



(ALMOST) EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT ACTIVIST RESEARCH BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK: WHAT ACTIVIST RESEARCHERS SAY ABOUT THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the work of activist researchers located in social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and people's organisations with close relations to contemporary progressive grassroots struggles in a number of countries, mainly in the global South. Drawing from extensive interviews with these researchers on their processes and practice of research and knowledge production, located outside of academic institutions and partnerships, it documents their understandings about the theoretical frameworks and methodologies they employ. This article thus foregrounds articulations of actual research practices from the perspectives of activist researchers themselves. In doing so, it suggests that social movement scholars can learn more about the intellectual work within movements, including the relations between theoretical and methodological approaches and action, from a deeper engagement with the work of activist researchers outside of academia.

Keywords

activist research; methodology; theory; social movements; knowledge production

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This article engages with the growing scholarly interest in the politics, practices and significance of knowledge production within social movement activism by exploring the work of activist researchers located outside of university/academic institutional settings or partnerships. Discussing the practices of several activist researchers working in social movements, small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and people's organisations in the Philippines, South Africa, North America, and transnationally, this article foregrounds their reflections upon their own processes of research and knowledge production, documenting their understandings about theoretical frameworks and methodologies. These reflections emerge from interviews that I conducted with activist researchers between 2011-2013¹. These interviews emphasised the importance of research frameworks, ongoing relationships and dialogue with movements as central features of, and tools in the research process.

Recent scholarship which attends to the significance of knowledge production in social movements includes strands of critical adult education such as Foley's (1999) work on informal learning in social action, and Holst's (2002, 2011) contributions on social movement learning. Several authors, including Bevington and Dixon (2005), Maddison and Scalmer (2006), and Choudry and Kapoor (2010), have highlighted the importance of engaging with knowledge being produced by, and internal debates within, social movements and activist networks, in order to more fully understand movements. As Croteau, Haynes and Ryan (2005, p. xiii) contended, "[t]heorists without significant connections to social movements can end up constructing elegant abstractions with little real insight or utility".

In many activist and social movement contexts, research is a central and essential activity – whether or not it is recognisable to outsiders, including many social movement scholars. Such work is sometimes dismissed as 'political', as mere propaganda perhaps, or overlooked because it was not produced through the dominant modes and processes of academic research. Addressing critical anthropologists, Speed (2004) wrote that in activist research, tensions exist "between political–ethical commitment and critical analysis" (p. 74), those of universalism, relativism or particularism, power relations between researcher and researched, and of short-term pragmatics and longer-term implications. As she noted, however, these are also present in all kinds of research. Yet she suggested that "[t]he benefit of explicitly activist research is precisely that it draws a focus on those tensions and maintains them as central to the work".

Critically engaged sociologists remind us that activists actively analyse and theorise. For example, Kinsman (2006, p. 134) has suggested that research and theorising is a broader everyday/everynight part of the life of social movements, whether explicitly recognised or not. He wrote that activists "are thinking, talking about, researching and theorizing about what is going on, what they are going to do next and how to analyze the situations they face, whether in relation to attending a demonstration, a meeting, a confrontation with institutional forces or planning the next action or campaign". Naples (1998) argued that specific methodologies employed are less indicative of what constitutes activist research than the questions asked and the purposes to which the analysis is put. While claims are sometimes made in scholarly literature about implicit or explicit connections between social justice, activism and certain methodological approaches such as participatory action research (see Jordan, 2003, for a critical discussion of such positions), a frequent assumption in much of the existing scholarship on activist research, research for social change, and community-based research is that university researchers with specialist academic

1 The selection of these organisations arose from awareness of their contributions to research/knowledge production through the author's longterm involvement in anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. The author thanks Désirée Rochat and Nakita Sunar who transcribed the interviews, Michelle Hartman and two reviewers for their suggestions, and all those interviewed for this article.

training must frame and conduct research. There has been considerable academic focus on the involvement of scholars in forms of popular/community education, activist research, academic activism, engaged scholarship and research partnerships. Yet relatively little work documents, explicates or theorises actual research practices of activist researchers located outside of the academy, let alone takes the perspectives of their everyday practice as its point of departure - as this article seeks to do. I contend that we need to take the opportunity to learn about how others think, analyse and generate research beyond the sometimes self-referential loops of academic social movement scholarship. A commitment to listening to activist researchers reflect upon their work is one step towards addressing this concern.

Based on the interviews I conducted with a number of activist researchers, this article proposes that scholars have much to learn from a sustained and serious engagement with the approaches to research developed within movement networks. Those interviewed in this article included researchers from: (Canada) Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), a labour and women's rights organisation that supports efforts of workers in global supply chains, mainly in the global South, to win improved wages and working conditions and a better quality of life; (South Africa) the Anti-Privatisation Forum which brought together community organisations, workers' groups, activist groups and individuals to oppose privatisation; (Philippines) human rights organisation KARAPATAN (Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights), labour rights education and research organisation EILER (Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research), IBON Foundation, an independent research institute and databank which focuses on socio-economic issues confronting Philippine society, and its international arm, IBON International; and (international) GRAIN, a small organisation which supports small farmers and social movements in struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems.

Framing Research in Theory and Practice

Analysing problems, systems and structures and proposing alternatives is central to the everyday lives and activities of many movements. While many of those interviewed noted differences between their approach to research and the protocols of academic inquiry, theoretical frameworks and methodology still clearly matter to them. The researchers I interviewed articulated these features of their research processes in different ways, sometimes making explicit reference to established categories of analysis and theoretical traditions, and sometimes in language grounded more in the everyday activities of their practice. Some offered critiques of both academic and dominant NGO research approaches which they believed to be disconnected from, and of questionable relevance and utility to, the communities and sectors of society most impacted by the issues investigated.

Those interviewed for this article emphasised the centrality of relationships of trust with organisations, movements and struggles that their work supports as resources for developing the frame of analysis and methodology of the research itself. MSN researcher Kevin Thomas argued that research needs a framework so that "people understand that you didn't just draw the facts and ideas out of a hat". Thomas said that this research starts with relationships with workers, trade unions or women's organisations which have approached MSN with a problem, rather than beginning with a hypothesis or theory to be tested or proven. He explained:

"They talk with us mostly because there's an ongoing relationship between us, because they know we have some capacity to assist in what they're doing.... That also means that the way the research gets done is divided up based on that relationship. They'll have already done

a lot of ground work, they'll have documented what's occurred, not necessarily everything that needs to be documented but they'll have started the process".

After these organisations have identified problems and shared what they know, sometimes MSN will do "a research test", asking: "what have you been able to get, how are you able to link that to a global company, have you found labels, do we know that those labels are not pirated, [that] we can trace them in some way that's credible? And what are our options for action here?" Thus the research is very much grounded in relationships and dialogue between Toronto-based MSN and workers, unions or women's organisations on the ground in countries in the global South, and focussed on informing effective strategy and action.

Relationships and dialogue are also central to GRAIN's research process. GRAIN researchers suggested that the organisation can produce research relatively quickly because it has an analytical framework which, while not articulated as a 'theory', reflects "an internal culture in GRAIN where there is a common understanding of how these things work so we don't need to put that on some pedestal, to say this is our methodology or theory". One GRAIN researcher said that this frame is grounded in the organisation's mandate of biodiversity, which places people – especially Indigenous Peoples, rural people and small farmers – as the source of agricultural biodiversity, which is sustained by local markets:

"Our organisation struggles against a really genocidal trend right now to wipe out those kinds of food systems... and the people who are supportive of them, the basis of them. That's the frame where we start from. So if you look at it that way and say 'what is really at the source of this and how do we explain it in that way?', 'how do we connect it in that way?'...and sometimes you might leap from that in order just to give more traction to an issue that you are working on where you see the connection and maybe you are not so much making it the focus of what you write but when you realise that connection is important".

GRAIN's research process is always ongoing, as one researcher explained:

"You are always connected with people that you are going to be working on the issue with and in developing the analysis and bringing in whatever information you see as important. ... So it's a matter of, early on, learning from what is happening there and also trying to [highlight] that experience ... for others to use. Of course there is the publication of the research but what is happening all the time throughout that whole process is dialogue with other groups. ... together trying to figure out what are the processes that we need to be a part of ... what can we do next and what is possible, and then that will probably stimulate other research at a certain point because things will be identified".

Paul Quintos of IBON International viewed a theoretical framework as very relevant, locating his work in a Marxist tradition, but not in

"very abstract, academic kind of views of that theoretical framework. For us, it was basically down to class analysis, who gains and benefits from the situation, who's screwed by the situation and how do you change that, how do you turn the tables on that? It's pretty much informed by a Marxist theoretical analysis or framework of analysis of classes and class relations, without necessarily using those terms and terminologies that you would

encounter in Marxist theoretical papers or books”.

Dale McKinley, who was an activist/researcher with the now defunct Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in South Africa also referenced a Marxist, anti-capitalist theoretical framework. He explained:

“we weren’t trying to ... situate this research within a particular theoretical history, a theoretical construct that is out there in the research world and we just like that one the best, etc., but ...the theoretical underpinning was that it had to be participatory, hooked into our own struggles and politics”.

EILER’s head researcher, Carlos Maningat shared that

“during the research design process, we use specific frameworks for analysis at the back of our minds but we are not actually particular on the mainstream types of research framework used in the academe. What is important for us is to lay down the concepts that will be investigated, the causalities, the anticipated impacts of the policy or interventions we are trying to study, so we are coming up with our own approaches in terms of framework-setting. So we are not actually confined or limiting ourselves to what is readily available in the literature in terms of framework. We situate our framework of analysis on the particular subject which we are trying to investigate. One concrete example - we did research on the pineapple industry, commissioned by a sustainability NGO based in Europe [which] had predetermined sets of variables to be probed. There was a set of the sustainability indicators on political, economic and environmental aspects. But what we did was to situate those variables or indicators in the socio-political context of the Philippines. We tried to map out those three main categories of variables into the mode of production in the Philippines. [In the] pineapple industry, it’s basically contract growers and small farmers which constitute the producers in a semi-feudal setup in the countryside. So we have the issue of ownership – who controls these industries, who are the partners of these multinational corporations, what is the policy attitude of the state towards the pineapple industry investment promotion. We customise the framework based on the assumption we are trying to investigate but we keep in mind the labour- capital relations, the mode of production of the country being probed and the classes, the particular class relations. Aside from workers, we also identify who are the other marginalised groups, etc. Our framework of analysis is pro-worker, mostly Marxist analysis...We also get the side of the government who implements this programme, but at the start of every research, it is clear for EILER that we have a class bias”.

The human rights organisation KARAPATAN also frames its research in a socio-historical context. Such contextualisation is key to its research and advocacy on human rights violations in the Philippines, said its secretary general, Cristina Palabay. She explained that

“it can be described by someone in academe as the historical and dialectical framework of analysis. Because we look at the research subjects in particular contexts, connected to the other factors present in the society and looking at the state as the primary duty bearer of rights”.

In conversation, KARAPATAN researcher DJ Acierto continued:

“I’m working with particular sectors - a lot of sectors would like to know the correlation between mining and human rights violation. With the data we have, we try to compare areas of mining with areas where human rights violations occur ...”

Palabay:

“...if there is no such context, any violation, whether big or small graver forms of violations we cannot explain it in any other way, how this incident occurred, so every fact sheet that we generate...it’s within and under that framework...”

Acierto:

“...because if we stick to a particular incident, the incident itself only it will just be...”

Palabay:

“...like a police report...”

Acierto:

“not a political crime...”

Palabay:

“Yeah, it will be like a police report”.

Thus, although this was articulated in various ways, theory, and the theoretical framing of research are clearly crucial to the activist researchers that were interviewed. All of them underlined the importance of theorisation and forming general principles (i.e., ones which are relevant to strategy and action) in connection to the practical work that they do. The ways in which this attention to theory was articulated ranged from researchers for KARAPATAN, EILER and the APF who clearly located what they do in an explicit theoretical/analytical tradition, to the more implicit statements and explications of research practice by GRAIN and MSN researchers which nonetheless attended to the dialectical/relational nature of knowledge construction in their processes. These insights into everyday activist research practices emphasised how they are grounded in long-term relationships within movement networks, and laid out how research was framed by political and social analysis developed within these organisations and the movement networks they belong to.

Methodological Considerations

It is not only theoretical frameworks that activist researchers develop in a dialectical relationship to their practice, but also the methodologies that they use. In the interviews, several researchers articulated how particular contexts led their organisations to use specific methodologies and approaches. One example in which this is very clear is the case of the APF’s research committee. Dale McKinley recalled that in the APF’s early days, a research committee was set up partly out of a commitment to building a cadre through basic skilling, so that activists could learn to do participatory research in their communities, conduct surveys, and document findings. Three large-scale research projects were set up and run from within the APF with full participation of all its constituent community organisations and those who had more formal research experience, perhaps undergraduate or graduate degrees, but who were not located within the academy.

At that time, the APF comprised about 23 different community organisations, said McKinley. Many of the community struggles concerned water, electricity, housing, and education - access to basic services. In a country believed to have the highest rates of HIV infection in the world, and with large amounts of money being poured into research, APF members could not see any

research being done on the links between HIV/AIDS and basic services. So they wanted to try to make this connection and base APF's research on the link between access to water and people who were HIV- positive in order to see how not having access to water affected people's quality of life and existence. McKinley recalled:

“All these academics, books being written and everything else, yet when you actually go onto the ground, most HIV-positive people, at least in the Gauteng² where we were working, had no clue of any of this. It was this complete gap between what was going on there and people's own experiences and actually a reticence on the part of formal researchers to make links with socio-economic and political-economy issues, in terms of their understanding of this epidemic and how it affected people's lives. So we were trying to bridge this gap with the way in which, and a research product, so to speak, that was accessible and understandable to ordinary people - it wasn't in 'academ-ese', it wasn't in journals, it wasn't about those publications. It was about getting it around and having policy impact, partially, but also fundamentally being able to have a sense that people are our goal in this. We did another one on prepaid water meters ... and one on housing. The whole point was to hook into a component of people's struggles - research can be one component of that. So it's not just about marching and picketing and doing all the other kinds of direct actions and writing good analyses and critiques of government policy, but countering what was out there with research from the ground”.

Thus, for the APF and the community members who comprised it, the context for their research was the disjuncture and disconnect between the experiences of communities most affected by HIV-AIDS and mainstream research projects being carried out in South Africa.

The APF research committee supported community members to make the survey questions themselves as much as possible and to conduct the research themselves. McKinley continued:

“Of course, [for] an academic coming into a context and asking, the power relationship is completely, fundamentally different and the answers therefore and the engagement and the material that you're going to derive is going to be fundamentally different. We wanted to try to make this so that people in the community felt very comfortable because it was people from their own communities doing the work, asking the questions because they themselves experience these things. So it is participatory much more than just simply methodologically, but in human and experiential terms. ... I think that lent itself to a much richer response and engagement with ... interviewees.”

In the Philippines, Cristina Palabay reflected on KARAPATAN's approach to research in a similar way, emphasising the role people play in researching their own communities. She differentiated KARAPATAN's research from that carried out by mainstream NGOs which is claimed to be participatory. “It's easy to claim that your research has this participatory character”, said Palabay,

“but I think our advocacy is the kind of research that is democratic in the sense that the actors do not only participate, they themselves are knowledge formators [*sic*]. They generate this knowledge, this data analysis and they claim these numbers and these analyses as their own analyses, and the actions that they put forward are the people themselves ... even in

2 South Africa's most populous province of which Johannesburg is the capital.

the process of doing forensic work and investigation”.

KARAPATAN’s DJ Acierto echoed this, saying that the organisation uses a combination of methods, including interviews in investigating and documenting human rights violations, “partial forensic investigation when we are allowed in the scene of the incident”, focus group discussions with affected communities, victims and relatives, and statistical analysis.

In order to contextualise the organisation’s approach to research, IBON executive director Sonny Africa explained that IBON’s research takes the side of the oppressed, marginalised, and exploited. He said that the

“decision point of consciously having a bias for the perspective of the marginalised is critical because this sets the direction of the sort of research we do, how we do it and what it’s used for. Secondly when doing the research we know how important it is to have a minimum of credibility, technical rigour, and data to support the positions we take. The strength and relevance of the research is tested by how far it can sustain a campaign – this is important especially for IBON because solid research is one of our most important contributions to the mass movement”.

Another activist researcher in the Philippines, Paul Quintos, had long experience working for both IBON International and also as an EILER researcher and trade union organiser in the past. He drew on these diverse experiences to reflect that the kinds of methodologies used typically include secondary research, Internet research, and daily conversations with workers. He recalled:

“When I was in organising work it wasn’t like when I was in EILER, I’d go to a factory interview, I’ve got a survey instrument, that kind of thing: it’s just the daily interaction with workers that informs much of the analysis, what questions should be pursued further for more in-depth research, for more validation, so a lot of it came from that but has to be supplemented by secondary research, some focus group discussions with the informants, more structured kind of data gathering. In terms of sources, a lot of it came from workers but we also got a lot of information from the company, some of it confidential and that’s the good thing with working with, say unions, because some ... employees ... have access to some information, and tapping into solidarity networks as well, for instance, in the case of one factory where I’ve helped in terms of organizing, because it was part of a garment production network we got information from solidarity groups in Taiwan about the parent company’s financials ... about the family who owned it, which became useful for education work among the workers and uniting towards certain positions”.

Although operating in a very different context, the MSN in Canada also draws upon the experiences of people to develop its research methodologies for its campaign and advocacy work. Like the activist researchers discussed in the previous examples, Kevin Thomas outlined how MSN and local activists, organisations and unions in the global South work together to contest working conditions and other abuses in the global supply chain. He highlighted the ways in which research is developed out of people’s experiences and the sharing of their knowledge to develop research strategies. He explained that

“the people we work with on the ground have developed a methodology of how they

document cases. They have experience of having done this time and time again – unfortunately, of *having* to do it time and time again. That’s not a good thing, but it does mean you develop the skills and tools to do it well. You know that if you put forward a case and make allegations about abuses at a particular factory, you’re gonna have to back those up with X, Y and Z and that’s where the research has to focus. For MSN, we tend to document the power relationships: where are the points of influence? A lot of local groups know about the local labour tribunals or other local tools that are available, or they know a lot about the local management of the factory, as well as the dynamics of the movement and actors in their own country, but they don’t always know how to link international buyers, northern consumers, or other institutions to that local reality. In many cases those outside links can be a real force to reckon with in a factory because we’re dealing with global supply chains based on decentralized and contracted production. These factories may depend entirely on foreign buyers to give them orders, and therefore those foreign buyers have a lot of sway. We always look into the buying relationships first because buyers have an ability to push the factory in a way that even the local government often doesn’t have”.

Returning again to Dale McKinley and the APF, it is crucial to link not only the contexts of research and the approaches and methods developed by groups through their engagement in different struggles, but also how the research is carried out and validated. In his interview, McKinley recalled the process through which APF members conceptualised, carried out and validated research collectively. This entailed all research, reports and updates being fed back into the APF’s larger democratic structures for discussion. He likened bringing research into a collective democratic process to internal movement planning and debates about different tactics for a march to confront the authorities:

“Everything was referred back into that organisation. When we say ‘participatory’, it doesn’t mean simply that members will participate in the research, but participatory of the membership of this group, of community organisations themselves, from the grounds, including people who lived in those communities where the research is taking place, so it’s community participation, not simply individual participation. The entire research project from the very beginning of the conceptualisation, to each of its stages, went through a democratic debate and discussion and that made it participatory beyond simply the researchers and those participating in the research project to those who were in the organisation themselves, this was an organisational project. The participation was of everybody. Every two months we had the coordinating committee which was 10 members of every single organisation that belonged to the APF. That’s 150 people, [if] you take 15, 20, if you take 20 organisations, sitting in a room, all weekend long discussing these things. When the research came, there were massive fights and debates about ‘no, now you’re asking the wrong question, why aren’t you doing this....’, and *that* is participatory, it’s constant feedback, constant shifting of the research project and the way you’re doing [it] as a result of the participation of those in that organisation, that was our understanding of participatory research in its fullest organic sense, as opposed to just saying, ‘we choose 10 of you to participate in this research because you’re from there’, which is a more functional relationship”.

A number of crucial insights can be drawn from the rich discussions of research practice by

these activist researchers. Their reflections derive from understandings about activist research as being a highly relational form of knowledge construction. Research and the construction and production of knowledge—in many different forms—are conceptualised by the researchers here as collaborative and done as shared work. Very often this research work is based on ongoing, longer-standing relationships with organisations, communities and movements. It is particularly important to note that this is not an isolated phenomenon but that this thread of collective and relational work typically runs through the research process from its very inception through to the way in which it is undertaken, defined and directed, how it is verified, and of course how it is connected to action.

Validation and peer review practices

The validation of research was raised in relation to method by the APF's McKinley in the previous section. This is indicative of the reflections of the other activist researchers who were interviewed more generally, and who frequently discussed their concerns about credibility and rigour. 'Getting the research right' is crucial. If done poorly, such research can be easily and publicly discredited by better-resourced corporate or state protagonists and media, in turn undermining efforts to build a campaign through reaching a broader base of people. A central aspect of these kinds of activist research practice is the relationship of trust and engagement built up with social struggles and movements, and this can easily be damaged. Cox and Nilsen (2007) argued that activist theorizing is not always subject to peer review before publication, but undergoes a form of peer review after publication

“that brings together a far broader range of empirical experience and points of view than are found in any academic journal. It is also subject to the test of practice: whether it *works* to bring together an action, a campaign or a network – or to win battles, large and small, against its opponents and convince the as yet unmobilised and unradicalised” (p. 430).

Several researchers who I interviewed clearly described formal and informal peer review processes in their work. For Kevin Thomas, such review processes are key to validating MSN's research. Operating in a movement which is comprised of many actors and shifting dynamics, he described a type of peer review process for the research produced. MSN sends a draft of its research to others engaged in the same work to ensure that it has addressed the questions that they would pose about the same issue,

“that our findings, conclusions and recommendations hold water with people who know the field really well. And usually we'll share our research with experts on both sides of the table. That is, we'll share something we've done with companies as well as with labour rights experts. That's not just to make sure we have the facts right; we also want to see what the reaction would be for someone on the other side of the table. Sometimes that's very useful to have - some people come back with things that you didn't anticipate”.

For Thomas, a key part of writing up effective research is to anticipate and address potential counter-arguments. Outside reviewers – including those with opposing views - may bring up issues that MSN could not have anticipated. He added that

“there's a sort of peer review process which we engage in for written work. But even before that, there is also an informal conversation between these groups where you begin

to develop research to address an issue that has come up for the movement in general. We tend to undertake research and writing largely because of that ongoing conversation amongst groups, where a problem has arisen that we haven't collectively been able to answer. So the research process itself is based on a collective exchange where priorities get identified and mapped out, rather than just based on the interests of one person or organisation. I'm talking here about research that's at a broader level than just a specific factory struggle, that's not just about getting a set of facts documented. There's research which is more about keeping our movement informed about changes in power relationships, for example. We do a lot of research around trade patterns, where the industry is moving, where sourcing is going, changes in wages, battles around wages in different countries. This isn't just information for information's sake, it's part of the process of developing strategy."

Echoing Thomas's concerns, EILER's Carlos Maningat also underlined the importance of bringing multiple sources of reviews into the validation of research. Citing the example of recent research which EILER had conducted on working conditions in Mindanao³'s pineapple plantations, Maningat said that validation of initial findings occurred through consultation with workers, labour organisers, and industry experts. He recounted that

"the initial research design was geared towards soliciting accounts and inputs from Dole Philippines workers, but as a way to validate other experiences - because we are studying Mindanao, we also tried to conduct data gathering on workers from Del Monte because it is a different corporation but on the same island group - Mindanao. But we also try to validate that with secondary data - so government statistics, company reports, and other documentation and data source[s]. It could also be the other way around, when we had copies of company reports, financial statements of Dole Philippines for instance and other companies and entities we tried to validate those factual claims with the accounts of workers so it's a dialectical process of validation. I don't know if the academe would qualify that as rigour but we see that it's an objective and holistic approach because we put primacy on the accounts of workers themselves, then later on we corroborate things under streams of available data."

True to the same approaches articulated above in relation to setting up theoretical principles in which to operate, GRAIN researchers emphasised their research's collaborative, dialogical nature through interactions with movement activists, farmers, and others. They underlined its forms of validation, through checking, testing and sharing material within the organisation and in networks throughout the research process, including what can be best described as a peer review process. A central question for GRAIN was

"how do people take what we write and how does that help them in the battles that they are fighting, the issues that they are dealing with at the local level? ... You can't just put anything there, our goal is not to be sensationalist, the goal is to provide solid material. the reputation of the organisation depends on it too and our relationships with our partners"

GRAIN's research practice involved analysis of information from industry and official

3 Mindanao, in the southern Philippines is both the name of the country's second largest island, and one of its three island groups.

sources, much of which is available online. Interviews are also important to how they build their research. As one researcher explained:

“The validation is [that] we test it and we share it with people, always. In GRAIN we never had [individual GRAIN researchers’] names in our publications, it is always collective material. It is an ideological thing but it also reflects that there is a lot of bouncing back and [constant] checking. There is a lot of that kind of circulation of material. Within GRAIN and also with friends and [other] groups. So you will call that a peer review I think ... because in a way that is exactly how it works ...you want to be challenged and you want to get serious feedback. So that’s a way of validating. But the real validation lies in what happens when we put it out”.

So while several of those interviewed stated that the use to which the research was put by social movements served as its major form of validation, Bevington and Dixon (2005) suggested that movement-relevant research cannot afford to uncritically reiterate the prevailing ideas of a favoured movement. They wrote: ‘If the research is exploring questions that have relevance to a given movement, it is in the interests of that movement to get the best available information, even if those findings don’t fit expectations (p. 191). The reflections of MSN’s Kevin Thomas and GRAIN researchers here highlight how informal processes of peer review, alongside the dialogical, collaborative nature of building the research, which all interviewees discussed, helped to hone research so that it became more effective, relevant and robust.

Conclusion: An Opportunity to Learn from Other Research Paths

The interviews that form the basis of this article expose a number of crucial points for building an understanding of how activist researchers articulate their own practice and how this relates to knowledge production within social movements. The activist researchers interviewed highlighted aspects of their practice, including theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches and the validation of research which describe relation-centred, materially-grounded understandings of constructing knowledge. They also demonstrated a commitment to research that is useful for struggles for social change, and an orientation to knowledge production that takes ideas, experience and analysis produced in movement struggles seriously. These approaches to research contest notions of “research as being an analysis, or a particular form of consciousness, and activism as about doing things ‘out there,’ which leads to a divorce between consciousness and practice”, as Kinsman (2006, p. 153) puts it. Much of the research discussed here is produced in, and from, a context of ongoing relationships across a range of movements, organisations and activists. Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell (2008) highlighted the valuing of receptivity and listening “to the explanations and arguments posed by movements, which may, in turn, entail various forms of engagement with, or participation in, the movements’ own knowledge-practices, locating them in relation to more conventional, “expert” theories (p. 26). Listening to people on the ground is a vital component of these activist researchers’ practice, built on a critical political, economic, social and ecological analysis developed over years of work in networks of social movements. A GRAIN staffer explained,

“it is important to listen to people because part of research is just learning So when you talk to people you have to listen to them and you have to integrate what they say ... that’s

really crucial to not do this kind of out there pie-in-the-sky kind of stuff”.

Some researchers interviewed for this article, such as Dale McKinley from the APF and KARAPATAN’s Cristina Palabay, emphasised the different ways in which the research processes were participatory, while being critical of wider claims by other organisations and agencies about their participatory research. Others, while not explicitly labeling their research as participatory, emphasised the importance of active dialogue throughout the research, including in the ways it was validated and disseminated. In sum, the concept of research articulated by activist researchers was an inherently relational one. All noted the relationship between research and struggle/action, and seemed to eschew notions about research and the intellectual work of social movements that divorce knowledge production from action, emphasising that research is a component of such struggles.

Haluza-Delay (2003) suggested there was often an assumption “that knowledge uncovers the oppressive structures and confronts power. However, it is not the “knowledge” alone that does this, but the process by which the knowledge is taken up and used in the community, altering “common-sense” (p. 86). That means how it informs organising: Bevington and Dixon (2005) argued that a test of the quality of activist research is whether it is taken up by activists in struggles. As one GRAIN researcher put it:

“We know there are movements, people on the ground, either part of movements or NGOs or whatever who need to take our material and translate it, transform it in a way, so that it becomes much more relevant at the local level. It is not only about translating it to a certain language because of giving it a different shape or a different form or whatever ... but that happens a lot. Much more than with more traditional academics with traditional research when doing research. I think our stuff is more relevant from their perspective than whatever I see coming out of academia. That’s the big problem with what is being produced on our issues in the academic world. It is not connected, some good researchers come up with good theories, and good materials but it stays out there in its corner of being scientifically, theoretically correct perhaps, but not very useful”.

In the examples discussed here, decisions about framing research were shaped and influenced by explicit political positions, sets of understandings and ongoing relationships with/in social movements. Many activist/movement researchers made decisions and developed research in dialogue with others based on experiential knowledge and analysis arising from active involvement in, and relationships, with struggles on the ground. We see this clearly in the approaches of EILER, MSN, and KARAPATAN as articulated by researchers interviewed here. As McKinley noted in his interview, taking movement knowledge seriously, and a commitment to democracy and participatory process can also necessitate that all aspects of the research be subject to intense scrutiny, vigorous debate and challenge within a movement, as was the case in the APF in South Africa. Such practices illustrate grounded approaches to rigour, knowledge production and validation of research which differ from the ways in which these notions tend to be viewed through scholarly lenses. I suggest that attending to actual practices and knowledge produced by activist researchers and the movements that they are in is key to extending our understandings about research for social change. Moreover, perhaps a deeper engagement with the various forms of movement research and theorizing which occur outside of university institutional contexts and partnerships with academics can expand social movement scholars’ appreciation for the intellectual work which takes place in social movement struggles-- including

living relationships between theory, methodology and action.

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