Activism Research: Designing Transformative Lab and Field Studies

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The solitary nature of most scholarly activity rewards the focused, single-minded, individual. The social nature of transformative activities reward outreach-oriented individuals who juggle rigor and relevance. Using the notion of activism research – starting one's research with the intent of changing behavior – this chapter explores ways a scholar might find the motivation, insight, and short cuts to move from being a scholar to being a more transforming scholar. It examines strategies of designing research and partnering with others in ways that have lead to transformation.

Transformational research is often identified by its results. It transforms thinking and behavior. It can happen without the researcher ever having any hope or intention for it to happen. Academia is ripe with examples of researchers who published a paper they saw as "no big deal" but which went on to transform a field. Milgram's (1963) work on compliance to authority has influenced the human subject regulations of every Institutional Review Board. Evan's (et al. 2005) work on childhood memories has changed the weight given to long-term recall testimonies in child abuse trials. Pechmann's work on tobacco use in films led to inoculation trailers on DVDs, which depict smoking (Pechmann and Shih 1999). Although research can transform regardless of the original intent of the researcher, most academics seldom have a direct influence on nonacademics (Hill 1995).

Activism research is different because of its intention. It is driven by the intention that the final product—if it evolves as expected—will change the behavior of a target population. It translates qualitative associations of participatory action research (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008) into an approach more understandable for mainstream empirical researchers. Research activism focuses on actionable, solution-oriented variables that will initiate, clarify, or balance a critical debate (Dash, 1999; Fennigan, 2009). It is then aggressively disseminated with the dominant purpose of changing behavior among a targeted group of stakeholders. This could range from changing the way Congress votes on a bill to changing harmful habits of pregnant drug-users. In this way, activism has as much in common with being a behavioral scientist as it does with being a

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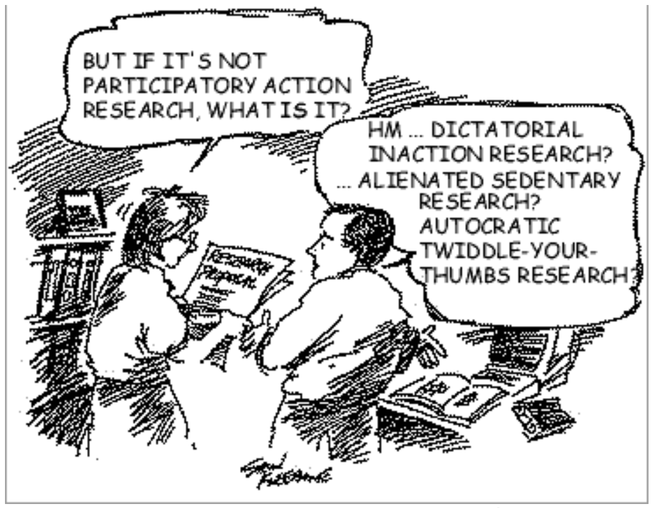
behavioral engineer (cf. AUTM 2007-9).

When it comes to the issue of impact or influence, most academics are bred to believe our role is the first in a chain of events that eventually lead to impact. That is, we publish our insight, and we assume it might make it into a textbook, which makes it into a classroom, where it influences a student, who eventually influences others (Shimp 1994). This view may assume too much, may be self-serving, and may eventually preclude the idea from ever having an impact beyond our vita (Murray & Ozanne, 2009).

This chapter underscores that there are two aspects to transforming research. The first is in engineering our research so it has the best potential to transform. The second is enlisting outreach partners that can make it transform. The chapter will end with some insights and distinctions that have separated successful attempts at transformational research from less successful but well-intended attempts at activism research. These mini-case studies and the experiences throughout are intended to help motivate and encourage readers in taking small reinforcing steps toward Transformative Consumer Research.

FIGURE 1
ONE VIEW TOWARD PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND ITS COUNTERPART



FROM ACTION RESEARCH TO ACTIVISM RESEARCH

Before discussing the features of activism research, it is important to understand the tradition from which it came. Shortly after the end of World War II, the social psychologist Kurt Lewin is credited with coining the term “action research.” His contention was that “Research needs to help people solve a problem.” Using allusions to social management or social engineering, Lewin (1951) contended that research that produces nothing but academic papers and books will not suffice. His Ivory Tower concerns (as interpreted in Figure 1) underscored that there was a tremendous opportunity to influence the world that was being lost because of academic isolation.

Lewin’s Action Research

Lewin’s approach involved a spiral of steps, each involving a cycle of “planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1951, p. 206). The action (and the “ideas” he refers to below) can be what experimentalists might consider hypotheses (Lewin, 1951):

> The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the

> means available. Frequently more fact-finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, 'an overall plan' of how to reach the objective and secondly, a decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea.
>
> The next step is 'composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan.

A fundamental premise of action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to help people to extend their understanding of their situation and resolve problems that confront them (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). As noted by Stringer (2007), action research is 1) *democratic* (it enables the participation of all people), 2) *equitable* (it acknowledges people's equality of worth), 3) *liberating* (it provides freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions), and 4) *life enhancing* (it enables the expression of people's full human potential).

Interest in action research declined during the 1960s because it was too strongly associated with radical political activism and it had lost the vision that it could also be quantitatively scientific (Ferrayra, 2006; Noffke, 1997). In recent years, it has begun to regain credibility with qualitative researchers in the areas community-based participatory action research and as a form of practice oriented to the improvement of education (Coleman & Lemby, 1999; Larkins, 2009). This process has been summarized as working through three basic phases (Stringer 2007): 1) *Look*—build a picture and gather information; while evaluating, define and describe the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set, 2) *Think*—analyze and interpret the situation; examine areas of success and any deficiencies, issues or problems, and 3) *Act*—resolve issues and problems; act to formulate solutions to any problems. The basic phases are similar to the process mentioned in most marketing research studies (Aaker et al., 2009). The more detailed steps generally associated with action research include the following (McNiff, 2002): 1. Start with a problem or issue; 2. Explore possible solutions (plan); 3. Select one solution and act on it; 4. Discuss, think, and learn (monitor); 5. Evaluate the solution - did it solve the issue or problem?; and 6. Repeat until problem is solved. For researchers there is an insistence that action research must be collaborative and entail group work (Predita, 2009; Pullman, 2009). Figure 2 illustrates action research in the context of improving the motivation of students in a school literacy context. In contrast to traditional, well-structured approaches to research, action research can often appear ill-structured (Marti & Vallansante, 2009; Kidd & Kral 2005). There is a general idea of a problem, but not always a clear notion of what the key independent variables will be and what their predicted relationship will be to the key outcome variables. Indeed the initial discovery process is likely to strike traditional researchers as being atheoretical and ad hoc (McNiff, 2008; Small, 1995).

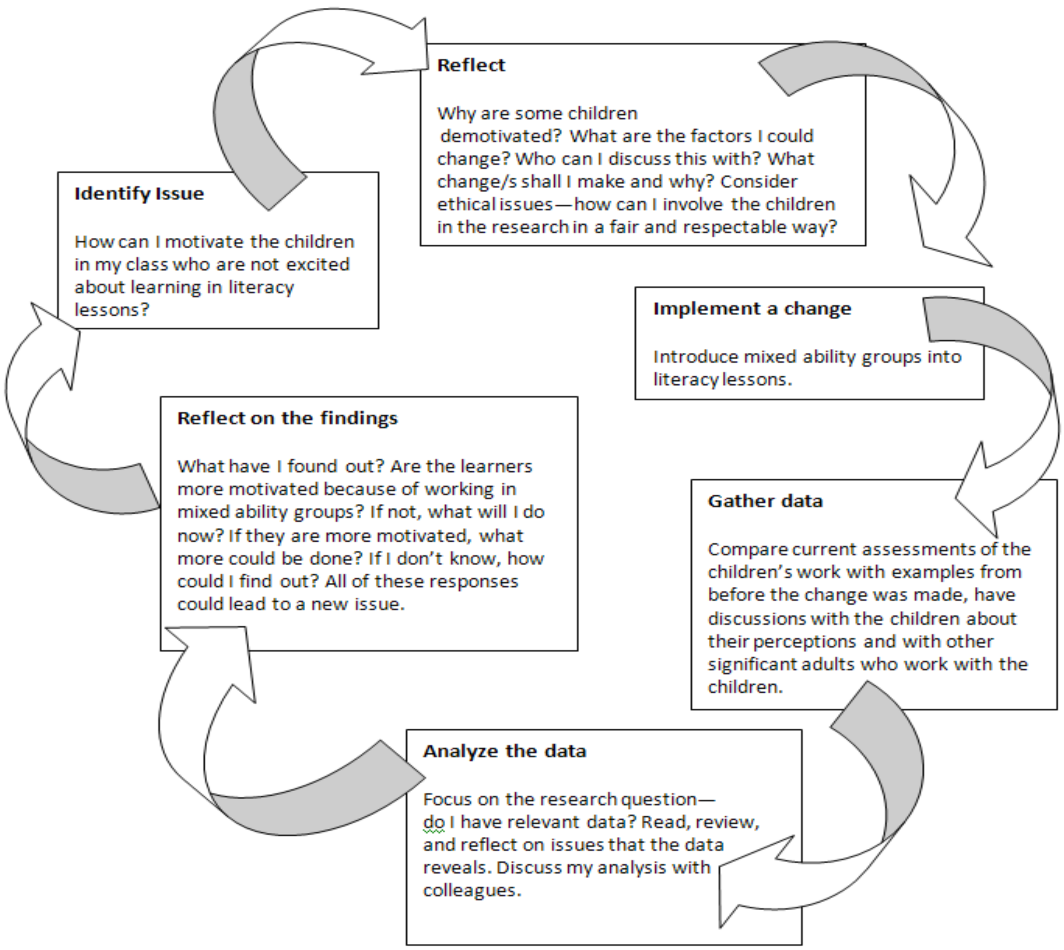
Action Research versus Research Activism

Part of the resurging interest in action research in the qualitative area may be based on the need for the researcher to be embedded into the community he or she is studying. To underscore the importance to this even further, Participatory Action Research (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008) has been coined to emphasize how critical the context and the stakeholders are in defining a research question and one's research approach.

Participant action research (PAC) has

long been found in problem-solving contexts that are often investigated in the academic domains of education, counseling, and agriculture (Nelson, Hiner, & Rios, 1994; Minkler, 2000). Yet it has been much less widely embraced in experimental studies in

FIGURE 2
ILLUSTRATING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
IN A SCHOOL LITERACY CONTEXT



Possible model for an action research cycle

consumer behavior (Mick, 2006). Part of this reason can be costs—such as its inconvenience –and a misunderstanding of the value it can bring?. Yet it may simply be because many experimental researchers do not understand how to conduct this type of research. For instance, the most vivid examples of PAC are political in nature and are from either qualitative studies or from dated field studies (Stahl & Shdaimah, 2008). To a hard-core experimentalist, some of these examples could be politically off-putting and their methods might be dismissed as confounded or over-determined. This would understandably leave many experimental researchers to question how or whether it was even it worth it to make their research action-oriented. Their sharply-defined constructs and surgical-like tools might appear to be out of place and even unwelcome.

To some experimentalists, action research can appear to be iterative, largely qualitative, applied research that does not seek to provide a general solution outside the setting in which it is conducted. This is why activism research holds such promise for experimentalists who wish to focus on actively having an impact in the day-to-day world as well as in the literature. In contrast to action research, activism research provides path experimentalists (as well as qualitative researchers) can use to approach problems deterministically, conceptualize them rigorously, and answer them using the methodologies that have made them experts.

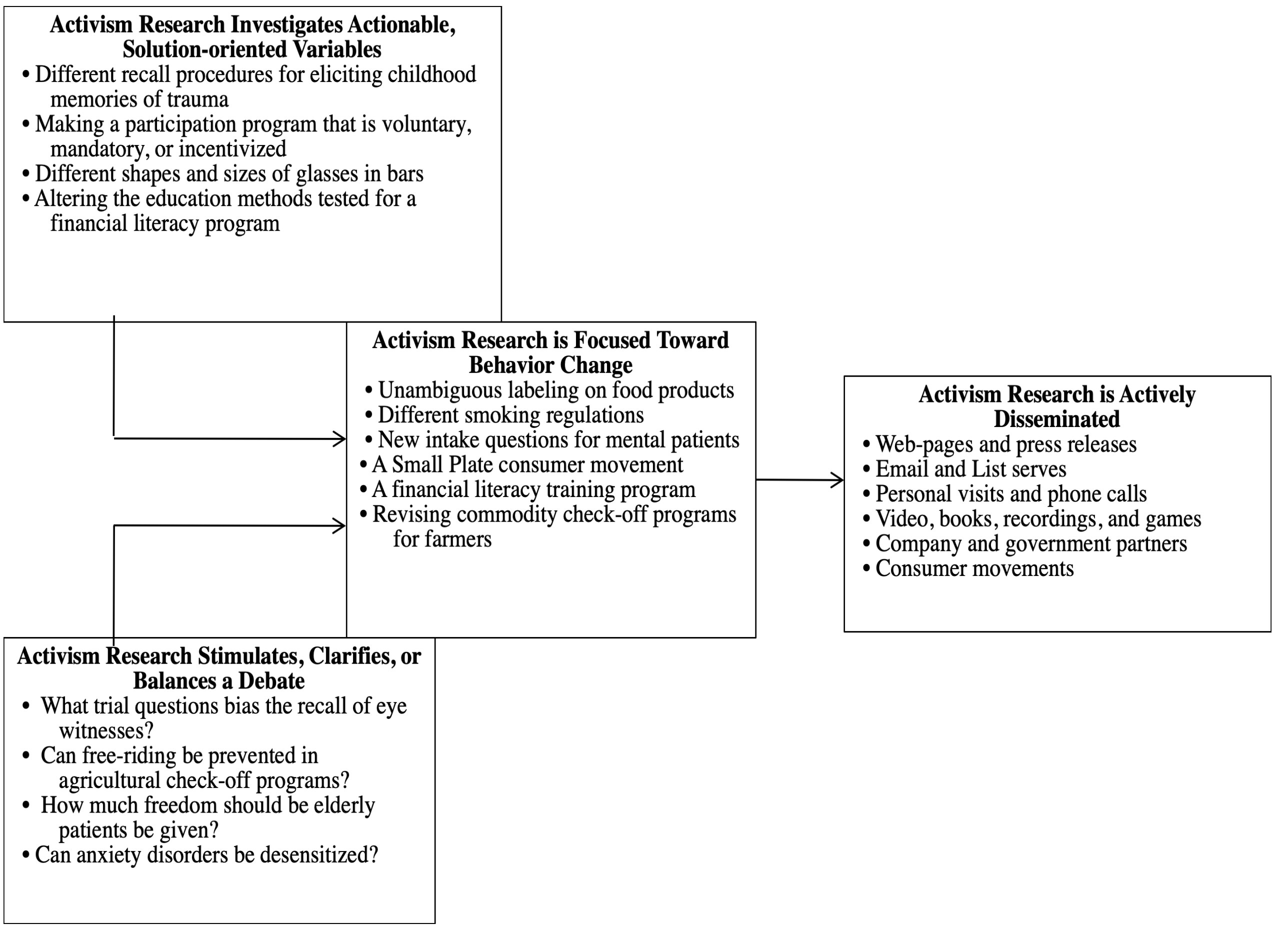
FROM ACTIVISM RESEARCH TO TRANSFORMATION

Are experimentalists inflexible and artificial in the way they conceptualize, constrain, and test their theories? Often, they are. This is precisely why their work has the potential to transform. Activism research provides the pathway and potential to do so.

Operationalizing Activism Research

Intentions are different than results. Whereas transformational research is research that *has* made a difference, activism research is research the authors intend to make a difference before they even begin. If everything works according to plan, it will transform a target population. It is designed and executed with the intention of the final product – should it evolve as expected –changing the behavior of a target population. There are four components to activism research: 1) it investigates actionable solutions, 2) it initiates, clarifies, or balances a debate, 3) it focuses on changing behavior, and 4) it is aggressively disseminated. Figure 3 illustrates different examples of these components, and they are explained in more detail below.

FIGURE 3
A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTIVISM RESEARCH



1. Activism Research Investigates Actionable Solutions. One criticism of action research is that it is too practical and too focused on "Monday morning" problems, and not on contributing to a larger body of theory or understanding. This criticism is understandable. Many Ph.D. programs in the social and natural sciences train scholars to think in terms of broad generalizable constructs (such as self-efficacy, or the need for cognition) and distinctions (individualistic vs. collectivistic or prevention- vs. promotion-focused). This leaves scholars well trained to conceptualize generalizable research problems, and to write rigorous, highly cited papers that apply to many population subgroups.

Yet the blessing of this training is also its curse. Because the constructs and theories we often strive to develop are general, they are often *too* general to be well suited to activism research. This extends Merton's (1968) notion of middle range theories. That is, it is less actionable to think in terms of a "prevention-focused" segment than to think in terms of cancer survivors or diabetics. It is less actionable to think in terms of a collectivist population than to think of non-English-speaking immigrants struggling to assimilate. Good activism research is conceptually rigorous, but it operationalizes constructs in actionable, targetable, solution-oriented ways (cf., Lynch et al 2010).

2. Activism Research Stimulates, Clarifies, or Balances a Debate. Whereas action research solves problems that might be specific to one situation, activism research intends to solve problems that are more generalizable in theory or in the evidence they provide. One way this can be done is to aim at a solution that not only attempts to solve the Monday morning problem mentioned earlier, but which tries to do so in a way that initiates, clarifies, or balances a larger debate. Indeed, most social, health, or political issues involve debates between differing positions (such as pro-choice vs. right to life) or debates about resource allocations – how much time, money, or energy should be spent on welfare, the homeless, or environmental clean up (Keller Lusard, this volume; Prinz, this volume).

Such debates often have assumptions or overlooked issues that can be introduced, proven, clarified, or made more vivid through research. In other cases, activism research can serve to slow down a bandwagon effect. For instance, Marion Nestle's work (Young & Nestle 2002) slowed down the "personal responsibility" bandwagon of obesity by showing that the industry trend of "supersizing" portions companies made it increasingly easy for consumers to overeat.

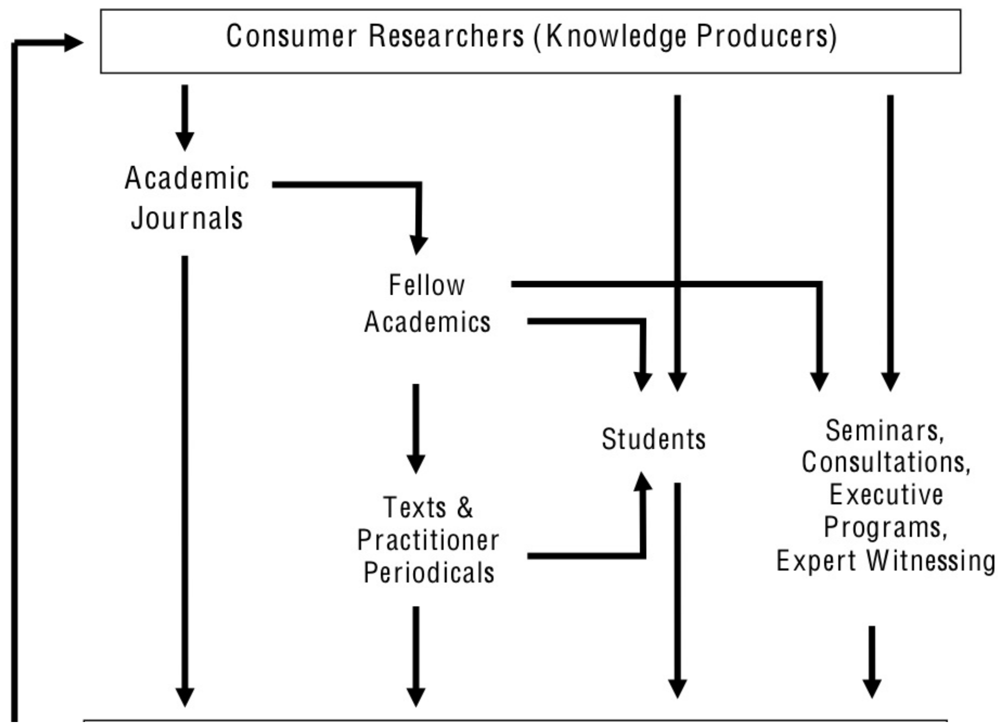
Yet actionable solutions can also lead to useful theories. For instance, consider the gap in the budgeting and spending literature as to whether people know how much they are spending as they shop. This gap – and types of reasons it exists with different segments – has ramifications for budgeting and spending theories, but it can also develop a theory for this gap by identifying key variables, how they are related, who is most affected, and so on.

3. Activism Research Focuses on Changing Behavior. Perhaps the most overused prefacing comments made in research seminars is "It would be interesting to know . . ." Most people believe they do interesting research. It is research they are curious about or a puzzle they find challenging to solve and to publish. Activism research begins with "It would be *useful* to know . . ." Its focus is on how the research will eventually be used to change behavior. This could lead to the passing of a state law on health care, or increased participation in an employer savings plan. The targeted behavior may eventually lead to decreases in AIDS infections, malnutrition, smoking, burglaries, alcoholism, car accidents, recidivism, or loan defaults (Vishwanathan, this volume; Fishbein and Middlestadt, this volume).

A remarkable example of this is the work of the development economist, Esther Duflo, who won the 2010 Clark Medal winner. To examine different solutions for reducing poverty around the world, she used field experiments to employ randomized community? trials to examine how microfinance, education, economic assistance, and pricing influence wealth development and equality.

either top-down or bottom-up. When the research suggesting a tax on sugared beverages failed to get traction on the national level, some researchers in this area began campaigning state governments, in

FIGURE 4
A 1994 VIEW OF HOW ACADEMIC RESEARCH PASSIVELY TRICKLES DOWN **TO USERS**



From Shimp, Terence A. (1994), "Academic Appalachia and the Discipline of Consumer Research," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 21, p. 3.

Because another of her transforming notions is to teach and empower village leaders to conduct their own experiments, hundreds of randomized trials are being conducted at any given time.

4. Activism Research Is Aggressively Disseminated. The "Publish it and they will come" approach works better in theory than in practice. In a world of 140 character messages, it is unlikely a journal article will have a direct impact on decision makers whose behavior we wish to change. Different research has different gatekeepers and different channels. This might mean presenting at companies and conventions, starting a blog and website, sending a direct-mail campaign to legislators, or visiting with congressional staffers. These efforts can be order to develop a state level proof-of-concept.

It has often been stated that "There's nothing more practical than a great theory." If a researcher develops a great theory that is robust, versatile, and compelling, this may be true. Unfortunately, many of our theories are "hot house" theories. Like hot house flowers that can only live and grow under the carefully controlled lighting, temperature, and humidity conditions of a greenhouse, the same is true with many of our theories. That is, we often test them with homogeneous undergraduates, in an artificial lab context, where they are asked about an artificial scenario, and where their decision or behavior involves circling a number on a questionnaire or pressing a key on a keyboard. When it comes to having a practical impact, it is often difficult to see how many of these "hot house" theories could guide a person to confidently make the leap from theory to practice.

Activism research starts off with the end—changing behavior—in mind. The researcher may not know exactly what behavior should change in what way when the project begins, but the research starts with an additional purpose than simply being academically interesting – this is a conflict in thoughts. If activism research wants to change behavior, then the question of academic interest is obsolete.

Moving From Passive to Active Research

Terry Shimp's Presidential address for the Association for Consumer Research (Shimp 1994) focused on how research influences society. His framework (see Figure 4) illustrated that research is produced and disseminated through consulting, through teaching, and through textbooks. In this manner, research findings—if they are useful—will eventually find their way into influencing the lives of others. Although this was a bold thought in 1994, its passive approach did not take our influence far enough, fast enough. At the time, however, this Presidential address was well-received. It gave researchers two reassurances they wanted to believe: 1) our research findings would eventually be recognized and have a wide-ranging impact we could not begin to imagine, and 2) we did not have to do anything for this to happen. But we have seen an evolution ??

In 1994, our academic community believed this was enough—our thoughts would move from articles to books to students to practice. That was a start, but we have now evolved to realize we can have a bigger and more immediate impact (Mick 2006; Keller 2008). Activism research argues for a more intentional, more direct, more aggressive path to transformation.

DESIGNING RESEARCH TO TRANSFORM

What makes research transformative is how it is used. We cannot always predict how research is going to be used when we start a project. At that point we do not even know what results to expect. How, then do we conduct research that is intended to transform? Consider five steps: 1) Visualize transformation, 2) Ask the right question, 3) Answer the right question with a clear, practical answer, 4) Collect cool data in the right context, 5) Disseminate to the actors.

Visualize Transformation

If transforming behavior is an end goal, it is important to be able to take the time to visualize how this *might* happen, eventhough you do not know the results. Three questions can be useful in helping accomplish this:

1. Who is a very specific person who should use these results? (e.g., drug abuse counselors at colleges, directors or trainers at homeless shelters, parents with preschool children, and so on).
2. What might be their one-sentence take-away of this research?
3. What would make this research most memorable, relevant, compelling, and Word-of-Mouth-worthy to this person?

To make this more clear consider the following example (Parmar, 2007). Suppose researchers have a working hypothesis that people pour more liquid into short, wide glasses than tall, narrow glasses of the same volume (see Wansink & van Ittersum, 2003). Before conducting that research, the researchers might answer these abbreviated questions in the following way:

1. Who should use this? Procurement (purchasing) officers for national casual dining restaurant chains such as TGI Fridays, Olive Garden, and Chili's.
2. What is their one-sentence take-away? "We can save 30% in alcohol costs by switching to highball glasses instead of tumblers."
3. What would make this compelling?

> Real bartenders in real bars in a real city (Philadelphia), who pour the 4 most commonly poured drinks into the most common glass sizes.

Visualizing possible answers to these three questions—even though the results of the study are not yet known—will direct the research design to be most potentially impactful. The answers can suggest a new context, a different population, or overlooked independent variables (see also McDonagh, Prothero, & Dobscha, this volume; Soman, Cheema, & Chan, this volume). Starting off with an intention to eventually transform behavior is the first step in activism research because it helps a researcher shape the right research question.

Ask the Right Question

In discussions with researchers over the years, there appear to be three common sources many researchers use to develop their research questions: 1) The literature, 2) personal experiences, and 3) immersion and engagement within a consumer context. Basing one's research question on the literature is perhaps the most common method academics use (Sheth & Sisodia, 2005). It is the way they are trained in their PhD programs. They may read the literature looking for gaps, and for potential mediators and moderators that might apply to well-cited findings. Because the question is related to an existing question that was successfully answered, a template exists that gives a researcher a head start on the literature, theory, and methods needed to answer this new question.

Other researchers use their own personal experiences to generate their research questions (see Levy, 1996). This leads them to investigate questions such as those related to impulsiveness, product cults, overconsumption, and post-purchase regret. In some cases, answering the question is more of a personal matter to the researcher than it is a general issue relevant to others. Whereas the resulting answers can be interesting and relevant to others, that was not necessarily the intent when initially framing the question. Too often, the resulting answers have a degree of academic interest, but they can be too stylized and not intended to change behavior or to be disseminated to any particular stakeholder other than a journal.

The third approach to developing research questions involves immersion and engagement within a consumer context (Whyte, 1991). Being emerged in the consumer context enables these researchers to learn from people *themselves* what problems are most troubling to them. They learn this in AIDS care facilities, homeless shelters, grocery stores, blood banks, bars, and nursing homes. It is in these contexts and with this knowledge that the appropriate research question can emerge, be appropriately framed, and eventually answered.

For instance, consider the question of how people track their grocery bill as they shop (this is an ongoing concern for the one-sixth of Americans who live paycheck-to-paycheck). This is an abstract, academic question for those of us who are not on a budget, or who do not do the shopping for our families. To better understand this struggle for a research project (van Ittersum, Pennings, & Wansink, 2010), I persuaded my family to limit ourselves to the $458/month in food (stamp) benefits the Federal government allocates to a family of four with one minimum wage ($7.25/hour) earner. For the 30 days of June, I did the grocery shopping (instead of my wife), and we saved all food receipts, including those for school lunches, fast food, and soft drinks ($414.52 total). Some of the resulting insights led my coauthors and I to write new survey questions, reorganize the paper, and to reposition the findings to be more useful for dollar-counting family shoppers.

The additional power of questions borne from immersion in these contexts is that their solution is also likely to be one that is relevant and actionable. Having spent time with consumers also enables researchers to determine which of the potential independent variables (such as illustrated in Figure 3) will be the ones most practical and actionable to study. This immersion also gives a researcher the language necessary to describe the problem and the interventions in a way that is most sensible. In this way, what might otherwise be referred to as a "restricted debit card" in a school lunch study turns into an "Anything but dessert" card, and a "large-sized dosage applicator" in a liquid medicine study becomes a "Tablespoon."

An analogue in the business-to-business context of marketing is that of customer visits (McQuarrie, 1993). Customer visits are an important business-to-business market research technique involving on-site team visitations. In one of the most basic forms of a customer visit, managers and engineers leave their offices and travel to the customer's place of business. They interview buyers and users, and they tour the work site. In a program of customer visits, a dozen or more visits are planned and conducted systematically. There are four primary advantages of developing such a program (McQuarrie, 1993):

1. They generate better information on what customers really want
2. They develop a common vision, shared across the organization, on what customers expect
3. They build closer relations with customers
4. They generate greater commitment on the part of all functional areas to satisfying customer needs.

There are additional benefits to immersion and engagement within the context: First, the research question is more likely to address a real problem suggested by experience than an academic problem suggested by the literature. Second, the independent variables being examined are most likely to be actionable and relevant. Third, the way in which the research is carried out is more likely to be realistic. Fourth, the language used in communicating the research will be relevant and actionable.

In his 2001 commentary in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Max Bazerman criticized consumer behavior research for focusing on issues that are small problems—or no problems at all—for consumers. He contended that the big questions that influence consumer welfare, such as saving, budgeting, investing, and medical decision-making are dwarfed in our literature in favor of research focusing on small inconsequential decisions, preference-formations, and similarly minor behaviors. His challenge was to focus on the real problems most bewildering to real people. He provided two suggestions in deciding the topics that could most help change lives: 1) Determine what is most important and challenging to consumers, and 2) recognize that these decisions are seldom made in isolation. They are made with salespeople, agents, spouses, and friends. Research and the advice that follow need to reflect these realities.

Yet the professional priority for a researcher's vita is that this research must be publishable. A piece of research that solves a real problem, but cannot be published in an esteemed journal may be less impactful than it otherwise would. Bazerman suggested that after the problem is identified, researchers should apply existing research models and extend the literature by identifying biases unique to or exacerbated by the consumer context. The problem solving should not occur in a vacuum, but instead it should be associated with existing models and theories that can be modified by the realities of the situation.

Answer the Right Question with a Clear, Practical Answer

Past writings on action research and participatory action research (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008) have focused on how research needs to be actionable and relevant. For research to be actionable and relevant, it should be born from engagement with the target audience. It should involve real problems that suggest research questions with potentially clear, actionable solutions.

TABLE 1
ILLUSTRATIONS OF CLASSIC TRANSFORMATIVE STUDIES

Critical Question	The Answer	Key Variables	Context & Target	Impact
What questions bias or lead eyewitnesses in jury trials? (Loftus 1975)	• Questions that directly asked or which indirectly implied the presence of a nonexistent object lead to erroneous recall one week later.	• The recalled existence of non-existent objects • The presence or absence of cued questions directly or indirectly asking about the non-existent objects	• Context: subjects were shown films of traffic accidents and crimes, and questioned a week later • Target: attorneys & judges	• Lead to revised questioning protocols of witnesses. • Has been used to therapists to more accurately elicit repressed memories of child abuse
How can we improve the happiness of nursing home patients? (Langer and Rodin 1976)	• Giving people the perception of increased responsibility increases happiness, involvement, and activity level	• You make your choices, or we make your choices • Ratings of happiness and involvement	Context: Patients in an upscale nursing home Target: Nursing home administrators and staff	• The death rate in the increased-responsibility group was ½ as high over the next 18 months • Altered the training of nursing home staff
How can neuroses be desensitized? (Wolpe 1961)	• Reducing phobias can be accomplished by putting patients in relaxed states and describing situations involving the phobia, and measuring their responses on a regular basis	• No exposure the actual phobia is necessary in treatment • Relaxation before describing the scenarios is critical	• Context: Actual patients with debilitating phobias (heights, public speaking, animals, small places, etc.) Target: Psychologists and therapists	• Now considered the treatment of choice for anxiety disorders

Each year at Cornell, I teach an interdisciplinary Ph.D. course called "Advanced Consumer Research." One of the last assignments for the course is titled "Crafting a Classic Paper." Students are asked to identify a professor whose research they admire and to interview him or her about the paper they wrote that had the most transformative impact outside of academia. They are asked to determine why it had impact, and what made it different from the favorite paper they wrote that was pretty much ignored. These papers come from a wide range of fields, including consumer research, food science, marketing, sociology, medicine, anthropology, community nutrition, education, sociology, psychology, industrial and labor relations, and so on. Among these papers, there were a surprising number of consistencies among them that can be instructive to activism research.

Some of these consistencies are uncontrollable, like being first in the field, winning an award, or being a lead article. However, three of the similarities found were controllable: 1) The researchers answered the right question with a simple, clear, and practical answer, 2) they collected data in the right context; and 3), about half of them published their papers in a journal in which they typically did not publish. Both of the first two similarities are consistent with Ozanne et al.'s (2008) emphasis on participation. In these cases, participation occurred both in framing the right question and in collecting the right data. Without participation, the question could have been theoretically relevant but practically irrelevant. Without participation, the data collection could have been tightly controlled (in a lab or on a computer) but unconvincing.

Designing potentially transformative research entails asking the right question, perhaps not the one our training would suggest. Whereas academic journals are interested in interactions and answering "why," potentially transformative questions may be more focused on main effects and answering "whether" or "how." There are ways to carefully accommodate both.

Most of these transforming papers have investigated important issues, but they did so with a practical end in sight. They conceptualized their constructs in a way that suggested simple changes that could be made. In many cases, the questions that were answered were not ones at the center of an existing debate. They were often new questions that had not been earlier identified. They underscore a new "main effect" that had not been previously considered. Much of the world is driven by main effects: Donating time or money makes people feel better, resolving conflict increases productivity, empowering a disadvantaged person increases the likelihood of employment, positive after-school role models reduce gang activity, and so on.

While the world cares about main effects, academics often focus on interactions, mediation, or counter-intuitive findings that are idiosyncratic to a narrow set of circumstances. In tackling the question of after-school role models and gang activity, we might focus on psychological factors, such as need for cognition or individualism that might moderate this relationship (instead of easily segmentable demographic variables). Or we might focus on factors such as locus of control and self-efficacy that might mediate effectiveness.

In the end, we may have a publishable article, but our focus on interactions or mediations could very easily obscure the real impact that a clear, compelling finding could have otherwise had on the world of counseling and after-school programming. As was once said about the distinguished Cambridge economist W. Brian Reddaway, "Better to be rough and relevant that to be precise and irrelevant" (Singh, 2009). As a result, the powerful focus that positive after-school role models could have on reducing gang activity could be lost (see also Firat, 2001).

Our focus on these subtleties—instead of focusing on the research question—might often come at the expense of discovering and underscoring the main effect that could make a transformational difference. It is not uncommon for researchers to find the context in which a phenomenon does *not* work, and then to focus on that context. Yet not starting with the right context can lead us down the road to irrelevance.

A common problem with academics is not that we miss seeing the forest because of the trees. We can often miss seeing even the trees because we are focused on the bark. Becoming immersed in the context not only helps move to a more immediately relevant question, but it also provides a context for collecting compelling data.

Collect Cool Data in the Right Context

The crucial characteristic of the classic papers the students examined involved the context of data collection or the method of analysis. One study involved analyzing the wage discrepancies between men and women longitudinally instead of cross-sectionally. The analyses showed different results and were used to help equalize wages. In another instance, labor union activity was analyzed in the context of alcohol abuse. The results showed a much greater reliance on alcohol in some unions than others, and it altered the way health care negotiations were approached (Sonnenstuhl, 1997).

The "right data" are contextually-rich data. These data are compelling and difficult to dismiss as irrelevant. This is exactly the type of data that many researchers *do not* want to collect. Most highly productive social scientists (especially psychologists) are experts at undergraduate lab studies, computer-lab studies, complex modeling exercises, or short-term trials involving begrudging sophomores who need the extra credit (Sears, 1986). When deciding to become academics, it was probably not so they could negotiate and conduct studies in restaurants, soup kitchens, AIDS care facilities, homeless shelters, grocery stores, movie theatres, blood banks, bars, and nursing homes. Yet this is where the right "contextually-rich" or "cool data" hide. It is data from real people in real situations that are being observed, coded, measured, and dispassionately analyzed and reported.

Contextually rich data are difficult to collect. It can be difficult to get Institutional Review Board approval to collect the data. It be logistically complicated to staff and set up the studies, to debrief participants, and to analyze data that are disordered, incomplete, or miscoded because of the chaos that surrounded the study. Yet contextually-rich data can capture imaginations. Cool results from cool data can suddenly make science relevant to unsuspecting groups of people (Wansink, 2006), and they can almost always be published, eventually.

Yet even the right question, answered in a practical way, with data from the right context, may not seem important when being read by a gatekeeping reviewer. It becomes our responsibility to be starkly clear about the specific problem, why it is a problem, for whom it is a problem, and the size of the problem. This can be calculated in dollars spent, number of people influenced, volume consumed, hours spent, time lost or so forth.

Disseminate to the Right Actors

Who makes research transformational? Academics read it and build on the theory or findings, but they are rarely the ones who act on it and make it transformational. The people who make it transformational are the actors to whom it is directed. They are the drug abuse counselors at colleges, the directors or trainers at homeless shelters, the parents with preschool children, the people receiving Federal food assistance, and so on.

Here is the good news: If we do the previous four steps right (visualize transformation, ask the right question, clearly answer it, and collect cool, contextual data), the story writes itself. The problem and our recommended solution will quickly be seen as relevant, interesting, and useful. Yet simply getting wide-spread exposure for a finding—however interesting—may not be what makes it transformable. Who was on the cover of *Time* magazine last week? Most of us never saw it, and the rest of us cannot remember who it was. Media exposure is frighteningly ephemeral.

Blasting all consumers with our findings is not likely to result in transformation. As we become more focused, however, we can better aim our findings at the people who can have the biggest referral impact (see also Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, this volume). A study was mentioned earlier that showed people pouring more alcohol into wider glasses than narrower glasses. These findings could be targeted at a number of users: people who drink mixed alcoholic beverages (and who do not want to over-imbibe), alcohol abuse counselors, owners of bars, or the corporate procurement officers of casual dining restaurant chains (such as TGI Fridays, Olive Garden, and Chili's). It was believed the biggest potential impact would be in targeting the research design and findings toward the procurement officers of these national chains. They would be clearly financially motivated to change; they could be easily pin-pointed; and they could be personally visited and potentially persuaded. Interestingly, perhaps the most effective way to disseminate findings to the right actors is also the most ignored. Nothing focuses the dissemination of findings better than a sponsoring partner.

THE POWER OF PARTNERS

Whereas "Too many cooks spoil the broth," it is also said, "Many hands make light work." In academia, as in other industrialized western cultures, individualism is often admired more than partnerships. Despite this bias, the right partner can be the engine that funds, facilitates, implements, and/or disseminates our ideas and findings.

No Programs Without Partners

Much of academic life is solitary. We learn to collect our own data, do our own debriefings, run our own analysis, write our own papers, and suffer alone from its initial rejection. Seeking an external partner is a strange, seemingly unnecessary notion for most scholars. The value of such a partnership is simply not obvious. However, trying to disseminate research insights so they transform almost always necessitates a partner. These partners can be a granting agency, the government, companies, nonprofit groups, or consumers.

Let us consider four types of partners: 1) Funding partners, 2) Facilitating partners, 3) Implementation partners, and 4) Dissemination partners. These involve four different roles that partners can take, and these can often overlap. Funding partners provide or help underwrite a project or support a researcher who's risking a new idea. They can include government agencies (such the National Institute of Health), private foundations (such as the Russell Sage Foundation or the Pew Charitable Trust), companies, family trust funds, and individual donors. Facilitating partners aid the research process by helping collect data or providing data. Implementation partners help make the intervention work in its target population. Dissemination partners are information multipliers that help make sure the research is used in a way that changes behavior.

Having to sell a potential partner on the idea of joining with you on a project has its benefits. It sharpens one's focus and vision of the project, it sharpens the anticipated end results, and it sharpens the benefits of the research itself. If we cannot find a partner that is equally passionate about our project, it may simply be because the project lacks the correct focus and precision. Yet it could also be because no one really cares about the problem we are trying to solve. In either case, it would be good to know where a project stands. The results could lead to a sharpened focus and value, or it could lead a researcher to move on to another more fruitful plan.

Two Ends of the Partnership Continuum

From the 1960s through today, academics have enjoyed a rich comfortable life. For the most part, academics have been expected to be decent teachers, decent department citizens, and regular publishers in decent journals. Other than that, they could follow their own idiosyncratic research muse in whatever way they wanted. In this past half-century, there is a wide continuum along which two extremes have emerged: The Solo Scholar vs. Professor, Inc. The Solo Scholar often sees research topics as puzzles to elegantly solve and cleverly position for publication. His or her office is remote, and the door is closed. With the exception of an occasional Ph.D. student, interactions with outside research influences are minimal. The Solo Scholar's research problems are insulated from the real problems of others. They often solve academic puzzles in ways that can be elegant and clever to colleagues, but inaccessible and irrelevant to anyone else.

At the other extreme is Professor, Inc. This person surrounds him- or herself with a fully equipped squad of students and missionary-zealed staff who view academic journal articles as only one objective of their well-focused mission. Unfortunately, this multi-dimensional strategy—and their zeal—makes them an easy target for collegiate criticism. One example is the University of Wisconsin-trained history professor, Steven Ambrose, who focused on putting a face on the Greatest Generation (World War II veterans) and honoring them in their last years. In addition to writing classic articles, his team at the University of New Orleans produced books (*Citizen Soldier*, *The Wild Blue*, *Pegasus Bridge*), an HBO mini-series (*Band of Brothers*), European and Pacific battlefield tours, and a $425 million World War II Museum in New Orleans. These efforts contributed to critics describing him as a "sloppy researcher," "fallen academic," and "greedy popularizer" (*Wall Street Journal*, 2004).

If activism research involves changing behavior, it is notable when a history professor succeeds at it so well. Besides helping raise $425 million for a museum, Ambrose's work stimulated living history exhibits at other museums, recollection recordings at libraries, the publishing of nearly forgotten memoirs, and countless rekindled relationships with a misunderstood or underappreciated parent (Goldstein, 2002).

Academia is evolving, and it is not clear whether the future of academia will tilt more toward one extreme than the other. Professor, Inc. represents one type of research activist, and certainly one with legitimate faults. Indeed, many colleagues did find numerous faults with Ambrose, but it is difficult to fault his effectiveness in making the difference he sought to make. One of the most notable lessons was how he accomplished this, namely, by finding partners for each of his projects. These partners included high profile directors (Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks), politicians (Bob Dole and George McGovern), companies (Chrysler and IBM), and governments (Louisiana and New Orleans).

Forming Partnerships with Policymakers

Over 30 years ago, Dyer and Shimp (1977) outlined three suggestions for how to make research more impactful. Their suggestions could not be more relevant to Transformative Consumer Research.

Person-to-Person Contact is Critical. In any research investigation, it is fundamentally important to interact with the user at the problem formulation and research design states. This personal contact is even more important in the public policy area. Many successful activism researchers tailor the study to the needs of the consumer or other decision makers. This requires the research have a forward and other orientation. The perfect research study has little or no value unless the individual sees its value and its fit with their needs (cf. Wilkie & Gardner, 1974).

Timing is Critical. Much of the research done to date on public policy issues, for example, has been done *after* the case has been settled or the policy or program has been set in motion. It provides less of a diagnosis and prescription than it does an autopsy. Most research will have a much greater impact if it is conducted before the policy maker or decision maker is committed to a position. One source of delay for research is the journal process. Many scholars are hesitant to show the results and begin implementing their findings until the paper is published. In many ways, this renders the research much less relevant and potentially less transformational. There are numerous examples of researchers who have conducted researched, and published the findings as a "white paper" or on the web long before it was eventually submitted for publication. In this way, the results could have an immediate impact.

Communicating Before and After the Project Begins. Many government agencies, such as the USDA, FTC, and FDA have public comment periods where they welcome insights and comments. Dwyer and Shimp (1977) recommend a strategy of "priming the pump" to generated policy maker attention to research findings. Sending copies of study results to concerned industry offices, writing press releases, and contacting consumer organizations can be critical. The wider the dissemination of study results, the more assured a researcher would be of his study's consideration by policymakers or other relevant target groups (Mick, 2004).

Partnerships can take many forms with many different stakeholders. Some partnerships can be made in defining the right question and collecting the right data. Another set of partnerships can be useful in helping disseminate the data. As an example, the USDA sponsored a study to examine how payment systems, such as using debit cards, influenced the types of foods high school students purchased. It showed that debit cards led students to eat less of the healthy foods and more of the less healthy foods. It also showed that restricting what debit cards could be used for (healthier foods) and still allowed other foods to be purchased with cash provided students provided a win-win result for both the nutrition of students and the profitability of the lunchroom (Wansink, Just, & Payne 2010). While the relevant researchers and policy makers at the USDA were partners in initiating and eventually disseminating the research findings, five different sets of high school principals, food service directors, meal staff, and students were partners in helping determine the right questions to ask and in helping collect the right field data.

ACTIVISM ADVICE FOR THE UNTENURED AND TENURED

A notable academic once told me, "We're not in this business to write five papers; we're in it to write 100." If we break this down over a 40-year career, publishing two and a half papers a year sounds like it should be doable. Then why does it happen so seldom?

Untenured Faculty: Keep the Fire Burning

If one starts with a burning desire to conduct activism research as a Ph.D. student, the biggest danger to "waiting until I have tenure" is that the fire will burn out before anything happens. Activism research can be difficult to publish in the preeminent journals. Elite top-10 universities want to see 5-7 top publications by tenure time, and it would be nearly impossible for them to all be activism research (Mari, 2008). In fact, the truth is that the vast majority of Ph.D.s will never publish in these journals; most of the rest will do so only once (Keith et al., 2002).

But most of us do not start out at Yale, Stanford, or the University of Chicago. We start out at a school where we have the choice to pursue activism research with 100 percent of our focus or with most of our focus. The overall goal in our early years is to do the research that keeps our spark alive and the fire burning in our belly. Here are some thoughts on how to manage this.

1. Choose Research You'll Do When it's Dark Outside. Although this sounds metaphorical, it is literal. A brilliantly productive academic once told me, "Everything I ever did that has made the difference in my life, I did while other people were sleeping." Assuming he was not referring to his lectures, this is a testament to believing your research is so important that it is worth working on at 11:00 PM or at 6:00 AM. For some, transformative research in a context that is close to them can inspire this "working when it's dark" mentality more than they would be inspired by writing an article for which they had no passion.

2. Answer the Question, then Find the Journal. If a person has an important question and answers it compellingly, the paper will find a great home. Too often, however, scholars first target a journal (e.g., "Let's write a paper for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*"), and *then* start the research process. This can unnaturally constrain and bias the research question, context, and independent variables in a way that makes them irrelevant for practically-focused decision makers (Wansink 2007). Starting with and answering the right question can give the right insight, even if you have to do another add-on study to make it *JPSP*–worthy after the paper is otherwise finished.

3. Team Up with a Senior Scholar. If this senior scholar is academically productive, he or she can greatly increase the likelihood your work together will get into a respected journal. When approaching this person, you need to clearly demonstrate what your value would be to the project and to their over-programmed schedule. Being prepared to do 80% of the legwork is a good start. Additionally, the right person can be a valuable confidant and advocate as you grow and move through the field.

4. Think of a Portfolio of Target Journals. Write and submit to a variety of journals where you think your ideas will have the biggest impact. Even if these journals are not all pre-eminent journals, this strategy has three advantages: 1) It extends your ideas to multiple audiences, 2) the publications still "count" toward tenure except at but the most elite institutions, and 3) it keeps you in the game, it keeps you motivated, and it sharpens your skills as a researcher. (My first 11 submissions to preeminent journals were rejected, but the skills I developed by publishing these articles in specialty journals, enabled many of the next submissions to get in). Without some early publication victories, even at specialty journals, it is easy to become discouraged and let the fire go out.

5. Leverage the Hidden Synergies of Activism Research. Grant money, interdisciplinary collaboration, media exposure, and outreach (especially at land-grant schools) are all much easier to obtain for a person doing activism research. They help build your research capacity and broaden its impact.

The hurdle of tenure is measured with a rubber ruler. This is an unspoken secret at many schools. While the quality and quantity of publications matters, the relative measure of quality and quantity can be stretched up for some people and scrunched down for others. Grant money, interdisciplinary collaboration, media exposure, and outreach scrunch down the tenure ruler.

6. Research What You Want and the Job will Follow. Many of us professors are academic migrant workers. We start at one school, and we keep moving until we find a school where the match is the "best fit." Finding the right fit has to do with a lot of obvious factors, but a very important factor for an activism researcher is being at a place that appreciates our work and offers the promise of synergy. If our activism research interests stay closeted, it is doubtful that we will ever find that ideal department or that it will find us.

Another danger to "waiting until I have tenure" before we start activism research is that the fire in our belly will burn out. After our dissertation and our "sure bet" articles are rejected, some of us will begin to distance ourselves from the "research game," calling it irrelevant and an "Insider's Club." We will invest more in the immediate returns of teaching or consulting. After one or two moves, we will settle into a comfortable school, continuing to work on earlier interests and unpublished data sets. Comfortable as it may be, it is far removed from the impassioned context we once thought we would get to "some day."

Tenured Faculty: Finding a New Spark

By the time a professor has tenure at a research university, he or she has become successful at collecting data, managing research assistants, and publishing certain types of research (Miller, 1969; Zimbardo, 2004). Yet despite one's successful publication record, such a person would not be reading this chapter or this book if they were not considering a way to expand their impact. The good news is that moving toward activism research may not require an overhaul of one's methodological skills or having to learn an unrelated set of theories. However, it may require "tooling up" on the perplexing questions in an applied context and understanding what can or cannot be realistically done by the consumers or decision makers in that context. Here is how that could be done.

Broaden Your View of "Acceptable" Journals. Focusing only on preeminent journals can move one away from asking and trying to answer the most critical questions in a specific context. Also, a portfolio of articles in different types of journals broadens the academic market for your ideas. Recall that when we asked academics about their most transformative impact outside of academia (e.g., "Crafting the Classic Paper"), about half claimed it was published in a journal they usually do not publish in.

Attend Unfamiliar Conferences. Although reading unfamiliar journals is valuable, going to unfamiliar conferences in your applied context area is even more useful. These conferences are forums for a wider range of topics and questions that are more relevant to the context and the decision makers in the field. Although one will be the unknown person at the party, it can be liberating not to have to attend the same types of conference sessions one usually would.

Find Nonacademic Partners. Partners can facilitate or disseminate the research on the right question in the right context (Pechmann and Knight 2002). In some cases, a senior professor can add legitimacy and inspiration that goes beyond the mutual project of interest.

Don't Delegate the Field Work. Part of power of activism research is being embedded in a context that makes the research more relevant and compelling. A tendency of senior professors is to ask research assistants to do the field work, interviews, and data collection, and to be the main contact person with the research partners. This often results in noisy data and never results in valuable serendipitous insights. Even the best trained graduate students and research assistants are inexperienced with making real-time decisions about adjustments in an experimental method for example. Their judgment calls about an unexpected debriefing glitch, a broken scale, or an unruly participant will seldom be the judgment call you would have made. Furthermore, their hypothesis-driven mission can lead to a tunnel vision that prevents them from seeing an unanticipated—but far more interesting—pattern of results that an experienced researcher might recognize.

Moving outside of the circle of influence that made one successful is difficult for most academics. With a new journal or a new partner, it means building our credibility from scratch. With new conferences, it is even more difficult. It is humbling to see how little influence most of us we have outside our field. Yet this may also indicate how little we have to lose by moving toward activism research.

CONCLUSION: "WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST REGRET?"

In 2002, while a marketing professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I was asked to be one of two faculty speakers at the annual Spring meeting of the university's Business Advisory Committee.

What excited me the most was the other faculty speaker. He was one of the most notable economists at the University. He occupied a rare niche at the intersection of economics, real estate, finance, and law. He was widely published, widely influential, and people—even his economist colleagues—often spoke of him in awe. He had won numerous awards and the rumor was that he was one of the most highly paid faculty in the entire business school. This year was his retirement year, and his speech would perhaps be his "Last Waltz" in front of a group like this. Both of our talks went well, and we got to know each other throughout the day and at the closing reception.

On the rainy 4-hour drive home, we sat next to each other in the back of the plush chartered bus. I asked him which of his many accomplishments he was most proud of, and which had the most impact. At one point, however, I asked a question that was not met with the same warmth and candor. I asked, "In light of all of the remarkable things you've accomplished so far in your career, what's your biggest professional regret?" Silence. Then he eventually said, "I don't have any regrets. If I had to do it again, I would do everything pretty much the same way." After another seemingly long pause he said (I am paraphrasing):

> Well, maybe I have one regret. My work lies at the intersection of four areas – economics, finance, real estate, and law. I have a very complete picture of how these interact and how they influence everything from real estate prices in ghettos to land speculation prices in the middle of nowhere. The problem is that I'm the only one who sees the big picture. My papers are published in econ journals and finance journals, while others are published in real estate journals and law reviews. Nobody else sees the big picture because they only read one type of journal.

I said, "Would it be easier for people to see the big picture if you were to write a book that pulled all of this together? That way, everything would be in one place and you could connect all the dots." He chuckled and immediately dismissed this, "I don't know about *marketing*, but in economics they don't reward books." After 45 years of research, here was a person who was retiring with one needless regret. Yet what he let get in his way was how he would be rewarded or whether a colleague might think he was "dumbing down" his research for the amateurs. I was uncharacteristically speechless.

It seemed to me that writing a book would have been a potentially transforming project. At the very least, it would have started out as activism research. It would have focused on solution-oriented variables, and it would have clarified a series of debates. Given his fervor in this area, I suspect he would have aggressively disseminated the work, and that it would have ultimately changed behavior. It could have become transforming.

The metaphor that is relevant for us is not a book. It is any project that might ratchet-up our level of influence. It is any project that would not be "rewarded with the respect of the person next door," but that we think is critically important. In fact, it might be actively derided. That's what happened to a number of metaphorical books. It happened to Carl Sagan's award-winning "Cosmos" series on PBS, to Gary Becker's famous *Business Week* columns, to Richard Posner's federal judge appointment, and to Stephen Ambrose's World War II Museum.

The unwritten book can be a useful metaphor for us. For many of us there is at least on metaphorical book that would take our ideas to a new level of influence. It might be starting a website and blog, presenting research in front of a House Subcommittee in order to propose a law, making class modules for science teachers, writing a review article in a related field, or starting a new class and turning the notes into a book. Transforming behavior is what many of us dream of doing. But, it cannot be guaranteed. Yet when we start with an "Activism Research" mindset, we start leaving fewer things to chance.

I remember another topic I discussed with that eminent economics professor ten years ago. It was how quickly he said that his research years had passed. He said after he graduated with his Ph.D., he blinked and he had tenure; he blinked again and had an endowed chair; he blinked again and he was riding with me on what he called “the retirement bus.” The idea of starting a career of activism research when “the time is right,” could disappear in a blink of an eye.

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