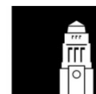

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Resourcing Scholar-Activism: Collaboration, Transformation and the Production of Knowledge

Abstract

In this paper we propose the concepts of 'resourcefulness' and 'triangulating the research question' as guiding principles for engaging in scholar-activism and discuss the way in which our own experiences in the Glasgow neighborhood of Govan have informed these concepts. In so doing, our objective is to propose one possible way forward for the practice of scholar-activism that responds to concerns regarding power dynamics, the limits of academic inquiry, and the need for reflexivity. We argue that reflective and collaborative scholars can engage in the co-production of knowledge without being paralyzed by such concerns.

Key words: scholar-activism, resourcefulness, Govan

The purpose of this paper is to provide a set of 'resources' for scholar-activists to (ref)use as they see fit. We do this by first elaborating on the notion of resourcefulness and the ethical practice of *resourcing* the various insurgencies with which we collaborate as scholar-activists. Grounded in the ethos of resourcing activism, we then offer an approach to scholar-activist research design we refer to as 'triangulating' the research question, laying out our approach to the co-production of knowledge with and for our community-based collaborators. We then draw from existing literature on the role of emotion in scholar-activism to engage with the question of what motivates a scholar to pursue this particular form of academic inquiry and how one might choose their research projects and partners. Our objective is to offer a set of conjectures or propositions for how one might go about doing scholar-activism based on our own experiences and reflections on those experiences. While we have nearly two decades of such research in various locations around the globe in this kind of research between us, we use

our most recent work in the Govan neighborhood of Glasgow to ground our propositions and reflections on the practice of doing scholar-activism.

First and foremost, we want to suggest a 'politics of resourcefulness' as a guiding framework for engaging in the process of doing scholar-activism.[i] We see three ways that the notion of 'resourcefulness' might inform scholar-activism. First, scholar-activists can commit to channeling the resources and privileges afforded academics (e.g., time; access to research, technology, and space; grant writing experience; expertise legible to new organizations) to advancing the work of non-academic collaborators (community groups, activist networks, local insurgencies, etc). Second, resourcing can take the form of research designed explicitly to ask and answer questions that non-academic collaborators want to know, following on from Appadurai's (2006) notion that the right to research is a precondition of active citizenship. Finally, a politics of resourcefulness suggests the need for research that explores barriers to sustained and active participation and activism. For example, we need to understand the challenges that non-academic collaborators face in affecting the change they want to see, and how social relations might be transformed in ways that create the conditions for success.

Crucially, any attempt to ask and answer these questions must contend with the larger question of how to lay the foundations and nurture conditions to transform grassroots experiences into useful knowledge beyond both the particular places of political practice and beyond the usefulness of that knowledge to academic theory production. Here we find much of use in popular education approaches to organizing and engaging with communities, whereby assets can be transformed into useable resources/knowledges for self-determination of communities (as well as academia). A politics of resourcefulness, then, can be understood as something of an interim politics. It is fiercely aligned with the subaltern, attentive to the intersection of power/knowledge, and takes seriously Appadurai's (2006) claim that the marginalized have a right to fully participate in, access, and conduct research. It is an interim politics in the sense

that it is not committed to an immutable vision for the future, but rather to the full and complete participation of all groups in engendering visions for the future.

In order to enact a politics of resourcefulness with respect to research design, we propose an approach to developing research questions and agendas we call 'triangulating the research question' (see figure 1). This concept, for us, is not about how valid knowledge is or should be produced, but rather how university-based scholars (i.e. those who must meet the demands and standards of academic knowledge production) might go about devising research questions with a strong ethical and political commitment to engaged research and scholar-activism. This approach takes seriously the 'scholar' part of the scholar-activist title, and to that end we have placed questions of theoretical and intellectual value at the top of the triangle. While there is no question that theoretical pursuits can quickly descend into navel gazing, we are drawn to critical social and political theory precisely because of the ways in which it allows for conceptual space to challenge the increasingly narrow realm of possible futures. It seems to us, then, that the role of the scholar-activist is to pursue and engage with theoretical and conceptual questions in ways that are always insistently and dialectically rooted in the struggles of everyday life.

The second point in the triangle, then, addresses the question of which publics, institutions, and political projects are served by knowing the answers the research sets out to address. There are very clear instances when asking this question might have produced different research, such as the case of the Havasupai Nation and the Arizona State researchers[ii], but in most cases the conflict between the publics and institutions served by knowing may be less straightforward. Research on poverty might illustrate these tensions well. For example, there is a substantive and political difference, we argue, in conducting research on how poor families make financial decisions in order to enable businesses to develop insurance products marketed to the poor,

and conducting research on the conditions that render poor families more vulnerable in natural disasters in order to inform public policy designed to address those conditions.

Finally, the third point in the process of triangulating the research question entails designing research questions in ways that produce knowledge that our community-based collaborators – those whom we do research 'with', 'for' and 'on' – want answered. This is not to suggest that scholar-activists become consultants of sorts (see Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010), but rather that we seek explicitly negotiate the tensions between the kinds of data and approaches to research that our collaborators desire in order to advance their projects and the theoretical and epistemological objectives that the academic literature push us toward. Moreover, we want to suggest that this kind of dialectical engagement holds promise to push the theoretical literature toward the kinds of questions that emerge from everyday struggles.

Having proposed a broad ethos for conducting scholar-activist research and a specific approach to design scholar-activist research projects, we want to turn to what we see as the crucial question of how one might decide to become a scholar-activist or enacts a scholar-activist approach to research. Since the mid 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in questions of political relevance, with geographers lamenting the separation between critical sectors of the discipline and activism going on both inside and outside the academy (e.g. see Blomley 1994, Castree 1999, Wills 2002; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005), and calling for critical geographers to become politically engaged outside the academy to interpret and effect social change (e.g. Chouinard 1994, Kobayashi 1994, Routledge 1996, Fuller 1999).

Hence, there have been powerful critiques of research methodology and the voices or ideas silenced by it, emphasising politically committed research (Nast 1994); increased recognition and negotiation of the differential power relations within the research process (Farrow *et al*., 1995) and multiple activist-academic positionalities (Merrifield 1995; Routledge, 1996); a

growing focus on for whom research is produced and whose needs it meets (Nast 1994; Farrow *et al*., 1995); interest in understanding the context-dependent and power-laden inter-subjectivity between scholar-activists and the researched (Katz 1992; McDowell 1992; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Slater, 1997; Kitchin 1999; Maxey, 1999; Laurie et al . 1999; Moss 2002; Routledge, 2002; Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Chatterton 2006; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010); and increasing significance of 'public' or participatory approaches (for example, Kindon *et al*., 2007; special issue of Antipode 'Being and Becoming a public scholar'; the People's Geographies project at Syracuse University (www.peoplesgeographies.org), and the Participatory Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society, UK (www.pygyrg.org).

What is clear from many of these interventions is that when deciding to engage in scholar-activism, it is important not to be immobilised at the outset by being overly analytical, overly reflexive or overly cautious. What we mean by this is that we think it important, given the ongoing economic, political and ecological crises confronting humanity, for aspiring scholar-activists to enter the logics of an insurrectionary imagination. We need to let our core values (e.g. concerning dignity, self-determination, justice) and feelings directly inform our research. This is informed by both personal political values and the need to engage with our emotional responses to the world around us.

This is because scholar-activist engagement emerges from our deep emotional responses to the world. Our personal feelings occur in relational encounters with human and non-human others (e.g. see Bondi, 2005). They mediate social and political processes through which people's subjectivities are reproduced and performed (Kwan 2007). Politically, emotions are intimately bound up with power relations and also with relations of affinity, and are a means of initiating action. People become politically active because they feel something profoundly – such as injustice or ecological destruction. This emotion triggers changes in people that motivates them

to engage in politics. It is people's ability to transform their feelings about the world into actions that inspire them to participate in political action (Chatterton et al 2008; Routledge, 2012). As feminist geographers and others have argued, collaborative association with (activist) others, necessitates interaction with others, through the doing of particular actions and the experiencing of personal and collective emotions, through creativity and imagination, through embodied, relational practices that produce political effects (Anderson and Smith 2001; Bennett 2004; Bosco, 2007; Pulido, 2003; Thien 2005).

Hence emotions are both reactive (directed towards outsiders and external events) and reciprocal (concerning people's feelings towards each other). Shared emotions generated between collaborators can create shared collective identities and be mobilised strategically (e.g. to generate motivation, commitment and sustained participation). Shared emotional templates can be created in order to find common cause, and to generate common narratives and solidarities (Askins, 2009; Bosco, 2006; 2007; Ettlinger, 2004; Ettlinger and Bosco, 2004; Goodwin *et al*, 2001; Jasper, 1998; Juris, 2008; Mansbridge and Morris, 2001; Taylor and Rupp, 2002).

In particular, and as a response to recent academic concerns with hope (see for example Harvey, 2000) we wish to mention the importance of anger as a motivating emotion (Henderson, 2008). This is because disruptive emotions such as anger embody political risks that are frequently emotionally engineered by authorities, whether in University settings or within overly political contexts such as demonstrations. Because the "social regulation of anger…generates . . . control scripts in individuals" (Gibbs 2001: no pagination), we need to craft and direct our anger in ways that are effective both for our research and which empower progressive political practices (Butler, 2010; Henderson, 2008). For example, we understand the notion of anger as a motivating force as potential response to 'post-political' techniques of governance (see for example Swygendouw, 2006). Of course in the process of crafting anger, we need to

acknowledge people's fears (e.g. concerning employment precarity, masculine norms of confrontation, etc.) and the potential risks involved in rendering oneself vulnerable through anger.

For purposes of illustrating and providing examples of the processes we have developed and the challenges we have encountered, we focus in this paper specifically on our mutual work in the South Glasgow neighborhood of Govan. Govan is a former shipbuilding community on the South bank of the River Clyde that experienced a rapid and painful economic decline when the shipbuilding industry collapsed. Today Govan is characterized by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and poor health and ranks within the 5% most deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation (SMID 2012). Of course, the level of deprivation only tells one piece of the story of Govan. Through our work there we have found remarkable levels of resilience, perseverance, generosity, intelligence, and creativity. Our approach to scholar-activism and engagement attempts to acknowledge those two realities simultaneously – that Govan is at once a place of deep economic deprivation with abiding challenges and a place that is rich in culture, history, knowledge and value from which we can learn. We see the notion of resourcefulness and triangulating the research question as being productive responses to these two realities in that they seek to acknowledge the uneven distribution of resources and research capacity that neighborhoods like Govan face (and hence the need for the act of resourcing), while also recognizing the valuable and unique knowledges that exist in these places with which we might co-produce knowledge and learn from such places (as represented in the approach to triangulating research questions we propose). In the following section, we reflect on a series of issues, challenges, and opportunities that arose as we each undertook complementary but distinct engagement processes in this neighborhood. We want to be clear that the set of propositions we lay out above (triangulating, resourcing, and the role of emotions in motivating scholar-activist engagement) emerged from these and other scholar-activist experiences we have pursued, and as such do not represent the seamless and linear application

of these proposed approaches. Instead quite the opposite is true: the experiences we recount below represent messy and imperfect scholar-activist engagement based on principles, research programs, emotional responses, and political commitments which, at the time, were not neatly organized or easily articulated. It is only upon mutual reflection on these and other processes that we arrived at the approaches we offer above.

Triangulating, resourcing, and doing scholar-activism: reflections from the field

We have each spent considerable time working in and with communities in Govan as part of our ongoing commitment to engaged scholarship and scholar-activism. Author A has primarily collaborated with the organization Community Roots and the Govan Connections[iii] project to inquire into notions of resilience and resourcefulness and Author B has worked in collaboration with activists in the environmental justice network So We Stand (http://sowestand.com)[iv] to conduct popular education and social theatre workshops with various activist constituencies. Based on these experiences and as a way to illustrate how triangulation, resourcefulness, and emotion might work in such contexts, we offer the follow set of reflections.

We want to begin by addressing the decision to engage with communities and in a sense *become* a scholar-activist. While feminists and other critical human geographers and social scientists were right in challenging scholars to consider questions of power and reflexivity in the production of knowledge, we want to suggest that the ongoing economic, political and ecological crises confronting humanity urgently necessitate engagement. Thus we cannot allow reflexivity to become paralyzing, and need to engage our deep emotional responses to the world around us to compel us to become engaged scholars.

For us, Author B's collaboration with So We Stand was motivated by concerns about issues of climate justice (see Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge, 2013) and economic deprivation in one of Glasgow's poorest neighbourhoods; and Author A's engagement with Community Roots

and Govan Connections was motivated by an abiding concern with resourcing (see MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) the capacities of actually existing urban struggles that are borne out of the lived experience of the place, particularly in poor and marginalized post-industrial neighborhoods. In both cases, our political and emotional commitments inspired an intellectual curiosity regarding the groups we worked with, and it was that curiosity that compelled us to reach out to these groups as potential research subjects and collaborators.

While we may have been motivated by emotion, politics, and curiosity in the first instance, however, we were quite deliberate about how we might approach the research process in a way that would do more than satisfy our own intellectual curiosities or academic imperatives. This required, first and foremost, a commitment to the idea that we would work collaboratively with the groups and organizations we approached, seeking to co-produce knowledge with them as opposed to conducting research 'on' them. We are certainly not the first academics to take this approach, but it bears a mention as we seek to describe our approach. Further, imperfectly formulated though it may have been at the time, we were both committed to the idea that our work (that is, work that is recognizable in the context of an academic institution) would not only fulfill the requirements of our employment and our intellectual communities, but also specifically advance the work of the community groups with which we collaborated. It was in attempting to realize this commitment that the notion of resourcefulness in relation to scholar-activism was developed. With respect to our work Govan, this took a number of different forms, and required us to carefully consider what resources and skill sets of value we brought to the collaboration. We had to consider the value (if any) placed on our (academic) expertise by others, as well as our non-academic skills and the material resources we could mobilize.

Thus, we approached representatives of the respective groups by being frank about the political and intellectual commitments that had piqued our curiosity about the work that each group was conducting, discussed broadly how they related back to our larger research program, and

proposed a set of material and intellectual resources we might bring to any collaboration. Some examples of the resources we brought to the table through these collaborations included assistance designing and conducting research that advanced the missions of the organizations, service learning projects completed by undergraduates, assistance organizing and writing grant applications as well as the opportunity to be included in any funding bids we developed over the course of the collaboration, and access to professional facilitation of popular education workshops.

Crucially, the set of resources we offered required a level of confidence in the value of academic inquiry for advancing community-based and academic projects. Whereas Author A's previous research collaborations with community-based groups had entailed a posture of researcher as 'supplicant' (English 1994), wherein Author A made themselves available for any menial task that the organizations with which they worked required done, experience had suggested that there is indeed something of value in collaborative research-driven approaches, and that critical and engaged academics need not be so timid about offering up the specific skill sets they bring to the table.

Thus, the approach to the co-production of knowledge that we propose through resourcing and triangulation of the research question requires that scholar-activists challenge their own assumptions about academics' 'power'. While feminist and others were right to raise concerns about power and research and to caution or implore researchers to be more reflexive about how power works in and through the research process (see for example McDowell 2002, England 2004, Rose 1997), we want to argue that in some ways, critical and engaged scholars have internalized this problematic too deeply in ways that have become counter-productive. Certainly, as academics we are entangled within broader powers of association and intellectual production - such as the institutions that employ us and/or fund our research, and their location within hierarchies of privilege – that may grant us certain economic, political, and

representational securities and advantages that may not be enjoyed by those with whom we collaborate – not least economically marginalized communities in Glasgow (Routledge, 2002). We are frequently in a position of power by virtue of our ability to name research categories, control information about the research agenda, shape the character of our interventions and come and go as researchers (Staeheli and Lawson 1995).

However, there are a range of 'powers' involved in the process of scholar-activist collaboration. For example, the power to define the field of collaboration can belong as much (if not more) to our collaborators as a result of their local knowledge that potentially can grant them a certain power over the construction of the forms, parameters and dynamics of the collaboration. Scholar-activists are frequently dependent upon information, research contacts, advice, and the good graces of our collaborators, and can be positioned within their collaborators' broader strategies and agendas (Routledge, 2002). We want to propose that instead of a posture of 'supplicant,' that scholar-activists adopt an approach more akin to what Nagar and Geiger (2007) call 'situated solidarities' built on mutual trust, admiration, and benefit. Unlike the posture of supplicant, this opens the door for scholar-activists to engage, constructively challenge approaches and assumptions, and engage in a genuine co-production of knowledge without being stymied or silenced by hand-wringing over power relations.

While concerns about power relations can render scholar-activists disinclined to voice even the slightest critique of activist practice, in our experience, thoughtful engagement carefully articulated once collaborative relationships have been established can be quite productive. For example, Author A was involved in an ongoing 'inquiry group' convened by community groups in Govan that sought to develop the concepts of resilience and self-reliance in relation to the community of Govan. Based on years of thinking about and engaging with the political ideologies of neoliberalism, revanchism, and upward redistribution – particularly in relation to what Peck and Tickell (2002) have called 'responsibility without power' that characterizes ever

evolving neoliberal governing strategies at preset – the idea that self-reliance and resilience were the goals toward which the deeply deprived residents of Govan ought to strive sat uncomfortably with Author A, and did not reflect the principles that she heard articulated by residents and community leaders during meetings. Rather, based on months of participation and engagement, it struck Author A that notions of self-determination and resourceful communities, rather than self-reliant and resilient communities, more accurately represented the goals of the community groups. When raised in with the group in a respectful and frank way, after a solid and consistent relationship was established over months of collaboration and resourcing, the group was open to and interested in Author A's concerns with and observations about the limitations of resilience. Illustrative of the nuanced nature of the multidirectional flow of power in these kinds of relationships, they did not abandon resilience as a useful term for their work, but they did work with Author A to flesh out the concept of community resourcefulness as a different way of getting at some of the political objectives they were interested in working toward. We want to emphasize here, however, that Author A's contributions were effective and relevant only because she was able to work with the groups over an extended period of time in ways that were not always solely focused on traditional 'data collection' but rather as a participant working to advance the broader objectives of the organizations. In so doing, Author A sought to expand what we might think of as 'spaces of encounter' between scholar-activists and collaborators.

Such spaces of encounter can generate dialogical contacts that enable activist assumptions to be open up for analysis and negotiation. For example, the ESRC-funded workshops in Govan[v] organized by Author B and others[vi] used popular education and social theatre to create communicative spaces that brought together different classes, ages and ethnicities in productive and generative ways, building relationships across difference, and enabling a sharing of their different experiences, concerns and knowledges concerning economic deprivation and environmental injustice. These produced empathies between activists from different campaigns and challenged their assumptions

about their own agency, so that one workshop participant noted that she had begun to see herself as an "active subject of change" (Interview, Govan, Scotland, 2011). Assumptions about solidarity and similarity amongst activists were also challenged. Hence, during the workshops conflicts arose concerning approaches to, and practices of, social change that reflected differences in the age and social class of anti-poverty and environmental justice activists. While these were not fully resolved, they did generate useful insights into each activist constituency's organizing practices, assumptions and limitations, as noted by one participant: "It was successful in opening up a space for people to project their self and their own struggles" (Interview, Govan, Scotland, 2011). However, it was recognized that such workshops were necessary but insufficient for movement- and campaign-building, since activists in Govan had to constantly negotiate economic and political marginalization.

Therefore, one of the key tasks of scholar activism is to attempt to find, generate and resource *potential* rather than only provide intellectual critique, in order to contribute to practices that are aimed at social transformation rather than merely the "production of knowledge" and/or the "solving" of "local" problems (see also Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2008). The aim is to put into practice principles of solidarity, equality, pluralism and horizontality so as to resource the potential to establish counter-power to the alienation and dislocation associated with contemporary capitalism. In part this involves the politics of prefiguration that theorizes action through doing, fashioning alternatives through lived practice (e.g. see Graeber, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2011), while also recognizing that such practices constantly require the negotiation of unequal power relations (see Routledge, 2002; Chatterton *et al* 2008).

By offering these examples we want to draw an emphatic distinction between the co-production of knowledge and the kind of 'give and take' mutuality that underlies the approach that we took and the mode of engagement that David Harvey (1996) has called 'critical distance,' in which he seeks to find sufficient distance to generate 'global ambitions' in what he calls dialectical engagement with lived lives or militant particularisms. While we share many of Harvey's

utopian visions, we read his work as taking 'theoretical practice' as his primary concern, or the pathway through which he chooses to work toward those utopian visions. This strikes us as an ironically Hegelian or idea-driven approach. By contrast, the process of triangulating the research question and prefiguration attempts to recognize the value of intellectual and academic inquiry while refusing the act of 'distancing' that Harvey proposes (see also Routledge, 2008). Instead, as we see it, the theoretical inquiry must always be accountable to, rather than distant from, actually existing community-based activism. Moreover, we want to suggest that the kinds of mutuality and horizontality that we have proposed require a willingness on the part of the scholar-activist to be transformed, or to have their understandings of how the world works be fundamentally challenged, if not changed, by the experience.

Resourcing Scholar-Activism

Our motivation for writing this piece is emphatically not to draw boundaries on what is or is not scholar-activism, or to provide a roadmap for the only way to engage with communities as a scholar. By contrast, we seek to open up such conversations, proposing alternative ways of thinking about productive collaborations, co-production of knowledge, and of rethinking how power works in some scholar-activist endeavors based on our own experiences. We are concerned with what we see as three tendencies in scholar-activist engagement – the tendency for scholars to underestimate the value of (some forms of) scholarly inquiry to community groups with which they seek to collaborate; the tendency for academics to focus on critique rather than engagement; and the tendency for some scholar-activists to be paralyzed by concerns over power dynamics in the scholar-activist collaboration.

Without diminishing the skepticism and reflection that ground such tendencies (e.g. reflections on power and critiques of academic knowledge production practices) we have proposed letting emotion and curiosity motivate us to engage in scholar-activism. Mindful of Appadurai's (2000)

call for academic research to "make its deliberations more consequential for the poorer eighty per cent of the population of the world" (p.3), we are guided by an ethos of resourcefulness and unfolding according to a process by which research questions are triangulated as one potential way to navigate the complexities of engaging in scholar-activism.

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[i] We recognize that grassroots organizations produce their own knowledges, that co-production of knowledge between scholar activists and such organizations is possible, and that scholar activists collaborate with organizations because there is resonance with their beliefs, feelings, research interests etc. and that through the act of collaboration useful knowledge can emerge.
[ii] See http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2004-05-27/news/indian-givers/ accessed 9/1/2013
[iii] "Community Roots" and "Govan Connections" are pseudonyms
[iv] And in particular with doctoral researcher and activist Aaron Franks.
[v] Economic and Social Research Council Knowledge Exchange Small Grants scheme (RES-192-22-0046).
[vi] These included Aaron Franks, Liam Kane, Julia Taudevin, Gavin Crichton and John Kellas.