

Doing Fieldwork at ‘Home’: Ethical and Emotional Considerations on the Academic-Activist Relationship

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Introduction

Activism is an affective field charged with emotions. It is bodily experience, a sensory involvement, particularly when involving collective action in public space, such as demonstrations. All your senses sharpen. You keep attentive. Walking in a middle of a crowd, people chanting, laughing, singing, clapping. Sound crackers being thrown. Flags waving above you. At times you bump into the person in front of you. You exchange glances with a feeling that you are both part of something shared, something bigger. If people start running, will you run too? You see police dogs with muzzles, hear their choked barks. You see people on the sidewalks watching you, sitting in cafes, looking down from private apartments, and through office windows. You wonder whether they know why we are protesting, perhaps they don't support our cause, or are annoyed by us, the noise we make. Us causing traffic jams. Or those that smile at us and clap their hands, nod their heads, give us the peace sign or thumbs up.

Emotions or felt processes of this kind have a revelatory potential in fieldwork (Henry 2012; Trigger et al. 2012). Placing myself bodily in the same situations as those I study gives me a deeper understanding of their world than if I restricted myself to verbal inquiry (Savage 2000, p. 331). The researcher's lived experience can be recollected after the event, thus the body also becomes a source of memories.

For researchers employing ethnographic methods like I do, researching activism raises questions about positionality, impact, possible overidentification with the people or groups studied, distinctions between theory and action, and epistemology. The boundaries between research, advocacy, and everyday life are blurred when researchers become heavily involved in the social setting of activist groups (Davis 2003; Petray