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

2012), and this is why the researcher needs to reflect on the relations between research and activism, and one's role as a researcher in the field of activism.

Duncan Fuller (1999), geographer, considers the potential role of the 'researcher as activist' and attempts to illustrate how the maintenance of a critical, multi-positioned (and repositioned) identity can be seen as a beneficial, reflexive learning experience for researchers within ethnography, and for the research itself:

> In our daily lives, we are constantly repositioning and renegotiating our identities and personalities in line with different situations, different spaces and different people, and we seem to do so relatively unproblematically; we are different people in different circumstances, we have different identities or roles in different spaces or places. When confronted with the seemingly straightforward task of moving between academic and activist identities or activities, however, a range of concerns seems to come to the fore. (Fuller 1999, p.223)

These concerns are partly due to the fact that shared physical experiences are likely to develop collectively-shared but individually-constituted sets of emotions between my research participants and me (Petray 2012). This sort of immersion in the field – which is first and foremost participation, while the observation part of the participant observation method is done subsequently, in a self-reflexive manner – requires considerable practical and intellectual effort from the part of the researcher.

In my case I also share national citizenship, ideological sympathies, activist experiences, city and city district, among other things, with many of my research participants. Shared nationality and local experiences are considered aspects of an insider position (McCurdy & Uldam 2013). The mentioned aspects, together with my personal relations with some activists, were of great advantage when accessing the field. However, there are no clear cut positions in the form of insider and outsider as a participant observer – but these roles are negotiated on a continuum in shifting field sites with varying degrees of the aspects I share, and don't, with my research participants (ibid). The question of where I find myself

in the insider/outsider continuum will be a continual process of critical reflection throughout fieldwork and research.

Ethnographic fieldwork always includes engagement in the lives of those being studied, within the context of their daily lives, and over an extended period of time. And because I am writing about real people in real life in my ethnography, my words have potentially profound consequences for the people I write about (Kahn 2011, p.181). As an ethnographic writer I feel anxieties about the potential risk to upset my research participants.

In this short text I will discuss and raise uncomfortable questions concerning the activist-academic relationship and positionalities, and the ethical and emotional considerations they entail. If we join the activists in their struggle, is it for the mere purpose of gaining access, or to join the common struggle for social change? What is the role of the researcher as citizen jointly challenging the broader social system? What responsibilities do we as researchers have with regards to the activists' struggle? I write based on my own experiences of fieldwork among activists in Malmö, a city in southern Sweden.

Doing fieldwork at 'home'

My research explores the conditions for and the consequences of urban activism, with special regard to the creation of new identities, changes of urban space, and activism as one pathway of migrant emplacement. To do this I have interviewed and followed activists in Malmö, a city in southern Sweden. The activists are organised in local leftist extra-parliamentarian groups and networks that arrange meetings, campaigns, demonstrations and other collective actions in public space as well as online. The groups are part of a larger network of activists in Malmö, other cities in Sweden as well as abroad, which struggle for urban and social justice. Their activism concerns migrant and asylum seekers' rights, anti-racism, and 'right-to-the-city' struggles, and moves in between the fields of charity to advocacy to more radical forms of direct action.

I chose Malmö because it is a city marked by high levels of immigration, urban restructuring and activism. Thereby it is a city where we can observe the manifold interconnections of those processes

as they are impacting – and being impacted by – specific local histories and activities, with political leftist activism being an entry point to the understanding of those interconnections and impacts.

I did fieldwork at 'home' in two respects: My history in relation to Möllevången and Malmö (where I lived for 10 years), and the leftist extra-parliamentary activist scene in the city. I had personal acquaintances with activists and previous experiences of the activism milieu in Malmö when starting my PhD project; however, I did not consider myself to be heavily involved, since I was not a member of any group at the time, although I did become involved soon after.

I conducted fieldwork among activists between 2013 and 2016. All interviewees were introduced to the content and purpose of my research and their participation is based on free and informed (oral) consent. However, participant observations have been done without me publicly announcing that my observations might be used for research purposes. And this is where my emotional and ethical anxieties come in. To clarify, I will provide a short background to this.

I knew about the formation of Action Against Deportation (AMD), a ramification of the Malmö-based Asylum Group, in 2009. AMD started organizing actions against detention centres and deportation of migrants. These kinds of actions were not previously well known in Sweden. When Reva (*Rättssäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete* (Rule of Law and Effective Work Enforcement [my translation]) – a police operation aiming to locate and deport undocumented migrants more efficiently[1] – became big news in the Swedish media during spring of 2013, AMD mobilized thousands of people to protest against it. It was at this point that I actually became involved directly in the group for some three months, for several reasons. First, I wanted to do something concrete and learn more about how activists plan for actions, their aims and strategies, and see how I could contribute. Secondly, I was curious as a researcher,

[1] REVA is a collaboration between three state authorities: The Migration Board, The National Police Board and The Correctional System (i.e. prisons). The operation was commissioned by the Swedish government in 2010 and piloted in Malmö the same year (http://www.polisen.se/Aktuellt/Nyheter/Gemensam/jan-mars/Polisens-arbete-med-inre-utlanningskontroller/).

although I got active before I knew that this very network was to become part of my study. Therefore I decided to approach the group (as a possible case study) as an activist, in order to show my commitment to the cause and to gain the deepest possible understanding of the group. I attended meetings and helped with organizing demonstrations and other kind of actions. It was a bit later that spring – after I got enrolled into the MUSA programme (Migration, Urbanization and Societal Change) at Malmö University in February 2013 – when I started to take field notes about what I saw and experienced.

As a researcher, I immersed in the activities and observed them from a different position and with an ethnographic lens. Nevertheless, I believe that efforts to separate the professional and the personal are not only difficult but rather illusory (see Amit 2000, p.5). The sense of "leaving the field" is also illusory, since one cannot help taking the field along, because 'the field' is being incorporated into one's biography, understandings and associations (Amit 2000, p.9).

Even though I was committed to the activists' political cause, I could not get away from the fact that this was my 'job' in the first place, which made me at times feel like a 'fake' in the activist milieu. At the same time, if I am to make science out of their struggle, the least I can do is to join and contribute practically.

Furthermore, long-term ethnographic fieldwork can generate close and enduring social relationships (Trigger et al. 2012), and I believe it is possible to sustain friendships and acquaintances that constitute and transcend my fieldwork engagements without jeopardizing the quality of my research. I can even go so far as to say I used "friendship as method" (Owton & Allen-Collinson 2013) in ethnographic research encounters. The friendship approach seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation between researcher and participant, it encourages a dialogical relationship and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion, and empathy between researcher and participants (p. 285).

Being an insider geographically (to the place) and ideologically (leftist activism), and having personal friends and acquaintances among the activists, requires transparency concerning the production of my material and documented reflexivity concerning the premises for analysis.

Reflexivity, responsibility and insecurity in ethnographic research on activism

Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is important for all forms of research. It refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the fieldworkers and their process of doing research. Moral and ethical decisions arise at all stages of the research process, from selection of the topic to the final writing-up and presentation of results (Akeroyd 1984, p.137). Reflexivity is nevertheless particularly central to the practice of ethnographic research wherein the relationship between researcher and research participants is normally long-term and more intimate.

The feeling of dishonesty came to me during the period of 'transition', from being 'only an activist' to becoming both an activist and researcher. There was no sharp line in between, but rather a slow process. I was an activist at the same time that I would maybe use it in research later on, although I at the time was not sure myself. I was only scanning the field, and learning what it was to be an activist. Later on in the research process I realized that some of the first activist meetings and public actions I attended could be interesting to write about and use as empirical material. Since I was not clear about my own roles at the time, I was not honest and clear towards my activist peers with my double intentions.

However, I interviewed some of the key activists in these groups, and they were therefore aware of my doctoral studies, although I believe they identified me first as an activist in their network. It was of course my, and not their, responsibility to make clear what my roles and intentions were.

From the beginning, I felt insecure about acting as a researcher among the activists, not knowing what they would think of me doing research on them and their work and whether I would meet opposition towards my dual roles as academic and activist. To build trust is crucial in the process of gaining access. If the activists think I am doing something that might harm them or their work, they would not talk to me. This meant that joining their struggle, if only partly, was crucial in order to do ethnographic fieldwork.

My insecurity was based in a desire to be seen as a useful activist as well as a useful researcher in front of my activist peers. Whatever 'good intentions' I had with the research, it might not have generated the same level of excitement among the activists in Malmö. Also, I realized I was not going to do what many critical activist scholars suggest, namely "to make strategic interventions collectively with the social movements we belong to" (AGC) in order to achieve social change, in line with Participatory Action Research (PAR)-approaches. PAR would not enable me to explore activism ethnographically with the research questions I had set out to investigate.

I was still worried about whether they would consider me as "operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the real work and have made financial/lifestyle sacrifices" (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, p.252), while I have full salary and in addition becoming "an expert" on the subject in the eyes of the academy (ibid). Even though I have not been personally criticised with such comments, they do contain elements of truth, and this has made me think and re-think about the motives, ethics, and intensions of my research. I strongly felt I did not want to be one in the row of academics who happily built their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed but rarely join with them in their 'struggle' (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, p.247).

Nevertheless, I noticed discontent towards academics from one of my research participants. She mentioned how dozens of under- and postgraduates and senior scholars had gotten in touch with them, conducted interviews, and then never again heard from them. This made her unwilling to collaborate with academics. With such experiences, I am not surprised if activists have the idea of academics as capitalising on activists' activity for their own career development. She still decided to talk to me, since she already knew me and had some level of trust in what I was doing, and because I was doing a PhD, not just an undergrad thesis. She said she did prioritize and participated according to the academic level and relevance of the study.

So far, my research topic has been met with positive reactions and encouragement among my research participants. One female activist said she thought my research seemed interesting. "Those topics are valuable for us to know more about. We don't have time to think about

them ourselves". Another activist said how important my work is, since "no one is writing about the autonomous movement and its history", saying that their work in Malmö is not being documented or recorded academically. These statements are also a reminder of the possibilities of misunderstandings and even disappointments on the part of the activists. Informed consent can't stop this from happening. My research findings may result in insights they are not pleased with, and writing activists' history in Malmö is not my primary goal.

In the end, the most important ethical consideration is how I will eventually write and publish the material. To represent your research participants ethically is perhaps the most complex problem facing ethnographic writers (Kahn 2011). Hence, the writing-up process will in particular require critical reflexivity on my part as a researcher. A way to compensate on my initial confusion is to send the activists my written drafts and see what their reactions are and respect requests not to reveal certain details.

Conclusions

In summary, the critical engagement I pursue in my research involves transparency and a continual questioning of my positioning in the research process (in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, profession/employment status, life in the neighbourhood and so on), in addition to the physical location of my research, my disciplinary location and my political position and personality. Put simply, as a researcher, I need to learn how to move between my various identities, and to be aware (and to be able to read) the effects of these movements on my research as a whole. I develop such skills throughout the research process, in dialogue with and support from my supervisors, which I see as an integral part of the learning and documentation of ethnographic method.

My aim is to reconnect my empirical chapters with my informants, discuss them and, if relevant, include their reactions in my final draft.

As I see it, the emotional stress that I have described here is part and parcel of ethnographic fieldwork. Marx (1843) described shame as a revolutionary emotion, an emotion that leads to do good. In the same way, I believe emotions in general and anxiety and insecurity in particular

in ethnographic method and writing can contribute to an in-depth and ethically responsible account of our experiences and the people we have met along the way.

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