

Ethical and Transformative Scholarly Public Engagement: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Promises

Engagement éthique et transformateur du public scientifique : pièges, possibilités et promesses



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Abstract

At its core, public engagement is geared toward transformative ends – to change the world for the better. Yet, the means are also critical. Scholars who engage communities and public processes should do so ethically, in ways that comport with core values. Despite good intentions, however, researchers seeking to engage the public face substantial challenges. This paper highlights the pitfalls and perils associated with scholarly public engagement and points to the promise of ethical and transformative engagement – that is, engagement for sound reasons carried out in effective ways. I make the case that ethical and transformative public engagement requires that researchers remain aware of their position, attentive to who is being engaged and discerning about how to engage.

Résumé

Dans son essence, la mobilisation du public est axée sur des fins transformatives – changer le monde pour le mieux. Pourtant, les moyens employés pour ce faire sont également importants. Les chercheurs qui s'engagent auprès des communautés et dans les processus publics devraient le faire de façon éthique, en respectant les valeurs fondamentales. Malgré leurs bonnes intentions, les chercheurs qui cherchent à mobiliser le public se heurtent toutefois à des défis considérables. Cet article met en évidence les pièges et les dangers associés à

la participation du public aux travaux des universitaires et souligne la promesse d'une participation éthique et transformatrice, c'est-à-dire une participation pour de bonnes raisons et réalisée de manière efficace. Je soutiens qu'une mobilisation publique éthique et transformatrice exige que les chercheurs demeurent conscients de leur position, qu'ils soient attentifs aux personnes mobilisées et qu'ils fassent preuve de discernement quant à la façon de les mobiliser.

Introduction

Policy makers, bureaucrats, media and even community organizations all rely on researchers (academic and non-academic) for purposes that range from relatively minimal (e.g., explaining research findings) to quite significant (e.g., co-producing collaborative research). Given researchers' specialized knowledge, they are capable of supporting policy and practice in ways that advance the common good. The pivotal role research scholars can play was apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ball 2021; Yin et al. 2021). Nevertheless, researchers face significant barriers to producing useful and effective engaged scholarship (Calice et al. 2022; Sdvizhkov et al. 2022). To expand and leverage the possibilities of research to contribute to positive social change, these and other obstacles must be continually articulated and grappled with. This article does so by elaborating four common pitfalls that undermine ethical, transformative public engagement among scholars. None of the challenges outlined here are surprising, nor is the discussion of them novel. Still, the task of ethical and transformative public engagement among scholars is perennial and enduring. It is new to scholars who are first encountering it and presents ever-evolving trials to experienced scholars. This is why reiterating the difficulties of ethical scholarly engagement through a different lens (as I do in this paper) is a useful contribution, even if the insights offered are not innovative. Indeed, it is in recurring rearticulation of vital principles that we forge a shared culture of ethical and transformative scholarly public engagement (SPE).

Defining, Conceptualizing and Motivating Scholarly Public Engagement

I define SPE as "the involvement of researchers in institutional processes that have direct relevance to the public good, with the aim of informing, enriching, or influencing those processes to produce public benefit."¹ This definition sensitizes us to two key elements of scholarly engagement. First, SPE must be oriented toward public processes (e.g., conducting research to support community organizations, enriching public knowledge via media, developing evidence useful for policy making and more). The point here is to differentiate between individualized engagement disconnected from larger institutional processes (e.g., a researcher volunteering at a local food bank to help distribute food) and public engagement embedded within such processes (e.g., a researcher working collaboratively with a food bank to study and promote building community power in food insecure locales). Second, SPE must be for

the purpose of producing public benefit. This point distinguishes between engagement that yields private benefits (e.g., a researcher collaborating with a corporate or nonprofit entity to help improve internal workplace practices) and engagement that generates public benefit (e.g., a researcher collaborating with a state administrative agency to understand and address the administrative burdens placed on social policy beneficiaries).

It is worth noting that SPE as defined above encompasses related scholarly practices, including community-engaged research and community-based participatory research (Barkin et al. 2013; Kantamneni et al. 2019). Community-engaged research (CER) is “a research paradigm that creates space for communities, community members, and community-based organizations to work in collaborative partnerships with academic researchers” (Kantamneni et al. 2019: 65). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a related but more intensive approach in which members of communities are “equal participants in the development and conduct of the research” and for which “the research has direct benefits for the people involved” (Hacker 2013: xi). If CER and CBPR can be thought of as distinct approaches on a shared continuum “ranging from research in the community setting to research that fully engages community partners,” then SPE is a broader umbrella than both (Hacker 2013: 2). Though SPE is always in relation to the public good, it is not always conducted directly in communities and does not always fully engage communities. Some scholars may engage from outside of communities (e.g., by partnering with government agencies that are trying to solve community problems) or may not involve communities until a middle or latter stage of research (thus not fully engaging them). These other choices are part of the calculus of how to ethically engage as a scholar, and are often contingent on context, constraints, resources or the specifics of the research being conducted. I focus (intentionally) on the broader concept of SPE (rather than more specific approaches, like CER and CBPR) to make the insights shared here applicable to a wider range of scholars who may be at different levels and/or stages of experience with engaging with processes relevant to public actors and institutions.

A broad throughline that applies to CER, CPBR and other forms of SPE is that researchers must be able to identify the public purpose of their engagement and connect their efforts to a larger understanding of how to make change in the world (i.e., a feasible theory of change). In the absence of such clarity, SPE can too easily be motivated by aims that are divorced from public good. Researchers can engage to build their own status, elevate the profile of their academic institutions or appease university donors. None of these motives capture the core impetus of public engagement. Put most simply, the point is to change the world. Public engagement should be designed to facilitate some degree of social transformation. The goal of social transformation is lofty. Such ambition may seem like the artifact of naiveté or hubris. Yet, scholars invested in public engagement must push beyond skepticism to cultivate possibilities of ethical and transformative public engagement. Transformative engagement is that which unreservedly seeks to change the world. Ethical engagement is that which does so in ways consistent with core principles of equity, democracy and transparency.

Laying a foundation for ethical and transformative SPE requires confronting four potential pitfalls: (1) failing to interrogate one's positioning and motives, (2) failing to co-produce clear values and expectations around the processes of engagement, (3) having myopic or exclusionary perspectives on who and how to engage and (4) ignoring or underestimating power dynamics. These are hardly the only pitfalls possible. Other scholars have considered these and many more (Downey 2018; Kantamneni et al. 2019; Salmon et al. 2017). Below, I draw on concrete examples from my own experience to demonstrate the risks of each pitfall. I do not provide neat resolutions. Instead, I instructively describe critical challenges that scholars must continually confront as they traverse uneasy paths toward ethical and transformative engagement.

Pitfall #1: Failure to Self-Interrogate

I grew up in working-class neighbourhoods in New York City as a Black American woman and the daughter of immigrant parents. Throughout my youth, I experienced the systems of economic and racial inequality that would eventually become the centerpiece of my scholarship and teaching. Even as I found my way to an economically stable life as an academic researcher, I remained tethered (through relationships, moral commitments and personal experiences) to race–class subjugated communities like those where I spent my formative years. Working with those communities is an essential aspect of my scholarly purpose. For this reason, I view public engagement as both an opportunity and obligation.

I am now a tenured professor at an Ivy League institution. In this capacity, I have benefitted considerably from institutional funding to facilitate community-engaged teaching and learning. At the same time, being at a top research institution has downsides. Because my commitment to public engagement predated my tenure and promotion, I ran the risk of overinvesting in that domain to the detriment of my research (the latter of which was more pivotal to my tenure case). What is more is that I am located within an organization that some community partners (rightly) view as an engine of privilege, distant from and unaccountable to less advantaged people and communities. That makes building trust an uphill climb, and moving at the speed of trust already requires time, a scarce resource. There is no easy solution to these dilemmas. They require choice after uncomfortable choice. Being sober about such choices and willing to decentre our personal interests in making them are most crucial.

Though pursuing public engagement in my scholarly life has been challenging, I've always believed – as Black feminist thinkers have long said – that if we change systems in ways that make things better for those who face stark precarity and disadvantage, we will necessarily improve life for everyone (The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977). Still, I have often found myself wondering whether academic institutions are properly equipped to foster such change. On many occasions, I've been unsure of whether the engagement of academics (including myself) was more instrumental and extractive than ethical and transformative. In my current role as Senior Associate Dean of Public Engagement at a school of

public policy, part of my work involves grappling with these questions. My approach to this work is more community-centred, capacious, equity-oriented and critical than it would be if I did not bring the specific background and perspectives I do to the role.

Exposing these details about myself is not an exercise in navel-gazing. To the contrary, I started with myself because the first pitfall I want to highlight is the failure to discern one's own positioning or a lack of reflexivity (Salmon et al. 2017). Reflexivity is a precursor to ethical public engagement. As researchers who work within educational institutions, we have a platform and resources that can be deployed for both good and ill. Acknowledging the contours of our own power and positions (even as we work within constraints) is necessary for acting with intentionality and integrity. Moreover, each of us inevitably bring a personal history to bear on our work engaging government, policy makers, media and communities. Those histories make us more (or less) comfortable with certain people, places, actions and strategies. Such histories structure our ability to build relationships, our understandings of policy problems and our outlook on the world. Understanding ourselves, our motives and our limits is essential for SPE.

Pitfall #2: Failure to Establish Clear Values and Expectations

Ethical public engagement requires committing to a set of core values to which scholars can hold themselves accountable and be held accountable. I will offer an example.

One of the first public engagement efforts I undertook involved working with a local community organization. The organization wanted to understand whether a policy spear-headed by officials in their city had successfully reduced poverty. I was keen to help them assess this so that they could develop an advocacy plan to benefit low-income communities in the city. I had positive initial conversations with the partner organization. I employed a small team of student researchers to assist with the poverty assessment. My team collected a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data. The results did not yield what my community partner expected. It was clear from early on that my partner was critical of the policy under study. However, our analysis revealed a complicated picture. My team's quantitative assessments registered appreciable reductions in the local poverty rate and our qualitative exploration revealed that some people were helped by the policy (even while others were not). Our conclusion was that the policy was partially successful, with much room for improvement. This was not what my community partner wanted to hear. Anticipating tension, I procrastinated and did not clearly communicate. The partner became frustrated and hesitated to communicate with me as well. Altogether, the partnership was not fruitful.

One of my biggest mistakes was failing to clarify and co-produce the values driving our work and the expectations we could have of one another. This is something we should have settled before embarking on a partnership – either informally through intensive conversations, formally through a memorandum of understanding or both. Unfortunately, I approached the project as a research activity: a one-off process of answering an empirical question (was the antipoverty initiative effective). I also viewed it as an opportunity (I wanted

to do more engaged work and had received funding to do it). But I did not understand it as a relationship and a commitment that I was accountable for following through on.

If I could do it over today, I would ground my engagement in shared values and transparent expectations. One value I would emphasize is integrity, which dictates that I faithfully convey the findings of research without altering the results to satisfy either myself or my partners. Another value would be equity. It is only through equitable practice (i.e., involving a representative range of actors affected by and involved with the processes we study) that we produce sound findings. If I had established these values at the onset and worked to come into alignment with my community partner, we might have had a successful collaboration. While each researcher must determine which values are priorities, the practice of co-establishing and clarifying some set of principles is of foremost importance.

Pitfall #3: Myopic, Exclusionary Perspectives

Having a capacious vision of SPE means critically assessing which actors to engage, what counts as engagement and how to engage. As public engagement is not part of the formal training of most researchers, we can too easily come to espouse narrow conceptions of engagement (e.g., those that primarily centre elite political actors), myopic understandings of what counts as engagement (e.g., writing op-eds or legislative testimony) or exclusionary approaches to the practices of engagement (e.g., engaging easy-to-reach actors while ignoring those we are less familiar or comfortable with). But transformative engagement necessitates the inclusion of a wide range of actors and partners in engagement practices, embracing forms of engagement that are not only elite-facing but also grounded in communities and pushing beyond our comfort zones in terms of whom and how we engage.

In my own work, the SPE I get the most attention for is not the work that reflects this inclusionary vision. For example, I have gotten accolades on the several occasions I have testified before the US House of Representatives or directly engaged federal policy makers. While these activities are worthwhile, they are also episodic and indeterminate in terms of outcomes. Alternatively, my work over the last two years with a local tenant organization has been much more meaningful. That work is rooted in a specific community of people. My academic partner and I obtained grant funding to help the tenant union hire an additional organizer and conduct informative focus groups (allowing us to ensure that our community partner receives direct support). This work has gotten comparatively little notice, but it has been predominantly community facing and has involved forms of engagement that I never would have considered were it not for a genuine partnership with directly affected people. For example, we are currently working to make a short film that the tenant union will use as an organizing and advocacy tool. The film will likely not generate much interest beyond the specific communities we engage with. However, within those communities, it can be leveraged to inform and mobilize the people who experience the predatory excesses of the US housing market.

Our aim is for this work to bring marginalized tenants into deeper relationship with governing bodies and to facilitate their influence on policy. Yet, we cannot shortsightedly assume that policy influence is only (or even optimally) possible through direct engagement with policy makers or other elite power brokers. An ethical attitude toward engagement requires that we think carefully about how change happens, and that we push beyond tendencies of engaging the most accessible, prominent or reputable people through the most traditional practices.

Pitfall #4: Ignoring or Underestimating Power

The fourth pitfall concerns power. Power is often unacknowledged in approaches to public engagement. Even while “voice” and “lived experience” gain ascendancy among many scholars committed to public engagement, power remains underattended. Yet, voice without power is tokenism. Bringing people with lived experience to the table without a recognition of power dynamics is hollow symbolism. Where are people with “lived experience” sitting at the tables we invite them to? Who else is at those tables? What are the rules structuring who gets to have influence over the decisions made at the tables? Unless there is real path between sitting at such tables and influencing the processes that unfold there, people with lived experience are being instrumentalized for purposes that do not benefit them. To be fair, this is usually unintentional. Regardless, once inclusion expands the circle of participants in a policy process, we must chart a feasible path to power for those with the most at stake in policy decisions. Given the status quo of many political institutions, we cannot expect marginalized actors to fall seamlessly into ongoing processes. Instead, their presence requires power analyses that reveal ways to restructure processes to build power in otherwise marginalized communities (Michener 2022a, 2022b; Michener and Ford 2022; Michener and Ford 2023).

One thing worth noting is that public engagement does not involve giving anybody power. Power is not something that can be conferred as such. Empowering communities is not as much the goal as is building power. The difference may be subtle, but it suggests that power already exists in marginalized communities, but institutional and other barriers hinder its effective exercise. SPE should be part and parcel of eroding such barriers (e.g., by providing access to knowledge, financial resources and other forms of support) and certainly has a mandate to never reinforce them.

Conclusion

The pitfalls elaborated above point to affirmative possibilities. SPE is not an ordeal rife with risks, it is a landscape filled with potential. The pitfalls detailed thus far threaten to diminish those positive prospects if not sufficiently mitigated. Yet, approaching engagement with reflexive intentionality holds promise for the kind of public engagement that brings meaning to research and enables it to be a mechanism of social transformation. The possibilities underlying the four perils noted above are fourfold. First, a commitment to ethical public engagement presupposes thoughtful introspection to assess our motives and positionality.

Second, effective engagement requires co-producing values and negotiating expectations that equip us to work respectfully with our partners in the work. Third, transformative public engagement entails cultivating a capacious, inclusionary vision of what counts as engagement, who should be involved in it and how to implement engagement practices. Finally, identifying and acknowledging and taking steps to redistribute power points us toward engagement approaches that build power in the places it has been unduly eroded. Taken together, these possibilities light a path forward for public engagement that might change the world for the better.

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Note

¹ This definition leaves room for interpretation. Who counts as a researcher? Which institutional processes have direct relevance to the public good? What constitutes public benefit? The answers to such inquiries are contingent on specificities of context. They cannot be determined in the abstract but must be actively grappled with by scholars and those they work alongside.

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