CHAPTER 23

Beyond the Romance of Participatory Youth Research

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Introduction

Youth studies as a body of knowledge is becoming increasingly inclusive. There are greater demonstrations of engagement; greater uses of participatory approaches; and recognition of plurality – that is, plurality of theory, frameworks, and perspectives. The benefits associated with these trends are well recognised. For instance, as a methodology, participatory action research encourages action, promotes empowerment, allows for flexibility, invites reflective practice and evaluation, recognises experiential wisdom and can give voice to the voiceless.

Although engagement, participation, and plurality are largely favoured (if not expected) in youth studies, there has been little consideration of the associated implications – be they intended or unintended. With few exceptions (Sukarieh and Tannock 2011), many researchers seem to be seduced by novel approaches and seldom consider potential consequences. Neglecting the potential consequences associated with recent trends in youth studies may exacerbate the complex issues that researchers endeavour to investigate. For instance, approaches that promote engagement, participation, and plurality may in fact give voice to those who are most visible and/or vocal – be they individuals or organisations –; they might redirect the attention of policymakers and those who hold the public purse to causes that are championed by those who are most visible and/or vocal. They may dilute opportunities to develop robust theory. This chapter engages with some of these challenges to elicit considered thought and debate within and beyond the research community, and ultimately alter the trajectory of critical youth studies in the 21st Century.

The purpose of this chapter is to move beyond the often romanticised image of youth participatory research, and towards critical youth studies that embrace reflexive, clear, and rigorous methodologies. This argument follows the problematisation of current research trends to "go...beyond surface illusions...uncover the real structures in the material world...[and] help people
change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (Neuman 1997, 74). Following a brief overview of youth participation – particularly in research – this chapter critiques selected exemplars to bring to the fore power dynamics and research implications. The chapter then concludes by highlighting key issues, particularly for researchers; presenting conversation-starters to invite the research community to question its practices and to further its dialogue; and calling for methodologies that will take critical youth studies into (if not beyond) the 21st Century. In this epoch of increasing accountability and transparency, methodologies that are reflexive, clear, and rigorous are likely to enable researchers to approach their craft as better-informed individuals.

The Youth Participatory Research Agenda

Participation is a theme that permeates much contemporary youth research. Within the past decade, it has appeared among seemingly disparate disciplines including law, education, and environmental studies. Perhaps this is for sound reason given its emergence in much official rhetoric, including international conventions and government-funded community services. Although the visibility of participatory youth research might reflect strategic efforts to align with, and secure funds from powerful entities – akin to the “frenzy of the visible” (Williams 1989) in other contexts – the advantages associated with participation among young people should not be underestimated.

Participation among young people has been linked to an array of benefits at the personal, social, and political levels. Personal benefits include psychosocial, behavioural, and academic adjustment, which in turn can help to improve an individual’s life course. The social benefits of participation include the fulfilment of legal responsibilities, enhanced democratic processes, improved policy development, and the betterment of community services. Participation among young people is also advantageous for political bodies. It helps to engage current and future constituents and encourage the adoption of policy changes. As McNeish (1999, 201) explains: participation generates greater ownership of an issue and...people are more likely to accept plans and messages which they have played a part in formulating. Given that alienated young people can be both self-destructive and destabilising for governments – powerfully evidenced by youth involvement in recent uprisings such as the Arab Spring – participation can be used to attract individuals into government agenda.

For some, this is cause for concern. For instance, in her “Reflections on Youth Participatory Action Research for Urban Justice,” Fine (2009, 2) expresses unease