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Resistance as Hope: A Review of Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches Edited by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega

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Abstract

Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches edited by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) is a research text as well as a book about transformation and hope. In this review I examine more thoroughly the word, resistance, and its relevance to teaching research methods and conducting inquiry from the academic margins.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Resistance, Hope

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**“Resistance as Hope”: A Review of
*Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous,
and Anti-oppressive Approaches*
Edited by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega**

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Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches edited by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) is a research text as well as a book about transformation and hope. In this review I examine more thoroughly the word, resistance, and its relevance to teaching research methods and conducting inquiry from the academic margins. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Resistance, and Hope

We, especially those of us in academia, usually think of research in the academic sense, that of answering crucial questions to add to our knowledge base so that we might go forward, increasing understanding and hopefully, improving current conditions. Academics do not usually tend to think of research as resistance, as a push back against something, or as opposing some situation. And generally speaking, we do not usually associate research within the realm of the critical, indigenous, or anti-oppressive. While these characteristics may not fit the mould of the normal and standard research, they form the core of the edited book by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) which have all these words in the title and subtitle. The purpose for, intent of, and investment in this book is made clear in the introduction authored by the editors. “We push the edges of academic acceptability not because we want to be accepted within the academy but in order to transform it” (p. 2).

Examining the traditional research paradigm further, we often find that the political factors, at least initially, are often back-grounded or not acknowledged at all (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). For example, when a new drug is introduced to overcome a longstanding illness or presented as a miracle drug, as a people, we are more likely to rejoice and applaud the researchers who broke through old barriers to improve the lives of those who suffer. The average citizen, reader, or researcher would not be likely to think in terms of oppression, or of challenging the endeavour and the researchers. Most probably, we would not have thought about the funding aspect of the research, or have worried about underlying storylines not revealed, or considered the individuals who were most directly affected by the research.

However, more writers are attending to the ethical questions evoked by research projects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Questions about who has benefitted or who has been included or excluded from inquiry are asked (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Questions regarding the context and the story running under the public story of the research are now increasingly becoming public. Questions of what is labelled as knowledge, as valid, as comprehensible, as worthy of publication are also being discussed in the literature more often. These are questions that are addressed as well by the authors in *Research as*

Resistance. It seems that ethics and resistance go hand in hand, that resistance can be viewed as an ethical stance, not just an oppositional stance.

I just used this book with social work undergraduates who were enrolled in their first research course. It was an online course with a two-week module devoted to qualitative methods. So in two weeks I was responsible for introducing undergraduates, whom I had never met face-to-face, to qualitative methods in memorable ways. Because this was my first experience at distance delivery, I asked questions of my own—what can I do in two weeks time? What should I choose to focus on—vocabulary, methods? Should I give specific power point presentations of all the “rules” and conventions? Should I concentrate on one example, like grounded theory? What kinds of readings and assignments would undergraduate learners really be thrilled about completing? I turned to select chapters from *Research as Resistance* as my choice for required reading material.

My reasoning for the chapters chosen was based on my hope to make an initial foray into qualitative research exciting, my need to make it integral to their daily work on the front lines of social work, and the bounds of delivery in a brief period of time. The stories in this book met all of these criteria. While the chapter titles were intriguing (e.g., *Stepping off the Road: A Narrative Inquiry*; *Interrupting Positions: Critical Thresholds and Queer Pro/Positions*; *Putting Ourselves Forward: Location in Aboriginal Research*; *Honouring the Oral Traditions of My Ancestors through Storytelling*), I chose chapters that were more suitable for introductory learners—ones that I thought novices could not resist. It occurred to me that *Research as Resistance* is about presenting irresistible stories—stories that describe pushback against the status quo, stories that revisit the ethics of “the way things are,” and stories that forge new paths by telling the stories *within* the stories.

This book is about push back, a resistance to having certain methods, especially qualitative methods, politically pushed to the margins and given little or no value. Let me tell you a story about the margins. At a family therapy conference presentation held in the US, there was an exercise in which all participants began by standing in a circle in a large room. A series of questions were asked regarding social privilege and experience. If the answer to the question was yes, this indicated that the participant had a form of privilege in his/her life and he/she took a step forward. If the answer to the question was no, this indicated that the participant was marginalized in some way and the participant took a step backward. At the end of the questioning, the room was configured with four White men in the middle of the room, literally nose-to-nose. Surrounding that circle was a second circle of mainly minority men and White women, and around the far perimeter of the room stood those participants who were primarily women from minority cultures and races. The final question then was posed-- “What can you see (without turning your head)?” The White men could only see the other men immediately in front of them. Those in the second circle could see a little bit more than that, but still had restricted vision. Those standing on the far outer circle possessed the widest view—their positioning allowed them to see much more of the room than either of other two circles of participants who were by definition, more privileged.

If certain methods are pushed to the margins then so are researchers and their contributions to our knowledge base in terms of content and process. But in the spirit of the exercise, it would seem that researchers located on the margins can see far more in terms of problematic situations and the ways to study them than the rest of us. It would

seem too that researchers who conduct research from the margins are perfectly positioned to see what is in need of resistance, of pushback. It would also seem that we would want to honour those who can see more, who know more, and who can see ways of learning more—the margins give the vantage point—in this book the authors present the *advantage* of conducting research from the edges.

I find it a good thing that there is resistance to awaken us to change and to widening the aperture to what we know, to transformation. So the pushback is about resisting in order to honour and appreciate. The editors (Brown & Strega, 2005), coin this as “talking back and making space” (p. 8). They invite us thus:

Our intention is to contribute to the project of having research reflect, both in terms of its processes and in terms of the knowledge it constructs, the experience, expertise, and concerns of those who have traditionally been marginalized in the research process and by widely held beliefs about what ‘counts’ as knowledge. (p. 6)

and

It is grassroots in the sense of considering as ‘legitimate’ what we have to say about our own lives and the lives of others, and how the conditions of those lives might be transformed. (p. 7)

Resistance implies a relationship, perhaps a dichotomy. If there is resistance it is usually in response to something that is in need of a push. But that may not always be accurate or the best understanding for resistance. In the field of family therapy and counselling, resistance was introduced as an explanation for clients’ lack of progress in relation to their plight. In a sense, resistance was a criticism of the client. That was until resistance was further examined by deShazer (1984), proposing that resistance might just be feedback indicating that clients did not find the ideas discussed in their counselling relevant or on target. This could be understood as a cooperative gesture or invitation to better calibrate the therapy process, something desired by both the client and the therapist. I think the authors in this book are telling us that in their circumstances, the tried and true, the regular, the traditional was not relevant or on target and if they tried to communicate within those bounds their messages would be lost, drowned, or deemed irrelevant. I would suggest that in this book resistance is about hope, about the hope of communicating effectively (even if alternatively); it is about pushing back to share with those of us possessing a more limited view a peek into that which we cannot see—they have done us quite a favour.

My students accepted the invitation to read these stories, and they were touched by the pain, the readability, the sense, the irresistibility of the methods that seemed to contain the “common sense” of social *working*. They learned about the ethics, politics, posing research questions, systematic analysis, rigor, credibility, decision-making, and critiquing research intended to pushback. The hard core sceptics admitted to cracks in their scepticism; the choir felt affirmed and legitimated. How do I know? I just graded their finals and they showed me!

One of the things that we at *The Qualitative Report* commonly ask our authors is “what were the unexpected results or experiences of your inquiry”? If I asked myself this question in regard to my experience of using *Research as Resistance*, I would say that I gained a new appreciation for narrative inquiry as a consequence of reading and studying one of the chapters in this book (this method has typically been a challenging type of analysis for me to edit). But now I understand better what a good narrative inquiry contains that meets our criteria of being systematic, rigorous, generative, and meaningful for all involved. As I approached reading the narrative inquiry chapter, I experienced a different kind of resistance, a pushback to my original resistance given the clarity and skill of the authors in discussing their narrative inquiry. Consequently, I have ended up more hopeful about narrative inquiry and my appreciation of it.

So if you want to:

- invite your students to learn resistance
- learn ways change can be accomplished through inquiry
- introduce your students to the basics of qualitative inquiry
- use your research to resist and reform

I strongly urge you to consult this book.

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