

Beyond boundaries? Activism, academia, reflexivity and research

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Summary *In this paper, I draw on my own experiences to question some of the boundaries constructed around notions of activism and academia. Firstly, I introduce activism as a discursively produced concept with potential both to challenge and to support social exclusion. I propose an inclusive, reflexive view of activism that places us all as 'activists'. Using this understanding of activism and the work of feminist and other critical geographers, I consider the role of reflexivity within research and other activist projects. Drawing on my own experiences of activism, I then explore some of the boundaries that reproduce the academic-activist binary. I suggest such boundaries are actively constructed and may compromise the liberatory potential of academic research. I conclude the article by suggesting that a reflexivity grounded in the contingency of our lives can support activism within the academy and beyond.*

Introduction

This paper is offered as a contribution to the growing body of work advocating a critically reflexive, engaged position for the academic researcher (Bondi 1997; Gibson-Graham 1994; Gormley and Bondi forthcoming; Rose 1997). As such, it can only be a work in progress, part of an ongoing process of reflection, action and reaction. In contrast to Marcus' (1992, 489) claim that the 'reflexive turn ... can be dangerous and diverting from real world concerns', I suggest that these ideas are relevant to academics, particularly those involved in 'real world concerns' such as social exclusion (Back and Solomos 1993; Beresford and Croft 1995; Katz 1992; 1994; Keith 1992). This paper is an attempt to engage with notions of activism and reflexivity as they are played out within the research process. In this vein, I draw upon my own experiences throughout, not in an attempt to claim authority for those experiences, but to demonstrate their contingent, fluid nature. My aim in employing my own experiences is to place myself, as far as possible, within the work, given that there is no fixed 'me' of which I am fully cognizant, and that

all experiences, texts and ideas are open to multiple interpretations.

I begin the paper by introducing the notion of activism as discursively produced. Invoking personal experiences and feminist theory, I demonstrate that activism is not a fixed term, but is actively constructed in a range of ways. I then argue that whilst some activist discourses lead to social exclusion and oppression, more critical approaches to activism demonstrate enormous liberatory potential. My opening discussion of activism is used to introduce the role of reflexivity and the importance of questioning and challenging boundaries as they appear in our everyday lives. Drawing on feminist understandings of reflexivity and my own attempts to engage with the term, I consider the potential value of reflexivity as a tool supporting activism, both within academia and beyond. Three 'stories' illustrate some of the tensions and dilemmas that arose as I attempted to engage actively, critically and reflexively with my research. I conclude the paper by celebrating the contingency of all attempts to be 'active'—to engage critically and reflexively with the social world. By celebrating this contingency, I hope

we can work together to reduce oppression and exclusion whilst addressing our own parts in their production.

If I may introduce myself—some understandings of activism

It is illustrative of the potentially empowering nature of critical reflexivity (discussed below) that I now view the very notion of activism as discursively produced. I have been labelled an 'activist' since 1994, when I took a 'year out' in the middle of a Masters degree to live on a direct action anti-road campaign. Although I had already been involved in direct action campaigning since 1990, my experiences during that year out demonstrated its empowering potential in new and inspiring ways. I understood that I was far more free than I had realized to take control of my own life, to challenge oppressive, exclusionary patterns at all scales—from those within myself to those of national and global structures. Following a number of researchers and activists, I suggest that this inspiring, personally empowering side to activism is one of its key strengths, and something that can usefully be employed to help counter social exclusion at all levels (Melucci 1989; Starhawk 1989). Empowered by my experiences of activism, I began to refer to myself as an 'activist'. I saw accepting this label as a form of activism, thereby encouraging and/or provoking others to adopt a more active attitude towards issues of social justice. Yet as my experiences and reflection concerning activism increased, I began to appreciate that the term can be problematic.

The label was applied to me in ways that were not always comfortable. I was constructed as an activist by people who had their own understandings of what this term meant. I felt that these diverse understandings and assumptions amounted to a series of discourses, and thus began to understand 'activism' as a discursively produced term. It was not a fixed notion whose meaning could be taken for granted, but was actively constructed within a range of discourses such as those found in the media, grass-roots organizations and academia. Once I understood 'activism' to be discursively produced, I could begin to question more fully the conflicting ways in which it was employed. There was, I acknowledged, nothing unproblematic about a group of us 'going on an action'. Through such statements we were actually producing a rather narrow, exclusionary

activism. When combined with tabloid media and other popular discourses, this led to a view of activism that emphasized dramatic, physical, 'macho' forms of activism with short-term public impacts. I realized that instead of opening up notions of activism to inspire, encourage and engage as many people as possible, such discourses often construct activism in ways that perpetuate society's dominant lines of oppression. Whilst racist, ableist, homophobic and other oppressive tendencies can be seen within discourses of activism, my attention was drawn to the sexist nature of various constructions (Maxey 1998).

My own experiences of the latent sexism within dominant discourses of activism are far from unique, as illustrated by Gerry Pratt, one of the organizers of the Inaugural International Conference of Critical Geography (IICCG):

It seemed to me that a type of deep-seated sexism defined what counted as radical and activist at the IICCG conference [sic] which reinscribed old categories of private and public. (Pratt, quoted in Katz 1998, 265)

Critical theoretical positions such as feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism and queer theory have helped to demonstrate how lines of domination and power underlie such discourses. I would like to see further work on the way such relations are played out specifically within discourses of activism. Notwithstanding this call for further research, existing understandings of the discursive nature of activism help to highlight the importance of consciously reclaiming such terms. In order to reclaim 'activism' so that it may inspire and engage people in inclusive, emancipatory ways, I view the term very broadly.

This broad, inclusive view of activism is supported by a range of theorist-activists. Some feminists, for example, suggest that all women need to be engaged in the processes of building equality and overcoming patriarchal oppression (hooks 1994). A moral and strategic commitment to embrace all people as 'activists' is central to the Gandhian tradition of *Satyagraha*,¹ for example. This approach emphasizes the contingent, ongoing nature of activism, placing it within a wider process of seeking spiritual, political and moral unity (Gandhi 1940; 1986; Gregg 1960; Merton 1996). Gandhi's approach to activism questions some of the foundational boundaries around which modern life is constructed, including, for example, those between activism, politics and spirituality. Showing some

commonality with this Gandhian perspective, a number of feminists have suggested that activism cannot simply be bounded off from other aspects of everyday life (hooks 1994; Stanley and Wise 1993).

My understanding of activism draws on these positions—as well as post-structuralist analyses of power—as saturated and performative (Foucault 1980). Thus, I argue, the social world is produced through the acts each of us engages in every day. Everything we do, every thought we have, contributes to the production of the social world. I understand activism to be the process of reflecting and acting upon this condition. We are in a sense all activists, as we are all engaged in producing the world. Reflexivity enables us to place ourselves actively within this process. Paradoxically, activism under this interpretation often starts from a mental rather than physical process. By actively and critically reflecting on the world and our place within it, we are more able to act in creative, constructive ways that challenge oppressive power relations rather than reinforce them. This is, perhaps, what one activist I spoke with termed a 'direct action attitude' (Maxey 1998). For me, activism means doing as much as I can from where I am at. Where I am at, of course, varies politically, spiritually, emotionally, physically and so on. Perhaps the central part of my understanding of activism is that it gives rise to a continual process of reflection, challenge and empowerment. I do not punish myself for the infinite number of things I cannot do, rather I celebrate each moment, each thought and deed undertaken in this spirit of critically reflexive engagement.

Reflexivity as radical?

My own reflection on the role of discourses around activism, and the view of activism I have just outlined, suggests a radical, transformatory role for reflexivity. Support for reflexivity's potentially radical role can be found across a range of disciplines and theoretical positions, as Phillips' quotation illustrates:

Unless we turn our gaze upon ourselves we cannot realize the reconstruction of the societies in which we live. (Phillips 1973, xii)

Within anthropology (Jackson 1989; Myerhoff and Ruby 1992; Rose 1990; Weil 1987), sociology (Gubrium and Silverman 1989; Steier 1991) and geography (Bondi 1997; Gilbert 1994), for example, there has been a plethora of commentators suggest-

ing reflexivity's potential for personal transformation and 'self-discovery' (England 1994, 82).

In addition to the potential of reflexivity to act as a catalyst for personal transformation, it has been used (by feminists in particular) to bring about wider transformations. A number of feminist geographers have used reflexivity to highlight and destabilize power imbalances within the research process (Gilbert 1994; McDowell 1992; McLafferty 1995; Staeheli and Lawson 1994). Donna Haraway (1988; 1991) and Sandra Harding (1987; 1991), for example, use reflexivity as a tool to counter the 'god-trick' of a universalized, objective knowledge in which patriarchal oppression can be hidden.

Attempting to locate oneself within one's research and exploring notions of positionality has been a key strategy for many feminists in challenging patriarchal, objectified approaches to knowledge production. Haraway (1991), for example, has called for 'situating technologies' that can help in the process of negotiating understandings of situatedness. Following this, Gillian Rose suggests:

For many feminist geographers reflexivity is one of those situating technologies. (Rose 1997, 308)

So reflexivity, in common with activism, has considerable radical potential. Yet, also in common with activism, reflexivity remains a rather problematic concept. Just as some discourses of activism actually work to conceal and perpetuate oppressions, so can reflexivity hide relations of power and oppression. Just as there are different ways of producing activism, so too has reflexivity been produced in a range of ways. Gillian Rose, for example, identifies a 'transparent reflexivity'.

The visible landscape of power, external to the researcher, transparently visible and spatially organized through scale and distribution, is a product of a particular kind of reflexivity, what I will call 'transparent reflexivity'. It depends on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable. (Rose 1997, 311)

Rose's notion of transparent reflexivity highlights some of the difficulties in trying to implement reflexivity. Rather than making relations of power (for example) explicit, enabling their negotiation, the use of reflexivity has often brought about its own form of concealment. For the 'reflexive researcher' to assume that they can be fully aware of their own self-conscious and simultaneously survey the entire

landscape of power is extremely problematic. This can be seen as yet another form of 'god-trick', in which reflexivity is actually part of a process of ignoring or concealing the more complex interplay of relations within and between the agency of the researcher and the workings of power.

Foucault (1980), and subsequently a number of feminist geographers (Butler 1990; Gibson-Graham 1994; Rose 1997; Bondi 1997), have suggested that our identities are performative, which means there is no fixed or given self-conscious of which we can ever be fully aware. Our identities are deeply uncertain, as they do not exist prior to our performance of them. The shifting nature of identity and human agency, (re)produced continuously in our daily practices, has implications for the process of reflexivity. This view of identity denies there can be a fully conscious researcher able to survey not only their own self-conscious, but also a clear set of social relations into which they fit.

Viewing agency as performative is useful in problematizing the authority of the 'reflexive researcher'. If notions of agency as performative are linked to more complex understandings of power, then transparent reflexivity can be replaced with a more contingent, critical, radical reflexivity. The Foucauldian understanding of power as relational and saturated is useful here again, just as it was in the view of activism outlined earlier. Rather than assuming that power is distributed, what Rose (1997, 311) termed 'context', this view of power suggests it is saturated. Like identity, power is performed in all we do. Power, therefore, cannot be identified and avoided unproblematically by the reflexive researcher. A number of feminists working within geography have begun to employ these understandings of power in radical ways. Rather than assuming they can side-step power relations, they have begun to seek ways of actively engaging with them (Gibson-Graham 1994; Gilbert 1994; Gormley and Bondi forthcoming).

Activism versus academia?

Attempting to engage actively and critically with reflexivity suggests central commonalities with my earlier discussion of activism. 'Critical', rather than 'transparent', reflexivity, like the activism outlined above, involves deeply personal processes of transformation that form part of wider emancipatory changes. The approaches to activism and reflexivity outlined in this paper demonstrate the impossibility

of maintaining the activist versus academic binary. Within academia there is considerable scope for embracing broad, inclusive visions of reflexivity and activism and applying them to our theory and practice. Theoretical positions and the way we relate to our work, for example, can become part of our activism (Bassett 1996; Blomley 1994; Katz 1996; Routledge and Simmons 1995). While I am not suggesting that all academic work can currently be considered activism, or that all activism occurs within academia, there are extremely potent areas of overlap. Routledge, for example, also highlights the overlapping of reflexivity with performative identities and radical activism in proposing the 'third space':

Certainly no simple opposition exists between academia and activism. Rather, occupying a third space of critical engagement enables research to become a personal and reflexive project of resistance. Clearly such a space must be one's own, not one prescribed, ordered, expected, enforced. (Routledge 1996, 411)

Routledge's third space provides another point from which the activism-academia binary is disrupted. I see the third space as a tool through which to explore some of the emancipatory potential of critical reflexivity. As I noted above, there has been no shortage of academics advocating reflexivity's radical potential. There is, however, a lack of support and advice from the literature when it comes to the very real dilemmas we face in working towards critical reflexivity.

Through notions such as transparent reflexivity, we can continue to explore the implications of reflexivity more critically. This exploratory process should, I suggest, draw on our shared experiences as we attempt to live and work reflexively. By openly discussing such experiences, we can form a pool of critical, contingent reflections and perspectives. Such a pool can perhaps become another aid in working towards critical reflexivity. A number of people have already begun this process. Bondi (1997), for example, usefully draws out some of the links she has experienced between psychoanalysis and reflexivity. Feminists have provided most of the work in this vein to date (Gilbert 1994; Gibson-Graham 1994; Katz 1994; Rose 1997; Aldridge 1998; Gormley and Bondi forthcoming). Following the approach of these feminist geographers, I offer a few of my 'stories', exploring some of the dilemmas I have faced in attempting to engage critically, reflexively and actively with research.

Some stories: problematizing boundaries—from an activist in academia to academic-activist

Attempting to engage critically and reflexively with my research has been a problematic, yet ultimately empowering, process. Earlier I outlined how *reflexivity* in relation to ‘activism’ led me to reconsider both terms; reflexivity within the context of my academic research has catalysed similarly profound shifts. In following my changing positionality, these stories take me from a position whereby I viewed myself as an interloping activist within academia, to my current position, whereby I reject the academic-activist binary and see the fluidity of all the roles I perform.

Story 1: bounding the research(er), or when is research not research?

This paper draws on research that was carried out as part of a PhD undertaken in the Department of Geography, University of Wales, Swansea. My research employed participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore issues of sustainability, community and identity as they were played out in three small-scale case-study communities. Upon entering the academy, I encountered a dominant approach towards academic research that identified several distinct stages of the research process. In addition, this approach urged that the roles one occupied during these stages could and should be clearly marked. In accepting this approach, I expected to establish clear boundaries around myself and my work. I thus assumed that my ‘literature review stage’ in the first year would be followed by the ‘fieldwork stage’, in which I went ‘out in the field’. Upon completion of this, I would return to the academy for the ‘writing-up stage’. My critical reflection on the progression of my research and my positionality has led me seriously to question the validity of such prescriptive, formulaic boundaries.

My involvement with all three communities preceded my research. I have a complex range of relationships and responsibilities within these groupings, as I interact with their members in diverse ways and on many levels. It proved impossible, therefore, to divide my research up into a discrete series of predetermined stages. For example, I spent time living in these groupings before my research started and then throughout the entire period of my PhD. Critical reflexivity, I suggest, requires me to acknowl-

edge that my period ‘in the field’ was not discretely bounded. While I could have identified a point at which I had obtained enough interviews and fieldwork notes for the purposes of writing my PhD, this would not necessarily have enabled me to return to the case studies without adopting my researcher role. As Foucault (1980), Keith (1992) and others note, writing up is an integral part of the fieldwork process. Even if I had deliberately avoided taking notes in this notional period when I visit as ‘post-researcher’, my experiences would still inform my final writing. This is equally true of experiences I had in the communities before the study period; all such experiences shaped my research in some way.

Boundaries can, of course, be useful. They may help to structure research, for example. Yet all boundaries are discursively produced and should be critically scrutinized. The theoretical ‘stages’ to my research provide examples of boundaries that initially seem unproblematic, almost self-evident. However, reflexivity begins to demonstrate the ways in which they break down. This alone does not invalidate such boundaries, although their uncritical adoption is problematic. If, for example, I had simply accepted the prescribed ‘stages’, I would not have been alerted to the impact of information gathered beyond the fieldwork stage. This information would still have influenced my PhD, even if it was in subconscious ways. Instead of being able to assess this impact openly, it would have remained hidden from both myself and the other individuals concerned. This would, I believe, have had implications for both the ethical and analytical quality of my research.

In addition to encouraging me to question the notion of different ‘stages’ of research, reflexivity has destabilized boundaries between myself, my research and those with whom I engage in my research. I mentioned above the complexity underscoring my relationships with the case-study residents. Understandings of power and identity as relational and performative are helpful in considering this complexity. The very fact that I am engaged in research does bring with it a whole series of responsibilities and repercussions. Reflexivity, however, highlights the importance of acknowledging many of the other relationships and identities played out in and around my research. In common with Oakley (1979) and Stanley and Wise (1993), for example, I now recognize that most of the people studied do not relate to me primarily as a ‘researcher’. I am at various points a friend, acquaintance, rather

enthusiastic (and for some extreme) activist and fellow activist. Of course the list goes on, it could never be finished, as we are all constantly (re)performing our identities and relationships. What is most important for me is that this reflection brings with it a number of dilemmas.

As with the notional 'stages' of research, destabilizing the boundary between the 'researcher' and the 'researched' has both ethical and analytical implications. I cannot attempt to fulfil all my responsibilities to the residents solely in terms of my researcher role, as my research is not the defining moment in my life nor in the lives of the case-study residents. I acknowledge that ultimate responsibility for my research rests with me and I will benefit from it more than anyone else. Attempting to define the relationships and responsibilities within my research is, then, problematic. Following the work of ethnographers such as Dan Rose (1990), I suggest that constructing rigid boundaries between 'researcher' and 'researched' can conceal numerous roles and responsibilities entailed within research of this kind.

Both the fluidity of relationships and the dilemmas posed by reflexivity can be seen when looking at informed consent. Most textbooks treat this issue prescriptively and unproblematically (Bower and de Gasparis 1978; Faden and Beauchamp 1986; Robson 1993; Frankfor-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996), although there are some rather more critical exceptions (Homan 1991). The central message I gleaned from the literature was that I should simply go out and get informed consent (Maxey 1997a). Looking more reflexively at the complexity of relationships within my research indicates that obtaining informed consent in the terms set out by most textbooks is impossible (for a more detailed analysis of tensions surrounding informed consent, both theoretically and in my research, see Maxey 1997a). In all three case studies, I spoke to individuals about my research, asking them to consider how they felt about it and emphasizing the notion of informed consent. In each case they were supportive of my research, but I emphasized that they could change their mind (revoke the consent) at any point and that I would like to discuss this with them in the future. On several occasions, and within each case study, subsequent conversations with some residents revealed that they had no clear recollection that I was studying at all, let alone that it involved them! This could indicate that I simply had not explained things clearly enough; whilst this point is valid, I offer an additional perspective.

There is a tendency, when engaging in research, to elevate its importance. For some of my interviewees, 'forgetting' my research was part of their making sense of the world—research meant very little in their lives. They did not relate to me as a researcher, even after I had discussed my work with them, because there were, for them, far more salient links between us. Whereas some residents showed great interest and empathy with my research, others saw my attempts to raise issues such as informed consent as being largely irrelevant to their lives. Whilst this is how I interpret the responses of some residents, each person I spoke to understood my attempts to gain informed consent differently. Given the uniqueness and diversity of people's understandings, it is impossible to assume I could gain a definitive informed consent for all members at all stages of my research.

Reflexivity has helped to destabilize many boundaries and assumptions within my research. A series of tensions and dilemmas have sprung from this challenging process. I can no longer complacently assert that I have 'gained informed consent', for example, or that I have ended my fieldwork stage. Central to the dilemmas this reflexivity brings is that it does not reduce my responsibilities or commitments, although it does often present them as more complex and contingent. In order to contextualize this a little, I offer a second story.

Story 2: meeting Holtsfield

The case study on whose spatial, social and cultural edges I lived for two years is Holtsfield. Consisting of 27 self-built chalets in the Plotlands tradition (see Hardy and Ward 1984), the group (currently 60 or so residents, aged from nine months to over 90 years), has lived on the field for several generations. Backgrounds, occupations and interests in this diverse group vary greatly. The residents therefore have a range of skills and resources that they have employed to campaign against eviction and demolition of the site since its purchase by a local businessman in 1989. My first connection with Holtsfield was as an activist. Upon moving to Swansea I got to know the Holtsfield residents, as I was keen to help in any way I could—by using media contacts gained through previous campaigning experiences, for example. This soon led to friendships with a number of residents and a growing involvement with the Holtsfield Campaign.²

Typically of my socialization, I sought boundaries for myself. I decided that my activities in the context

of Holtsfield were separate from my PhD. This meant I could be clear about my motivations and know when I was doing things 'to help others' and when I was being altogether more selfish and esoteric—'headwanking', as one activist friend succinctly put it. On the face of it this was a perfectly reasonable course to take. I could satisfy both my activist and academic commitments, using my privileged position within the academy and my experience of various campaigns to help a clearly marginalized and oppressed group. Happily, events collapsed such cosy divisions.

In the spring of 1996, the Holtsfield Campaign had some 'successes', winning an appeal to the House of Lords for a test case with, crucially, the other 26 chalets' cases being frozen pending this appeal. We were advised that the appeal process would take at least a year. Having lived and campaigned with the threat of almost imminent eviction for over six years, the residents gained a desperately needed period of leeway—they actually got on with 'simply living here again', in the words of one resident. I spent the summer of 1996 on the Sustainable Europe Tour, again combining my research with activism.³

Upon my return, I knew I had to focus on my PhD, and decided I would place my 'activism' lower in my priorities for a year or two. I realized, however, that whilst I was not indispensable to the Holtsfield Campaign, I could be useful to it. As I chatted with members of the campaign, we recognized there really was a need to 'get things going again'. A date had been set for the appeal—20 March 1997—and one resident came up with the idea of a 260-mile 'Holtsfield walk to the House of Lords'. We knew this would take considerable organization.

At this time, a resident suggested I use Holtsfield as one of my case studies. She had raised this idea months earlier, but I was still intent on maintaining clear boundaries between my activism and research. At this stage, though, I considered her suggestion more deeply. As she, too, was involved in postgraduate research, we had already discussed issues of subjectivity, reflexivity and positionality. I began to question many of my earlier assumptions about my involvement with both academia and activism. In addition, I was faced with a fairly stark practical choice. I could not continue my level of involvement with the Holtsfield Campaign and meet my PhD commitments unless I combined the two.

This story illustrates the contingency of my research process. I recognize, in common with a number of authors (eg Rose 1990; Oakley 1979),

that research involves a certain degree of spontaneity, as the researcher is forced to make some decisions on the hoof. There is clearly a tension between this and the more deliberative approach that reflexivity implies. By at least attempting to engage critically and reflexively, one has the potential to learn from these situations, raising one's understanding and empowerment. Reflexivity has frequently enabled me to open up new ways of working with my research, as I attempted to balance the various responsibilities highlighted by the process.

Thus, I have attempted to work proactively within the case-study groupings. With Holtsfield, for example, I have taken minutes in meetings between residents and various officials with whom they interact, written articles and given papers about Holtsfield and been a point of contact (both internally and externally). These have all enabled me to use my research in a directly proactive way. Whilst this appears to be the kind of engaged research that many have called for (Blomley 1994; 1995; Katz 1998; Routledge 1996; Tickell 1995), each of these examples is problematic, as my third story demonstrates.

Story 3: the Holtsfield walk—an exercise in collaborative writing?

Whilst on the Holtsfield walk to the House of Lords, I was asked to write an article about Holtsfield for the magazine *Red Pepper*. Rather than simply write the article and show it to a couple of people before I sent it off, I discussed the idea with as many people living on Holtsfield as possible. Their attitude was generally to assume that it was a good idea and that I should get on with it. In trying to pursue a more participatory approach, I was in danger of imposing my project on others. I struggled with this: were my prejudices at work, in assuming a potentially empowering role for the article when many did not care about it and others clearly lacked the time to get involved? One of my aims was to reach a point where others were meaningfully involved in the writing process, but I recognized that this was at least partially an attempt to placate my own fears of writing of/for/over 'them' and thus falling into a role of manipulator and misrepresenter (there has been much discussion of this within critical research: see Beresford and Croft 1995; Katz 1992; Kobayashi 1994; Routledge and Simons 1995).

In the end, the article was written whilst actually on the walk (Maxey 1997b). This meant we were a

small group, all of whom were involved in the article in some way, with many people offering ideas, perspectives and events that were new to me. The writing project can be viewed as a success in a number of ways. We all felt very positive about it, albeit to differing degrees and in different ways. The sense of shared effort and ownership we felt, and the project's ability to draw on a range of perspectives are classic strengths of participatory action research (Elden and Levin 1991; Holland and Blackburn 1998; Kitchin 1999; Mayo and Craig 1995). The project still 'failed' in many respects, however. I was still 'the author', my name was put to the article and, whilst I was entirely indebted to everyone's contribution, most still considered it 'my' article. The sense of shared ownership was complex and partial. I do not misrepresent the case when I say that I felt like a scribe to whom everyone contributed. Even my role as scribe, though, was not accomplished without the help of others in the group. My handwriting was so poor that two others (both women) rewrote the article so that I could fax it off in time. Was my discomfort in this part of the labour division misplaced or insufficient? As with my PhD, ultimate responsibility for the article rested with me. I undertook collating, editing and other roles, so reflexivity demands that I recognize I was never 'just' a scribe.

This 'story' echoes issues raised recurrently in attempts to involve the researched in the research process (Elden and Chisholm 1993; Madge 1997; Holland and Blackburn 1998; Kitchin 1999). Yet the extent to which this is actually an inappropriate imposition on people who really do not have the time or interest in such things is often left hidden. Many writers, quite rightly, seek to address the power imbalance between researcher and researched, employing tactics that place as much power as possible 'back' into the hands of the researched (attempts to do this with some analysis of the limitations involved include Cohen 1992; England 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Madge 1997). But such techniques cannot always be assumed to be appropriate. Power works in such saturated, relational ways that there can be no formula for addressing power imbalances within research. Sometimes, for example, assumptions of power imbalance need to be challenged, even reversed (Aldridge 1998; Gormley and Bondi forthcoming). Critical reflexivity can render such assumptions transformative, as the process of reflecting may bring the researcher's prejudices to the fore. Finally, I suggest that these tensions often stem from the problematic

nature of the very boundaries we construct around ourselves and our work, in this case between researcher and researched.

Less a conclusion, more a comment within an ongoing discussion

We can never know all the implications our actions will have, nor how they will be perceived, interpreted and consumed. This has been recognized by academics within the context of the reading of their texts (Bondi 1997; Foucault 1980; Keith 1992); indeed, this element of unpredictability is something all activists face and thus, I suggest, it is something we should all reflect on. Not knowing the full implications of our writing and actions does not, however, reduce our responsibilities. I argue that 'activism' is a daily reality for us all. Each of us reading this article is already engaged in producing the social world. Given the scale and depth of oppression and exclusion in this increasingly brutalized and globalized world, reflecting on our minuscule individual contributions could be disempowering, leaving us to shrug our shoulders and reject the whole reflexive challenge. However, the empowering potential of engaging critically and reflexively with our research, and all aspects of our lives, remains there for us all, whether we choose to embrace this potential or not. I make sense of this, as I outlined above, by attempting to do as much as I can from 'where I am at'. For me, this approach emphasizes the provisional, ongoing nature of engaged critical reflexivity. Once we are able to celebrate the value of our contingent, flawed efforts, we will be far freer to add our next contribution to the conversation.

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Notes

- 1 *Satyagraha* is Gandhi's own term and was one of his central principles, emphasizing the importance of 'truth'. The root of the term is often described as 'holding onto the truth' (Gandhi 1940; 1986; Merton 1996). This search for and practice of 'truth' is often confused with Gandhi's support for and practice of non-violent direct

- action (NVDA). *Satyagraha*, however, went far beyond this; for Gandhi, it was a process involving continuous reflection and practice, a side effect of which was NVDA. Unlike NVDA, *Satyagraha* could not be considered a short-term tactic. There is much in common, I suggest, between *Satyagraha* and the reflexivity and activism outlined in this paper. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* was not about the pursuit of a universal 'truth'. The approach was quite the reverse, in the sense that it recognized everyone would have their own part to play in opposing oppression, and that they would bring their own particularities to this.
- 2 For more information on Holtsfield and the campaign, email the author.
 - 3 The tour was coordinated by three Europe-wide environmental networks and involved working with local groups in twelve countries to produce workshops, concerts, street theatre and actions. The three networks are: ASEED (Action for Solidarity, Equality, Environment and Development), EYFA (European Youth for Action) and YEE (Youth and Environment Europe).

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