. Moreover, being an insider researcher, as many of the authors are because their race, gender, or past profession is the same as their research subjects, does not guarantee to level the playing field. Reflecting on her position as an “insider” researcher in her project on racism in social services workplaces, Harjeet Kaur Badwall argues against focusing on the sameness between researcher and participants out of concern for the erasure of differences; she also speaks to the issue of power, noting the tension between her insider perspective, given her shared experiences of racism, and her status and power as an outsider, because of her role as researcher.

Readers are encouraged not only to examine power dynamics that threaten neutrality and objectivity, but to challenge the very value ascribed to certainty and neutrality. Vannina Sztainbok and Lorena M. Gajardo argue that ambiguity and uncertainty are not deficiencies in research. Similarly, as Leila Angod reflects on her work as a racialized researcher, she demonstrates the very impossibility of being a “neutral” researcher, insofar as she is a witness to racism during her ethnographic work and needs to decide whether or not to intervene.

Ultimately, the challenge in the book is to examine the possibility of using research to achieve social justice. Recommendations are made, like in Brenda A. LeFrançois and Jijian Voronka’s call for unruly research and the maddening of research, to challenge the racist and colonial roots of mainstream research in psychiatry. Yet questions remain unanswered for all authors, as is fitting for a book that calls for uncertainty. Can research bring about social justice if, as suggested by Teresa Macias, speaking and documenting injustice and tragedy is, in and of itself, another form of violence? Also, given the distance between the researcher and the participant, such as in the case of the street sex workers in the work of Caitlin Janzen and Susan Strega, can researchers succeed in bearing witness to the trauma?

Some of the themes of the book, like the lack of objectivity and neutrality of the researcher, will not be new to readers familiar with critical approaches to research methods. The book does, however, raise new and important ethical questions by examining strategies to address imbalances in power and researcher bias that themselves continue to perpetuate hierarchies and exploit participants in the name of knowledge production. The language used by the authors is strong, reflecting the ethical import of social justice issues in research. Teresa Macias in her chapter on archival research and terror stories argues that representation and writing are themselves forms of violence. In her chapter on community-based participatory research, Julia Elizabeth Janes refers to CBPR as a colonial form of extraction. All the authors provide evidence and arguments to demonstrate how participants are exploited, misrepresented, or failed when research does not bring about necessary

change. These themes are well documented in the book as various researchers confront the racism of their research subjects, the assumption that those on the margins do not hold valuable knowledge, and the extremely low wages granted to community-based researchers. The chapters all demonstrate how difficult it can be to overcome power dynamics and exploitation in research, yet also leave open the possibility, even the necessity, that these be overcome to achieve justice.

The one weakness of the book is in its theoretical approach. The authors all presume (and I think rightly) that there is universal value to social justice and principles of equity but this is inconsistent with their strong critique of the possibility of any universal claims to knowledge. The book leaves no doubt that researchers should fight for justice and work to overcome systemic inequality and prejudice. This strong, principled stance for social justice is key in the book but the authors do not address directly the fact that this is one instance where uncertainty is not morally acceptable.

The book is deeply bound in post-structuralist and postcolonial theory. The authors make a concerted effort to explain the theorists, such as Anzaldúa, Derrida and Levinas, that they draw on. The brief explanations of these theorists' work may be insufficient for readers new to these theories, though; more background in theory may be necessary for readers to grapple with the ethical challenges these theorists pose. Additionally, the book offers an important critique to many mainstream assumptions around objectivity, universality, participant involvement in research, and informed consent requiring a basic understanding of commonly used research methods and the functioning of research ethics boards. The writing style in the chapters varies because of the different authors, but the regular use of the first person, narrative style, and concrete examples from the authors' research make the chapters more accessible to more readers. Researchers, graduate students, and possibly upper undergraduate students are the ideal audience for this book.

The value of *Unravelling Research* comes from its relentless critique of power and search for social justice. The researchers practice what they are preaching by continuously reflecting on their own research practices. They examine the ways that they themselves are implicated in power structures and in positions of privilege, but also outside of these structures as racialized researchers. Their nuanced approach argues for both the necessity of challenging problematic research methods while also knowing that ethical and political dilemmas are not easily resolved.