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### The Difficult and Hopeful Ethics of Research on, and with, Social Movements

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# The Difficult and Hopeful Ethics of Research on, and with, Social Movements

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores a number of key questions that serve to introduce this special issue on the ethics of research on activism. We first set out the limitations of the bureaucratic response to ethical complexities in our field. We then examine two approaches often used to justify research that demands time consuming and potentially risky participation in research by activists. We label these approaches the ethic of immediate reciprocity and the ethic of general reciprocity and question their impacts. We note, in particular, the tendency of ethics of reciprocity to preclude research on 'ugly movements' whose politics offends the left and liberal leanings predominant among movement researchers. The two ethics also imply different positionalities for the researcher vis-à-vis their subject movement which we explore, alongside dilemmas thrown up by multiple approaches to knowledge production and by complex issues of researcher and activist identities. The overall move to increasing complexity offered by this paper will, we hope, provide food for thought for others who confront real-world ethical dilemmas in fields marked by contention. We also hope that it will encourage readers to turn next to the wide range of contributions offered in this issue.*

**KEY WORDS:** Research ethics, activism, knowledge production, identity

## Introduction

Every stage of the research process into social movements can introduce complex ethical questions. The issues we choose to address are often highly politicised and involve our own moral judgements and sympathies. The groups and individuals with whom we engage, whether directly or through documentary records, may be in positions of peculiar vulnerability. They may be relatively powerless by virtue of their social situation, their activities may be covert or illegal, and they may face a high risk of repression. The data we gather, then, have special risks associated with them (Blee and Vinning, 2010), but ethical challenges do not stop once we insert our own analyses. Rather, we must make choices about what we report, in what terms we report it and what we leave unsaid, judging the risks faced by research respondents and deciding on the importance of giving voice to those who feel under-represented in their societies. Moreover, we must choose which audiences we wish to address. These issues and many more are likely to be familiar to anyone who has engaged in research on social movements, whatever the particular

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methodological techniques they employ. While some of these ethical challenges may seem unique to the study of social movements, we also believe that the lessons available here may be much more broadly applicable to original research in a number of cognate fields.

This special issue was prompted in part by the rising demands for researchers to specify the ethical implications of their work; demands of which anyone working within a higher education institution in the USA, Europe and perhaps further afield, will be aware. In the first section below, we argue that the bureaucratic nature of ethical review processes offers a partial, and at times, debilitating approach to carrying out ethical research. A part of the problem is the fact that deferral to research ethics 'specialists' empties such processes of the important complexities resulting from the substantive characteristics of any research project. This introduction highlights a number of those complexities as commonly experienced in research relating to social movements. Such complexities are not necessarily best served by more complex and sensitive (and therefore onerous) review procedures; they will not dissolve in a bureaucratic solution. It is instead the practices of sharing experiences, airing conundrums and puzzling over problems in the community of scholars and research participants that will allow researchers to continually improve the ethical standards of data collection, analysis and dissemination. This special issue is intended to be one step in that direction. No field has sharply defined boundaries of course, and it remains important to consider problems and solutions found in a range of social scientific fields; we hope, in this regard, that this special issue will have a relevance for anyone whose research subject is marked by contention or conflict, or who recognises the urge to take a principled stand for, or against, those who have been involved in or benefit from their research.

Here, we explore a few themes of particular interest that cut across the papers in this special issue, and a couple which perhaps have yet to be adequately addressed. In the next few paragraphs, we will briefly outline the role of institutional ethical review before this introduction (and indeed the whole volume) opens out the notion of research ethics to much broader and important questions. We conclude by identifying some hopeful ways forward in practising an ethical approach to researching activism.

### **Bureaucratic Demands and 'Real' Research Ethics**

Not so long ago, demonstrating awareness of the relevant disciplinary 'code of conduct' for research was often all that was required to reassure supervisors, funders or managers that the ethical implications of one's social science research project had been thoroughly thought through. Research ethics committees in many institutions now have considerably strengthened oversight, lengthy forms and demanding panel meetings in which one must defend the procedures used for research. Additional demands are thus placed not only on professional researchers but also on our doctoral students and, in some institutions, undergraduates too. There are undoubtedly instances where review processes will have encouraged better practices and one positive outcome is the increasing focus on research ethics in our teaching. It has now become rather more automatic to consider the genuine ethical quandaries that might arise in one's research project although, in our own experience, and that of many of our students, the 'real ethics' that we considered before submitting our projects to ethical review never seem to have a box on the form.

While drafting this introduction we received an email publicising a book that promised to help us 'Avoid Ethical Lapses that Put Your Project and Organization at Risk' with 'the

use of graphics, checklists, examples, and other tools' (marketing materials for Kliem, 2011). The check-box approach to ethics, which is the mainstay of any bureaucratic procedure, may help deal with certain sorts of risk but is ultimately limited. By reducing ethics to a generic checklist, often not even sensitive to differences between physical and social sciences, let alone different disciplines, much of the ambiguity of ethics is lost. Yet it is precisely the ambiguity—the uncertainty of what research is for, who it should benefit and what risk and harm is acceptable in conducting research—that ethical thinking should help us navigate. Ethical questions are not clear cut but are heavily contextualised by the researchers' own positionality and relationship to research subjects. Instead many university ethical procedures simply require social scientists to ensure written consent forms and project information sheets are used. Consent forms are required for ethical approval, regardless of the fact that they can be highly inappropriate for some forms of activism research. This process of approval is further generalised (and thus limited) by the process of peer approval operating within specialised departments which means that those who determine if research is ethical often have no knowledge of the field of research which they judge. We have encountered ethics officers who resist any alternative approaches because they have no knowledge of social movements or the variety of approaches taken in researching with them.

Reducing all of this complexity to questions on whether a 'gatekeeper' will need to provide access or whether physical tests will be carried out on subjects ignores the importance of the *process* of research, the need to navigate scenarios where there is no clear 'right' choice, and the requirement to respond to changing conditions. At many universities in Britain, although ethics committees have been established, there is still no mechanism for checking whether researchers actually implemented the ethical approach they signed up to. There is no feedback mechanism as to how research was actually undertaken or any reflection or sharing of lessons learnt in the field. In this way, ethics are still perceived as a static consideration to be completed early in any research project, rather than the dynamic, complex and ongoing dilemma that researchers really face. Indeed, in this volume many of the most difficult and complex ethical questions and choices faced by researchers emerged late in the research process (see both De Jong and Creek, this issue) when much data collection had already been completed. It is often the temporal implications of participation, the evolving affiliation with research subjects and the heightened politicisation of researchers (often through the research itself) that emerge which raise really interesting ethical dilemmas. As such these questions of participation, politics, identity, reciprocity and social justice are the issues too often missed from a bureaucratic approach to ethics.

### **The Complexity of Reciprocation**

There is a growing trend within social movement research for academics to consciously, indeed loudly, take on the role of 'activist-scholars' (Routledge, 1996; Maxey, 1999; Fuller & Kitchen, 2004; Bevington & Dixon, 2005; Graeber, 2009; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Such arguments tend to assert the potential for academics to make a real and positive impact on movements they are studying. This may be simply by using ethnographic methods that enable participation with movements that are being studied, thereby adding to the movement's number and offering a particular set of skills. Or it may be that the activist-scholars focus more on their particular skills, offering

research and writing activity that may be beneficial to movement participants (though see Flacks, 2005), while not necessarily putting themselves on the line in physical actions. Taking on the activist-scholar role is often justified through an argument, we will refer to as the ethics of immediate reciprocation: participation in research has its costs for activists through the time taken and in the personal security risk (which may be perceived as considerable when the researcher is not personally known to participants beforehand), so, academics must ask, what can we do to return favours due? Directly aiding the movement one studies becomes one of the answers.

Such arguments are explored and advanced in a number of contributions to this special issue, so we will not detail them further here (see Dawson and Sinwell; Cordner *et al.*; Smeltzer; Chesters; and Santos; this issue). We would, however, like to sound a few notes of caution concerning this ethical claim. We want to be cautious about advocating reciprocity as a simple and easy resolution to the inequity of power between researchers and research participants, as a way to gain access to groups, as a way to enact social change, or to share in the 'risk' of activism *per se*. While both of us have practised reciprocity in various ways over the years, it has rarely been an easy ethical approach.

The main issue with immediate reciprocity is that problems of objectification do not disappear through participation (Roseneil, 1993). As the trend for identifying as activist-scholars has grown so too has the kudos for being an activist within academia. No longer marginalised for being subjective, this active engagement with social change actors has meant that it is increasingly possible to benefit from links with social movements in order to further one's academic career (most notably in Britain through the inclusion of an 'impact' factor in our formal Research Excellence Framework which measures our engagement with those 'outside' academia). Benefitting from others' knowledge and actions to further one's career is the antithesis of what an ethical approach should be about (see also Chesters, this volume). At the same time, there may be limits to how useful the activity offered by academics really is; as Croteau has it, 'Becoming an academic to support social movements is akin to launching a space program to develop a pen that writes upside down. At best, it is a circuitous route' (2005: 20). We do not make these points as an accusation against those scholars we reference above and recognise that there are other justifications for the activist-scholar role. It is noteworthy, however, that even a perception of an instrumental, exchange-based approach might have longer-term dangers for relationships between social scientists and activists.

Another result of an emphasis on reciprocation is to narrow those movements which we study. Most of the arguments concerning immediate reciprocity have come from scholars studying movements that are, broadly speaking, of the left. Given a decided leftward lean among the social movement researchers, activist-scholars can expect some argument concerning the particular politics of particular movements, but are unlikely to face hostility about the broader ambitions of the movements they attempt to assist. However, it is intellectually essential not to restrict our collective endeavours to research on movements with which we can have such easy relationships. It is necessary to research anti-abortion movements, racist national movements, terrorist movements and the whole gamut of fundamentalist religions. How, then, does one apply the ethic of immediate reciprocation when one requests (as Creek has done, this issue) the participation of ex-gay activists who proselytise on the basis that people need redemption from their non-heterosexual identities? Genuine attempts to assist ugly movements achieve their goals would likely

meet consternation from those who have argued so strongly for 'embedded' activist-scholarship.

If the study of a diversity of movements is important for social movement scholarship, then the ethic of immediate reciprocation raises uncomfortable demands and introduces political contestation squarely at the heart of the collective, intellectual endeavour. While it would be misleading to pretend that individual academics' politics could be banished from their research, to turn all research on activism into political action would be to weaken any claims to the systematic creation and critique of knowledge that the academic field could muster.

Thus, there is a need to critically examine whether immediate reciprocation could preclude the important task of exploring a diversity of social movements, and whether the ethic of immediate reciprocation could itself become a dominant and ultimately unhelpful dogma in social movement studies. There is a danger that reciprocation is practised simply as a way to gain access, rather than as a genuine desire to aid the movement; potentially an ethically dishonest approach. The growing assumption that reciprocation is a preferred ethic has also had unfortunate implications on activists' expectations of researchers. Reciprocation becomes particularly messy and emotionally fraught when research subjects assume abundant resources are available, or request help with tasks in which the researcher has no skill (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; see also Dawson and Sinwell, this issue). Though as Smeltzer (this issue) argues often the most useful immediate reciprocation involves 'back office' work which is less visible but just as important as front line direct action. These issues are in addition to the long-known quandaries of when such participation and reciprocation blurs the ability of academics to think critically about their subject and the need for continual reflexivity about our roles and positionality (England, 1994; Plows, 1998; Cordner *et al.*, this issue).

### **The Value of Academic Knowledge Production and Dissemination**

The desire to reciprocate on research participants' investment in a project is hardly the only justification for activist-scholarship. To the extent that individuals mobilise the knowledge and skills of their intellectual discipline in the service of particular groups, then the activities of activist-scholars may fit with calls for a more public sociology (which may, of course, be extended to many social science disciplines) and, perhaps more surprisingly, with the desire of funding bodies to see the impact of research on a variety of stakeholders or 'user groups' relevant to the study.<sup>1</sup> These arguments imply an older ethic of general reciprocity: it may be impossible to 'pay back' a research participant for their efforts in any direct way that does not somehow compromise the research, but the utility of the results of research will offer some benefit at a broader, societal level.

The main dilemma then becomes whether, and how, knowledge produced should be of relevance to social movements. Knowledge produced should at least be physically accessible to those who participated in its creation, though so much, including unfortunately the papers in this journal, remain locked up in costly or inaccessible publications (Pickerill, 2008). Even if such publications are freely shared, however, the language, findings and timeliness of our research can be of limited use to social movements.

Activists are often very interested in research that addresses the particular problem they are mobilising around, which may sit outside the domain of social movement studies, or in studies that offer lessons about strategy and tactics. Within this journal's main field, it may

be work on movement outcomes and impacts that most obviously pique the interest of activists along, perhaps, with practical insights into the processes of mobilisation. But many areas of scholarship may have huge merit academically speaking, but remain of little direct interest to activists. Indeed, if social movement research projects rely mostly on listening to activists analyses and then simply parroting these lessons to an academic community, then it would be difficult to see it as having any benefits to the social movements themselves beyond, perhaps, amplifying the voices of activists.

Academia, however, also offers particular value in knowledge production as a consequence of its claims to rigour and systematicity. Academic research includes (or at least ought to include) a very significant analytical step such that the sum of the parts is greater than simply a collection of data drawn from the goodwill of movement participants as research subjects. Moreover, social movement scholars can, and often do, work in other fields, making significant contributions to knowledge about neoliberal globalisation, patriarchy, racism and a whole host of movement-relevant issues. As Don Mitchell has persuasively argued, ‘to make a difference beyond the academy it is necessary to do good and important, and committed work *within the academy*’ (2004, p. 23). Thus, the ethical question remains as to whether it is enough, having elicited ‘rich data’ from our research respondents, to use these solely in pursuit of intellectual plaudits in the academy. This argument from general reciprocity, resting on the assumption that academic knowledge has a particular role alongside and interacting with activist knowledge, may be an ethical justification for inviting activists to behave as research subjects. In doing so, it seeks to avoid risking the appearance of condescension to movement participants (by telling them what they already know, just wrapped up in academic language) and excessive political involvement to our scholarly peers.

Yet, as discussed by both Santos and Chesters (this issue) many of us have come to accept that all our knowledge is situated knowledge, and that whether we are open and honest about it or not we write with a subjectivity that is often formed by an embedded and sympathetic position to social movements. In recent years, the validation of the participatory approach to social movement studies has supported the claim that knowledge that is grounded and situated within movement praxis is more worthwhile, perhaps more authentic, than knowledge developed in the academy. This scholarship can actively situate itself against capitalism, corporations and elites and in support of those social movements with which we work (Barker, 2008). While broadly supportive of the value of this situated approach, there is a danger of losing sight of the different values of different kinds of knowledge. Building a hierarchy with ‘authentic’ or ‘situated’ knowledge at the top may undermine the value of knowledge developed in the academy for academic ends. Indeed, there remains a responsibility on academics to clearly articulate and advocate the value of knowledge-in-general and thus the wider purposes of academic work; that is, the value of a general reciprocity approach.

These arguments are not intended to undermine the importance of embedded participatory research—especially those projects where the goals of the research are co-designed by academics and participants (see Corder *et al.*, this issue)—or to undervalue those who seek to produce and disseminate socially useful knowledge, especially in easily understandable forms. However, we do oppose any dogma that one form of knowledge production is superior to all others. Ethical questions as to who the research should be useful to, and for what ends, do not require disregarding the importance of producing knowledge-in-general (Chase, 2003). Rather, these questions should make us alert to the

risks of how knowledge might be misused (such as for state surveillance), and to navigate the necessary attempts at co-production, but also to create space and respect for knowledge production in other forms.

### **Identity, Dualisms and the Spatial Politics of Responsibility**

One of the main themes emerging from the papers in this volume is the acknowledgement that our identities (as researchers, activists, women, white, homosexuals, and so on) overlap and intertwine with our research and, in practice, negate many of the dualisms which have been long established in academia. Moreover, these identities are dynamic and fluid and thus often co-evolve with our research. Ethically, this complicates our positionality but also strengthens our understanding of our subjectivity and involvement in knowledge production. At the same time, for many who conduct research in places far from our homes and academic institutions, this assertion of our identity and visible insertion of ourselves into our research can help us better understand how our sense of responsibility to our research subjects stretches and changes over time and space (Smeltzer, this issue). In other words, for many of us there is a spatial politics of responsibility to those social movements with whom we work, but this responsibility can be difficult to articulate and enact within the traditional framework of academia (Massey, 2004).

This acknowledgement of the importance of our deeply embedded understanding of our identity moves the ethical debates beyond simply a question of what form of reciprocity is appropriate. Rather it raises fundamental questions about our sense of self, when our work might at times clash with the increasingly capitalist and corporate university institutions in which many of us work (Barker, 2008; Dawson and Sinwell, this issue). Ethical considerations then become about much more than bureaucratic checklists of practical elements we must include in our research, they become (and always were) about how we understand ourselves, our role in social change and our very identities.

Celebrating and being open about our identities and their complexity then becomes a core ethical approach to research activism. The 'rewarding intersection' between ourselves as social actors and academics should be celebrated (Santos, this issue). An emphasis on uniqueness and diversity, rather than a single route to ethical research, echoes the way we would expect activists to favour a variety of strategies and tactics for social change. This is an extension of the long-standing work on the need for reflexivity (England, 1994), but it is more overt in its discussion of who the researcher is and how that interplays with our work. To ignore the importance of identity to ethics risks failing to value passion about the movements with whom we work as much as we value rigour in our methods and findings.

A focus on identity also helps overcome a perception that ethical dilemmas need only be examined by early career researchers. Too often ethics are deemed something doctoral students need to overcome and much reflection and writing on ethical dilemmas is by early career academics. It appears that once an ethical approach has been determined then academics can get on with the 'real' research and ethical questions are rarely revisited. If we are to take identity and ethics seriously, then ethical questions become ongoing and central to our research. This better reflects the ongoing physical and emotional labour involved in social movement research. Ethics need to include a reflection on care-of-self as well as care of research participants, especially when one is physically in the front line (De Jong, this issue) or emotionally exposed (Creek, this issue). This individualisation of

ethical problems prevents us from adequately sharing success stories and showing solidarity to those who have taken difficult ethical paths. It is too often left to the individual to justify why, as De Jong did, they ultimately participate, at great personal risk, in the social movements they were studying. We hope that this volume will go some way to sharing the stories of ethical issues and approaches and move towards a more collective sense of responsibility for these ethical dilemmas.

Overcoming the dualisms inherent in much research (such as academic-activist, writer-social change actor, elite-subject, university-society) also enables us to articulate the spatial politics of responsibility. Taking an ethical approach requires us to understand how, even when those with whom we work might be many thousands of miles away, we respect and incorporate and feedback our work. It requires us to understand how distance—physical and intellectual—does not negate our responsibilities.

A spatial politics also enables us to understand and situate social movements within broader conceptual frames—such as capitalism, colonialism (Lewis, this issue) or patriarchy—which in turn identifies hierarchies of power, the position of academics within those hierarchies, and may also help us avoid repeating past mistakes in the objectification and disempowerment of research subjects. By situating the academy as a space within these conceptual frames, it can be understood as an important space of social change itself. This helps us recognise the potential isolation of the academy's 'ivory tower', standing intellectually dislocated from wider society, while at the same time the institutional demands on the university embed it within systems of capitalism and colonialism. As Dawson and Sinwell argue in this issue, these processes reinforce the need to link our work on social movements with making changes within our own institutions.

### **Hopeful Ways Forward**

Thus far, we have tended towards identifying the problems with existing ethical approaches to the study of activism and the complexity of attempts to navigate the ethical minefield. We would like to end by identifying some of the more successful strategies and hopeful ways forward—many of them illustrated in this volume.

A key part of an ethical research process is recognition of our location within the broader dynamics of society and seeking to reflexively critique and adjust that positionality. Lewis (this issue) does this by asserting a role for academics, particularly those working with Indigenous activists resisting colonialism. This involves acknowledging the need to recognise oppression and domination in places where it might have previously been invisible and seeking to address it. Similar approaches have been made in overcoming patriarchy and gender domination and in the realm of sexuality (Santos, this issue). Smeltzer (this issue) also demonstrates a sensitive approach to recognising the impact of power differentials, in her case with a focus on the limited freedoms of activists (both as activists and as research participants) in democratically restricted societies. Both authors, in their different ways, indicate the importance of research that moves further afield than the norm, seeking to understand the importance of different political and social contexts. We would certainly want to encourage other attempts to find broader perspectives and note that studies of movements based in African and Asian countries are particularly lacking in the field (though see Smeltzer and Dawson and Sinwell, this issue).

While we have presented some cautionary notes about the ways in which different forms of knowledge can interact, it is clear that a number of scholars are working hard to include

movement actors within the knowledge production process. Cordner *et al.* (this issue) reflect on some of the dilemmas introduced here and demonstrate the relevance of community-based participatory research methods to social movements. Chesters (this issue) advocates, and has long practised, co-production of knowledge and, on a practical level, collaborative working with social movements and co-writing. This approach is time consuming and it can be difficult to negotiate the different agendas involved, but ultimately it can produce ethically robust and important knowledge. Moreover, as de Jong argues, taking adequate stock of the knowledge and perspectives of the movements we study may be essential in confronting some long-held biases on the academic mainstream. While this work often assertively amplifies the activist voice within all writings, others such as Jolly, Russell and Cohen (this issue) argue for the importance of telling the stories of social movements through individual voices: making the personal political, situating knowledge within personal trajectories and journeys and asserting the importance of oral history. Too often the voice and identity of individual activists is subsumed into a broader narrative and the nuances and complexities of their journey are lost. Jolly and colleagues offer an approach through oral histories and explore its ethical opportunities and limitations.

In addition to the approaches reflected on in the rest of this volume is the growing emphasis on taking our work outside the academy. Works like that of Mitchell (2008) seek to celebrate attempts to engage beyond academia and co-produce useful political work. Authors such as Fuller and Kitchen (2004) have long argued for a subversion of academic structuring of knowledge through peer-reviewed publishing systems and government research assessment schemes. Increasingly, there are new forms of solidarity for academics who wish to enact alternative ethics in their research with social movements and to publish in different and varied forms, often with open access. Perhaps, however, there remains a need to shift ethical questions from the personal and individual to more collective and mutually supportive ways of understanding our ethical obligations and responsibilities. We hope that this collective sense of responsibility for ethics might begin to emerge from this volume, though really this is a continuation of a long-running debate and we intend for that debate to flourish further.

We have deliberately chosen a diversity of ethical dilemmas and social movements to populate this volume and these offer a range of perspectives. We hope this issue will become both an essential point of reference for researchers in our field and also a valuable set of reflections for all academics occupied with research in sensitive or complex social environments. As an academic field we are increasingly aware of the ethical dilemmas involved in our research. However, this awareness has also shaped our research topic choices and it should not put us off from tackling any complex social movement research. Perhaps it needs saying that as a journal we welcome research on the ugly movements described above, on movements of the right and on movements in majority world countries—we see these lacunae as a weakness in our current publications. That said, a key undercurrent of this theme is an assertion that the ends can no longer justify any unethical means in our research. There are no excuses; instead there are plenty of productive, political and hopeful ways forward in research on, and with, social movements.

## Note

1. On public sociology, see Burawoy (2004); also Santos, this issue. In relation to funding bodies there has, in the UK, been much debate over the so-called 'impact agenda', with varying understandings of 'impact'

developing in different spaces. However, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) may be taken as one important benchmark, with its insistence on funding proposals including an outline of potential research users and the ways in which research may benefit them. It is a little difficult to imagine the ESRC taking a favourable view of proposals that include significant time for the researcher to take part in activism for the sake of reciprocating activists' involvement in the research. (There are, of course, real methodological justifications for extended participation.) However, where a relatively formally organised group exists that might have a beneficial role in the research project, either in an advisory capacity or as a recipient of dissemination efforts, this would seemingly be looked on positively.

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