Social Scientists as Agents of International Change

As graduate students, and active members of SPSSI, we are motivated to bring about change in the world around us. From the local level, to the national level, to the international level, we are – and should be – agents of change. Local and national action is relatively easy to achieve: writing letters to editors of newspapers, voting in local and national elections, conducting research in the field. But how does one, as a graduate student, enter that international arena?

Often, the word activism conjures up harsh images accompanied by strong connotations. Yet Meriam-Webster defines activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” Thus, we all don’t need to walk off our jobs, refuse to eat, nor camp out on the White House lawn to voice our opinions on Iraqi military action, prison abuse, gun control, or any of the many other pressing issues of today. It is noteworthy, however, that many of the common issues that play out on our news media here in the United States can also be seen in news media outlets across the world. Human rights, prejudice, intergroup conflict, torture, and workplace and school violence. At some metaphysical level, then, are international issues simply local issues magnified? If so, entering the international arena should not require much extra effort. In fact, instead of confrontational action and angry voices in the face of controversy, let international activism play out with that which can speak volumes: data.

Ultimately, we want our work - from grad school and beyond - to make an impact. By applying our research tools and knowledge to external situations, social scientists are uniquely poised to make meaningful contributions to relevant and important issues. Creating minimal groups in a laboratory is one thing; watching minimal groups evolve into distinct entities with complex inter- and intragroup interactions is quite another. Involving individuals from said groups in a participatory action research design is two steps beyond. Indeed, individuals living the life that encompasses such social issues as poverty, conflict, and violence have far deeper insight into these issues than the common researcher. In such instances, particularly with Western social science entering non-Western communities, cultural knowledge and understanding is priceless. Agents of change can bring about fruitful interventions by fostering change from within the community or culture. It is my feeling, and my hope, that we can be activists, or agents of change, simply by raising awareness about a particular issue of concern to us. Internationally, the possibilities for action are endless, particularly in the social sciences.

SPSSI is but one avenue for implementing change around us. Modernity may have decreased the abilities for action are endless, particularly in the social sciences. But how does one, as a graduate student, enter that international arena?

At some metaphysical level, then, are international issues simply local issues magnified? If so, entering the international arena should not require much extra effort. In fact, instead of confrontational action and angry voices in the face of controversy, let international activism play out with that which can speak volumes: data.

ROOKIE

Introduction

Greetings fellow students of SPSSI!

This issue of the Rookie focuses on activism in a number of different settings. Michelle Kaufman discusses the inclusion of social activism in the classroom by describing a project that she has included in many of her classes. Michelle Billies discusses her experiences at the National Multicultural Conference and Summit, which has been a springboard for activism at a national level. Finally, Janice Adelman discusses the importance of considering international activism ideas in your research and data collection choices.

I also want to take a few minutes to describe Graduate Student Committee sponsored activities at the upcoming APA convention in San Francisco. The first GSC event is titled “Making Our Research Matter – Dissemination Beyond Academic Journals” and will feature Marybeth Shinn, Heather Bullock, and Linda Tropp. This would be an excellent choice for those of you who want to know more about activism beyond what we will discuss in this issue of the Rookie.

This event is on Friday, August 17, from 10-10:50. Our second activity is a co-sponsored event with the Graduate Student Committee of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP). This event titled “Words of Wisdom – A Coffee Break”, will feature a number of mentors and a small number of students interacting in a very intimate setting. Students will have a chance to network with some of the brightest members of the SPSP/SPSSI community and ask them questions. This is a unique event, and we hope you will enjoy it. The coffee hour is on Friday the 17th from 4-4:50. The final event is titled “Cross-Cultural Collaboration – How Do We Create Dialogue Across Borders?” In this informal and open discussion, several distinguished researchers, as well as student researchers, will discuss their experiences in conducting international research and creating cross-cultural collaborations. This event takes place on Sunday the 19th from 11-11:50.

As always, if you have any ideas, suggestions, or comments about the Rookie or SPSSI, please don’t hesitate to contact me at jedlund@niu.edu. Have a wonderful summer and see you in San Francisco!

John Edlund
Student Newsletter and Website Editor

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Social Activism Projects Can Enhance Classroom Learning

Finding time to do volunteer and activist work is next to impossible as a graduate student, when you barely have time to keep up with your own work! But as SPSSI members, we are obviously concerned with social issues, so volunteerism and activist work are often part of our core. How can we find time for it all?

Social activism is something that can be incorporated into the classroom with your students. By encouraging students to complete activism projects, you can use your classroom as a way to make up for all of that time you wish you had to volunteer yourself.

This project introduces students to the benefits of social activism and gets them excited about doing work in their communities...

Each semester in my Psychology of Women and Gender in the Global Perspective courses, my students complete what I call a social activism project. This is a semester-long project that requires spending a minimum of 10 hours total doing volunteer/activist work for a cause about which they feel passionate. First, they are required to write a short project proposal. Then, they engage in their activist work activities during the middle part of the semester. During the last week of class, they are required to write a reaction paper about their experience and to make a short presentation about their project.

Students have done projects that range from writing their Representatives to encourage them to pay more attention to a given social problem, to selling jewelry to raise money for an AIDS organization in South Africa, to collecting business clothing for women who have recently been released from prison and need to find employment. Projects have focused on the homeless, teen pregnancy prevention, violence against women, breast cancer awareness, and the needs of women in Afghanistan, among many other issues.

Although some students seem a bit overwhelmed by this project in the beginning, many of them soon find that they spend way beyond the 10-hour requirement working on their projects. Several of them have continued their projects beyond the end of the semester, and still others have become involved in the projects that they saw presented by their fellow students. A couple of my students have even gone on to pursue volunteer opportunities abroad.

This project is especially rewarding for me because it not only introduces students to the benefits of social activism and gets them excited about doing work in their communities, but it also allows me to fill that hole in my desire to do more community work. By requiring my students to engage in volunteer work, I am passing on the tradition and generating activist work far beyond what I could accomplish on my own.

I urge you to consider incorporating social activism projects into your own classes, particularly in classes where race, class, gender, sexuality, and inequity in general are the main focus of class material. By getting out into the real world, students can learn far more than what a book or journal article can tell them. Even better, they might continue to be activists beyond the requirements of your class.

If you would like more information on how to incorporate social activism projects into your classroom, feel free to contact me at MichelleKaufman@msn.com.

Michelle Kaufman
University of Connecticut
SPSSI GSC Chair

Report on the National Multicultural Conference and Summit

I want to thank SPSSI Graduate Student Council for sponsoring me to attend the 2007 National Multicultural Conference and Summit (NMCS). I am a first year Ph.D. student in the Social – Personality Psychology program at the City University of New York. I am an older student with a history of working on issues of racism and homophobia.

For those of us with a commitment to wrestling with challenging social issues, the conference was a shot in the arm. Entering the opening reception, I was struck by the welcoming atmosphere and exciting energy. A candle-lighting ritual provided a sense of focus to the conference and highlighted the need for healing from oppression among marginalized groups. Divisions 17, 35, 39, 44, and 45 have convened NMCS every two years since 1999 and the conference keeps growing. Planners announced that they had expected about 450 attendees; more than 950 registered.

NMCS brings together counseling and educational psychologists who engage in research, clinical work, and advocacy that focuses on identity, culture, and power. This year focused on 1) the multiple identities all people hold and 2) how oppression and privilege play out when people meet. There was a distinct effort during the conference to discuss what unfolds when privileged and disadvantaged identities are in conflict. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and religion were all salient.

In the first plenary, Dr. Melba Vasquez addressed the challenges of conflict among allies and used a number of controversies within the APA related to larger issues as examples. Often in conflicts, those with more power demonstrate a decreased ability to empathize. She advocated for the development of resolution tools such as awareness of the causes of one’s feelings communication leading toward mutual understanding, and the ability to take the perspective of others.

Another plenary speaker, Dr. Rosie Bingham, expressed the importance of inclusion as a form of power. Citing Darryl Wing Sue’s term, she generously described her personal experience as a target of “microaggressions” of racism. She drove home the need for collective multicultural power garnered through inclusivity. Later, Dr. Beverly Greene offered a powerful and nuanced critique of challenges faced by white people and people of color in discussions of sexual orientation and Christianity. She adeptly analyzed the role white privilege can play in obscuring racism. She also described religious beliefs as “part of the human endeavor,” which can and should be questioned, especially when they harm groups of people.

Breakout sessions offered a variety of conceptual tools to continue exploring the experiences of marginalized groups. Some focused on clinical purposes such as the “latent oppressor identity ego state” (Mobley, 2004) and a “culturally oriented psychoanalytic perspective” (Peña, 2007), while others explored narratives of individual and community resilience in the face of oppression. Traditional trauma frameworks were seen in part to erase the strengths people show when dealing with, for example, intractable racism, residential schooling among aboriginal peoples in Canada, and anti-immigrant public sentiment. Presenters also raised awareness about ongoing structural disparities in wealth and access among communities of color and people with disabilities. Research sessions explored concrete strategies for ethical research for empowerment among racial and ethnic communities, dealing with issues such as building trust, recruitment and retention, how to incorporate cultural factors, and how to use research to empower racial and ethnic communities.

Multiple awards to distinguished elders and leaders, a multiracial gospel choir, an LGBT swing band, and taiko drumming created a wonderful conference culture. This is an especially bountiful space for psychologists and students of color who appreciate hearing from and connecting with colleagues of color in order to keep moving forward in the work.

Michelle Billies, LCSW
City University of New York

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SPSSI is but one avenue for implementing change around us. Modernity may have decreased the distance between individuals, in essence removing some barriers, yet borders still remain. If you are interested in international issues and change, or want to hear how others are working toward these ends, join us at the GSC roundtable at APA, where we will discuss international research and collaboration (see page 1). National Multicultural Conference and Summit, which has been a springboard for activism at a national level. Finally, Janice Adelman discusses the importance of considering international activism ideas in your research and data collection choices.

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