Activists and the Academy: Making Social Movement Research Useful

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IN JANUARY 2015, I was sitting in a pub with Hunter, a member of a grassroots group working in solidarity with communities affected by Canadian resource extraction operations. We were nearing the end of the interview when I asked “Do you have any hopes for what benefits might emerge from this project?” Hunter replied after a brief pause:

If you’re able to write about this in a way that draws conclusions about what has been useful and what has hindered the mining justice movement… I think that that can inform a diverse group of actors and their actions. You don’t even have to analyze it. You can literally just have a description of what people had to say, and that’s going to be so informative. Academia is another tool [for social change].

The desire for useful results was echoed by other participants, serving both as a call for public sociology as well as a reminder of one way in which scholar-activists can commit sociology: by working with social movements to produce useful knowledge that assists struggles for environmental and social justice. According to Hunter, this requires moving beyond—in the context of my research—a critique of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) since “it’s not useful to just be critical or negative.” Committing sociology, however, is more than making research useful to the public we study. In the context of phenomenologically informed research, committing sociology involves carefully navigating the dilemmas associated with a scholar-activist identity by engaging in the practice of reflexivity and bracketing.

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Before elaborating on these points, it is worthwhile linking the emergence of my research to Hunter’s suggestion that social movement research move beyond a critique of NGOs. This requires turning back the clock to Thursday January 30, 2014, more memorably known as the day I serendipitously discovered my Master’s thesis topic at a book launch for Choudry and Kapoor’s (2013) edited anthology. Across a variety of movements and in different country contexts, the authors of this text argued that NGOs undermine social movements. Although a provocative, critical, and insightful text, my experience in the movement challenging resource extractivism did not coincide with the epistemological assumptions informing the chapters of the book—specifically, that NGOs are disconnected from social movements. I left the launch wondering if my experiences were shared by other activists, and whether or not others attached the same meanings and significance as I did to NGO–grassroots dynamics.

As I pondered these questions, I became immersed in the literature critically but constructively engaging with traditional approaches to social movement theory and research (Bevington and Dixon 2005; Flacks 2004). I was struggling with the main arguments proposed by the authors: that most theories of social movements were not useful to, or being read by, activists. I thought to myself: will studying NGOization produce critical research that, although theoretically informative, does little for the movement I feel passionate about and accountable to? In an effort to partially address this concern, I contacted a few activists to solicit feedback on my project. Activists were interested, and my discussions with them provided an opportunity to incorporate into my interview guide questions of strategic value to the movement. These were questions related to the effectiveness of current approaches to advocacy, movement building, contemplating future directions, and evaluating existing interorganizational relationships—all of which were included in a report disseminated at the project’s conclusion.

In addition to this problem of research design, I had to ensure that I was reflexive and engaging in the practice of bracketing from interviews to analysis. In regard to reflexivity, I made note of how my involvement in the movement, as well as my analysis of the dynamics of resource extractivism, influenced my assumptions about larger social processes, including NGO–grassroots relationships. To partially address these concerns, I practiced a creative interviewing style requiring mutual disclosure and my involvement in conversational development (Gibson and Brown 2009). On the one hand, I disclosed to NGO participants my previous affiliation with one of the several grassroots groups active in this movement nationally, strategically positioning myself as an insider in an effort to develop trust and to link my academic interests to personal experience. On the other hand, I disclosed my biography to indicate to participants with whom I have established friendships that I am also an outsider—someone who is currently no longer active in the movement.
For all participants, disclosure would occur at the start of the interview with a preamble that went over my previous affiliation and included a request that they not assume my familiarity with the politics surrounding interorganizational relationships. Disclosure was important for engaging in the hermeneutic and phenomenological practice of reflexivity and bracketing. I created a (reflexive) space to discuss my own biography “not as an exercise in self-indulgence but as a way of gaining further insight into our mutual, embodied intersubjective world” (Finlay 2014:130). However, bracketing involves more than situating the researcher; it involves discussing and reflecting on personal experiences. It also involves the difficult task of “partly set[ting] them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study” (Creswell 2013:78), including the meanings they attach to interorganizational relationships. In doing so, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding through this form of relationality. Adopting these phenomenological techniques allowed me to be open and honest with my participants while demonstrating an interest in learning, understanding, and interpreting their experiences.

Committing sociology includes making research and the discipline relevant and useful to movements struggling for environmental and social justice. In the process, it requires those of us involved in movements to consider methodological strategies such as reflexivity and bracketing to help navigate scholar-activist identities and their effects on knowledge production. For social movement studies, committing sociology should include increasing the level of engagement of activists in research design. Involving activists in a more comprehensive manner will not only make research more relevant and useful, but, as a method, it better attests to the reality that knowledge is co-constituted. This would make committing sociology more accountable to, and centered on, the agents struggling for social and environmental justice.

References


