

## Political Activist Ethnography

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# POLITICAL ACTIVIST ETHNOGRAPHY

**Studies in the Social Relations of Struggle**

*edited by*  
Agnieszka Doll, Laura Bisailon,  
*and* Kevin Walby

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*To the memory of Dorothy E. Smith, a revolutionary scholar—for changing the world through her pioneering sociology and inspiring pedagogy.*

*To the memory of George W. Smith and Aziz Choudry, trailblazing scholars—for paving a road for generations of political activist ethnographers.*

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# Introduction

## Institutional Ethnography and Political Activist Ethnography in Context

Agnieszka Doll, Laura Bisailon, and Kevin Walby

How can research help produce knowledge for oppressed peoples, activism, and social reform? This question forms the backbone of this edited collection. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed global problems related to deepening social inequalities, environmental degradation, racial oppression, political polarization, and right-wing nationalism. As activists strategize, build resistance, and advance solidarity, they also make appeals for deeper relations between academic researchers and those engaged in social movements and for research that can enhance their struggle (Burnett and Ross 2020; Matthews 2020; Chattopadhyay, Wood, and Cox 2020). The body of work contained between these covers contributes to these mobilizations by reporting on the research results of political activist ethnographers and institutional ethnographers from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Bangladesh, Canada, Poland, and the United States. These examples illustrate how activist-oriented researchers have worked from places of struggle and produced practical guidance for advancing social reform.

Political activist ethnography (PAE) is a form of critical materialist social science inquiry closely related to institutional ethnography (IE): an approach pioneered by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith in *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987). IE emerged from her involvement in feminist critique and activism, whereas PAE evolved from the activist work of Canadian sociologist George W. Smith (the same last name is a coincidence), active in Canadian gay liberation and AIDS community work. They worked together

and developed these approaches during their tenure as colleagues at the University of Toronto. IE examines how oppression is embedded and reproduced in and through the social relations that organize institutions, focusing on how texts mediate these relations. In the article “Political Activist as Ethnographer,” George Smith (1990) builds on Dorothy Smith’s thinking to lay the foundation for a new research strategy that he intends to be valuable for those involved in social activism, which later comes to be known as political activist ethnography (Frampton et al. 2006). This approach uses “political confrontation as an ethnographic resource” (G. Smith 1990, 629), focusing on moments and places of direct struggle to reveal how ruling regimes are organized so activists can fight them. Yet for knowledge to be helpful for people in mobilizing against those in power, it must be generated from the starting point of these people’s position in the world, from their actualities and practices, and grounded in their daily lives. PAE and IE thus adopt a “bottom-up” approach to inquiry to produce knowledge *for* rather than *about* people—for *activists*, not about activists. They both turn the power of ethnography against the ruling institution to create knowledge *for* those who are oppressed (Kinsman, chapter 2 in this volume). These properties are some of the most important that distinguish PAE and IE from other politically engaged ethnographies, such as militant ethnographies (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003; Shukatis and Graeber 2007), community-based participatory action research (Nichols, Griffith, and McLarnon 2017), or critical ethnographies of political activism (Hansen 2021).

Hence, our volume has two main objectives. The first is to popularize PAE as a research strategy for movements and mobilizations for social change and justice. Inspired by *Sociology for Changing the World* (Frampton et al. 2006), our collection illustrates a wide range of ways that researchers, who are variously situated inside and outside academia, can take up PAE or IE to produce knowledge that can be useful for activists in their pursuit of direct struggle or social reform. Contributors to this book explore from the bottom-up such topics as anti-poverty organizing, former prisoners’ re-entry into society, pro-environmental anti-fracking campaigns, left-inspired think-tank development, non-governmental partnerships, state mental health adjudications, and immigration medical services. They provide examples of *activist research* as the *sociology of confrontation* and *intervention* and invite other activists or activist scholars to further probe ways of understanding the relationship among activism, research, and scientism. Such probing can

open activist research to new possibilities as well as foster innovative ways of doing PAE and IE.

The second objective is to challenge the traditional academic understanding of what activist research *is*. George Smith writes that research can be activism, and activism can be research (G. Smith 1990; Hurl and Klostermann 2019). This idea emphasizes the connection between politically grounded research and activism and suggests that research (broadly understood and practiced) can be a productive site of activist activity. Resistance is a political act, and researching for resistance can be a political act. What becomes visible across the contributions in our volume is that dismantling the academic activist divide is neither easy nor without dangers when academic research standards start to colonize and substitute grassroots modes of doing research. For example, this caveat becomes particularly visible in Aziz Choudry's (chapter 4) contribution when he points to how activism as research becomes hierarchically organized and differently valued even in grassroots activism, where academic research standards are adopted. These hierarchies can also manifest subtly: through the resources and language we use to frame (Walsh, chapter 10) and write up research, where we seek out and secure funding, or in what strings are then attached to research monies (see Sirett, chapter 6). Thus, this book provides practical insights into how PAE and IE can be used in research for activism while raising questions about power relations in academia.

Before we turn to the themes of this volume, we address some premises of both IE and PAE to demonstrate their uniqueness as research strategies for activists and social movements. Doing so will help establish common grounds and vocabulary for readers, especially those new to IE and PAE. Given that PAE requires an understanding of IE, it is essential to explore IE first.

## **Dorothy Smith and Social Inquiry**

IE emerged from Dorothy Smith's contestation of knowledge production in academia and her activism in the context of education. She reflected on a disjuncture experienced between the life she lived as a mother and the social world of the academic sociologist, in which she engaged as a part of her work. She observed that when sociologists impose an overly predetermined theoretical framework for interpreting people's lives, they restrict their inquiry and the knowledge they produce from how actual lives are experienced

(D. Smith 2007, 409). In such sociological theorizing, people “become the *object* of investigation and explanation” instead of being treated as knowers (D. Smith 2005, 22). Even methods developed as alternatives to traditional social inquiry, such as feminist ones, can be guilty of these forms of theory-based objectification. When knowledge has no connection to people’s actual experiences, it holds little promise in helping them understand the origins of the tensions and contradictions they encounter.

Working from the idea that “people must be viewed as experts on the conditions of their own lives” (Walby 2013, 143), IE is committed to creating knowledge that can show where organizations erase the experiences of the people they serve. Thus, IE proposes an alternative way of producing sociological knowledge. For it to be relevant, sociology must ground itself in knowledge produced and held directly by the knower. IE “begins with some issues, concerns, or problems that are real for people and that are situated in their relationship to an institutional order” (D. Smith 2005, 32). For instance, Ellen Pence (2001), an advocate for women abused by their partners in the United States, used her knowledge of advocacy for women with experiences of gender violence to investigate how concerns about these women’s safety disappear during their abusers’ criminal processes. This example demonstrates how people’s social experiences and material realities are a “ground zero of the analysis” in IE (as well as in PAE) to understand how ruling relations and ideological regimes organize those experiences (Campbell 2006, 91).

This is a sociology *for* people, as it aims to produce knowledge that will help people understand how various institutions—such as law, health, education, and social services—shape their lives and the difficulties they experience. As IE proceeds “from where actual people are in their own lives, activities, and experiences,” it does so “to open up relations and organizations that are, in a sense, actually *present* in them [in these activities and experiences] but not observable” (D. Smith 2006, 4; also see Luken and Vaughan 2021). In this way, IE is a sociology not *about* people but *for* people. With such knowledge of how their lives are organized in a way that is oppressive, people can know how and where to confront ruling regimes. Institutional ethnographers identify the social hierarchies, discourses, workplace procedures, and administrative policies that configure and control people’s everyday world by gathering and analyzing knowledge founded directly in their lived experiences (Luken and Vaughan 2023; D. Smith and Griffith 2022). To instigate change,

IE expands people's knowledge by investigating and explicating how their lives are socially organized.

For institutional ethnographers, ruling relations are objectified forms of knowledge and coordinated forms of social organization (D. Smith 2005, 227; Luken and Vaughan 2021). They are translocal or coordinated across time, and their "objectivity" relies on the ability to abstract, categorize, standardize, and administer. Ruling relations depend on the circulation and reproduction of texts (written, printed, electronic, video, and audio) and their standardizing messages. Textually mediated forms of social organization have dominated for the last two hundred years (D. Smith 2005, 227). Dorothy Smith developed the concept of *textually mediated social organization* "to express the notion that engagement with texts concerts and coordinates people's actions" (Campbell and Gregor 2004, 29). Abstracting, standardizing, and generalizing are inherent outcomes of working with institutional texts such as forms, policies, guidelines, and reports. She refers to these textually mediated processes as "conceptual practices of power" that are not "neutral" and do not produce "neutral" consequences (D. Smith 1990, 2005).

When people's lives are packaged into categories, abstractions, and generalizations, the embodied disappears under institutional categories and terminology. These social relations of knowledge production reflect and reinforce dominant power structures (D. Smith 1990). Those practices can be seen vividly in Gary Kinsman's (chapter 2) illustration of how sorting people who are recipients of public welfare programs into institutional categories precludes some people from accessing benefits needed for their survival and reinforces divisions among different categories of recipients of disability assistance. Some people are subsequently ordered as the "deserving" or "undeserving" poor. Indeed, those categories and, more broadly, ruling relations govern and organize institutional encounters between those invested with power to "serve" and those who are "served." For those who "serve" (as an extension of various institutions such as the criminal system, social welfare, health, or immigration services), people become expressions of organizational categories, which are naturalized, divorcing institutional actions from the priorities and needs of people these institutions serve (see Deveau, chapter 3; Bisailon, chapter 7; and Doll, chapter 9).

## George Smith and Social Reform: Political Activist Ethnography

Because of the potential for change at the level of bureaucracies and agencies, IE has appealed to practitioners and is used by frontline workers in various bureaucratic milieus. George Smith's PAE provides a more specific grounding for activists and social movements. This is an activist subfield of IE that was given the name "political activist ethnography" in the edited volume entitled *Sociology for Changing the World* (Frampton et al. 2006). PAE projects maintain the commitments of IE while proposing an approach to research that intends to produce knowledge for activists based on their struggles (Bisaillon 2012, 617; 2020; 2022). The development of PAE stemmed from George Smith's activist and research work. During the 1980s, he studied criminal justice and medical regimes' organization to benefit those who, like himself, were involved in direct action and other forms of organizing.

Smith's early work on policing gay men in Toronto explored how politico-ideological ruling regimes socially organized the policing of sexual activities in public bathhouses. He described how the Canadian Criminal Code provisions and legal documents organized the police's documenting practices. He read these texts for the social organization of the mandated course of action and evidence gathering for the bawdyhouse-related offences that converted sexual conduct into criminal activity. He provided a basis for activists to focus on Criminal Code changes instead of individual police officers' outreach and education. Smith was also involved as a member and researcher of a community-based activist group from Toronto—AIDS ACTION NOW!—to contest "government and medical inaction around HIV/AIDS in the 1980s" (AIDS Activist History Project, n.d.). His study revealed how the lack of mandate and infrastructure for delivering experimental drugs to people with AIDS produced institutional absences in that case (AIDS Activist History Project, n.d.).

One of the political commitments that George Smith carried forward as an institutional ethnographer doing activist work is embodied and situated research. He and other political activist ethnographers assert that only research grounded in the actualities of activists engaged in a political struggle can enable an understanding of how activist struggle is socially organized (Kinsman, chapter 2). PAE starts with activists' experiences and adopts a standpoint of people making change, working from that site to understand



how the struggle is organized to enable strategic next steps in activism. In other words, it “interrogates institutional relations from the vantage point of social movements that confront them and maps out the social relations of the struggle facing these movements so they can grasp how to transform the relations they find themselves fighting” (Kinsman in Bisailon 2012, 617). Confrontations with the state can be seen as an entry point to explore how government, domestic and transnational capital, and other extra-local forces socially organize power, as manifested through the work in this book. By conceptualizing, harnessing, and mobilizing confrontation, including direct action tactics, and researching ruling regimes, activist researchers can understand how they operate and then how to resist them.

During blockades and protests, intentional disruptions of the political and economic order can expose ruling practices against which activists struggle. By analyzing moments of confrontation and the disruptions that they trigger, activists and researchers can piece together how power operates. Such research can equip those on the frontlines of contestation “with a more direct orientation towards social change” (AIDS Activist History Project, n.d.), as PAE investigates observable rather than abstract cases of ruling. PAE can help to train social movements and activists to identify and act on the ways that their thinking and actions are socially organized and to use these insights to achieve specific change.

Furthermore, a political activist ethnographer would reject abstract conceptual explanations or speculative accounts of why and how things seem to happen as they do. According to some gay rights activists in the 1980s, the explanation for why gay men in bathhouses in downtown Toronto were arrested was that “police are homophobic” (G. Smith 1990). Yet such an explanation provided activists with little understanding of how and where to proceed with activism. It requires that a researcher make a shift from what George Smith (1990, 633) describes as a “generalized world of conceptual and theoretical explanations to the concrete, sensuous world of people’s actual practices and activities.” While police officers might well have been homophobic, the point is to understand ruling and know where to intervene to mitigate harm; speculative explanations are not helpful because they do not address how oppression happens through mundane policing practices. It is crucial to reveal the specificities of how ruling happens in the work of police officers, for example. When directed at agencies, activism must be grounded in a detailed understanding of how these agencies operate, including their

internal operations, external interactions, assumptions, and goals that guide their priorities and actions. Before activists can modify institutions, they “must be able to see how they are put together in time, and this means explicating text-mediated, trans-local relations as accomplished by people in particular local sites and seeing how they are hooked (and objectified) into larger organizational processes” (Dobson 2001, 154). Political activist research can unpack these practices and the ruling relations that govern them.

Lastly, while it is vital to critique the ruling regimes that activists face, activists must understand the ruling regimes that organize their work to resist them. Hussey (2012) argues that neither activists nor social movements are immune from being governed by ruling relations. Activists may have their perspectives embedded in the officialdom of a particular organization. Focusing on his personal involvement in fair trade anti-sweatshop lobbying in Vancouver, British Columbia, he advances the idea that activist projects can hook activists into institutional regimes and officially authorized forms of knowledge. While activists might be able to challenge some ruling perspectives and confront ruling regimes, these are the same relations that organize their work priorities and those of the movements with which they are aligned. Grassroots activists can take up this line of thinking when it comes time to decide whether or on what conditions to acquiesce to or resist a movement’s priorities. Further, it offers new knowledge for activists about managing tensions between grassroots activists and movement institutions. This brings us to the practice of PAE and its relationship to research.

## **Practicing Political Activist Ethnography**

PAE is by no means a one-size-fits-all approach to activist inquiry. It is open-ended in terms of research directions and is guided by research problematics that emerge from the everyday realities of activists and social movements. It offers an opportunity for methodological flexibility to deal with an unexpected scale and complexity of data.

The authors of the chapters ahead ask questions about the social organization of the following: mobilizing in the interest of poor people, prisoners’ re-entry into society, troubling results of practices in the fracking industry, envisioning left-leaning think tanks, partnerships between government and civil society groups, mental health law for psychiatric patients, medical and administrative decision-making in immigration systems, and activist

scholarship inside and outside the academy. Below, we outline some unifying empirical, conceptual, and methodological interventions that this text makes to activist struggle and research.

### **Activist Research Inside/Outside Academia**

In this volume, one thing the authors do is share activist research that informs their advocacy. The work of A. J. Withers (chapter 1), Gary Kinsman (chapter 2), Jean Louis Deveau (chapter 3), the late Aziz Choudry (chapter 4), and Sue Bradford (chapter 5) is representative of this *outside*-of-academia trajectory that began in these authors' prior experiences of doing activist work. Withers and Kinsman are both political activist ethnographers. They use their experience working with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty to illustrate on-the-ground strategies that activists employ in their work. Kinsman discusses the value of conceptualizing direct action and direct support work as valuable sources of data and shows how research that goes into mobilizing allows activists to focus on and prepare for future interventions. Withers points to how figuring out questions, requesting documents, and reviewing them informed the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's actions. Choudry, as well, was an activist before becoming an academic, and his work explores activist researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and people's organizing that evolve in activist milieus off the university campus. He problematizes a hierarchy of knowledge that locates activist grassroots organizations' research on a lower rung than the projects carried out by academics and persons within NGOs. He calls for the recognition of intellectual work done by activists to dislocate the idea that research education, training, and mentorship are within the exclusive purview of the university. Grounded in collective efforts with his activist colleagues, Deveau has penned a narrative about how anti-fracking activism happened across time and place. He analyzes how a New Brunswick coalition to which he belonged opposed the growth of the shale gas industry and its intensification by mobilizing specific types of scientific knowledge in distinct ways. Bradford arrived at her problematic from her long-term engagement as a left-leaning activist in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Her chapter is a compelling analysis of the absence of a left-wing think tank, and her work offers ideas about how to develop such a community of practice.

Examples of activist research that started *inside* academia are showcased in the chapters by Erin Sirett (chapter 6), Laura Bisailon (chapter 7), Megan

Welsh Carroll (chapter 8), and Agnieszka Doll (chapter 9). Welsh Carroll developed an IE-infused advocacy orientation to explore the work involved for incarcerated women exiting prison and re-entering dominant society. She accompanied her participants to administrative appointments in various governmental offices, learning alongside them how women needed to advocate in their subjective interests to get social and legal entitlements. She has presented an approach to fieldwork that infiltrates institutional sites of oppression to challenge them. Doll's research into the social organization of involuntary admission in Poland was motivated by the procedural and practical inadequacy she observed as a lawyer. She explores the social organization of the involuntary admission procedure that keeps admittees silent despite their legal right to participate in their admission's legal adjudication and contest it. Sirett used IE to explore the social relations that organized a connection between the Bangladeshi grassroots organization and Canadian non-governmental organization's partnership along with textually mediated rulings by funding agencies. Bisailon blends IE and PAE to investigate the social organization of the Canadian immigration system's medical program from the standpoint of people with HIV as they apply for permanent residency, making empirically supported recommendations for institutional reform. In these studies, advocacy occurs directly within the context of the authors' research or research is done to interrogate policy so activists and social movements can adjust their strategy.

These accounts of organizing and activism further complicate the *academic activist divide* constructed in university disciplines and reveal its limits when applied to politically engaged research undertaken from inside and outside academia. Authors in this volume also bring to our attention the fact that academic standards of validity do not resonate with how activists understand knowledge. According to Kinsman, the defining criterion for successful activist research is whether it provides a foundation for organizing based on an analysis of how ruling relations are organized. This is a much higher test than in regular academic research, since the direction of people's struggles depends on it. Choudry raises an essential question of whether knowledge is only valued if people with qualifications and status produce it in specific institutional settings. He rightly observes that the subjugation of activist knowledge, specifically grassroots activists, not only is happening in academia but also penetrates social movements themselves. For more professionalized NGOs, grassroots knowledge production may be seen as invalid when the former

internalizes the conception of a professional researcher as an expert and of academic research standards (see chapter 10 by Walsh).

### **Means, Methods, and Modes of Inquiry**

PAE's methodological flexibility also enables it to deal with an unexpected scale and complexity of data. Yet by no means are PAE and IE one-size-fits-all approaches to inquiry. This volume showcases PAE and advocacy-infused IE projects' diversity in the methods and modes that researchers deploy to produce activist knowledge. While some contributors adhere to the methodological guidance of PAE and IE, others adapt these to fit their research needs. Kinsman and Deveau (chapters 2 and 3, respectively) use direct action as activist research, such as occupying decision-makers' offices, protesting in and outside buildings, participating in and disrupting consultation meetings, and bringing crowds to official meetings to pressure those in power to make concessions or implement change. An intentional disruption of the social order by an academic activist ("breaching" project) can help reveal the social organization of a ruling practice that activists struggle against and produce knowledge grounded in the actualities of their everyday struggles.

Frontline support work is another form of research for activism and social movements in which researchers may want to engage in deriving the benefits of direct experiential knowledge. It can involve taking on the grievances of individuals living in poverty as group grievances, accompanying people to appointments with social assistance workers to apply pressure, or writing letters (Withers, chapter 1; Kinsman, chapter 2; Welsh Carroll, chapter 8). Welsh Carroll volunteered for a community-based organization working with formerly incarcerated women to learn how the post-carceral reintegration system operates from the standpoint of women subjected to it. Seeing the limited resources of community-based providers at their disposal, she filled this gap by providing day-to-day services, such as driving women to appointments, supporting them psychologically and emotionally, and keeping them calm when they were frustrated with the treatment received from service institutions. She also mapped "moments of confrontations" as they appeared in the interactions between women and people working in social assistance agencies. Welsh Carroll might not have had the opportunity to pinpoint and analyze these points of rupture if not for this support work. Yet what seems to make sense in one activist context may not migrate so well

into another context, or the work might need to take a different form. While Kinsman, in alliance with the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty, and Welsh Carroll both were working on the side of dispossessed people in the hopes of availing them of services, Kinsman and colleagues took their intervention a step further by “applying pressure through mobilizing people.”

Contributors also read institutional texts critically to learn about institutional processes to map ideological accounts and ruling relations. Deveau discusses his provincial government’s fracking policy and its observable consequences. His meticulous reading of changes to policy and subsequent analyses shaped how he and his colleagues proceeded to resist. He describes how reports that he and his colleagues presented through the government’s public consultation exercise on fracking were subsumed by officially commissioned reports about the consultation process. Doll reads professional and research regulations to understand how they work together to limit the extent to which direct intervention was permissible. Sirett reads documents for organizing the partnership between two activist NGOs, while Bisailon engaged with documents on immigration HIV testing for how they compel contract physicians to become state agents rather than care providers. Moreover Kinsman’s and Deveau’s chapters illustrate how activists can apply a strategy coined by George Smith as “document and demonstrate,” bringing together analysis and writing texts with direct action to pressure those in power to respond to activists’ demands expressed in texts.

Furthermore, a contribution of this volume is the emphasis on mapping social relations and even movements. For Kinsman, mapping is a part of PAE—informing its theorizing and practice. Welsh Carroll visualizes macro-social maps of economic, political, legal, and social relations that organize formerly incarcerated women’s access to resources. She argues that such maps bring into view multiple opportunities for action and can be a resource for prison activist organizations that help them focus on policy change and for advocates or workers to call for resources to aid the re-entry work of their clients. Mapping can also help debunk the myth that those hurdles are people’s fault, as it makes institutional causes visible (Kinsman 2011a, 2011b; Doll and Walby 2019). While perplexed by the absence of formalized left-wing activism in her home country, New Zealand, Bradford uses her research to explore and map the feasibility of formalizing left-wing activism by establishing a major left-wing think tank. Our contributors also showcase how to use mapping in the context of Hussey’s (2012) idea of extended PAE. Here, mapping involves

tracing not only the ruling relations against which these movements fight but also those that contain resistance and shape movement capacities both positively and negatively. Such an “inside-in” mapping can help activists locate themselves within the web of relations, identify weak links, and find ways to forge alliances to advance political goals.

Lastly, this collection complicates the binaries between knowledge production and knowledge mobilization. Many of the chapters bring into view the relationship between knowledge production and knowledge mobilization in the context of political activist ethnographies and IE-infused advocacy projects. Activist research is an ongoing process, not like a traditional academic modelling of research projects. This again points to the fact that activism and research remain in a dynamic and reflexive relation, and this is explored across the chapters when the authors showcase the diversity of approaches in IE and PAE toward the mobilization of knowledge for the sake of social struggle.

## **Conclusion**

As readers engage with the material presented in this collection, they will notice multiple tensions that authors bring to the forefront as well as those that emerge across chapters. Multiple tensions emerge from within the authors’ experiences of doing their PAE and advocacy-inspired IE research. These tensions vary from how to read state documents and interpret technical “state speak” (Kinsman, chapter 2) to how to navigate ethical dilemmas (Doll, chapter 9) and write in a way that is accessible to activists. One of the tensions spanning across the chapters is between activism and professionalism. In IE, tensions, specifically those between lived experience and institutional accounts, are considered a productive site for launching an investigation into ruling relations. Likewise, in the context of this collection, tensions speak to the complicated project of producing research for activism by researchers who are variously located and the need to recognize their inherent challenges and limits.

On that note, we acknowledge the limitations of this project, specifically in terms of its lack of engagement with more recent social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Strike for Climate Change, and others that rose to prominence in recent years. Indeed, this book project came into being in 2014, and then the chapters were solicited. Hence, the chapters stand as artifacts of their time in terms of a conversation about social issues and activist mobilization.

Nonetheless, we hope that this collection will advance the practice of PAE and advocacy-infused IE and inspire a new generation of political and institutional ethnographers to use the tools of those sociologies for social change.

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## Part 1

# Direct Action

## The Sociology of Confrontation

These chapters demonstrate how research and activism are reflexively related to work in and for social movements. We begin the first section with A. J. Withers's chapter, "Don't Study Us—Study Them': Political Activist Ethnography and Activist Ethics in Practice," which provides an explanation of PAE from the standpoint of the anti-poverty organizer. Withers offers a reflective account of the features and practices of PAE, particularly those that pertain to the intersections of ethics and activist research. They developed a unique approach to ethics as a part of their PAE research following the principles of accountability, utility, accessibility, reciprocity, and reflexivity. In practice, it meant that the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty directly oversaw Withers's research, and its members and the organization itself were to be the primary beneficiaries of the results. Withers notes that these ethical "principles are not discrete pillars; they are interwoven in multiple ways—like a net" and should be considered an integral part of PAE practice and ethics.

Gary Kinsman's chapter, "Direct Action as Political Activist Ethnography: Activist Research in the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty," explores direct

action tactics as a form of activist research. Drawing on his activist organizing with the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty, an anti-poverty organization, he illustrates new ways that direct action can be used to yield valuable knowledge about ruling relations.

Jean Louis Deveau's "Looking into the Mouth of Premier David Alward's Trojan Horse: Responsible Environmental Management of Shale Gas in New Brunswick, Canada" explores research-activist work in community mobilization against the fracking industry in New Brunswick. He demonstrates how the then provincial government created an ideological concept of "responsible environment management" that allowed the government to bypass public consultation and enable extraction and drilling for shale gas.

The late Aziz Choudry's "Research from the Ground Up: Reflections on Activist Research Practice and Political Activist Ethnography" problematizes the idea of activist knowledge production to point to hierarchical power relations. He explores how activist knowledge undergoes subjugation, arguing that a certain kind of activist knowledge occurs in activism and organizing. He concludes that not all activist knowledge and research are equally valued and that this devaluation of knowledge and research of smaller grassroots organizations is a serious problem. This problem can stem from the professionalization of activism.

# 1 “Don’t Study Us—Study Them”

## Political Activist Ethnography and Activist Ethics in Practice

A. J. Withers

I came into academia after a long history of social justice organizing and encountering multiple people conducting research on activists, social movement organizations, and social justice movements. I have found that researchers tend to take a lot of time out of activists’ lives and give very little back. Academics, especially graduate students, often articulate a desire to make an important political intervention to benefit social movements. In the end, however, there is usually a long and inaccessible thesis or dissertation of which the people and the organization that contributed might never see a copy. This type of work commonly goes on to benefit the career of the author but not the movement or those of us who are part of it. Indeed, Croteau (2005) says, “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 that is surely not the most efficient way of realizing this goal” (20). I cannot say how many times I have heard people I organize with in anti-poverty circles say something to the effect of “don’t study us—study them—study something that will be useful to us.” Political activist ethnography (PAE) helped me “study them” while “looking at us and from our perspective” to help “us” be more effective in the struggle for social justice.

I worked as an anti-poverty organizer with a group called the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) for many years. OCAP was “a direct-action based anti-poverty organization formed in 1990 and disbanded 33 years later, in 2023. OCAP [was] based in Toronto but work[ed] on issues that

affect people across the province and are in solidarity with similar movements across the country and around the world” (OCAP, n.d.). I joined OCAP in 2000 and have been a paid organizer and served many terms as a member of its executive committee. My recent project examined ruling relations and the social relations of struggle from the standpoint of OCAP. With PAE as my central theoretical framework and methodological approach, I conducted field research, interviews, and textual analysis of city and organizational documents. I focused on OCAP’s homelessness campaigns: a campaign to stop the criminalization of unhoused people in a public park by private security, a campaign to increase access to a social assistance benefit for people in need of emergency housing, and a campaign to increase the number and improve the conditions of emergency shelter beds. My findings demonstrated the active and ongoing research and theorization that anti-poverty activists engage in as well as the practices of delegitimization—excluding critique, testimonial injustice, and epistemic violence—that ruling relations engage in to counter activist research and theory. While the city of Toronto worked to contain homelessness organizing in Toronto and deployed numerous demobilization tactics to do so, each campaign was fully or partially successful. These victories were secured by anti-poverty activists through the use (or threat) of direct action tactics, showing poor people’s organizing can be effective even in periods of neoliberal retrenchment.

PAE offered me, and offers other activists and scholars, a theoretical and methodological framework to do this work. As an organizer, I wanted to better understand my own work and how it fit into and impacted the world. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways that PAE provides a useful alternative to normative scholarly social movement theory and the activist ethical framework I developed to implement PAE fully and justly in my own organization.

## **Political Activist Ethnography as a Theory/Method**

When I started getting ready to do my research, I set out to read every academic text that had been written about OCAP. I came across a chapter written by one of OCAP’s founders, John Clarke (2006). In “Researching for Resistance: OCAP, Housing Struggles and Activist Research,” Clarke says social justice organizations like OCAP “need a generalized understanding and detailed knowledge of what they are up against” (132). Nowhere does he say that we need more studies of social justice organizations. Clarke’s chapter

is in *Sociology for Changing the World: Social Movements / Social Research*, edited by Frampton et al. (2006c), the only book about PAE—until now. And the chapter after Clarke's is Gary Kinsman's (2006) "Mapping Social Relations of Struggle: Activism, Ethnography, Social Organization." I knew Gary from my work in OCAP; he was an organizer with the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty, so I took the time to read his chapter. As I read it and then the short, accessible section introductions by the four editors, including Kinsman, I felt excited and relieved. This was my way out from under the mainstream body of sociological movement theory that is largely irrelevant to social movements (Bevington and Dixon 2005; Flacks 2004). PAE would let me show OCAP's work but not with the aim of simply learning about OCAP—rather, with the aim of supporting it and other social justice movements.

PAE was founded by George Smith (1990) and emerged out of and in response to institutional ethnography (IE), which was developed by Dorothy Smith (e.g., 1987, 1990, 1999). One can't understand PAE without understanding some of the theory behind IE. I couldn't do PAE without turning to IE because there were so few examples of PAE. Drawing on Dorothy Smith's work, George Smith, who was a gay liberation activist, developed PAE, which uses basic IE approaches to conduct research within activist movements and to assist movements. George Smith (1990) argues that IE "provid[es] a ground-work for grass-roots political action; not only because, as a matter of method, it begins from the standpoint of those outside of ruling *regimes*, but because its analysis is directed at empirically determining how such *regimes* work—that is, how they are socially organized" (631).

PAE draws heavily from IE. Its key extensions are with respect to the role of the author and the purpose of the research. Here, the researcher is an activist doing work with a group they have an ongoing relationship with, and the research is intended to contribute to the social movement of which the activist/researcher is a part. Frampton et al. (2006b) explain, "One of the central propositions of political activist ethnography is that, through confrontations with ruling regimes, activists are able to uncover aspects of their social organization. Through an analysis of the institutional relations movements are up against, more effective forms of activism can be developed" (3). This is a materialist framework and methodology that understands ruling relations as something that "we actively produce" (Frampton et al. 2006a, 256) and, therefore, as something we can change. Dorothy Smith (1990) observes, from her reading of Marx, that society is not a thing; it is "relations and

processes that arise in and only in the actual activities of actual people. Society, therefore, happens” (34). Drawing on this, Frampton et al. (2006a) say there is “therefore [a] need to abandon the language of ‘systems’ and ‘structures.’ They get in the way of the work of recovering social practices, relations, and organization, and impede our social struggles” (256). Scholars and activists are inclined to reify (make to seem real by extracting the social relations) and objectify social relations and their consequences, what Dorothy Smith (2001) calls “blob-ontology” (166). Ruling relations and things like oppression, capitalism, and colonialism, for example, are not leviathans that we must fight but cannot necessarily locate—they are the result of human interactions, and they are under human control. As a social justice organizer, I have found this ontological observation to be significant both for my research and for organizing work. The target for change is not a far-off yet ever-present set of interlocked *systems*; it is human actions of which we are a part and that we can resist and change.

### **Getting Ready: Standpoint, Subjectivity/Objective, Inside/Outside**

George Smith (1990) envisioned a standpoint for PAE not based on the experience of being part of an oppressed group but based in activity—being an activist who is already within the organizations or movements that one is researching (also see Hussey 2012). I took on the standpoint of a member of OCAP, which I was. George Smith took on the standpoint of a gay activist who was part of a group doing work to make social change, which he was. Hussey (2012) says “the details” of each activist standpoint “are case specific” (3). This is an important distinction between PAE and IE (although sometimes PAE scholars use standpoint following Dorothy Smith’s IE; see Ng 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Approaching my research from the standpoint of an OCAP member allowed me to reject the ideology of objective sociology and generalizability typical of mainstream social movement theory (D. Smith 1987; G. Smith 1990). At the same time, PAE and IE avoid the pitfalls of relativism because

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1 I have written elsewhere (Withers 2020) about some of the difficulties I have with standpoint as it is used in IE and how it can lead to epistemic and colonial violence. Taking up the standpoint of an activist, rather than the standpoint of a member of an oppressed group of which one is not a part, resolves these issues.



the methodology does not simply produce situated subjective knowledge that is only applicable to isolated situations. Rather, they allow for the piecing together of the ruling relations that dominate and organize social relations. As such, the problems of objectivity and generalizability within social movement theory, and scholarship in general, can be addressed while still producing meaningful and useful knowledge. Further, rather than pretending to be objective, PAE is actively oriented toward supporting social justice and social change. IE and PAE focus on “explicit[ing] ruling relations that organize and coordinate”; therefore, generalizability “relies on discovery and demonstration of how ruling relations exist in and across many local settings” (Campbell and Gregor 2002, 89). The researcher works to uncover “social processes that have generalized effects” and/or “institutional processes [that] may produce similarities of experience” across space and time (DeVault and McCoy 2012, 382). Within these frameworks/methodologies, knowledge about ruling relations (or the social relations of struggle) is uncovered, and that can contribute to broader understandings of ruling relations generally. Therefore, what my research uncovers about the tactics that ruling relations use to demobilize shelter struggles in Toronto could be applied to and built on by climate justice activists in Tokyo. In this approach, each movement or organization that research is produced about from within can help piece together a part of a broader map of ruling relations—some findings will create new knowledge, while others will reinforce understandings of these relations.

Also, unlike most social movement researchers, I, like other political activist ethnographers, am an “insider” researcher because I am a part of the movement that I am researching. Being a member of the group that one is engaging in interviews and doing field research with can be an opportunity and a limitation. Because I am embedded in this community, I am invested in maintaining relationships and being non-exploitative. I may be more driven to act ethically than other researchers because of my connections with the people being researched. Further, Oakley (1981) argues that qualitative interviews are the most fruitful when there is a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.

There is a difference between being inside or outside an organization and being inside and outside of ruling relations for activists. Kinsman (2006, 143) challenges these divisions: “While we may be in rupture with ruling relations on one front, we may be fully inside ruling relations on another.” Kinsman calls on us to reject simplistic understandings of insider and outsider and

grapple with the complexities of the ways in which we both are subjected to and benefit from ruling relations. Consequently, a PAE approach calls on researchers to “explod[e] the inside/outside binary” (Frampton et al. 2006a, 247). Some researchers claim innocence from complicity in oppression as “insiders” in oppressed communities. This negates both the diversity within communities and everyone’s participation—no matter how reluctant in institutional relations. This offering from political activist ethnographers is an important one in thinking about how researchers relate to their research. It requires ongoing reflexivity and does not provide the space for insiders to absolve themselves of oppressive actions because they are “insiders.”

### **Putting Political Activist Ethnography into Practice**

George Smith developed PAE for researchers who were working from the standpoint of social justice movements to do research “with a view to helping them change it” (1990, 629). However, simply having such a view is not sufficient. Indeed, every researcher who came along and studied “us” instead of “them” also, I’m sure, wanted to support social justice movements—including those who have caused harm conducting their research. Many people have enacted violence with the aim of helping make the world better and in the name of progressive or radical social change (see Chapman and Withers 2019).

For my own practice of PAE, I needed to establish clear activist research ethics because George Smith did not provide an ethical framework, and academic institutional ethics are inadequate. Academic institutional ethical review boards have been criticized for prioritizing “sav[ing] face, minimiz[ing] liability, and prevent[ing] offense” (Nichols 2015, 9). There can also be direct conflicts between academic and activist ethics (for example, what information should be provided to the state, if any, and at what point; see Bevington and Dixon 2005). These bodies are, therefore, fundamentally insufficient ethical guides for activist research.

Further, social movements, in general, and OCAP, in specific, are distrustful of researchers (Greene 2006). I had this access to OCAP because of my relationship with OCAP. I had established a significant amount of trust with people in the organization as both a volunteer and a former paid organizer. It was politically important to me, in terms of my responsibility to OCAP, not only to act in ethical ways but also to be understood as acting in ethically sound ways. This was also personally important to me, as many people in

OCAP were my dear friends, and my political reputation would be deeply impacted by this project. So, in addition to institutional ethics, I developed my own set of ethics, or guiding principles, to hold me to a social justice movement ethic that was transparent and accountable. The activist research ethical principles that I developed to both guide and ground my PAE work are accountability, utility, accessibility, reciprocity, and reflexivity.

### Accountability

The first guiding principle of my research is accountability, which did more than require that there was a mechanism in place to ensure that there was recourse available if I behaved unethically. I worked to establish a form of “dual accountability” (Cancain 1993, 94): accountability to both the academy and the community. In addition to approval from York University’s Office of Research Ethics, OCAP and I established a Research Steering Committee (RSC) that was made up of people chosen by OCAP. It was the RSC’s responsibility to supervise my work and research. I could go to them with concerns or questions that I had, and OCAP members could also go to them with any concerns they had that they did not wish to bring to me directly. The committee was composed of five people. It reviewed my dissertation proposal and provided feedback about and approved my informed consent forms and ethics protocols. The OCAP research committee also helped me transition into the role of an OCAP Organizer. When I revised my dissertation into a book—*Fight to Win: Inside Poor People’s Organizing* (Withers 2021)—the committee reformed and read through multiple drafts of the text.

The committee and I established several internal protocols for my research relationship with OCAP. If I violated these parameters, OCAP could withdraw its consent for the study (although the research was done with full, free, and informed consent, and OCAP could withdraw its consent at any point—even if I didn’t violate these parameters). Of course, if the RSC felt I violated our agreement, it could put other restrictions on me (these would not necessarily be limited to my research but could include my membership in the organization). It was agreed that I would not report on the internal workings of general membership or executive committee meetings so members felt they could speak freely.

Academic research has a long track record of exploitation and appropriation of social justice movement knowledge (Chesters 2012; Dixon 2014; Kinsman 2006). So OCAP could take the risk in participating, I agreed I

would not present anything in my research that caused harm to OCAP. This was always what I believed going into the project. It is what I told each member of my academic supervisory committee when I asked them if they would be part of my committee. I wanted to understand ruling relations and what makes OCAP more effective; I did not want to cause damage to OCAP or the movement. In practice, it can be daunting to hold that principle collectively and make that determination collectively.

## Utility

Secondly, I wanted my work to be useful. Bevington and Dixon (2005) put out a call for those engaged in researching and writing about social movements to produce “theory that is useful and accountable to movements,” which “can inform and assist movements” (186). Utility activates a different ethical standard and motivation than typical academic research that is simply focused on producing knowledge. Utility is something that George Smith makes clear that PAE was developed for. I felt like it was important to forefront this for myself and for the folks I was working with, so I articulated utility as one of my five core guiding ethics. I believe that my finished project was useful and have gotten that feedback from some of the activists who have read it. I published my research in a book with a left-wing press (rather than an academic one) to make it more available to activists so it can be more useful. Much of the question of utility was also addressed through the next two activist principles: accessibility and reciprocity.

## Accessibility

If one cannot access the text, it is not useful—regardless of the importance or urgency of the knowledge within it—and I cannot easily be held accountable if people cannot read it. Accessibility was an especially integral ethical principle because I was working with a poor people’s organization. While many activists engage with theory, even when it is academically written and less accessible (Bevington and Dixon 2005), this can still be a significant barrier. Those activists who are the least likely to find academic texts accessible are also more likely members of oppressed groups: particularly poor and working-class people who cannot afford postsecondary education, people with intellectual disabilities, and migrants who do not know English well. This works to continue the concentration of knowledge among people who are already exalted

in movements, maintaining the oppressive relations it wishes to overthrow. Issues of accessibility are indeed core issues and key to ensuring legitimate and meaningful social justice research ethics. I wrote my dissertation using relatively accessible language and included a plain(er) language summary and glossary to make my work more accessible.

## Reciprocity

Also strongly linked to utility, reciprocity is a principle that demands more than an extractive research practice. Reciprocal research is a “collaborative research process [that] becomes an ongoing and dynamic form of giving back in itself” (Driver and Higgins 2014, 1). This means that researchers must think beyond the finished product as their contribution back to the movement and engage in thinking meaningfully about what reciprocity means for the people, organizations, and movements about which they write.

Many well-intentioned activists have made, or attempted to make, “interventions into the movement” through academic texts that many activists I know, including myself, have never read. That is why I began my research with the assumption that my actual dissertation would not be useful at all. I felt that I had to attempt to design a research project that would contribute to my community more than I was taking out of it by *doing* the research—through the process, not the final project. My shift in thinking about non-extractive, reciprocal research absent a final project is what called upon me to do field research and helped me formulate the parameters in which I would conduct it. I worked as an unpaid OCAP Organizer for my field research. I had, about ten years previously, filled this role in a paid capacity.

Organizers are constantly strategizing about how to be more effective; PAE also aims to make social movements more effective. Consequently, my conversational engagement with members and allies about the work we were doing, about strategy and evaluation, was often what Eric Mykhalovskiy calls “confirmation or correction” of my analysis (as quoted in DeVault and McCoy 2006, 23). This also meant I was checking in and checking back in with OCAP members about my analysis—something that took their time and energy (even if these conversations were interesting or engaging to them). So, while I intended for my field research to be a giving method, it would be naive for me to imagine my role as organizer-researcher as a straightforward contribution. Researchers are always extracting, always taking.

Initially, I intended to work for OCAP relatively full-time; however, my physical condition prevented me from doing this, as my recovery from my back injury and surgery was slower than I had expected. My original ethics approval permitted me to conduct field research for four to six months, but I later amended this period for an additional six months. Even as I stepped back from intensive full-time organizing, it made sense for me to continue to collect more data as I analyzed my data given that I continued to organize with the group.

I also interviewed OCAP members with various degrees of involvement, from those who were relatively new but routinely attended meetings and demonstrations to those who had been members for longer but were less involved at the time of the interview. OCAP interview participants were provided with those quotations that were used in the dissertation so they could respond to or clarify their quotes. This was a taking practice because I took people's time and especially their knowledge. Providing people with their quotes permitted an extra degree of ethicality, in my view, but it also added an additional burden onto those people who were interviewed. I tried to take measures to mitigate the extractive character of this practice. This included naming anyone who wanted to be named so their contribution was attributed to them and providing an honorarium of \$20 in recognition of their time. I also interviewed city councillors, their staff, members of the media, and a Member of Parliament. These latter interviews were highly reciprocal because they didn't take time or energy from the movement, and the information I acquired through them produced strategically useful knowledge for the movement. I also submitted multiple requests for information under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, totaling over five thousand pages. While all these requests were to the city of Toronto, except one that was to the province of Ontario, some of the social justice movement ethics that I outlined could still be applied. As freedom of information (FOI) requests came in, I would often review them with one of the other organizers or bring summaries to meetings. Sometimes we would obtain useful statistical data; other times we would obtain information about how OCAP was perceived. We would come up with working theories that we would use to apply to OCAP's work, demonstrating the utility of the project. The practice of figuring out questions and reviewing the documents involved others and took resources. I did the bulk of the labour, and this method was generative, but it also took resources out of the movement.

For me, reciprocity meant sharing my findings as I went and working as an unpaid organizer (staff person) as field research. Also, in the spirit of reciprocity and accountability, I created a research archive (including recordings of interviews with people who consented) for OCAP. The process of determining reciprocity is dynamic and must be done collaboratively with the community (Driver and Higgins 2014). As my project shows, even when someone tries to design a research project that is beneficial to the movement using largely reciprocal methods, there is still a resource cost for the movement in conducting that research.

## Reflexivity

Researchers can impact those they are researching, including in harmful ways. Reflexivity is often viewed as an important part of the qualitative research process in order to mitigate harm (Cooper and Burnett 2006; Fortier 2015; Gray 2008; Pinnington 2012; Probst and Berenson 2014; Larsen and Walby 2012). Social justice activists also practice reflexivity, although they often don't call it that (e.g., Dixon 2014; Fortier 2015; Milstein 2017; Oparah 2010; Withers 2020). Throughout my project, I worked to practice reflexivity, including what Craig Fortier (2015) calls "collective self-reflexivity," which seeks "to foster a collective process of self-reflexivity rather than see[ing] this process as being inherently individualistic" (60).

Because I am an "insider," long before I began the research process, I had to practice self-reflexivity in relation to this project. Indeed, from the moment I first had the notion that I might want to do this as a project, I started "checking" my behaviour to ensure that I wasn't doing anything that could impact my research, and this continued through my initial informal conversations with key OCAP members about their thoughts about such a project until the last T was crossed. For example, because I, like most OCAP members, have an opportunity to edit most of the text that OCAP puts out, I could make subtle changes to seed the record to benefit my research before people in the organization even knew I was thinking about conducting it. A simple change from "government" to "government bureaucracy," for instance, could better fit a text into a section that I anticipated writing in the future. I had an ethical responsibility as both a researcher and an OCAP member not to do this not only because it would lead to invalid results but also because it would undermine the organization's trust in me.

An important part of reflexivity is understanding who I am in the world and how that impacts (and is impacted by) my research. Doing PAE, being an “insider,” and starting from the standpoint of an activist do not negate those social experiences that deeply inform how every researcher engages with and understands their research from start to finish. It was important for me to practice reflexivity about my social location (as, I would argue, it is for every researcher), and in the interests of accountability and reflexivity, I needed to make my own social location apparent to the reader (also see Sudbury 1998).<sup>2</sup>

Early in the text, I located myself as a white settler who benefits from settler colonial and white supremacist relations. Being exalted as white informs all my experiences. I organize in an anti-poverty organization, and until I entered my PhD, I lived below the poverty line, with many of those years spent on social assistance—both welfare and, later, disability. I had brief experiences of street and hidden homelessness in my youth, and I am queer, trans, and non-binary. All these things impact how I experience and interpret the world.

However, it wasn’t enough to simply position myself in the text, to render my social location visible to the reader. I would argue that this is helpful to the reader in understanding the text and the research but would ultimately mean I was performing accountability through socially locating myself. Instead, it is important that researchers “show their work”—to demonstrate their reflexivity in the text. Because reflexivity is an ongoing and continuous practice, I couldn’t have written up my research and included even a significant portion of my own field notes on the issue. However, when I was aware that my social location was significantly impacting the research, I tried to include it in my final write-up.

One way I included my social location was in discussing my talks with unhoused people while doing outreach. While I have had some experience with homelessness, that means nothing to folks who are unhoused right now, and it would have been weird to try to drop that into conversations. I described how I would try to demonstrate working-class solidarity and groundedness rather than middle-class do-gooderness. Sometimes people would give me a “Why is this stranger coming up and talking to me?” look. I usually overcame this by using a few strategies, including dropping OCAP’s name quickly and, if

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2 Of course, there are different ways that this makes sense. Situating the author doesn’t necessarily make sense on an info sheet or report published by the organization.



people didn't know OCAP, asking them if they knew Gaétan. Gaétan Héroux is a well-loved long-time frontline worker and OCAP member who, it seems, has helped pretty much everyone on the streets at some point. I was often smoking and would give out cigarettes when asked and/or have my adorable three-legged Chihuahua with me (a dog probably meant I was not at work). I would usually swear quite quickly in our interactions as well. All these things were disarming and signalled to most people that I was not—or at least not only—some random do-gooder. However, when someone was distant in an interaction, I never knew why that was the case, and it very well could have been because of my social privilege.

I also wrote my disability into the write-up of my project as part of how I located myself because it impacted how I conducted my work. This wouldn't be the case for all disabled researchers, but when I began my field research, I was recovering from spinal surgery, in addition to having chronic pain, and it significantly impacted my work. This doesn't mean disability is a deficit; it can contribute to the research process (see Bennett 2013). I brought insight and ways of observing because of my disability that I made palpable *through* my disability (see Michalko 2002; Withers 2012). Accounts of field research are often grand depictions of physical performance (e.g., Graeber 2009; Valentine 2007), not of painful disabled bodies. A non-disabled researcher is assumed.<sup>3</sup> I haven't come across descriptions of fieldwork that include my experiences—like taking calls in the office while lying down on a yoga mat or participating in a protest march from an accessibility van. But those are movement spaces where organizing happens, ruling relations are confronted, and knowledge is produced. So I thought it was important to make my disability visible.

I also wrote about my note-taking process. This is often the case for many people describing their field research in a large project; however, I had to take notes and describe how I took notes very differently than most people doing field research. In “Political Activist as Ethnographer,” George Smith (1990) talks about meetings and conversations being sources of data but doesn't say how he makes that information text—how he takes notes. His is a short article, so it makes sense that he doesn't spend time on this. Generally speaking, people doing field research are told by the textbooks to write as much as possible as quickly as possible and to do so on location whenever possible

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3 With, perhaps, the exception of disability studies.

(e.g., Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I had to not only demonstrate that I knew the “right way”—the non-disabled way—to take field notes but also then explain why and how I deviated from this norm. I turned this into a reflexive discussion not only about my chronic pain, which made it impossible to keep normative field notes, but also about the culture within social movements, which responds negatively to people taking field notes in such a manner. I followed the field note-taking practice of Hugh Campbell (2005), who was in a bar and drunk most of the time for his field research on hypermasculinity. What I didn’t say at the time but hoped was evident on its face was just how sad and comedic it is that, because of the absence of disabled ethnographers who talk about disability, the best example I had to follow was a note-taking practice designed around drunkenness and its subsequent frequent urination.

The reflexive process can create space for accountability with both the group the activist is working with and the broader community. For me, I worked to put reflexivity on the page, especially with respect to social location, but reflexivity was a daily practice with the people around me. David Graeber emphasizes the practice of reflexivity—the actual *doing* of it rather than performing it (Graeber 2014, drawing on Skeggs 2002).

The activist research ethics that I developed and implemented as part of my PAE research process has five principles: accountability, utility, accessibility, reciprocity, and reflexivity. These principles are important because PAE begins from an activist standpoint, and social justice activists and academic institutions hold different, sometimes oppositional ethical standards. These principles are not discrete pillars; they are interwoven in multiple ways—like a net. Some of the ways they are interwoven are that one of my research projects can be reciprocal if the research process is useful to the movement, that accessibility is a prerequisite for accountability and utility, and that reflexivity is necessary for accountability to take place. PAE calls on researchers to support movements that make social change, and I developed these principles to help me do that.

## Conclusion

My research examined homelessness organizing from the standpoint of an OCAP Organizer. PAE wasn’t simply a nice fit for my project. When I found PAE, this theory/method resolved many of the problems that I had with and felt stifled by normative social movement theory. PAE allowed me,

as an OCAP member working for social justice, to be explicit in my aims to conduct research that will help contribute to social justice organizing. PAE enables the researcher to produce knowledge *with* social movements that is useful *to* social movements.

PAE has a lot of underutilized potential for social justice research that can work to benefit organizing. Both Gary Kinsman's (2006; this volume, chapter 2) and my work examine the social relations of struggle with anti-poverty movements. PAE is especially suited for anti-poverty movements because it is a methodology from the bottom. I found using FOI requests to access documents that would not otherwise be available to the organization was particularly fruitful. They helped me examine what the ruling regime is doing to coordinate ruling and attempt to demobilize movements. FOI requests can take a lot of time, and my field research certainly did; this isn't to mention the advance work with the organization to ensure accountability and reciprocity. PAE, the way that I practiced it, was slow research, which can run counter to the urgent needs of crisis organizing and the knowledge production standards of the neoliberal university. However, finding the time to step back also means making the space to map the social relations of struggle to move forward more effectively. The aim isn't simply to struggle, as OCAP says; it is to "fight to win," and PAE can be a useful tool to help us do that.

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## 2 Direct Action as Political Activist Ethnography

### Activist Research in the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty

Gary Kinsman

*Dedicated to those active in the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty (S-CAP) between 2001 and 2014.*

#### Introduction to the Research Problematic

In this chapter, I explore direct action as an important form of activist research and how direct action as research enriches political activist ethnography (PAE).<sup>1</sup> I do this by reflecting on my organizing with the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty (S-CAP) from 2001 to early 2014. S-CAP was a direct action-based anti-poverty activist organization located in the Canadian province of Ontario.<sup>2</sup> Direct action moves beyond state-sanctioned forms of protest, such as writing letters and lobbying, to take up ways of organizing that break with the rules those with social power have set up to

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1 Thanks to Chris Bowes, Chris Dixon, Clarissa Lassaline, A. J. Withers, and especially Ander Negrazis for comments and assistance. Thanks to Ander Negrazis for the diagrams. Responsibility for any errors is mine alone.

2 Unfortunately, S-CAP collapsed in late 2015, owing to both a crisis of capacity and the sectarian intervention of the Revolutionary Student Movement / Revolutionary Communist Party. See Kinsman and Charboneau (2017).

contain us. Instead, direct action activists refuse to recognize the legitimacy of unjust laws. They use their bodies to disrupt ruling relations to get results for oppressed people—in this case, for people living in poverty. Exploring how direct action *is* activist research, I draw on my own memory work; discussions and a workshop with S-CAP activists in May 2014; publications, websites, and texts produced by S-CAP and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP); and critical textual analysis of state regulations.<sup>3</sup>

I begin by reviewing the theoretical and methodological contributions for investigating direct action as activist research, identifying areas in need of further development. This includes how direct action in confronting ruling regimes interrogates institutional relations, how this activism and research are reflexively related, and how this approach makes visible class relations. Second, I provide an overview of the historical context in which Ontario anti-poverty organizing has taken place, outlining the contexts in which struggles played out through S-CAP organizing. Third, I illustrate what S-CAP activists learned from engaging in direct action support work *for* people living in poverty generally and those enrolled in the Special Diet Campaign, the Community Start Up struggle, and the struggle over the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) that replaced the Community Start Up. Each of these involved a major struggle over the amount of funding people on social assistance received. I conclude by reflecting on the learning process involved in doing direct action as activist research, pointing to areas for further investigation.

\* \* \*

*March 22, 2006. Sudbury. It was one day before the provincial budget was to be presented and over a decade since the Mike Harris Conservative government began coordinated attacks against people in poverty. I was among sixty rowdy people chanting “Stop the War on the Poor” as we marched through the 7<sup>th</sup> floor office of Liberal Member of Provincial Parliament and Minister of Northern Development, Rick Bartolucci, to demand an immediate 40% increase in social assistance rates to raise them back to the level they were at over a decade earlier.*

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3 On memory work, see Ruth Frankenburg (1993) and Frigga Haug (1992). On OCAP, see Withers (2020).



*Given that we had publicly announced our visit to Rick Bartolucci's office, how did we manage to get in? During our last visit to his constituency office, a wall of police met us. This time we discovered that Bartolucci also had a Ministry office, and we went there instead. With the help of another Ontario anti-poverty group, we poured into the building and secured the elevators to send people to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. They did not expect us. On the way out, we held a noisy rally in the building lobby vowing we would be back if there was no major increase in social assistance rates. (Activist Reflections, Gary Kinsman)*

In my life as an activist, the most inspiring activism has been direct actions such as those described above. Direct action has engaged my imagination and body far more than other forms of activism. Direct action is not only a form of activism; it is a form of research, a point echoed by Chris Bowes (2003) and Andrew K. Thompson (2006). Direct action as research makes an important contribution to political activist ethnographic knowledge production. In disrupting ruling relations, a great deal can be learned about how institutional relations are socially organized. For example, the planning of the occupation of a government office involves research activities such as doing reconnaissance to establish where the entrances and exits are located and how the office is organized, finding out what possible legal charges could be laid if the police are alerted, holding discussions about what demands to prioritize and what tactics can be deployed if people are arrested, and notifying mass media without inadvertently informing the office or police.

Another important form of activist research in S-CAP was direct action support work. Activist support work is the practice of taking on board the grievances of individuals living in poverty as group grievances (Corbeil and House 2016; Withers 2021). Doing this involves research and knowledge production through the following: active listening to and understanding the layered accounts of people's experiences with bureaucratic relations, accompanying people to appointments with social assistance workers to put on pressure, mapping out how social assistance agencies are organized, and actively supporting people by writing letters, setting deadlines, and applying pressure through mobilizing people to go to offices to disrupt their everyday operations to get a response.

## Theoretical and Methodological Issues

Activists in social movements are constantly producing knowledge and doing research, even when not named as such, in their confrontations with ruling regimes. Making this knowledge visible and critical is an important task in building movement-based research and theorizing capacities (Dixon 2014). Direct action can be seen in a sociological context as an activist extension of an ethnomethodological breaching experiment (Garfinkel 1967) where “social order” is intentionally disrupted to reveal what can be learned about its social organization.<sup>4</sup> Direct action as research resonates with Dorothy Smith’s (2005) work on institutional ethnography, which turns the powers of ethnography against ruling institutions to produce knowledge *for* those oppressed within these relations. George Smith’s (2006) work on PAE pushes institutional ethnographic inquiry further by taking up the social standpoints of activists to produce knowledge that is useful *for* activists in movements. My contribution to PAE has been to stress the importance of mapping social relations of struggle so that activists can locate themselves within the web of relations they are engaged in and strategize how best to move forward in meeting people’s needs (Kinsman 2006).

Mapping relations of struggle involves not only investigating the ruling relations movements are organizing against, including how these relations can contain activists’ resistance, but also inquiring into the composition or power of struggle (Kinsman 2005; Thorburn and Kinsman 2020) that movements can mobilize in transforming these relations.<sup>5</sup> Mapping relations of struggle is not neutral but rather a politically engaged process of capturing the relational contestations and connections between ruling relations and social movement struggles. Mapping relations of struggle also involves explicating movement capacities, including possible allies and strategies and tactics, and identifying weak points where activists

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4 Ethnomethodology is the study of the methods people use to produce and make sense of their social worlds.

5 I borrow the formulation *composition of struggle* from autonomist Marxist work on working-class composition. Working-class composition is the strength and autonomy of working-class struggle from/against capital. The working-class composition of struggle is worked against and decomposed by the forces of capital as part of a broader cycle of struggle (Kinsman 2005; Thorburn and Kinsman 2020).

can best disrupt ruling relations. In this chapter, I show how mapping social relations of struggle clarified and recorded the knowledge produced through S-CAP activism and how this method assisted in orienting people's organizing.

I also address an underdeveloped aspect of PAE. George Smith largely writes about doing PAE as an individual activist/scholar. But he also writes, "Research studies of this sort are designed to be written up, published and made available to members in grassroots organizations for their political consideration. They are not in some sense special or unique. Rather, they are intended to provide, on a day-to-day basis, the scientific ground for political action" (2006, 68). How this is to be done, however, is not clarified, and neither is how this can become collective activist knowledge production. I suggest that one way this weakness in PAE can be addressed is through direct action as activist research, which opens possibilities for collectivizing/democratizing research and theorizing.

Direct action research is a unique form of investigation because it both illustrates and demonstrates how consciousness has an active relation to the social world. The practice of investigation is inseparable from that of activist intervention, and the researcher/activist is always in (and of) the world they investigate. As George Smith, my political activist ethnographer mentor, expresses, "My research was given direction by the on-going confrontation with the authorities. It was this that determined what piece of the puzzle I should study next" (2006, 57). Because research is driven by the needs of the struggle, direct action is a form of research that can exceed constraints placed upon more traditional forms of research. The defining criterion for successful activist research is whether it allows for organizing based on an analysis of how ruling relations are organized so that they can be transformed. This is a much higher test than in regular academic research, since the direction of people's struggles depends on it.

## **A Brief Sketch of Direct Action Anti-poverty Organizing in Ontario and in Sudbury**

In the mid-1990s, the Ontario provincial government led by Conservative Premier Mike Harris launched a major neoliberal war on the poor in general and women living in poverty in particular (Little 2003; Vaillancourt 2011)

by reducing basic social assistance funding by more than 21 percent.<sup>6</sup> Social assistance was also redesigned and divided between Ontario Works (OW), which provides basic levels of social assistance and on which “workfare” was imposed (Vaillancourt 2011), and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which provides a higher level of support but is far more difficult to access due to required medical documentation and the long waiting period for approval.

This attack provoked important resistance from anti-poverty organizers, especially OCAP (Clarke 2006; Withers 2020, 2021). OCAP and other allied groups developed connections with several unions, most notably the Ontario section of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, to form the Raise the Rates campaign. Along with calling for major increases in social assistance rates and in the minimum wage for low-income workers, the Raise the Rates campaign worked to expand the use of existing programs—such as the Special Diet Supplement (which provides funding for a more nutritious diet if a medical professional approves this) and the Community Start Up and Maintenance Benefit (referred to in this chapter as the Community Start Up, which provided funding for people on social assistance for moving and to establish a home for themselves)—to increase the amount of support that people on social assistance receive.

Sudbury is a city of 170,000 people in northeastern Ontario on the territories of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek Nation and other Anishnawbek people. Historically, it was first a rail centre and then a mining town where major union struggles were waged. Now it is an important regional centre (Leadbeater 2008; Beck et al. 2005) that is Anglophone dominated, with a large Francophone minority and a sizeable Indigenous population facing racism, social exclusion, and poverty. It was in Sudbury that Kimberly Rogers was accused of “welfare fraud” for receiving both social assistance and student assistance at the same time, which the Conservative provincial government had outlawed. Rogers was placed under house arrest and died during a heat wave in August 2001, which led to the formation of the important Justice with Dignity campaign for social assistance reform.<sup>7</sup> S-CAP first

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6 With the rise in the cost of living, this now requires more than a 55 percent increase just to bring a single individual on basic social assistance back to where they were in 1995 in terms of buying power.

7 See Income Security Advocacy Centre (2020).

came together in 2001 and was composed of activists who were inspired by OCAP and the global justice movement and who wanted to organize locally along activist lines. First, “we” campaigned for raising social assistance rates and against homelessness and, in 2002, added direct action support work to our organizing (Bowes 2003).<sup>8</sup>

## **Ideology Critique and What S-CAP Learned from Direct Action Support Work**

Creating a basis for more effective organizing requires a critique of ideological accounts that exist within both traditional forms of research and movement organizing (G. Smith 2006; Hussey 2012). Concepts and abstract ideas mobilized as “explanations” in social movements can misinform activism because they fall short of uncovering the social organization of oppression and power. Examples George Smith (2006) identifies are how concepts of “homophobia” or “AIDSphobia” failed to produce useful analysis about the social organization of police repression or the denial of access to AIDS treatments and therefore misdirected social struggles.

In anti-poverty organizing, ideological approaches include the views that people living in poverty are separate from the broader working class (Cruikshank 1994) and are “apathetic” and require “help.” The Raise the Rates campaign cut across attempts to pose the needs of waged and unwaged people living in poverty against each other. By viewing the problem not as that of the individual living in poverty but because of the social relations of capitalism that continually produce poverty in people’s lives, anti-poverty activist approaches reject the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, along with divisions between people in poverty who receive wages and those who do not. Instead, all people living in poverty are viewed as part of the working class whether they are waged, engage in unpaid domestic and reproductive labour, or engage in the everyday unpaid “hooking up” work

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8 There can be lots of problems with the use of “we,” especially when it is used to deny the differential experiences of the oppressed. At the same time, it can be used in a more collective sense. While recognizing these limitations, I use “we” here to refer to the collective project S-CAP was engaged in. On this use of “we,” see J. Holloway (2005).

imposed on people on social assistance to qualify for and to maintain this assistance (Mykhalovskiy and G. Smith 1994).<sup>9</sup>

Through doing direct action support work in Sudbury, we discovered that people in state and social agencies, and even people living in poverty, would often make sense of the world through an ideological lens. We noticed, for example, that some people on social assistance described their struggles as resulting from having a “bad worker” who offered little information, provided minimal support, and often obstructed their claims. While this analysis has important insights, it can also produce an individualizing, ideological account of the social and institutional organization of social assistance by locating the problem within a specific individual worker rather than the organizational constraints that pressure workers to carry out institutional rules discouraging applications for benefits and excluding people from receiving social assistance entirely.

Broader ethnographic perspectives open possibilities not only for struggles with social assistance workers who enforce regulations that hurt people but also for building alliances with unions and workers and for tensions to be exacerbated between workers and the management of OW and of ODSP. One illustration of this potential is how, in opposing the possible merger of ODSP and OW, which would significantly hurt people living with disabilities, the opposition of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union provided one of the reasons behind the Liberal provincial government’s decision to officially abandon this merger proposal in 2014 while continuing to restructure the program against people on ODSP.

The creation of spaces where critical discussion, mapping, and decision-making skills could be developed was crucial in moving the struggle forward both within S-CAP and with our allies. Direct action support work was organized as a central aspect of the daily work of S-CAP. It was discussed at every meeting, and sometimes, there were meetings of those most directly involved in this work. In these discussions, there was a collective pooling of ideas and suggestions of what to do as well as reflections on what we learned from doing this work. These discussions made the mapping of social relations of struggle possible in learning from each other’s experiences—both those doing activist

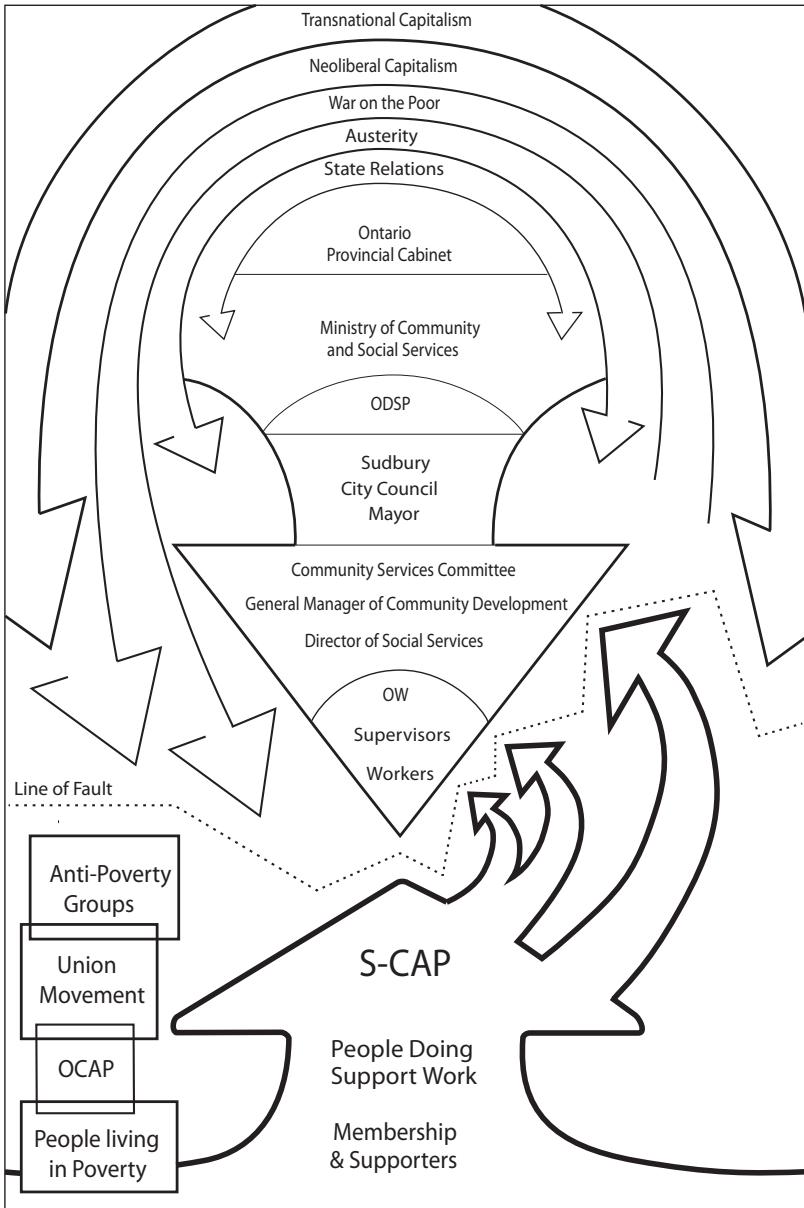
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9 Here I am drawing on autonomist Marxist theorizing for a broader notion of the working class that includes waged and unwaged workers (see Kinsman 2005; Thornburn and Kinsman 2020).

support work and the people we were working with and for. This led to more generalized analysis and remembering within the group of how to do this work most effectively. There were also direct action support work training workshops to get more people prepared for doing this activity.

What did S-CAP learn from doing direct action support work? I provide some suggestions here on how to read the following mappings of the social relations of struggle in which S-CAP was involved (figures 2.1–2.4). At the top of the diagrams are the forces we were up against, and below are the forces that could be mobilized for the struggle. In mapping out the social relations of struggle engaged within doing activist support work, we recognized that we were confronting transnational capitalism, state relations, neoliberalism, austerity, and the war on the poor and that these broader dynamics had to contextualize our organizing (see figure 2.1). We also learned how seemingly distant forces in the Ontario provincial government’s cabinet and the Ministry of Community and Social Services directly affected people’s lives through the textually mediated (D. Smith and Turner 2014) regulations and policies of ODSP and of OW. In coming to terms with the textually mediated character of social relations, we developed critical reading skills that enabled us to read state regulations for their social organization rather than as instructions people are required to follow. At the same time, in S-CAP, it was important not to get too caught up in the technical “state-speak” in these texts in doing support work because that could separate us from people living in poverty. We should never fetishize these documents and give power to the texts themselves, since all these texts are written by, mobilized by, and struggled over by people. We have no need to be “experts” on these documents, but instead, we need to use our skills and expertise in reading, using, and resisting these texts *for* the struggle.

We mapped out the institutional relations of OW and of ODSP as crucial knowledge for doing effective support work. There is an institutional division of labour in the administration of social assistance. ODSP, as previously mentioned, is still under direct provincial jurisdiction, while municipalities more directly administer OW. This means that the course of action is different in supporting a person on OW than a person on ODSP. In approaching OW support work, we learned to contact the person’s worker, the worker’s supervisor, the director of Social Services, and the general manager of Community Development for the city simultaneously. We would hand deliver letters and send emails, and if we did not receive a favourable response by the



**Figure 2.1.** Mapping the social relations of struggle S-CAP was engaged in. Illustration by Ander Negrazis.



set deadline, we would send a delegation to the office of the general manager of Community Development and demand action. Oftentimes, they would respond before our deadline, which demonstrated that applying pressure to those higher up in the bureaucratic hierarchy brought results.

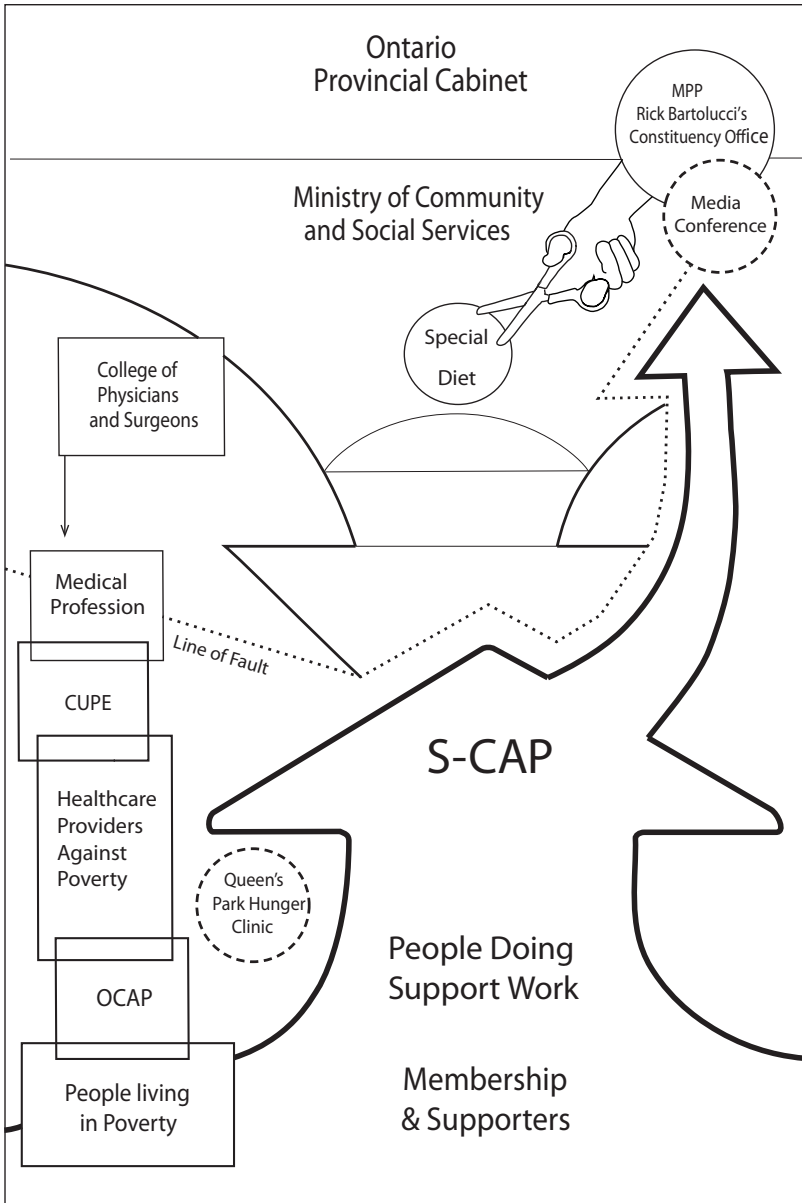
Below provincial state relations is Sudbury municipal state organization, including the city council, the mayor, and the Community Services Committee that oversees social assistance and that S-CAP sometimes took matters to through supportive city councillors. The head staff member under this committee is the general manager of Community Development. Below her is the director of Social Services, whose office is now located behind the OW “fortress” in the provincial building. We found the general manager of Community Development to be most vulnerable to direct action delegations given the publicly accessible character of her office in Sudbury city hall.

The line of fault is between ruling relations and the resistance to this. The mass media and social agencies often lie, to some extent, astride this line of fault and can become contested terrains between ruling relations and activist anti-poverty organizing.

On the other side of the line of fault, the relations of struggle S-CAP was able to mobilize included the people doing support work, the broader membership of S-CAP and our supporters, broader community networks of people living in poverty, and at times OCAP and other activist anti-poverty groups and the union movement. Occasionally, we also made it a public issue, especially if the person we were working with was willing to talk to the media about their grievance. This mapping of the relations of struggle we were involved in allowed us to identify weak links and ways to advance in specific support work situations. I now examine what we learned from three of the main direct action campaigns we engaged in.

### **The Special Diet Struggle: “We Won’t Be Quiet Until We Get Our Special Diet”**

In 2005, S-CAP reconstituted itself with a focus on creating more access for people to the Special Diet Supplement and defending this benefit from attack (see figure 2.2). Although people on OW and on ODSP were rarely informed of this benefit, they could receive up to \$250 extra per month if a medical professional decided they needed more nutritious or special foods for health reasons. Health Providers Against Poverty and activists in OCAP discovered



**Figure 2.2.** Mapping the social relations of struggle of the Special Diet Campaign. Illustration by Ander Negrazis.

through research that this provision could be used to get people badly needed funding and began to publicize the existence of these funds. Hunger clinics were organized where medical professionals interviewed and approved people for access to the Special Diet, and provincial alliances were built with progressive medical professionals and with health workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

In 2005, after more people started to access the Special Diet and more funds had to be allocated to it, the Liberal provincial government excluded several health conditions from the list of coverage, making it very difficult to access the full \$250 monthly supplement.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, the Liberal provincial government announced they were abolishing the Special Diet entirely, but following a storm of protests, it was continued in a restricted form with benefits for fewer conditions and higher demands for confidential medical information, including from people with AIDS and HIV infection, among other intrusive measures designed to prevent access to the benefit.<sup>11</sup> The provincial government was able to restrict access to this supplement by altering the textually mediated regulations through which it was organized. The Special Diet is now so restricted it is not always a very useful way to access more funding for people on social assistance.

The struggle we were able to mobilize in Sudbury for the Special Diet was limited by the lack of support we received from the local medical profession. While there were some medical professionals who would fill out the form for their patients, few would take referrals from us, and none were willing to participate in a Special Diet clinic. This posed a problem for people in Sudbury because large numbers of people in poverty do not have primary care physicians. Many previously supportive medical professionals were also scared away by measures taken against doctors who regularly supported people's requests for the Special Diet. One of these doctors, Dr. Roland Wong in Toronto, was taken to the College of Physicians and Surgeons

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10 In Toronto alone, over ten thousand more people on welfare started getting the Special Diet. Before that, only two thousand people were getting this funding. On this and the cuts to the Special Diet, see Clarke and Dobey (2020).

11 See Government of Ontario (2022). On the Special Diet struggle, also see Clarke and Dobey (2020).

following a complaint by then city councillor Rob Ford (who later became Toronto's mayor). Wong had his medical license suspended for six months in 2014.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, S-CAP made many more people in Sudbury aware of the Special Diet when we held a media conference with people speaking out about the need for the Special Diet *inside* the constituency office of our local Liberal Member of Provincial Parliament Rick Bartolucci in 2005. We also brought several people to the mass hunger clinic in the fall of 2005 organized on the lawn at Queen's Park in Toronto, which is the seat of government in Ontario. All the people from Sudbury who participated were signed up for a \$250 supplement, which made a real difference in their lives.

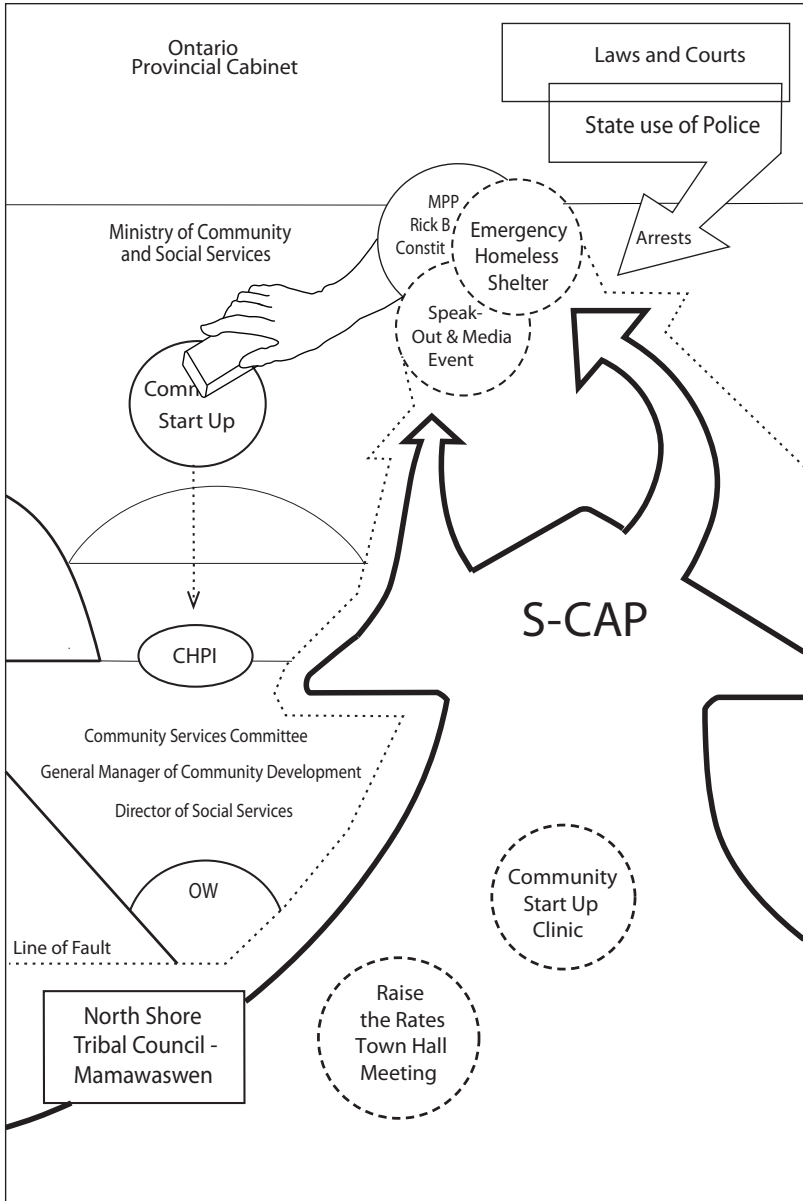
## The Community Start Up Struggle

As part of a broader neoliberal downloading of social assistance provision responsibilities to municipalities, the Liberal provincial government in 2012 announced its plan to abolish the vital Community Start Up and place only 50 percent of its funding into a new program called the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI; Wellesley Institute 2012). Originally, the Community Start Up was a vital benefit that people on social assistance relied on to move, prevent themselves from becoming homeless, acquire furniture and appliances, set up a home, flee violence and abuse, and/or set themselves up after leaving an institution. The new CHPI program would focus more directly on rent and prevention of homelessness and much less on community start-up and maintenance needs. This smaller amount of funding was to be spread across a broader group of people, including low-income people not on social assistance (see figure 2.3).

S-CAP, OCAP, and the Raise the Rates campaign recognized that this was a major attack on people on social assistance that followed the earlier cuts to the Special Diet. We organized a campaign and backed it up with popular education, support work, and organized clinics to sign people up for the Community Start Up. Building on what we learned from the Special Diet struggle, S-CAP's first action was to target the government cabinet minister in our city. On April 19, 2012, we held a speak-out and media event in the waiting area of Bartolucci's constituency office that brought together more than thirty people

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<sup>12</sup> See Withers (2021, 57–58).



**Figure 2.3.** Mapping the social relations of struggle of the Community Start Up campaign. Illustration by Ander Negrazis.

and received major local media coverage. After about an hour, we left, but only after the staff had faxed our package of information to Bartolucci with a request for him to get back to us on this as soon as possible. He never did.

The composition of struggle we mobilized in Sudbury was strengthened by the alliance we built with the North Shore Tribal Council, Mamaweswen (<https://mamaweswen.com>), which represents First Nation reserves from Sudbury to Sault Ste. Marie, who were also organizing against cuts in the budget that affected their communities, including the cut to the Community Start Up. S-CAP supported their march in Sudbury in June 2012 and a jointly organized march in November, both of which brought hundreds of people into the streets. A month later, during the province-wide week of action, S-CAP and the Tribal Council co-organized an action in Sault Ste. Marie that involved closing the Trans-Canada Highway for close to thirty minutes. This alliance enabled S-CAP to deepen its support for Indigenous struggles and allowed many of us to develop a deeper anti-racist and anti-colonial analysis that also led to our support for Idle No More, an Indigenous activist movement, when it emerged.

In the summer of 2012, we engaged in mass leafleting about the proposed cut to the Community Start Up, and in the fall, we organized a large Raise the Rates town hall meeting. We also held a clinic to sign people up for the Community Start Up and organized a specific direct action to focus pressure on this issue. We held planning meetings, did the necessary research, and returned to Bartolucci's office to turn his waiting room into an emergency homeless shelter to dramatize the effects of this cut. On November 9, 2012, more than twenty people moved into Bartolucci's office shortly before 2 p.m. with the intention of staying there until the office closed at 4 p.m. After about ten or fifteen minutes, we heard reports from people outside that up to five police cruisers had pulled up outside and then later police arrest vehicles. We were there for about one hour and fifteen minutes before those of us who stayed were arrested.

When the police said we would be arrested if we stayed, support people left, and the remaining eleven of us were arrested by the police, handcuffed, taken downstairs, placed in the arrest vehicles, and taken to police headquarters for processing, where we were charged with trespassing and released. These major police operations created quite a spectacle in downtown Sudbury, with many people gathering to watch, and it became a major media story.<sup>13</sup>

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13 For some video coverage of the action and the arrests, see HuggyMkwa (2012).

For those of us arrested, it was an important learning experience about the social relations of arrest.<sup>14</sup> In very concrete ways, we learned how the police are used to stifle political dissent and about the operations of the legal system.

This action in Bartolucci's office turned out to be tactically brilliant, although when we planned it, we had no idea that he would be there and no way of anticipating the scale of the police response. After the arrests and the media coverage, far more people knew about the Community Start Up, and the action we held later that November with the North Shore Tribal Council had far more people from Sudbury at it than any other action we organized in defence of this benefit.

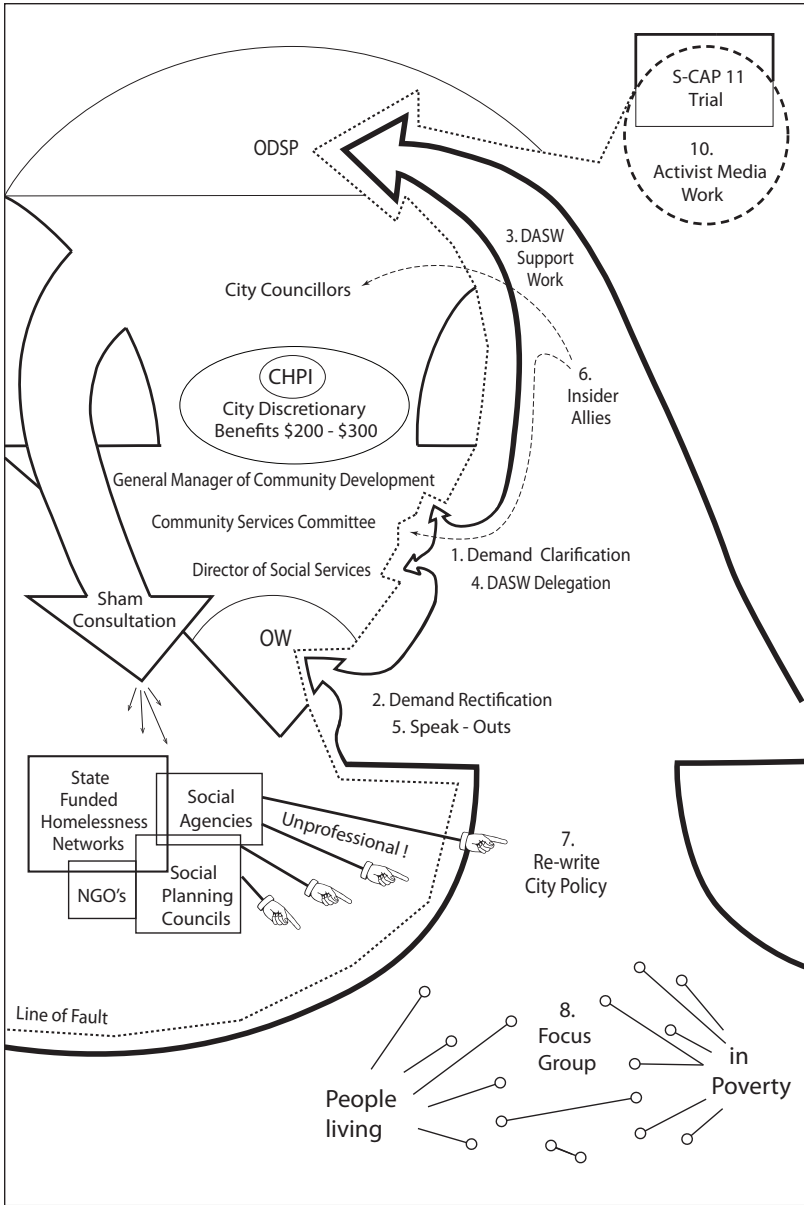
Direct action led to more people participating in street marches. During the province-wide week of action, we were also able to secure the city's official support in calling for the maintenance of the Community Start Up. It was only at the end of December—when the provincial government announced that it was going to put an extra \$42 million into the CHPI funding for a year to address Community Start Up and homelessness prevention needs—that we realized the full impact of all the province-wide protests, including those we organized. While we were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the abolition of the Community Start Up, we learned that direct action and mobilization win gains.

## **The CHPI Struggle: Community Start Up Rates and Policies for CHPI**

In mapping out what the new set of relations surrounding CHPI looked like (see figure 2.4), we demanded clarification from the general manager of Community Development and the director of Social Services, who, in January 2013, assured us that the new municipal “application process [was] the same and the amounts [were] consistent” with the previous Community Start Up rates and policies. We soon found out that this was not the case and that funding for furniture and appliances was no longer mandatory due to the administrative funding split between CHPI funding proper (directly related to housing and rent) and the City Discretionary Benefits funding for beds, furniture, and appliances. This marked a shift in the terrain of struggle whereby responsibilities for Community Start Up funding were downloaded onto municipalities,

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14 On this, see Thompson (2006).



**Figure 2.4.** Mapping the social relations of struggle of the CHPI campaign. Illustration by Ander Negrazis.



which dispersed struggles that were once unified with the province-wide program (Withers 2020, 2021). Struggles would now have to be waged each year regarding city budgets.

We soon discovered that people on ODSP were having major difficulties with their start-up needs being met because their requests were now sent to the OW office, where decision-makers had no real understanding of the needs of people with disabilities. We knew there were important tensions between the administration of ODSP and that of OW in Sudbury, and we wrote a letter to OW and the city demanding the situation be rectified. Our position was that the previous provincial Community Start Up rates and policies had to be matched by municipal CHPI and associated funding, since this provided more access and funding for people on social assistance. While doing support work to ensure that people on ODSP could get as much as possible to meet their needs, we also discovered problems with exceptional circumstances funding. Under the Community Start Up, people who had already received this funding in the last two years were eligible for up to the full amount again (\$799 for individuals and \$1,500 for families with children) if they encountered exceptional circumstances rendering them homeless, had bedbug infestations, or had to flee a violent relationship.

This provision did not exist under CHPI, and at first, it was not clear whether OW and the city were going to provide this funding. In response to support work involving a delegation going to the office of the general manager of Community Development, we got a meeting with city staff who clarified that only \$200 for an individual and \$300 for families with children in exceptional circumstances would be provided. We responded by organizing protests that included speak-outs in the OW office, and we worked with two supportive city councillors to raise the rates to Community Start Up levels at the Community Services Committee and at city council. Just before this motion went to city council, the exceptional circumstances amounts were raised back to the Community Start Up rates pending a “consultation” with social agencies. This was an important victory based on our support work and our organizing outside of but also to some extent within municipal bureaucratic relations.

The strategy city managers adopted in response to our struggle was that of “consultation” with social agencies (Kinsman 1997). These agencies are themselves heavily dependent on municipal and other forms of state funding, and they were “consulted” to develop guidelines for cutting back CHPI

funding when the extra \$42 million in funding would run out. S-CAP pointed out in our counter-report to that of city staff that this was a “sham ‘consultation’ process since people living in poverty were not involved or consulted. The only people ‘consulted’ were some of the people in social agencies, who were then asked to rank their priorities in a follow-up survey which was to be used to establish priorities for both funding and cutting back on funding” (S-CAP 2013).

The weakest link in their strategy was that people in poverty were never consulted. We were able to use this to undermine the legitimacy of this “consultation.” As part of the research for our counter-report, we organized a “focus group” in the fall of 2013 with people on OW and on ODSP to discuss their needs. At this group, people spoke of a broad range of issues, including the need for Community Start Up rates and policies for CHPI funding (S-CAP 2013). This was the only consultation with people living in poverty that took place during this period.

We adopted a strategy of “documents and demonstrations” outlined by George Smith in the Right to Privacy Committee (which organized against the police repression of gay men) and AIDS ACTION NOW! (organizing for pharmaceutical treatment access). By this, Smith means not only that we need to have comprehensive research and analysis but also that people in positions of power will never consider our proposals without the power of demonstrations threatening to destabilize ruling relations. There was also a relation between what we learned from demonstrations and the analysis developed in our documents.<sup>15</sup> When the “consultation” was held on June 17, 2013, we held a protest outside and gave a presentation inside demanding Community Start Up rates and policies for CHPI funding. Most S-CAP members present then walked out, since we did not want to take responsibility for any decisions that would hurt people living in poverty. Later, we learned from one of our observers who remained at the “consultation” that city staff tried to construct a “consensus” by making the opposition raised during the meeting disappear from their reports. We critically analyzed the survey questions that were sent to the agency representatives following the “consultation” meeting and found that the questions directed replies toward de-prioritizing important areas of funding.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see AIDS Activist History (n.d.).

Under neoliberalism and austerity, it becomes more difficult for social agencies to support direct action activism because they are tied more directly to state funding and professional relations. What can be referred to in a broad sense as the “anti-poverty industry” includes a range of social agencies, non-governmental organizations, social planning councils, and state-funded homelessness networks. The process of state funding and regulation has transformed community groups into professionalized groups that have become staff- and management-driven and that have corporate forms of organization with executive directors and boards of directors (Ng 1996; Walker 1990). While these groups are often now obstacles to direct action anti-poverty organizing, winning their support, when possible, adds to the composition of struggle we can mobilize.

Some people in and around S-CAP were confused by the stance of people in the social agencies, since they were supposed to “help” people in poverty. What we needed was not a moral critique of them for “betraying us” but instead to understand how their collaboration with and within ruling relations was socially organized. Simultaneously, in our activist support work, we found that we got into some “turf wars” with some of the social agencies in the city on housing issues. Even though our support work resulted in people getting what they needed, managers and staff at some social agencies saw us as disrupting their professional agency/client relations. As a result, these somewhat supportive agencies became more hostile. We were accused of not having any “professional” credentials for doing this work and of believing what people living in poverty told us. On the surface, this was quite disorienting for people doing support work until we examined how this was socially organized both through “professional” relations and through city and other state funding for these agencies. In Sudbury, most of these agencies now stand in an administrative relation to their “clients.” This investigation makes visible a broader class analysis. Staff at the agencies separate people living in poverty from the broader working class they are part of and construct the poor as “victims” requiring “help” from middle-class-oriented agencies. This is an active part of the work of constructing class relations. Political activist ethnographic work makes visible class relations and struggles.

Through this period, we developed good working relations with two members of the Community Services Committee and city council. As “city insiders,” they were often helpful in enabling us to understand some of the workings of the committee and of council, including the need to have CHPI

funding put on the agenda of the city budget process through the Finance and Administration Committee. We anticipated that there would be major cuts in CHPI funding after March 2014 because the extra \$42 million in provincial funding had not been renewed for the 2014 fiscal year. In response, we mobilized throughout the fall of 2013 for Community Start Up rates and policies for CHPI. During the provincial week of anti-poverty action in October 2013, more than fifty people chanting “What do we want? Community Start Up rates for CHPI funding!” broke into the lobby of city hall. We also continued our support work, often finding that people were not getting what they were eligible for even under the existing city policies.

In addition, the S-CAP 11 trial that took place that fall proved very useful in re-raising the issues around the cut to the Community Start Up and the effects it had. We were able to exert some control over the contextualization of the legal case by doing extensive activist media work. Although we had a very good pro bono lawyer, our control over the struggle tended to be lost once it entered the legal realm. We learned that the legal terrain is not our terrain even though we need to fight on it.<sup>16</sup>

Within the context of our campaign for Community Start Up rates and policies for CHPI funding, the supportive city councillors contacted city financial personnel to try to locate funding to sustain the same level of CHPI funding beyond March 2014. Meanwhile, city staff consistently attempted to shift attention away from our demands over Community Start Up rates and policies for CHPI funding toward the total amount of funds that could be allocated. While the support of these two councillors was crucial, at this point, S-CAP lost any real input into the process as negotiations took place between city staff and financial personnel and a few city councillors within city bureaucratic relations. The more this was taken up within city-state formation, the less control we had and the more disempowered we felt. When we arrived at the Finance and Administration Committee meeting on December 3, 2013, one of the supportive councillors informed us that the funding had been found and everything was resolved. We responded that while that was excellent, we also needed Community Start Up rates and policies for the CHPI funding. Securing this funding was an important victory, but it was a

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16 The Crown appealed the dismissal of most of the charges, and in June 2014, a new trial for 9 of the S-CAP 11 was ordered. On October 6, 2014, a diversion arrangement was agreed to, and the charges were withdrawn. See Ulrichsen (2014).

limited victory because the new arrangement did not establish that Community Start Up policies and rates were to be followed for CHPI.

Continuing support work in December made it clear that the City Discretionary Benefits policy provided far lower amounts of funding than was offered under the Community Start Up. In response, we sent a deputation to the Community Services Committee on January 20, 2014, to demand that Community Start Up policies and rates be followed and that, at the very least, the discretionary amounts must be raised. To strengthen our argument, we rewrote the city CHPI policy so that it conformed as much as possible to Community Start Up rates and policies. We were able to get the discretionary funding policy reviewed, which led to the raising of the amounts for furniture and appliances as well as the addition of dryers to the coverage. This story and struggle continued, but this narrative concludes at this point.

## **Drawing Some Conclusions: Direct Action as Political Activist Ethnography**

This investigation of S-CAP activism shows how direct action is both a major form of activism and a profound form of activist knowledge creation, producing grounds for more effective organizing. I have explicated how an activism-research-activism-research dynamic was at the heart of S-CAP, informing its theorizing and practice. Mapping the social relations of struggle is an important way of focusing and developing activist research (Withers 2020, 2021). It records what is learned from struggles, so it does not have to be learned repeatedly. This mapping work also provides a means through which the activist research and theorizing capacities of the group can be developed. I have also described how mapping the social relations of struggle addresses a weakness in PAE through collectivizing research in ways that strengthen the capacities of the group so that everyone can potentially become activist researchers.

Finally, while this has been an ethnographic exploration of one form of organizing located in one city, it brings far more than this into view. While S-CAP organizing shows the potential of direct action as activist research and its relation to political activist ethnographic practice, it also raises questions about how to engage with text-mediated regulations, with city-state formation, and with legal proceedings without getting contained within these social forms. How can we engage with these necessary terrains of struggle while navigating our way through and beyond their strategies of containment? We

need more political activist ethnographic work that details knowledge produced from diverse struggles and movements. I hope this analysis provokes further investigation into other sites of activist organizing and research.

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### 3 Looking into the Mouth of Premier David Alward's Trojan Horse

#### Responsible Environmental Management of Shale Gas in New Brunswick, Canada

Jean Louis Deveau

*Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Gas Activities in New Brunswick*—this is the title of a discussion paper released by the government of New Brunswick, Canada, to solicit feedback from the public on shale gas mining in the province. Borrowing three tricks originally developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, this political activist ethnography demonstrates how texts (documents), like this discussion paper, are used by the government to manufacture an ideological currency that, when in circulation in the public discourse, distorts reality in the government's favour. On June 11, 2012, during the Citizen Engagement Tour organized by the Natural Gas Group, Dr. Stephen Hart said the following:

I'm not suggesting that we call an election over this, but some government must have the mandate from an election. You can't come in a year after the election and say we're going in this direction. This is the biggest, perhaps the biggest decision that New Brunswickers have ever had to face. . . . It'll last for, it could last forever. And no one has assured me, scientists, technologists, or anybody else that they can protect our water in a way that I'd say go ahead and do it. If you want it, take it to the electorate, let the people vote in the next election, say

you're going to do it and if you get into power and the people in New Brunswick say you can go ahead with it, go ahead with it. But for now, stop. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Durham Bridge, NB, June 11, 2012)

There is a disjuncture between Dr. Stephen Hart's above comments uttered during one of nine public meetings staged during a "province-wide" tour to obtain feedback from New Brunswickers on the government's discussion paper and what Premier David Alward had been saying. After he became premier, following the September 2010 provincial elections, David Alward consistently argued that he was mandated to pursue the development of natural gas from shale in New Brunswick. For instance, when Kirk MacDonald, one of his caucus members, raised the issue of a shale gas referendum, as requested by his constituents eleven months after the 2010 provincial election, Premier Alward said, "New Brunswickers have made that decision through the election, through the platform. . . . During the campaign, we ran on a platform that included the responsible development of shale gas" (Berry 2011).

But as clearly stated in the seven words used in the party plank below, Alward campaigned not on the development of shale gas but on the development of natural gas: "A new Progressive Conservative government led by David Alward will: support the *responsible expansion of the natural gas sector* [my emphasis]" ("Putting New Brunswick First" 2010).

After first explaining the differences between unconventional shale gas extraction and conventional natural gas drilling, my goals in this chapter are threefold. First, using Marx and Engels's (1939) three tricks in the construction of ideology, I will explicate how, from their seven-word platform plank, members of the Alward government methodologically developed a 106-page discussion paper called *Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Gas Activities in New Brunswick: Recommendations for Public Discussion* (New Brunswick Natural Gas Group 2012)—henceforth referred to as "the discussion paper"—to commandeer the word *responsible* for their own self-interests. Using a heuristic device known as an ideological circle (Deveau 2016), I will then show how the guiding principles used by the Alward government in its recipe for creating this ideological concept are nested within *responsible environmental management*, first used in the title of their discussion paper, released in May 2012 as *Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Gas Activities in New Brunswick: Recommendations for Public Discussion*, and then again in February 2013 in the title of their discussion paper's reincarnation,

the *Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Natural Gas Activities in New Brunswick: Updated Rules for Industry* (New Brunswick Natural Gas Group 2013). The former contained recommendations for rules needed to regulate the shale gas industry, which, after being somewhat modified, came into being as such.

Second, I will demonstrate how our community-based, anti-shale gas coalition's work of attending and providing feedback to the government on its discussion paper, via nine public consultation meetings in a Citizen Engagement Tour between June and July of 2012, some of our interventions were added to the *Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Natural Gas Activities in New Brunswick: Updated Rules for Industry*, whereas others were not.

Third, I will demonstrate how, unbeknownst to New Brunswickers, one of the primary ingredients used in the government's recipe for making the ideological concept of responsible environmental management—public health—was quietly dropped without the public's awareness and how our activist coalition used this research discovery to further our cause.

## **Unconventional Versus Conventional Drilling of Natural Gas**

While shale gas is a form of natural gas, it is more often referred to in the oil and gas industry as *unconventional* natural gas, partly because it is trapped and unable to move within the shale where it was formed millions of years ago, but also because of a process called “hydraulic fracturing” designed to extract it from that rock deep beneath the earth's surface (Concerned Health Professionals of New York and Physicians for Social Responsibility 2020, 26; Howarth, Ingraeffa, and Engelder 2011). There are fundamental differences in the environmental consequences of the ways in which conventional and unconventional natural gas are extracted.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is the process used to extract unconventional natural gas. It involves pumping water down a borehole under enough pressure to fracture the rock in which the gas is imprisoned. The water is mixed with chemicals. Chemicals are used to facilitate boring, reduce friction, and shorten drilling time. Sand is added to the chemical mixture to keep the fractures open after the wellbore pressure has been released. The fractures provide a passageway for the gas to come up the well (National Energy Board

2009). Colborn et al. (2011) found that more than 75 percent of 353 chemicals known to be used in fracking were a danger to public health. A more recent publication suggests that the potential “ecotoxicological or mammalian toxicity” of the chemicals used in fracking is largely unknown (Danforth et al. 2020).

The cement casing around boreholes can fracture, causing fracking fluids to infiltrate underground aquifers, leading to the contamination of well water. In the United States, more than a thousand cases of alleged contamination resulting from fracking have been reported (Charman 2010; Concerned Health Professionals of New York and Physicians for Social Responsibility 2020, 33). Another concern is the thousands of tractor-trailer loads of water and wastewater carried to and from well pads, which damage rural roadways and bridges that were not designed to handle such heavy traffic. Air quality tests in Dish, a town in Texas with a well-established shale gas industry, detected the presence of fifteen elements exceeding safe levels for humans (Subra 2009; Concerned Health Professionals of New York and Physicians for Social Responsibility 2020, 60). Other issues of concern are decreased property values (Tillman, personal communication, n.d.), questionable returns on investment and job creation potential (Kinnaman 2011; Concerned Health Professionals of New York and Physicians for Social Responsibility 2020, 412), increased health care costs resulting from air and water pollution (Bamberger and Oswald 2012), and loss of revenue from traditional sources of employment (Barth 2013).

In short, many in the province of New Brunswick believe that shale gas mining is likely the greatest environmental threat this province will face soon. And since New Brunswick has already seen a rise in cancer rates in heavily industrialized areas (Milewski and Liu 2009a, 2009b), the possibility that more carcinogens will be introduced into the environment through fracking is alarming.

The conventional way of extracting natural gas is by drilling into an impermeable rock seal overtop a reservoir into which the gas has amassed after having moved through permeable rock layers beneath. In Alberta, these pockets encompass an area averaging 5.3 square kilometres (National Energy Board 2009). New Brunswick has a long history of conventional natural gas exploration and extraction. In 1908, J. A. L. Henderson, a company from London, England, made the first natural gas discovery in Stoney Creek Field, just 15 kilometres south of Moncton. In 1912, Henderson built a pipeline, and for

eighty years, it sold its natural gas to buyers in Moncton and Hillsborough. Other discoveries of conventional natural gas were made in 1985 and 1998. There had never been opposition to the expansion of this type of natural gas extraction in New Brunswick, nor would there have been if Premier Alward had focused his efforts on the expansion of conventional natural gas, something that most people would argue has significantly less environmental impact than fracking. What became problematic was the Alward government's pursuit of unconventional natural gas, henceforth referred to as shale gas. The late Peter deMarsh, an anti-shale activist residing in Taymouth, New Brunswick, alleged during a public meeting in Durham Bridge that the provincial government was playing a language-game by deliberately misleading the public in its choice of language:

The working group I think originally was called the Shale Gas Working Group, but the name was changed. We were certainly introduced to you as the Shale Gas Working Group a year ago. That I remember for sure. The government, whatever the motives, in the way in which language, simple language is being manipulated, is creating the impression of trying to confuse people by changing discussion about something that's of some concern, changing the discussion from something that's of very, very deep concerns [shale gas] to something that's of less concern [natural gas]. . . . And all I'm trying to get at, Dr. LaPierre, is that we got to get the language plain and simple. Why is the government creating this appearance of trying to confuse the issue, why not call a spade a spade. We're concerned about hydro fracking the shale gas. Stop playing games or at least creating the appearance of playing games and let's have a clear, honest, open debate about what we're really concerned about. [*Applause.*] (Citizen Engagement Tour, Durham Bridge, June 11, 2012)

The following provides a timeline of how our struggle evolved from 2010 to 2012, before we became involved in confrontations with the Natural Gas Group during the Citizen Engagement Tour.

## **Beginnings**

It is impossible to discuss resistance to proposed shale gas development in New Brunswick without recognizing the pivotal role of Indigenous activism.

Alarms were raised in 2010 after it was discovered that the New Brunswick government had been secretly issuing leases to various energy companies giving them the rights to shale gas exploration and development in specific parts of the province, agreements that together covered an area of roughly 1.4 million hectares (CBC New Brunswick 2011). As is well known, what is today called New Brunswick consists of the unceded territories of the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), Mi'kmaq, and Peskotomuhkati peoples, and the province is required to consult with Indigenous nations prior to taking any action that might adversely affect the constitutional rights of their citizens. Yet these leases were signed without any prior consultation with the First Nations whose lands these were. Both First Nations and non-Indigenous New Brunswick residents voiced serious concerns surrounding the potential environmental damage posed by fracking, especially the contamination of water. First Nations were, however, fighting as well for their right to exercise sovereignty over their own territory.

Indigenous resistance intensified in June 2013 after SWN Resources Canada began exploration operations in Kent County, home of the Elsipogtog First Nation. The situation exploded onto the national news in mid-October when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), acting on the strength of a court injunction, raided an otherwise peaceful protest in the town of Rexton, not far from the Elsipogtog reserve (Howe 2015; Crosby and Monaghan 2018, 136–77). Armed with tear gas and rubber bullets, the police attempted to break up the blockade and began arresting protesters. As a number of those present noted afterward, although the protesters included many who were not Indigenous, the police seemed to target those who were. Similarly, images of burning RCMP vehicles were splashed across news reports—images implicitly associating Indigenous people with violence.

Beyond these images, however, stands another, now iconic image: that of Amanda Polchies, a member of the Elsipogtog First Nation, kneeling in front of a wall of armoured police officers with her eagle feather raised to the sky (see Polchies 2018). The events of that day have since been immortalized in documentaries such as *Elsipogtog: The Fire over Water* (Fault Lines 2013), aired on Al Jazeera America's program *Fault Lines*, and Michael Primo's *Water Warriors* (2019). Yet as Jim Emberger, spokesperson for the New Brunswick Anti-Shale Gas Alliance, rightly points out, it was the New Brunswick government's own stubborn refusal to engage with massive, broad-based opposition to fracking that led to the violent confrontation at Rexton. "Ironically," he

observes, “that may have been the event that finally doomed shale gas and spelled the end of the Alward government.”

### **American Informants, Citizens for Responsible Resource Development, the Shale Gas Caucus, and the Discussion Paper**

In June 2010, I attended a meeting at a fire station in Elgin organized by Stephanie Merrill from the Conservation Council of New Brunswick. This was to hear American activists Kate Sinding and Wes Gillingham talk about their experiences with shale gas mining in the United States. Sinding and Gillingham impressed upon me the serious threat that hydraulic fracturing posed to our groundwater. Following this meeting, Merrill toured the province giving presentations on shale gas and showing the movie *Gasland* (Fox 2010). Her presentation included, among other things, the names of nine companies that had been granted exploration leases in the province. Yet it seemed most New Brunswickers were completely unaware that negotiations had been taking place between the government and this industry. The four most active companies were Corridor Resources, Windsor Energy, Petroworth, and SWN Resources Canada.

In October 2010, Corn Hill residents were invited not by their elected officials but by Corridor Resources to a community meeting that I attended. Residents had received their invitation through a pamphlet in the mail. Corn Hill was the birthplace—a month later, on November 16—of a non-governmental organization called Citizens for Responsible Resource Development (CRRD). I became their elected secretary. Our mission was to raise awareness about shale gas development. In early July 2011, I and others appeared on radio and television to discredit CRRD after our chairperson unilaterally announced her support for the responsible development of shale gas at a joint press conference with then minister of natural resources Bruce Northrup. Following an emergency meeting in Sussex later that month, we planned our first of five marches/rallies to the Legislative Assembly denouncing the government’s plans to pursue shale gas mining. Similar marches occurred elsewhere across New Brunswick. These events were attended by hundreds of people from various communities. People marched together. In Fredericton, a group of Wolastoqiyik drummers led the march (Howe 2015, 64).

In June 2011, the Alward government organized a forum on shale gas at the Fredericton Inn. Participation was by invitation only. So about sixty anti-shale activists, including myself, paraded on the sidewalk in front of the hotel with “No Shale Gas” signs. Later that day, representatives from approximately twenty community organizations met to establish the first major anti-shale gas coalition under the umbrella of the New Brunswick Environmental Network. We called ourselves the Shale Gas Caucus, and I was elected its first chairperson. This coalition consisted of Indigenous peoples, Acadians, and Anglophones.

In December 2011, the government issued a press release outlining twelve guiding principles from which it would build its “world-class regulations” to ensure that the province would be ready in the event of an upsurge in this industry, as had occurred in Pennsylvania (New Brunswick Natural Resources Department 2011). I have listed these twelve guiding principles in the second column of table 3.1 in the order that they appeared in the press release.

## **Citizen Engagement Tour**

In May 2012, the government issued another press release announcing this time nine locations where it would be soliciting feedback from the public on its discussion paper, referred to above. These meetings were held in small New Brunswick villages: Chipman (June 6), Durham Bridge (June 11), Havelock (June 18), Hillsborough (June 19), Grand Falls (June 20), Bathurst (June 21), Bouctouche (June 22), Blackville (June 25), and Norton (July 4). This was the first and only time that our coalition had an opportunity to debate this issue with government officials in a public forum, which the government called a Citizen Engagement Tour. The government officials sitting on the panel were Craig Parks, Department of Energy and Mines, as well as David Whyte and Annie Daigle, Department of Environment. The moderator was Mark Belliveau, communications officer with the Department of Natural Resources. The chair was retired professor Dr. Louis LaPierre, later discredited after it was learned that he had falsified some of his academic credentials.

Reading the discussion paper when it first became publicly available, I was struck by its level of complexity, particularly section 2, which is about “preventing potential contaminants from escaping the well bore.” Part of the reason for this, as explained to us later by Parks, was that the discussion paper contains technical information on things like lining the gas well with a protective layer of steel casing, cementing the space between the steel casing



**Table 3.1** Guiding principles as interpretive schema for the government’s discussion paper and rules for industry on the responsible environmental management of shale gas mining in New Brunswick

|  | Guiding principle | Discussion paper                                    | Rules for industry                                  |
|--|-------------------|---|---|
| Monitoring to protect water quality  | 1                 | 5   | 5   |
| Addressing the need for sustainable water use  | 2                 | 6   | 6   |
| Protecting public health and safety  | 3                 | 8 (addressing public safety and emergency planning) | 8 (addressing public safety and emergency planning) |
| Protecting communities and the environment   | 4                 | 9   | 9   |
| Reducing financial risk and protecting landowner rights                                | 5                 | 10  | 10  |
| Addressing potential impacts of geophysical (seismic) activities                       | 6                 | 1   | 1   |
| Taking steps to prevent potential contaminants from escaping the wellbore              | 7                 | 2   | 2   |
| Verifying geological containment outside the wellbore                                  | 8                 | 3   | 3   |
| Maintaining wastes and taking steps to prevent contaminants from escaping the well pad | 9                 | 4   | 4   |
| Addressing air emissions   | 10                | 7   | 7   |
| Maintaining an effective regulatory framework  | 11                | 12  | n/a   |
| Sharing information  | 12                | 11  | 11  |

and the surrounding ground, pressure testing the wellbore, and so on. Even though the intent had been to solicit “constructive feedback on these recommendations from New Brunswickers,” as had previously been suggested by Natural Resources Minister Bruce Northrup in his press release, the degree of complexity in which these were written precluded this from happening.

The most damning accusation about the complexity of the language used in the discussion paper came from Maureen Burke (Citizen Engagement Tour, Norton, July 4, 2012). Quoting literacy statistics from the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey of 2003, she told the panel that more than half of New Brunswickers aged sixteen and over “are not able to understand and act upon information found not only within the government of New Brunswick’s ‘Natural gas from shale’ website but also upon information found within the . . . discussion paper.”

Obviously, that did not deter the members of the Natural Gas Group from completing their nine-stop tour in small New Brunswick towns. In fact, one of the most frequent complaints the panel received was about their choice of venues and how they had deliberately avoided the larger cities of Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton. Julie Dingwall, a Saint John resident, voiced our displeasure on this issue with remarkable precision:

I want to talk tonight about democracy and the democratic process and ask you to go back and ask the government why they felt it necessary to make sure that cities weren’t invited. . . . We’re all New Brunswickers and we all should have a say in what’s going to happen to the future of our province because this is long term stuff. This isn’t stuff that you just say, “Oh, let’s do that today and we will see what happens.” I want to talk about [the fact that] in making sure that cities weren’t heard, you in fact removed the bulk of the people from the province from having an opportunity to come to these. Many city dwellers by living in urban environments in fact don’t have cars and I defy you to get from Saint John to the Norton Region without a car. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Norton, July 4, 2012)

Whenever that point was raised, we were informed that the issue would be taken back to the government’s attention. In the end, the cities were never included in the tour. Nevertheless, our coalition had decided well beforehand that we would encourage our membership to carpool and attend as many of the nine public meetings as possible, which we did. I personally attended the first meeting in Chipman, the last meeting in Norton, and the one in Durham Bridge.

All the meetings were audio-recorded. I obtained a copy of the recordings for each meeting from the Natural Gas Group and had them transcribed at my expense.

For each of these public meetings, picture, if you would, three members of the Natural Gas Group, along with Dr. LaPierre, sitting behind a table at one end of the hall. Following the moderator's introductory remarks, either Parks or Daigle would provide an overview of the various stages involved in the development of this industry before leading into a dialogue about the discussion paper itself. This is how Parks related the discussion paper to the concept of responsible environmental management: "So, the discussion document as I've mentioned contains 116 recommendations and these are recommendations from the Natural Gas Group to government, for what we see to be the *responsible environmental management* [my emphasis] of oil and gas activities in New Brunswick" (Citizen Engagement Tour, Bathurst, June 21, 2012).

With those words, and for the first time ever, I understood what the concept of responsible environmental management meant. It signified the unconventional extraction of natural gas (shale gas) as a manageable risk requiring regulatory oversight via the enactment of 116 recommendations found in the discussion paper. In acting upon those recommendations, the concept would become actualized.

Writing about sociological description, Dorothy Smith (1990b, 105) explains,

In description, whether the informant's or sociologist's, terms are wrenched out of the setting. The social relations of which they are part and which control how they mean in the setting (where control is a social not an individual process) are suppressed. The terms are entered into a form of social relation of which the descriptive process is a practice. They enter trailing a debris of meaning behind them which we may describe as "connotation" when we attempt to analyze the present intimations of its uses in an original and absent setting. That debris of meaning originates in the social organization and relations of the setting to be described; it bleeds properties of that organization and those relations into the descriptive text. The language-game of description uses terms to do referencing, to locate and organize an object, and to do *categorizing* [my emphasis].

Here, the descriptive process consisted of the government's practice of repeating the same introductory twenty-one-slide PowerPoint presentation to all citizens who attended any of the nine public engagement sessions. The fourth slide of this PowerPoint presentation introduced the government's

twelve guiding principles for the responsible environmental management of shale gas and contained the following wording:

Development of the document [discussion paper]:

1. New Brunswick Natural Gas Forum, June 23, 2011
2. Subject matter experts from within provincial government
3. Requirements from other North American jurisdictions
4. Reports, critiques, scientific studies, monitoring results and model standards (industry, academia, NGOs)

The social relations that led to the development of the discussion paper trail a debris of meaning only partially visible in the four bullets listed above. Below are the transcribed words used by Parks in his attempt to shed light on some of the properties of that original and absent setting from which the term *discussion paper* was wrenched:

[Bullet 1:] With respect to the actual development of the document, last year, last summer, we held a New Brunswick Natural Gas Forum—that was in June of last year. A lot of valuable information was garnered from the public and stakeholders in the province from that. [Bullet 2:] As well as subject matter experts from across government departments have all waded in on this, numerous times. [Bullet 3:] As well we did a cross-jurisdictional review of basically all the North American jurisdictions that had this type of activity going on. We wanted to see what their regulations and best practices were. [Bullet 4:] As well as some 300 reports, critiques, and model standards that are coming out and are still continuing to come out as this industry has continued to grow. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Bouctouche, June 22, 2012)

Each bullet would, and may even still, serve as a trail for further investigation into the “social organization and relations of the setting[s]” that led to the materialization of the discussion paper. However, for my purpose as a political activist ethnographer, Park’s connotations were sufficient in that they enabled me to establish what the connection was between the responsible expansion of natural gas, as alluded to in the Progressive Conservative Party platform, and the 116 recommendations contained in the discussion paper.

We learned a lot from participating in this Citizen Engagement Tour. Instead of being able to witness for ourselves what responsible environmental management had meant prior to the 2010 election, so that New Brunswickers

would be in a position to vote either for or against the Progressive Conservative Party's energy policy on shale gas development, it wasn't until twenty months after the election, and during this Citizen Engagement Tour, that we discovered that their seven-word party platform plank meant fracking. But by that time, the Progressive Conservatives had already won a majority, which left us ordinary citizens—including retired couples, university professors, union personnel, grandmothers, and so on—with no other option but to reorganize our lives to become anti-shale gas activists.

This encompassed such things as developing the elements of a counter-campaign, which included forging alliances with other like-minded organizations like the New Brunswick division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, getting hydro fracking experts like Cornell University professor Anthony Ingraeffa to come to New Brunswick to raise awareness, and attending the nine-stop public engagement tour to challenge the legitimacy of unconventional natural gas mining in our communities. All the aforementioned and more, which I've described elsewhere (Deveau 2014), is bona fide work, and while a complete description of its magnitude is beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice it for me to say that all this encompassed long drives in treacherous road conditions, myriad hours negotiating on the phone, and incalculable hours explaining to supportive, albeit uncommitted, friends and family why opposition to shale gas development is critical.

## **Marx and Engels's Theory of Ideology**

Marx's theory of ideology (D. Smith 1990a, 35–45) is invaluable in helping us understand how institutional knowledge such as this concept of responsible environmental management is created. Ideology, here, refers not to the concept of responsible environmental management itself but to its method of creation (45). Marx's theory of ideology had a twofold purpose. First, he wanted to affirm that people's ideas "arise from material activity" and not the other way around, as purported by, for example, German idealist philosophy. Hegel and the Young Hegelians advocated that objective reality existed in people's minds and that if things were not going well during a specific period in history, one simply had to will those bad thoughts away and replace them with more pleasant ones. This internal will is what Hegel called the "spirit" (Marx and Engels 1939, 42). Historical progress was, then, simply a manifestation of progressive changes in this spirit. Marx believed that he could prove the

falsity of this notion by divulging the three tricks that the German ideologists used in concocting ideology. This gave way to Marx’s second precept about ideology, which was that as the modes of production changed, so did people’s ideas and beliefs. Marx believed that he could prove this by demonstrating a link between the economic activities of a given epoch and the thinking of its populace (14–15).

Recall that it was Marx and Engels’s contention that the first thing humans do to survive in the everyday world is provide for their material needs. For instance, during the time when the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts of honour, decency, and loyalty were prevalent. Similarly, when the bourgeoisie became dominant, perceptions about what was important in everyday life changed to things like freedom and equality. Marx and Engels (1939, 39) argued that the ideas of the ruling class became dominant because in addition to controlling the modes of production, the ruling class also controlled the means of mental production: “Thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” What was of interest in all this was the willingness with which the non-ruling class in each epoch appeared to have accepted the ideas and concepts of the ruling class, as if they had been their co-authors. According to Marx and Engels, this was achieved not by accident but by ruse and involved what they described as a series of three tricks, which I illustrate in figure 3.1.

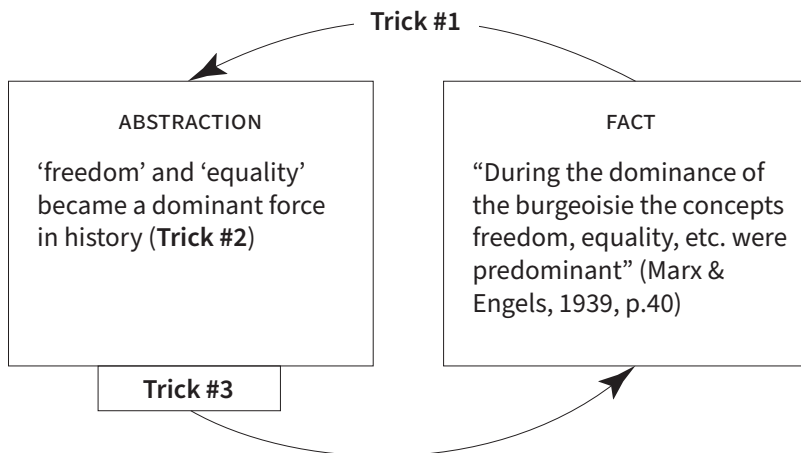


Figure 3.1. Three tricks in manufacturing ideology.

Consider once again the fact that during the period when capitalism replaced feudalism as the mode of production in society, the concepts of freedom and equality became predominant. This is represented by the large square to the right in figure 3.1. According to Marx and Engels (1939, 40), the first trick, Trick 1, in creating ideological perceptions requires that “we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence.” Imagine, then, that these ideas take up a life of their own and become recognizable throughout society as being the kind of things that are for the betterment of everyone. Marx and Engels (42) write that “it is very easy to abstract from these various ideas ‘the idea’ . . . as the dominant force in history.” Notice here that an abstraction, Trick 2, as depicted by the large square to the left in figure 3.1, is being made from the fact. In his *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, Bertell Ollman (1973, 141) defines an abstraction as “a break in connections, a link in the chain which has set itself off as an independent piece.” After this is done, the entire process is then turned “upside down” (or reversed). That is, once these ideas that appear to be as natural and as normal as a midsummer night’s breeze become universalized, they are grabbed once again by the ruling class—except this time, the ruling class advocates that it is doing the righteous thing in upholding what everyone in society has come to recognize as the highest proclaimed values and principles of that epoch. This is depicted in figure 3.1 as Trick 3. Note that a contradiction arises here because these same ideas that have become universalized were implanted by the ruling class from the outset and are now simply being recycled.

Ideology, then, has several explicit functions, one of which is to conceal the kind of social contradictions seen in the above paragraph and that arise from class differences. Another is that it provides the means for resolving these contradictions in favour of the ruling class and its corresponding interests. And third, ideology makes it appear as if these contradictions occur naturally, so it then becomes perfectly acceptable for the ruling class to dominate over the non-ruling class. Ken Morrison (1995, 50) sums it up nicely as follows: “The job of ideology is to manage the contradictions by: (i) making them appear as legitimate; and (ii) by explaining the contradictions away by assigning their causes to sources other than social inequalities and class differences.”

In summary, this theory of ideology, as illustrated in what might be called an ideological circle, demonstrates how reality is fabricated in a manner that excludes the non-ruling class’s perceptions about their reality. In this manner,

the ideas being promulgated by the ruling class become universally accepted as being in the best interest of all members of society (Marx and Engels 1939, 41).

## **Adoption of Marx's Ideology to Responsible Expansion of the Natural Gas Sector**

Consider that there are at least two different ways of knowing what the Conservative Party intended when it adopted the nominalized phrase “responsible expansion of the natural gas sector” in its election platform. One way of knowing this is that the unconventional extraction of natural gas (shale gas) through fracking is something so dangerous for people’s health and our environment that the only responsible thing to do is to have it banned. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a responsible “practice or activity” as “carried out in a morally principled or ethical way” (Simpson and Weiner 1989). The other way is to portray unconventional gas extraction as a manageable risk requiring strict regulatory oversight. My job as a political activist ethnographer is to explain to readers exactly how (as opposed to why) the latter gained precedence over the former—that is, how it became factual. In her *Conceptual Practices of Power*, Dorothy Smith (1990a, 71) writes, “Facts are neither the statements themselves, nor the actualities those statements refer to. They are an organization of practices of inscribing an actuality into a text, of reading, hearing, or talking about what is there, what happened, and so forth. They are . . . properties of a discourse or other organization mediated by texts.” Inscribing refers to the use of various techniques—such as asking questions, filming, reviewing the literature, going on field expeditions, and so on—to provide specific meaning to something like responsible environmental management that beforehand had no definite meaning. The mapping of how, where, and by whom this was done is the primary focus of all political activist ethnographers. Once something is treated as a “fact,” the “method of inscription” and the person(s) who created these facts about something become obsolete (74).

In our case, and as mentioned above, Trick 1 involves an attempt by the government to “separate the ideas of those ruling . . . as corporeal individuals, from these rulers, and thus recognize the rule of ideas” (Marx and Engels 1975, 62). Applied here, the ideas in the discussion paper needed to be recognized on their own merits and not as government propaganda. The following statement taken from the discussion paper’s introduction illustrates how this was

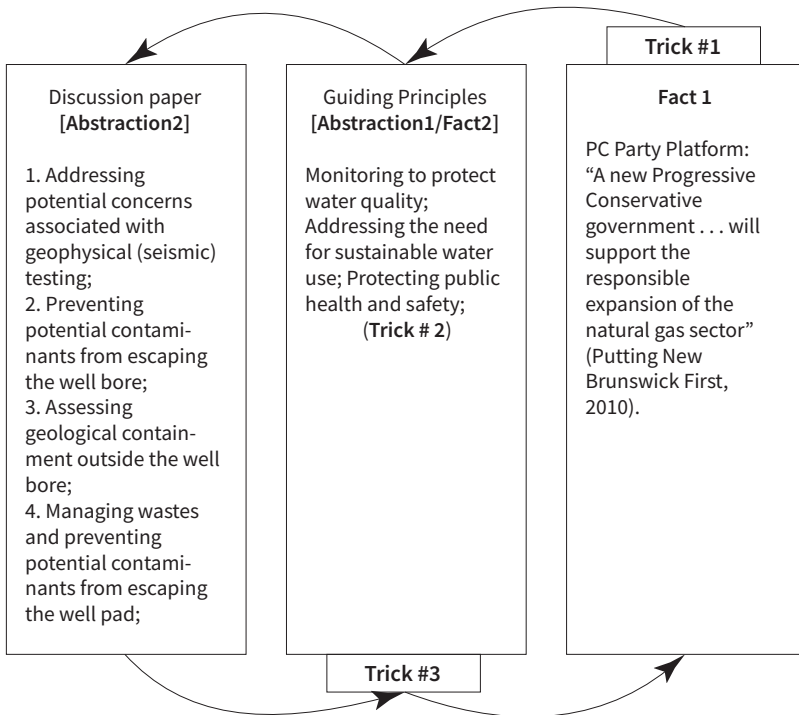


achieved: “In preparing this discussion paper, the Natural Gas Group reviewed information from a variety of sources including scientific studies, critiques, model standards, best management practices and proposed or existing regulations in other North American jurisdictions” (New Brunswick Natural Gas Group 2012, 8). What the government is saying here is that the content of the discussion paper came not from within our government but from “other North American jurisdictions.”

Another dimension of Trick 1 involves not mentioning who the authors of the discussion paper are. The authors are referred to as the Natural Gas Group and are described as “experts drawn from within the provincial government” (New Brunswick Natural Gas Group 2012, forward). But we do not know who these experts are, what their areas of expertise might be, and whether they are civil servants, cabinet ministers, or members of the Legislative Assembly. The collective capacity of people to write the discussion paper has been transferred from living, breathing human beings working in government to a socially constructed entity known as the Natural Gas Group.

Once the various ideas that shale gas mining can be done responsibly through the enactment of those 116 recommendations found in the discussion paper have been disassociated from “those ruling,” referring here to the members of the Natural Gas Group, Trick 2 is “to demonstrate an order among them [the various ideas] that accounts for what is observed” (D. Smith 1990a, 43). The order of the 116 recommendations as listed in the discussion paper is not random but makes sense of and expands upon the twelve guiding principles released by the government on December 14 in its press release and to which I alluded to earlier in table 3.1.

Notice that an abstraction, as depicted by the square in the middle of figure 3.2, is being made from the fact as it appears in the square located on the right side of the figure—that an elected Progressive Conservative government supports the responsible expansion of natural gas. In her explanation of how “facts” are constructed, Dorothy Smith (1974, 258) explains that a “fact” is “that actuality as it has been *worked up* [my emphasis] so that it intends its own description.” We saw earlier that of the two ways of working up what responsible expansion of the natural gas industry means—fracking or a ban on fracking—an abstraction made from the government’s particular way of knowing inferred that the contents of the abstraction, referring in this case to the twelve guiding principles, had to be aligned with fracking.



**Figure 3.2.** Ideological circle of the Progressive Conservative Party plank written as “the responsible expansion of the natural gas sector” nested within the *Responsible Environmental Management of Oil and Gas Activities in New Brunswick: Recommendations for Public Discussion* (discussion paper)’s ideological circle.

Note, then, that the discussion paper could just as easily have contained recommendations of an entirely different nature, recommendations that would shape the terms and conditions upon which a moratorium or a ban on shale gas exploration and mining could have been imposed. For example, the discussion paper might have quoted damning evidence from health practitioners like Theo Colborn and others (2011) on the deleterious impacts of fracking on human and animal health, or it might have highlighted the negative impacts on air quality, property values, and quality of life, well-documented problems that people have experienced in the United States, where this industry has been developed. But since the discussion paper intended processes and procedures necessary for the responsible expansion of the natural gas industry

as purported in the Progressive Conservative Party platform, none of the above recommendations would have been seen by the Progressive Conservative government as appropriate pieces to “demonstrate an order among them that accounts for what is [proposed]”: a tight regulatory strategy to oversee shale gas mining in the province.

Trick 3 involves “changing the ideas into a person; that is, set[ting] them up as distinct entities to which agency (or possibly causal efficacy) may be attributed” (D. Smith 1990a, 43). Take, for example, the title of a news article released by Marketwire (2012) on December 11, 2012, by federal Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver: “Responsible Resource Development Supports Jobs in Atlantic Canada.” Here, responsible resource development is given the same status as a person. But how can a lifeless concept possibly do anything, let alone support forty-five thousand jobs, as suggested in this press release? Obviously, only people can do this and not the concept as alleged above. So somebody, let’s say X, although it could be Y, supports forty-five thousand jobs. In her investigations of management discourse, Janet Giltrow (1998) found numerous examples of concepts such as the above that she refers to as nominalizations. A nominalization occurs when a verb form (e.g., “to develop a given resource”) has been converted into a noun (“responsible resource development”). The presence of what is done by people is preserved (D. Smith 2005, 166), but the actors are nowhere to be seen.

So first, we had a meaningless seven-word concept appear in the Progressive Conservative Party platform: responsible expansion of the natural gas sector. Then, in December 2011, abstractions were made from this concept in the form of twelve guiding principles from which other abstractions containing 116 regulatory recommendations were produced after having established as facts what the guiding principles for those were. The process was then reversed so that as of May 17, 2012, these 116 recommendations now form the basis of the Progressive Conservative government’s policy on the responsible expansion of the natural (shale) gas sector. Another way of saying this is the following: “First . . . abstraction[s] [the twelve guiding principles and 116 recommendations] [are] made from the fact [responsible expansion of the shale gas industry]; then it is declared that the fact is based upon the abstractions[s]” (D. Smith 1990a, 44).

In sum, figure 3.2 illustrates how the guiding principles, first introduced as an abstraction (abstraction 1) during the initial creation stage of ideological knowledge, subsequently became the factual basis (fact 2) from which

a second abstraction, the discussion paper (abstraction 2), was produced bearing the same headings used in the twelve guiding principles. In this instance, the headings initially fabricated and used in the guiding principles (fact 2) are manifested in the headings of the discussion paper's twelve sections (abstraction 2), which, as depicted in table 3.1, are the same as those found in its intended progeny, the Rules for Industry.

In IE (institutional ethnography) / PAE (political activist ethnography), we say that the guiding principles, as manifested in the headings of the twelve sections of the discussion paper, are the interpretive schema that intend the headings used in the discussion paper. An interpretive schema is a “controlling framework . . . provided by the social relation that the text was written to intend” (D. Smith 1990a, 154). The social relation intended in this instance was to work up the adjective *responsible* as meaning nothing other than fracking under tight regulatory oversight. The headings of the discussion paper similarly intend the rules for industry and function as its interpretive schema.

Often, as is the case here, concepts like responsible environmental management “become a kind of ‘currency’—a medium of exchange among ideologists” (D. Smith 1990a, 42). The following examples serve as a small sample to illustrate the extent to which this ideological currency is now prevalent in public discourse:

August 25, 2012: In a meeting with the editorial board of the *Telegraph-Journal*, Premier Alward told the meeting participants, “We don’t feel that we could afford not to look for the opportunity [to develop shale gas] if it could be done in a responsible way” (Editors 2012).

October 19, 2012: Based on an interview with University of New Brunswick economics professor Rod Hill, New Brunswick should not expect exorbitant royalty payments from this industry. This was based on a comparative analysis between New Brunswick’s discussion paper and a similar report produced in Québec entitled “A Fair and Competitive Royalty System for Responsible Shale Gas Production” (Huras 2012a).

November 5, 2012: “The governing Progressive Conservatives have said they believe in the responsible development of shale gas and want to develop an industry if it can be done in a safe way,” wrote Shawn Berry (2012) in an article in the *Fredericton Daily Gleaner*.

November 16, 2012: Former Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney told reporter Adam Huras (2012b) that “shale gas development could

bring the province wealth, if it's carried out in a safe and responsible manner.”

November 27, 2012: On the day before the fall sitting of the Legislative Assembly, Dave Collyer (2012), president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, wrote in a commentary published in the *Telegraph-Journal* that “an effective and efficient regulatory framework ensures environmentally responsible resource development and assures the public that resource development can proceed safely.”

November 28, 2012: In his throne speech, Premier Alward said, “We have a responsibility as a government to ensure that if we are able to develop natural gas in New Brunswick it is done in a responsible and safe way” (Morris 2012).

## **Experiential Knowledge No Match Against Ideological Knowledge**

The next three sections illustrate how the feedback received by the Natural Gas Group from New Brunswickers who attended sessions of the Citizen Engagement Tour was filtered to maintain the basic integrity of the twelve guiding principles first introduced in the discussion paper and reiterated in the Rules for Industry. I also demonstrate how the Alward government's surreptitious transformation of one of those guiding principles—public health—was used to our advantage as activists.

### **Guiding Principle Two: Fear of Groundwater Contamination**

Groundwater contamination was by far one of the greatest concerns people expressed about the shale gas industry. In a brief produced for Physicians, Scientists, and Engineers for Healthy Energy, Anthony Ingraefea (2013) writes that 6–7 percent of new wells leak in their first year. Reporting similar statistics that he had discovered after reading both the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection website and a paper published by Brufatto et al. (2003) in *Oilfield Review*, community member Mark D'Arcy expressed concerns that these leaks would lead to the eventual contamination of our groundwater.

After quoting a different set of reports, and more specifically the work of Theresa Watson and Steven Bachu (2009) on more than 315,000 wells in

Alberta, as well as a study done by Osborn et al. (2011) from Duke University, Parks responded that this high proportion of leaky wells was likely attributable to inadequate regulations and the fact that the Osborn study lacked appropriate baseline data. Although there was never any denial that gas wells leak, Parks was unmoved by this intervention, as suggested in his response to D'Arcy's comments: "As you said, that's not an acceptable situation and people are working hard to resolve it. So, let's not be blind about the past, but let's look to the future in terms of how we can address these issues" (Citizen Engagement Tour, Blackville, June 25, 2012). Whenever one of us tried to undermine the legitimacy of the hydraulic fracturing process using a report gleaned from either the internet or the scientific literature proper, someone from the panel countered with a different study or, as demonstrated above, by suggesting that future technological breakthroughs would solve the problem. The issue was the people who sat on the panel—with the exception of Dr. LaPierre, who said in his introductory remarks that he was neutral—had been paid from tax dollars to defend the process of hydraulic fracturing. Even though our participation during the citizen engagement sessions proved to be the only opportunity we had to influence the government's way of knowing about this industry, D'Arcy's intervention was futile because his comments did not fit within any of the twelve categories outlined in the discussion paper. There was no category entitled "flaws in the hydraulic fracturing process."

Maxime Daigle came up to the microphone in Bouctouche to challenge section 2.4 of the discussion paper. Daigle was a "former oil and gas driller / casing installer" with seven years of experience in shale gas mining. He started by zeroing in on section 2.3, which referred to the ability of the casing to withstand "an internal pressure rating that is at least 20% greater than the anticipated maximum pressure to which the casing will be exposed during hydraulic fracturing and lifetime of the well." After agreeing with the recommendations for section 2.3, he asked why the same recommendations were not being applied in section 2.4 to the joints between the casings.

After boring a hole into the ground and removing the drill bit, steel pipes are used to isolate the well from the surrounding ground and water sources. These steel pipes, known as well casings, come in sections with threads at both ends and are screwed together. This is the same principle you would use in joining a sequence of garden hoses together to water your garden, except in this case the casings stretch underground averaging around 2,500 meters (Jackson et al. 2015). Daigle argued, "When you torqued the casing

together, four, five, six-thousand-foot pounds of torque on each, at least half of them, they strip. You can't correct that" (Citizen Engagement Tour, Bouctouche, June 22, 2012).

So here we have what appears to be an inherent flaw in the process brought to the panel members' attention by someone with lived experiences in the field and who incidentally asked the panel if any of them had drilled wells:

So my question is . . . how do you guys know how to put regulations into place when . . . you don't have anybody on that group that has ever drilled, cased, cemented, fracked a well, and you're talking about all these recommendations, you're putting all that together, and yes, you went into bits and pieces of everywhere around the world . . . and made yourself called experts . . . but you've never even worked in the oil and gas industry. Bullshit. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Bouctouche, June 22, 2012)

When section 2.4, as proposed in the discussion paper, was rewritten for the Rules for Industry, it was not modified to reflect Daigle's experiential knowledge. Even though Daigle's intervention undermined what to this day remains one of the greatest flaws in the practice of hydraulic fracturing (leakages between pipe joints), the Natural Gas Group was not there to justify whatever shortfalls existed in best industry practices at the time but, according to Natural Resources Minister Bruce Northrup, was there instead to receive "constructive feedback on the recommendations" to enable them to proceed with fracking. Heather Scott saw through this charade when she said the following: "It just sounds like the government is planning to go ahead and you're looking for our input on the regulations and most people don't want to go ahead and I think we needed a process before this to ask us whether we wanted to do this or not" (Citizen Engagement Tour, Norton, July 4, 2012).

### **Guiding Principle Ten: Depreciating Property Values**

The panel members never dismissed the fact that groundwater or surface contamination was a possibility. But this recognition of the shortcomings of the hydraulic fracturing process unravelled not in terms of waiting for a new and improved method of extraction, as concerned citizens often suggested, but fell within the realm of two sections of the discussion paper. Section 10.1 requires companies to post a \$100,000 bond "to protect property owners from the financial impacts of industrial accidents, including the loss or contamination

of drinking water.” Section 10.2 describes a water replacement protocol if the oil and gas company is presumed responsible for adversely affecting the quality and capacity of a landowner’s water supply. So when Margo, a fourth-generation dairy farmer, expressed concern about the level of compensation she would be entitled to receive if either her land or that of her neighbour’s got polluted, Belliveau’s response was the following:

We had that exact same comment from another dairy farmer yesterday, in Havelock . . . and obviously part of the reporting here, is that not only do we have to look at houses, and single dwellings, but you’re bringing up a point that is also part of what we have to look at which is you can’t just look at homes, you have to look at what about the farm that’s here . . . what about . . . so your point is taken and duly noted by Dr. LaPierre, I’m sure, in his report. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Hillsborough, June 19, 2012)

Belliveau’s comments should be construed as a sign of empathy not toward a fourth-generation dairy farmer who could potentially lose her entire livelihood but toward ensuring that their damage deposits, as stipulated in the discussion paper, were large enough to account not only for single-family dwellings but for farms as well. The revised damage deposit in section 10.1 of the Rules for Industry was increased from \$100,000 to \$500,000. So instead of refraining altogether from fracking in areas close to farms, which from our standpoint as activists would have been the responsible thing to do, responsible environmental management meant instead modifying one of the categories of the ruling text (Rules for Industry) to provide more money for possible damage control.

### **Guiding Principle Eight: Public Health**

This brings me to my final point: public health, something of great concern to many. For example, in Hillsborough, Patricia Leger asked, “What health studies have you based these [116] recommendations on?” (Citizen Engagement Tour, Hillsborough, June 19, 2012). And in Blackville, Garth Hood wanted to know if one of the members of the Natural Gas Group was a toxicologist (Citizen Engagement Tour, Blackville, June 25, 2012).

Certainly, one of the most compelling interventions was when Meghan Scammel spoke—not so much in terms of what she said but how Annie Daigle,



Department of Environment, responded to her. Scammel asked where in the discussion paper the public health section was found. Daigle responded,

Sure, so [the] Department of Health and the Public Health section within that department, or whatever it is, is undertaking their own independent work on this. They have been in consultation with the Natural Gas Group, and we've been working with them, but at more of an arm's length since the beginning. So, they will be releasing something publicly later this year. It's not in that document—no, that was on purpose to have it separate. It's a benefit to them somewhat for us to be putting out what government's recommendations are for regulation and what may or may not be permitted in the province should shale gas development proceed. So, they've been fully briefed and are aware of this document and there will be more forthcoming from them in the future. (Citizen Engagement Tour, Durham Bridge, June 11, 2012)

This was another important clue that something had gone awry because the protection of public health had been one of the initial guiding principles used in the development of the discussion paper.

After grabbing the list containing the government's initial twelve principles and comparing them with those found in the discussion paper, I noticed an anomaly in the eighth principle: public health had been dropped. This was a major discovery for our coalition. As seen in table 3.1, principle eight now read "Addressing public safety and emergency planning" instead of what we had initially seen under the government's third guiding principle: "Protecting public health and safety." Despite all these principles having been announced publicly, there was never any subsequent announcement made by the government indicating that the protection of public health and safety was no longer on the list. As Parks explained, "Section eight is aimed at planning for public safety and emergency response. The requirements in this section are for industry to have security plans and emergency response plans in place" (Citizen Engagement Tour, Blackville, June 25, 2012).

A public health perspective would assess if and how this industry might add value to the lives and health of New Brunswickers (Province of New Brunswick 2012). By contrast, public safety is about ensuring a plan is in place to respond to an emergency that may affect public health. On April 30, I asked Belliveau for an explanation of why the initial, proactive category of public health had been downgraded to a reactive public safety approach. I

received the following email response on July 16 from his replacement, Veronique Taylor.

The 12 principles were essentially developed to guide the rules to be developed for the oil and gas industry. While the Rules for Industry that were released in 2013 do contain provision[s] for the protection of public health such as setbacks, noise level limits, water testing, air quality monitoring, etc. [sic] and industry certainly has a big role to play to ensure environmental and public health, the ultimate responsibility to ensure public health should rest with government, and not industry. That's our sense as to why the wording was changed.

Dr. Eilish Cleary, New Brunswick's chief medical officer, was more succinct. In an email sent to me on June 20, 2014, Dr. Cleary stated that the Rules for Industry were meant to protect the environment, not people. At that time, she had been conducting her own study on the health impacts of shale gas mining in the province and aimed to release her report to the public. Unfortunately, the Alward government initially kept the release of Dr. Cleary's report a secret, but this sinister maneuver was leaked to one of our activists, so we alerted the media, and after considerable public pressure, the report was released publicly a month after our intervention.

In an interview with Adam Huras and April Cunningham for the *Telegraph-Journal* on December 12, 2012, Dr. Cleary told these two reporters that she would have liked her recommendations on public health to be included in the regulations. But by issuing their discussion paper four months prior to the release of Dr. Cleary's report, they precluded the incorporation of any of her thirty recommendations into the discussion paper.

As one of the core building blocks used by the government in their establishment of the concept of responsible environmental management, public health's secret disappearance provided us with a rare opportunity with which to undermine the government's credibility in the court of public opinion. Our group issued a press release to this effect and subsequently included the disappearance of public health as part of the messaging we used to rally public support against shale gas mining in the province. The implementation of Dr. Cleary's recommendations on public health was ultimately included in the Liberal Party's 2014 election platform. The Liberals under the leadership of Brian Gallant won the election, and the Progressive Conservatives were defeated. However, in December 2015, shortly after the election, the Gallant government fired Dr. Cleary without cause.

## Conclusion

PAE has proved to be an invaluable tool in helping me establish proof that the Progressive Conservative Party's 2010 election platform, in which they promised to "support the responsible expansion of the natural gas sector," had an inherent contradiction. Whereas we as protectors of the land, water, and air had interpreted that seven-word promise as meaning a ban on shale gas mining, the Progressive Conservatives that formed a majority government in September 2010 took the twenty months after the election to dress it up as regulated hydraulic fracturing. This PAE is an example of how ideology provides the means for resolving contradictions in favour of the ruling class, and it demonstrates how we as anti-shale activists were stifled in our abilities to take back the word *responsible*.

Being in step with the government's actions, though, and engaging in the frontlines with them in their Citizen Engagement Tour proved to be very useful in helping us locate a chink in their armour. This is one of the goals of many struggles. In our case, knowing that one of the primary concerns New Brunswickers had about shale gas mining was its effects on public health—and learning through our confrontations with the government that not only had this guiding principle been purposely omitted from the proposed regulations but the government had attempted to stifle the province's chief medical officer's report on the subject—proved to be a powerful catalyst in furthering our struggle to protect the commons.

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## 4 Research from the Ground Up

### Reflections on Activist Research Practice and Political Activist Ethnography

Aziz Choudry

This chapter explores the work of several activist researchers in various social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and people's organizations within, or with close relations to, progressive grassroots struggles.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the reflections of these researchers on the process of research and knowledge production are foregrounded. In one sense, this focus emerges from my orientation to and understanding of research, which have been rather more shaped by the everyday practices and processes of activist work than my much more recent formal training in social science research (including exposure to institutional ethnography [IE] and political activist ethnography [PAE]). I began my graduate studies and eventually was hired as faculty in a Canadian university after many years as an organizer, researcher, and educator in activist groups, NGOs, and social movements in Aotearoa / New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific. Hence, much of what I had learned about research came through informal and non-formal "learning through doing" rather than taking ideas from scholarly studies to then apply in the "real world." These experiences, and my continued work in academia and activism,

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have sustained my interest in the relationships between research/knowledge practices that evolve in activist contexts located outside of the university and academic scholarship on methodological and theoretical aspects of research.

Hence, while engaging sympathetically with George Smith's (2006) and Gary Kinsman's (2006) work to develop PAE, my chapter also suggests that academic researchers can learn about theory and methodology and the social relations of research processes from the practices of activist researchers working outside of university institutional contexts. There are features of PAE that seem somewhat congruent with aspects of the kind of activist research I have engaged in and encountered through my recent inquiries into activist research while working as a university professor. Analyzing problems, mapping systems and structures, probing for weaknesses and contradictions, and proposing alternatives are central to the everyday lives and activities of many movements.

As Kinsman (2006, 153) notes, research and theorizing are an everyday / every night part of the lives of social movements, whether explicitly recognized or not. Activists are thinking, talking, 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, or a confrontation with institutional forces or planning the next action or campaign.

Yet, as outlined elsewhere in this volume, PAE and, in turn, IE, from which it emerged, are methods of inquiry that take up specific conceptualizations of social relations, approaches to social research, and terminology. This chapter builds from and engages with a range of practices for producing knowledge for struggles that make no claim to being PAE projects but that are, nonetheless, arguably examples of "the dialogical and pedagogical forms of research within social movements" called for by Frampton and her associates (2006, 269) in *Sociology for Changing the World*.

This chapter assumes a Marxist theory of praxis that insists upon the unity of thought and action, contending that research and organizing in this context are mutually constitutive and that knowledge production in these movements is dialectically related to the material conditions experienced in struggles for social and economic justice. I think this dialectical relationship is amply illustrated by reflections from two activist researchers whom I interviewed during a visit to Manila. Founded in 1978 during the Marcos dictatorship, IBON

studies socio-economic issues confronting Philippine society and the world.<sup>2</sup> It provides research, education, information work, and advocacy support, including non-formal education, to people's organizations and all sectors of society. Thus, it works closely with militant trade unions, farmers' movements, urban poor movements, and women's movements, among others, to support their struggles. IBON executive director Sonny Africa reflected on the skills needed for research for/with movements:

The sort of skills that the researcher has are also skills useful for other aspects of political work; a good researcher has skills that will be useful if you're an organizer. A good researcher has skills that are useful if you're a media liaison or a propagandist. A good researcher has the skills to be a good manager for whatever work is involved. So when talking about research skills there's a sort of a tension between using these for research or for other things. They're so useful for other lines of work in the mass movement that there's a tendency for the research work to be downgraded. (Interview, December 2012)

Formerly a department in IBON, with an independent program since 2005, IBON International provides capacity development for people's movements and civil society organizations outside of the Philippines, with major foci on food sovereignty, agriculture and rural development, environmental and climate justice, trade and development finance, and the politics of aid and development effectiveness. Paul Quintos, of IBON International, with a background in labour research and union organizing in the Philippines, further illustrated these social relations of knowledge production when he said that research is

very integral to organizing and mobilizing so it's not a stand-alone or distinct category of activity . . . and this was very prominent to me when I was in organizing. In that social practice, you can't really put boundaries in terms of "am I doing research now or am I doing education or am I doing organizing?"—the lines are blurred. (Interview, December 2012)

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2 IBON takes its name from the Tagalog word for "bird," suggesting that the organization takes a bird's-eye view of socio-economic injustices in the Philippines. Hence IBON publishes a comic strip called *Bird's Eye View* and conducts the IBON Birdtalk, a semi-annual briefing on socio-economic and political assessment and trends.

In a similar vein, Kinsman (2006, 153) warns,

Sometimes when we talk about research and activism in the academic world, we replicate distinctions around notions of consciousness and activity that are detrimental to our objectives. We can fall back on 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. In turn, we should be wary of replicating such dynamics in activist milieus.

### **Expertise? Professionalism and Professionalization of Research**

Kinsman (2006) is right to challenge the separation of social movement life from research and binaries of theory versus practice and researcher versus activist constructed through academic disciplines, professionalization, and institutionalization, and this view was echoed in the reflections of many of those whom I interviewed. A frequent assumption in scholarship on activist research, research for social change, and community-based research, including in some strands of IE, is that university researchers with professionalized, specialist academic training must conduct it. Despite considerable academic focus on the involvement of scholars in forms of popular/community education, activist research, academic activism, engaged scholarship, and research partnerships, relatively little work documents, explicates, or theorizes the *actual* research practices of activist researchers in concrete locations outside of the academy in activist groups, social movements, and some NGOs. This is consistent with the ways in which the intellectual work, knowledge production, learning, and forms of investigation/research undertaken within activism are sometimes overlooked or unrecognized in activist movements themselves, in the academic studies of activist movements, and in the scholarship of academic researchers who work with activist movements. Nonetheless, these practices and relations in movements are inextricably linked to the activities of a wide spectrum of social and political action. Perhaps, then, these fabricated separations between roles are less about an actual division of labour between “ideas people” and “movement activists” but rather reflect the alienation of many ordinary people from their intellectual labour and from the ideas and visions produced in collective action. Is knowledge only

valued if people with qualifications or professional status produce it in certain institutional settings? We might ask this question of social movements and other forms of activism just as we pose it to academia. While being cautious about “common-sense theorizing,” we cannot just assume people do not know anything and need a research professional to enlighten them.

Professionalization is a concern that is taken up by institutional and political activist ethnographers (D. Smith 1987; Kinsman 1997; Campbell and Gregor 2002). For Dorothy Smith (1987, 216–17), “Professionalization uses knowledge to restructure ‘collective noncapitalist forms of organization’ into hierarchical strata, detaching them from the movements they originate in and connecting them to the relations of ruling.” Kinsman (1997, 228) explores how dominant (in this case, the Canadian federal government) discourses define HIV/AIDS as a medical problem and thus privilege “the power and knowledge of the medical profession and its ‘expert’ status.” We should examine not only professionalization as it applies to government policies and the workings of international financial and economic institutions but also the ways in which certain activities, such as research, and certain people and classes of people (e.g., academics, trade lawyers, and economists working within or consulting for NGOs) are constructed as “experts” not only through academic scholarship but within some NGOs and social movement networks (Choudry 2008, 2010, 2015). By an exploration of actual NGO and activist practices, we must ask how, why, and by whom certain kinds of knowing are organized in these networks—and for what purpose. These questions are important if we want to understand how knowledge is useful or not to activist movements (or moves within them) and how knowledge also serves to regulate and suppress what is possible within activist contexts. As Kinsman (1997, 228) notes, professional relations are “power/knowledge relations of exclusion” and are tied to the social organization of class, gender, and race. Campbell and Gregor (2002, 70) argue that professional discourse contributes “a language and authorized practices for conducting the work of an institution [and] provides a framing of the way work is thought about and undertaken.”

While, as argued elsewhere (Choudry 2008; Hussey 2012), social movements and activist groups do not somehow exist outside of ruling relations, nonetheless, the organizations and movements on which I have focused are, in general, considerably smaller, less well-resourced, and less professionalized than the transnational alternative policy groups that William Carroll (2013) discusses and are drawn from outside of this rather elite layer of policy research

organizations that are often arguably disconnected from social movements. The profiles of those interviewed for this chapter within these movements and the NGOs that specialize in research as a major activity—including educational backgrounds—varied. While some had undergraduate degrees, a smaller number had graduate degrees, and others had neither, few had undertaken what would generally be conceived as formal academic training in research. Most contended that they learned significantly through doing research for and in organizing and that any formal academic training was of limited value to them in their work. Drawing from my own long-standing relationships in social movement and activist networks, to put it in institutional and PAE terms, my research explicitly investigated the practices—the social organization—of activist knowledge production from the standpoints of people in smaller organizations closer to grassroots movements rather than the larger professionalized NGO spaces.

In terms of the organizational/movement contexts in which these activist researchers work, broadly speaking, those organizations with a stronger “research” identity conduct internal research training and train other social movement / NGO activists on data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Yet for organizers in social movements in the Philippines, for example, social research and class analysis are key first steps in effective organizing at the grassroots. Activist research practices are far from homogeneous and exist across a continuum—from work conducted by research-focused organizations that is readily identifiable as “research” to those everyday, less obvious forms of on-the-ground research done while organizing and mobilizing.

I spoke with PAMALAKAYA (Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas / National Federation of Small Fisherfolk Organizations in the Philippines), a mass movement organization that claims over eighty thousand individual members and forty-three provincial chapters (PAMALAKAYA, n.d.). A PAMALAKAYA researcher shared that the process of movement research must happen

in the company of organizing, because you cannot talk to those small fisherfolk if they're not organized. For a scientific collation of the data we need to have an organization for a specific and holistic approach on all of the data coming in, what's happening with them through the economic status, and regarding also the environmental impact from those years up to the present and how this is done by the supplement

or the new policy that the government wanted to change specifically in [the] Laguna area, so our research work [involves] accompanying and organizing. (Interview, December 2012)<sup>3</sup>

Thus, for PAMALAKAYA, the work of organizing at the grassroots is key to the production and collection of information and experiences necessary to inform further mobilization, strategy, and pressure for change.

In a similar vein, for Arnold Padilla—who, at the time of our interview, was the public information officer and researcher for the umbrella alliance of mass movement people's organizations in the Philippines national democratic left, BAYAN (Bagong Alyansang Makabayan / New Patriotic Alliance)—social investigation by organizers at the grassroots is crucial for research, education, and organizing. He said, "That is the first step actually when you're involved in the organizations of BAYAN that are doing community organizing work." Organizers must understand the community by identifying relationships within the community and people's class background and source of livelihood

because it guides them in their organizing work, it guides them in terms of which people to approach and what issues are most prominent that affect the people and will mobilize them to action. So, the mass movement and its growth and its strength depends on effective organizing and effective organizing is impossible without social investigation because it gives you the guide—when conducted properly and effectively—it gives you vital information that will help you in your organizing work. (Interview, December 2012)

This kind of continuous, mutually constitutive process of research and organizing blurs the boundaries of those often categorized as organizers and researchers and carries into all phases of the cycle of such activist research. Thus, there is a spectrum of what research does, where it takes place, and indeed what is understood by or recognized as research.

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3 Laguna Lake, the Philippines' largest freshwater lake, and the communities dependent upon it for livelihoods and food have suffered from overfishing by large commercial operators and serious contamination through industrial pollution and face a public-private partnership reclamation and development project that some fear will displace about eighty-two thousand fishing families—five hundred thousand people.

## Reflections on Research Processes

While many of those I interviewed noted differences between their approach to research and approaches taken in academic inquiry, theoretical frameworks and methodology still clearly mattered to them. These researchers articulated these features of their research processes in different ways, sometimes making explicit reference to established categories of analysis and theoretical traditions, sometimes in language grounded more in practice (see Choudry 2014 and 2015 for a more extended discussion). Some offered critiques of both academic and dominant NGO research approaches that 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.

At the time of our interview, Kevin Thomas was a researcher with the Toronto-based Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), a labour and women's rights organization that supports efforts of workers in supply chains, mainly in the Global South, to win improved wages and working conditions and a better quality of life. Thomas outlined how MSN and local activists, organizations, and unions in the Global South had worked together to contest working conditions and other abuses in the global supply chain. He highlighted the ways in which research strategies are developed out of people's experiences and the sharing of their knowledge. 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. (Interview, April 2013)

Thomas's description of this example of a strategic and systematic knowledge production and use process—in this case, developed by labour activists through experience and trial and error, as with other examples in this chapter—points to the wealth of intellectual/research work practices that are rarely documented. My research indicates that this intellectual and research work tends to be largely unrecognized because of the undervaluing of knowledge produced within activism and because of a dominant tendency for academic research on social movements to objectify movements in ways that view them more as “raw data” than as sites that produce analysis.

Founded in 1990, with a decentralized structure (offices/staff in Europe, the Americas, and Africa), GRAIN is a small, international organization working to support small farmers and social movements in struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. Broadly, its research examines connections between agribusiness and the current global food crisis, food sovereignty, and the role of the industrial food system in land grabbing and creating climate change. At the heart of GRAIN's research process are relationships and dialogue:

The research process is always ongoing. 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. . . . 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. In this case you might have certain sections you want to check with other people and see if it corresponds with what they say. You might want to ask them to have a box that is part of your publication and you are giving people space for that and then afterwards you are . . . 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. (Interview, February 2012)

In the examples discussed here, decisions about framing research are shaped and influenced by dialogue and collaboration and ongoing relationships with/in social movements. Those with whom I spoke often emphasized that their research processes depended on built/extended networks and social relations and that these were key parts of the work that could not be separated from what might be commonly called “research outputs.” Many activist/movement researchers make decisions and develop research in dialogue with others based on experiential knowledge and analysis arising from active involvement in and relationships with struggles on the ground.

This is not in any way to suggest that these practices and processes are without tension. Dale McKinley, a researcher/activist with the (now-defunct) Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in South Africa, discussed how 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. McKinley recalled the process through which APF members conceptualized, 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:

The entire research project from the very beginning of the conceptualization 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 organization themselves, this was an organizational project. The participation was of everybody. Every two months we had the coordinating committee, which was ten members of every single organization that belonged to the APF. That’s 150 people, [if] you take fifteen [organizations], two hundred if you take twenty organizations. 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 organization, that was our understanding of participatory research in its fullest organic sense, as opposed to just saying, “we

choose ten of you to participate in this research because you're from there," which is a more functional relationship. (Interview, December 2012)

In his PAE work, George Smith (2006) suggests that activist researchers derive a wealth of research materials and signposts for exploring the ways that power in our world is socially organized from their participation in political organizing and moments of confrontation. He contends that being interrogated by insiders to a ruling regime, like a crown attorney, brings a researcher into direct contact with the conceptual relevancies and organizing principles of such regimes. Confrontations with the state, then, can be very rich entry points from which to explore the ways that government, domestic and transnational capital, and other extra-local forces socially organize power.

Those engaged in this work make decisions in dialogue with others as well as they can based on experiential knowledge and analysis that emerge from people's active involvement in the struggles on the ground as they attempt to change their material conditions and overcome exploitation and oppression. Such practices often employ grounded approaches to rigour, knowledge production, and validation of research that differ from the ways in which these notions tend to be viewed through scholarly lenses. I suggest that attending to the actual practices and knowledge produced by activist researchers and the movements that they are in is key to extending our understanding of research for social change.

For all of those with whom I spoke, taking the time to "get the research right" is crucial. If done poorly, better-resourced protagonists and media can easily and publicly discredit it. This in turn can undermine efforts to build a campaign through reaching and mobilizing a broader base of people. BAYAN's Arnold Padilla shared that

if you do not have solid research, launching a campaign and mobilizing people and getting the attention of the people that you are targeting would be much more difficult because they could easily have dismissed activist groups [like] us as propaganda. But if you are able to back it up with solid research, you're able to cite experiences and macro-data that can support your advocacy, then they will be forced to engage with you, and you will be able to influence public opinion. (Interview, December 2012)

Such processes of validation and fact-checking are in practice often inseparable from organizing and education. Reflections on doing activist research, as well as research for activism itself, often emerge from collective, collaborative relations and discussions with a wide range of actors. While some activist research targets policymakers and international institutions, the main goal in the cases discussed here has been to support and inform social change through popular organizing. Implicit within this work is an understanding of the importance of building counter-power against domination by the interests of capital and states. The activist research processes described here are embedded in relations of trust with other activists and organizations that develop through constant effort to work together in formal and informal networks and collaborations. These networks are spaces for the ongoing sharing of information and analysis connected to action. They allow for the identification of research that is most relevant to struggles and the communication of that research in ways that are meaningful and useful for movement building. They are invaluable in the production, validation, vetting (or “getting the research right”), application, strategic considerations, and dissemination of the research. But they are also spaces for organizing. As those interviewed noted, the research process itself can be a form of organizing, building, and strengthening communities, movements, and alliances and, in turn, needs an organized grassroots / rank and file to foster and develop research for struggles. This is an ongoing process that informs action and, in turn, continues to be produced and used strategically, drawing upon new knowledge and challenges that arise during confrontations with, for example, transnational corporations, state policies, or impositions by international financial institutions. It is not a process that necessarily ends when research is “written up” and a report or some other document is published. In this sense, there is a way in which building research into political organizing itself serves to counteract how the “conceptual relevancies and organizing principles” of the ruling regime are designed to recognize and discredit knowledge that is produced outside the terms set by those in power. While building broader public support may be one goal, these processes are not based on an assumption or a hope that producing critical research outputs that conform to certain externally organized professional standards will influence policy or otherwise effect change without organizing and building counter-power.

The organizations and movements discussed here are engaged in long-haul struggles, so it should not be surprising that those interviewed emphasized the

links between short-term campaign- or crisis-driven research for mobilization and longer-term processes of research for and in the context of strategies and tactics for movement building. This is not to claim that all activist research is “good” or useful research. Indeed, critical appraisal of research is in the interest of struggles (Bevington and Dixon 2005), even if this might not always be well received in movement or activist networks. But one might make the same observation of all research, including academic forms.

Much of the research described here is part of a continuous process, where information and analysis are shared and processed constantly with others—from beginning to end. Some of the most important products of this research may come from email exchanges, meetings, and time spent on picket lines, in affected communities, or in workshops that happen before anything is formally written down. This process strengthens the research, as collaboration brings out more information, deepens the analysis, and connects the research with others working on the issue. In sum, the research process itself is often critical to building networks, long-term relationships, and organizing. It is also critical for enabling the research to have a greater impact, as the groups and individuals involved will be more connected to the work, and there will be more reason for them to use it and then share it with their networks. Such research informs and shapes and is, in turn, informed and shaped by other forms of incremental, informal, and non-formal learning and knowledge production that take place in social movements.

As noted earlier, research practices are frequently constructed in ways that are abstracted from actual material conditions and contradictions, with “research” seen as an activity separated from the material/social world. Applying Colley’s (2012, 99) articulation of dialectical thinking to research, we should critique “the separation of ideas or concepts as abstractions, disembodied from the actual social relations in which they are produced, and disarticulated from the actual social practices in which they are enacted.”

## **Connecting Political Activist Ethnography with Existing Activist Research Practices**

While in my academic writing I am wary of imposing paradigms on practices and/or reading PAE into different activist research work, I think it is useful to continue to bring some of these already existing practices into dialogue with this approach to social research. There has been dialogue and exchanges

between university-based political activist ethnographers and activists / activist researchers located outside of the university for some years (Frampton et al. 2006; Choudry and Kuyek 2012).

Gary Kinsman (2006, 135) illustrates how PAE “requires challenging the ‘common-sense’ theorizing that can often be ideological in character—uprooted from actual social practices and organization—put forward in movement circles.” George Smith (1995, 23) writes of a “move away from idealist theorizing and speculation to investigating empirically the everyday world.” Idealist theorizing in “global justice” circles sometimes takes the form of assuming or constructing the diverse range of players in social movements and NGOs as all sharing the same ideals and aspirations. In this practice, certain voices and organizations are privileged over others. Similarly, apparent moves made by governments and international financial and economic institutions toward partnership and consultation with “civil society” must be analyzed by empirical investigation of these institutions’ actual practices, paying close attention to the forms of social organization embedded in texts and discourses that they produce. Concretely, this means an analysis that begins with what happens and that goes beyond the idealist theorizing of many NGOs. Such theorizing, for example, might assume that “civil society” consultation undertaken by governments signifies a genuinely responsive government, or embodies democratic values, as opposed to seeing it as a practice of managing dissent (see Choudry 2010). The politics of various forms of activist research are impacted by challenges related to mobilizing and maintaining support, continuity, and accountability among and between activist researchers and broader social struggles. Funding and institutional recognition of movement research is not necessarily proportionate to the utility of such work, especially if it is disconnected from the task of building and supporting movements but rather oriented toward outputs intended to influence decision-makers in government, private sectors, or international organizations. Indeed, some NGO research is driven by project-centric cycles and/or compartmentalized logics that are disconnected from social struggles and more reflective of tensions around funding priorities.

Kinsman (2006, 154–55) suggests, “Political activist ethnography can be very useful in extending the capacities of activist researchers and in clarifying that these activists in movements are already doing research. They are already intellectuals when they are active in social movements.” He argues that research about the social forces that movements confront is always ongoing

and that PAE is “able to be continually open-ended and remade as new voices and new movements come forward to join in struggles for social transformation” (155).

One challenge to extending understandings about activist research and bringing PAE into dialogue with already existing research practices of the kind I have been exploring is that much of this practice is not documented. To extend Diana Coben’s (1998) assessment of popular education, often it seems that innovative research practices and processes can remain unknown to anyone outside the networks of those engaged in it. Ideas and dilemmas may be worked out every day in different areas of practice, but if they are not recorded and they are not readily available for others to share, debate ends. What is researched, written up, presented at conferences, or submitted for assessment toward a degree, and the even smaller amount of writing that is published, is a small and not necessarily representative sample of a much larger enterprise. Yet documented or not, there is an already existing and significant body of research and range of research practices and experiences by engaged activists/researchers located mainly outside of the academy who begin their research from a standpoint within social, political, and ecological struggles. Dialogue among activist researchers occurs both within formal coalitions and campaigns and in informal webs or networks of various kinds. Such research is indeed sometimes driven and informed by immediate confrontations with ruling relations (for example, a struggle against a specific corporation or a proposed policy or law) or seeks to explicate and expose underlying ruling practices that socially organize institutions or actions on a longer-term or historic basis.

This tension also connects to the ways in which such research is socially organized through funders’ expectations. MSN’s Kevin Thomas shared some reflections on external pressures to produce research in ways that are not necessarily the most conducive to supporting wider dissemination, education, and action:

There is a bias sometimes in research around written materials in the activist world . . . some of the audiences which really like written stuff and some who really don’t make use of it in any useful way. I find that the best dissemination tends to be in terms of a workshop format, or speaking format, even one on one, but in some ways where you’re working with the group, going over the findings and the outcomes

and the strategies that come out of it. The problem with that [for most NGOs] is that the funders like written, published materials that they can link to on their websites. [There is] a bias in terms of funding towards written material, documentation, and there's a bias in terms of actual effectiveness in my opinion in terms of the group work where you are actually thinking about and discussing what the research means. So the written document is, I find, fairly dry—I work very well with [the] written word; I can take that and think about it and disseminate it. I think in terms of activist stuff, the best stuff happens in groups, and the best kind of strategy happens in groups, and so research feeding that process is usually better. (Interview, April 2013)

For researchers in organizations such as GRAIN, MSN, and IBON International, which work in and across several countries / movement networks, multiple standpoints in different locations can be used to collaboratively work up a detailed and textured analysis of an institution such as a transnational corporation or a trade and investment liberalization agreement. The late feminist scholar Roxana Ng (2006, 187), who collaborated with MSN, contended that IE is collaborative and “requires that people share information on what they know on the basis of their locations within institutional modes in order to gain an overview of how the system works as a whole and how to challenge and transform it.” Such a collaborative approach draws on, for example, different experiences of confrontation in multiple sites as research resources and tests analysis by comparison with that of similarly located activist researchers. To democratize and transnationalize PAE—to continually remake it—necessitates recognition and validation of these diverse forms of activist research that start from a standpoint of everyday engagement in social action in concrete settings, as well as further examination and explication of existing activist research practices. It requires a respectful dialogue and a commitment to an “expansive” view of PAE as articulated by Frampton and her associates (2006, 16).

## **Conclusion: Listening and Learning from One Another**

Many people see activism as practice and education, theory, and research as something generated elsewhere. Yet through their practices, activists generate various forms of sophisticated knowledge and engage in significant learning and research during their activism. People struggle, learn, educate, and



theorize where they find themselves. The forms may change, but spaces and places for collective action, learning, and reflection seem crucial, along with an openness to valuing processes of informal and non-formal learning and knowledge produced from within people's everyday struggles and experiences. As some of those interviewed here suggest, in practice, boundaries among research, education, and organizing are often blurred to the point of non-existence. Such understandings challenge binary thinking, which separates, fragments, and compartmentalizes activities into categories of "research," "education," and "organizing" and actors into "researchers," "popular educators," and "organizers." Can we demystify "research" itself as an activity that is implicit in so much social action, whether recognized or not? In what ways can activist researchers operating outside of universities, private sectors, or official infrastructures (and the resources that come with these locations) collaborate to strengthen and broaden activist research and their own research practice in the service of social struggles?

To return to the question of the relationship between these various practices and approaches to research and PAE, it seems that while there are points of apparent convergence, we should stop short of claiming that this research is PAE. While PAE might come close to explicating the research processes of activist milieus that I have been part of and of the research practices shared in this chapter, this is an approximation rather than a clear description. A central aspect of the activist research discussed here is the relationships of trust and engagement built up with social struggles and movements. To reiterate, we should challenge the notion that there must be a separation between what some have called the "brain" and the "brawn" of movements, since intellectual work, knowledge production, and forms of investigation/research that take place within activism are often related to action and the everyday life of struggles. Rather than attempting to categorize activist research processes into neat, finite models, I think that it is important to capture and understand the dynamic interplay between activist research and organizing.

I find the approaches to and promises of PAE to be compelling, and I support the work of those who wish to make its tools and methods useful/relevant for activists and to democratize research. While I felt a strong sense of affinity and recognition when I first encountered George Smith's and Gary Kinsman's contributions to PAE because they articulated practices and concerns that resonated with my own experiences in activist research, most of

what I know about research came from my own praxis and engagement with other activist researchers, struggles, and movements. My more recent research into activist researchers also confirms a range of theoretical and methodological approaches that underpin these practices within and alongside the broader struggles that they relate to. Thus, while PAE may be valuable to present and future struggles (and for analyzing historical ones), it is important to acknowledge that concepts and theory/theoretical thinking circulate in and sometimes emerge from the everyday activities of social movements, activists, and organizers. The few examples discussed here give at least a sense of the scope of some of these practices and do not require that they fit neatly into an existing research paradigm for them to have validity. Further study of methodologies and theoretical frameworks at use in activist research practice in relation to those approaches in academic literature claiming to be “activist” methodologies has the potential to develop powerful tools for struggles against capitalism and imperialism. Insights from the kinds of activist researchers I discuss here have great potential to enrich, broaden, and challenge understandings of how, where, and when education, learning, and knowledge production occur, as well as provide critical conceptual tools with which to understand and advance social change.

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## Part 2

# Research as Policy Intervention and Critique of Institutions

In this section, attention is turned to how scientific evidence produced through PAE and IE can play a role in changing policy, law, and administrative practices. In “From an Institutional Absence to Radical Action: A Political Activist Ethnography Project in Aotearoa / New Zealand,” Sue Bradford introduces a new way of doing PAE: focusing on research attuned to absences rather than presences. Curious and troubled by the lack of formalized left-wing activism in New Zealand, where she lives, Bradford uses her research to explore the possibilities for formalizing left-leaning activism into think tanks. Bradford chronicles the left in her home country, reflecting on the history of the absence of such a think tank. She imagines what such an organization could possibly look like and consist of.

Erin Sirett's "North-South Partnership and Capacity Building: Tracing Ruling Relations in the Canadian-Bangladeshi Partnership Between Social Justice NGOs" shows how reporting criteria, rolled out by the international development funding body of the Canadian government, reorganized an existing partnership between organizations operating at the community levels in Canada and Bangladesh. Sirett explores the social relations of funding to show that translocal priorities trumped local priorities and with what effects. She shines a light on the ways in which both organizations took up dominant understandings of "partnership" as manifest in particular ways of transferring funds, circulating ideas, and working.

Laura Bisailon's "Mandatory HIV Screening Policy and Everyday Life: A Look Inside the Canadian Immigration Medical Examination" is an institutional and political activist ethnography of HIV-specific practices within the Canadian immigration system's medical program. Her argument is that mandatory HIV screening triggers institutional practices that are problematic not only for would-be immigrants but also for bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, and other actors who work for and within the Canadian immigration system. She convinces that public policy and its effects should be investigated from the perspective of the very people toward whom the (in this case, exclusionary) health policy is directed. This work provides a vital corrective to state claims about the functioning of—and the professional and administrative practices supporting—mandatory HIV testing and medical examination, showing how and where things need to change.

## 5 From an Institutional Absence to Radical Action

### A Political Activist Ethnography Project in Aotearoa / New Zealand

Sue Bradford

This chapter describes a political activist ethnography (PAE) project I undertook between 2010 and 2013 as a researcher whose primary identity, when I began the project, was as an activist rather than an academic. A lifetime of engagement on the radical left of Aotearoa / New Zealand politics had left me with a fundamental question:<sup>1</sup> Why was it that we on the left had never been able to develop a major think tank to counter those on the right, and what might it take to establish such an institution? Aotearoa / New Zealand was a comparative latecomer to the world of think tanks, which had proliferated globally from the early 1970s onward (‘t Hart and Vromen 2008; J. Smith 1991; Stone 2007). The first substantial think tank to impact political discourse was the right-wing New Zealand Business Roundtable, which wielded influence at the highest levels of government, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s (Beder 2006; Harris and Twiname 1998; Jesson 1999; Murray 2006; Roper 2005). A small number of other right-wing and centrist think tanks also emerged, most notably the Maxim Institute, the New Zealand Institute, and the New Zealand Initiative (Mintrom 2006; Partridge and Carter 2011). No comparable institutional challenge ever appeared on the left.

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1 Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand.

I set out to uncover answers to five fundamental questions. Why had a major left-wing think tank never developed in New Zealand? Was there any support from left academics and activists for such an entity (or entities)? If there was, what was the nature of the think tank they would like to see established? What did the state of the activist left in 2010–13 in New Zealand indicate about the possibility or otherwise of establishing a left-wing think tank? With such an initiative in mind, what might be learned from the experiences of some of the left-wing think tank–like organizations that had already existed?

From the earliest stages of the project, it was clear that a definition of “left” was critical. This is the working definition I put to my participants:

*Left:* a commitment to working for a world based on values of fairness, inclusion, participatory democracy, solidarity and equality, and to transforming Aotearoa into a society grounded in economic, social, environmental and Tiriti justice.<sup>2</sup>

I faced several challenges as I sought the most appropriate methodological frame to investigate answers to the five questions outlined above. Not only was I seeking knowledge about something that did not exist—that is, a major left-wing think tank—but I was entering a research field that encompassed the entire left of the political spectrum, a somewhat daunting prospect even in a country with a small population of just over four million at the time (Backhouse 2013). In this chapter, I document my approach to using PAE to overcome these challenges in what became a feasibility study for the establishment of one or more left-wing think tanks. It was also a rare opportunity for the Aotearoa / New Zealand left (or at least some of it) to take a reasonably detailed look at itself at a particular point in history. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with fifty-one left academics and activists from around Aotearoa / New Zealand and maintained a three-year research journal of observations and analysis, both of which produced a wealth of data (Bradford 2014).

This chapter is organized in five parts. I begin by identifying the source of the research problematic and what immersion in the field taught me about

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2 Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) was signed in 1840 between representatives of the English Crown and many Māori chiefs. It is a foundational constitutional document.



it. In the second section, I explore the key reasons for my choice of PAE as the study's method of inquiry, and I discuss some of the opportunities and challenges involved with its use in this project. In part three, I identify and consider my research findings on the question of creating a left-wing think tank in New Zealand. In part four, I explore the revelation of a second major institutional absence on the left. I conclude by offering some analytic reflections on the use of PAE in this study and on its future use in New Zealand.

## Identifying and Exploring the Research Problematic

Core to PAE is the concept of the research problematic that “provides an organizing frame and gives direction to projects that start from within the activities and relevancies of standpoint informants” (Bisaillon 2012, 617–18). The problematic driving and shaping this research is embodied in its title: “A Major Left Wing Think Tank in Aotearoa: An Impossible Dream or a Call to Action?” The implicit question behind it (Why had a major left-wing think tank never developed, and was the ground fertile for the establishment of such a body?) remained the same from the beginning to the end of the project. It derived directly from the experience and knowledge gained from my work as a frontline activist and organizer. My entry point into PAE was as a researcher who identified as an activist, not an academic. I first became politically engaged when I joined a progressive youth organization while still in school, going on to become a founding member of the first women's liberation group on my university campus. I took an active role in many struggles and organizations over the ensuing decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, I worked as an organizer in local and national unemployed workers' and welfare claimants' groups before going on to become a Member of Parliament for the Green Party for ten years. After resigning from Parliament in 2009, I returned to grassroots work with two organizations: anti-capitalist welfare rights group Auckland Action Against Poverty and Kōtare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa.

I had been part of conversations with friends and colleagues about the need for a left-wing think tank since around 1990. This awareness had in part been driven by the efficacy of the New Zealand Business Roundtable's influence on political discourse. One of New Zealand's leading left public intellectuals at the time, Bruce Jesson, wrote the following in 1987:

A cabal of hardline right-wingers now exists in the Roundtable, and it has become a strident organization of the libertarian Right. . . . The battle for political power is a battle for public opinion, and people like Kerr and bodies like the Roundtable are still fighting it. They are more aware than other New Zealanders of the intellectual content of this battle. (1987, 131–32)<sup>3</sup>

A left-leaning economist, Brian Easton, also spent decades attempting to draw attention to the poor public discourse in New Zealand (Easton 2003) and calling for the development of institutions with the intellectual substance sufficient to enable the social democratic left to present a serious challenge to the neoliberal hegemony that dominated New Zealand’s political life (Easton 2012). In 1995, law professor Jane Kelsey, a long-time campaigner on free trade and other issues, called for the establishment of “well-resourced critical think tanks . . . which can develop an integrated analysis and foster climates favourable to change. Unco-ordinated [*sic*] research by isolated critics can never compete” (1995, page unknown).

It was not just the calls of renowned public figures on the left that drove my awareness of the absence of a left-wing think tank and the need for the left to create an intellectual armoury of its own. My work in the unemployed workers’ movement and elsewhere had taught me directly that until those who suffered most from the impacts of right-wing government and business agendas had their own think tank(s) capable of advancing and advocating policies in their interests with similar efficacy, they would always be on the back foot. I had also learned from my time in Parliament that the parties who try to represent left interests in the legislature all too often lack the kind of innovative and radical new policies that a substantive and quality left-wing think tank (or tanks) could provide.

As I immersed myself in the field between July and November 2012, I asked participants what they thought of my working definition of *think tank*, deliberately designed to reflect an organization capable of being developed by left activists and academics autonomously of government and the academy:

**Think tank:** A community-based not-for-profit organization which undertakes detailed research and policy development in order to influence and enhance public policy formation across a broad range

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Roger Kerr was the founding director of the New Zealand Business Roundtable.

of issues, through publications, media work, lobbying, conferences, workshops and other forms of advocacy and education.

Most respondents were positive about the proffered definition, especially when I had explained clearly that the entity I was talking about was both “left” and a “think tank” and that the two definitions should be considered in tandem. The term *think tank* itself raised far more concern. As community-based researcher and activist Karen Davis told me,

Well, we were opposing those bastard business think tanks, the [Business Roundtable], right back in 1990 or something, so we were aware of think tanks, but we mainly saw them as the enemy. . . . You sort of associate think tank and horrible right-wing bastards in the same breath, so they do get a bit mixed in that way.

Another common perception was that *think tank* implied a mix of aloof isolation and elitism. Community development worker Jane Stevens said, “It kind of creates a picture of academics sitting around with a glass of wine having a nice little chat.” Several participants also noted with disapprobation the term’s warlike connotations. It became apparent that most participants viewed the term *think tank* in an unfavourable light and that the term may be a barrier to the development of a left institution of this nature.

I was keen to find out whether participants discerned the same absence I had, the gap that motivated my research, or had my initial assumption been wrong? I was quickly disabused of any notion that I was alone in recognizing an absence. Former British Labour MP Bryan Gould told me, “I’ve had some experience with that kind of thing, but I’ve yet to see, in New Zealand at any rate, anything that would fit that bill.” Māori unionist and Labour Party campaign manager Matt McCarten summed up the absence—and the need—in a way that reflected the opinions of many: “We just keep losing and when you think about what this government’s doing in things like the reform of social welfare and what previous governments have done on the economic thing, the reason they’re able to get away with it, the intellectual armoury to fight with wasn’t there.”

The responses from participants across the board confirmed that the question posed by the problematic had not been a figment of my imagination. They also provided a textured and thoughtful range of responses about why such an entity had never come into being, including the lack of critical mass in a

small country, concomitant with a shortage of the necessary organizing skills and expertise; the simple fact that no one had picked up the challenge and run with it because of an individual and collective focus on other priorities; a history of left anti-intellectualism; and the difficulties in sourcing funding for an overtly left-wing institution of this nature.

What I had not expected when I started out was the extent to which questions about the state of the Aotearoa / New Zealand left triggered by the problematic came to dominate participant responses, my fieldwork journal, and subsequent analysis. While initially driven by the absence of one institution, a major left-wing think tank, the question about what the state of the activist left in 2010–13 indicated about the possibility or otherwise of the establishment of a left-wing think tank opened up what were in fact much broader and deeper concerns among people on the left in Aotearoa / New Zealand at that time and revealed an even more critical institutional gap that I will discuss shortly.

### **Why Political Activist Ethnography?**

My research was well underway before I discovered that a method of inquiry called “political activist ethnography” existed. I had struggled to find an academically rigorous framework that would meet the challenges of the research question and site while remaining congruent with my own political and philosophical perspectives. I was first alerted to PAE through the work of Aziz Choudry, whom I had known as an anti-globalization activist in Christchurch before he left for an academic life in Canada (Choudry 2010, 23). No one with whom I worked in Aotearoa / New Zealand, academic or activist, had ever heard of PAE, but I soon became convinced it would be interesting and—I hoped—productive to build on the seminal work of George Smith and other early practitioners (G. Smith 1990; Frampton et al. 2006a). There were three key reasons for this choice.

First, the questions I was asking were aimed at uncovering knowledge about the activities and perceptions of left activists and academics and a small selection of their organizations. My primary focus was not on examining the ways in which the institutions of society govern and regulate some aspects of people’s lives and activities, in which case it may have been appropriate to employ institutional ethnography (IE; Campbell 2002; Devault 2006; Taber 2010). While the state of New Zealand’s ruling relations would remain

of inescapable relevance, my priority was to explore in some depth aspects of the relationships, experiences, tensions, and contradictions within the New Zealand left itself. My inquiry into an absence—the lack of a major left-wing think tank—meant finding a way of investigating the reasons for that absence and whether and how it might be filled.

This meant that I was particularly taken with Ian Hussey's notion of expanding PAE into the realm of the institutions and networks of activism, suggesting that activist work be viewed in the same way as other types of work and that such work can be investigated and mapped in relation to the institutions of activism itself (Hussey 2012). In other words, PAE can extend beyond consideration of the organization and impact of ruling relations at the interface between the institutions of power and those who work for change into a deeper examination of the relationships, contradictions, and tensions within activist worlds themselves. Related to this was the significance institutional and political activist ethnographers give to the concept of the problematic, discussed above. The question at the core of this project met with some exactitude the notion of the problematic, grounded as it was in a very long period of gestation among the people and groups that constitute the research field and in the dynamics and contradictions of our work. The critical reflexivity inherent in PAE also meant that my identity as a biased, value-laden activist researcher, who was in part a key source of the problematic, would be a useful and congruent attribute rather than something to be minimized or denied.

Secondly, there is an assumption inherent in PAE that knowledge gained from research is expected to inform the next phase of work being undertaken by the relevant activist groups or networks. PAE is designed to move practitioners beyond the all-too-common divides between theory and practice and between activism and the academy. As Gary Kinsman writes, "We need theory connected to and constantly transformed and enriched by practice that can assist us in mapping out social relations of struggle, identifying sites where progress is possible and developing strategies for fighting to win our struggles" (2006, 154). From its conception, my project was developed with the intention that the findings, whatever they might be, would offer some practical assistance to the strengthening of the intellectual and organizational capacity of at least some parts of the Aotearoa / New Zealand left.

The third factor that drew me to PAE lay in my own positioning as an activist researcher. While there is no question this study was undertaken in part to gain a doctoral qualification, my overwhelming motivation was a

desire to find the answers to the research questions—and then, with others, act on those answers. My long experience in street politics and community organizing had often caused me to reflect on the roles we take as activists beyond the frontlines, in areas like research, education, and policy development. PAE provided a legitimate and provocative framework within which to explore not only the research problematic itself but also my own shifting academic/activist identity as the project unfolded. In addition, PAE's acute reflexivity and use of the ethnographic toolbox offered distance and rigour within a project that cut to the heart of my political life and context and in which there was a real danger of potentially self-sabotaging confusion and a deficit around issues of transparency.

I faced two challenges in engaging with a relatively new method of inquiry in a geographically isolated academic environment lacking in any collegial opportunities for advice and discussion. First, I was concerned that the scale of what I was attempting seemed larger than other political activist ethnographies of which I was aware, transcending any one group, movement, or network and treating the left of an entire country as a research site. I was heartened by Dorothy Smith's statement that "institutional ethnography isn't about studying institutions as such" (2006, 2) but realized that, as part of the scale issue, there was a second dissonance between my proposed research and IE and PAE as I understood them to have evolved up to that point. Both methods use textual analysis. To examine the relevant textual practices and output of the New Zealand left for 2010 through 2013, even within some tight constraints, would certainly have been an interesting exercise, but would have entailed so much work that common sense alone placed such an effort well out of the scope of the project.

As the interviews, journal keeping, and subsequent analysis proceeded, these early concerns diminished in importance. Laura Bisailon writes about social relations as "sequences of interdependent actions that shape people's daily practices" (2012, 619). In the field, I observed, discovered, described, analyzed, and mapped these social relations, the contradictions and problems of the Aotearoa / New Zealand left of that time within its historical, geographical, and political context. I utilized PAE to go beyond methods that were either too localized and intimate to paint any bigger picture or too meta, so large that they carried the risk of missing out on the specifics that add colour, complexity, and depth to research findings. PAE allowed all three levels—meta, meso, and micro—and their interconnections to emerge with

some degree of clarity, which was particularly useful when engaged with the complexities involved in examining the state of the left.

On the question of textual analysis, it was only later that I came to understand that interview transcripts themselves were texts, although not in the way identified by Dorothy Smith, as “material in a form that enables replication . . . with the capacity to coordinate people’s doings translocally” (2005, 228). I finally came to understand that the raw data of my research—fifty-one interviews and the field journal—were themselves texts that I had in fact analyzed in fine-grained detail. This illumination arrived only at the point I first made contact in person with a political activist ethnographer, Gary Kinsman, when he visited New Zealand in early 2014. The consequences of geographical isolation were suddenly all too apparent, much to my methodological embarrassment. A much earlier collegial conversation would have saved considerable angst.

## **Findings: Creating a Left-Wing Think Tank in Aotearoa / New Zealand**

The original question underpinning the research was answered in the affirmative. Every person I interviewed supported the strengthening of the “intellectual armoury” of the left through the development of some form of think tank or think tank-like organization(s). This ranged from careful skepticism to passionate enthusiasm, and almost everything in between. Academics were encouraging. University lecturer and activist Sandra Grey saw “a left-wing think tank or a longer-term strategizing for the left as being immensely necessary in New Zealand,” while Māori Fulbright scholar Veronica Tawhai told me, “This is just the most amazing idea, we definitely need it.” From those whose identification was primarily activist, the support was just as strong. Welfare rights advocate Paul Blair remarked, “New Zealand could do with one, definitely. The deep south of the planet needs a left-wing think tank, sure, why not?” It was clear that this sample of the Aotearoa / New Zealand left not only recognized the same gap that drove the problematic in the first place but also supported, in varying ways and with varying degrees of enthusiasm, the development of a major left-wing think tank (or tanks).

It was clear, however, that strong verbal support from across the left for some form of think tank was not in itself ever going to make it happen, nor would it determine what such an entity might look like in practice. Above all,

was the time right for such an initiative, and how might it develop in practice? Participants were enthusiastic and detailed in their advice. On timing, some conveyed an almost overwhelming sense of urgency. Prominent Māori lawyer and activist Annette Sykes said, “I want this to happen by tomorrow . . . it’s long overdue . . . this stuff here is so desperately needed. . . . I think if we don’t make a commitment to this now it’ll be a hundred years, unless there’s a revolution, a people’s revolution in between.”

Others spoke of the need for organizational expertise if any development was to be successful. Academic and activist David Parker told me, “Creating change is not simply about speaking the truth . . . what a think tank also needs as part of its equipment and armoury is the knowhow and people willing to do that.” Participants were clear that success would depend on the willingness and ability of an individual or group to make such a project their priority. As Dunedin academic Brian Roper noted, “It either requires getting some money from somewhere where you can employ somebody to be an organizer, or it requires somebody who’s prepared to really make that the number one thing that they’re doing in their life, and really devote the time to doing the basic organizing of it, to make it happen.”

A number of those interviewed spoke of the characteristics they believed essential to the successful completion of such an initiative, chief among them the capacity to attract respect and support, to corral together people from different parts of the left, and a degree of charisma. Paul Blair made a very direct comparison with the role played by the late Roger Kerr, former long-standing executive director of the New Zealand Business Roundtable:

Do we need a Roger Kerr? Maybe it has to be a Julia Kerr instead of a Roger, maybe it needs to be more than one person, all those kinds of things, so you have a public face that doesn’t have to be tokenist . . . when he came on the radio, you knew it was the big [Business Roundtable] talking. So when our people in our left-wing think tank come on the radio, the same thing has got to happen.

Despite an overwhelming view that funding was likely to be a major obstacle to the development of a left-wing think tank, many respondents were refreshingly optimistic and practical when offering thoughts on the matter. Long-term community development practitioner Vivian Hutchinson said,



This is how things have happened for hundreds of years. People who want to take initiative have been supported by their friends. That comes with pros and cons and all that sort of stuff, but really, that's how it happens. So we've got to get more businesslike about asking for that support and calling each other to generosity about it.

Participants identified many significant considerations that any future initiatives should take into account. These included a strong sense that left-wing think tanks should not attempt to mirror those of the right but establish their own philosophically and politically congruent purposes, structures, and relationships; that the process of establishment should be slow and careful, bearing in mind that creating impossibly difficult goals would set a project up for failure; and that high-quality work would be vital not only to increase a group's ability to influence public policy processes and bring about change but also because the powerful forces ranged against the left will, given the chance, do everything possible to undermine such projects. As academic and activist Daphne Lawless said, "It does have to be at a level where it can do battle with the research which is put up by the right-wing think tanks on the field of battle, as it were, in the academic marketplace."

When it came to suggestions about what the activities of a major left-wing think tank might involve, participants offered an enormous range of ideas, often in considerable detail. These included a wide variety of possible types and areas of research; the suggestion that any new entity should be a place where the left could reflect, think, and argue together; and that a space could be created that nurtured the voices and views of those whose perspectives and stories are not normally heard. As community-based Māori researcher Helen Potter told me, "You would be seeking to hear all manner of voices and there wouldn't be a closed downness or an excluding of voices that were—what's that word they use in the literature?—unruly. You would hear all sorts of unruly voices."

The research found very real barriers to any project that might attempt to establish what left city councillor Cathy Casey called a "pan left" think tank. Analysis of the data left me very clear that it would be foolish in the extreme to expect an initiative that tried to include the entire left within its brief to have any chance of success. Ideological differences between the social democratic and radical anti-capitalist left were too significant. There was also a substantive difference between a lot of environmental thinking and that of

both social democrats and radicals, given the “neither right nor left” tendency prominent in some Green Party and environmental activist circles (Tanczos 2011; Browning 2011). I did not consider it possible to overcome these very real barriers with a project whose basic principles may be internally confused and contradictory. Trying to blend the radical and social democratic left together simply would not work, nor would forcing a conjunction between those who contend there is or should be no such thing as “left” or “right” and those whose beliefs and actions are shaped by the side they take in capitalism’s enduring war on the poor. Therefore, I found that while there are many potential permutations, there could be a place in New Zealand for at least three major left-wing think tanks: social democratic, green, and radical left. However, my own interest and commitment after my doctoral studies remained undeniably with the latter category.

### **Findings: State of the Left—a Second Institutional Absence Revealed**

As I began the interview process, I was struck by the sense conveyed by so many participants that the left had lost—that in Aotearoa / New Zealand, we had in effect been permanently defeated in the struggle against much stronger economic and political forces upholding and pursuing a neoliberal agenda. Māori academic Maria Bargh said, “We are being fractured and divided by things that in the scheme of the planet are not as major as they’re made out to be.” Academic and activist John Stansfield was forthright: “We failed, actually. Love us all to bits, but we failed. Things are worse now than they were when we were children, income distribution is worse, fairness is worse, the potential rise in fascism is much worse, the only way people escape this is on a jet.”

This sense of loss and failure was accompanied by a decrease in confidence, an awareness of insufficient collective analysis and planning, and the realities of organizational fragility across sectors. Community organizer and educator Tim Howard summed up what he saw as the possible consequences of life as a left activist at a time when the neoliberal hegemony seemed virtually unchallengeable. He explained that we risked “taking on internally the dominant discourse that means that they are right, that their perception—corporate capitalist stuff from the neoliberal perspective—is ‘the way things are.’ . . . While fighting that norm, we can be taking that perception as somehow centralized in ourselves and leave ourselves peripheralized by that.”

At the same time, there were signs of hope among many participants. Union economist Bill Rosenberg said, “You keep on coming across people who are more progressive than you ever expected.” Activist Rhiannon Thomson observed,

Perhaps it’s my age. . . . I’ve seen people almost doing a full circle, like some people that I thought were reasonably right wing are seeing the effects of things, or perhaps have hit a point in their life where they’re mature enough to see. I think they’re becoming quite aware just of those divisions between the haves and have-nots and workers and some of those workers’ rights things. Amazingly, since we’ve been so down for so long, people are becoming aware.

Beyond the aspirations of participants, there was also a noticeable rise in street and left parliamentary activism during the research period, which included the local manifestation of the international Occupy movement in 2011 (Grey 2011) and the rise of the Mana Parliamentary Party, launched after a left-wing split from the more conservative Māori Party (Mana 2011). There was also a growing willingness, noted particularly among the traditionally factionalized radical left, to cooperate with and listen to each other across old generational, sectarian, and ideological boundaries.

Unlike findings around the absence of a major left-wing think tank, the major conclusion in this area was not expected from the outset of the project. As part of determining whether the New Zealand left was in a fit state to support the development of one or more major left-wing think tanks and of working out whether and how such initiatives might fit within broader strategies, it was crucial to explore how we might develop counter-hegemonic power more effectually than we had done so far. Trade union leader Robert Reid summed up the thoughts of many when he said the left needed “to put a knife through that neoliberal framework, because it’s still so powerful.” Referring to a line from Yeats’s poem *The Second Coming*, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (Yeats 2003), Pasifika poet Karlo Mila put the question, “What would hold [the left] together?” In assembling a response, I found myself asking, “What would Robert’s ‘knife’ look like? What strategies, ideas, and actions might more cogently hold us together as we wield that knife?”

In posing that question, the most significant finding in this area emerged: a desire for a shared vision across the radical left and a shared way of achieving that vision through the creation of a party or movement. As history lecturer and former unemployed movement activist Cybèle Locke put it, “I’m still

looking for that home, ideological home . . . and a really, really beautiful utopia . . . I'm still looking for that too. I've never given up trying." These are powerful sentiments. Finding an ideological home that provides a congruent means to achieve the common dream requires organizations that can meet these purposes in alignment with the beliefs and hopes of those who are doing the seeking. Given that I was deliberately interviewing people from all parts of the left spectrum, some of whom were completely comfortable with their current affiliations or were not in search of such a "home" in the first place, this absence only affected some participants. For the latter, the search for something not yet born—a party or movement that fully expressed their dreams while providing a mechanism for realizing those dreams—was imperative.

The use of PAE as my method of inquiry brought this conclusion unexpectedly to the fore. Analysis of my source texts (the fifty-one interview transcripts and the field journal) also provided the beginnings of a road map forward. Recommendations included the need for the New Zealand left to become braver and more aware that courage and the willingness to take power are essential; that we recognize and foster theory as part of developing sustainable counter-hegemonic organization, no longer accepting it solely as an elite practice within the academy; and that the left, wherever we are placed within it, simply needs to become more thoughtful, replacing mindless activism and a gross imbalance of power by collectively becoming smarter, deeper thinkers than the structural forces we are up against.

## Concluding Reflections

"Ethnography is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study" (Denzin 2006, 422). My research question was not an innocent one. Anything discovered was aimed at serving those who aspire to "put a knife through the neoliberal framework." From the point at which I first became aware of its existence, PAE seemed a close, if not quite perfect, fit for this far-from-innocent purpose. There were times when it felt like a risky choice for a geographically isolated researcher new to the world of sociological theory. Yet despite the risks and uncertainties, the experiment was attempted. I offer three closing reflections on the experience.

First, the practical application of PAE to this research enabled me to overcome two challenges I faced in seeking to understand a lacuna, an institutional absence rather than a presence, as well as coming to grips with a large and somewhat amorphous ethnographic field. Fundamental to this was the notion of the problematic and the way in which it had genuinely risen from inside the activist world. It emerged not just from the mind and memory of the researcher but also from the acute consciousness of many others, as the research findings demonstrated. The method of inquiry was also flexible enough to open up and deal with the unexpected scale and complexity of data around the “state of the left,” demonstrating Gary Kinsman’s point that IE and PAE “are alternative ways of doing sociology that are not fixed or dogmatic and thus are able to be continually open-ended and remade as new voices and new movements come forward to join in struggles for social transformation” (2006, 155).

Second, the research findings have already been of direct and immediate use to a wide range of individuals and organizations on the Aotearoa / New Zealand left. From the time research results first started to be disseminated in 2013, there have been several practical consequences at both the local and national levels among individuals, groups, and networks. Perhaps the most significant of these was the collective project to establish a radical left-wing think tank for which my thesis became in effect a feasibility study. In September 2016, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA) was officially launched at a major public event in Wellington, New Zealand’s capital city (ESRA 2016). Building on the second major research finding, ESRA was also actively working to nurture an even bigger and more difficult initiative: the creation of a national radical left political organization or party. The editors of *Sociology for Changing the World* argue that “the test for whether or not research has been successful is the extent to which it enables people to transform the world” (Frampton et al. 2006b, 1). In my study, PAE proved not only its academic worth but also its capacity to reveal and support at least two significant starting points for action aimed at strengthening the power and influence of left thinking, culture, and organization in New Zealand.

Third, in undertaking this study using PAE, I accepted the challenge presented by Frampton and her associates a decade ago when they proposed that activist-ethnographic research should “challenge and move beyond the binary opposition that separates ‘activist’ and ‘researcher’ as identity categories . . . in the very process of doing activist research and knowledge production”

(2006c, 258). One of the most telling moments during the research period came when it suddenly dawned on me that I was no longer just an activist with an interest in using research to further our daily work, but I had somehow metamorphosed into an academic as well. Since then, I have carried this dual identity consciously as I seek, with others, to extend the range of what is both conceivable and practical at the academic activist interface. I could not have championed the establishment of a think tank without a PhD, as so much of the work involves mutual understanding and respect with those already situated in the academy. My credibility as an activist would never have allowed this on its own, but that identity was also essential in first attempts to develop a new kind of institution that lies beyond old boundaries.

With others, I have also been part of the development of a series of national conferences called “Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change,” which now bring together hundreds of left activists and academics each year to share their latest research and insights. The fourth such gathering took place in September 2017 and was jointly hosted by ESRA and Massey University (ESRA 2017). I am also a member of the editorial board of a new journal, *Counter-futures: Left Thought & Practice Aotearoa*, a “multidisciplinary journal of Left research, thought and alternatives,” which now publishes twice a year and is another site where academic and activist thinking can be brought into the same arena (Counterfutures, n.d.). This is to imply not that my involvement was essential to either of these latter initiatives but rather that the reflexivity and ethnographic rigour offered by PAE played an integral part in the practical development of my understanding, confidence, and capacity to attempt a useful contribution to all these boundary-crossing projects. The terrain of the counter-hegemonic left in New Zealand has changed considerably since my thesis became public in mid-2014, and I believe the use of PAE in this study has helped underpin the development of “a position that contests the insider/outsider polarity that continues to trap both research and activism” (Frampton et al. 2006c, 258).

Lastly, I am excited by the new possibilities for the use of PAE in New Zealand. Since my thesis became public in July 2014, I have become aware of at least three New Zealand-based postgraduate students who are using, or considering using, PAE in their research. There may well be more. The ESRA Research Committee was itself interested in the possibilities of using PAE as a method of inquiry in future projects with our union and community activist partner organizations. I am much taken with the following statement from

Aziz Choudry (2014): “Rather than attempting to categorize activist research processes into neat, finite models, I contend that it is important to capture and understand the dynamic interplay between activist research and organizing.” I believe there is much exciting potential for this to happen as increasing numbers of us at the academic activist interface continue to trial methodologies and methods in ways that will become increasingly relevant to the activist as well as academic worlds, including here in Aotearoa / New Zealand, where such research is barely visible. PAE is unquestionably a valuable addition to the range of methodological options available to all of us who wish to innovate and strengthen our intellectual and organizational capacity to build a future less confined by colonial and corporate agendas.

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## 6 North-South Partnership and Capacity Building

### Tracing Ruling Relations in the Canadian-Bangladeshi Partnership Between Social Justice NGOs

Erin Sirett

“Donor-driven development,” or development in the Global South driven by the agendas of foreign development agencies rather than by the states and/or communities where interventions are taking place, is recognized even by large institutions like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1996) and the World Bank (1998) as responsible for initiatives that are not appropriate or effective for the contexts in which they are implemented and whose positive impacts, if any, are short-term (Saxby 2003). However, partnerships between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are thought to promote more equitable relations between donors and recipients and between the North and the South. According to some development practitioners, they are pursued to advance development strategies that incorporate the knowledge and experience of communities in the South, arguably making these strategies more sustainable (Lavergne and Wood 2008). Perhaps for this reason, North-South NGO partnership programs are a popular funding model for development agencies around the world. This chapter looks at one of these North-South partnerships between a Canadian NGO and a Bangladeshi NGO, which receive funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) / Department of

Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) to support their social justice work.<sup>1</sup>

Changes to CIDA/DFATD's partnership programming left the NGOs in this study struggling to adapt to ensure they could continue to secure funding from the Canadian state's aid agency. My intention was to examine how partnership programming and its funding arrangements were shaping international development assistance and affecting the work and social relations of the two activist NGOs. As I carried out my research of the "everyday lives" of those working within the two organizations, the NGOs were engaging with each other in an endeavour to build the Bangladeshi NGO's organizational capacity, and this became the entry point of my investigation.

Researchers have criticized the professionalization of NGOs, or "NGOization," and suggested that building organizational capacity consistently displaces NGOs' activist work (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Goudar 2010; Kim and Campbell 2013; Sinaga 1994; Wallace 2003). Such decisions to build organizational capacity are often fuelled by the desire to appeal to donor agendas to secure funding. The NGOs in this study were indeed facing a precarious funding situation and, in this case, increasingly took up organizational capacity building through their partnership. This chapter, based on data collected from 2011 to 2014, looks at this work and reveals how the discourse of capacity building conflicted with the NGO staff's experiential knowledge of how best to engage in partnership with each other in order to accomplish their social justice aims, one of which was a partnership of equality and mutuality, as well as challenged the Bangladeshi NGO staff's capacity to use their local experiential knowledge and that of their members to guide their work.

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1 In 2013, CIDA merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade to become the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD). My research examined the period before and after this merger took place, so I will use CIDA/DFATD for trends spanning these periods. When referring to the period before 2013, only CIDA will be used, and when referring to the period after, I use only DFATD. At the end of 2015, the government changed the department's name to Global Affairs Canada; however, this occurred after I had completed my research.

## The Study

This chapter focuses on a partnership between social justice NGOs, one Canadian and one Bangladeshi, as they worked together with funding from CIDA's Voluntary Sector Program.<sup>2</sup> The Canadian NGO received five-year funding from the Voluntary Sector Program in 2010 to support its partnerships with approximately thirty-eight NGOs in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Canada, one of which was the Bangladeshi NGO.<sup>3</sup> The Voluntary Sector Program provided multi-year institutional funding for Canadian not-for-profit organizations, in partnership with “developing-country” partner organizations, to carry out sustainable international development programs in countries in the Global South and public engagement activities in Canada (CIDA 2006). While CIDA/DFATD funds civil society through all branches, the Partnerships with Canadians Branch exclusively funds Canadian civil society organizations—including NGOs, professional associations, and universities—to do international development projects, research and policy analysis, and volunteer programs. Through its programs, the branch aims to “recognize and support the work of Canadian organizations dedicated to improving the lives of those living in poverty in developing countries” (DFATD 2013).

The Partnerships with Canadians Branch was undergoing review when the Canadian NGO applied and received the five-year funding it held at the time of this study. The review took place between 2008 and 2010 and resulted in many changes to the branch, including to its name, which had formerly been the Canadian Partnership Branch. The Canadian NGO was one of the last NGOs funded by the branch's Voluntary Sector Program before it was replaced with the Partners for Development Program at the end of September 2010. The government, led by former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, introduced significant changes to CIDA/DFATD's partnership programming with the new program. Canadian NGOs were no longer able to submit applications for partnership funding throughout the year (or when their present funding ended). Instead, they had to respond to a call for proposals. For the

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2 I refer to the organizations not by name but as the Canadian NGO and the Bangladeshi NGO to protect their anonymity.

3 This number is approximate, as NGOs were added and removed over the course of the program.

new Partners for Development Program, to which the Canadian NGO hoped to apply once its funding ended in February 2016, there had not been a call for proposals since April 2011 and no indication of when the next one would come. This left many Canadian NGOs in a precarious situation as they struggled to find the means to continue funding their programs, and it also caused widespread fear of losing funding in the sector (Swan 2010).

In addition to these changes to its partnership programming, CIDA's overall aid priorities also shifted. As part of its new "aid effectiveness agenda," CIDA announced in May 2009 the agency's three priority themes to guide development programming would be economic growth, children and youth, and food security. In response to a so-called emerging consensus on development effectiveness (CIDA 2001), CIDA released its *Policy Statement on Strengthening Aid Effectiveness* in 2002. This policy introduced a reduction in the number of countries to which CIDA would provide development assistance and a "strategic allocation" of resources to a small number of sectors in those countries (CIDA 2002, 11–12). Given the changes that were taking place, and that many other well-established Canadian NGOs had lost their CIDA/DFATD funding since the changes had taken effect, the Canadian NGO studied was concerned about being able to continue to secure DFATD funding to support its partnerships once its present funding ended. Its Bangladeshi partner was facing funding challenges of its own, having been unable to secure funding to replace a large grant from the British Department for International Development (DFID) that ended in 2009. This chapter looks at how the NGOs responded to their precarious funding situations and to aid agency priorities in their partnership.

## The NGOs and Their Partnership

The two social justice NGOs at the centre of this study had worked as partners for over thirty years, most of this time supported by CIDA and its partnership programs. In line with the social justice aims of their work, equality and mutuality in their partnership were important to the staff of both NGOs. They saw roles for themselves in sharing knowledge and supporting each other with the challenges they each faced. The Canadian NGO described its relationships with partners as "two-way" and collaborative. In one of its publications, it explained, "Overseas colleagues strongly influence [our] thinking and our actions here in Canada, especially with respect to influencing Canadian

policy and NGO discourse and analysis.”<sup>4</sup> The Canadian NGO’s role, then, was not only to secure funding to support the Bangladeshi NGO’s work but also to learn from the Bangladeshi staff about the particular issues faced by the people they worked with and how they went about addressing them. This knowledge was then used to advocate for change in the various development policymaking circles to which the Canadian NGO had access and to educate the Canadian public. While the primary focus of the staff of the Bangladeshi NGO was carrying out work identified as important by its local members and funded by the Canadian NGO, they expressed the importance of mutuality in their partnership too. Bangladeshi staff talked about the importance of the Canadian NGO’s moral support and lobbying for their work.

The NGOs had their own institutional identities, histories, and practices, and each NGO had partnerships with multiple other organizations. Founded in the 1970s, the Canadian NGO was a feminist social justice organization. The NGO provided other social justice organizations—both in Canada and in the Global South—with funding, in some cases building their organizational capacity, doing advocacy in Canada and internationally, and educating the Canadian public on the issues they faced. The NGO was unique among Canadian international development NGOs for its feminist management structure, whose characteristics included sharing the management and decision-making of the organization among all staff, following principles of equal responsibility and equal pay, and working by consensus. The NGO had been evaluated four times by CIDA, with many positive results found. The most recent of these evaluations found the following: “Asked to describe what special value [the Canadian NGO] brought to their work together, all [NGO partners] pointed to the quality of the relationship, using words like ‘trust,’ ‘reciprocity,’ ‘rigour,’ ‘reward for time invested.’” The NGO’s partners were divided up among ten of the approximately fifteen staff members, who were the primary contact person for those partners. Paul was the person responsible for the relationship with the Bangladeshi NGO, a position he had held since 2008. Most of his time was spent at the NGO’s office in Ottawa, although he usually travelled once a year to visit partners in Bangladesh and India. While in Ottawa, he communicated with partners over email and less

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4 In order to protect the anonymity of the organizations involved in this study, I will not provide references to the documents—public or internal—that I collected in the course of my fieldwork.

frequently by phone, participated in the work of Canadian-based coalitions, gathered information and prepared reporting documents for CIDA/DFATD, and attended staff meetings and public events.

The Bangladeshi NGO also stood out in its context. It had since its formation over thirty years ago focused on awareness building with the aim of developing the potential of economically poor people to challenge structural inequalities through education, organization, and mobilization. Practically speaking, this aim had led to the organization's resistance to service delivery and micro-credit, two of the most prevalent activities of local NGOs in Bangladesh. Several researchers, from both Bangladesh and abroad, had recognized the Bangladeshi NGO for its tangible contribution to furthering landless people's participation in combating oppression and claiming their rights.<sup>5</sup> The NGO had over five hundred employees across Bangladesh. Approximately fifty of those were based at the head office in the capital city, Dhaka. The other staff lived in "sub-centres" in communities across the country where they worked to form small groups of landless people. The staff taught the people in these groups about their human and legal rights. Action was then taken on issues identified by group members as most significant, such as women's rights, access to health care or education, or fighting the corruption of local officials. There were two staff members at the Bangladeshi NGO, Rahnuma and Shamsul, who primarily communicated with donors, including the Canadian NGO. As the coordinator, Rahnuma had been head of the organization since its formation, while Shamsul, the manager of reporting, documentation, research, and advocacy, managed a team to collect data and produce all the reporting required by donors. Rahnuma and Shamsul were both based at the head office but frequently travelled to the NGO's working areas. Rahnuma was a prominent figure in Bangladeshi civil society and the face of the NGO. She was frequently interviewed on local television and made appearances at various public events.

The relationship between the staff of the two NGOs occurred most regularly through email and occasionally through phone calls. They shared documents back and forth; most of them were reports on the Bangladeshi NGO's work used to fulfill the Canadian NGO's reporting requirements to CIDA/DFATD. They usually met once a year when a Canadian staff person

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5 I have not included the five references I am referring to here to protect the anonymity of the NGO.



travelled to Bangladesh for an annual partners meeting, organized by the Bangladeshi NGO to bring together all donors. Less regularly, a staff member from the Bangladeshi NGO, usually Rahnuma, travelled to Canada.

## A Problematic Emerges

As I collected ethnographic data on the NGO staff's work, the Voluntary Sector Program and funding, a puzzling picture of their partnership emerged. The NGOs were highly critical of state-funded donor agency priorities and programming mechanisms; however, given they rely heavily on this funding, securing it was an important preoccupation for both. Around the time the Canadian NGO received its last five-year Voluntary Sector Program grant, the organization decided it would try to strengthen its institutional sustainability and that of some of its partners. When the Canadian NGO took up the term *sustainability*, it was concerned, along with other Canadian NGOs, about maintaining funding from DFATD. Changes in CIDA/DFATD's relationships with NGOs, including the lack of any significant and predictable funding for the sector, had disrupted the relative long-term stability of these relationships and resulted in a significant number of organizations experiencing declining total revenues (CCIC 2014). A report by the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (2014, 35), an umbrella organization for Canadian international development NGOs, found that "these impacts have affected the capacities of organizations to maintain staff and sustain often long-standing programs and partnerships on the ground."

Given the imminent impacts of such changes to their work, the Canadian NGO felt it was necessary to "strengthen its institutional sustainability." Investing private funds from the bequest of an individual Canadian donor, which were free of any guidelines or priorities, the NGO hired a consultant to build the staff's capacity to fit their work into the results-based management documentation required by CIDA/DFATD. Paul offered the Bangladeshi NGO funding to strengthen its sustainability too, and discussions took place between Paul and Rahnuma and Shamsul about how the money would be spent. Paul suggested the Bangladeshi NGO hire consultants to provide English language and results-based management training to the reporting and central management staff. Shamsul explained these new activities to me:

Now [the Canadian NGO] is providing a small fund, which is not a part of CIDA's fund. It's an individual contribution for building [our] capacity on reporting, evaluation, and monitoring. At the same time, it contributes to improving our English language capacity, especially focused on the reporting cell but also some others in the Dhaka office. So, beyond the regular fund, [the Canadian NGO] would like to build the capacity of [the Bangladeshi NGO], to help [the Bangladeshi NGO] improve our own capacity for seeking future funding and for improving reporting systems.

Rahnuma and Shamsul agreed with Paul's suggestions and also suggested updating the NGO's website. Together, they also decided to fund a trip to Canada for Shamsul to attend a human rights training program and spend time with the Canadian NGO.

In seeking out funding, the NGOs had already worked together on a concept note directed at one of CIDA/DFATD's three new priority areas, economic growth, which the Canadian NGO submitted in 2009. If accepted, it would have allowed them to apply for bilateral funding.<sup>6</sup> CIDA rejected the proposal, however, and the Canadian NGO was informed in writing (one and a half years later) that the proposal didn't fit with the agency's programme in Bangladesh, but no other feedback was given. It was after this that Paul turned his attention to developing a funding proposal to address one of CIDA/DFATD's other priorities—food security. He described it as “seeing the writing on the wall in terms of future funding from CIDA and the need to be able to describe the Bangladeshi NGO's work in food security terms.”

Paul's idea of “seeing the writing on the wall” to meet CIDA/DFATD's priorities corresponded to changing features of the NGOs' work and provided a point of entry into the ruling relations that the NGO staff entered through their partnership. Paul said he was motivated to describe the Bangladeshi NGO's work in a way that aligned with CIDA/DFATD's priorities to secure funding through the Partnerships with Canadians Branch for their organizations, a role he took on given this funding is only open to Canadian applicants. Given the Canadian NGO staff would be writing the application for further partnership funding and, if successful, receive this funding, I was intrigued

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6 Bilateral funding provides development assistance from one country to another, usually directly from government to government, but in some cases via NGOs, other donors, universities, associations, or private corporations.

by Paul's efforts to also build the Bangladeshi NGO staff's capacity to do this work of describing itself in terms that appealed to CIDA/DFATD.

Bangladeshi staff appreciated the Canadian NGO's efforts to improve their ability to secure donor funding. They too saw value in building their capacity for different and newly required reporting, although they struggled to find the time to undergo the training given their heavy workloads. Rahnuma also found it challenging to describe their work differently and still do the work in the way she and her staff wanted to. As she explained,

We believe in transparency so for the staff to [understand] . . . that this is no different from the work [our organization] did before and the funding source and the reporting format has to be a little different . . . I mean we must keep reinforcing that nothing's changed just because we're getting funds from somewhere else and because there's a different reporting format. In the end, it's the same. But even in terms of our dealing with project staff we must reiterate that it's the same, so it's extra work, much *much* more extra work for the NGOs.

Not only were the reporting requirements that the Bangladeshi NGO must meet onerous, but they were also frequently subject to change, sometimes more than once a year for any given donor.

Rahnuma's concern about the extra work associated with collecting data and reporting to meet the requirements of donors, despite her insistence that "nothing's changed," raised questions for me about not only the increasing volume of work for staff but also the changing nature of their work. While those working in organizations may primarily think of texts as means of information tracking, documents often serve as important instruments for organizing workplace activities and interactions (DeVault 2006). In part, this is achieved because of a text's "capacity to carry a particular idea or meaning across sites and perpetuate it" (Campbell and Gregor 2002, 36). This feature allows ruling relations to coordinate "someone's action here with someone else's there" (33).

Rahnuma indeed found having to present her organization's work in formats digestible to donors a challenge not only due to the time and effort she and her staff were spending on this but also because donors' priorities are in many cases not understood or implemented in ways that align with her staff and members' views and in some cases even in ways that undermine their work. She said,

Now each government has decided they will be looking at food security or at education or whatever and they would be looking at parts of it, and then they decide which type of education and what they mean by food security. And a lot of the food security they're looking at is related to private enterprise. And they call it the private-public partnership. And so of course all of this affects us very deeply because it's totally against the principles for which [our organization] was founded and is working and is committed to upholding.

Despite the significant time and resources being put into building staff's capacity to respond to donor priorities, and the ways donors' understandings were different or even in conflict with the NGOs' priorities, both NGOs also insisted that the required reporting was not having a significant impact on their work. Paul said, "We must do [the report to CIDA], fine. The necessary evil. I don't consider it all that important really." He continued to explain what he saw his work and partnership with the Bangladeshi NGO to really accomplish:

So, reporting for me is just not what I'm here for. We do it and we do it well to keep CIDA happy but for me we're here to have relationships with our counterparts and to bring the messages that they're trying to get across and the work that they're trying to do to talk about that to, to bring it to the Canadian public's attention, to work on those campaigns. That's what the relationship's about. It's not about reporting to CIDA.

Reporting may not be what was most important to Paul or to the Bangladeshi NGO's staff, but the desire to do it well to "keep CIDA happy" prompted capacity-building activities in which the NGOs invested significant resources. It also prompted shifts to their partnership, including a greater role for Paul in building the Bangladeshi NGO's capacity to respond to donor priorities.

Besides funding consultants to build the Bangladeshi NGO's capacity to respond to current and potential donors, Paul undertook more direct capacity-building work to strengthen what would help the Canadian NGO secure the funding it shared with the Bangladeshi NGO. Using his trips to Bangladesh and subsequent trip reports, Paul discussed with Bangladeshi staff issues related to CIDA/DFTAD's priority theme of food security. He wrote the following in a report following one such trip: "I focused on the global rise in food prices and said that food was going to be an increasingly important

theme for international cooperation (yes, I had an agenda in pushing this point with the [Bangladeshi NGO]) and something that would have growing impacts on Bangladesh.” The Canadian NGO staff’s perspective on trends in international development funding had long been an important part of their partnership and was valued by the Bangladeshi NGO, as Rahnuma expressed in saying, “What is very important that we get from [the Canadian NGO] is the global donor and economic position, which helps us to understand what and why funding patterns change. And they’re very critical of this, so they provide us information.” While providing information, as Rahnuma described it, we see that Paul was also advancing a particular “agenda,” and the interactions that stemmed from this agenda appeared intimately connected to CIDA/DFATD’s priorities.

What I found and want to explain is that as Paul took steps to build the capacities of the Bangladeshi NGO to appeal to donor priorities and secure further funding, shifts in the organizations’ everyday work and working relations were taking place. The Canadian NGO had taken on a new role in the capacity building of the Bangladeshi NGO. While these activities were appreciated and seen as important by the Bangladeshi NGO staff, they were placing greater responsibility on the Bangladeshi NGO’s staff to respond to donor priorities. They were also challenging their ability to focus on the priorities identified by their members, a social justice aim that had always been central to the NGOs’ partnership. Capacity building was not being driven by the priorities of the Bangladeshi NGO or the people its work sought to empower. This work consisted of building skills to construct alignment between the work of the organizations and the priorities of the Canadian government.

As an institutional ethnographer, I understand such shifts to be socially organized, shaped by ideologies and discourses situated beyond the immediate context. Before examining these translocal forces, I will explain how the NGO staff were taking up the work of capacity building in their partnership. Then, from these realities, my inquiry begins to track the ruling relations in this context by examining CIDA/DFATD’s partnership discourse and programming, including funding mechanisms and reporting requirements.

## Ruling Relations, North-South Partnership, and Capacity Building

The Canadian NGO staff demonstrated in their new initiatives an understanding that the strength of their organization's sustainability and that of their Bangladeshi partner was tied to both NGOs' capacity to prepare funding proposals and reports and to continuously secure funding. For the Canadian NGO, which received most of its funding from CIDA/DFATD, this capacity involved knowing how to prepare funding proposals and reports using results-based management and involved being able to describe their work in ways that aligned with CIDA/DFATD's priorities. The Bangladeshi NGO, however, received its funding from other NGOs, most of whom received funding from state development agencies, such as CIDA/DFATD in Canada. Bangladeshi staff preferred this to receiving state development funding directly, due in large part to the reporting and monitoring requirements that accompany funding from state agency donors, which they found to be overly onerous. This conclusion was informed by their experience of receiving a grant from DFID, which involved major work for staff to develop the reporting systems required, including the establishment of a management information system (MIS) to collect and track data from its sub-centres. A member of the Central Management Team, Ershad, explained to me the problems he saw with the reporting requirements imposed by the DFID grant:

There are two problems I face in the MIS system. One is that the staff are working with the MIS system, if they leave then others can't complete it, and there are different areas and districts, and they are all required to submit the same information, but each sub-centre is different. The donors are giving us new instructions like "Report to us this way or that way," so with these instructions, the donors are making us mentally dependent on the donor. Like, "We know everything, and you don't know anything." This is a global system.

Ershad was concerned about the resources put into training Bangladeshi staff to enable them to use the reporting systems, such as the MIS, that were lost when staff left the organization, when a donor changed its reporting requirements, or when the organization was no longer able to obtain funding from a particular donor. He was also concerned that the standardization of information collected did not account for differences in the various communities

where they were working. He understood the requirement for his NGO to use an MIS to be part of a “global system,” revolving around donors’ knowledge about why and how reporting and monitoring should be done and involving processes and documentation that require specialized knowledge to complete. These requirements positioned him and his coworkers as lacking capacity rather than as the competent and skilled community organizers they are.

In comparison to state development agencies, the Bangladeshi staff appreciated the efforts some of their NGO donors took to reduce the reporting burden for them, including accepting reports in formats the Bangladeshi staff were already producing, such as narrative formats, rather than formats requiring specialized knowledge, such as results-based management. For example, two of its NGO donors, including the Canadian NGO, agreed to accept the report that the Bangladeshi NGO submitted to another NGO to reduce the work for its staff. Rahnuma also emphasized how important the Canadian NGO staff were in helping her push back against the demands of her NGO’s other donors.

Pushing back was becoming increasingly difficult as donors directed their funding toward narrower priorities and projects. The Bangladeshi NGO had been unsuccessful in finding a grant large enough to replace the funding it received from DFID, so it was seeking smaller grants from a larger number of donors. This was significantly increasing the time and energy staff, such as Shamsul, were spending preparing funding applications, on top of their already heavy workload associated with reporting on the funding they were receiving. It was in response to this situation and with the intention to help its partner get funding that the Canadian NGO took on a new role in helping the Bangladeshi NGO build its capacity to prepare funding proposals and reports that responded to donor priorities. Paul initiated a new project called “Strengthening the Sustainability of the Bangladeshi NGO,” funded with the bequest of an individual private Canadian donor. After discussing with Rahnuma and Shamsul the project’s activities, he asked them to prepare a proposal. When he did not receive one, he figured it was largely because they were so busy with their other work, and he ended up putting together the proposal himself, in which he described the problem to be addressed, the expected outcomes, and the activities. In this proposal, he wrote, “As [the Bangladeshi NGO] moves to a situation where there are more funding agencies and more individual projects it is necessary to increase the capacity of staff to be able to respond to the demands.”

With these efforts, I noticed the work of the partners shifting. As the Canadian NGO began designing and funding a project that identified the Bangladeshi NGO's lack of capacity (to get funding), Paul found himself in a position of trying to support the work of his partner in a new way. This new role of helping build the capacity of Bangladeshi NGO staff accounted for the way Paul drew their attention to issues he considered important, including CIDA/DFATD's priority of food security. During one of his trips to Bangladesh, he spoke with some members of the Bangladeshi NGO, farmers in this case, about the challenges they were facing. After this discussion, he shared his thoughts on this experience with Bangladeshi staff:

And we talked as well about the meeting I had had with the farmers who said, "Well, actually for us land is not the crucial issue, it's control of our seeds and it's the marketing of our produce." And I said that's an interesting message that I hadn't heard before and I don't know to what extent that is common but everything I read from you guys, [the Bangladeshi NGO] says land is the issue. The struggle for land is what we're all about and here I'm hearing from people: "Actually, we've got a bit of land, but our family economy is screwed because of this mess." So I don't know. I mean I don't pretend to be a big expert coming in with any comprehensive view of [the Bangladeshi NGO's] program and saying, "Ok, I've done this big evaluation study, and this is where you should focus your efforts" or something like that, but I try to make it as useful as possible to them and to us.

Paul spoke of his interest in seeds and marketing produce as a personal one, but his interest was also related to CIDA/DFATD's priorities and his efforts to get further funding. He saw these issues connected to building the Bangladeshi NGO's capacity to describe its work in a way that aligned with CIDA/DFATD's priority of food security. As he explained, "I was also trying to talk to them about this food security focus program. And say, 'this is a way of describing your work, it's not a matter of changing what you're doing but you do food security related work now.'"

In discussing a proposal for funding a food security project, Paul's intention was to secure further funding to support the work of the NGOs; however, his learning about the Bangladeshi NGO's work to describe it in ways that met CIDA/DFATD's priorities was displaced by his efforts to help the Bangladeshi NGO learn to describe its work in this required way. From here, his role of



supporting the Bangladeshi NGO's capacity building to secure funding also enabled him to express suggestions about the issues his partner should work on. We see the way their work became organized supports a form of partnership that neither NGO wanted. This is reflected in the following statement from Paul: "I wouldn't couch [what I'm saying] in terms of recommendations because I don't want to be a funder saying, 'Do this.' That's not what we're trying to do but it is observations."

As I learned about the new capacity-building activities the Canadian NGO was initiating for the Bangladeshi NGO, I found deep connections between the concept of capacity building and the discourse on North-South NGO partnerships. I first noticed traces of the discourse in the Canadian NGO's "logic model," which described one of two activities it did with partners as capacity building in organizational development, programme development, and policy analysis.<sup>7</sup> Paul found this description misleading. As he explained,

We have described a lot of our programme to CIDA as we build the capacity of fellow organizations. We have a two-way relationship. They help us, we help them and depending on the relationship, we may do capacity building with them, or they will very often do capacity building with the beneficiaries they work with. Clearly that's most of what [the Bangladeshi NGO] is doing. How do we build the capacity of [the Bangladeshi NGO]? Well, we don't have a programme where we say, we go over and do a training workshop for [them] and it's a bit presumptuous on our part I would say.

While it didn't align with Paul's understanding of his partnership with the Bangladeshi NGO, the ideas his NGO's staff were relying on to provide this description of their North-South partnerships were provided through clear means. This description of the Canadian NGO's work as building the capacity of its Bangladeshi partner appealed to the concept of partnership found in other texts, including the Voluntary Sector Program's guidelines and the Partnerships with Canadians Branch programs more broadly.

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7 As a results-based management "tool" that was required for all Voluntary Sector Program-funded projects, the logic model is a linear method of capturing causal relationships among inputs (financial, human, material, and information resources), activities (actions taken that mobilize the inputs), outputs (products of the activities), and outcomes or results (CIDA 2008).

According to the guidelines, a Voluntary Sector Program–funded project “is a long-term strategic partnership between a Canadian not-for-profit organization or consortium and one or more developing-country organizations” (CIDA 2010, 2). The guidelines state, “Past aid programming often failed because it focused on resource transfers and did not provide enough support for local capacity development efforts to sustain these investments once donor countries had withdrawn support” (9). To build sustainability, then, the first objective of the Voluntary Sector Program was to strengthen the capacities of developing-country organizations, and Canadian applicants were told, “Your program proposal should clearly articulate the capacity-development needs of your partner organizations and how you propose to address those needs” (9). This meant demonstrating Canadian “value-add” beyond financial support (2). Benefit to Canadian NGOs because of their partnerships was not required. In fact, to the contrary, the program guidelines explicitly note the following: “The Canadian applicant(s) is not a beneficiary” (8). These guidelines clearly contradicted the NGOs’ commitment to equality and mutuality in their partnership.

The role of Canadian NGOs to respond to southern NGOs’ lack of capacity through their partnerships that is normalized through the Voluntary Sector Program is also found in the discourse of the branch offering this program. CIDA/DFATD’s Partnerships with Canadians Branch asserts that Canadian NGOs possess specific values beneficial to development efforts, stating on its website, “Working in partnership means that efforts to reduce poverty will have positive outcomes and reflect Canadian values of compassion and caring” (DFATD 2013). Lavergne and Wood (2008, 7), former CIDA staff, identify additional Canadian values: “To these financial contributions [of Canadian civil society organizations] can be added contributions of voluntary time and expertise, and the dedication and commitment that Canadians bring to the task. . . . They also reinforce the expression of Canadian values internationally such as the importance of democracy, human rights, justice, and pluralism.” Thus Lavergne and Wood suggest Canadian NGOs, in their many shapes and forms, are categorically equipped with the capacity to positively influence development as they work with southern partners, largely due to the “Canadian values” they hold. There is no shortage of places to question this line of reasoning (for one, Indigenous peoples might disagree with the characterization of Canadian values as being compassionate and caring); however, my concern here is that the discursive recognition of North-South

NGO partnerships benefiting from Canadian NGOs' expertise, initiative, and values implies that southern NGOs lack the capacity, not simply the resources, to effectively do development. Capacity building by northern NGOs is framed as the solution, falling in line with Crewe and Harrison's (1998, 76) finding that "the aid industry continues to rest on the assumption of inadequacy on the part of the institutional recipients in 'poorer' countries."

In the context of NGO professionalism, people are actively and strategically participating in capacity-building discourses. Discourse, in this sense, is a social relation, connecting how Canadian and Bangladeshi NGO workers interact with one another and with farmers in rural Bangladesh and ensuring that Canadian state priorities are met through these coordinated complexes of ostensibly non-governmental activity. While the two NGOs in my study held egalitarian beliefs and sought to empower rural Bangladeshis from poor communities to gain more control over their lives and livelihoods, I found their practices were being organized into ruling relations in which northern capacity and southern incapacity are reinforced. Ultimately, such a construction of the South as lacking capacities that the North can provide sustains traditional power relations across these regions.

## Conclusion

I have described how, through efforts to strengthen the sustainability of their work and their partnership, the Canadian and Bangladeshi social justice NGOs I studied were hooked into the ruling discourse of capacity building. The Canadian NGO's capacity-building efforts to strengthen its institutional "sustainability" and that of its Bangladeshi partner were a response to CIDA/DFATD's changing partnership funding policies and mechanisms. These changes, including unpredictable and decreasing funding opportunities, have posed significant challenges to Canadian civil society organizations and have been found to impact the effectiveness of both donors and recipients (CCIC 2014, 36). Given these detrimental impacts, CIDA/DFATD's changes to its partnership funding opportunities are particularly troubling. These policy changes were part of a larger shift in the agency, in which support for civil society organizations was being replaced with an increased commitment by the Canadian government to partnering with the private sector. These new partnerships, involving Canadian private sector investors, most notably from the extractive sector, were one piece of CIDA/DFATD's aim to "broaden and

deepen its engagement with the private sector in order to achieve sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty in developing countries” (CIDA 2013). Through a commitment to “achieving *private sector-led* sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction” (CIDA 2013; emphasis mine), the Canadian government was turning away from any responsibility to promote initiatives that ensure local communities benefit from economic growth, and as development researchers Douglas and Kindornay (2013, 13) point out, this shift “risks turning development projects into appendages of private sector investments, whether by the extractive sector or companies working in other areas.” In placing development in the hands of the private sector, the strategy represents a more direct form of what Kamat (2004) calls “the privatization of public interest.”

For Canadian NGOs and their southern partners, CIDA/DFTAD’s new strategy is a threat to the sustainability of their development assistance work. In undertaking various types of capacity-building activities, the NGOs in my study are responding to this threat. My study contributes to research critical of the role of capacity building in North-South partnerships (Fowler 1998; Lewis 1998) by revealing how the discourse of capacity building operates in practice. In outlining the institutional processes that allow for it to take place, I have demonstrated how CIDA/DFTAD’s partnership programming provides the institutional discourse for advancing a ruling development agenda. I have explicated how the NGOs I studied are caught up in these processes as they take on specific roles, supported by ideas that originate outside their partnership and that emphasize northern expertise and southern incapacity. These roles conflict with the NGO staff’s experiential knowledge of how best to engage in partnership with one another to accomplish their social justice aims of equality and mutuality, as well as challenge the Bangladeshi NGO staff’s capacity to use their local experiential knowledge and that of their members to guide their work. The result is that development assistance turns away from the knowledge and experience of local communities, suggesting, as Arturo Escobar (1995, 44) does, that “the most important exclusion . . . was and continues to be what development was supposed to be all about: people.”

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## 7 Mandatory HIV Screening Policy and Everyday Life

### A Look Inside the Canadian Immigration Medical Examination

Laura Bisailon

*Story and science are interrelated, interactive, and ultimately constitute each other. . . . The natural world and the cultural worlds share the burden of creating disease realities.<sup>1</sup>*

*I had grasped well that there are situations in life where our body is our entire self and our fate. I was in my body and nothing else. . . . My body and nothing else. . . . My body . . . was my calamity. My body . . . was my physical and metaphysical dignity.<sup>2</sup>*

In this chapter, I report findings from research using institutional ethnography (IE) that illuminate the practices associated with the mandatory HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) screening of people who are refugee and immigrant applicants to Canada. I focus on interactions between immigrant and refugee applicants who live with HIV and federal government–appointed immigration doctors during the official immigration medical examination.

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1 Goldstein (2004, xiii).

2 Jean Améry in Langer (1991, 89).

What are the everyday activities of persons living with HIV? What happens during the medical examination? How are the visits socially organized, and what happens there?

I advance two arguments. First, there is relevance and practical value in investigating public policy from within people's concerns and the material circumstances of their everyday lives. Such empirical accounts circumvent speculative, abstract, and ideological knowledge and understandings about the side effects of policy. Second, the mandatory HIV testing policy and the medical, legal, and bureaucratic practices associated with it give rise to serious and significant challenges in the lives of HIV-positive immigrant and refugee applicants, and these must be understood as socially produced and set within the broader socio-political contexts in which they occur. Until my research on HIV-related practices in the Canadian immigration medical program, what exactly was happening to people during the medical examination had not been the focus of sustained ethnographic inquiry—in part, I argue, because whatever practices go on there are taken for granted as being among the activities that “just must happen” to people who hope to settle and stay in Canada permanently.<sup>3</sup>

After reading this chapter, the reader will be able to see and appreciate the considerable effort and time-consuming work that people do during their immigration application process. Analysis of the social organization of the medical examination within the broader process of immigrating when one lives with HIV reveals the distinctively prejudicial treatment of people with HIV within the Canadian immigration system.

## Context of Mandatory HIV Screening of Immigrants

Since 2002, Canada has required HIV testing of all persons aged fifteen years and above who request Canadian permanent resident status (such as immigrant and refugee persons) and temporary resident status (such as migrant

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3 For this chapter, I was awarded the 2011 George W. Smith Outstanding Graduate Student Paper Award by the Institutional Ethnography Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Later that year, this piece appeared, titled as here, in *Aporia: The Nursing Journal* 3(4): 5–14. As I prepared this chapter for this volume, since time had passed since its initial publication, I updated its supporting empirical data and made editorial adjustments.



workers, students, and long-term visitors from certain countries), with some exceptions. The federal immigration department manages the testing program and contracts physicians to practice what I named “immigration medicine,” which involves arranging for HIV testing and preparing a medical file (Bisaillon 2013, e45). There are an estimated 2,900 immigration doctors and radiologists worldwide carrying out medical examinations and interpreting chest X-rays as state contractors; approximately 925,000 examinations were conducted in 2019 (CIC 2021). Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s Global Case Management System reveals the pattern of steadily increasing numbers of yearly immigration medical examinations over time (Imrie 2019). Tuberculosis, syphilis, and HIV are the three health conditions for which mandatory screening is required (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network 2009; CIC 2002).

The rationale for Canada’s mandatory HIV testing policy is not clearly articulated, and it remains unclear why the HIV test was singled out as the only addition to the medical examination in recent history. Before 2002, there was no blanket immigration screening for HIV. I have previously addressed key human rights consequences of the mandatory HIV screening policy. I argued that there are sound options for responding to human rights challenges the policy posed and formulated actionable recommendations for change (Bisaillon 2010). As expressed by Dvora Yanow (2000, v), “The promise and implications of a policy are not transparent and easily evident in its text. . . . The ‘architecture of meaning’ of a policy is revealed by the systematic investigation of policy categories and labels, metaphors and narratives, programs, and institutional places.” As with all public policy, Canada’s mandatory HIV testing policy is neither value neutral nor without intended effect.

The number of HIV-positive applicants admitted to Canada is very small relative to the population increase through immigration and the number of people living with HIV who live in Canada. Between 2002 and 2010, for example, 4,374 persons were reported to have tested HIV positive during their immigration medical examination. In 2019, immigration department medical officers found 1,400 people inadmissible on health grounds based on determination of the anticipated future costs to public health systems of caring for such people (personal communication with a senior official from the immigration department’s Medical Services Branch, 2021, based on data sourced from Government of Canada 2024). However, most individuals with HIV who remain in Canada are those who, by law, cannot be excluded from

doing so based on their medical status. These are persons who are refugees and those who immigrate as family members.

## Discovery of a Disturbing Disjuncture

An article appearing in the *International Journal of STD and AIDS* four years after the HIV testing policy came into effect reported on the functioning of the screening program in its first two years (Zencovich et al. 2006). The authors wrote that all refugee and immigrant persons who tested HIV positive through Canadian immigration medical screening consented to testing; received pre- and post-HIV test counselling; and, on positive diagnosis, received referrals to specialty facilities. From my career providing care and services for people with HIV, I knew that these claims were inconsistent with the material circumstances of the lives of people who test HIV positive through immigration screening; the story had to be nuanced, at best; and, furthermore, applicants to Canada have no choice *but* to be screened for HIV, so there is no informed consent process. Refugee and immigrant persons living with HIV and health providers among whom I worked—notably nurses, social workers, and community lawyers working pro bono with immigrants with HIV—told a different story about what the immigration process was like for people with HIV (Bisaillon 2010, 2014, 2022; Duchesneau 2004).

The dissonance between official and experiential knowledge was problematic, not least because we know that ideological accounts shape what and how people know about HIV and other diseases that are not necessarily readable on a person's social skin (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Treichler 1999; Young 1993; Walby 1996). Disjunctures stemming from competing forms of knowledge have been starting places for valuable anthropological scholarship focused on creating knowledge rooted in the bodily experience of people living with HIV and other serious diseases of inequality and poverty who are socially marginalized (Biehl 2005; Biehl and Moran-Thomas 2009; Farmer and Kleinman 1998; Nguyen and Peschard 2003; Scheper Hughes 1992). Academic reports such as those noted above were divorced from people's embodied experience with immigration HIV screening; they did not reflect what was happening in people's lives. Left unchallenged, these became the accepted representations or evidence. This disjuncture was the analytic entry point for the longer-term research project in which this chapter is set: work structured to uncover and disturb knowledge embedded in the official explanations of Canada's

mandatory HIV screening of applicants, the explicit goals of which were to establish a “scientific basis for the political strategy of grass-roots community organizing” and generate knowledge in the interests of and for immigrant and refugee people living with HIV in (or who would like to live in) Canada (G. Smith 1990, 629).<sup>4</sup>

## An Approach to the Social

The analyses in this chapter emerge from an empirical study that I conducted using IE as a method of sociological inquiry (D. Smith 1990, 2006; D. Smith and Griffith 2022; see also Campbell and Manicom 1995; Luken and Vaughn 2023). I honed my abilities as an ethnographer by studying the way things were done in projects with similar ontological and epistemological commitments such as activist ethnography (Mykhalovskiy and Namaste 2019; Frampton et al. 2006; G. Smith 1990; Bresalier et al. 2002) and also the ways that medical anthropologists worked (Barrett 1996; Fassin 2005; Scheper-Hughes 1995). The approach to the social that I employ here takes organizational processes and relations of power as problematic (and fascinating) objects of study. My project joins with other institutional and political activist ethnographies that problematize organizational processes through the unmasking by thick and rich description of how ruling relations operate to produce “formal, empirically based scholarly” explications of the happenings of everyday life as understood to be relational and socially produced (Mykhalovskiy and McCoy 2002, 20). As a feminist scholar who has been deeply influenced by Dorothy Smith’s body of contributions to the social organization of knowledge and her early articulation of feminist sociology within this trajectory, I anchored my work in the standpoint of people living with HIV (D. Smith 1977, 1992). My analyses are storied and move outward from the vantage point of a woman I have called Patience, though this is not her real name, who, at the time we met, was applying for state protection as a refugee claimant from within Canada and who found out she was HIV positive in the medical examination.

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4 I published my long-term ethnography as *Screening Out: HIV Testing and the Canadian Immigration Experience* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2022). Based on this research, I made the film *The Unmaking of Medical Inadmissibility* (Toronto: Inadmissibles Art Collective, 2020), <https://vimeo.com/448054053>.

Sociologist George Smith called IE a “new paradigm for sociology” because it offers both a method and a theorized way of seeing and thinking about the world that produces useable, contextualized knowledge from people’s sensual experiences with the world (1990, 630–31). In this way, I focused close and careful ethnographic attention on understanding the social organization of people’s everyday activities to be able to explicate what happens there so that awareness could be brought and changes introduced where problems were detected (Carroll 2006). Michael Orsini and Francesca Scala (2006, 115) write, “Recognition or validation of experiential knowledge can facilitate a critique of prevailing institutional norms that may be contributing to the marginalization of groups or perspectives.” For example, attention to people’s day-to-day practices led psychiatrist and anthropologist Robert Barrett (1996) to generate understandings of how the discursively and institutionally organized work practices of clinical staff (of which he was one) in an Australian psychiatric facility intersect to shape how people with schizophrenia are understood, with consequences for the health of such people. Timothy Diamond’s (1992) incisive (and deeply unsettling in the finest sense of the term) observations from his social location as a sociologist working covertly and nursing home assistant in the United States reveal insights into how the lives of staff and residents are governed by extra-local or external public and private sector interests.

## **Ethnographic Fieldwork**

I gathered data during two phases of fieldwork and analyzed various documents and texts. The first period of fieldwork was in 2009 and 2010. I did observational work and also interviews and focus groups with thirty-three persons who were mainly living in Montréal and Toronto. I recruited people through AIDS service organizations, HIV clinics, and word of mouth.

Twenty-nine people I talked with were HIV positive, and four persons were HIV negative. I carried out interviews in English and French, with additional sessions done through interpretation in Amharic, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Mongolian. Those I spoke to hailed from twenty-four countries, and all had arrived in Canada since the mandatory HIV testing policy was introduced. Most people were refugee applicants at various stages in their immigration application process. My talk with people was conceptually organized by what I came to call their “immigration application work” (Bisaillon 2020, 2022).

In a second phase of fieldwork, I gathered data in twenty-eight bilingual interviews in Toronto, Montréal, Ottawa, and Gatineau from 2010 to 2011. Interviewees included people in occupational roles identified by people with HIV as important to their immigration application process. These included lawyers, immigration doctors, HIV physicians, social workers, nurses, AIDS service organization caseworkers, shelter and Public Health personnel, Canadian Border Services Agency employees, and government advisors and officials. I recruited people directly. In both phases, my priority was on attracting people who would offer a broad selection of personal and professional experiences with processes associated with the mandatory HIV testing policy and immigration medical examination.

During both phases of fieldwork, I reviewed official documents, people's own immigration-related paperwork, legislation, forms, websites, and other publicly available texts such as Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (S.C. 2001, c. 27) and Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (SOR/2002-227); Canada's mandatory HIV testing policy (CIC 2002); *Handbook for Designated Medical Practitioners* (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada 2009 [also editions from 1992, 2003]; hereafter referred to as *Handbook*); and the "Personal Identification Form" (changed to the "Basis of Claim Form" in 2012) that people who are applying as refugees fill out. For this study, I received ethics approvals and respected standards in Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement on research practice.

## **Findings: Everyday Work and Textual Practices**

That people with HIV who apply for Canadian permanent residency do a lot of work to immigrate to Canada is a gross understatement. The root of this is the firm desire to become a Canadian citizen, which they see as a privilege and an opportunity. Applicants acquiesce to all that is required of them with the idea of becoming Canadians, including submitting to whatever health screening is asked of them. There is, however, a disjuncture: notions of privilege are not part of the everyday experience of people I met with. That experience is, rather, a matter of waiting (and waiting some more), wondering, hoping, and coping with their HIV diagnosis. What this looks and feels like is broached below. My descriptions and analyses emerge from within the activities stemming from the Canadian immigration medical examination,

and I centre these within the experiences of Patience. She and I first met at a women's sexual health organization where I was working at the time.

### **“Urgent: Contact the Doctor Immediately”**

Patience, a doctor in her country, described her earliest days in Canada to me, during which she lived in a shelter for several months. She said that a memorable feature about the place was that it was while she lived there that she learned that she was living with HIV.

At the Canadian border, Patience was instructed to see a government-appointed immigration doctor. She left the border with an information package, which included a list of state-affiliated doctors. Promptly, Patience reported to one of the doctors on this list, choosing the one closest to the shelter. He did a brief examination of her body, and his nurse drew her blood. The doctor told her that if there were problems, someone from his office would contact her.

Ten days later, a note bearing her name and a handwritten inscription appeared on the communal bulletin board of the shelter. It read “*PATIENCE. URGENT : Contacter le Médecin tout de suite.*” She quickly removed the note. Since arriving in the shelter, Patience learned that the general chatter among residents, all people recently arrived in Canada from developing world societies, was that if a person received a call back from the immigration doctor's office, this signalled HIV. Patience's heart sank. The announcement made her feel fearful and bare.

Patience talked to me about her second visit to the doctor. She was distressed by the brevity of the encounter—how little she and he spoke after her diagnosis. Patience had a good deal of expectation and knowledge about what the visit could have involved given that she, too, was a medical doctor. She walked away from the medical office with a slip of paper with the name and address of a clinic treating people living with HIV. Patience was told to report to that hospital, and later that day, she took the bus there.

### **“Of Course They Took Blood for HIV”**

The immigration medical examination is one of the first steps that people applying for permanent residency are asked to do. People I met with place considerable importance on this examination in part because they come to realize that the Canadian government likewise places a lot of importance

on it. Applicants want to “pass” the medical examination and be screened forward through the immigration process. Patience told me about how she came to know about the medical examination and what she did to prepare for it, saying,

At the YMCA [shelter], they gave us an information package that contained the steps we had to go through to complete steps to immigrate—for example, go to the medical visit, take the immigration course, go to the refugee-receiving centre, and fill out the Personal Information Form. With that piece of paper, you check off the list. In that way, you know what you must do, and you know what you have done. You know how much time you must spend on each activity.

Describing her first visit to the immigration doctor, Patience said,

You just had to fill in the normal paperwork, answering such questions as, “Has anyone in your family had HIV or AIDS? Have you ever had HIV?” At that time, of course, I knew [assumed] I was clean. Negative.

I was very sure of myself because I had had my last HIV test one year prior to that. I knew [thought] I wasn’t sick. I did the HIV test and lots of other medical tests, including X-rays. Of course, they took blood for HIV. Immigration did not tell me they were doing an HIV test.

As we see here, Patience had not been told, in the context of the immigration process, that she was being tested for HIV. When I asked an immigration doctor about this, he said,

You are supposed to advise patients, “We are doing these tests, and we are doing an HIV screen.” You do a bit of a screen to see if that is a concern beforehand—so that they are aware of why we are testing. If it is [HIV] positive, we will call them in. There is supposed to be pre- and post-test counselling [for HIV]. I suppose you could call it a pre-test “notification.”

The immigration doctor’s statement brings attention to several intriguing points. The parameters for what this doctoring function “is supposed to” consist of and the institutional logic for how this work is carried out are outlined in the official *Handbook* and periodic operational updates, which are issued by the immigration department. Physicians can run diagnostic

tests for conditions above and beyond the obligatory trio of HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis, but these are not part of the routine tests, as the immigration doctor reveals.

My review of the forms and instructions in the 2009 *Handbook* shows that the Canadian government places importance on the delivery of “pre- and post-test counselling,” since specific forms and instructions were additions from the previous edition of the *Handbook*. Through these publications, we can read that the cost doctors can invoice the immigration department for delivering post-test counselling is more than the cost of the medical examination itself.

In the immigration doctor’s statement above, he explains that the “notification” is how people may be advised that HIV antibodies will be searched for in their blood sample. The applicant does not give consent to an HIV test because the person has no choice *but* to be tested. Of relevant note here is that the mandatory HIV testing of Canadian permanent residents and citizens is unlawful except under very rare circumstances (Klein 2001). Thus, a practice that Canadians would only very exceptionally experience is done routinely to prospective immigrants.

### “I Began Asking Questions of Him, and He Became Friendlier”

In response to the note tacked on her shelter’s bulletin board, Patience called the doctor’s office as she was asked. A nurse answered, who said, “There is something wrong with your medicals. We need to see you again.” Patience pressed to know more. “When you come here, it is quite confidential; we will let you know,” the nurse replied. This is the moment when the trajectory of an applicant living with HIV departs sharply from that of an applicant who is HIV negative.

A week went by, experienced anxiously for Patience, before she went back to see the immigration physician for a second visit. “I sat there with the doctor,” she said. “We were the only ones in the room. He said, ‘I have some bad news for you. Did you know that you were HIV positive?’” She did not. Her mind raced and she wondered, “What will the doctor do with the results? Who will know? Will it be possible for me to stay in Canada? Where will he send the record of my HIV-positive diagnosis?”

Patience did not say a word. She sat still and focused on not making a sound. This absence of talk is analytically interesting for how it draws our



attention to strategies that people I spoke with practice decidedly: they set forth to engage with physicians on their terms. People's dialogical practices, as they sit and do the mental work of figuring out how they might shape the medical visit in particular ways, take several forms, including talking when prompted, asking few questions, offering deliberate silence, and responding to questions with short answers. One person told me about how he used both deliberative talk and silence moments after being told that he was HIV positive:

The first question was, "Do you have sex with men?" [The immigration doctor] asked me if I was having sex with men in Canada. I said [to myself], "Oh my God! He is inquiring to see if I am spreading this in Canada." When he asked me the question about my behaviour, whether I have sex with men, his indirect manner of coming to the point of me being HIV positive, I knew, without a doubt, that I was HIV positive. After that, I began asking questions of him, and he became friendlier. I began asking him about things in Canada. I said to him, "So, what next?"

When I discussed this issue of people's silent response to their diagnosis, immigration doctors I met talked to me about being puzzled. They arrive at asking themselves whether the person sitting in front of them already knew their HIV status. "There is a good number [of people] who are diagnosed at the moment of immigration. Sometimes I wonder if they knew before and just do not say so at their entrance to Canada," said an immigration doctor. However, people's directed talk and deliberative silence are meaningful and not mysterious when we see the absence of talk as shaped by the ruling relations organizing the immigration medical visit, including the interests tied up in the doctors' work and the stakes and lived implications for people with HIV of receiving a problematic bill of health.

### **"We Are the Guys in the Trenches"**

In conversation and after conversation with the immigration doctors I met, they emphasize that they are not decision-makers. "I am a fact finder—gathering information, giving it to a higher level that has a protocol to make a decision. We are the guys in the trenches," said one physician. Nevertheless, the immigration doctors' function must be unpacked: in this role, such contract physicians are critical actors in the immigration system and indeed the lives

of people who apply to reside in Canada permanently. Doctors are charged with detecting specific blood and lung conditions, and perhaps other maladies at their discretion, and reporting these in a medical file to the government. On receiving doctors' reports, medical officers employed within the immigration department bureaucracy proceed to anticipate how much the applicant persons are forecasted to cost public health care and services. Thus, the way immigration doctoring is organized institutionally is entirely focused on the discovery and disclosure of medical conditions that will render applicants inadmissible to immigrate to Canada.

One doctor said the following to me: "My work is with immigration—with Ottawa, the federal government, principally." Applicants living with HIV do not initially realize that the immigration doctors drawing their blood are working in state interests rather than their subjective interests. The relationship between themselves and immigration doctors is not a therapeutic one in this institutional instance. The moment that some people with HIV told me they realized the reality of the doctors' job purpose was when they were told of their HIV status. At this point, they may receive a referral to an HIV specialist, with whom they are required by the immigration department to follow up. People told me that they felt confused, conflicted, and tense during the immigration medical examination process, which commonly consists of a first and repeat visit to the same doctor. Here again, that people feel anxious and ill at ease in these situations is not bewildering when we understand such feelings as responses to the social organization of the immigration doctors' work within relations of medical- and health-based exclusion.

Immigration doctors in Montréal and Toronto have developed referral systems and are professionally well connected to services and facilities that specialize in care for people living with HIV. When a person tests positive, doctors generally provide the person with the name and address of an HIV clinic or specialized unit within a hospital. In an everyday way, then, post-test care in Canada is shifted to specialist doctors and to people working within the HIV and sexual health milieus. In conversation with a lawyer whose legal aid practice is almost entirely devoted to working with people with HIV who are refugee claimants and immigrants, he told me about writing a letter to the immigration department asking for direct guidance about where and with whom the responsibility for delivering HIV test counselling before and after a diagnosis lies. He was concerned about this because his clients generally

did not receive this care from the immigration doctor. Some months later, he received a response (Binette 2009), which read,

Based on these provisions [on post-test counselling in the 2003 *Handbook*], it is clearly the DMP's [designated medical practitioner's] duty to provide HIV post-test counselling to all HIV positive applicants and to sign the Post-Test Counselling form . . . the form should be signed by the immigration doctor. . . . We will also create a reminder to all immigration doctors on our website on this subject.

As I came to learn, immigration doctors' communication with the immigration department is irregular and infrequent. "We have a protocol. If you do your work, you will not hear from [the immigration department]. I have very limited communication with CIC [Citizenship and Immigration Canada]. We do our job, and that is it," said one doctor. The purposefulness and effectiveness of transmitting the message above to doctors via the department's website is thus questionable.

### **"I Eased His Job, or Maybe I Made It More Difficult"**

Patience talked to me about her second visit to the immigration doctor and what happened after she found out that she was living with HIV:

He gave me a piece of paper that I had to sign that stated that I acknowledged that I was tested HIV positive, that I am aware that I am HIV positive, and that I had been educated about the means of transmission. I had not been educated through this doctor. Probably he was going to give me that talk. I read through his paper and agreed with everything it said. It said, "You cannot donate blood, protect yourself when engaging in sex, cannot give organs." That was the attempt at counselling. I eased his job, or maybe I made it more difficult

Patience's statement points to an interface between embodied experience and institutional processes when a "piece of paper" enters her experience. In outlining details of the HIV testing program prior to its implementation in 2002, the then minister of immigration, Elinor Caplan, stated that counselling for HIV would be a part of the service delivered to applicants, as per Canadian and international guidelines at the time (Klein 2001). The "Acknowledgement of HIV Post-test Counselling" form to which Patience referred is a standardized, one-page government document bearing a four-line text written in the

first person. In signing, the person agrees to have received counselling “on several topics” related to the “HIV-positive condition.”

When someone receives this acknowledgement form, they have just received a diagnosis of HIV. Whether or not this is a first diagnosis (perhaps the person has tested HIV positive in other circumstances), all applicants living with HIV describe the diagnosis as instilling fear, loss, and worry—concerns about bodily survival. Someone shared his candid thoughts with me about being diagnosed through the immigration screening process: “I kind of expected the results. I think that every gay man expects, or is ready, or assumes you can get it. It was still really, *really* hard. It is so shocking.” About this acknowledgement form, a doctor I spoke with said,

Immigration Canada asks us to fill out a form called “Acknowledgement of HIV Post-test Counselling” form. This is in the *Handbook*. This is to acknowledge that people have been counselled. I sign, and the client also has to sign. It is mandatory for us to do counselling. It is mandatory to submit this signed form to Immigration when we submit the [medical] file; the client acknowledges having received counselling.

However, there is a sharp and stark contradiction between the embodied accounts of people with HIV with this acknowledgement form and how immigration doctors use it, what the government does with it, and what the latter claims happens in relation to it. The form does not appear to be routinely integrated into what doctors do with applicants living with HIV; few of the latter reported knowing about or putting their signature to this document. At the same time, the government frames the form as an important administrative and accountability tool. In the 2009 *Handbook*, this form was included “to at least have a control record that they were actually receiving post-counselling,” said a government advisor from the immigration department’s Medical Services Branch with whom I discussed this issue. As part of their review work associated with medical files of HIV-positive applicants, immigration department medical officers are said to ensure that this acknowledgement form is included in the doctor’s submission. Regrettably, I cannot confirm this because I did not have sustained access to the federal immigration department work site.

What I heard from people with HIV revealed to me that immigration doctors do not do the work of educating and counselling very well. For applicants

to Canada, the immigration doctor is the first face that they associate with Canadian health care and service delivery. Their two visits to see the doctor are at odds with what people expect from a medical examination by a Canadian or by a person affiliated with the Canadian government. People are disappointed that they are not cared for in certain ways and surprised that the medical visits are short, that dialogue is limited, and that messages emphasize population-level health issues rather than concerns related to their personal well-being. On the immigration department's website, applicants locate a doctor's name, contact details, and the languages the person speaks—choosing a doctor who speaks either their mother tongue or a language they speak well and whose office is close to where they live. A native Spanish speaker spoke to me about the reasons he chose the doctor he did:

The immigration office gave me a paper for the medical exam. They gave me a list of the number[s] for the doctors. The list explains about who's the doctor, what language he speaks. One doctor said, "Spanish and Portuguese," so I chose this doctor. When I went to the doctor, he didn't speak Spanish. He spoke Portuguese. I said, "What happened?" and he tells me, "It's the same language." But it was not the same. I didn't understand what he was doing. He explained everything, but it was in Portuguese. Maybe I understood 40 percent, but it was not enough.

### **"If You Are Starting Off, It Is Likely an Important Tool"**

While the immigration department has researched, updated, and produced an official handbook and availed doctors of successive editions of the latter over time, doctors reported to me that they did not make use of this particular guidebook in their immigration medicine work. Rather, what they do is activate their common-sense working knowledge in dealing with people they diagnose with HIV. About this *Handbook*, a doctor I talked with said, "If you are starting off, it is likely an important tool. It encompasses everything [an immigration doctor] should know about his job. Because I have been doing this for so long, there is not much that is enlightening."

Within this doctor's statement, another feature shaping the immigration medical visit comes to light: the physician's formal education and current knowledge about HIV. Immigration doctors based in Canada are most often general practitioners, and they generally have had four years of medical

training and three years of residency. Their training may or may not have equipped them with the skills of caring for people diagnosed with HIV. An HIV specialist I interviewed commented that his immigration doctor colleagues were generally around or above retirement age, a point that directs attention to the timeline of the epidemic that manifested in bodies during the mid- to late 1980s in North America; HIV education would not have been part of the formal medical education of Canadian immigration doctors of a certain age. It would be unreasonable for me to suggest that immigration doctors, who are general practitioners, should be specialists in providing care for those with HIV. However, since Canada, for the time being, *oblige*s applicants to submit to HIV testing, I contend that it is definitely reasonable to expect that physicians should communicate information about HIV and AIDS and should explore positive results both *prior to* testing and *after* positive results are disclosed.

## Conclusion

Centring my analysis in what I learned from interactions with Patience and other applicants for Canadian permanent residency living with HIV, and then with professional practitioners and bureaucrats whose work (and bank accounts) tethers them to the immigration medical program, through this chapter, I have explored the social organization of routine processes associated with Canada's mandatory HIV testing policy and scratched beneath the surface of official interpretations of what goes on through the medical examination for people with HIV. The *Handbook* is a text in which the immigration department references its "standards" that are said to govern the medical examination and doctoring practices (CIC 2010, 6). In a presentation to the Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration, "providing appropriate counselling" was listed as one of the "five duties" of immigration doctors (CIC 2010, 6). Public education and the public availability of the *Handbook* promote the notion, which turns out to be an ideological one, that certain professional practices are happening during the medical examination—despite empirical reports showing that counselling, for example, is an exception rather than a rule. The idea that immigration doctors are informed about counselling conventions is also reinforced through this work. As I have demonstrated, however, this is a staunchly ideological position, which supports the position that the state has at times cultivated about itself publicly: Canada as a

country that receives persons in need of protection because it is motivated by a long-standing “humanitarian tradition” that rewards “legitimate refugees” with a “safe haven” (CIC 2011).

The immigration medical examination as it currently functions is socially organized inside of state interests and outside of an applicant’s subjective interests. That there generally is no pre- and post-testing counselling after an HIV-positive diagnosis is not mysterious when the social relations embedded within the medical examination are investigated. I would like for these generally unknown features of the social organization of the Canadian immigration medical program and HIV testing within this program to be widely and broadly known to all people in Canada and to all people who would like to settle in Canada permanently. To persons working in medical, legal, and bureaucratic roles associated with upholding these practices, I would like for them to read this chapter and understand the social organization of their thinking and practices and the attendant implications for people living with HIV on whom or on behalf of whom they do what they do. I have shown how difficulties experienced by applicants are produced because of how things are organized institutionally through professional and bureaucratic work practices.

In reading this chapter, those working with or on behalf of immigrant and refugee applicants with HIV might take the analyses proffered as starting points for doing an institutional “audit” of the structural conditions organizing their work environments (Pence 2001, 226). In the interests of the people with or for whom we work, those inclined toward activism—such as my lawyer colleague who wrote a letter to the immigration department to get to the bottom of who was in charge of delivering care and service to applicants with HIV while querying why these services were not happening at all times everywhere—can, in opening their daily worlds to institutional ethnographic scrutiny, produce empirical evidence to support claims-making about the need for structural change at specific rather than general places. In making problems and lacunae visible through the challenging (and rewarding) effort of explaining how and where problems are organized in the practices of doctors, lawyers, and bureaucrats, I hope that those who oversee the immigration medical program and uphold HIV-related practices will hear the call and follow the evidence for how and where to change the immigration medical system so that harms carried out through it can, once and for all, be dispensed of.

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## Part 3

# Frontline Research and the Ethics of Engagement

This third section discusses the possibilities and limitations of institutional ethnography–infused advocacy. The authors whose work is featured here might be considered outsiders to activism, while some are trained professionals with experience working within large bureaucracies. The glue that binds them is their close consideration of how to build activist-professional partnerships to make it possible for the researcher-professional to do activist research.

Megan Welsh Carroll’s IE-infused advocacy project “Studying Out: Institutional Ethnographic Fieldwork as Post-incarceration Activism” plunges us into a web of ruling relations that formerly incarcerated women are drawn into during their post-incarceration work. In addition to showing how social scientists can do fieldwork as activism, she reveals how advocates might use fieldwork to pinpoint where institutional changes are warranted. In this way,

her research offers prison activist movements a chance to build fieldwork into their ongoing work.

Agnieszka Doll's "Double Ethics, Double Burden: Professionalism, Activism, and Institutional Ethnography" focuses on the possibilities and challenges of IE-infused advocacy research. She grapples with the complications arising when the activist is also a lawyer occupying the dual position of researcher-professional and advocate during fieldwork in a psychiatric hospital.

In the final chapter, "Objectivity Regimes: Challenges for Activist Research in the Academy," informed by political activist ethnography, Shannon Walsh explores how activists working in the academy respond to demands for so-called professional objectivity in academic research and to the possibility that assumptions about race, gender, and class privilege may find their way into studies if practitioners rely on academic methodology alone. Walsh raises important questions related to research and ethics, challenging the objectivity regime in academia that divides more than it unifies people in struggle.

## 8 Studying Out

### Institutional Ethnographic Fieldwork as Post-incarceration Activism

Megan Welsh Carroll

Although recent declines offer a glimmer of hope, the United States still incarcerates—by far—the largest number of people, as well as the largest percentage of its population, compared to all other countries (Walmsley 2013). A still young but rapidly growing field of research has informed “evidence-based” practices to reduce the likelihood that formerly incarcerated individuals will subsequently return to incarceration (MacKenzie 2000; Listwan, Cullen, and Latessa 2006; Turner and Petersilia 2012). Yet the process of re-entering society after a period of imprisonment remains fraught with social, economic, and institutional barriers (Kaufman and Welsh Carroll 2021) that prevent former prisoners from regaining full personhood—even if recidivism is avoided.

When released from carceral settings, formerly incarcerated people must engage in a wide range of work activities, most of which are unrecognized as such by the institutions that manage them. When considering prisoner re-entry through the lens of institutional ethnography’s “generous conception of work” (D. Smith 2005, 210), this labour involves accessing various services and resources, reconnecting with kin networks, and overcoming the stigma of having a criminal record to pursue education and employment opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The term *prisoner re-entry* has been contested if it has been part of the criminal justice lexicon. At its most general, *re-entry* denotes the process of being released from prison or jail. Much of the dissatisfaction with the term seems to stem from its imprecision. The “process” of re-entry is not singular in nature; as I show here, re-entering

In an era of government decentralization and chronic budget deficits, formerly incarcerated people often must navigate these multiple demands on their own, with very little guidance from the programs that claim to assist them.

In this chapter, I document my approach to conducting institutional ethnographic research on formerly incarcerated women's post-incarceration work in California, US. To fully understand the work that women do in navigating the multiple public service bureaucracies with which they frequently interact, I sought to study out from the women's standpoint to various institutional contexts.<sup>2</sup> I did this by accompanying women to their appointments and—with their permission—helping them advocate for themselves in applying for resources such as housing, public assistance benefits (welfare), mental health services, and substance abuse counselling. During this time, I also volunteered with a legal aid group working on the ground to challenge and change the welfare system to learn the intricacies of the work involved there. In doing so, I was able to trace the web of ruling relations into which formerly incarcerated people are drawn in their post-incarceration work. Through

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people must engage in difficult work to rebuild multiple aspects of their lives, and many—between 40 and 60 percent—return to prison within three years. Critiques of the term have focused on how it specifies a “problem at the level of individuals” (Bumiller 2013, 16), rather than a problem that is socially constructed and produced, and that it has been co-opted by for-profit institutions to establish a prisoner re-entry “industry” (Thompkins 2010; Wacquant 2010). For clarity, I use the term *prisoner re-entry* in reference to the broader institution—comprising disparate organizations with both state and non-state affiliations—as defined by Miller (2014). I use the more precise term *post-incarceration* as an adjective to specify the multiple forms of labour associated with the process of rebuilding one's life.

2 I use the phrase *studying out* as part homage, part challenge to Laura Nader's (1972) urging to anthropologists to forgo yet another study of the poor, marginalized, and powerless and instead to “study up” to the affluent and powerful. Nader includes institutions in this latter group and argues that social scientists have a responsibility to educate the citizens of democratic nations about the decision-makers and bureaucracies that greatly affect their lives but that may be largely invisible to the naked eye. Political activist ethnography certainly heeds this call. However, the hierarchy implied in Nader's term—clients are “down,” at the bottom, and institutions are “up”—is not necessarily compatible with institutional ethnographic inquiry, which seeks to understand how the work done in one location is affected by work done elsewhere. Thus, I seek to disrupt prevailing social arrangements that place some people at the top and others at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the first place.



reflexively accounting for my presence during fieldwork, I also discovered interlocking processes of racialization and class production that operate in and through the public institutions frequently accessed by formerly incarcerated people. My research process suggests a way in which such fieldwork can be built into the organizing of prison activist movements.

I first describe what I call the “prisoner re-entry conundrum”—how community-based agencies with an activist agenda use their limited resources to effect as much change as possible. I argue that this tends to leave a sizeable hole in the support that the women need as they carry out actual post-incarceration work, and I discuss how I sought to fill this hole for a brief time to envision what could be possible. I document how I entered my research with the women and how I approached reflexivity in this process. I then show what kind of data can be gathered in using this approach by sharing some early experiences in the welfare office with one of my key informants. My research process and the knowledge it produced suggest what sort of approaches prison activist organizations might adopt not only to better empower their clients but also to generate an understanding of institutional dysfunction that can then be used to advocate for change.

## The Prisoner Re-entry Conundrum

Critical scholars have quickly grown weary of the “prisoner re-entry industrial complex” (Speck 2010; Wacquant 2010; Beckett and Murakawa 2012), in which stakeholders who previously profited from the prison-industrial complex scramble to monetize services for people being released from prison. Such efforts are particularly insidious because they shift surveillance from a contained environment (prisons, which are often in remote locations) to halfway houses, sober living homes, and other community-based programs. I have argued elsewhere that this “government at a distance” (Miller and Rose 2008; Haney 2010) mode of surveillance that has infiltrated our homes and communities perpetuates a series of invisible punishments (Travis 2002) that extend the time and spaces into which crime-processed people continue to be marginalized (Welsh Carroll and Rajah 2014).<sup>3</sup>

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3 In *The Invisible Woman*, Belknap (2007) encourages feminist criminologists to avoid perpetuating the illusion of “justice” as is carried out by government institutions. As Potter (2006) points out, “*Justice* [original emphasis] implies that victims and

For people working on the ground to help formerly incarcerated people, the story is even more complex. In the United States, grassroots prison activist groups—policy think tanks, advocacy organizations, and social service providers—many of which are led by formerly incarcerated people, have grown rapidly in recent decades (Toney 2007). In the United States, concerns about mass incarceration are inextricably linked to slavery, a connection made visible by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* (2010). Yet the message of such advocacy programs that also provide social services is easily compromised. Programs such as the one where I began the research presented here often take on government contracts via community supervision agencies in which the program is paid money “per head” to house recently released people.<sup>4</sup> By accepting government funds, programs become—however reluctantly—complicit in the mass surveillance scheme.

I began my research by volunteering with New Beginnings,<sup>5</sup> a small community-based program that provides housing for women recently released from prison and jail and their children.<sup>6</sup> Despite its location in a large urban area of California, the program is one of only a handful in the region that provides these services specifically for women. New Beginnings’ founder and director is a woman who herself had cycled in and out of jail and prison for years before “getting clean” from drugs and opening her home to other women who were trying to do the same. Over time, she purchased three other homes in the area and rented office space nearby to serve as the program’s

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offenders are treated justly and equally within the ‘criminal justice system,’ however, this is not always true, particularly with African American women” (120–21n). Following this line of thinking, wherever possible, I use the term *crime-processing system* in lieu of the more conventional term *criminal justice* and refer to people who have contact with this system as *crime-processed*.

4 I use the term *community supervision* here in reference to parole and probation. In the United States, parole is generally understood to be the discretionary release from prison following a period of incarceration, while probation has traditionally been a punishment in lieu of incarceration.

5 To protect my research participants’ identities, their names, and the name of the program, I use pseudonyms throughout.

6 In the United States, individuals receiving sentences of more than a year typically serve their time in state prisons, which are often geographically far removed from where the individual lives; individuals serving sentences of less than a year typically do so in local, county- or city-level jails.

headquarters. The converted garage of one of the homes also functions as the office for a local chapter of a national activist coalition working to end mass incarceration. Through the coalition, New Beginnings offers training to its residents to become activists on issues of mass incarceration and prisoner re-entry. Such efforts are part of a large-scale movement to enlist formerly incarcerated people in activism against the overuse of incarceration as punishment, the conditions of prison confinement, and the “collateral consequences” of incarceration, such as restrictions preventing people with criminal records from voting, obtaining employment and permanent housing, and receiving public assistance (Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Mauer and McCalmont 2013; Toney 2007). The Ban the Box Campaign, which advocates fair hiring practices for people with criminal records, is a recent example of such efforts on a national scale (Ban the Box Campaign, n.d.).

In other ways, New Beginnings is unable to fully meet its activist goals. I define activism as the empowerment of marginalized individuals to bring about change not just on a broader scale but in their lives as well. The program lacks the resources to be able to do this in a holistic way for its residents. From New Beginnings’ perspective, it tries to pick its battles by strategically using its limited resources to help the women, on the one hand, and to launch more visible advocacy campaigns, on the other. As I argue here, however, such empowerment efforts are crucial not only to improving the on-the-ground conditions of formerly incarcerated people but also to fuelling sustainable activism led by people who have directly experienced incarceration. The women who participated in my study are reflective of the broader status quo for people with criminal records: for the lucky few who are able to obtain and maintain employment, they are stuck in low-wage work with little opportunity for upward mobility; they cope with chronic health issues from years of inadequate medical care in prison and jail and on the streets; and in combination with these difficulties, maintaining sobriety from drugs or alcohol and keeping up with mental health needs such as counselling and medication are daily struggles (Richie 2001; Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004; Braithwaite, Arriola, and Newkirk 2006). Thus, it is difficult to enlist and sustain the participation of formerly incarcerated people in activist activities when they have such a tenuous grasp on their own basic needs.

## Entering the Research Setting

New Beginnings' bare-bones staffing structure—typical of small non-profits—confirms that all too often, the people who are best equipped to be activists for social justice causes are too overwhelmed with social service work to advocate for needed changes (see, for example, Poppendieck 1998). As a wealth of literature has described, the actual doings of case management frequently involve copious amounts of paperwork (Taylor 2013). New Beginnings' case manager seldom leaves her office during work hours. She is preoccupied with managing the abundant paperwork that accompanies the contracts that the program holds with government agencies to provide housing to the women, in addition to completing the reports required for the private foundation funding the program receives. With the little time she has left over, she meets with women in her office and makes referrals and appointments on their behalf.

Because of these limited resources, New Beginnings relies heavily on student interns to carry out the daily work of supporting the women. Even the interns, however, are severely limited in what they can do: they cannot provide the women with transportation to and from their appointments because their schools' liability policies forbid the transportation of clients in students' cars. Transportation is a major element of post-incarceration work, both in the sprawling metropolitan region where I conducted this research and, arguably, even more so in many suburban and rural areas (Morani et al. 2011). For the women at New Beginnings, it is not unusual to spend two hours on public transportation to attend a family court hearing regarding child custody matters, to check in with their parole agent or probation officer, or to participate in state-mandated substance abuse counselling. Frequently, women must do this important work on their own. Worse still, women often must make difficult choices if one form of work—making it to a family court date, for example—conflicts with another, such as getting or keeping a job that will show she is a fit parent (for a deeper examination of these dilemmas, see Welsh Carroll and Rajah 2014).

Thus, researcher-activist allies who have the (relative) luxury of time to do such things must be willing to do the sort of ethnographic fieldwork that can inform where pressure should be applied to change the various institutions with which formerly incarcerated people often interact. As Frampton et al. (2006, 35) have suggested, “By being located outside of and yet constantly in interaction and struggle with ruling regimes, activists can explore the social

organization of power as it is revealed through the moments of confrontation” (see also G. Smith 1990). Early on in my fieldwork at New Beginnings, I identified a need—transportation to institutional appointments—and began to fill it. This opened ample opportunities for such “moments of confrontation.” An excerpt from my field notes early in the research illustrates how my position evolved:

*I sense that my role when we are out in the field is often to demonstrate that the woman has support and an additional form of supervision that will keep her “on the right track.” In reality, I am realizing that I often help the women to be active participants in their own re-entry process, something that they receive little support to do. Most of the women do not understand the copious forms they are told to fill out; some are reluctant to ask clarifying questions to understand what is going on, for risk of being perceived as troublesome. I have noticed that this happens a lot in the welfare application process and in family court. From my experience as a social worker, I know that a quiet client may be perceived as a compliant one, but that silence can also be interpreted as not caring. Other women are quick to become angry and impatient. In these instances, I try to help the woman to understand the process, to validate her frustration but also to keep her calm. I realize that my active involvement in these situations distorts interactions and prevents me from observing what would happen if I weren't there or did not intervene. On the other hand, as a feminist researcher committed to empowerment, I have an ethical responsibility to assist the women in getting the help they need (May 30, 2012).*

By immersing myself in the research setting, I sought to take advantage of what Burawoy (1998) has called research as *intervention*: to produce a situational knowledge of women's post-incarceration work that could then be connected with the work that frontline staff do within public service institutions. Furthermore, I sought to bring into view certain aspects of the post-incarceration experience that are left out of “official” accounts of the process. A rich literature now exists on the most common factors that determine whether a formerly incarcerated person will succeed “on the outside” or whether they will return to prison (MacKenzie 2006; Bushway, Stoll, and Weiman 2006). Likewise, much research exists on the collateral consequences of having a criminal record (Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002). Yet there is a dearth of research on how formerly incarcerated people experience—and are processed by—institutions outside the formal purview of the crime-processing system.

## On Positionality, Reflexivity, and When to Be a “Well-Dressed White Lady”

Although there is consensus among qualitative researchers that *being* reflexive is an important part of the process, there is little guidance about how to go about *doing* reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Like others doing research on crime-processed girls and women (McKim 2008, 2014; Haney 1996, 2010; Leverentz 2006, 2011), my positionality necessitated ongoing reflection and discussion with my research participants.<sup>7</sup> New Beginnings is in a low-income neighbourhood in which 99 percent of the residents are people of colour (US Census Bureau 2010). As a white female doctoral student from a middle-class background with no personal history of incarceration, I wanted to be alert to the ways in which my presence in the women’s lives might be an asset and/or a liability. This has been a struggle shared by feminist prison activist groups, some of which employ a rhetoric of “sisterhood” (Lawston 2009) that risks glossing over significant differences.

I communicated to the women that I viewed them as “expert knowers” (D. Smith 2006, 224; Bisailon 2012, 613) of how things work in their own lives and that I wanted to learn from them through interviews and observations. I shared that I had training as a social worker and that I was willing to help them in any way I could. Several of the women were immediately accepting of me, while others warmed up to me as soon as they realized I was willing and able not only to drive them to their various appointments (a relative luxury at New Beginnings) but also to sit with them during these appointments and offer support. Once word got out about this, many women started calling me and asking to participate in the study.<sup>8</sup>

Through my own previous professional experience as well as other researchers’ experiences (see McKim 2008, 2014), I was aware that client-staff dynamics are complicated at programs like New Beginnings. In interviews, when asked who had helped them the most since they had been released from

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7 A key difference in my work is that New Beginnings, unlike the research sites of the other authors cited, is a grassroots non-profit organization, not a state-run halfway house. Although New Beginnings has contracts with state and county agencies, private foundations and various fundraising efforts cover much of its operational costs.

8 I also provided cash incentives to the women for participating in in-depth interviews.

jail or prison, several women talked about the director of New Beginnings as being “like a mother” to them at a critical time in their lives. Yet many women also spoke critically of the “tough love” approach that the director frequently utilized to ensure compliance with the program’s rules. Over time, I heard about several such conflicts that often resulted in women leaving the program. I took care during my fieldwork to distance myself from New Beginnings’ staff as much as possible to not appear to be an authority figure. I accomplished this by not spending much time at the program after the first few weeks, instead only coming to the program to pick up someone for an appointment. In exchange for permission to conduct my research, I wrote grant applications and concept papers under the instruction of New Beginnings’ grant writer and the director. I did much of this work either remotely or in the office space away from the homes where the women resided.

In the field, I dressed in casual attire—T-shirts, hooded sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers—to blend in as much as possible at New Beginnings and to draw minimal attention to myself when I accompanied women to places such as the welfare office or the parole office. I was rarely asked to explain my presence, but when pressed, I would state that I was a friend. While I was particularly attuned to how one’s criminal record might shape encounters with other public institutions, race and class dynamics also became readily visible.

In later stages of my fieldwork, I began dressing up on occasions in which I thought my professional standing as a social worker might be utilized to the benefit of the women, such as when I accompanied women seeking to regain custody of their children to family court. Out of growing frustration with the public assistance/welfare system, I occasionally wore professional attire to the welfare office to expedite the women getting what they needed.

On one particularly trying day, I took this approach when I accompanied Dawn, a Black woman in her early twenties who was a central figure in my fieldwork, to the welfare office to find out why her welfare benefits were in the process of being terminated. By the time of this incident, I had repeatedly witnessed Dawn’s ability to be an effective advocate for herself without any intervention on my part. Yet in this instance, it was clear that the mundane and all-too-typical nature of Dawn’s issue—some important paperwork was sent to the wrong address—meant that it might not be dealt with in a timely fashion. Thus, with Dawn’s permission, I decided to intervene, first by speaking to the office intake worker and then by demanding to speak with the office

supervisor (as Dawn's caseworker was unavailable), who quickly apologized and corrected the issue in the computer system.

As we left the office and walked back to my car, Dawn joked that she was glad to have a "well-dressed white lady" with her on that day. We both laughed at the absurdity that what we had accomplished in half an hour together was something that likely would have taken Dawn several hours and possibly even days—since we went to the office on a Friday afternoon—to get addressed on her own. Had I not been with her, Dawn likely would have waited until the office closing time, at which point an exasperated caseworker would have either fixed the issue or told Dawn to come back on Monday, when she would have waited several more hours.

Dawn intuitively knew she could not have effectively demanded to speak to the office supervisor without being perceived as a typical angry client—poor, Black, and female—and thus easily tuned out and "lost in the shuffle." In this way, Dawn, while she might have been frustrated or even angry about this institutional mishap, performed the emotional labour (Hochschild 1979, 1983) necessary to manage this situation. For women of colour, scholars have noted that there seem to be two possible paths in such circumstances, neither of which is desirable. Some women work to stay calm during infuriating situations, knowing that outward displays of anger and frustration likely will only make their situations worse (Harlow 2003); others deliberately adopt a "loud Black woman" persona (Ong 2005; see also Mirchandani 2003) that plays into stereotypes but also allows them space to assert themselves. During fieldwork, I observed women adopting both types of approaches, to varying success. My presence in this situation allowed Dawn to not have to make this unpleasant choice. Further, it was not only my ability to look and act white, professional, and middle-class (and thus clearly not a client / welfare recipient) that expedited our time at the welfare office on that day, but it was also that I had accumulated intimate knowledge about how the welfare office functions—knowledge that is typically off-limits to clients—and was able to communicate this effectively to the office supervisor.

### **"Studying Out": Tracing Ruling Relations from the Client Perspective**

During eighteen months of fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-four women and engaged in participant observation with ten of them.



Early on, I identified encounters with the welfare system as a common and particularly tricky form of post-incarceration work and thus selected it for further examination. All but one of the women who participated in my study went to apply for welfare during their first couple of weeks in the program. They were urged to do so by New Beginnings' case manager because if they qualified, the food stamps the women received would be used to purchase food for the program's houses.

To learn more about the work done in the welfare system, I simultaneously began volunteering with a legal aid group that trains law students and lawyers looking to do pro bono work to provide advocacy to individuals applying for welfare. When I approached the director of the program about my research, she invited me to go through the training and then volunteer. Volunteers are trained on the local (county-level) welfare system in the morning, then go to a welfare office in the afternoon. Assistance work typically takes the form of helping first-time welfare applicants apply for benefits, advocating for recipients who are at risk of losing their benefits, and assisting former recipients who need to reapply. By spending one day a week working with this group simultaneous to my time at New Beginnings, I gained an intricate knowledge of the county welfare system. In doing so, I sought to produce an "insider's critique" (D. Smith 1990, 204) of how the welfare system processes formerly incarcerated women (see Welsh Carroll 2015). I make use of institutional ethnography's approach to analytical mapping to render a partial illustration of this process from the women's standpoint, with an emphasis on the set of relations women are drawn into when they walk into the welfare office. This map brings into view multiple opportunities for protest and action.

I then used this knowledge to help women advocate for themselves when applying for welfare benefits. For example, in the instance mentioned earlier, I was able to help expedite the re-opening of Dawn's case because I had been able to gain an insider's understanding of how things work in the welfare office. As I stated above, such knowledge is off-limits to welfare applicants. Termination proceedings had been initiated in Dawn's case because the quarterly reporting form she was required to fill out and submit, updating her employment and income information, had been sent to the wrong address. I knew from my volunteer work that lost quarterly reporting forms are a common problem in the welfare system: either the forms are lost in the mail or, once they are returned to the welfare office, they are not recorded in client files. This can often be fixed simply by filling out a new quarterly reporting form,

giving it to a worker, and making sure that they update their computerized files with the correct address. I also knew, however, that had we not known what to do—and what forms to ask for at the office—Dawn would have had to wait for a hearing date to be set for her to contest the termination. Dawn likely would have had to repeat the application process, losing a month or more of her aid as a result.

The “administrative logic” (Diamond 1984) of the welfare office prescribes that eligibility workers carry out their work tasks in ways that fit with the mission and goals of the welfare system. The mission of the California Department of Social Services (n.d.) is “to serve, aid, and protect needy and vulnerable children and adults in ways that strengthen and preserve families, encourage personal responsibility, and foster independence.” Unsurprisingly, then, frontline workers typically adhere to the logic of promoting personal responsibility and independence by only assisting when it is requested in the “right” way. Persistently heavy caseloads render any sort of personalized attention to welfare applicants nearly impossible (Kaufman and Welsh Carroll 2021), further reinforcing this logic. An earlier experience I had with Dawn at the same office illustrates this point (see also figure 8.1):

*I pick Dawn up at 7am and drive her to the welfare office where she has her food stamps case already open. Dawn just got laid off from her telemarketing job, so she needs to apply for General Assistance, which is the cash aid portion of welfare for single adults with no kids. The office opens at 8am, and Dawn wants to be there before it opens. I quickly realize why: when we arrive 30 minutes before the office opens, a long line wraps around the outside of the building. Once inside, we pass through a metal detector while security guards check our bags. Young men of colour are the dominant demographic here, and they all shuffle through the metal detector while holding their pants up. Once inside, they cluster around the security guard’s desk as they scramble to put their belts back on.*

*As I watch this scene, Dawn, an experienced visitor to this office, confidently walks over and stands in a line for one of about ten windows lining one wall of the building. Here, as with most of the public service buildings I have visited during my fieldwork, bulletproof glass covers each window, separating the client from the worker. I ask her how she knows which window to stand at, and she points to a cracked, faded sign that says “non-appointments.” Other people walk up after*



**Figure 8.1.** The front of the line to enter the welfare office. While waiting to enter the building and walk through the metal detectors, one has ample time to read the long list of items not permitted inside. April 2012. Photo by the author.

*us, confused about which line to stand in, and we direct them. Dawn receives a thick packet of paperwork, which she fills out with me lending as much assistance as I can. I have learned from [the legal aid group where I volunteer] that the welfare application forms are written at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.*

*Then, we wait . . . [hours later] I notice that the line to get in the building has dissipated, so around lunchtime, realizing that we are in for an all-day ordeal, I go outside to buy us fortifications from a lunch truck. During my absence, Dawn is called back to one of the interview booths. I grab our food and find her at one of about 50 interview booths. She sits across from a middle-aged man of South Asian descent, a window of bulletproof glass separating them (field notes, April 19, 2012).*

In an interview with me afterward, Dawn and I discussed the eligibility interview that ensued:

Dawn: *He was rude to me, and I don't know, he already knew from the last time I had applied . . . everything's in the system, and they made me bring a letter from my parole agent, so they know I'm on parole, you know? And it was just . . . he was rude. First, I was just texting to tell you that I was back there, and he was like, "You can put your phone up or you can come back at 2 o'clock . . ." So I hurried up and sent it and put it up. And then he said . . .*

Megan: *"You can't eat."*

Dawn: *Yeah! Because you came back with the food, "You can't eat or you can come back at 2 o'clock," and "Just sign here" and threw the papers out the window. And then he's all, "Your food stamps are about to be terminated." And I was like, "How is that?" And he was like, "Because you didn't do the community service for your food stamps," like, "You gotta work for your food stamps." They try to make it nice; they call it a work program, a work requirement program, so you go freaking work all these hours a week, you're saying that this is to help us get back on our feet, but you're making it . . . you're like slaving us for it or something, like what if I have other things to do?*

Megan: *And the time spent doing that is time you can't spend . . .*

Dawn: *Working, looking for a job.*

Dawn intuitively senses that a set of ruling relations is contributing to her circumstances (D. Smith 1987, 2006). She is clearly upset that she must provide her welfare worker with a letter from her parole agent. This is an example of an ever-widening net of surveillance that is cast over the poor and crime-involved (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Dawn and the other women I interviewed resignedly accepted the intrusion of multiple institutions in their lives, but having to disclose their involvement with one (in Dawn's case, parole) to another (welfare) feels insulting, like a violation of privacy. Yet Dawn is forced to participate in the violation of her own privacy to get the help she needs, even though there is no coordination between welfare and parole to provide special services for formerly incarcerated people.

When Dawn says "you're slaving us for it" when she talks about the welfare-to-work program she must participate in for twenty hours per week, she alludes to the American legacy of slavery, now visible in the mass

incarceration–welfare nexus. In doing so, Dawn instinctively points to another juncture in which the social relations of race and class come into view. Having cycled on and off welfare several times in between periods of incarceration, Dawn recognizes that the program is little more than another form of social control. It is a waste of her time; ironically, it is a distraction from actually getting a job.

Over the course of his interaction with her, the worker seems to soften his approach. We inform him that Dawn had been working until very recently and thus should not have been required to participate in the welfare-to-work program while she was employed:

Megan: *But then, after that initial thing, he seemed to try to help you, right? Because he was like . . .*

Dawn: *“OK, I’ll put it in the computer that you were pregnant and that you were working at this time, so you had good cause not to [participate in the work program], and if your food stamps don’t come on the third, call your worker and get it settled.” So yeah, afterward, but initially, he was all rude at first. I guess maybe because I didn’t get rude back, maybe he was like, “OK, she’s not gonna be rude back.”*

Megan: *Yeah, yeah. “Maybe she’s gonna be cool about it.” But the way he took that pile of papers and just shoved it through the window, and they didn’t quite fit, but he just shoved them through . . .*

Dawn: *If I had done that to him, he would have been like, “Come back at two,” you know?*

My experience with Dawn in the welfare office illustrates that even in a “successful” eligibility interview, little is resolved with any certainty: Dawn’s application was processed for General Assistance, but she would have to wait thirty days to start receiving the cash aid. She also must wait and see if her food stamps come through on the third of the month; if not, she will have to call her case manager to reinstate them. Such uncertainty is stressful for any welfare applicant but particularly so for formerly incarcerated people, whose social and economic support networks have often been strained—if not decimated—by a recent period of incarceration (Richie 2001; Leverenz 2006, 2011). Thus, in the welfare office as in other aspects of their post-prison

lives, people like Dawn exist in a liminal space in which they are no longer imprisoned but are also not fully free (Werth 2011).

## Conclusion

For the most part, the staff and administration of New Beginnings consider the welfare system to be a necessary evil one must endure to get critical financial assistance upon release from prison or jail. Perhaps New Beginnings is reluctant to be too critical of the welfare system because the program relies on the women receiving food stamps to purchase food and other essentials for its homes. Perhaps, too, because New Beginnings' staff and interns are rarely able to go to the welfare offices themselves, they have a limited understanding of the intricacies of its oppressiveness. Such realities only make a more compelling argument for the complementarity of this sort of research with an activist agenda. My fieldwork with Dawn unearthed her own rich knowledge of how to navigate the welfare office, and my volunteer work with the legal aid program equipped me with an insider's understanding of what questions to ask and what forms to request—in short, how to access the help one needs. Both sorts of knowledge are typically unavailable to people who have just been released from prison.

In several states, prison and anti-poverty activists are organizing to eliminate the lifetime ban on welfare benefits for people convicted of felony drug offences (Mauer and McCalmont 2013; McCarty et al. 2013).<sup>9</sup> In the welfare application process, this ban takes the form of the “Food Stamp Program Qualifying Drug Felon Addendum,” which all food stamp applicants must fill out (Welsh Carroll 2015).

Less contested has been a county-level requirement that all applicants coming from another jurisdiction, including those just released from prison, must first establish “residency” in the county for fourteen days. During the welfare application process—often after having already waited for several hours—some of the women in my study who had just been released from prison were turned away for this reason. The standard processing time for a cash aid application is thirty days. Thus, these women had to wait a total of up to six weeks after their release from prison to receive the cash portion

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9 In California, these activist efforts were successful, with the ban on food stamps for people convicted of drug felonies being repealed as of January 2015.

of assistance, leaving them in a financially precarious situation: at risk of returning to criminal activity and/or entering otherwise dangerous situations to survive. It is these types of policies that hinder rather than facilitate former prisoners' post-incarceration work, and they must be challenged.

In this chapter, I have presented an approach to fieldwork that infiltrates institutional sites of oppression as a means of challenging them. I have shown how I went about doing such research in the American welfare system, which, in many ways, is designed to disempower those who need its resources and to desensitize those who work on its frontlines. This is a slightly different approach than that proposed by George Smith in his paper "Political Activist as Ethnographer" (1990). Following Smith, my approach is grounded "empirically in the actual operations of a ruling regime . . . provid[ing] a scientific rather than an ideological basis for developing political strategy" (647). Like Smith too, my project not only identifies sites for potential protest but also suggests opportunities for researcher-practitioner partnerships that can advance an activist agenda in ways both big and small. As I have shown, however, my approach might be particularly informative for advocates working on the ground on behalf of marginalized individuals—an angle unexamined by Smith and yet largely under-explored in institutional ethnography (see Pence 2001 for an important exception). As I have shown here, such an approach can yield important discoveries—ones that otherwise would remain invisible—about the social relations that are of greatest concern to institutional ethnographers.

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## 9 Double Ethics, Double Burden

### Professionalism, Activism, and Institutional Ethnography

Agnieszka Doll

*Any foray into the field may lend a sense of betrayal.*

—Adler and Adler (1997, 36)

In this chapter, drawing from my fieldwork, which examined the social organization of involuntary psychiatric admission procedures in Poland, I discuss the challenges that I encountered during my fieldwork, which was carried out in psychiatric hospitals and courts, and the ethical dilemmas that I experienced. To illustrate these dilemmas, I introduce the case of a young woman who was involuntarily hospitalized. As I followed her case, I witnessed both the breach of her substantive and procedural rights and her unsuccessful struggle to contest her emergency involuntary admission through legal means. Realizing that I had both the knowledge and the skills to potentially assist with her situation, I struggled with the ethics of whether and how I should intervene in her case. This emerged quite intensely in at least three moments: firstly, at the outset of her admission; secondly, at the district court proceedings; and thirdly, at her appeal hearing. Each moment resolved differently but left me with even more questions about institutional ethnography's promise of merging activism and professionalism and highlighted the challenges in reconciling transformative research goals with impromptu intervention.

This chapter both attempts to make sense of the fieldwork experience and seeks to promote a broader discussion among institutional ethnographers on the implications of the researcher's professional background for fieldwork practice.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the researcher's professional background is an integral element of a researcher's bodily presence in the field. As the researcher's dual positionality interacts dynamically with other factors during fieldwork, it both opens and forecloses possibilities for activism during research. Furthermore, while in some institutional ethnographic research designs, activism and the transformative goals of the project can be easily reconciled, in a project where a researcher takes the standpoint of "the oppressed" yet works mostly with the "experts" during the data collection phase, those two commitments can sometimes intersect in conflicting ways, raising questions about the possibility of reconciling transformative goals of institutional ethnography (IE) with impromptu interventions.

The chapter is organized into four sections. The first section explains my study's context and its links to my professional legal practice. That section is followed by a discussion of Polish law on involuntary psychiatric admission. In the third section, I present the case of a young woman who was hospitalized during my fieldwork and struggled to have her legal rights protected. I also discuss the dilemmas and tensions that I faced as an institutional ethnographer with a professional background as I was considering intervention in her case. Lastly, I analyze those tensions in terms of double positionality as a researcher and professional and of fieldwork politics. I conclude with reflections on porous identities, ruling relations, and IE.

### **Locating My Institutional Ethnography on Emergency Psychiatric Admission in the Context of My Lawyering Work**

This section of the chapter briefly discusses the emergence of my research project, designed as IE, to show its close link to my professional legal background and legal practice in criminal and mental health cases in Poland. My initial

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1 Since the chapter was written and accepted, an important discussion about the social relations of professionalism concerning IE researchers with a professional background (topics considered in my chapter) has also been undertaken by other IE scholars. See Luken and Vaughan (2023), Campbell (2023), and Ridzi (2023).

research aimed to explicate the social organization of women's involuntary admissions to psychiatric hospitals on the grounds of mental illness and dangerousness. This involved looking at how women's pathologies were produced through textually mediated practices and how broader social, legal, financial, and other relations organized those institutional practices. As I represented women in domestic violence and family cases, I observed not only pervasive gender stereotyping of how, for example, the victim of domestic violence should behave but also the adverse impact of any mental health diagnosis on the position of women in these cases. This professional experience led to my realization that while, in the short term, the medicalization of psychiatric intervention may bring some temporary relief for women located amid family conflicts (although I remain critical of the need to institutionalize in general), in the longer term, involuntary institutionalization does not serve women well. Psychiatric records and diagnoses tended to follow women on subsequent encounters with legal authorities, often with no legal purpose, but rather re-created narratives about those women as "bad" and "mad." Often, these psychiatric files were attached to legal files upon the request of an opposing party, such as a partner accused of domestic violence or a party in a child custody case.<sup>2</sup> Frustrated with a legal system that obscured the systemic inequalities that organized women's lives and pathologized them as individuals, I decided to suspend my professional career and study overseas (in the United States and Canada) to equip myself to address the systems of power that contribute to the oppression of women by the law. Through an examination of everyday practices and processes, I hoped to learn how, within the context of the admission procedures, the accounts of mental health and behavioural pathologies in women were produced, so lawyers could gain new knowledge and tools on how to effectively challenge those psychiatric opinions or map the space where they could intervene effectively to provide alternative stories based on women's experiential accounts. Hence, my research into the social organization of processes of involuntary admission of women clearly had an activist goal: to disrupt the metanarrative of the official and authoritative accounts of involuntarily hospitalized women as "mad and bad" and to improve institutional practices for women.

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2 See Megan Welsh Carroll in this volume (chapter 8) for a similar reflection on "the travel" of the criminal record across organizational sites as women discharged from prisons navigate their re-entry into society.

I chose IE as my method of inquiry because it focuses on exploring institutional practice and has the potential to inform social and institutional change (Smith 2005). This method of inquiry has been frequently utilized by researchers with professional backgrounds in social justice interested in addressing the operation of various policies that do not meet people's actual needs (Bell 2001; Bisailon and Rankin 2013; Miller 2005; Pence 2001; Rankin and Campbell 2006; Townsend 1998). Institutional ethnographers take seriously professionals' concerns about institutions' functioning and use their own professional experiences as starting points for further inquiry into how experiences and oppressive practices are socially organized (Smith 2005). Later, such knowledge can be taken up by those professionals to enact progressive social change on either an individual or a structural level (Campbell and Gregor 2008; Dobson 2001).

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Poland between August 2012 and February 2014. My research sites included psychiatric facilities, courts, lawyers' offices, and emergency services. I interviewed judges, paramedics, psychiatrists, and administrators; had casual conversations with them; and observed their work. Aiming to illuminate how involuntary admission decisions are made and the material context of decision-makers' work, I observed the daily routines of legal and medical professionals. For example, I participated in psychiatrists' morning reports, observed their diagnostic work, listened to their discussions, and accompanied them in their other work activities (such as their lectures to medical students, seminar talks, and conferences). I spent a few hours a day in doctors' offices, where I had the chance to engage in both casual conversations and formal interviews. Similarly, I accompanied judges on their trips to psychiatric facilities, attended hearings, and observed the production of case documents pertaining to emergency admissions. I paid particular attention to the exchanges between various professionals involved in a case or when a case was moved between different organizational sites. I also gathered various regulatory texts and a set of ex-patients' medical and legal documents from courts and observed how they were used by medical and legal professionals during the admission process. Furthermore, I monitored a few individual involuntary admission cases from their outset to their conclusion to capture those exchanges, especially when the person was admitted against their will by an appellate court decision. There were several times I felt uneasy during my research; however, I found one case particularly troubling in terms of both institutional practices and my responses to those



situations. The case of this young woman, whom I call Anna, sheds light on the challenges of navigating both professional and activist commitments. This conflict arises when one is conducting research with professionals involved in problematic practices while attempting to uphold the perspectives and rights of admittees.

Before I turn to that case, I will present a brief survey of the Polish mental health law on emergency involuntary admission, which provides an essential background for understanding Anna's case and the emergence of my ethical dilemmas.

### **Polish Mental Health Law on Emergency Involuntary Admission**

On January 22, 1995, the Mental Health Protection Act of 1994 (MHPA;<sup>3</sup> particularly articles 23, 24, and 28) came into effect to regulate involuntary emergency admissions to psychiatric hospitals in Poland. The MHPA was the culmination of more than two decades of mental health reforms intended to humanize involuntary admission procedures and coercive treatment of persons deemed mentally ill (Zajackowska 2011). To address severe rights violations of patients in psychiatric facilities—abuses associated with a medical model in which psychiatrists exercised omnipotence over involuntary admissions—reformers in Poland (Dąbrowski and Kubicki 1994; Dąbrowski and Pietrzykowski 1997; Zajackowska 2011) and elsewhere implemented a rights-based legal framework grounded in the argument that “substantive improvements in a lot of the mentally disordered [would] follow from a recognition of their rights” (Rose 1986, 177).<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, mental health reformers sought to enact stricter admission standards to prevent unnecessary admissions, including developing more comprehensive admission criteria than the single previous criterion of a need for treatment (Arrigo 1993; Collins 2009; Dallaire, Morin, and Cohen 2001). Specific solutions adopted in Poland included narrowing the grounds for an involuntary emergency admission by adding extra criteria that needed to be

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3 Translations of Polish statutes and their titles are mine unless otherwise noted.

4 *Mentally disordered* is an old-fashioned term, used commonly when Rose's article was published.

met, in conjunction with the diagnosis of a mental illness. These elements are called substantive grounds.

According to the MHPA, a person can be admitted involuntarily *only* if the person

- 1) is mentally ill and that person's illness-related behaviour poses a threat to her own life or the life and health of others (article 23), or
- 2) exhibits a mental disturbance, and that person's disturbance-related behaviour poses a threat to her own life or the life and health of others, yet it is unclear whether she is mentally ill (article 24),<sup>5</sup> or
- 3) is mentally ill and not treating that person would cause a significant deterioration of her health (article 28, clause 1), or
- 4) is mentally ill and not capable of caring for her basic needs, and it is predicted that the treatment will improve that person's health (article 28, clause 2).

The first two instances are called emergency admissions, and the admission decisions in these cases are made by psychiatrists and later reviewed for their legality by the courts. In the last two situations, admission decisions are made by a court.

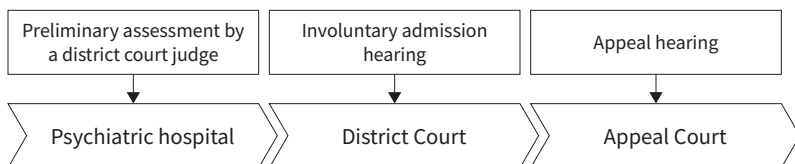
Polish mental health reforms also resulted in procedural changes in the involuntary admission process. The MHPA imposed a strict timeline for decision-making and legal control, including a multi-level judicial control process, and granted admittees the right to participate in the procedure personally or through a legal representative. These elements are called procedural rights. The MHPA introduced a mixed medico-legal model into the involuntary admission procedure, wherein psychiatrists make the admission decisions but an independent judicial body assesses those decisions (articles 23 and 24). In Poland's previous medical model regulating psychiatric admission, psychiatrists were the sole decision-makers (Zajackowska 2011). The significance of the mixed model is that not only does it impose a legal framework and control over psychiatrists' decisions, but it also ratifies strict legal grounds for involuntary admissions (substantive rights) and increases guarantees of due process by the insertion of patients' rights (procedural rights; Zajackowska

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5 The Polish language uses gendered nouns. The noun "person" is a female noun, and therefore it is accompanied by the pronoun and a possessive determiner "she/her" while referring to all genders.

2011). These legal changes were to ensure that nobody would be confined unnecessarily and illegally. The MHPA also mandates the work undertaken by psychiatrists in stipulating and enforcing standards for emergency involuntary admission. For instance, upon a person's arrival in a psychiatric facility, a psychiatrist needs to decide if that person should be admitted and on what grounds (MHPA articles 23, 24, or 28). Within forty-eight hours, the facility director is required to endorse the psychiatrist's decision. Regardless of this endorsement, however, the director is obliged to notify the family court of the involuntary admission to the hospital (article 23, clauses 2–4). This sets in motion the procedure for judicial control over the legality of psychiatrist-issued admission decisions. These judicial control activities take place across organizational sites, as illustrated in figure 9.1.

The time frame for judicial control activities is also strictly prescribed and relatively short. Within forty-eight hours of the director's notification, a district court judge from the family unit visits the admitted person for a preliminary assessment (MHPA article 45, clause 2). This preliminary assessment involves meetings between the judge and the admitted person and between the judge and that person's lead psychiatrist. In my research sites, these meetings were held in psychiatric facilities. At this stage, the judge needs to determine whether the patient should be discharged immediately (if there are no grounds for the emergency involuntary admission) or whether the case should be sent for further adjudication by the court. My observations of the proceedings, along with my analysis of numerous case files, show that involuntarily admission cases are almost always sent for adjudication by a district court; the one exception is when the admitted person consents to the admission during that preliminary assessment by a district court judge. In such a case, the admission becomes voluntary, and the further procedure for judicial control is discontinued. Otherwise, a district



**Figure 9.1.** Judicial control of the legality of psychiatrists' decisions on emergency involuntary admissions.

court must hold the involuntary admission hearing within two weeks of the preliminary assessment (article 45, clause 1). Subsequently, if the district court finds the decision illegal, it recommends an immediate discharge of the concerned person from the psychiatric hospital. If the decision is found to be legal, the admitted person has a right to appeal, but appealing the admission decision is a lengthy procedure, and it may take up to a year for the court of appeals to issue its final verdict; therefore, the admitted person, by the time the appellate hearing is scheduled, might be already released.<sup>6</sup> The appeals court can accept the appeal as valid or reject it and uphold the lower court's decision. If the appellate court accepts the appeal on the basis that the emergency admission did not meet its legal grounds (article 23 or 24), it reverses the lower court's decision and discharges the admitted person immediately. If the court of appeals accepts the appeal on the basis that there were procedural problems, it sends the case back to the lower court for re-adjudication. In such situations, the appeal court's decision will not result in the immediate discharge of the concerned person.

With this brief explanation, now I turn attention to Anna's emergency involuntary admission case, which sparked my ethical dilemma and tensions about whether I should intervene in her case and, if so, how to do it most effectively.

## **A Story of Anna's Admission**

About four months into my fieldwork, a young woman, "Anna," was involuntarily admitted on emergency grounds (under article 23 of the MHPA) to the psychiatric hospital where I was conducting my research. The following morning, I learned about her admission when I attended the morning staff report and sat in a psychiatrist's office where her case was discussed. Her case stirred intense reactions and discussion among the psychiatrists for at least two reasons. First, Anna was very vocal in contesting the legality of her

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6 A patient might be released while an appeal is in process, for instance, if their psychiatric team deems them well enough or when the statutory time for involuntary hospitalization expires. The latter circumstance is applicable to involuntary hospitalization based on article 24 of the MHPA, where the MHPA limits such detention to a maximum of ten days. During my fieldwork, I also found out that the psychiatric team may release a person when the insurance coverage for an assigned diagnosis expires.

admission, and second, her legal training provided her with the skills and knowledge to challenge the admission legally. Not only was she familiar with the substantive legal grounds for involuntary admission, but she also knew her procedural rights and was familiar with the network of human rights institutions that could potentially intercede in her case. For example, within the first few hours, she wrote a letter to the Human Rights Ombudsperson, asking them for assistance. Psychiatrists were aware that she would challenge the decision by an admitting psychiatrist by all available legal means. In a way, this was a unique situation because, from what I observed during my fieldwork, many patients were confused about what was happening to them, unfamiliar with their legal rights, and scared (for further discussion, see Doll 2017).

As I followed Anna's case, I witnessed violations of her rights and her unsuccessful struggle to contest her involuntary admission. I will elaborate on both of those aspects below.

### **Violations of Anna's Rights**

There were at least three kinds of breaches of the legal provisions of the MHPA and Anna's rights:

1. Violation of the MHPA substantive requirements for involuntary admission (the violation of substantive rights);
2. Deprivation of her right to representation (the violation of procedural rights); and
3. Deprivation of her right to participate in an involuntary admission hearing (a second procedural rights violation).

In terms of the first violation, from conversations among psychiatrists during the morning staff report and later continued in their offices, I learned that Anna was categorized as an emergency involuntary admission (based on article 23 of the MHPA) instead of a non-emergency one to facilitate her prompt admission and treatment. Yet what became quickly apparent was that she had been admitted because of an arrangement between her parents and one of the psychiatrists working in the facility, and not because she posed a direct threat to herself or others or could have been considered dangerous. Concerned about her well-being, her parents wanted her to get treatment, even against her will (I will expand on this topic below). Indeed, Anna's

parents had mounted two prior unsuccessful attempts to institutionalize her involuntarily. In those two instances, Anna had been able to avoid being admitted by physically escaping from the emergency ward where her parents had brought her. Knowing that Anna would legally contest her admission and the case would go under judicial review, the psychiatrists producing her medical documents put extra effort into constructing evidence of the danger she posed to herself and others. As per article 23 of the MHPA, they needed to demonstrate *both* that Anna was mentally ill *and* that her illness-related behaviour posed a threat to her own life or the life and health of others. I saw how Anna's mental illness and, stemming from it, her perceived dangerousness were produced by psychiatrists. Psychiatrists had concerns about her mental health based on her drawings and sketches that her family had delivered and on Anna's mother's report suggesting that Anna had starved a dog. To construct a diagnosis of her mental illness, a certain narrative of Anna's a-sociality was produced through accounts of her supposed transgression of gender norms, such as the expectation that women be social and friendly and that they neither express controversial opinions nor be openly critical of others. I also witnessed how Anna's "dangerousness" was constructed in an interview with her mother, during which a psychiatrist led the mother through a set of specifically directed and suggestive questions. The psychiatrist asked the mother whether Anna had ever been physically violent—for example, by pushing or hitting her mother—or whether Anna had ever been verbally violent. Her mother explained that Anna had forced her mother aside to access the balcony; it happened only once, when the mother had blocked Anna from accessing the apartment balcony, ostensibly for Anna's safety. This pushing event was recorded in the psychiatrist's notes as an example of Anna's *violence* and *dangerousness*, while the rest of her mother's explanation, including the context of the encounter, was omitted. Psychiatrists also interpreted Anna's vegan diet as evidence of her desire to harm herself, and it was used as another example of her danger, this time to herself (Doll 2017).

The deprivation of Anna's procedural rights began as soon as the day after her admission, when she requested a legal aid lawyer. She made this request verbally to her lead doctor, who noted it briefly in her patient file. However, in Poland, in all non-criminal cases (to which involuntary admission cases also belong), only a court has the legal authority to appoint a legal aid lawyer for those who request such. Thus, for Anna to get a lawyer, her request needed to be brought to a judge's attention—yet the psychiatrist failed to pass Anna's

request along when the judge came for the pre-assessment meeting in her case. Nor did the judge see the note about the request in Anna's patient file when skimming through her medical documents during the preliminary assessment meeting. Although the request for a lawyer does not automatically result in the appointment, it is still a patient's right to have such a request reviewed by a judge. This is especially important in cases involving psychiatric patients. Since 2010, the Supreme Court of Poland, in interpreting the provision on representation in involuntary admission cases (article 48 of the MHPA), has even suggested that people undergoing admission are unable to represent themselves due to their mental health or their confinement in closed wards, and they should have a lawyer mandatorily appointed (for example, Poland Supreme Court 2012). Although Polish law is not precedent based, the Supreme Court's interpretation informs how lower courts should apply certain legal provisions. However, this did not happen in Anna's admission case, and nor was a lawyer appointed for her mandatorily. She only received the lawyer later at the appeal hearing when she resubmitted her request in written form.

In terms of the second instance of procedural rights deprivation, this one relates to her absence from the involuntary admission hearing held at the district court. As I mentioned before, giving the admitted person an opportunity to be heard was to be one of the core advancements enacted by mental health reforms and the MHPA. After Anna learned of the date and time of her involuntary admission hearing, she requested that her doctor allow her to participate in that hearing. The doctor did not see any medical concerns preventing Anna from participating; moreover, the doctor phoned to inform the court that Anna had requested to be transported there. However, because of the significant distance between the hospital and the district court and the security restrictions imposed on involuntarily admitted persons, they require secure transportation to the courthouse if they want to participate in their involuntary admission hearings. Although the MHPA institutionalized the right of an individual to attend their hearings, this was not practiced in my research sites. Neither the court nor the hospital considered ensuring transportation for these patients to be their responsibility. Moreover, district court judges did not see the patient's presence in court as essential in involuntary admission hearings (Doll 2017). Indeed, in assessing the legality of involuntary admission, judges relied heavily on documents produced by the admitting psychiatrist and the judge visiting the hospital for the pre-hearing

meeting and on the opinion of a so-called *independent* psychiatric expert.<sup>7</sup> As a result, on the hearing day, Anna was ready and waiting to be taken to court to defend her rights in person in front of the district court judge, but she was not allowed to do so. She was never taken to the courthouse, and the hearing proceeded in Anna's absence. The notation in the court file was that Anna had been informed about the date and time of the hearing but did not come to attend (Doll 2017).

These short vignettes show how various rights violations emerged in different forms, as the case of an involuntary admission that I traced moved through various stages of admission and judicial control. In the rest of this chapter, I discuss how ethical challenges manifested themselves for me in these contexts and how various constellations of power relations during my fieldwork opened some opportunities for my intervention while closing others.

### **Ethical Dilemma and My Advocacy for Anna**

Compelled by my commitment to social justice, and following the standpoint grounded in the interests of the involuntarily admitted persons, I wanted to act and advocate for Anna's rights—yet I realized how constrained I was in my ability to do so in various ways. At the initial stage of her admission, I felt that my ability to advocate for her rights was limited. Thus, in response to the breach of her substantive rights at the initial stage of her admission, I decided to intervene only by asking psychiatrists questions to raise doubt about the nature of the symptoms of her “illness” and present a potential alternative interpretation of her behaviour. I wanted to show how both her symptoms

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7 Such valuation of psychiatric experts' reports or facts presented by psychiatrists and devaluation of the voices of detainees are not unique to the Polish courts that I observed in my study. For example, in the 2017 report *Operating in Darkness: B.C.'s Mental Health Act Detention System* (Johnston 2017), similar biases were reported in the operation of review panels. Regarding the matter of independent experts in Poland, my data show that experts who prepare these opinions are employed typically in the same ward to which the person is admitted. Given that in the research sites where I conducted my study, wards were rather small, with a limited number of doctors employed, and that these doctors shared offices, the degree to which their opinion was an independent expert opinion could be contested. I observed that some cases were widely discussed among professionals, and every new admission was discussed during a routine morning report, which all doctors, student residents, and a head nurse should and tended to attend (Doll 2017).



(such as her lack of interaction and socialization with members of the small-town community) and her actions could be interpreted differently if put in the broader context of her life trajectory (she had been educated internationally and was pursuing a graduate degree in France, and thus she might not see members of the community as intellectual companions; plus their values and priorities might have differed from hers).

I was aware of the limited space for challenging Anna's mental illness as a justified ground for her involuntary admission due to the predominance of the hegemonic biomedical model of mental illness and the interpretation of her actions according to it. Thus, my attempt to involve psychiatrists in the discussion did not have significant traction as the biomedical model of mental illness was upheld uncritically by professionals with whom I interacted. Furthermore, I was unsettled by my decision not to intervene directly by drawing attention to her request for representation even though such intervention could cause harm to my research participants—such as the professionals managing her case as well as putting me in breach of research confidentiality. It was still disheartening to watch her longing for help and not provide it. New space for intervention opened later as her case moved to appeal court. I decided to approach this space strategically. Before her case reached the appeal court, I felt that I could not intervene in Anna's request for a lawyer without violating the standard of confidentiality that I guaranteed to my research participants, specifically psychiatrists, who told me about Anna's request.

Yet even without a lawyer, given her legal training, I foresaw that Anna would have more of a chance to make her points if only she would be given an opportunity to present her case to the district court during the hearing. In fact, during my fieldwork activities, I learned about one successful case in which the court adjudicated that admission was illegal after hearing facts presented directly by an admittee. Thus, I put my efforts into ensuring that she could appear in the district court. On purpose, I went early to the psychiatric facility and later to the courthouse on the day of the hearing. In the courthouse, I engaged in a casual conversation with a judge, during which I mentioned that Anna was waiting in the psychiatric facility to come to the courthouse. I also ensured that I was at the hearing and waited for a few hours for it, hoping to put tacit pressure on the court by my persistence in attending this hearing and learning its results, although I was discouraged by court staff from doing so. Unfortunately, I was neither successful in making the judge consider Anna's

appearance in the court nor given a chance to observe the hearing, as in Anna's absence, it was moved in camera, meaning that the judge decided the case in their office.

The most successful intervention came about unexpectedly at the court of appeals. After Anna sent a *written* request directly to the district court, she was eventually granted a legal aid lawyer to represent her in the appeal. Just before the appeal hearing (to which Anna did not come despite having been discharged from the facility by her treating psychiatrist), in a brief conversation, I was able to direct Anna's lawyer's attention to the fact that she had not received legal representation in the previous stage of the procedure (and this was the recommendation of the Supreme Court and practice encouraged by the appeal court). He understood the clue and was able to incorporate the argument about the breach of her procedural right (the right to representation) into the oral submission during the appeal (the announcement of the decision was deferred for some time). Anna's appeal was successful, and the case was sent back to the lower court. Yet here I was troubled, knowing how limited the scope and effectiveness of my intervention would be. By the time the appeal hearing came up, Anna had already been discharged from the hospital for months—not because she was able to mobilize the means to challenge her decision's legality, but because she began to comply with the treatment recommendations of her doctors. Reopening the hearing at the lower court meant that she would be required to partake in something that she might want to forget about. In fact, I saw in court files that she stopped accepting court correspondence about her case.

I left my field sites feeling that I had betrayed my moral and ethical standing as both a lawyer and a researcher, given my limited intervention in the early stages of her admission case and later intervention at the appeal court, which might have carried adverse emotional effects for her. By acting "safely" and guardedly, worrying about the impact of my bolder interventions on my institutional access, I felt that I betrayed the people whose interests motivated my research. I started to question IE's promise of merging activism and professionalism and institutional ethnographers' capacity to reconcile a project's transformative goals with impromptu interventions within a field-work context.

## **Two Facets of My Dilemma: Social Relations of Professionalism and of Fieldwork**

Grasping these dilemmas' complexity was an emotionally and intellectually challenging undertaking—one that took several months to come to grips with. It was like peeling layers of an onion, uncovering the many elements that both constrained my ability to intervene and determined my choice of strategies for specific interventions. Initially, I thought the conflict was between my professional and research ethics, but with time, I realized the situation was much more complex. I came to understand that the social relations of professional standards and ethics interacted dynamically with other influences—such as my specific research design and fieldwork politics (Bisaillon and Rankin 2013)—to discipline my capacity for action.

I address the social relations that I see disciplined my capacity for action, and eventually my intervention strategies, by grouping them into two sections. First, I discuss restraints in terms of professionalism, reflecting on my research and legal professional relations, precisely values and standards binding me in these capacities and restricting my capacity to intervene. Second, I address restraints imposed on me by the “politics of fieldwork,” where the tension between working with professionals who contributed to the observed rights violations and the adoption of the standpoint of those subjected to those violations surfaced with great intensity.

### **The Lawyer as Institutional Ethnographer: Social Relations of Professionalism**

Belonging to professional communities granted me certain privileges in the context of my fieldwork. Due to my professional credentials as a researcher and my previous work-based connections as a lawyer, I was able to gain entrance to research sites in psychiatric facilities and restricted spaces in courts, such as judges' chambers, often closed to others. I was afforded considerable trust and credibility and gained “insider” status from the outset. Once I secured access, I established good working relationships with both legal and medical professionals. The facility director granted me extensive access to files and records, and I was welcomed into professional spaces where everyday work occurred. Professionals working in the hospital and courts took me into their confidence; many even felt comfortable expressing their opinions,

frustrations, and concerns about their work and the admission procedure. Through this open access to data, I learned the details of Anna's case.

While my professional status as a researcher and legal professional opened important doors for me, it also imposed significant limits. As a researcher, I was bound by the research ethics and protocols approved by the Research Ethics Board at my home university (Human Research Ethics Board 2012). I guaranteed that the information I acquired through formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations of participants' work would be confidential. I emphasized guarantees of confidentiality when I was recruiting professionals for my study and when I was engaging in research with them. We mutually agreed to the confidentiality measures by signing informed consent documents. I guaranteed I would use the data only for academic and professional publications and policy recommendations. Accordingly, my potential interventions could only be grounded in the information that would not risk confidentiality or affect my participants' professional status. As a researcher, I was reminded (even by my doctoral supervisors) that I should restrain myself from such action and focus on documenting the abuses as evidence that could be used to inform changes in policy and practice. My fieldwork had, after all, not been proposed under an activist research design. This imposed a specific limitation on my ability to disclose to a judge Anna's request for a lawyer, as this information was obtained from my psychiatric professional informants. I was freer to disclose that Anna was waiting to be transported to the courtroom because I was able to observe it first-hand. Lastly, when the case reached the appellate stage, I could use my fieldwork knowledge of what arguments had been successful in involuntary admission appeals to intervene without breaching research ethics and confidentiality. I suggested to Anna's legal aid lawyer that they consider the Supreme Court's decision that had recommended legal aid representation for detainees at all stages of the judicial control procedure and check when Anna was provided with legal aid. Thinking through this suggestion, he arrived to the argument that Anna was not represented properly in the previous stages of the adjudication process.

In addition to research ethics, as a legal professional and a member of the Polish bar, I was bound by professional, ethical standards set for lawyers, specified in the Polish "Bar Law" (1982) and Polish "Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Advocates" (1998). According to these regulations, a lawyer in Poland can provide legal assistance only when formally appointed. This means they can only advise or advocate on someone's behalf

upon receiving a power of attorney from that person or their relatives. Also, to provide legal representation, a lawyer needs to be a practicing member of the local bar. When I entered my graduate studies, I had suspended my legal career and became a *non-practicing* member of a regional bar, which imposed an additional barrier to my engagement in Anna's case. Yet at the same time, in Poland, admission to the bar is perceived as a vocation and a calling to co-work with other legal agencies to defend the rule of law and protect human and civil rights ("Bar Law" 1982). Thus, it was not only because of my professional affiliation that I felt conflicted with my inability to advocate for Anna directly but also because of the professional values that I had internalized as a member of the attorney community and my personal commitment to social justice. For these reasons, I was inclined to engage in an impromptu, informal action to fulfill my professional legal commitment—yet the very same professional standards, with their formal requirements, prevented me from acting or even advising based on my professional legal knowledge of Anna's case. Being aware of these formal limitations to my direct professional legal involvement, I needed to channel my advocacy commitment through informal conversations with practitioners, where they would serve as mere suggestions. I was aware that, otherwise, my intervention in Anna's case could breach provisions for legal representation in Poland and the ethics set for lawyers by the regional bar association.

I realized how social relations of professionalism organize how we position ourselves in activist ethnographic fieldwork and the strategies we develop to meet our social justice goals. Thus, in the institutional ethnographic project, a more dynamic approach to the researcher's professional background and experience is needed, one that moves beyond seeing the importance of professional background and experience only in the initial phase of IE, when the researcher maps the disjuncture in the functioning of institutions, to treating them as an integral element shaping the "politics of fieldwork" (Bisaillon and Rankin 2013). This new approach can help account for power relations that may materialize during the fieldwork, of which relations stemming from one's professional background and commitments are important. Furthermore, taking seriously challenges that emerge because of one's professional background may help researchers with a dual professional commitment to prepare for fieldwork and consider in advance spaces for advocacy intervention.

## “Fieldwork Politics”: Challenges to Advocacy

In the usual design of an IE project, a researcher begins their study by working with a group of people whose experiential knowledge is the starting point for the inquiry. After mapping the *problematic* in institutional practices through interviews with those standpoint informants, and potentially also through the observation of their work/life realities, the researcher proceeds to explore the organization of institutional processes and practices and, more broadly, of the coordination of ruling relations and how this problematic arises out of coordinated ruling regimes and specific power constellations. Accordingly, in this design, the researcher only works with experts and authorities (also called extra-local informants) at the later stage of the project. In this stage, the data collected is through interviews, and the researcher does not usually spend a substantive amount of time with extra-local informants. My own research design departed from this. While my study took a standpoint of institutionalized women (and I carried out the study in their interests), I adopted what could be called a “jump-in” research design. DeVault and McCoy (2006, 22) note that in this kind of design, the researcher “jumps right into the examination of organizational work sites” and specifically investigates “organizational work processes and the activities of people who perform them.” Additionally, they point out that this type of IE focuses on ruling relations. The researcher proceeds with “the detailed examination of administrative and professional work processes,” exploring specifically “how they are carried out, how they are discursively shaped, and how they organize other settings” (22). Accordingly, I collected data at multiple sites of emergency services, psychiatric facilities, and various levels of courts. There, I spent a significant amount of time observing work processes, carrying out interviews and informal conversations, and participating in professional training, conferences, workshops, and so on. I interacted predominately with medical and legal professionals involved in involuntary admission during my data collection.

The practical challenges of working with professional informants while maintaining the “oppressed” standpoint have already been noted by Bisaillon and Rankin (2013) in their post-study reflection on fieldwork challenges. They show how fieldwork politics were challenging to navigate because of the disjuncture between the standpoint grounded in the experiential knowledge they adopted and the “official” knowledge that extra-local informants represented. They argue that the politics embedded in a standpoint position shape

ethnographic fieldwork and pose various challenges, which can even threaten the research process. While I was able to gain access to these research sites due to my “belonging” to the professional community and my previous professional and personal relationships within the medical and judicial systems, my access was precarious and only secured after a lengthy process of institutional approvals by multiple levels of courts, supervisors from psychiatric wards, and governing bodies. It took me from June to December 2013 to obtain all these approvals. Thus, as much as I wanted to engage in the most expansive advocacy for Anna I could, I also needed to carefully consider how to do it most effectively and without foreclosing possibilities for future data collection and research that aimed to illuminate socially and legally troublesome practices during the admission process and to subsequently map space for organizational transformation. While there are several examples of institutional studies where researchers who were practitioners were able to successfully reconcile their professional duties with their researcher standing, due to my research design, this negotiation was incredibly challenging for me, to the extent that I felt it could threaten the future of my data collection. For example, in his doctoral research, Craig Dale (2013), a critical care nurse specializing in mouth care and a researcher in a clinical critical care setting, supported other critical care nurses, his standpoint informants, in their patient care. Similarly, Megan Welsh Carroll (in this volume) studied the social organization of re-entry and, during her fieldwork, assisted women in filing papers for social assistance and used her social work experience to help these women navigate other bureaucratic hurdles.

Yet I was able to use my professional knowledge of legal procedures, along with insights gained through my research, to strategically assess what kind of interventions I should undertake and assess their potential for success. For example, I became aware that advocating for legal representation would contradict the judiciary’s focus on procedural efficiency. Lower court judges often told me about significant workloads, for which they are accountable to the chief justice of their court division. From an interview with a chief of the family and youth division of a regional court, I learned that the successful performance of a judge is understood as their ability to quickly adjudicate cases, ensure minimal delay, and show few overdue cases in the monthly report, sent by the chief of each department to the minister of justice (unpublished data, May 7, 2013). Furthermore, the district court judges are made responsible for enacting financial discipline for their courts and sections (Doll 2017). The

district court judges were clearly aware of the financial consequences of their decisions to grant legal aid for their court's budget ("Decree of October 22, 2015 of the Ministry of Justice"). Responding to my question about her practice of the Supreme Court of Poland's promotion of extensive scope of legal aid assistance in involuntary admission cases, one district court judge stated, "If I appoint an advocate to every single case, the Chief Justice will not be happy about it" (district court judge, unpublished data, February 22, 2013). At the same time, the appellate court tended to adhere to the Supreme Court's recommendation on access to legal aid lawyers for admittees. This affected my decisions around strategizing my interventions in Anna's case and what interventions I could enact pragmatically.

As becomes clear, my professional background and knowledge interacted with other factors during the fieldwork in a dynamic way; at various times, they both opened and foreclosed different constellations of possibilities for activist actions during research. My experience coincides with observations made by Marie Campbell (2006) about activism from the "inside" of agencies. She reflects that finding oneself "arrayed on the opposite side of issues from those with the power" (88) carries numerous implications. Because of the power differences and the fact that their understanding is superseded under the official one (representing a different set of priorities), the activist "must find ways of impressing on the opposition the importance of their view and the course of action it requires" (88). This involves looking strategically at a problem, including what elements to focus on and what course of action will maximize effects. As Campbell (2006) further indicates, challenges can prompt a good analysis that reveals functioning institutions. Thus, beyond my direct intervention, I hope that my chapter can also be useful in this way.

## **Porous Identities, Ruling Relations, and Institutional Ethnography**

My experience illuminates some specific ethical and practical challenges that researchers with other professional credentials or training might face while pursuing ethnographic fieldwork—in this case, the difficulty in navigating fieldwork as a researcher with legal skills in situations where I witnessed abuses that I felt obliged to challenge as both a researcher and a lawyer. Even though I was committed to social justice in both of my roles, I found it difficult to realize my obligations in practice because my actions were constrained by



professional ethical standards, conflicting priorities, the formalism of legal procedures, and the structures of my research sites. This caused me significant emotional distress. Researchers coming from human services have recognized that there are dilemmas that “are especially likely to occur when researchers who are also practitioners recognize the need to acknowledge relevant multiple responsibilities and sensitivities” (Bell and Nutt 2012, 77; see also Miller et al. 2012). When the researcher is accountable institutionally or morally to different sets of professional standards and, even more so, when these conflict with loyalty to subjects for whom the research is being pursued, the researcher may experience these ethical standards as a double burden. This double burden can articulate itself, as was the case in my research, in questions about how to “manage’ all these responsibilities in practice, in ways that all parties would consider ‘ethical” (Bell and Nutt 2012, 76).

Thus, institutional ethnographers must engage with research ethics and the “double responsibility” of a researcher who is also a practitioner belonging to academic and professional communities (Doll 2017). There are two reasons for doing so: first, these are integral realities in the lives of researchers with other professional credentials, and second, it is through analyzing the organization of ethical dilemmas that we gain valuable insight into the ruling regimes that activists and politically engaged scholars aim to challenge. IE is attractive to researchers with professional backgrounds, as it assists them in understanding their workplace worlds and the problems that arise therein. Yet in IE, a researcher’s professional background, with all the experience and knowledge it involves, is seen only as a *terra incognita* from which to launch an inquiry. My fieldwork experience and subsequent analysis problematize this selective attention, prevalent among institutional ethnographers, to researchers’ professional backgrounds. I documented that a researcher’s professional background is an essential element of their presence in the field, carrying methodological and ethical significance for the research practice. The professional background creates “conditions and restraints under which [research] is produced” (Mauthner and Doucet 2003, 424). One does not stop being a professional when one becomes a researcher. As a mode of inquiry, IE needs more discussion about the pragmatics of working in the field. This could offer novice researchers hands-on strategies for navigating the various challenges, including ethical ones, they may encounter during their fieldwork (Bisaillon and Rankin 2013; Grahame and Grahame 2009).

By treating a professional background as an element of the researcher's field presence that contributes to certain experiences of ethical dilemmas, we can approach this background and experience analytically. By analyzing the organization of institutional ethnographic research processes and the ethical dilemmas that may emerge in the fieldwork context, we can gain valuable insight into governing relations (Nichols 2016). I initially saw my roles as a researcher and a professional as being in conflict. A closer analysis of my dilemmas, however, revealed that institutional ethical standards reinforced my standing as an agent of certain institutions in both roles, and that compromised my standing as an ad hoc advocate of the rights of the committed person (Doll 2017). It is essential to recognize that ethical standards are not neutral. Hussey (2012, 13) points out that a "person's 'ethics,' 'morals,' or 'politics' don't just come from anywhere." Serving "as a mechanism for endorsement and quality assurance," Tummons (2014, 419) asserts that professional standards are connected to broader social and legal relations. In my roles, I internalized this kind of professional accountability, whether toward my university or the bar association. My professional ethical commitments forced me to discipline my activist involvement even though this conflicted with my moral and political standing. Acting upon my professional commitments, I sacrificed my ability to help Anna the way I would have wanted, even though I had the knowledge and skills to do so.

Although I could not intervene in Anna's case to the extent and in the manner that I wanted to, I nevertheless ended up with significant research findings on institutional practices that significantly undermine the rights of involuntarily admitted persons. The matter of legal representation, the tensions I felt, and my capacity to intervene in these regards are important to consider, as they speak to the broader social organization of involuntary admission procedures. While institutional priorities constructed limits to my activist involvement, more importantly, they also suppressed the interests of people involuntarily placed in psychiatric facilities. I realized that ethics is a socially organized work of academic and legal professionals that can interfere with the ethics of caring for people in research. Furthermore, the analysis of my ethical dilemma illuminated how the interests of involuntarily committed people "are being marginalized in routine organizational action" (Campbell 2006, 91). By taking seriously my ethical dilemma and challenges surrounding my intervention in Anna's case, I hope that my research has contributed to a better understanding of the potential structural and ethical limitations (as

organized by ruling relations) of advocacy-motivated research in the context of legal and psychiatric systems.

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## 10 Objectivity Regimes

### Challenges for Activist Research in the Academy

Shannon Walsh

Practitioners, students, and scholars doing activist scholarship are often challenged about the merits of their research when they take the chance to explicitly state their political positions. This assumes that where a political position is not stated, research is neutral or objective, which is often also false.

Within institutional settings where high value is placed on neutrality and detachment, there can be pushback against activist researchers who centre subjectivity, overt political dispositions, and small-scale qualitative data. How do demands for objectivity in academic research impact the ethics of activist scholarship? At the same time, how might ideology continue to creep into activist scholarship, and how might self-reflexivity and political activist ethnography (PAE) address this? How do differing notions of ethics in the context of community-based and activist work push against and rupture practices of ethics and objectivity in academic paradigms? What do institutions expect from activist scholars, and how does that intersect with social processes active in the communities in which they work?

In this chapter, I explore these questions through an autoethnographic account of my own experience, told alongside fragments of discussions with activist scholars who reflect on their own research within the academy. By *activist scholars*, I refer to scholars with explicit commitments to community and activist groups, who are often engaged as participants in social movements themselves. In the first section, I use autoethnography to recount

a personal story around frictions and ethical tensions that occur as activist ethnography meets academic processes, in this case a scholarship jury. In the second section, I turn to interviews conducted with a variety of activist scholars who share experiences of ethics, relevance, and objectivity in their academic work. How can we make visible the politico-administrative regimes at work in the academy by looking at these scholars' experiences with it? Later, I use the tools of PAE and IE to reflect on the subjugation of activist knowledge in academia and the challenges activist scholars face as they attempt to produce knowledge *for* activists within the administrative-bureaucratic regime of academia. Finally, I briefly reflect on how activist methodologies should not be understood as inherently ethical, and at times, methods may even mask, rather than reveal, power relations (Hussey 2012). The chapter reflects on practices and solutions rather than proposing any definitive answers, understanding that each context presents specific challenges, choices, and compromises.

### **Navigating Activism and the Academy Using Autoethnography**

Knowledge around practices of power is continually being interrogated by activists through direct engagement with political processes and everyday struggles. Activists develop conceptual ideas through research and strategizing in multiple spaces and on a continual basis: at meetings, on the streets, in late-night discussions, at demonstrations, and at organized events. Such conceptualization continues when writing up memorandums and movement reflections and creating action plans, strategies, and tactics. While these spaces have often been ignored as sites of intellectual development and engagement, there is increasing recognition of the importance of these spaces of knowledge production (Choudry 2015). Activists are drawn into the academy for a variety of reasons; it can be the desire to deepen and expand knowledge, gain cultural capital that might help to further advance social change, or carve a path to economic or career stability where social justice might continue. Of course, identities overlap and collide, and I use the term *activist scholar* to denote people who may move between street- and community-level work where they may be involved in organizing, campaigning, report writing, support work, and academic work in institutions, such as being involved in publishing, teaching, and conferencing. Once inside academic institutions,



activists “doing academia” have multiple kinds of pressures and structures of power that come to organize the ways knowledge is produced.

PAE’s focus on the empirical social processes that occur in the real world that create ruling regimes of academic knowledge production and structures of power through everyday practices can illuminate ways in which “objectivity” becomes a superior academic standard. Codes that devalue political subjectivity can be found in the social organization of peer review processes, awards committees, and tenure reviews and are deeply embedded within academic politico-administrative relations. These norms can present real challenges to research that attempts to disrupt them.

Dorothy Smith (1974) critiqued ideology, and objectivity, as the social organization of knowledge operating through “the imposition of objective, textually-mediated, conceptual practices on a local setting in the interest of ruling it” (G. Smith 1990, 633). It was here where George Smith saw the “epistemological line of fault between the objective knowledge of a regime and [. . .] reflexive, everyday knowledge (i.e., knowledge as members)” (G. Smith 1990, 633). As (at times reluctant) members of the academy, activist scholars create ruptures in the ruling regimes of objectivity, as much as they may also be challenged by it. Through PAE, we may also better ascertain the assumptions we bring to our research while looking closely at how ruling regimes are organized. To interrogate by whom and by what knowing is organized, I approach the questions around objectivity and ethics in activist scholarship through an autoethnography grounded in “the everyday world with the actual experiences of actual individuals” (G. Smith 2006, 48), in this case my own experience navigating objectivity regimes as both a graduate student and an activist scholar.

During my doctoral research, I became acutely aware of the ethical requirements of activist research that relied on my ability to hold on to my subjective positionality and personal ethical commitments alongside the institutional ethical standards, objectivity regimes, and practices of the academy. I reflect on one moment where this tension became visceral using autoethnography (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2008; Gale 2019). Autoethnography is a genre of autobiographical writing and research (Ellis and Bochner 2000) used as a means of uncovering political and social norms at work through reflexively observing personal experience (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Ellis and Bochner 2006). Such an approach allows for a shift in perspective “from an objective to a reflexive one where the sociologist, going beyond the seductions

of solipsism, inhabits an actual world that she is investigating” (G. Smith 1990, 233). Autoethnography became an important tool in understanding my research process, as it “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 274).

The experience where my subjective positionality and personal ethical commitments came to a head with the institutional ethical standards, objectivity regimes, and practices of the academy occurred amid my research in Durban. I was called back to Canada for an interview for a prestigious doctoral scholarship. After a two-day plane journey to Montréal, I trudged nervously through the freshly fallen snow to where my interview would take place. A panel of four distinguished academics, two men and two women, interrogated me on aspects of my research in South Africa. I had arrived in Montréal directly from Siyapila Clinic in Durban, where one of the women I was working with was clinging to life, desperately seeking access to antiretrovirals (ARVs).

Mandisa was living in a shack with six children to care for, no income, and no money for treatment.<sup>1</sup> Her prospects did not look good, and I had been documenting her journey as she moved through ruling regimes, from one government institution to the next, attempting to track the institutional spaces she came up against and how these spaces and practices fit into a broader system of care (or lack thereof) that spanned from the shack settlement to the hospital to the farm.

My primary research site was a community-based HIV drop-in centre in a sprawling, politically active shack settlement. Inspired by PAE, I followed the research directives of a primarily women-based centre on the frontlines of community health care. Volunteer workers provided basic support and health care services for the community of over seven thousand shack dwellers. Many were in need, with infection rates in the settlement rising past 70 percent (Hunter 2005). The more time I spent in the settlement, the more involved I became in the community, in local social movements, and in the lives of the people who were becoming friends. Mandisa, initially a home-based care worker as part of the drop-in centre, was now on the edge of her life and being denied treatment because she did not have the funds to pay for it. Any residual

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1 The name Mandisa is a pseudonym.

attempt to be a distanced observer evaporated as Mandisa's life increasingly hung in the balance. I began to directly attempt to help her access ARVs.

As I told Mandisa's story back in Montréal to the distinguished panel, one of the jurists curtly interrupted, visibly irritated. He questioned research methods that focused on the life stories of such a few people, grounded in a community-based movement, and my direct involvement at times in their lives. He wanted to know the statistics: How would I collect numbers on infection rates in the settlement? Why was I following Mandisa through the health care process? Why was I involved? His tone was sharp. I explained that a great deal of statistics had already been collected. More than one thousand people were dying every day of AIDS-related illnesses in South Africa. The provincial HIV infection rate hovered at 45 percent in KwaZulu-Natal. There were an estimated seven out of ten people having HIV infection or AIDS in the shack settlements. There were plenty of numerical facts available. In fact, one of my respondents in Durban, a child welfare social worker, had emphatically reported that they were so overwhelmed on the ground that they had no need for new statistics. "We know the infection rates; we need action," she told me. There is a real tension between the knowledge people need and the knowledge demanded by institutions, which in turn govern their lives. I explained to the jurist that while I was doing research, I also had become part of the lives of the people I was working with as I moved with them through the various levels of bureaucracy and governmentality around health care. The jurist audibly gasped and turned to the others, saying, "It sounds like she's talking about *intervening*! How can she maintain objectivity?" His outburst was awkward and threw the others into a strange silence. I cited feminist and qualitative research that had evolved ideas around research subjectivity, activist ethnography, and social change. One of the other jurists made silent eye contact with me from across the table, and we seemed to share a moment of understanding. The moment passed. The tension between work *for people* versus work *about people for academia* felt stark in this moment. The conceptual practices of power were made visible in the ways that abstract, numerical knowledge about people's lives is the optimal and most valued form of knowledge in academia.

I concede I may have read the jurist's disdain for activist research incorrectly. Perhaps he was not as irritated as he seemed with my approach, merely doing his due diligence. Nonetheless, the tone and tension of the exchange left a strong impression. Often, norms are internalized and adopted

unwittingly, and the jurists were likely enacting and governing institutional forms of knowledge in line with stated institutional priorities. It is during these kinds of micro-moments that the social processes and norms of the academy are materially enforced. It was a moment of visibility within the ruling regimes of knowledge production, in this case between the senior academics acting as adjudicators and a graduate student. I was learning the ropes, still being trained in the language and social practices of the institution.

Our divergent sense-making was on display. For the jury, the purpose, rigour, reliability, and ethical commitments, as related to academic norms, were in question. For me, the purpose, ethical commitments, and reliability of my research had a direct relationship to the community members with whom I was working. I was drawn back to the sense-making that would happen at the community level, where people living with AIDS (PLWA) were frustrated by the lack of access to life-saving health care, including ARVs, and their belief that academics were only contributing piles of paper to already well-documented issues, and not committed ethically, materially, or reliably to the task of changing a situation in which people were dying daily. These spaces were such different parts of the complex social relations that I was trying to work through in the literature, the writing, and the being and doing in the world.

In that moment in front of the jury, I felt the weight of the academic institution demanding a distanced, numbers-based objectivity. Institutional ethnography gave me a way to examine this small moment for the subtle, relational dynamics of power operating within the everyday practices of a ruling regime, bringing some light to the barely visible ways that social discipline, privilege, and dominant forms of knowledge are reproduced. I realized that the adjudicator and I had divergent understandings of the purpose, rigour, and reliability of my research through our different social processes of sense-making. We must remember that “sense making is not a process happening in an individual mind; rather, it is a social process” (Hussey 2012, 8). These micro-moments pile up in the life of activist scholarship, where the force of institutional power can obscure other ethical commitments. In fact, our understandings of ethical commitments are inherently organized differently, and other academics may well believe they are upholding their commitments as an oppositional position to my own. To enter this space can at times feel like becoming a split person. As Dorothy Smith (2005) reminds us, even though

we are taught to reproduce hierarchies of scholarship and theories, there are other ways of knowing.

That small moment, and others like it, posed questions around ethics and objectivity that I have carried with me ever since. From my perspective, it was far more unethical not to “intervene”—to document Mandisa’s death—when direct efforts could have been taken to prolong her life and quality of life. The jurist’s bewildered comment echoed in my head. I considered my role as an insider/outsider and wondered if I was too involved in Mandisa’s life. I contemplated whether focus placed in other ways might have provided more reliable, scalable data that would contribute to change via a more traditional route. The sense-making of distance and objectivity that is taught in courses, outlined in ethics reviews, and discussed in academic articles was deeply ingrained in me. I had been a member of academic life for decades, even if I knew that there was no field “out there” to retreat to or to run away from. The HIV drop-in centre, the hospital wards, and the university’s plush offices were all part of a continuous field of ethical engagement. Yet each world, in its different way, asks us to resolve this tension, to stake a claim of integrity. For the academic jury, the question was “Where is your objective integrity as a researcher?” while for Mandisa and the other women at the drop-in centre, the question was “Where is your ethical integrity as a human being?” At times, the gap seems insurmountable between much of the institutional framework of the academy and what feminist, qualitative, and activist literature endorses. These tensions are continually arising in various ways and forums. As Campbell and Gregor write, “Institutional ethnographers explore the *actual* world in which things happen, in which people live, work, love, laugh, and cry. Exploring that is a different research undertaking from approaches that objectify people and events, and slot them into theoretical categories to arrive at explanation” (2002, 17).

Activist research is messy and needs to be so. We are part of *this world*, not merely its distanced observer. I agree with Aisha Ong when she writes, “[There is] no objectivity that stands outside a moral position . . . because power operates through hegemonic constructions of social reality, making commonsensical, routine, and ‘natural’ the immoral arrangements that perpetuate social inequalities” (1995, 429). Furthermore, the ethics of the research encounter are never explicit. Ethics involves informed consent and due diligence and is about relational aspects of *being-in-the-world*, accountability, and responsibility toward those we encounter. At times, institutionally organized

ethics may encroach on the ethics of humanity during the research process. Feminists, both inside and outside the academy, have written and discussed the silencing and dismissal of research that involves working *with* participants rather than *on* them. Yet there is something quite idealist in this framing too, as though it were ever possible to create a space free of power differentials and asymmetry.

Situating ethnography around the activist insider allowed for new spaces to open around how knowledge is produced and by whom. It emphasized the complexity of social relations and relations of power. In this kind of work, the researcher is necessarily involved in social movements. Yet this can also blind research to biases: from romantic ideas of the ideological purity of social movement subjects to being less willing to critique leaders who are key academic informants or friends. Too often academic researchers try to conceal their bonds, friendships, biases, and affective ties with their research subjects. These relations bubble beneath the surface, with the potential of spilling over at any time. Seen as dangerous, as compromising the objectivity of the researcher, these biases are kept hidden. Yet social processes that create structures of power always operate within affective relationships (Walsh and Soske 2016). Dispositions, biases, and skewed thinking can be reinforced by keeping affective networks hidden. With these questions and issues in mind, I turn to other activist scholars to gain some insight into the dilemmas of objectivity and ethics in their research practice.

## **Activist Scholars: Relevance, Objectivity, and Ethics**

The interviews that follow are with activist scholars within my own social network whose scholarly work I am familiar with. These excerpts were done just as I joined my first academic faculty position in 2013 and 2014, and they are fragments of longer-standing discussions with activists navigating the academy. These discussions have been ongoing for years. The activist scholars interviewed were, and continue to be, invested in social change in South Africa, Spain, Hong Kong, and Canada. This chapter emerges nearly ten years after the interviews were initially conducted, creating a dynamic of looking back at an earlier period of activist experiences in the academy that stand in relation to contemporary experiences of the same phenomena. How have things changed, and how have they stayed the same? These interviews marked a few distinct moments in time, but such discussions had been ongoing before

and have continued ever since. Each activist scholar was asked to reflect on ways they had been challenged on the objectivity and ethics of their research by the institutions in which they were engaged. As members of a community that may rupture the regimes of objectivity often enforced by the academy, I asked them what had been their experience in disrupting or confronting existing regimes.

Miguel Martinez worked in Spain for many years as a researcher and participant in European squatting movements. In 2009, Martinez launched the SqEK (Squatting Europe Kollektive), aimed at creating an activist research network focused on squatting throughout Europe. During the same period, he was straddling a career as an urban sociologist and a manager of the Municipal Housing Department in Vigo. Martinez is deeply invested in multiple and intersecting worlds of activist and academic research. He describes how in his experience, the freedom to express his political perspective is often hampered by the ruling regimes of the academy. He attempts to navigate these as best he can, finding spaces to subvert the systems to his own needs and the needs of the communities he works with. Martinez speaks specifically to the academic systems of anonymous peer review that, even unwittingly, enforce a regime of objectivity or neutrality on the way research proposals are written. In an email to the author on August 11, 2014, Martinez explains,

Our freedom to express our points of view, rationality or knowledge depends heavily on those usually anonymous gatekeepers. And therefore, we tend to adopt an apparent “neutral” and overwhelmingly informed way of writing or presenting ourselves. It’s a form of self-repression that can only be surpassed or avoided in case we create our own free environments to express ourselves and our own publications, or if we participate in friendly spaces. Otherwise, there is the more risky, but brave, option of facing directly all the criticisms while struggling always from our most sincere standpoint. . . . Going to your point, if I propose a research project about a hot political issue, I know in advance that the likelihood of obtaining funds is by not saying what I really think about many of those involved in the issue, with the hope that once I get the money I would be able to write more freely what I want, and this usually happens.<sup>2</sup>

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2 While the discussions related in this chapter continued over time, the quotes in this section are from email communications between the author and Melissa Garcia

Martinez attempts to play both fields at once and find a way through the various ordering regimes in the best way possible as he tries to hold on to what makes sense for him in the activist worlds he feels are the outlets for his research. It is interesting that the subversion Martinez chooses to use is that of camouflage. He hides his perspective and attempts to work in two registers simultaneously.

Melissa Garcia Lamarca has been active in anti-eviction social struggles in Spain as well as working within formal academic research environments to look at insurgent claims on urban development. In her work, Garcia Lamarca attempts to represent varying and multiple points of view, allowing for a full picture of the social issue to surface. She describes her research process, quite like PAE, as building from actors' discourses to investigate how particular institutional regimes are organized to strategically resist them. In an email to the author, she writes,

Aside from being engaged for almost a year with housing rights platforms whose struggles are at the core of my academic and political interest, I have also interviewed people working in banks (or retired) and in regional government and attended a real estate investor conference. Methodologically this provides some "air" of objectivity in terms of engaging with other actors/perspectives, but what is the most politically interesting is to use these actors' discourses to understand how they have lived/experienced certain processes, to make evident systemic contradictions, how certain ways of thinking are normalized, etc. [This] can give more ammo to defend an (anti-capitalist, egalitarian, etc.) position by having spoken with elites. . . . Of course it is often not possible to access these people but if it is, it can be an interesting approach, and surprisingly insightful. (M. Garcia Lamarca, personal communication, August 14, 2014)

For Garcia Lamarca, empirical data are grounded in how actors have "lived/experienced certain processes" to resist them and give her work what she calls an "air" of validity within the sense-making of the university. As Kinsman notes, activists assess research validity differently than academics, looking for

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Lamarca, August 14, 2014; Miguel Martinez, August 11, 2014; Chris Dixon, August 14, 2014; Claire Ceruti, August 11, 2014; and Mondli Hlatshwayo, August 11, 2014.



how they can depend on research findings to develop strategies and tactics for resisting ruling regimes toward activist goals (Kinsman this volume).

For Miguel Martinez, the regimes of objectivity in the academy have systematically excluded him, in an “implicit way, by being excluded from many standard or mainstream academic and media events, books, journals, etc.” Working in an urban studies department, Martinez chooses to integrate a reflexive position into his process while still hanging on to the structuring ruling regimes of the university and society, which he believes will allow the work to gain further traction. In personal correspondence with the author, he explains,

For me, in social sciences, “objectivity” is a very ambitious goal and quite difficult to reach, so I also prefer “reflexivity,” “intersubjectivity” or just something like “engaged-rationality-under-collective-construction.” Regardless of all my (political and social) subjectivity, at [a] certain point, I need to engage with society (and academia) at large, so I need to justify and argue in a rational manner my “points of view” as “good knowledge” about society versus “bad knowledge.” So, this is a critical and never-ending stance.

When thinking about the sense-making of ethical positions, both Garcia Lamarca and Martinez speak about their relationships to movements. Martinez claims he has faced many dilemmas around justifying political subjectivity in his work, “especially with activists (always suspicious about the ‘true truth’ of your engagement) because for many scholars this is not a significant question. How do you deal with it?” Martinez is aware of operating in two structuring regimes at once. Conversely, Garcia Lamarca says she is not frequently asked to justify her work among activists. She believes this is due to an assumed sense-making and common ground with people whom she works with beyond the frame of research. She explains,

I have been surprised to not feel any pressure whatsoever to justify my political subjectivity with activists I am engaged with, but I think this is more due to the nature of the movement as well as informal conversations about politics where our (shared) political perspectives emerge: the latter is thanks to spending an extended period of time so these relationships can develop. I also made clear from the start that I wanted to contribute to the movement and have been constantly trying to find ways to do so—it has not been easy but again with time different ways have emerged.

Political subjectivity is a theme that constantly surfaces with activist scholars. I think of Chris Dixon, the author of *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements* (2014). In his book, Dixon interviews organizers and documents work done by anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist activists and movements across Canada and the United States. Dixon describes himself on his blog *Writing with Movements* as follows:

I'm a white, middle-class, straight cisgendered and able-bodied man originally from Anchorage, Alaska, on Dena'ina Territory, which I still regard as my home. I'm also a longtime anarchist with a deep commitment to collective struggles for liberation, and I have been involved in social movements for more than twenty years. I am part of a political tendency that prioritizes grassroots organizing, creative direct action, movement-building, tenderness and care, coalition work, developing institutions, vision-based strategy, and engaging in dialogue with other sectors of the left, all with the aim of challenging and transforming social relations of domination. (Dixon 2024)

Because Dixon looks at activist knowledge production explicitly, he believes the subjective position of his research is perhaps more easily accepted in academic environments. It is also clear that for Dixon, sense-making is much more grounded in movement-focused regimes than in institutional ones. This may also be in part because of his race, sexuality, class, and gender, along with the fact that he has never tried to “play the game” of being an academic. In personal correspondence with the author, he explains,

I haven't had much experience with having my objectivity questioned or being asked to justify political subjectivity. I think this is for two main reasons: (1) I'm a white guy from a middle-class background and so I'm accorded way more legitimacy in university contexts, even when doing work that pushes the envelope; and (2) I haven't pursued a career in academe and so have had much less need to engage with university-based intellectuals who might raise questions about my objectivity.

As Dixon alludes, context is of critical importance. All the scholars quoted above work in North America or Europe. In South Africa, the political context significantly changes the discussion around ethics and objectivity. In Canada—where institutional structures of power built on white supremacy, colonialism, and sexism have never been fully challenged or dismantled—people

can be lulled by alienating statistics, whereas in other political economic contexts like South Africa, the neutrality of an institution is continually questioned, whether it is a school, government department, university, or police department. Across society, there is an awareness that apartheid-era institutions were deeply political and ideological. This distrust of institutional neutrality and an awareness of the political and social processes that create structures of power are lived experiences in South Africa, and this grounds the work of activist scholars. During the struggle against apartheid, the adherence to ideas of “objective distance” within university structures was jettisoned. Academics played a major role in the anti-apartheid movement, but they were also vocal in maintaining the status quo. As long-time South African unionist, organizer, and academic Claire Ceruti explains,

When I arrived at varsity, our sociology lecturers were taking up debates inside the movement. Taking sides against apartheid was implied, and our own grasp of the world was also thereby implied to be somewhat indeterminate by the focus on strategic debates. Objective/subjective seemed less important than idealist/materialist. The kind of Marxism I grew up in assumed that your position in society would affect your interests and hence your perspectives on society. “Objective” was therefore the things “outside” of our own heads, rather than a position any human could claim to practice. At the same time, it was assumed that changing the world required understanding it accurately (without claiming to be unbiased). So that meant, at least theoretically, constantly testing our own assumptions. So, if anyone ever said “you’re not objective” my answer would be, “No shit, Sherlock! But I’ve declared my bias. What’s yours?”

In a context such as South Africa, most academics were forced to understand, through struggle, the political nature of knowledge production. Given that it was institutionalized racism that laid the foundations for the apartheid system, for South African scholars, the idea of an objective researcher is suspect. The sense that ideas and their application serve systemic regimes of power is starkly clear.

Mondli Hlatshwayo is a South African activist, organizer, and academic. Hlatshwayo explained to me that he attempted to deal with his political position when he entered the academy through reflexivity. This meant including details of his personal biography in his doctoral thesis. For Hlatshwayo, his

research journey is intimately linked to questions of race, class, and political positioning. I quote his story at length, as it shows the dynamic nature of his subjectivity and multiple identities, remaining connected to movement spaces while also attempting to reconcile his institutional position within the academy:

Predicated on the assumptions of “reflexivity,” as a researcher of this [PhD] project, I was also caught up in this complex relationship between “insider” and “outsider” positions. I am a Black man who grew up in a society where race “matters.” Together with other Blacks, I lived in a rural area, which lacked access to basic services. My parents are black working class and worked in the textile factories of Ladysmith. Later, my mother was retrenched and had to work as a domestic worker in a residential area reserved for whites, in Ladysmith. After I matriculated, I worked as a part time gardener for a liberal white family who offered moral support and who encouraged me to further my studies.

While studying in a boarding school in Pietermaritzburg in the 1980s, I became interested in the activities of the UDF and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). These organizations were to change my life. As a young man, I became part of the anti-apartheid movement. My role was limited to taking part in marches and protest actions in the Edendale area. I completed formal schooling in 1990 and became unemployed. I then worked in a Taiwanese factory at Ladysmith in 1993 and left the factory for a shop where I worked as a general worker. I then organised workers for the South African Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers’ Union (SACCAWU) in several shops that were part of a family business. I became a shop steward of SACCAWU in 1993.

In the 1990s, I was a member of the African National Congress (ANC) and represented SACCAWU in the ANC, COSATU and SACP tri-partite alliance meetings in Ladysmith. At that time, I developed a close relationship with Kassim Goga, who was a member of the ANC. I was expelled from work because of my union activities. After some discussions with comrades in Ladysmith, I decided to go back to further my studies at the “University of the Left,” that is, the University of the Western Cape, where I became a student activist with a working-class orientation. After completing my post-graduate studies, I worked for ten years at Khanya College, a labour and community support

organisation. In my capacity as a researcher at the college, my main research area was trade unions and social movements. (Hlatshwayo 2013)

Hlatshwayo recounts his position as a globalized worker, union organizer, shop steward, ANC party member, graduate student, student activist, community organizer, and researcher, as well as an African man in apartheid South Africa and the recipient of support from a liberal white family. It is a complex array of stories that tell of his journey toward the academy, none of which are complete in their descriptions or easy to disentangle in relation to how he approaches the research setting.

Finally, the focus and ethics of activist research itself can be affected by its position within the academy. Many activist scholars attempt to occupy a concrete location in academic environments and faculties while continuing to participate in grassroots movements. This can be quite contentious for scholars who want to create movement-relevant theory, for example, but who are primarily writing in academic contexts. These two readerships can pull the writing, research, and focus of the work apart. At the same time, for so many activist researchers working in a neoliberal academic environment, the emphasis on “outputs” in recognized academic journals and conferences can hamper both the time and the energy spent on creating work aimed at social movements or community groups. In addition, as Martinez explains, the politics of the university system become more intractable as researchers become more deeply embedded in the system: “Experiences around the questions you raise are quite different as a PhD student and then at different levels of academic positions, where there are certainly more pressures and challenges in terms of (explicitly) having radical politics especially as universities become more and more neoliberal.” For each of these activist scholars, then, there is a complex negotiation that happens between the institutional space and the social issues that are at the heart of the research.

## **Dangers and Ethical Issues**

Another issue is that academic writing about social movements does not feed back into movements at all. Journal articles and academic books are often not accessible or written in clear ways and, therefore, not engaged by activists. Additionally, work done by activist scholars might also be read to gain

insider accounts of movement dynamics that, for previous decades, activists worked hard to keep private. Revealing the details of how the insides of social movements operate could be damaging to movements, as it brings internal fault lines into public sight. There is almost no discussion on the ethics of revealing insider knowledge when political stakes are high, such as when groups are fighting multinationals, governments, or other powerful stakeholders. Activist scholarship would greatly benefit from establishing a hearty discussion around the ethics of reporting activist and social movement knowledge. These considerations should include thinking through various levels of ethical concerns in the research space and being up-front with informants about potential vulnerabilities if the research is read by the police or state or is the target of social movement action. Accounts of tactics, direct action, and other strategic debates may be unethical to reveal if participants are not able to fully envision the life cycle of a published article available to the government, law enforcement, and so on. This seems to be a particularly important discussion to have when doing in-depth reporting and documentation with social movements that might trust the researcher as a former/current activist insider without fully understanding the potential dangers. In such a burgeoning area of research, it is important to discuss the kinds of ethical challenges that are particular to this form of knowledge dissemination.

## **Conclusion: Tensions of Activist Scholarship**

Since this research was first conducted, there has been a well-spring of activist engagement within academic environments that is ongoing. From Black Lives Matter to #MeToo, voices that were once on the margins have grown louder and have been given more importance. While on the surface, it may seem that things are changing, in practice, alternative knowledge production for activists and movements is still a fraught space within the academic environment. The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, for example, who has written extensively about the everyday practices and structures of power, resigned from her institution as an act of protest. As part of the institution, she increasingly turned her focus to the university as a site of power itself. Ahmed explained how attempting to bring critical language and ideas to institutional spaces in fact hollowed out the very goals such criticality attempted to transform. Referring to her experience as part of a group writing a race equity policy, she explains,

Writing that policy was my first hard institutional lesson. We brought what I thought of as a critical language into it, but the university was able to use the policy—which was about articulating racism in the institution—as evidence of how good it was at race equality. What I learned from that was how easily we can end up being interpellated. It's not only that there's a gap between statements about inclusivity and diversity and what actually happens. It's also that we end up working to create the appearance of what isn't the case. (Binyam 2022)

Ahmed eventually famously resigned, coming out with the book *Complaint!* in 2021, which explores institutional power through testimonies from academics and students who have made complaints about harassment, bullying, and unequal work conditions at universities. The structures of power at work in institutions are strong and ongoing. Methods developed by activist scholars that aim to correct such power imbalances and contribute to processes of social justice can be invigorating to the research process, yet it is worth remembering that these methods are not inherently ethical or always effective, as the above example illustrates. Ethics and the dilemmas around activist methodologies still have many hurdles to overcome. A method is a process, but a process must always be further informed by principles.

As I have set out in this chapter, the tensions around academic knowledge and the governance of academic standards by those in power often subjugate and marginalize activist knowledge. The tension between making movement-relevant research and simultaneously creating work that meets the demands of the neoliberal academy is not always easy to navigate. Many scholars find the pressure from the academy more persuasive in the end and sacrifice some of the action or process-oriented goals to meet the demands of publishing and outputs. Race, gender, and class become real factors in how much scope researchers are given to experiment and push the envelope. Somewhere in trying to squeeze into the academic box, some of the reasons activist scholars came to research in the first place get lost. Relevance slips away as the desire for neat narratives that fit the intellectual trends of today takes prominence. As Aziz Choudry (2014, 113) warns,

Rather than building an analysis that is based on actual practice and useful to movements for social change there is a temptation and perhaps a danger of imposing typologies on activist research. The alternative is to seek to understand such research processes through

starting from actual practice and the sense activist researchers make of this, as well as the ways in which movements with which they are connected understand, use, and are often part of the research process themselves.

This chapter explores multiple tensions and dilemmas that exist when doing activist research. Through autoethnography and interviews with activist scholars, the chapter examines how varying ethical considerations in activism and academia evolve and can be untangled. Activist scholarship can and should challenge the politico-administrative regimes of the academy to create new spaces to investigate ethics, objectivity, relevance, and subjectivity. After nearly a decade since the initial research and interviews in this chapter were first conducted, the uneasy relationship between activism and the academy has been given more attention, with many scholar-activists attempting to bridge the divide. In some places, activist knowledge in institutions is more contested than ever, while in other ways, there has been an evolution of the language and practices that many activists have fought for. It is clear that objectivity regimes and the challenges scholar-activists face in academic institutions will continue to be contested and investigated.

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# Conclusion

Agnieszka Doll, Laura Bisailon, and Kevin Walby

Previously Canada-bound, institutional and political activist ethnographies have been making their way outside of Canada to the United States, Europe, and lately also other countries, where they have been taken up by both academics and members of social movements. This collection reflects this geographical diversity by featuring research conducted by political activist ethnographers and institutional ethnographers in Canada, the United States, Aotearoa / New Zealand, Bangladesh, and Poland on a wide variety of topics. This collection has had a specific objective to introduce political activist ethnography (PAE) and institutional ethnography (IE)—two research strategies that carry significant utility for social organizing—to broader audiences of activists and activist researchers through a series of specific research examples that used IE and PAE. Before reflecting on the future of IE and PAE in enhancing activism and social mobilization, we will first outline some unifying empirical, conceptual, and methodological themes of the volume in relation to IE and PAE. Our discussion will address the themes of mapping social relations of struggle, dismantling speculative accounts, engaging with activism-research-professionalism divide, and attending to multiple tensions that emerge in the practice of PAE.

## Mapping the Terrain of Struggle

Mapping social relations of struggle is a strategy first proposed by George W. Smith (1990) and later expanded on by other political activist ethnographers. Mapping in IE and PAE provides an analytical and “visual representation

of sequences of action and interchanges that connect the activities of individuals working in different parts of institutional complexes” (Doll and Walby 2019, 152). Collectively, the chapters bring to light a plurality of repertoires that activists and advocates are using. This includes direct action (Withers, Kinsman, Deveau, and Choudry; chapters 1 to 4), direct action support work (Kinsman, Deveau, and Welsh Carroll; chapters 2, 3, and 8), “document and demonstrate” strategies (Kinsman and Deveau; chapters 2 and 3), navigating bureaucracies with or on behalf of clients (Kinsman, Welsh Carroll, and Doll; chapters 2, 8, and 9), activities involved in coalition building (Kinsman, Deveau, and Choudry; chapters 2 to 4), and policy-oriented empirical research for marginalized populations or underrepresented activist groups (Withers, Kinsman, Choudry, Bradford, Sirett, Bisailon, Welsh Carroll, Doll, and Walsh; chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 to 10). Those activist interventions and research practices are mostly unknown to anyone outside of the network of actors participating in them. Contributors to this volume illustrate a variety of forms of activism and advocacy organizing. Activist research is grounded in the realities of activists’ and advocates’ work, so it must account for the repertoires from which activists pull when they design, develop, and perform their interventions.

This collection also provides a range of examples of how mapping is done. Mapping emerges as a multi-faceted practice that may involve activities of researching, organizing, strategizing, and direct activist intervention performed at multiple sites of struggle. In her chapter, Sue Bradford, an activist, organizer, and researcher, explores (through sizable empirical data) the historical absence of left-wing think tanks in Aotearoa / New Zealand and explores ways for building this capacity. Bradford’s projects, along with others in the volume (Withers, Kinsman, Deveau, and Choudry; chapters 1 to 4), showcase from a practical point of view how the everyday work of activists grounded in their realities opens sites for a critical investigation of those social relations. Moreover, contributors explore how mapping can collectivize and democratize research (Withers, Kinsman, Deveau, Choudry, Bradford, and Welsh Carroll chapters; 1 to 4, 5, and 8) and strengthen a group’s capacities so that everyone can potentially become an activist researcher and enhance pedagogical and memory work (Kinsman, chapter 2, but also Choudry, chapter 4).

The work of mapping as a collective endeavour also helps train social movement actors to identify how thinking and actions are socially organized (Kinsman and Choudry; chapters 2 and 4). Building new maps or reflecting on

older ones (“memory work,” pedagogical aspects of mapping) allows activists to see how to use the formal political system to achieve change (Kinsman, this volume). Choudry further notes that activist research is embedded in collaborative relationships between activists and organizations through which trust and a commitment to working together are fostered. Those steps “allow for the identification of research that is most relevant to struggles and the communication of that research in ways that are meaningful and useful for movement building” (Choudry, chapter 4). Such collective knowledge production creates preparedness for current and future struggles. This collection illuminates how PAE’s methods and tools can be relevant for activists and provides examples of various kinds of collective endeavours (e.g., Welsh Carroll, working with and learning from service providers).

## Debunking Speculative Accounts

Explicating movement capacities—including possible allies, strategies, and tactics—and identifying weak points and contradictions in ruling relations are important tasks for organizing. Challenging ruling relations requires that movements shift their organizing from a moral critique of “others” toward how people’s practices come about. In such instances, George Smith argues, “these become the ‘causes’ of action or inaction by a regime. Instead of events being produced by people in concrete situations, they are said to be ‘caused’ by ideas such as ‘AIDSphobia’” (G. Smith 1995, 22). He illustrated how ideological accounts focused on “homophobia” or “AIDSphobia” prevented people from being able to learn about the social organization of police practice and government hesitancy to provide AIDS medicine. Tools provided by institutional and political activist ethnographies illustrate how people (including clients of agencies) make sense of the world through ideological lenses that may be individualized rather than highlighting organizational and institutional issues.

Contributors undertake the critical work of debunking speculative accounts of how institutions against which activists struggle function and how things happen, for example, by exposing both how people use ideological accounts of evil workers and the notion of betrayal to make sense of malfunctioning systems and how workers use ideological accounts to categorize clients and construct their institutional actions accordingly. In this volume, Kinsman illustrates how class relations are produced in the daily activities of services workers who divide living in poverty as distinct from the broader

working class (chapter 2). Similar analysis and observations appear in Welsh Carroll's chapter as she traces relations including race and class that organize formerly incarcerated women's access to resources (chapter 8). Class, race, gender, immigration status, and other relations can be exposed when speculative accounts are debunked. By reflexively accounting for her presence in the field and contrasting her experience with the experience of her research participants (the well-dressed white lady and the perception of the "typical angry client—poor, Black, and female"), Welsh Carroll examines the intersections of race, gender, and class as socially organized practices. Sirett (chapter 6) demonstrates how colonial relations between North American and Global South non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are reproduced in Western NGOs' everyday work around funding practices. These insights regarding class, class production, and class alienation/divisions are important. Although those relations often sustain the focus of anti-poverty and anti-racism work, they have not been as central as they should be in political activist and institutional ethnographies.

These are all textually mediated processes that can be explored to enhance activist struggle. Developing critical reading skills will enable activists to read state regulations for their social organization and the ideological work they do (Kinsman, Deveau, Choudry, Bisailon, and Doll; chapters 2 to 4, 7, and 9). Agency workers draw on those regulations, and it becomes one way that texts organize local sites. Deveau (chapter 3) analyzes how the government produces ruling and ideological relations when it attempts to advance its agenda. Such an investigation can help activists go beyond their experiential knowledge to explore the work of agencies, policies, laws, and institutional processes that produce relations of class, race, and gender. Another potential future direction for PAE is work that critically interrogates commonly used but rarely unpacked terms, such as *neoliberalism*, that activists might use as explanatory tropes instead of explicating the social relations that produce the conditions in which people live and work.

## Academic Research Divide

Contributors to this collection challenge us to rethink the academic activist divide and its limits when applied to politically engaged ethnographies. They challenge the separation of activist research from the actual life/work of movements by showing how activist direct action, activist organizing, and

advocacy-infused fieldwork are at once key sites for struggle and essential places for activist knowledge production. They expose how the imposition of professional academic standards on research and knowledge production within social movements results in the professionalization of activist research and the exclusion of specific ways of knowing. Walsh (chapter 10) centrally addresses this issue. Choudry (chapter 4) argues that for more professionalized NGOs, grassroots knowledge production may be seen as invalid when the former internalizes the conception of a professional researcher as an expert and of academic research standards (predominately Western) as universal standards. Choudry suggests knowledge is only valued if people with certain qualifications, social capital, and status produce it.

Here we reflect on the hazard of institutionalization that political activists and grassroots research may face if incorporated into academic spaces (e.g., involving activists in producing standards for academic research), which can contribute to the loss of activist research's radical potential. This shift has been observed as aspects of IE have become institutionalized in university disciplines and professional locations. Based on his political ethnographic work organizing with other activists associated with S-CAP, Kinsman has demonstrated that such radical spaces for critical discussion, mapping, and decision-making skills are crucial for "moving the struggle forward."

There are many possibilities for equal collaboration between academics and activists. Welsh Carroll and other contributors to this volume deepen the discussion between activist researchers inside and outside academia involved in politically engaged research. Choudry discusses collective knowledge production, as does Kinsman. Bradford's research further points to the need and desire for a collective vision and a shared way of achieving that vision. Her study was one way for participants to think through that vision collectively and which organizations might be useful in working collectively toward a shared purpose. For PAE to remain radical and relevant, the pathways between movement spaces and the academy must be well-trodden to open possibilities for intellectual work to be done in common spaces within social movements.

## **Engaging Frontally with Tension and Contradiction**

Contributors to this volume have problematized NGOs' professionalism and professionalism as a ruling relation. Professionalization of activism coordinates how activists, researchers, funding organizations, governing bodies, and

so on interact to achieve institutional goals. Already in the 1990s, institutional ethnographer Roxana Ng (cited in Campbell and Gregor 2004, 115), in her study of working with an agency for immigrant women, noted that in the course when activist agencies began to rely on government funding, “the perspective of the agency shifted from one who attended to the lived experiences of the clients to the perspective of an impersonal institutional order.” This insight has been advanced by our contributors, who empirically demonstrate how the ruling relations of professionalism, within the context of activist organizing and activist research, shift and dislocate the accountability of social agencies, partnering global North and South NGOs, and activist researchers toward the state, funders, and other professional bodies. The professionalization of activism and social justice organizing is visible not only in the instalment of corporate forms of organizations in NGOs but also if one looks at the social relations of funding. The fact that the processes of state funding and regulations transform community groups into professional groups (Kinsman, Sirett, Welsh Carroll; chapters 2, 6, and 8) is a functional trope in institutional ethnographic research (see Ng 1996; Walker 1990; and the edited collection by Griffith and D. Smith 2014). Kinsman illuminates how this collaboration of workers within ruling relations is socially organized by investigating state funding and regulation processes that have transformed community groups into professionalized groups.

The perils of professionalization within social movements and grassroots agencies have been made explicit in the work of Sirett (chapter 6). Sirett examines “how partnership programming and its funding arrangements were shaping international development assistance and affecting the work and social relations of the two activist NGOs.” Her institutional ethnographic work illuminates how the “discourse of capacity building” that responded to CIDA’s Voluntary Sector Program conflicted with the NGO staff’s experiential knowledge of how best to engage in partnership with each other to accomplish their social justice aims. It also challenged the Bangladeshi NGO staff’s capacity to use their local experiential knowledge and their members to guide their work. Instead of focusing on their members’ needs, the Bangladeshi NGO concentrated on realizing the Canadian government funding agency’s priorities. Sirett’s work illustrates empirically how “in the context of NGO professionalism, people [were] actively and strategically participating in capacity-building discourses, [and that discourse connected] how Canadian



and Bangladeshi NGO workers interact[ed] with one another and with farmers in rural Bangladesh.”

In this sense, this volume showcases how the expansive view of PAE (Hussey 2012) allows us to read and map across the ruling relations that activists and movements organize against and that govern movements’ internal operations. Adding to the existing literature (e.g., De Montigny 1995; Eastwood 2005; Diamond 1992; Nichols 2016), it also illustrates empirically how processes of detachment, abstraction, and fragmentation occur when ruling relations, such as social relations of research professionalization, begin to organize the activities of people, including those involved in organizing.

Doll exposes another aspect of professionalization that regulates her work as a researcher associated with a university and as a trained lawyer (although not practicing) and poses tensions with her advocacy commitments. Her insights into these professional relations emerged in the context of a case she followed and regarding which she observed several rights breaches of an involuntarily admitted woman when she was considering intervening in the “case” (although it would have been a different kind of intervention than Welsh Carroll, who provided direct assistance to her research participants). Doll’s ability to intervene (in the initial moments of the case development) would require revealing some confidential information acquired during interviews. She argues that “while [her] professional status as a researcher and legal professional opened important doors for [her], it also imposed significant limits.” Depending on the context, researchers may be able to navigate the tensions between professionalism and activism to minimize the disjuncture between the experiential and the institutional/professional.

In conclusion, there are many possibilities for collaborative work between academics and activists. Yet, with the spread of IE as a new research field, it is important to reflect on the relationship between professionals and activism. First, it is critical to recognize that various professionals’ social locations differ, which may have implications for their research pursuits. Professionals’ activism does not fit easily into the conventional understanding of activism as grassroots social mobilization. Professionals are in their institutional affiliations and professional responsibilities because of differences in their work’s material and organizational conditions. The legal organization of their work impacts their professional loyalties. Yet not all professionals are employees. It is crucial to understand how these diverse social and institutional relations may constrain certain types of activist research and critical engagement with

social, political, and economic inequalities. Different professions may also vary in terms of responsibilities. For example, lawyering is often understood as a “public profession” whose “contribution[s] to society goes beyond the aggregation, assembling, and deployment of technical skills” (Sarat and Scheingold 1998, 3). While some lawyers may see their work as serving individual clients with their legal skills (like other professions involved in service delivery), others (cause lawyers) would see their work as “directed at altering some aspects of social, economic and political status quo” (4). Lawyers may also bring their political commitments to their research in the form of professional activism. They aim to address both the social organization of oppressive legal practices and the power relations on which these oppressive practices rest.

Given the diversity existing among professionals and their engagement with politically informed research, it could be more productive to understand activism as a spectrum of possibilities from which radical streams of critique can emerge. By giving space to professional activism, institutional ethnographers can open new kinds of knowledge for on-the-ground activists to draw. Grassroots activists may find it useful to learn from professionals’ practical knowledge about optimal sites for direct interventions and strategies for doing so.

We consider these tensions as productive sites for future scholarly and activist research undertakings. Not only do they emerge from the experiences of researchers doing their activist and advocacy work, but they also open windows into further investigation of a broader social organization of sites of struggle as well as the relations that organize the work of activists, advocates, and social movements. This volume attests to the need for flexible methodological activist research strategies and creativity in applying IE’s and PAE’s tools to explicate these tensions and social relations that organize them to make broader oppressive relations visible as well as foster activist struggle. For PAE to remain radical and relevant, the pathways between movements and the academy must be open to possibilities for intellectual work to be done in common spaces and struggles.

## **Where Now?**

Within the past few years, there has been increasing mobilization around deepening social and economic inequalities, pervasive oppression of disenfranchised and marginalized populations, and environmental issues.

While activist research has gained popularity across academic disciplines to the extent that *activism* and *activist research* became buzzwords in social justice scholarship, we ask to what extent can such research aid activists in subverting oppressive regimes when it produces theory disconnected from practice? Activist, organizer, and educator Aziz Choudry (2020) calls for re-centring understandings and practice of activist research by unfastening it from academic-based knowledge production and taking seriously knowledge contributions made from inside of social movements. There is an ongoing need for the broader community and political organizing and activism by everyday residents and workers as well as for politically engaged research (Kinsman, this volume). We leave the reader and ourselves as well with questions such as these: What else could be possible in terms of expanding PAE and advocacy-infused IE? What new sites of struggle can be explored? How can we address the need for more flexible methodological activist research strategies so various organizations, grassroots groups, and citizens can use them while doing rigorous research?

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# Postscript

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

Gary Kinsman

My close encounters with the work of Dorothy Smith and institutional ethnography (IE) saved my life as an activist and scholar by providing a way of bringing my socially divided self as a queer activist and graduate student together. I learned how the insights and capacities of ethnography could be turned against ruling social institutions in this society. This was deepened through my learning from George Smith, my political activist ethnographer mentor. I engaged with Smith not only at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto) but also in the Right to Privacy Committee fighting anti-gay police repression and in AIDS ACTION NOW! organizing for treatment access and survival for people living with HIV. I learned how research could be done to produce knowledge for oppressed people and, more specifically, for activism and social transformation. This enriched my life both as an activist and in the university world.

Since then, I have witnessed aspects of IE shift as they have become institutionalized in university disciplines and professional locations. This, of course, is what had happened earlier with women's studies and other activist/scholar currents, as they became more academically institutionalized and their connections with activism and organizing were broken. So, it should be no surprise that no matter how critical we are, this can still happen to IE. This shifted the social standpoints from which IE was done away from community and movement-based organizing. I have read exciting IE work that is brilliant in its critical analysis but seems mesmerized by, or trapped within, forms of

bureaucratic and textual power, producing little knowledge for resistance and social transformation.

In response to this, in the edited collection *Sociology for Changing the World*, we point to a return to George Smith's political activist ethnography (PAE) as one way of resisting these very real social pressures and as a way of re-grounding our work in activism and social movements. In our concluding chapter, we outline one way of doing this as a joint activist/academic research project that would produce knowledge for anti-poverty organizing, providing knowledge for more effective organizing through mapping the social relations of struggle anti-poverty organizers are engaged in. While this approach is still very useful, it is also increasingly precarious given the regulations that characterize the neoliberal capitalist university. Still, where there is possible space for this, we need to struggle for it, opening it up further and making it as accountable to the needs of activism as possible.

Increasingly, I find there is value in pursuing PAE-informed research in organizing that takes place outside university and academic contexts. This is part of what I suggest in my chapter in this book reflecting on my experiences in mapping out the social relations of struggle that the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty was engaged in. This is also an attempt to push PAE further, from it largely being the work of the individual activist/scholar, as it was in Smith's experience, to see how direct action-based organizing provides for the emergence of more collective and participatory forms of knowledge production informing the research-activism-research relation. This focuses on developing the research and knowledge production capacities of activists and organizers in movements where theorizing and practice can be reflexively interlinked. In my view, this needs to be expanded with more investigations of this research-activism-research relation in other sites needing to be undertaken in producing a broader mapping of social struggles that can be linked together. This also intersects with a new emphasis in organizing on forms of activist research, research within and for social movements, and other forms of militant research.

In my view, PAE needs to expand in these grassroots organizing contexts while continuing to be connected to places for radical knowledge production that exist in university settings. It is only through movements and organizing that we can secure and define a future for PAE. As the Zapatistas put it, "Walking we ask questions"—it is only through doing PAE grounded in activist organizing that this future becomes clearer.

## Contributors

**Laura Bisailon** is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. She studies the social organization of knowledge of lay versus expert ways of knowing about medical, legal, and administrative practices and their implications. She is the author of *Screening Out: HIV Testing and the Canadian Immigration Experience* (University of British Columbia Press, 2022). As the first-ever analysis of the medical, legal, and bureaucratic practices governing the Canadian immigration medical program, the book received awards from the Canadian Sociological Association and the Canadian Studies Network. In 2021, the University of Amsterdam hosted the world premiere of her film *The Unmaking of Medical Inadmissibility* (2020). The film's festival debut was the 2022 Canadian Labour International Film Festival.

**Sue Bradford** has been a community activist most of her life, apart from ten years as a Green Member of Parliament (1999–2009). Her political and research work has been in welfare, jobs, housing, participatory adult education, and organizational development. She completed her PhD in 2014, under the mentorship of Professor Marilyn Waring of the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). “A Major Left Wing Think Tank in Aotearoa: An Impossible Dream or a Call to Action?” was its name, and Dr. Laura Bisailon was the international external examiner. Bradford works for the community-based organization Kōtare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa. She also undertakes doctoral supervisions at AUT's Institute of Public Policy.

**Aziz Choudry** was a professor at the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation at the University of Johannesburg. Before that, he was an associate professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University and a Canada Research Chair in Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Production. His books include *Learning Activism: The Intellectual*

*Life of Contemporary Social Movements* (University of Toronto Press, 2015) and *The University and Social Justice: Struggles across the Globe* (Pluto, 2020).

**Jean Louis Deveau** is a political activist ethnographer. Starting in 2010, he used this method of investigation to help an anti-shale gas alliance consisting of twenty-nine community groups stop the development of shale gas mining in New Brunswick, where he lives. In 2015, he joined forces with traditional Wolastoqey Grand Chief Ron Tremblay to challenge the development of a snowmobile grooming hub in Wolastokuk (traditional homeland). This foray led to his discovery of a long-forgotten treaty promise made in 1725 by the British to Wolastoquiyik. In 2021, he enrolled as a part-time student in a law school program, through which he will develop the skills to treat this historical amnesia.

**Agnieszka Doll** is an assistant professor at the Department of History and Sociology at the University of British Columbia Okanagan and a socio-legal scholar working at the intersection of mental health, law, regulations, and society. Between 2019 and 2022, she held postdoctoral fellowships at McGill University, Dalhousie University, and the University of Toronto. Drawing on her professional legal experience, her doctorate “Lawyering for the ‘Mad’: An Institutional Ethnography of Involuntary Admission to Psychiatric Facilities in Poland” examined the social organization of involuntary admission that results in silencing the voices of admittees and those advocating on their behalf. She is preparing a book manuscript based on this with the University of Toronto, Institutional Ethnography Series tentatively titled *Unaccountable Legalities: Mental Health Law, Legal Aid Lawyering and Institutional Entanglements*. She aims to make her work available to academics, professionals, activists, and people entangled in psychiatric and/or criminal systems.

**Gary Kinsman** is a queer liberation, anti-poverty, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist activist living on Indigenous land. He was involved in the Sudbury Coalition Against Poverty and more recently in the AIDS Activist History Project, Anti-69, the No Pride in Policing Coalition, and Queers for Palestine. He is the author of *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles, 3rd edition* (Concordia University Press, 2024), co-author of *The Canadian War on Queers* (with Patrizia Gentile; University of British Columbia Press, 2010), and co-editor of *We Still Demand!* (University of British Columbia



Press, 2017), *Sociology for Changing the World* (Fernwood, 2006), and *Whose National Security?* (Between the Lines, 2000). He lectures and writes on many topics including connections between AIDS activism and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. He is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Laurentian University. His website is <http://radicalnoise.ca>.

**Erin Sirett** drew on her work with NGOs in several different contexts for her doctoral research in International and Cultural Studies in Education at McGill University. She is now a union negotiator with the Public Service Alliance of Canada. She works primarily in the university sector.

**Kevin Walby** is an associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Winnipeg. He is the co-author of *Police Funding, Dark Money, and the Greedy Institution* (Routledge, 2022). He is co-editor (with S. Pasternak and A. Stadnyk) of *Disarm, Defund, Dismantle: Police Abolition in Canada* (Between the Lines Press, 2022) and *Changing of the Guards: Private Influences, Privatization, and Criminal Justice in Canada* (University of British Columbia Press, 2022) with A. Luscombe. He is the director of the Centre for Access to Information and Justice. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

**Shannon Walsh** is a director and writer of multiple award-winning documentaries on topics ranging from labour rights to grief and climate change. Walsh's films have been theatrically released and broadcast globally and screened in festivals such as Hot Docs, CPH:DOX, IDFA, Doc NYC, and many others. She is co-editor of *Ties That Bind: Race and the Politics of Friendship in South Africa* (Wits University Press, 2016) and *In My Life: Stories of Young Activists in South Africa 2002–2022* (Jacana, 2022). She was a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow and was awarded the Canadian Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2023. In 2024, her book *The Documentary Filmmaker's Intuition* was released by Routledge, and her feature doc *Adrienne & the Castle* premiered at SXSW. Walsh is associate professor at the University of British Columbia.

**Megan Welsh Carroll** is an associate professor in the School of Public Affairs, where she teaches courses on research methods and data analysis for social scientists, as well as special topics courses on homelessness and racial and gender (in)justice. The main goal of her scholarship is to inform community-based responses to poverty and criminal-legal contact that are rooted in people's

wisdom about their own lives, needs, and humanity. Her current research focuses on the health and sanitation needs of people experiencing homelessness, the criminalization of poverty, and racialized policing. Her work has been published in academic journals such as *Social Problems*, *Feminist Criminology*, *Police Quarterly*, *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration*, *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, and *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

**A. J. Withers** is a long-time anti-poverty organizer and adjunct faculty in critical disability studies at York University, Toronto/Tkaronto. They are the co-editor (with Chris Chapman) of *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), *Disability Politics and Theory* (Fernwood, 2012), and [stillmyrevolution.org](http://stillmyrevolution.org). They are currently revising their dissertation—a PAE from the standpoint of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, which is the focus of their chapter in this collected volume—into a book.