



Just Participatory Research with Young People Involved in Climate Justice Activism

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on the tensions inherent in enacting creative, co-produced, and participatory methods with younger co-researchers who are also climate justice advocates. Whilst participatory research with young people involved in climate justice work has the potential to build intergenerational networks of solidarity, such research is contoured with complexity. The authors, two university-based researchers, juxtapose the social justice agenda at the foundation of participatory research, with the climate justice agenda, and consider the resonances and tensions between research and social movements. They advocate for an intersectional climate justice approach to participatory research that positions young people as co-researchers and co-authors, aiming to counter epistemic injustices and amplify the voices of those first and worst affected by climate change. Simultaneously, the felt value-action gap (between the justice sought and the injustices that persist within research) generates questions about the profound differences, even incommensurability, between university-generated research and the pursuit of climate justice in movement spaces. A series of questions are offered to those engaged in participatory research with younger people to prompt collective reflection on research processes and practises. The commentary concludes with a call for university-based researchers to engage critically with the power structures within academia and to prioritise the needs and goals of younger climate justice advocates over institutional demands.

Keywords Participatory research · Youth climate activism · Climate justice · Solidarity

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Recent years have seen a burgeoning body of literature where young people involved in climate advocacy and activism co-author with university-based academics, or are involved in other aspects of the research process, in various forms of participatory research (e.g. Chiew et al. 2024; Diffey et al. 2022; Halstead et al. 2021; Luna and Mearman 2020; Navne and Skovdal 2021; Rousell et al. 2017; White et al. 2022; Wrigley et al. 2024). Years before the mass mobilisations of young people associated with the Fridays for Futures movement, Kallio and Häkli (2011) argued for the recognition of children and young people as ‘competent political agents’ whose political worlds are ‘embedded in and intertwined with adults’ political worlds’ (pp 21, 30). Subsequent co-produced research with young people has positioned young people as political agents and legitimate knowledge producers in research, extending a long legacy of social justice research striving to dismantle unequal power relations in both research and society (Freire 1970; Fals Borda 2006). Advocates argue that participatory research has the ‘potential for transformative change’ (Tisdall 2017, p 70), to be a political act of resistance (Flinders and Wood 2019), to unleash ‘new methods, new theoretical frameworks, new ways of setting things, and new ethical positions’ (Guishard and Tuck 2014, p 187), and to be a utopian method, with ‘an important role to play in rethinking and remaking the world for the better’ (Bell and Pahl 2018, p 105). Participatory research with young people about climate change has been argued to ‘challenge the narrative’ of young people as ‘victims of climate change’, instead recognising them as experts by experience and agents of change (Perkins 2023, p 347; their emphasis).

Participatory research with young people is a complex endeavour that varies in enactment, undertaken across a spectrum: from tokenistic and opportunistic to extensive and transformative. Co-researching collaborations vary in timescale and scope. Some are short-term writing collaborations aimed towards a particular publication, with the young person volunteering their time. Other collaborations partially involve young people in the research process as participant researchers. Longer-term participatory research projects can involve young people from the beginning of the project to its dissemination, sometimes in forms of Youth Participatory Action Research, and sometimes as paid members of the research team. Participatory research may use a wide variety of methods—including interview methods (Neas 2023; Walker 2023), photovoice (Lam and Trott 2022; Trott 2019), the creation of art (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2023), participatory video (MacDonald et al. 2015), legislative theatre (Elliott 2021), and citizen science methods (Groulx 2017). Rather than conceptualise ‘participatory’ as an arrival point, or to seek to normatively evaluate different approaches, we consider participatory research to be a relational and evolving process. There is not necessarily a hierarchy or ladder of value towards a ‘democratic nirvana’ (Carpentier 2018, p 67), though there is certainly a need for more durational Participatory Action Research with young climate activists (Bowman 2019; Neas et al. 2022). Rather, there are different possibilities and challenges at different places on a continuum or spectrum of participation (e.g. Grimwood 2015), with differing intended and unintended risks, outcomes, and consequences.

Whilst aligning ourselves with affirmative and maximal visions of participatory research, in this commentary, we reflect on the tensions that arise in the

process of attempting to enact creative, co-produced, and participatory methods with younger co-researchers who are also climate justice advocates. We situate ourselves as two university-based researchers who are attempting to engage in participatory research with young climate justice advocates, in separate projects on different continents (see acknowledgements). We agree that research *with not on* young people in relation to climate justice is a critical step forward for those positioned within the academy for building networks for solidarity and amplifying the voices of young people concerned about the lived urgency of climate change (Bowman 2019; Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell 2019). At the same time, we build upon previous cautionary tales in relation to participatory research processes. For example, Bell and Pahl (2018) warn that power dynamics between researchers and participants are inescapable, even as researchers might work towards destabilising and rebalancing power where possible. Kara (2017) cautions that co-production in activist research has traditionally been a space driven by the researcher, and that making a project participatory (in design, enactment, analysis, and/or writing) does not avoid questions of power and privilege. In this commentary, we explore the im/possibilities of participatory research, with a specific focus on research relating to youth-led climate advocacy, and questions of justice.

The commentary foregrounds ‘just participatory research’ to juxtapose the social justice agenda at the foundation of participatory research with the climate justice agenda. This title evokes long-standing questions of what ‘just research’ looks like (e.g. Fine 2018). ‘Climate justice’ centres the needs of those first and worst affected by climate-related impacts, but who have done the least to contribute to climate change, emphasising how climate change exacerbates existing intersectional inequalities directly shaped by colonialism and capitalism (Newell et al. 2021). Climate justice is ‘simultaneously a movement, an academic field, an organising principle, and a political demand’ (Perkins 2023, p 2). Those demanding climate justice seek to promote social transformation that is intersectional (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022) through participatory approaches with communities first and worst affected by climate change in responding, mitigating, and adapting. Both climate justice and participatory research can be described as ‘prefigurative’, envisioning but also seeking to enact and build the just social relations and worlds that those practising them would like to live in (e.g. Wrigley et al. 2024). As such, both climate justice and participatory research attempt to enact non-oppressive and regenerative ways of knowing-feeling-being-relating-researching.

This commentary raises questions for reflection on the tensions between the values of well-meaning researchers, entrenched in systems of power within the academy, and actions with younger co-researchers. We reflect on the challenges experienced when aspiring towards justice in participatory research with young people involved in climate justice efforts. Our felt sense of this value-action gap (between the justice sought and the injustices that persist within research) generates questions for us about the profound differences, even incommensurability, between research conducted in the academy and the work of climate justice activists in movement spaces. This leads us to ask, thinking with Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012): Is there a fundamental incommensurability between ‘research’, which is

‘inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism’ (p 1), and modes of climate justice that seek to refuse and dismantle colonial and capitalist systems of power?

In what follows, we articulate some questions that have emerged in our attempts to engage in transformative practises with younger co-researchers, citing particular resources that we have found challenging and inspiring. We hope that this commentary can support the intergenerational work that is happening within and beyond the academy, particularly in relation to urgent matters of climate change and social justice. We address these questions to researchers attempting this work and welcome readers to reflect with us, respond to us, and add to this list.

Questions for Reflection

Orienting Goals and Values

- Who are you in relation to lived experiences of climate change and social injustice?
- How do you ‘see’ young people involved in climate advocacy and activism: for example, as heterogeneous and ever-changing, and part of complex intergenerational communities (e.g. Guishard and Tuck 2014, p 189)?
- What shared values motivate those involved in the participatory research collaboration relating to climate justice, across your intersectional identities? (For a model of such negotiations of shared values, see CLEAR 2021, pp 63–67)
- Are you collaborating on this project to make a difference in the world? If yes, for whom, and to what extent?
- Whose needs are prioritised in a research collaboration? (How) are you prioritising the needs and well-being of young people involved in the project over the demands of the ‘academic industrial complex’ (Tuck and Yang 2014b, p 223)?
- Who is your research ‘answerable’ to (Patel 2016)?

Framing the Research Project and Questions

- Who frames up the publication/project, even if young people are involved as co-authors/co-researchers?
- For funding applications, at what point do young people join university-based researchers—for instance, does the project have a youth advisory board that advises the project prior to applying for funding and beginning the project?
- Who shapes the research/interview questions? How do these questions shape what can/can’t be said and done?
- What institutional, intersectional, and intergenerational power relations circulate in working up a project idea and design, even when young people are involved as co-authors/co-researchers with university-based researchers?

Uneven Opportunities to Participate

- How can inequitably distributed opportunities to co-author and/or co-research perpetuate the ‘representational injustice[s]’ (‘Arati’, quoted in Talukdar 2022) associated with the mainstream climate movement?
- How might university-based researchers challenge common-sense assumptions about what constitutes climate ‘activism’ and ‘advocacy’ and who is a climate ‘activist’/‘advocate’ (see Arya and Henn 2023; Ford and Norgaard 2020; Walker 2020)?
- In the ‘polyphonic’ climate justice movement and its ‘exceptionally complex’ politics (Bowman 2020 p 1), which young people are offered the opportunity to be co-researchers and/or co-authors on projects and public outputs? How are these opportunities unevenly shaped and constrained by gender, class, whiteness, racialisation, neurotypicality, dis/ability, and geography?
- What barriers exist for young people who want to be involved in research, especially in more expansive modes of co-research? What conditions enable/constrain young people from being/becoming co-researchers and co-authors (cf. Feldman 2022)?

Negotiating Relationships, Capacity, and Usefulness

- How are university-based researchers building networks of solidarity and relationships with those at the frontlines of climate change? (How) will these relationships have longevity beyond the lifetime of an individual research project?
- Why would young people, who are juggling their education, activism/advocacy, jobs, family, and social lives, necessarily want to be involved in research (in Rudolph et al. 2024, pp 7–8)?
- To what extent is being involved in research ‘useful’ to young people, aligning with how they want to use their time and their emerging theories of change (see Rudolph et al. 2024; Tuck and Yang 2014a)?
- What processes support young people to be co-researchers and co-authors ‘on [their] own terms’ (Navne and Skovdal 2021, p 309)?
- When is it appropriate to pay young co-researchers and participants as experts-by-experience, acknowledging the loss of potential earnings, loss of community, family and personal time that they incur in being part of a research project?
- How can you, as a researcher, be of ‘service’ to younger co-researchers involved in a project (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021)? For example, how could you enable and give practical support, build capacity, help with academic and employment applications, and/or engage in practical forms of solidarity with co-researchers’ climate justice networks?

Research Processes, Outputs, and Benefits

- What training is needed for researchers, and for institutional ethics boards, to consider the possibilities and ethical challenges of co-researching and co-authoring with young people, particularly those under 18 years old?

- How might university-based researchers and young people involved as co-authors and/or co-researchers negotiate research team protocols that acknowledge and trouble the power relations that contour research collaborations and nurture practises of ‘collective care’ (see CLEAR 2021, for multiple examples; see Wrigley et al. 2024 on the crafting of ‘collective care’ practises, p 8)?
- How can university-based researchers nurture horizontal practises that create space for young co-researchers to have a sense of ownership of a research space and of project outputs?
- Should young people be identifiable in research ostensibly conducted *with* them (considering that many young people involved in activists are identifiable in media and social media texts), if they wish to be?
- What further ethical principles support considerations of identifiability and authorship in research with young climate advocates/ activists? (For example, considering Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property for young people who are First Nations and First Peoples.)
- When researching with young people involved in climate justice activism, when and how might research timeframes and priorities clash with the urgent campaign priorities (Rudolph et al. 2024)?
- Kyle Pows White has critiqued colonialist logics of urgency and crisis in the mainstream environmental movement (see Whyte 2020). How might researchers, who also find themselves falling into the urgency trap, push back against these logics and attempt to embody other ways of enacting research relations? What are the structural conditions and embodied relations of power and privilege which drive researchers into the capitalist-driven hustle of ‘publish or perish’?
- How do you ensure that the stories shared with intergenerational research teams are not stolen and/or coopted by the academy (see Tuck and Yang 2014b)?
- When and how should young people be ‘credited’ for their research contributions as co-authors, and how is author order decided? (Liboiron et al. 2017)
- How do you acknowledge the different roles and capacities in intergenerational writing processes—for example, asking: ‘Who has time and headspace to write?’ (Abhayawickrama et al 2024, p 218)? What alternative modes of writing (e.g. transcribed oral conversations) might support intergenerational writing processes?
- What academic protocols for peer reviews might need to be developed, for reviews of outputs co-authored with young climate justice advocates (for further discussion, see Skovdal and Benwell 2021, p 265)?
- How might research teams create accessible research products, beyond academic publications, that honour different modes of communicating and registers of young people and social movements? Who benefits from the production and dissemination of these alternative research products?

Refusals

- How might university-based researchers attune to young people’s hesitations and ‘affective refusals’ (Truman 2019) of the premises of research projects and questions?

- How can you attune to subtle signals of hesitation and uncertainty from research collaborators and participants (including verbal and non-verbal communication, including silences) and honour and respect those who choose not to participate or who stop participating (O’Connell Davidson 2008)?
- What escape routes can be built into the project’s processes and methods to enable people to opt in/ out of research at different stages?
- How might you affirm and what might you learn from the strength and sovereignty of young people’s refusals (Tuck and Yang 2014a)?

Conclusion

Young people are the demographic most affected by the climate crisis—especially those in Global Majority communities, who are first and worst impacted in the present, and who carry the burden of its social, economic, and political impacts into the future (Skillington 2019). However, not all young people who care about climate change and its inequitably distributed effects are necessarily involved in organised activist or advocacy spaces, whilst others move in, out, and beyond these spaces of collective climate organising. The complex intersectional inequalities that shape young people’s lives mean that those whose actions do not approximate those of high-profile networks like Fridays For Future are often less visible and platformed (Arya and Henn 2023; Ford and Norgaard 2020; Grewal et al. 2022; Talukdar 2022; Walker 2020).

In this commentary, we have advocated for an intersectional climate justice orientation with younger co-researchers. Learning from intersectionality frameworks, research that is justice-oriented, is structured by transformative aims and coproduced methods. Positioning young people as co-researchers and co-authors is one way to craft and amplify narratives that counter the epistemic injustices of research (Fine 2018) and deficit representations of young people as ‘victims’ of climate change (Perkins 2023, p 347). We are interested in how researchers can recognise the transformative knowledge that is already being produced in communities of resistance, and how researchers might support these communities where invited and/ or reciprocally negotiated. This might look like leveraging university resources to nurture the capacities and work of co-researchers (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021), with university-based researchers ultimately getting out of the way. When we think about planetary justice, the needs and goals of the young people and communities that we collaborate with supersede the needs and goals of the ‘academic industrial complex’ (Tuck and Yang 2014b, p 223).

Simultaneously, in this commentary, we have raised questions about the structures of power and micropolitical dynamics that continue to circulate in and through intergenerational and intersectional research, just as they continue to circulate through even ostensibly ‘progressive’ social movement spaces (Choudry 2015). Research remains entangled with capitalist and ‘colonial institutions, temporalities and incentive structures’ (Theriault et al. 2020, p 902); involving young people as co-researchers and co-authors risks entangling them within the web of these colonial temporalities, structures, and incentives. We are conscious that the questions we

have raised above risk catalysing a sense of not being ‘participatory’ enough, particularly for those more precariously situated in universities (e.g. doctoral candidates and those on casual, short-term or non-tenured contracts). Feelings of inadequacy have also, in our experiences, been shared by younger co-researchers in their reflections on their own climate justice-oriented activities: that is, feelings of not knowing or being ‘enough’. These experiences must be situated within an analysis of neo-liberal structural forces and the matrix of interlocking oppressions (Bohrer 2018) that generate inequalities of opportunity, employment, resourcing, and recognition. Those institutionally privileged to undertake more expansive and well-resourced modes of participatory research might ask: what would it look like to redeploy and/or divest of these privileges and resources? What could it look like to refuse the needs of the ‘academic industrial complex’ when they are incommensurable with the needs and goals of grassroots climate justice work?

In this commentary, we have advocated for an intersectional climate justice orientation in work with younger co-researchers who we know are disproportionately facing the greatest burden of the climate crisis as young people. We hope that our inquisitive commentary can contribute towards more just participatory research for planetary transformation with young people climate justice.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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