

# Conceptualizing Scholar-Activism Through Scholar-Activist Accounts



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## Introduction

Scholar-activism has emerged as one of the ways to make scholarship matter. According to Buras (2021, p. 42), who examines their own role as a researcher in alliance with oppressed communities: “If research involves people and places, then it should matter to the people in the places where scholars conduct re-search.” Buras emphasizes the importance of linking scholarship and activism as a pivotal approach to ensure that research has a meaningful impact.

However, the ideal relationship between scholarship and activism remains debated within both the social domain and the academic community. Praised by some and rejected by others, scholar-activism rouses emotions but is seldom carefully discussed. Despite extensive literature on the subject, there is a lack of a definitive or widely accepted definition or conceptualization of this phenomenon. Scholar-activism is often subjectively, loosely, and vaguely delineated, leaving the audience without a clear analytical framework to comprehend it. Recognizing this gap, the present chapter<sup>1</sup> aims to remedy the situation by exploring how self-identified scholar-activists have conceptualized their scholar-activism through their own writings.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is part of a larger thesis project that examines scholar-activism as a phenomenon, which at this point, I broadly define as the pursuit of alignment between one’s social and political ideals and academic responsibilities. Within my thesis, I explore the question of how scholar-activists navigate the intersection of activism and scholarship.

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In his monumental work on Persian mythology, *The Book of Kings*, Ferdowsi<sup>2</sup> mentions four distinct social classes during the reign of Jamshid Shah Pishdadi. These classes included the warriors, the farmers, the contented but ignorant group, and a unique group referred to as the “Katouzians”—the thinkers. Jamshid, the Shah, had arranged for this last group to live in the mountains, far away from people, and there they would think of good ways of life for people and provide solutions (IBNA, 2011). The mountains in this context bear a striking resemblance to the “ivory tower” often associated with academia. The dichotomy between deep contemplation and intellectual pursuits, on one hand, and the practical and experiential aspects of life, on the other, is not a recent notion. It has persisted for thousands of years. The pursuit of “impact” (Rhodes et al., 2018) and the call for thinkers to contribute practical solutions to enhance people’s lives are not novel either. In our example, Jamshid also sought the guidance of intellectuals for societal improvement. However, these dichotomies beg the question: How wide is this divide capable of stretching? Is there a beneficial interplay between the ivory tower and society, or can they be integrated harmoniously?

Action-oriented research approaches have long advocated for an opposing viewpoint, asserting that the intertwining of scholarship and society is not only beneficial but also essential in addressing pressing and enduring societal and ecological challenges. Advocates argue that research agendas can be enhanced when societal actors actively participate in the research process. Such involvement can enhance the legitimacy of scientific knowledge, foster ownership of solutions among societal actors, and ultimately result in a greater impact of scientific endeavors (Apgar & Allen, 2021; Greenwood et al., 1993; Pohl & Hadorn, 2007), and thus make research matter more.

Within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), there has been extensive research and ongoing debate regarding the relationship between universities or science and society, as well as the emergence of a more “activist” trend in studying science (Waks, 1993). Scholars such as Woodhouse and colleagues (2002), with some caution, ask how such activist-oriented scholarship can effectively balance the goals of practical utility and scholarly rigor. Acknowledging the importance of including activist-oriented STS perspectives, they provide a rather limited definition of activist-oriented research, ranging from subtly normative problem-posing scholarship to the utilization of participatory action research (PAR) methods. In their work on the continuum of activist scholarship in STS, Woodhouse and colleagues develop a heuristic categorization of STS orientations toward three distinct constituencies: scholars, policymakers, and activists. They refer to the latter as “activist-oriented STS,” which involves research that is primarily committed to promoting social change at the grassroots level (as illustrated in Table 1).

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<sup>2</sup> In Persian literature, Ferdowsi is a prominent poet who lived in the tenth century C.E. He dedicated 30 years of his life to meticulously collecting and compiling Persian mythology in a book of poems called *The Book of the Kings*.

**Table 1** Features of STS oriented to three types of constituencies (from Woodhouse et al., 2002)

	Scholar-oriented STS	Policy-maker-oriented STS	Activist-oriented STS
Researcher’s primary commitment	Scholarship	Government and expert-adviser system	Social change, often at the grassroots
Key criterion for the choice of topic and method	Intellectual importance	Government officials’ priorities	Social and environmental problems
Primary audience	Scholars	Policy-makers	Activists, publics
Typical style	Academic	Bureaucratic	Accessible
Typical communication channels	Scholarly journals, books, and conferences	Reports, policy briefings	Cross-over books, electronic media

Considering the vast diversity and the increasing trend within the scientific realm toward embracing activist scholarship (as observed in examples such as critical geography in the 1970s, popular education in the 1960s, and liberation theology in the 1950s), there remains a lack of a comprehensive definition for activist-oriented research, or what I choose to call from now on, scholar-activism. Barnett (2021) highlights the conceptual challenges in approaching the intersection of activism and scholarship, given the multitude of meanings and varied applications of the term both within academia and throughout history (Barnett, 2021). For instance, while STS scholars have distinguished between policy scholarship and activist scholarship, the term “scholar-activism” has been employed by Pain (2003) to describe policy research as well as methodological approaches such as participatory and action-oriented research.

Our understanding of what constitutes scholar-activism and its intellectual origins remains, at best, fragmented and lacking in any systematic review of conceptual contributions. This leads us back to the fundamental question: What are the conceptual frameworks and the intellectual roots of scholar-activism for those who identify as scholar-activists? How do they conceptualize it?

Next, I will discuss the method used in the study. Following that, I will delve into data analysis, where I will present the findings in two sections focusing on the defining features and concepts of scholar-activism and its intellectual influences. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion on the implications and draw some general conclusions.

## Methodological Reflections

### *Method of the Study*

This study aims to analyze the existing literature written by scholar-activists to uncover the intellectual foundations and conceptual frameworks of scholar-activism. It seeks to explore how scholar-activists define and understand scholar-activism, as well as the theoretical inspirations that shape their perspectives. Drawing on standpoint theory, it is recognized that insiders possess unique knowledge that may differ from that of outsiders (Crasnow, 2013). For me, this literature review functions as an interview with scholar-activists who have made efforts to conceptualize scholar-activism. The aim is to understand their backgrounds, sources of inspiration, and the theoretical frameworks they employ in their work.

Since the individuals under examination are scholars actively involved in activism, accessing their perspectives and approaches to defining and understanding the concept is best achieved through an analysis of their published works on the topic. There were two possible approaches for this task: identifying scholar-activists and investigating whether they have published relevant works, or selecting articles that conceptualize scholar-activism, focusing specifically on those written by scholar-activists. Considering accessibility and feasibility, the latter option was chosen, which entails a systematic conceptual review of the topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Durocher et al., 2014). After conducting a systematic review of over 800 academic publications, using keywords such as “scholar-activism,” “intellectual activism,” “academic activism,” and related combinations, a selection of 25 papers was made that were (1) authored by scholar-activists, (2) examined scholar-activism as a central theme, and (3) provided conceptual analyses or discussions on the phenomenon. This decision was made to ensure alignment with the research questions and to gain insider perspectives directly linked to the experiences of scholar-activists.

The data were retrieved from Scopus in the spring of 2022 and subsequently analyzed and coded using NVivo. Additionally, VantagePoint was employed to assist in identifying co-wording patterns and co-citations, helping uncover potential concepts and references that might have been missed during manual analysis with NVivo. In certain cases, to follow historical and contextual clues, supplementary materials cited in the main texts were investigated.

### *Data Collection*

This review encompasses 25 articles, published between 1999 and 2020, exploring the field of scholar-activism. Various disciplines have been represented, with prominent contributions from fields such as geography, education studies, sociology, and management and organization studies. However, certain fields have had a greater presence in the dataset, with geography being notably more prevalent. The dataset

primarily includes contributions from the UK and the US, with only one contribution from South Africa, indicating a lack of representation from “Global South” countries. Nonetheless, some authors have drawn on their experiences from the “Southern context” (e.g., Routledge & Derickson, 2015) or worked closely with marginalized groups within the Northern context. Scholar-activism, in this literature, covers a wide range of topics, including poverty, gender, LGBTQ rights, environmental justice, migration, ethnic and racial struggles, labor movements, classroom activism, and resistance against neoliberal politics within academia. In Appendix 1, an overview of the selected articles, with a brief description and the respective characteristics is presented.

### Defining Features and Concepts

In the following section, I will introduce the defining features and concepts of scholar-activism, divided into four different categories. Firstly, I will discuss similar terminologies and conceptual inventions that have been used alongside scholar-activism, each invoking different intellectual and conceptual connotations and meanings. Then, I will outline the three main categories that have emerged in the 25 texts written by scholar-activists attempting to define scholar-activism. These themes were complemented by a co-wording analysis of all the titles, abstracts, and keywords, which is demonstrated in the word cloud in Fig. 1. The broader themes include criticality, active engagement, and normative orientation.

Criticality encompasses various critical aspects of scholar-activism, manifested in general theoretical approaches such as critical education and critical management



**Fig. 1** A word cloud illustrating the co-occurrence analysis of the titles-abstracts-keywords (minimum occurrence: in three papers). Created by the author, using Vantage Point for the analysis and [www.wordclouds.com](http://www.wordclouds.com) for the illustration

studies. It also encompasses critical thinking as an intellectual activity. Active engagement refers to the various ways in which the “action” aspect of scholar-activism is enacted, such as through research methods, pedagogy, and participation in social movements. This section is crucial in understanding what the “scholarly” aspect of the definition entails when it comes to taking action.

Normative orientation is a final feature of scholar-activism, as many scholar-activists approach their definition by emphasizing certain values and directionalities over others. For example, *social justice* has been argued for as a defining feature, suggesting that other causes may not necessarily be labeled as “activism.” However, some scholar-activists argue for a broader definition that includes all kinds of normative orientations and ideological invocations as part of scholar-activism, as long as certain modes of active engagement are utilized.

### ***Parallel Concepts***

Scholars and activists have long been engaged in developing terminologies to describe different forms of intellectual and scholarly involvement with social movements and the pursuit of social justice. Within this study, scholar-activists have drawn upon various existing concepts and terminologies to frame their own work as scholar-activists. Table 2 presents the key alternative concepts employed by scholar-activists in this review, which include “organic intellectual,” “intellectual activism,” “public intellectual,” “tempered radical,” and “liberation theologian.” It is crucial to recognize that these terminologies are rooted in diverse intellectual traditions and sociopolitical contexts. For instance, the term “organic intellectual” was coined by Gramsci, a Marxist thinker and activist, to define a specific kind of intellectual who organically belongs to a particular movement or community of struggle. Cox (2015), in order to clarify his usage of the term “activism,” employed the concept of “organic intellectual” and provided further elaboration:

I am using it [activism] here to distinguish forms of intellectual practice which have an organic connection to social movements and collective action from those which do not. (p. 35)

Here, the emphasis lies on the activist aspect of scholar-activism. Another notable example is the concept of “tempered radicalism,” which has been utilized by two scholars within the field of organization and management studies to conceptualize scholar-activism. Grosser (2021) and Contu (2020) employ this term to describe individuals within systems and organizations who strive to bring about change. These individuals leverage tools and strategies that enable them to do so (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). The term “tempered radicalism” was initially coined by Meyerson and Scully (1995), both professors in various business schools across the United States. It draws inspiration from feminist approaches to scholarly work that aim to promote

**Table 2** Alternative terms and parallel concepts used by scholar-activists in this literature review

Alternative terminology	Meaning	Origin	Instances in the literature
Organic intellectual	Represents a group or class they belong to Not necessarily a writer or scholar Leads the ideas and aspirations of their group	1930s; Coined by Gramsci	Cox (2015), de beer (2015), Santos (2012) Pimlott (2017), Hern (2016)
Intellectual activism	Speaking the truth Many ways of enacting ideas for social justice (poetry, research, etc.)	1990; Patricia Hill Collins	Contu (2018), Contu, (2020), Deschner et al. (2020), Grosser (2021)
Public intellectual	Involved in public debates Represents personal beliefs while objectively arguing	1993; Popularized by Edward Said	Hern (2016), Santos (2012), Hales et al. (2018), Apple (2016)
Tempered radical	Works from within the organizations to change	1995; Coined by Meyerson and Scully	Contu (2020), Richter et al. (2020), Grosser (2021)
Liberation theologian	Works in solidarity with the oppressed through faith communities to alleviate suffering	1970s; From the South American context	de beer (2015)

equality based on gender, race, and class. This form of scholar-activism represents a distinct approach, involving efforts to effect change from within problematic organizations and institutions. Richter et al. (2020) further elaborate:

Working at the hyphens of scholarship and activism, tempered radicals in educational settings balance their critical consciousness with institutional legitimacy to provoke change. (p. 1016)

Although these terms invoke different meanings and are often used interchangeably with scholar-activism (as shown in Table 2), scholar-activists go beyond these terminologies and provide their own definitions of scholar-activism as an independent concept. In the following section, I will elaborate further on its emerging features.

### *Criticality*

*Criticality* can be perceived as a fundamental aspect that underlies and informs both the active engagement and the normative orientation in scholar-activism. It encompasses critical thinking, reflexivity, and a keen awareness of power dynamics, which

are integral to the practice of scholar-activism and guide scholars in their practical engagement and choice of direction. Hence, it is my contention that criticality should be recognized as a foundational element that influences both the engagement and the orientation of scholar-activists.

The term “critical” is consistently employed in various articles, often in conjunction with other words such as “engagement,” “theory,” and “analysis.” Additionally, it is frequently utilized as part of the title of specific fields or disciplines, highlighting their critical perspectives, such as critical pedagogy, critical performativity, critical geography, or critical sociology.

When practicing criticality, scholars confront existing assumptions, question the prevailing norms, and challenge dominant beliefs, ideas, and discourses. It also involves grappling with issues of power dynamics and engaging in reflexivity. Each of these aspects, namely, hegemony, power, and reflexivity, will be explored in greater detail as key features of criticality. However, mere examination of existing assumptions, norms, power structures, and ideologies, without necessarily emphasizing action is criticized by scholar-activists like Alessia Contu:

Think of all the critical work, for example, that has become known as CMS [Critical Management Studies]; [...]. Collectively, we have created sophisticated analyses on the dark side of organizing/managing; the complex ways in which power works to subjugate and exploit individuals and communities; [...] The need to ‘walk the talk’ of our refined critical theories and analyses to influence and change our societies has been the object of much discussion also in this journal. More work is needed to go from what Sarah Ahmed has called talking about the ‘doing’ to doing the ‘doing’ of critical work. (p. 283)

Here, Contu underscores the importance of bridging the gap between theory and practice, advocating for scholars to translate their refined critical theories into tangible actions aimed at influencing and changing societies. The reference to the concept of “talking about the doing” versus “doing the doing” of critical work underscores the need for practical application and real-world impact.

In some cases, action is implied by the term “critical,” and “critical” is used in a more encompassing way that combines theory and practice, aiming for social change and transformation through engagement, collaboration, and action:

In engaging in such critical analyses, it is vital that such critical analyses also point to contradictions and to *spaces of possible action*. [...] This is an absolutely crucial step, since otherwise our research can simply lead to cynicism or despair. Cynicism and despair can only assist those who wish to remain in power. (Apple, 2016, p. 511)

Emphasized by this quote, critical scholarship must transcend mere critique and actively strive for positive change. Therefore, criticality is tied to active engagement, a pivotal component of scholar-activism expounded upon in Sect. 3.3.

## Hegemony

Scholar-activism encompasses a critical examination and resistance against hegemony within academia and society (Askins, 2009; Grey, 2013; Hales et al., 2018).



By questioning dominant discourses and producing alternative knowledge, scholar-activists strive to dismantle the oppressive forces of hegemony and foster transformative change in both academic institutions and broader society. Scholar-activists engage in the analysis of current realities, exposing contradictions and identifying “spaces for more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions” (Apple, 2016; Deschner et al., 2020). They challenge the norms and narratives perpetuated by dominant structures and exploitative systems, such as marketization and managerialism (Grey, 2013), as well as dominant norms in academia, such as the way we write and publish:

[W]e should also pursue the emotional in writing within hegemonic academia in order to shift what is ‘acceptable’. (Askins, 2009, p. 11)

The question of hegemony, when entangled with “oppression” and “injustice,” remains a critical aspect of scholarly activism. Contu (2020) argues that scholar-activism aims to rupture or revise norms, contesting the hegemony they impose. For example, one such hegemonic notion, contributing to epistemic injustice, can be what constitutes “valid knowledge” in academia (Hammelman et al., [2020] in Reynolds et al., 2020) and who has the power to speak and shape knowledge (Contu, 2020). Scholar-activism also involves engaging in struggles against exploitative relations of neoliberal capitalism, heteronormative patriarchy, authoritarianism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and white supremacy (Contu, 2020).

As part of the overlap between different components of the definition of scholar-activism (namely, criticality, active engagement, and normative orientation), hegemony can be constitutive of the orientation. In other words, although the critique of hegemony is identified as a defining feature of criticality, different forms of hegemony can inform the orientations that most scholar-activists put forth, such as the “hegemony of neoliberalism.” However, some, like Pimlott, may have a different definition of scholar-activism that is irrespective of hegemony. Pimlott (2017) states that

activism is potentially more ideologically encompassing [...] The general bias that equates activism with anti-establishment or left-wing actions ignores right-wing activist academics and senior administrators [...] Professors whose work supports the dominant worldview or status quo are no less activist than those who challenge the status quo. (p. 34)

While Pimlott points to an important and prevalent critique or debate on scholar-activism, the majority of the literature in this study, including Pimlott’s contribution, utilizes means of scholarly activism (such as critical pedagogy for Pimlott) that are oriented toward the “deconstruction of dominant discourse and consideration of perspectives that question the status quo” (Pimlott, 2017).

## Power

The concept of power is intricately linked to the notion of hegemony, where dominant norms, relations, and structures such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity

operate as “systems of power” (Collins, as cited in Contu, 2018). Scholar-activism acknowledges that we exist within a network of relationships that are neither neutral nor equal. Therefore, a crucial aspect of scholar-activism involves questioning these norms and uncovering the hidden power dynamics. For example, Apple (2016), using a critical educational lens, raises pertinent questions about formal education: “Whose knowledge is this? How did it become ‘official’? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge and who does not?” (p. 510).

Some scholar-activists employ *intersectionality* as a framework to illuminate the intersections of power relations and how inequality is shaped across class, race, gender, and other dimensions (Contu, 2018; e.g., Richter et al., 2020; Santos, 2012). Hence, scholar-activism is highly attuned to power dynamics, but it also endeavors to take action based on that understanding in order to “destabilize” power imbalances (Maxey, 1999). This includes challenging hierarchies within the research process and knowledge production (Maxey, 1999) and striving to “reclaim” power by amplifying marginalized voices and ensuring that they are heard by those in positions of power (Mason, 2013).

Another way for scholar-activists to address the issue of power is by actively and introspectively navigating their various relational positions as scholars and activists simultaneously (Routledge & Derickson, 2015). This aspect, known as *reflexivity*, will be further examined in the subsequent section.

## Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a form of critical reflection that involves examining one’s own position within the context of engagement (Canaan, 2010; Cox, 2015; Hales et al., 2018), whether theoretical or practical. In scholar-activism, reflexivity plays a significant role by prompting scholars to critically assess their own identities, expand their understanding of themselves and others, and recognize the limitations of their prior knowledge. By embracing reflexivity, scholar-activists engage in a process of self-reflection and questioning that helps them navigate their positionality within social movements and academic settings. Reflexivity serves multiple purposes. One purpose is to become aware of power imbalances in relationships with others and to address them (Routledge & Derickson, 2015), whether in their interactions with students, research subjects, or fellow activists in social movements.

Reflexivity can also be used to achieve greater objectivity. Objectivity, often promoted as a norm in modern scientific models and associated with neutrality and impartiality, can pose a serious threat to scholar-activism. Scholar-activists make efforts to counteract this critique, and reflexivity is presented as a way to attain a higher level of objectivity. Rather than denying one’s values and normativity, reflexivity enables critical engagement with one’s positionality. Hales et al. (2018) acknowledge the expectation for scholars to maintain *pure objectivity* as demanded by external entities, but they argue against detachment from the world as a means to achieve objectivity, drawing on Bourdieu’s perspective. According to Bourdieu, political reflexivity requires researchers to critically situate their interpretations and

be transparent about the political implications that may arise from uncritical and politically unaware interpretations. Similarly, reflexivity is invoked to achieve *strong objectivity* in feminist perspectives (Crasnow, 2013). Hern (2016) emphasizes the significance of reflexivity in promoting objectivity, suggesting that scholar-activists should examine how their efforts have influenced the movements in which they work and include their own reactions as data within their analyses. Through this process, scholar-activists strive to ensure that their final analysis is rooted in strong objectivity and free from biased results.

It is important to note that a significant portion of the literature reviewed in this study presents itself as a reflexive account of scholar-activist endeavors. For instance, Chatterton et al. (2010), Askins (2009), and Croog et al. (2018) offer reflexive perspectives on scholar-activism, rendering their writing as a part of their scholar-activist endeavor in its own right. Additionally, some scholars explicitly discuss the incorporation of reflexivity in scholar-activism as a conceptual framework. Maxey (1999), for example, describes reflexivity as an active and critical reflection on the world and our position within it, enabling us to challenge oppressive power dynamics through creative and constructive actions instead of perpetuating them.

However, Derickson and Routledge (2015) raise a challenge regarding the balance between reflexivity and active engagement. They caution against becoming “immobilized” by being overly analytical, reflexive, or cautious, suggesting that, while addressing questions of power and reflexivity in knowledge production is important, the current economic, political, and ecological crises demand urgent engagement. They highlight an important tension between reflection and action and emphasize the need for a constructive balance between the two.

### ***Active Engagement***

As mentioned earlier, action is a crucial component of activism, which can be defined as action undertaken in support of a cause (Pimlott, 2017). However, when it comes to defining and conceptualizing scholar-activism, there exists a wide range of engagements that differ in terms of their level of “activeness” and are not necessarily synonymous with praxis or hands-on practice. To account for the diverse practices involved in scholar-activism, I prefer to classify these engagements as “active engagement.” This classification allows for the recognition of the multifaceted nature of scholar-activism as understood by scholar-activists themselves. The following section provides a brief overview of the prevalent forms of these engagements.

### **Engaging Emotions**

Some scholar-activists have explored the significance of emotions in scholar-activism. The discussion on emotions in scholar-activism often references the works of Bondi (1999, 2005), who explores the intersection of human geography and

psychotherapeutic practice, and of Katy Bennett (2004) and Laura Pulido (2003), who shed light on the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of scholar-activism. Through engaging with emotions, scholars delve into the more nuanced and personal aspects of scholar-activism. Derickson and Routledge (2015) describe scholar-activism as a “deep emotional response” to the injustices witnessed in the world, highlighting the potential to transform these emotions into political action that forms the foundation of activism as a whole. This can be considered a departure from the traditional model of modern science, which stands on the idea of rationality and “disinterestedness” (Merton, 1973). Scholar-activists recognize the importance of emotions and the need to embrace and engage with their feelings as inseparable elements of their identities as both academics and activists. Askins (2009), in her reflexive work, eloquently expresses this interconnectedness:

[W]hen I'm lecturing, facilitating seminars, seeing students as guidance tutor, dissertation supervisor, I have my body, my emotions, my subjectivity/ies with me too, as much as when I'm activist-researching. My passion for social and environmental justice isn't switched off in the classroom or office: as it feeds through my personal life so it feeds through learning and teaching approaches. (p. 10)

Emotions not only serve as the driving force behind scholar-activism (Askins, 2009; Routledge & Derickson, 2015) but also encompass a range of experiences, such as anger, discomfort, and fatigue, that arise throughout the scholar-activism journey. Quaye et al. (2017) draw attention to the emotional toll paid by scholar-activists, particularly Black faculty who, as they navigate academia, encounter “racial battle fatigue” stemming from the distressing mental and emotional conditions they face due to daily experiences of racism. Croog et al. (2018) also reflect on the emotion of “discomfort” as a significant aspect that must be navigated when operating within or challenging the boundaries of traditional research.

## **Engagement with Commitment**

Scholar-activism is characterized by scholar-activists as a commitment to a cause, certain values, or specific communities and groups. Canaan (2010), with reference to Bourdieu (2003), describes it as “scholarship with commitment.” This commitment encompasses moral dedication and the pursuit of values such as democracy and inclusiveness (Hales et al., 2018), as well as justice (Apple, 2016; Quaye et al., 2017; etc.). It can also manifest as a deep desire to engage with the “local” (de Beer, 2015), “indigenous communities” (Hales et al., 2018), the “on-the-ground” reality (Buras, 2021), or the “real world” (Askins, 2009). Each of these commitments represents a form of engagement that demands the investment of energy, time, and resources to bring about meaningful change. Scholar-activists recognize that this commitment goes beyond mere involvement; it requires them to actively engage with communities, prioritize their needs, and establish enduring relationships, as emphasized by Hales et al. (2018) and Mason (2013) in their call for “long-term commitment.” As noted by Hales et al. (2018), the process of entering communities, meeting their needs, and

eventually exiting is time-consuming but crucial for fostering mutual empowerment, self-determination, and emancipation, especially in indigenous contexts.

Scholars also acknowledge that commitment may fluctuate due to constraints and tensions between the academic and activist worlds. The dual commitment of being both scholars and activists lacks a clear definition and support, which can impose tensions on scholar-activists' engagements. Apple (2016) illuminates the scholar-activists' role as someone who

demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be both an excellent researcher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities. She or he needs to show how one can blend these two roles together in ways that may be tense, but still embody the dual commitments to exceptional and socially committed research and participation in movements. (p. 512)

The dual commitment generates tensions that Chatterton and colleagues (2010) address in their engagement with activist communities and social movements. They explore the differing perspectives on capacity and the complexities of balancing multiple demands, providing further insight into the challenges that scholar-activists face (Chatterton et al., 2010).

### **From Resistance to Creation**

As scholar-activists engage in their work, the need for resistance becomes apparent. Scholar-activists often find themselves participating in resistance movements and communities of struggle, as demonstrated in the works of Chatterton et al. (2010), who were involved in the anti-capitalist autonomous housing movement, and Mason (2013), who engaged with the Climate Justice Movement.

Resistance involves taking a stand against specific forces or conditions within academia that scholar-activists recognize as oppressive. These forces may include "the trappings or oppressions of the institution" (de Beer, 2015), manifestations of neoliberalism (Deschner et al., 2020), the erosion of autonomy and spaces of freedom (Canaan, 2010), or the detrimental effects of New Public Management (Grey, 2013). Scholar-activism is called upon as a means of resistance against these problematic forces within academia, perpetuated by the dominance of neoliberalism and New Public Management. As Canaan (2010) phrases it:

Can we take it so far as to act as 'sand in the machine' [...] encouraging students to work with us to critically explore and potentially progressively transform the beast whose belly we work within? (p. 204)

Scholar-activists have not limited themselves to using resistance as a reactionary measure against existing forces; they have also embraced a proactive approach that involves creation, transformation, and prefiguration, as highlighted by Deschner et al. (2020), Richter et al. (2020), Mason (2013), and de Beer (2015). This proactive approach is exemplified in Mason's (2013) reflections on planning and participating in an academic seminar blockade during the UN COP15 as part of the Climate Justice Action. Mason critiques the traditional strategy of merely reacting to global

capitalism by attending climate conferences and similar events, which they perceive as futile and lacking substantial impact. Instead, they advocate for a proactive stance, suggesting the following:

In advance of future rounds of COP and the like, we could turn our backs, in theory and in practice, [...] bringing all our considerable movement talents to bear ‘locally’ in favor of our comrades and their cause probably in a place other than that where the ‘official’ summit is held. Imagine, for instance, how twenty-thousand people could contribute during a week spent assisting a low-impact development, ecovillage or that refugee centre threatened with closure; Imagine how that number could literally remodel the cycling culture of a regressive British or Spanish city. (p. 39)

## Teaching and Pedagogy

Within the scholarly literature, there are scholars who specifically emphasize education, pedagogy, and teaching as integral components of scholar-activism. Pimlott (2017), Cnaan (2010), Apple (2016), and Richter et al. (2020) are among those who highlight this aspect. Additionally, other scholar-activists underscore the importance of teaching in conjunction with research as a means of engaging in activism (e.g., Contu, 2018, 2020; Cox, 2015; Quaye et al., 2017, among others).

Scholar-activists draw upon various theoretical frameworks to inform their pedagogy, aligning it with their activist pursuits. For instance, de Beer (2015) adopts Giroux’s concept of a “pedagogy of wakefulness,” which involves critically and actively engaging with the world to challenge oppressive structures and alleviate human suffering. Some scholars employ “critical pedagogy,” inspired by Paulo Freire, and utilize diverse teaching techniques as a form of activism. Inspired by critical pedagogy, Pimlott (2017) combines “critical content” with a “student-centered, dialogic process” in the classroom to promote scholar-activism.

The fundamental principle underlying the view of pedagogy as a mode of active engagement for scholar-activism is the recognition that education is not neutral (Cnaan, 2010). Traditional education perpetuates oppressive power dynamics both within and beyond the classroom, necessitating a more emancipatory approach to education for societal transformation (e.g., Freire and hooks). The goal of teaching and pedagogy as a means of scholar-activism is to strive for the betterment of humanity and the promotion of the common good, guided by principles of justice, human flourishing, and the alleviation of suffering (Hyttén, 2017).

Another noteworthy example of an intensive activist educational program is the MA program in Community Education, Equality, and Social Activism developed and implemented by activist scholars at Maynooth, as described by Cox (2015). The program aimed to bring together participants from diverse social movements to foster mutual learning and advance social change. It employed popular education methods, emphasizing dialogue and reflection on participants’ own practices. This is one mode of active engagement for Cox, which is complemented by other approaches such as participatory action research and active participation in social movements. These other modes of active engagement will be further explored below.

## **Participatory, Collaborative, Action-Oriented Research**

In general, apart from teaching, research is another significant mode of active engagement for scholars. However, certain research approaches are more commonly utilized by scholar-activists as they align with the pursuit of scholar-activism, aiming for transformation, social justice, equality, and addressing power relations. These methods or approaches to research include action-oriented research, which involves opening up participation to non-academics, communities of struggle, and marginalized voices, as well as fostering the co-creation of knowledge. Participatory research, as described by Pain (cited in Chatterton et al., 2010), is one form of scholar-activism with multiple aims, including participation, practical outcomes, and knowledge production. Reynolds et al. (2020) further argue that the field of geography has witnessed calls for action-oriented research, addressing the theory–practice gap in academia and the need for relevance to the real world and practitioners.

Collaboration in the research process is also recognized as a valuable form of engagement for scholar-activism. Derickson and Routledge (2015) emphasize the significance of collaboration in their own projects, highlighting their commitment to working with communities and organizations to “coproduce knowledge with them as opposed to conducting research on them.” They further explain that their academic work not only fulfills the requirements of their employment and intellectual communities but also specifically advances the goals of the community groups they collaborate with.

Through collaboration, scholar-activists are able to engage with diverse perspectives, challenge existing assumptions, and explore the multifaceted nature of issues such as food justice. Croog et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of collaborative work in their scholar-activism focused on food justice. By engaging in collaboration, they have gained insights into the various dimensions of food justice. They have come to recognize that food encompasses more than just an organizing tool; it is connected to nutrition, emotions, rights, desires, and ecological actions. This collaborative approach has allowed them to grasp the complexity and interconnectedness of food practices within social and ecological movements (Croog et al., 2018).

Collective or collaborative writing serves as a strategy employed by scholar-activists to bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing academics to work together to generate new knowledge and insights. Chatterton et al. (2010) critically highlight the dominance of individualized accounts of academics “in the field” within the existing literature on scholar-activism. However, this study reveals a notable shift in recent years, with five out of the twelve published works since 2017 presenting collective narratives of scholar-activism. This trend suggests an increasing embrace of collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches within the realm of scholar-activism.

Collaboration, whether among scholars or extending beyond academia to engage with movements or organizations, can be viewed as a significant form of active engagement for scholar-activism.

## Collective Action and Social Movement

Scholar-activists who engage in social movements recognize the value of working closely with the movements they support and belong to. They draw on personal experiences and reflections of actively participating in campaigns and movements that promote social and political change, to formulate a conception of scholar-activism as engagement in both worlds of the academy and social movements. According to their narratives, these scholar-activists assume various roles and capacities within social movements, including teachers, researchers, experts, narrators, and public intellectuals. They leverage their knowledge and expertise to further the goals and deepen the understanding of the movements they support (Chatterton et al., 2010; Hern, 2016; Santos, 2012, etc.). For instance, Hern (2016) perceives their role as that of a narrator or storyteller:

[T]he scholar-activist also has another important role when working within social movements—as a narrator, or storyteller, within the narrative practice of the social movement. Narrative practice is the process through which social movement actors understand and construct opportunities in their environment in ways that serve to mobilize their constituencies. (p. 120)

Chatterton et al. (2010) see their role as sharing their resources as academics with the movement they feel they belong to:

Our motivation as originally conceived was to enable us to work closer with the social movements we support and belong to. Using our privileged position to access research funding we resolved to engage in participatory research alongside the everyday struggles of a number of anti-capitalist or ‘autonomous’ political groups, networks and spaces in the UK. (p. 246)

What connects these scholars is the idea of inhabiting both the worlds of academia and activism, as separate worlds with separate forms of organization and norms. Here, scholar-activists are not merely social movement scholars who study movements; rather, they belong to them and support the movements and their cause and therefore have a commitment to advance the goals of the movement by sharing their capacities as scholars. This is not an easy task, as many issues and tensions of such double engagement are discussed in the scholar-activists’ accounts (see for example Quaye et al., 2017 and Chatterton et al., 2010). However, there is a belief that such “double agency” has the potential to help “build and disseminate empirically grounded knowledge” (Santos, 2012), contributing to the improvement of the field of social movement studies (Cox, 2015) and more direct ways of contributing to social change.

Some argue that social movements and struggles are not confined solely to external contexts but also exist within the oppressive dynamics present within academia itself. McCann (2010), for instance, explores the rhetoric of bordering to discuss engagement outside of academia, while emphasizing the need for engagement within the academy where instances of “cruelty” occur. As such, scholar-activists draw on their own campaigns and collectives within the academic setting to address oppressive structures that persist within universities. Quaye et al. (2017), for instance,



formed their own collective called the Mobilizing Anger Collective as Black faculty in response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement:

[W]e define scholar-activism as campus employees (e.g., faculty, administrators, and staff) who engage in efforts to bring about change on campus and/or in society. Scholar-activism is campus employees engaging in tactics for social change and weaving that activism into how they lead through their teaching, practice, and research/scholarly activities. (p. 385)

## *Normative Orientation*

### **Social Change**

Social change is a fundamental tenet in defining and conceptualizing scholar-activism as highlighted by almost all of the scholar-activist texts included in this study. The majority of the texts highlight that scholar-activism revolves around the pursuit of social change, encompassing various dimensions such as challenging oppression, advocating for social justice, collaborating with communities, and actively engaging in transformative practices and other forms of engagement that have been previously discussed (see as examples Contu, 2018, 2020; Croog et al., 2018; Grosser, 2021; Hales et al., 2018; Hern, 2016; Quaye et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2020).

The texts underscore the historical significance of scholars and intellectuals in driving societal change, establishing the groundwork for the role of scholarship beyond the confines of the intellectual realm, and actively addressing pressing societal issues beyond the confines of the “ivory tower.” Hern (2016) highlights the scholar’s role in social change by referencing historical instances, such as the contribution of critical race scholars in “understanding, critiquing, and, ultimately, changing systems of racial oppression,” as well as the role of radical sociological studies in antiwar and antipoverty movements (Morton et al., 2012).

Hence, scholar-activism encompasses diverse modes of active engagement and critical perspectives aimed at effecting tangible change in real-world contexts. However, it is crucial to unpack the notion of change itself. What specific type of change is envisioned? What are the intended outcomes? Scholar-activists often express their aspirations in terms of “changing the world for the better” (Contu, 2020), which implies a normative stance regarding what is considered desirable and problematic. Yet, the question arises: What values underpin these judgments?

In other words, there are different forms of academic engagement that aim to bring about change. However, how does scholar-activism differ from these approaches? Contu provides insight on this matter:

Intellectual activism is different from other forms of scholarship that aim in one way or another ‘to change the world’, such as public critical management scholarship, phronetic scholarship and engaged scholarship, because it addresses our academic praxis at 360° in the service to social justice, asking us to be accountable to it. (p. 284)

Here, the focus is on the direction of change, specifically the achievement of “social justice,” which is emphasized as a fundamental defining characteristic of

scholar-activism. Contu is not the only scholar-activist who seeks this goal; others also emphasize the importance of values such as sustainability, democracy, equity, accessibility, distribution of power, and dissemination of knowledge. However, justice and resistance against neoliberalism have emerged as major themes within scholar-activism. In the next section, I will delve further into the significance of justice as both a value and a goal that shapes the normativity of scholar-activism.

## Justice

The emphasis on justice in defining and conceptualizing scholar-activism, instead of solely focusing on social change as the goal, has been a recurring theme in this review. Contu (2020) highlights the explicit articulation of this focus on justice by Patricia Hill Collins (2012), stating:

*Social change begs the question of what goals are desirable as well as the standards to move towards them.* (p. 241)

According to Cox (2015), the critical aspect of scholar-activism is intertwined with an awareness of social injustices. Engaging in reflexive “critical scholarship” entails recognizing systemic or structural injustices. Therefore, scholar-activism cannot be detached from the pursuit of social justice in theory. However, this commitment is not confined to theoretical discussions alone. Many scholar-activists examined in this review actively participate in various social justice movements and collectives. For instance, they are involved in the Climate Justice Movement (Mason, 2013), the Local to Global Justice collective (Richter et al., 2020), the global justice movement (Chatterton et al., 2010), the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice (Pimlott, 2017), and others.

It can be inferred that justice encompasses a broad spectrum of values, such as economic equality, human rights, sustainable environments, a pertinent research agenda, progressive politics, collective care, attentive listening, and equity. However, Contu (2020), building upon Collins’s intellectual activism and Black feminist scholarship in the USA, endeavors to provide a more historically grounded understanding of social justice. In their words:

[S]ocial justice [here] is understood as part of the intellectual and concrete history of radical progressive politics. The politics advocated here is a progressive democratic politics that constantly insists and returns on the value of freedom, equality and solidarity as they are embedded in the history of progressive radical politics, and must also include the history of thought. (p. 741)

Hence, social justice is not merely an abstract notion but rather possesses a rich intellectual, social, and political history that has become increasingly intricate at the intersection of various systemic challenges, including neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and contemporary ecological crises. As a result, scholar-activists pursue various strands of justice, such as environmental justice (Mason, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2020), educational justice (Apple, 2016), and epistemic justice (Contu, 2018, 2020;

Deschner et al., 2020). Deschner et al. (2020) draw attention to epistemic oppression as a form of injustice that silences certain voices, asserting that scholarship by women, non-white individuals, and non-heteronormative individuals inherently constitutes an activist practice.

Another strand of arguments on scholar-activism emphasizes the alignment between active engagement, critical perspectives, and the pursuit of social justice (Croog et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2020). In essence, scholar-activism is seen as a viable approach for advancing social justice. For instance, Croog et al. (2018), who delve into their scholar-activism within the realm of food justice, observe:

[T]he reasons that scholar-activism has the potential to be so useful for food justice scholarship is its ability to enable food justice scholarship to be as broad, encompassing, and fluid as the food practices that are enacted in social and ecological mobilizations on the ground. This ability is in large part due to the collaborative mode of conducting scholar-activist research, which produces a multiplicity of perspectives, and which we have worked to cultivate as a research community. (p. 1028)

### **(Anti-)Neoliberalism**

The most prevalent and recurring theme in this literature review is the influence of neoliberalism on contemporary universities, which is highlighted by 16 out of the 25 reviewed sources. Scholars in these papers argue that the adoption of a corporate model by universities has led to detrimental effects, as academic and professional staff face overwork, undervaluation, and unequal labor conditions (McCann, 2010; Richter et al., 2020). In such environments, politically engaged research is often discouraged and viewed as “unscientific” or “subjective” (Routledge & Derickson, 2015). Moreover, authors assert that the precarity and fear of job loss impede academics from engaging with contentious issues and challenging prevailing policies (Apple, 2016).

The theory of academic capitalism is utilized by scholar-activists (de Beer, 2015; Deschner et al., 2020; Pimlott, 2017) to support their arguments regarding the challenges faced by scholar-activists within neoliberal universities. Developed by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), academic capitalism refers to the influence of neoliberalism on universities, resulting in the integration of the corporate sector into academia and the commodification of education as a service and lifestyle. Scholar-activists in this review draw upon this theory to underscore how the neoliberal shift impacts scholars, reducing them to mere academic bureaucrats (de Beer, 2015) and making it arduous to balance personal and professional responsibilities while meeting the heightened productivity demands of senior administrators, which include “publishing outputs and securing research grants, the teaching of larger class sizes...” (Pimlott, 2017, p. 38).

While neoliberalism is the most significant hegemonic issue presented by the contributions in this review, there are mentions of other historical forms of injustice and marginalization stemming from different types of hegemonic systems and discourses in the broader societal landscapes, such as slavery, patriarchy, fascism, racism, and colonialism, and their continual legacy within the academy (Buras, 2021; Contu, 2018; Deschner et al., 2020; Santos, 2012). The works of feminist scholars,

queer sociologists, and anti-fascist intellectual activists in the twentieth century are examples of a legacy of scholar-activism rooted in resistance toward different kinds of power struggles by and for marginalized and oppressed groups. Literature draws attention to the intersection of such historical structures of oppression within contemporary neoliberal academia, leading to increased pressure and precarity, workload, and mental and emotional tolls on marginalized academics and students (Dechner et al., 2020; McCann, 2010; Quaye et al., 2017).

Despite a widespread notion of the impact of neoliberalism, Contu (2020), inspired by Gramsci, argues that neoliberalism is experiencing a crisis of hegemony, which is “a crisis of the legitimacy and consensus around the moral authority and leadership of the ideas and values of the establishment” (p. 743). The crisis is viewed as conditions that move people from passivity to activity.

Scholar-activists in the literature widely agree on the need to challenge neoliberal conditions through their activist scholarly practices. As emphasized by Chatterton et al. (2010), “academic activism is driven, intellectually, through calls from radical academics for more ‘direct action’ against neoliberal education policies.” It is a scholar-activism that prefigures academia and creates spaces for solidarity, mutual benefits, trust, learning, as well as creating “activist homeplaces” that serve as safe havens for activism, providing support and protection for those who engage in it as a form of resistance (Richter et al., 2020).

## **Intellectual Influences**

In this section, I present the findings of the data analysis concerning theoretical frameworks, prominent figures cited in the conceptualization of scholar-activism, as well as the fields of study and theoretical traditions in which scholar-activists are situated or draw upon. Additionally, I employed a co-citation analysis as a complementary tool to identify the most frequently cited scholars and works. The following paragraphs delve into some of these fields, traditions, and figures that exerted a significant influence on the works of scholar-activists during the conceptualization of their work.

### ***Critical Geography***

In this review, the field of critical geography, or critical human geography, has exerted a significant influence, accounting for 8 out of 25 articles. The oldest article included in this literature review, Maxey (1999), also falls within this field. Another noteworthy contributor from this field is Paul Routledge, who has long been engaged in writing about scholar-activism (e.g., his contribution in 1996 about scholar-activism and third-space). Therefore, geographers have a longer history of conceptualizing the term “scholar-activism” compared to other disciplines in this review, and they have

prominent figures in their own field to refer to when conceptualizing scholar-activism (Routledge, Fuller and Kitchin, Harvey, etc.). However, the impact of prominent scholars such as Paul Routledge seems to be confined to the geography community, as evident from the citation pattern.

The field of critical geography itself is heavily influenced by feminist and post-structuralist theories, with a particular focus on the work of Foucault, Butler, and hooks (see Appendix 1). Most of the scholars writing on scholar-activism have referenced Marxist geographer David Harvey in their historical backgrounds, but they do not use his perspectives to explain their own understanding of scholar-activism. In fact, some scholars, such as Derickson and Routledge (2015), distinguish their approach from Harvey's perspective, emphasizing the importance of being accountable to community-based activism rather than being "critically distant" from it as Harvey has argued for.

The theoretical evolution of the field goes back to a few historical turns in the twentieth century. Fuller and Kitchin (2004), whose work has been cited multiple times in this review, in their book *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy*, summarize the history of critical geography and its relationship with concepts such as activism, societal relevance, and critical praxis. The field of critical geography has its roots in the radicalization of geography in the 1960s, inspired by calls from geographers for a more socially and politically relevant discipline in response to the politically neutral and quantitative approach of the time. Over time, critical geography has incorporated Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonialist theories. However, it wasn't until the late 1990s that the field witnessed a shift toward action-oriented and activist-led scholarly work, as exemplified by the work of Maxey, Routledge, and Chatterton (their literature on scholar-activism is included in this study).

This increasingly reflexive and action-oriented turn in geography is also evident in the data in this review as power, reflexivity, emotion, and methodological reflections are the most recurrent themes running through the reviewed literature in geography.

### ***The Feminist Perspective***

Feminist scholarship has roots in the feminist movements that have fought against women's oppression from the nineteenth century until today. Therefore, it can be argued that the theories developed in feminist scholarship have been closely connected to real-world social movements and struggles. Deschner et al. (2020) state:

Feminist scholars have dedicated a lot of attention to finding paths for resisting and transforming higher education. [...] [F]eminism, as a social movement and a corpus of theory, has always relied on the entanglement of academic and social movement practices. (p. 330)

The majority of scholar-activists in this review incorporate a feminist perspective into their work, evident through references to influential feminist scholars and

activists such as Collins, Butler, Haraway, Harding, Crenshaw, and hooks. However, it is important to note that feminist perspectives encompass a wide range of approaches, methods, and epistemologies, and they have influenced the works of scholar-activists in various ways, intersecting with other fields and theories. Some authors explicitly draw on feminist perspectives, such as Black feminist thought, while others utilize specific frameworks such as Crenshaw's intersectionality or Haraway's *situated knowledges* to shape their understanding of scholar-activism.

The concept of *intellectual activism*, coined by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, has been used in this review to refer to "the myriad ways in which people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice" (Collins, 2013). Contu (2018, 2020) and Grosser (2021), both scholar-activists in the field of organization and management studies, draw on feminist theory in their scholar-activism, believing that the feminist perspective can contribute to these fields by shedding light on knowledge production processes and policymaking.

Another example is Haraway's *situated knowledges*, which critiques the positivist approach and the norms of value-neutrality and universalism in modern science. Scholar-activists such as Richter et al. (2020) and Santos (2012) draw on Haraway's concept to challenge the notion of a "God trick" view of science and instead view knowledge as contextualized and situated. The theory of situated knowledge, rooted in feminist standpoint theory, recognizes the dual perspective of the scholar-activist as both an insider and outsider in academia and marginalized communities (Crasnow, 2013), allowing for a nuanced understanding of the scholar-activists' role.

Scholar-activists in this review have employed the framework of *intersectionality* to analyze power dynamics, inequalities, and the interconnected nature of oppressions within the realm of scholar-activism. They rely on the contributions of Black feminist scholars, including Kimberlé Crenshaw, and emphasize the significance of acknowledging and addressing the intricate intersections of identity in the pursuit of social justice and transformative change. Deschner et al. (2020) articulate this perspective, stating:

Intellectual activism necessitates the use of "intersectionality" as [a] framework to engage [in] academic praxis, whether it is in doing research, teaching or administrative work. (p. 331)

Scholars who employ feminist epistemology to frame their understanding of scholar-activism often adopt specific research and writing methods and tools, such as reflexivity, collective writing, and narrative writing (Maxey, 1999; Richter et al., 2020; Routledge & Derickson, 2015). By utilizing these approaches, they aim to challenge the prevailing conventions of academic writing that may not accommodate self-reflexive, narrative, auto-ethnographic, or autobiographic accounts, including narratives of failure that are typically not embraced within the publish-or-perish paradigm.

## *Popular and Critical Education Influences*

Theories of critical pedagogy, encompassing popular education and critical education, have been employed and referenced not only by scholar-activists in the field of education but also by various contributors in this review. Scholars such as Apple (2016), Canaan (2010), Grey (2013), and Buras (2021) within the education realm, as well as Pimlott (2017) in communication studies, Cox (2015) in sociology and social movement studies, and Derickson and Routledge (2015) in geography, have drawn upon and incorporated this theory into their work. This widespread adoption indicates the broad influence and relevance of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy finds its roots in Critical Theory,<sup>3</sup> primarily associated with the works of the Frankfurt School during the early twentieth century (Abraham, 2014). Critical Theorists sought to expand upon Marxist ideas of class struggles, capitalism, and alienation by examining the role of art, culture, and individual subjectivities. They recognized that oppression was deeply ingrained and accepted within individuals, and the anticipated revolution predicted by Marx had not fully materialized. Paulo Freire, a prominent Brazilian scholar, further advanced Critical Theory's focus on education, particularly in the context of adult literacy, drawing from various other theoretical perspectives. As Kincheloe (2007) explains:

Emerging from Paulo Freire's work in poverty stricken northeastern Brazil in the 1960s, critical pedagogy amalgamated liberation theological ethics and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany with the progressive impulses in education.... (p. 12)

Within the context of this review, which focuses on the intersection of education, pedagogy, and scholar-activism, there exists a shared belief among scholars that education should strive for greater social justice. They question whose knowledge is considered authoritative, who benefits from existing educational frameworks, and how these inequalities can be addressed and rectified (Apple, 2016). Rejecting the notion of education as a neutral process, these authors emphasize the presence of power imbalances and educational injustices within educational systems. Canaan eloquently expresses this viewpoint:

Like Freire and others [here they mention Bourdieu and Giroux], I recognise that education is never a neutral process and therefore that HE [Higher Education], like other formal and informal educational spaces, is a political site like others. (p. 205)

The scholars examined in this review offer diverse approaches to address the aforementioned issues within educational institutions and the broader educational policy arena. These approaches include critical race praxis advocated by Buras (2021), which promotes a critical examination of race and racism in education. Another approach is the adoption of dialogic engagement between lecturers and students, as proposed by Apple (2016). Additionally, the concept of academic literacies, as discussed by Canaan (2010), is highlighted as a means to navigate and challenge dominant educational norms.

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<sup>3</sup> Using capital letters in "Critical Theory" is intended to distinguish it from critical theory as the broader critical approach to social theory.

Critical pedagogy, central to these discussions, underscores the significance of practical experiences and their real-world relevance for students. This perspective gives rise to a range of methodologies, such as dialogical pedagogy, which fosters active engagement between teachers and students within the classroom. Furthermore, research methods such as participatory action research (PAR) are employed to challenge oppressive practices in both education and research (Canaan, 2010; Pimlott, 2017).

However, some scholar-activists express reservations about the complete applicability of critical pedagogy within their academic work, considering the institutional constraints they face (Canaan, 2010; Pimlott, 2017). For instance, Canaan elaborates on this viewpoint:

I still find popular education somewhat dissatisfying because popular educators are primarily located outside the state sector which gives them more freedom (albeit fewer financial resources (Kane, 2007b) than state-based educators whose political agendas are consequently more muted. I find the concept of ‘academic activism’ helpful because of its focus on the university, recognising that our working conditions and relations within this institution, like those of others, are structured by the logic of neo-liberalism. (p. 210)

Critical pedagogy serves as a wellspring of inspiration and is employed to varying degrees by scholar-activists in their engagement within classroom settings. It is also harnessed in research endeavors, as exemplified by Derickson and Routledge (2015) and Cox (2015), who view the research process as a collaborative learning experience with social movements and activist communities. Notably, Freirian critical pedagogy has played a significant role in the resurgence of participatory action research (PAR) as a research methodology (Jacobs, 2016). Consequently, critical pedagogy blurs the boundaries between knowledge acquisition and knowledge production, fostering a dynamic interchange of ideas and perspectives.

### ***Critical Social Theory***

In this section, I aim to examine the influences of three prominent scholars in the field of what can be broadly termed “critical sociology”: Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael Burawoy. Their contributions have significantly shaped the conceptualization of scholar-activism by scholar-activists. Within this context, critical social theory emerges as a comprehensive approach to social theory that encompasses the examination of power, domination, and hegemony.

**Bourdieu:** The book *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market* by the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu has been cited in much of the literature in this review (Apple, 2016; Canaan, 2010; Hales et al., 2018), and his concept of “scholarship with commitment” has been discussed (Canaan, 2010). Serving as a manifesto, the book unveils the claims of neoliberalism and calls for decisive action to counter it (Pearce, 2005). Bourdieu identifies researchers and activists as agents of change, emphasizing the importance of collaboration among them. These ideas align with the



fundamental principles of scholar-activism explored in earlier sections, including the critique of hegemony, the active engagement through resistance and collaboration, and an anti-neoliberal orientation.

In his work *For a Scholarship with Commitment*, Bourdieu (2000) poses the question: “Can intellectuals, particularly scholars, intervene in the political sphere?” He acknowledges that scholars’ political involvement may attract criticism, especially from within academia, and may face anti-intellectual sentiments. However, Bourdieu argues that scholars and intellectuals have the capacity to engage in political debates and social movements without neglecting their responsibilities as researchers. They can achieve this by cultivating critical reflexivity and subjecting themselves to critique. Bourdieu (2000) introduces the concept of the “collective intellectual” and highlights their role in liberating social critique from the constraints of academia’s “small world,” as well as in fostering the social conditions necessary for the collective production of realistic utopias. Drawing on Bourdieu’s ideas, Canaan (2010), who operates at the intersection of scholar-activism and education, interprets “scholarship with commitment” as countering the increasingly dehumanizing working conditions by collaborating with others in a democratic manner.

**Gramsci:** Scholar-activists also draw upon the works of Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist intellectual activist whose theories have been utilized in social movements studies (Cox, 2015; Santos, 2012) as well as in the fields of education and pedagogy (Apple, 2016; Canaan, 2010; Pimlott, 2017) in the literature. Gramsci’s concept of *cultural hegemony* and his distinction between “organic intellectuals” and “traditional intellectuals” have had a profound influence on the scholarship of scholar-activists. While Gramsci developed his ideas in the context of pre-World War II Italy and the fight against fascism, scholar-activists adapted this notion to the crisis of neoliberal hegemony (Contu, 2020).

Gramsci’s view that “All men are intellectuals” (Forgacs, 2000; p. 304) challenges the boundaries between scholarship and activism. He argues that organic intellectuals have a unique opportunity to challenge dominant ideologies, shape new modes of thinking, and develop alternative theories rooted in history and sensitive to specific contexts. These intellectuals play a crucial role in fostering political emancipation (Strine, 1991). Therefore, Gramsci’s theories align with the theorizations of scholar-activists discussed earlier in this chapter, including the critique of hegemony, the pursuit of social change and emancipation, and modes of engagement that involve creating counter-hegemonies within social movements or closely aligning with marginalized communities experiencing political oppression. Cox (2015) suggests that theorizing about social movements can occur from two distinct positions: the academic position (corresponding to the traditional intellectual) and the activist position (corresponding to the organic intellectual). In the field of education, Apple (2016), inspired by Gramsci, argues that the role of “counter-hegemonic education” was not “to throw out ‘elite knowledge’ but to reconstruct its form and content so that it served genuinely progressive social needs” (Apple, 2016).

**Burawoy**, in his last thesis for *public sociology* states:

If the standpoint of economics is the market and its expansion, and the standpoint of political science is the state and the guarantee of political stability, then the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity. (p. 24)

Michael Burawoy's concept of public sociology emphasizes a sociological approach that is more focused on societal issues, highlighting the public dimension of the discipline. However, the specific modes of engagement associated with this scholarship remain unclear until Burawoy distinguishes between traditional and organic public sociology. In traditional public sociology, the public is merely "addressed" but is otherwise "invisible" and "passive." In contrast, organic public sociology involves sociologists actively engaging with various counter-publics, such as "labor movements, neighborhood associations, and faith communities," through dialogue and mutual learning (Burawoy, 2005). This approach aligns with the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and collaboration between public sociologists and the public they serve.

While one might anticipate Burawoy having a significant influence on the conception of scholar-activism, this review primarily examines the engagement of two scholars with Burawoy's public sociology, particularly its organic variant (Apple, 2016; Santos, 2012). Santos (2012) explores the notion of queer public sociology at the intersection of public sociology and queer studies. They perceive in Burawoy's sociology a call for politicized action that necessitates the disclosure of one's political orientations as scholar-activists (Santos, 2012). The other scholar is Apple (2016), who incorporates organic public sociology, along with the ideas of Gramsci and Bourdieu, to shape his list of tasks for public intellectuals or scholar-activists in the field of education, emphasizing the importance of "engaging in the mutually pedagogic dialogues" with students.

Significant overlaps and similarities can be observed in the conceptual discussions presented by Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Burawoy. However, it is evident that there are varying levels of engagement in their propositions. For instance, while Bourdieu and Burawoy emphasize political and public engagement, they maintain a commitment to the academic realm and the sense of belonging within the academic community. In contrast, Gramsci argues for a more deeply embedded form of activism that is not necessarily constrained by academic affiliations. This difference in perspective can partly reflect the different lived experiences of these thinkers in engaging with both activism and academia.

## Discussion

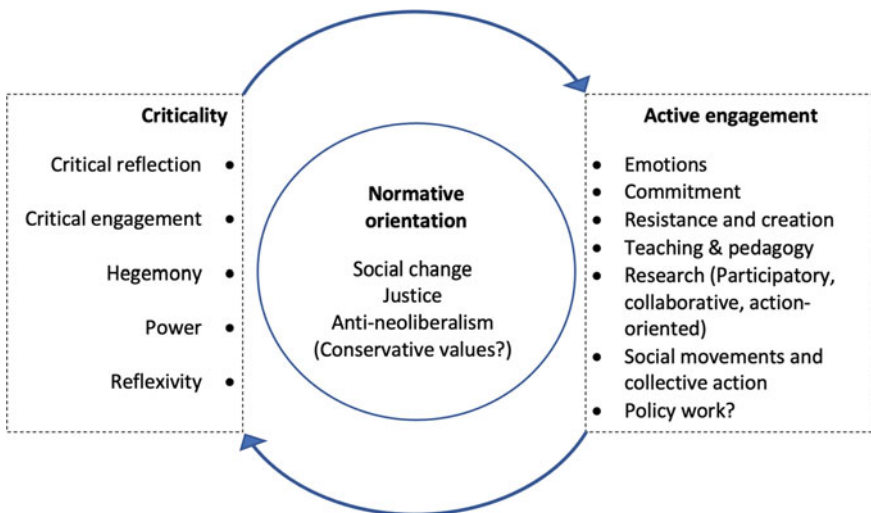
In this discussion section, I will consolidate our understanding of scholar-activism by synthesizing the key insights gained from the literature review. I will explore the implications of the findings for future research.

### *Scholar-Activism Conceptualized*

As this study suggests, scholar-activism is a critical, reflexive, normative, and active scholarly engagement with a commitment to create social and political change within or beyond the academic realm and mainly in accordance with the principles of social justice. This definition aligns with various perspectives found in the literature. However, this study has further refined the understanding of each component of scholar-activism. Based on the findings, I have developed a conceptual framework (Fig. 2) categorizing the different components of scholar-activism as criticality, normative orientation, and active engagement. It is important to note that these components are interconnected and overlap with each other.

Criticality refers to scholar-activism arising from a critique of the present, including the status quo, prevailing norms, assumptions, and taken-for-granted discourses that perpetuate problems and marginalize certain discourses, perspectives, voices, or groups of people. Such hegemonies give rise to various forms of inequality and injustice, such as social injustice, environmental injustice, and epistemic injustice. Reflexivity, as part of criticality, involves the scholar-activist critically examining their own positionality in relation to the groups they engage with, their values and assumptions in their scholarly work and activism, and their role in addressing the problem, aiming to foster greater objectivity and self-awareness.

Scholar-activism, as indicated by this study, transcends a mere “doctrine of committed action” for any cause and is primarily defined by its normative orientation toward social change, particularly focused on social justice rather than efforts (e.g.,



**Fig. 2** A conceptual framework categorizing the different components of scholar-activism identified in this study as criticality, normative orientation, and active engagement (developed by the author)

by certain think tanks) aimed at preserving and maintaining specific neoliberal policies or hegemony. While some scholar-activists have sought to broaden this definition to encompass a wider range of causes not necessarily centered on change (Pimlott, 2017), all the articles self-identified as scholar-activist maintain an anti-neoliberal (often explicitly left-leaning) and social justice orientation and conceptualization. Hence, one could argue that activism has become associated with leftist ideals.

If right-leaning scholars engaging in committed action to maintain the status quo do not identify as scholar-activists, what might be the reason? One hypothesis could be that right-leaning conservative values do not align with the values upheld by scholar-activists. Thus, conservatives accuse liberal scholar-activists of promoting biased and distorted science, using such claims to oppose liberal activism, particularly in the social sciences (Cofnas et al., 2017). For instance, Cofnas et al. (2017), in their article on conservatives' lack of trust in scientists, argue that their diminishing trust reflects the increasing adoption of a liberal-activist stance by scientists in certain fields, particularly social science, as they seek to "influence public policy in a liberal direction."

I argue that the binary political framework restricts our capacity to envision progress beyond the left-right divide and perpetuates the continuous fragmentation and hostility within our societies. However, it is evident from the statements I have presented that conservatives perceive activism (specifically referred to as "liberal activism") as a threat to science, considering activist scholarship to be biased and distorted. Larregue (2018) views these conservative claims as a form of boundary work with various purposes, including upholding power and subverting liberal dominance in the field of social sciences. This debate represents a classic conflict between these two groups, ultimately influencing the use of language and differently shaping the understanding of notions such as objectivity and scientific norms from each side. My objective here is to illustrate how diverse value domains can influence language in unique ways, resulting in varying definitions from different perspectives. With this nuanced understanding, I return to my main goal, which is to understand the insider perspective of scholar-activism; by highlighting the influence of the liberal left on this conceptual field, it can be argued that social change and liberal progressive values are fundamental defining elements of scholar-activism.

Engagement, as defined here, encompasses a range of different forms, including emotional engagement, committed engagement, and practical engagements in teaching, research, and collaboration with social movements or collectives. Active engagement not only encompasses the types of activities and practices employed by scholar-activists to effect tangible change in the world but also emphasizes the quality of engagement. This allows for a spectrum of activities that may not necessarily be confrontational, loud, or visible. It includes emotional engagement involving feelings of discomfort, anger, or joy, as well as long-term commitment to a cause that extends beyond, for instance, one-time participation in collective action. Moreover, different modes of active engagement are interconnected. For instance, participation in social movements can involve various roles for the scholar as a teacher or researcher, as well as involving emotional engagement and long-term commitment.

It is worth noting that “active engagement” differs from the concept of “academic engagement” within university-industry relations (Perkmann et al., 2013). In that context, modes of engagement revolve around academic interactions with industries, such as consultancy, patenting, and co-authorship with industrial researchers, with a focus on accessing resources and learning opportunities relevant to research activities.

While active engagement shares similarities with the concept of “action” in action-oriented research (Wittmeyer et al., 2014), there are also differences. According to Wittmeyer et al. (2014), action in action-oriented research involves various activities such as facilitating and participating in processes, supporting policy formulation, and analyzing actions. These activities fall under the umbrella of “action-oriented research” and represent one of the modes of active engagement for scholar-activists that are illustrated in this study, among others. Therefore, the concept of “action” does not fully capture the diverse range of engagements described by scholar-activists. This means that scholar-activism as a concept is different from both academic engagement and action research.

### ***Scholar-Activism’s Intellectual Roots***

In this study, I have demonstrated the common and significant intellectual influences on scholar-activists in their conceptual approach to their work. Firstly, a critical geography circle has been identified which has greatly influenced the literature included in this study (approximately one-third of the articles). Within this field, various intellectuals have made conceptual contributions and theorized scholar-activism. It is notable that there has been a shift from Marxist theories toward a growing influence from feminist and poststructuralist perspectives among these scholar-activists.

Feminist perspective and theory represent the second stream of intellectual influence shaping the works of scholar-activists in this review. Feminist thought, historically intertwined with on-the-ground social movements, has developed a rich body of theories that provide support for scholar-activist conceptualizations. Examples include Collins’s intellectual activism, Haraway’s situated knowledges, Harding’s strong objectivity, and Crenshaw’s intersectionality.

The third category of intellectual influence is centered around critical pedagogy and education. This category has shaped the works of scholar-activists across various disciplines, focusing on education and teaching as active engagement for scholar-activism. Participatory action research (PAR) as a mode of active engagement also shares theoretical roots with critical education. The main influential figures from this field of scholar-activism have been Paulo Freire, Giroux, hooks, and Apple.

The final category encompasses the contributions of three prominent scholars, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Burawoy, within the field of critical social theory. These scholars have served as major sources of intellectual inspiration for scholar-activists, not only in sociology but also in other fields. Gramsci’s notion of organic intellectuals, Bourdieu’s scholarship with commitment, and Burawoy’s concept of public sociology have all been influential.

It is important to acknowledge that there are additional perspectives worthy of exploration, although the scope of this chapter does not permit an in-depth examination of them. For instance, social movement theory has been referenced multiple times and has provided both an analytical framework for scholar-activists in relation to their organizations and a space for reflecting on the role of scholars engaged in social movement studies. However, due to limitations, it has not been extensively discussed.

Another area of influence that deserves attention is critical management studies, which is the field to which two of the scholar-activists belong. They draw on concepts from this field and traditions such as corporate social responsibility, yet there is only minimal reference to it in this study. Additionally, liberation theology, which informs one of the works, emerges as an important activist tradition that merits further exploration.

### *Concluding Remarks*

I will now return to the story of the intellectual Katouzians, whom Jamshid secluded in the mountains to think and provide society with knowledge and solutions. The question arises: Can the pursuit of intellectual and social commitments be harmoniously linked? The findings presented in this text demonstrate that scholar-activism is not necessarily a haphazard combination of scientific and scholarly activities with activism and political partisanship. Scholar-activists in this study have actively engaged with their dual roles and commitments, drawing upon intellectual traditions and conceptually harmonizing their involvement with scholar-activism. An important aspect of this effort is the recognition of the tensions that arise from merging these two tasks, not necessarily from a conceptual standpoint, but from a practical one. The constructed boundaries between science and society have tangible consequences, particularly within an increasingly neoliberal academia where academic success is measured using criteria that are incompatible with activist engagements by academics.

Moreover, viewing science as a socially constructed process and product influences how we approach its definitions and norms, ultimately shaping its compatibility with other realms of society. For instance, the growing space for collaboration between universities and industries has been influenced by the framing of science and the pursuit of science in science policy, as well as the setting of priorities through an academic capitalist mode of governance. Thus, the incompatibilities between science and activism as social institutions do not stem from inherent differences between the two (as theoretical reconciliation seems plausible), but rather from the difficulties in navigating the “mountains” that lie between them when attempting to combine the two. In today’s world, this challenge manifests as difficulties in securing sufficient funding and stability, which would enable scholars to focus on their activist scholarship without being forced to compromise their intellectual inquiries due to other pressing needs.

The scholar-activists examined in this study do not provide a straightforward answer to the dilemma of linking scholarship and activism harmoniously. Perhaps, the pursuit of “harmony” is not the ultimate goal, as these reflexive accounts show tensions, and contradictions are an inherent part of the scholar-activism experience. Instead, the pursuit of scholar-activism may lie in challenging the constructed boundaries between science and society in order to contest the hierarchy of knowledge, the power dynamics generated by these boundaries, and the problems that arise from such hierarchical structures and constructed boundaries, in order to make scholarship matter.

## Appendix 1

The literature included in this review.

Authors	Title	Field	Cause	Geographical focus
Hales et al. (2018)	Academic activism in tourism studies: Critical narratives from four researchers	Tourism studies	Various	Multiple
de Beer (2015)	The university, the city and the clown: A theological essay on solidarity, mutuality and prophecy	Theology	Poverty and injustice	South Africa
Hern (2016)	Navigating the borderland of scholar activism: Narrative practice as applied sociology in the movement for single payer health care reform	Sociology	Single payer health care reform	US
Cox (2015)	Scholarship and activism: A social movements perspective	Sociology	Social movements	UK
Santos (2012)	Disclosed and willing: Towards a queer public sociology	Sociology	LGBTQ	Portugal
Deschner et al. (2020)	Prefiguring a feminist academia: A multi-vocal autoethnography on the creation of a feminist space in a neoliberal university	Multidisciplinary	Epistemic justice	UK/US

(continued)

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Authors	Title	Field	Cause	Geographical focus
Quaye et al. (2017)	Blending scholar and activist identities: Establishing the need for scholar activism	Multidisciplinary	Black faculty	US
Richter et al. (2020)	Tempered radicalism and intersectionality: Scholar-activism in the neoliberal university	Multidisciplinary	Neoliberalism in HEI	Multiple
Contu (2018)	'... The point is to change it'—Yes, but in what direction and how? Intellectual activism as a way of 'walking the talk' of critical work in business schools	Management and organization studies	Social justice	Worldwide
Contu (2020)	Answering the crisis with intellectual activism: Making a difference as business schools scholars	Management and organization studies	Business schools	Worldwide
Grosser (2021)	Gender, business and human rights: Academic activism as critical engagement in neoliberal times	Management and organization studies	Social justice	Australia
Routledge and Derickson (2015)	Situated solidarities and the practice of scholar-activism	Geography	Environmental movements	UK
Croog et al. (2018)	Real world food justice and the enigma of the scholar-activist label: A reflection on research values	Geography	Food justice	US
Mason (2013)	Academics and social movements: Knowing our place, making our space	Geography	Environmental movements	Europe
Maxey (1999)	Beyond boundaries? Activism, academia, reflexivity and research	Geography	Land ownership	UK
Derickson and Routledge (2015)	Resourcing scholar-activism: Collaboration, transformation, and the production of knowledge	Geography	Environment justice-resilience	Worldwide

(continued)



(continued)

Authors	Title	Field	Cause	Geographical focus
Reynolds et al. (2020)	Envisioning radical food geographies: Shared learning and praxis through the food justice scholar-activist/activist-scholar community of practice	Geography	Food justice	US
Chatterton et al. (2010)	Beyond scholar activism: Making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university	Geography	Autonomous housing	UK
Askins (2009)	'That's just what I do': Placing emotion in academic activism	Geography	Migration and asylum	UK
Canaan (2010)	Sand in the machine: Encouraging academic activism with sociology HE students today	Education studies	Social justice	UK/US
Grey (2013)	Activist academics: What future?	Education studies	Changing academia	New Zealand
Buras (2021)	Education research and critical race praxis: Fieldnotes on "making it matter" in New Orleans	Education studies	Social justice	North America
Apple (2016)	Challenging the epistemological fog: The roles of the scholar/activist in education	Education studies	Social justice in education	Worldwide
Pimlott (2017)	Cultural production in the classroom	Communication	Classroom engagement	Canada
McCann (2010)	Borders of engagement: Rethinking scholarship, activism, and the academy	Communication	Academia	US

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