Chapter 2

Involving communities as skilled learners: The STRAP framework

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Bosnia Herzegovina, November 2013. 'Why do you use the language of donors?', asked the 'directress' of a feminist organization who had agreed to be interviewed in the framework of a research on organizing for women's rights in the Balkans. 'Advocacy, gender politics, gender equality… All those keywords you just mentioned are something that I personally do not believe in', she claimed. 'Gender equality is a very problematic concept, because in the moment that gender equality and the related projects came into the Balkans they lost the political component of feminism'. Local civil society organizations embraced the donors' agenda, she argued, prettifying and watering down needs and demands without articulating an in-depth criticism of the patriarchal system these are embedded in. 'The umbrella of gender equality softens and makes things easier to swallow. So, all the radical topics and important issues connected to feminism were never discussed in these projects', she added.

Conducting research in the field of development and social change entails working closely with communities, disadvantaged individuals and grassroots groups. Notwithstanding the best intentions, episodes like the one opening this chapter might affect the quality of a research as well as the researcher-research subject relationships. Unfortunately, they are not an exception—yet taking them seriously might help us to reflect upon the researcher's role vis-à-vis individual motivations, methodological choices and epistemological approaches. Although the research investigating Bosnian women's organizing ultimately intended to contribute to their empowerment, the accidental adoption of the 'language of donors' confined this emerging movement to a Western understanding of women's organizations, dismissing the potential taming effect of donors' agendas and visions on grassroots values and strategies. But communities are active agents with their own specific values and preferences, experiences and worldviews, modes of interactions and needs. This yields some crucial epistemological and methodological questions. How can we make sure we do not overly 'shape' the empirical phenomenon under study, to a point that it becomes alien to the very same activists who bring it to life? How can we avoid appropriating and uncritically repurposing the language and goals of other players? How can we make sure that our research benefits *also* (and perhaps, primarily) the researched? But also: What resources are researchers using up for data collection, which would be more effectively used for, for example, improving living conditions or fostering social change? How can we build-in our research projects operational mechanisms to warrant that we listen to and are accountable to the communities we study?

In an article co-authored with community organizer Karen Jeffreys, sociologist Charlotte Ryan argued that both theorizing and practice would benefit if scholars 'embed themselves in movements, not simply as active citizens but as skilled learners' (Ryan and Jeffreys, 2008, p. 3). The invitation goes out to academics who have access to resources such as knowledge and time, and whose job is to analyze social reality and occasionally offer normative reflections. But what if, following Ryan and Jeffreys' call, we reverse the perspective, and consider communities and activist groups as skilled learners? We believe this a valid approach for three reasons. First, communities and activists regularly engage in complex, rich 'meaning work', that is to say the 'interactive process of constructing meaning' (Gamson, 1992, p. xii) and making sense of reality which is at the core of constructing collective action and sustaining it over time. This 'meaning work' is at the core of movement learning and memory mechanisms. Second, the activists translate into practice the values and projects researchers observe, thus we can reasonably assume that they 'know it better'—although often the knowledge does not come in the form academia expects and is prepared to understand and value. Third, their activism evolves over time, setting in motion a process of experiential learning that produces hands-on expertise that typically includes a (variably explicit) self-reflexive component.

Although substantial scholarly attention has been given to participatory methodologies and to self-reflexive practices, little has been said about the involvement in the research process of communities as skilled learners. This chapter offers a ready-to-use community engagement checklist for research in the fields of development studies and communication for development and social change (CDSC). We explore five challenges, in the form of practical 'questions' that researchers should take into account when planning and conducting fieldwork, namely: Is my research relevant to the community? How do I plan to acknowledge and address power imbalances? What accountability mechanisms can I establish? Is my research design transparent, and will my data and findings be available to the community? How can I (best) translate my research findings for community understanding and use?

We summarize these questions in what we have termed the STRAP framework, acronym for **Sharing**, **Translation**, **Relevance**, **Accountability**, and **Power**. In daily life, straps connect different objects such as pieces of clothing, and they are usually integral to the item they belong to. Similarly, the STRAP approach has the ability to create meaningful connections between researchers and the research subjects, while embedding the research project into the process of social change itself, making sure that the latter is not perceived as exogenous, intrusive, or irrelevant to the activists' daily practices. The STRAP framework emerges in the context of a specific type of co-generative inquiry that we call 'engaged research': without departing from systematic, evidence-based, social science research, engaged research is designed to make a difference for disempowered communities and people beyond the academic community (Milan S., 2010). These questions have a direct link to methodological practices, because, as Chesters put it, a '[m]ethod cannot be separated from ontology, and ontology has epistemological consequences'

(2012, p. 157). Here, ontology refers to the knowledge and prefigurative politics movements typically embed, and epistemology indicates the way knowledge is produced by both activists and researchers.

In what follows, we outline the practice of engaged research, offering it as a valid epistemological approach to the study of grassroots and disadvantaged communities. Then we explore the five tenets of the STRAP method, linking them to the different phases of a research project. The chapter is illustrated with examples from the authors' fieldwork, respectively with community Internet projects and radio stations across the world (S. Milan) and rural communities and grassroots women's groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina (C. Milan). The two cases are paradigmatic of distinct challenging social settings that require a tailored approach: endangered groups often object of surveillance and repression, and deeply divided communities in a transitional democracy. Looking at how these two communities have been engaged in a research project helps us to reflect on research relationships, and their impact on research quality and social change processes.

Practicing engaged research

'The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man,' wrote the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his 1968 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2012, p. 47). Based on a Marxist analysis of the relations between colonizers and the colonized, Freire called for an approach to education that had empowerment, rather than knowledge transfer, at its core. In his view, freedom is the result of informed action, or 'praxis', which integrates theory with practice, and treats learners as co-creators of knowledge.

Almost fifty years after its publication, Freire's invite appears particularly relevant to contemporary research with and about communities in CDSC and neighbouring disciplines, for three reasons. First, the very same definition of communication for development as 'a social process based on dialogue' and 'seeking change at different levels including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change' (World Bank, 2007), calls for research subjects who are neither amorphous or passive. Second, the practice and study of communication for development and social change (and the many names it goes by, including development communication) have moved from the edges of the academic agenda to a central position. This reflects the mainstreaming and consolidation of the field, with the emergence of dedicated educational programs as well as funding streams, in particular following the first global 'public acknowledgement' of the role of communication in development by the world congress on the topic organized by the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (Rome 2006). Third, the agenda and the scholarly reflection in CDSC increasingly intersect that of the neoliberal digital capitalism, lacking however the ability to articulate this problematic relationship (Enghel, 2015). While the mainstreaming of the field has gone hand in hand with its contamination with neoliberal policies, the tools and devices of communication for development have changed, too. For instance, in the priority list of international funding agencies, 'liberation technology' enabling people to 'report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom' (Diamond, 2010, p. 70) has taken the place that was once of community radio and journalism. In other words, we are at a crucial turning point, one that might define the meaning and relevance of the field for the generations to come. It is time to ask ourselves what role can CDSC research play in the process of the 'conquest of freedom', to say it with Freire, and how can we avoid falling into the trap of the colonizer-colonized dichotomy, among others. In order to do so we have to engage with fundamental ontological and epistemological questions, interrogating what knowledge is produced, how, and for whom.

The most widely practiced approach in dialogic research is perhaps co-generative inquiry, which builds upon joint collaborative efforts by research professionals and the communities under study. Within this framework, Stoecker (2005) argued in support of an explicit focus on nurturing social change, by means of increased involvement of the research subjects in the investigation, greater attention to process, appropriate time lines respectful of the respective needs, mutual respect, and sustained communication between the two groups. These recommendations resonate with other critical approaches in qualitative research, most notably with participatory action research, whereby scholars are believe to 'have a responsibility to do work that is socially meaningful and socially responsible' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 34). In a similar fashion, Dewey's notion of 'democratic inquiry' posited that the publics with a stake in a particular issue have the right to contribute to resolve it (Dewey, 1927); publics, in addition, are formed through becoming self-aware of their commonalities, hence research (and policy advocacy, for that matters) can contribute also to make communities aware of their identity and specificities. Boyer (1996), in turn, called for a 'scholarship of engagement', inviting scholars to engage in community-based research and teaching able to benefit both sides of the equation. More recently, Frey and Carragee have pioneered an approach named 'communication activism for social justice scholarship', or 'communication activism scholarship', intended to 'work with and for oppressed, marginalized, and underresourced groups and communities […] to intervene into unjust discourses and material conditions to make them more just, and documenting and reporting their practices, processes, and effects to multiple publics' (see Carragee and Frey, forthcoming 2016). However, academia is not always supportive of these participatory forms of inquiry, as they might seem to hinder the scientific and objective quality of the research (c.f., Benford, 1991). Frequently invoked but seldom seriously practiced, and in the lack of benchmarks and criteria, engaged forms of scholarships risk becoming a 'purr word', 'a word that sounds nice (like a cat purring) and conveys pleasant connotative thoughts, but a word that has virtually lost its substantive denotative meaning because of the many different conceptions that people have of it' (underwood and Frey, 2008, p. 371).

Here we focus none of the most fruitful tenets of engaged research approaches, the relation with research subjects. Engaged research has the potential to acknowledge the status of local communities as sophisticated and self-directed knowledge producers that 'can make sense out of what they are doing, autonomously of any evangelical or manipulative interventions of the researcher' (Melucci, 1996, p. 389). This approach has received renewed interest within, among others, the field of social movement studies, which faces challenges similar to communication for development and social change. There, scholars suggest to start by asking 'what kinds of knowledge do movements produce' (Cox and Forminaya, 2009, p. 1), and how do movements produce said knowledge, in order for scholars to replicate, whenever possible, similar practices of knowledge generation. For instance, researchers might try to mirror the participatory approach of movements in their investigation (Milan S., 2013). They may also support the attempts by community activists to set the agenda of policymakers, or address issues of concern to community members. For instance, Ryan and colleagues conducted a research on the costs and benefits of immigration into the United States on behalf of students from rural education centres in Mexico: the students, who lacked access to the internet, obtained the collected information via a searchable compact-disk, while the researchers gained insights on the way immigration is framed online (Ryan et al., 2010).

Engaged research departs from the acknowledgement that for the most part researchers and activists embody different motivations and investments, which are reflected in (and risks to jeopardize) the interaction between the two groups. One such discrepancy is to be found in what the two sides of the equation might 'gain' from engaging in the research, which concerns for example material aspects and different understandings of 'labour'. For instance, the interview process requires from both sides an investment of time and resources, but whereas for academics this is part of the job description and leads to material earnings of some kind, for activists and practitioners participating in a research often ends up being part of the leisure time, reducing the time that is available to gain income (or to work for social change). This imbalance cannot easily be resolved – by payments to the activists, for example—as it is grounded in a deeper clash between different organizational cultures, work ethics, and motivations, that is, between those whose interest in an issue is part of an income-generating activities and those who engage voluntarily for social and political reasons.

While calling for collaborative research, our approach does not argue in favour of a total blurring of the boundaries between researchers and research subjects. Rather, we acknowledge the reciprocal roles, strengths and drawbacks, and suggest building on those. In fact, engaged research represents an implementation of what sociologist Melucci (1992) called 'situated epistemology', to indicate an approach that takes into account the contextual elements of knowledge production, rather than simply paying attention to its outcomes. Most importantly, situated epistemology openly embeds the investigation in a relationship, as opposed to standing above or outside the research object (Melucci, 1996). In such perspective, maintaining a critical distance is no longer an issue, as defining roles and functions is part of the process and embodied in the research relationship. It is important to note that such relation is not, and cannot be, 'between equals', and differences in status, motivations, and resources must be acknowledged and recursively addressed. The five questions of the STRAP framework represent one way of interrogating and improving relation relationships. With this in mind, we now move to explore the first of the five tenets of the STRAP framework, one that asks whether a research project is relevant to the community under study.

S for sharing (and transparency)

The first question to ask concerns the overall research design, and its transparency and the sharing of data and research results in particular. With sharing and transparency we refer to the 'moral' imperative to provide access to raw and analysed data to the communities under investigation. Sharing, however, cannot be considered a 'final' stage only, and this is where transparency comes in. 'Transparency' represents a dynamic approach to sharing, affecting the process through which a research unfolds, rather than merely its outcomes. It concerns the ways in which a researcher selects theoretical approaches, methods and data. In this respect, Moravcsik defines research transparency as 'the principle that every political scientist should make the essential components of his or her work visible to fellow scholars' (2014, 48). A researcher should start at the onset of every research project by reflecting on the tools and design choices able to make her research findings accessible to the community at large, and should make this reflection explicit and crystal clear to the community at large. She should also be ready to evaluate and renegotiate such transparency and sharing patterns throughout the research process.

The concern upon sharing and transparency is increasingly a widespread one, to the extent that recently the American Political Science Association (APSA) formally recommended higher transparency standards for qualitative research (APSA, 2012). According to APSA, research transparency consists of three dimensions: data, analytic and production transparency. The first provides the reader with 'the evidence or data used to support empirical research claims' (Moravcsik, 2014 48), bolstering the reader's evaluation of the correct data interpretation and analysis. The second 'assures readers access to information about data analysis: the precise interpretive process by which an author infers that evidence supports a specific descriptive, interpretive, or causal claim' (Moravcsik, 2014 48). Briefly, a scholar has to 'provide an account on the basis on which they reached particular conclusions' (Moravcsik, 2014 48). Finally, production transparency 'grants readers access to information about the methods by which particular bodies of cited evidence, arguments, and methods were selected from among the full body of possible choices' (Moravcsik, 2014, 49), in order to make explicit the selection criteria for evidence, theory, and methods.

But the dimension of sharing and transparency we are mostly concerned with here is its ability to give something back, becoming a means to contribute to self-reflection and grassroots learning. At the outset, committing to transparency is closely connected to creating and maintaining trust, since usually respondents rely on the researcher's personal and professional integrity (Malthaner, 2014). Hence, it is important for a researcher to be consistent with what she stated prior to interact with the informant, for instance to keep personal information anonymous or not to use 'off-the-record' excerpts of the interview without the explicit consent of the interviewee (della Porta, 2014, 237). Similarly, the researcher has the obligation to present the topic, the overall purpose of her research project, and the procedures she intends to use truthfully and openly, securing (and occasionally negotiating) informed consent prior to beginning of data collection (see Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, 70), and throughout the research process itself.

While a lot has been written on ethical issues concerning transparency of the research design, little has been said on how to cope with transparency of research findings. Kvale and Brinkmann explained that a researcher must 'publish findings that are as accurate and representative of the field of inquiry as possible' and that 'the results reported should be checked and validated as fully as possible, and with an effort toward a transparency of procedures by which the conclusions have been arrived at' (2009, p. 74). Even fewer scholars have dealt with the issue of sharing the researcher's findings for community use and benefit—with some exceptions (Croteau et al., 2005; Hintz and Milan, 2010; Ryan et al., 2010; Ryan and Jeffreys, 2008). On the contrary, a 'paternalistic'—or rather neo-colonialist approach considering research subjects in view of the exclusive benefit of academic inquiry—is often often adopted towards the communities under scrutiny. But if we take communities as skilled learners, the sharing of data and research results can contribute to political learning, self-assessment and collective memory. At the end of a research on grassroots Internet practices, an activist collective reported that participating in the study had 'initiated long interesting discussions within the group. That is a very welcome side effect of the whole thing. It helps us to clarify our positions in the issues' at stake (Milan S., 2013, p. 184).

T for translation

Building bridges between academia and the social world from a perspective of social change presents numerous challenges: to name a few, trying to find a common ground despite the different 'professional' languages; the tension between individualism and collectivism; and the emphasis on 'practices' of practitioners vs. the accent on theory development among academics (see Hintz and Milan, 2010). Here we focus on the clash of organizational cultures, and reflect on the problem of translation.

By translation, we mean the conversion of a unit of meaning (for instance, a research question, a theoretical concept, an empirical finding) expressed in a certain language (in our case, the professional and epistemological languages of social sciences) into an equivalent meaning in another grammar (such as a discourse that can be understood by activists). It concerns the research cycle from beginning to end, but is particularly relevant in the dissemination of findings. The process operates in two directions, from the researcher to the activist and vice-versa. It means, for instance, making the research questions not only intelligible to our research partners, but also meaningful to their ontological concerns. It requires adopting research methods that respect the ways social practices are experienced by practitioners. It also bounds researchers to share their research findings in an activist-friendly format useful for action or self-reflection, in view of taking findings back to the field (Adler, 1996). But, especially, it requires both researchers and activists to engage in a process of mutual learning, which is at the core of conducting research *with* social groups, processes, and events (as opposed to research *about*). For example, we have engaged in translation efforts in occasions of presentations of research findings in activist or community settings and events. It is not a matter of simplifying concepts and outcomes, but of making them *relevant* to the communities, inserting them into, for example, normative analysis or impact assessments.

Whereas most current social science is research *about* (social groups, processes, events– research that tends to treat the movements' concerns 'as secondary or relative to their own specific ontology/cosmopology' [Chesters, 2012, p. 148]), engaged researchers aim to make research *with* (that is, in collaboration with) these subjects. Research about is usually considered to be the only objective, and therefore the only scientifically sound research, on the grounds that the observer is sufficiently detached from the object of study. Research *with*, however, is grounded on a similarly solid scientific basis. But it requires a commitment from both sides to collaborate and come to terms with the reciprocal differences; it demands a long-term time frame, recurrent cycles of reflection, and constant adjustments along the way. Furthermore, research *with* is not only possible but also desirable. If we cannot deny the existence of a potential contradiction between engagement and academic rigorousness, the former does not have to come at the expense of evidence-based scientific research. The types of questions being asked, and the way we ask them, as well as the methods we select to approach social actors may partially differ, but the results can be equally systematic and scientifically solid. It is at this stage that reflectivity comes in again: researchers should be ready to regularly question their identities and roles as researchers immerged in a complex and challenging social world, torn between science and action.

In this respect, Ryan and Jeffreys proposed to implement 'two-way, dialogic exchanges that create new, generalizable knowledge' and can lead to the 'democratization of theorizing' (Ryan and Jeffreys, 2008, p. 4). Recognizing their complementary nature, researchers and CDSC communities should establish 'learning communities' based on shared learning practices and work routines, and implementing 'iterative cycles of dialog, action and reflection' (p. 4). In this way, researchers can actively support a community's ability to learn from practice and embed its learning in the collective memory. In turn, scholars benefit from the activists' experience-based feedback and direct observation.

R for relevance of the research to the community

In 1845, Karl Marx argued that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. The incitement holds true today, in particular for scholars who aim to combine a social change agenda with their academic obligations. It translates into a commitment to address the relevance of a given research project to the research subjects, prior and throughout fieldwork one should. But in practice this task might be more complex as it might seem at a first sight.

While in Bosnia Herzegovina investigating the impact of local development projects on multi-cultural integration, one of us happened to visit a cultural center in the Serbian-dominated part of the country, which suffered massive ethnic cleansing during the 1990s war with the persecution and fleeing of thousands from the non-Serb ethnic minorities.[1] The center, allegedly opened to all community members, housed a women-run craft laboratory financed by the Italian nongovernmental organization (NGO) that hosted the researcher at that time. The woman who escorted us around claimed that the laboratory represented a great job opportunity for local women. When the researcher inquired about the ethnic belonging of the women participating in the project, the interviewee proudly reported that they hailed from different ethnic communities. It sounded like a striking example of a successful reconciliation process. But the translator who accompanied us, a local girl deeply involved in community life, revealed that in fact only Muslim women participated in the activities of the center; the center itself was named after a Muslim partisan "hero"—a cultural identitarian marker that alienated the non-Muslim part of the community.[2] Why did the interviewee lie to the researcher, although there was no apparent reason for doing it? 'She just said what you wanted to hear,' the translator explained, 'somehow you are linked to the NGO financing their laboratory and reconciliation-through-craft workshops. They do not want to lose the funds.' Would

[1] Bosnia Herzegovina is composed by three 'constituent peoples' (Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, or Bosnian Muslim) and divided in two semi-autonomous halves called entities (the Serbian republic, or Republika Srpska, and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina).

[2] Geographical names and even the alphabet (Latin versus Cyrillic) typically correspond to a precise ethnic connotation, and are used to include or exclude the ethnic 'others'.

it not have been for the translator, our research would have offered a superficial and biased portrayal of the local community, depicted as fully reconciled after the war, whereas a more in-depth analysis of local dynamics revealed that this was far from being true. What truth would have served what agenda? The report of a reconciled town in which women of different ethnic communities work on craft together would ultimately have benefited the researcher, whose initial agenda was to prove that reconciliation in post-war societies is possible. It might also have smoothed the community's relation with funders. But certainly it would have not contributed to reconciliation.

The question of relevance intervenes in all phases of the research cycle, from envisioning the research design (and the development of research questions in particular) to data gathering, from theory building to data dissemination. How do we define relevance? Researchers alone are usually not in the position of undertaking this exercise—and this is where taking communities as skilled learners comes into the picture. Recursively interrogating the community on relevance is conducive to improving research questions, promoting a better research relationship, and ultimately increasing data quality.

Selecting research questions that matter not only to scholars but also to the activist community is the first step in addressing the relevance question. It is also a way to tackle the discrepancy in motivations and investments between the two sides of the equation. When conducting engaged research with radical Internet activists and community radio stations, we tried to put the research design at the service of both activism and scientific data gathering. In practice, it meant that research questions had to relate closely to the daily interpersonal practices of the activists for them to accept the research as legitimate and engage with it, even when those needs were not immediately self-evident, nor easy to translate into research questions functional to the research (Milan S, 2013).

Finally, the question of relevance is also connected to gaining and maintaining access to the field. In a project that sought to revitalize the practice of foraging and consumption of seaweed in the Azores islands (Portugal), Matos (2013) started by identifying the needs of the local community. She designed a stakeholder engagement process with three tenets, namely action, participation and context-sensitive approach, which contributed to improve the relevance of the research to local communities, as well as the acceptance of the research (and the researcher) by the research subjects. Furthermore, as the Bosnian example showed, it is important to question our entry points, especially when they are institutional intermediaries, to avoid the researcher being 'seen as "representing" or being on the side of the leadership or management' (Malthaner, 2014)—a mechanism that can distort the community perception of the reseach relevance.

A for accountability towards research objects

With the notion of 'accountability', we mean the moral obligation for CDSC scholars to be accountable to their research objects, and to take into consideration their 'social and political ontologies and epistemological practices' (Chesters 2012, p. 153). In practice, accountability translates in a set of measures that, if taken seriously, contribute to building bridges between academia and the social world from a perspective of social change. The question of accountability intervenes in particular in the phases of data analysis and theory building, in consideration of the connection between grassroots practices and academic reflection evoked by Chesters (2012), but should play a role also within data dissemination and publication of research findings.

In practice, accountability entails that a researcher shares her scientific knowledge and makes it accessible to activists and the wider community, not keeping it at the exclusive disposal of academia. It is no surprise that often researchers are met with activists' skepticism, stemming from previous negative experiences that left them with the impression that researchers 'take advantage' of activists merely to further their careers, while communities and activists do not benefit from the research. One of our interview partners, herself a former PhD researcher but in this occasion wearing the activist hat, passionately plead us to disseminate our findings on the recent mobilizations in Bosnia Herzegovina. As she said, 'after the protests [of February 2014] there are so many researchers who come here and ask us questions! We are constantly providing them with our time, information, expertise, but we do not have any trade-off, academia never ever gets back to us.' In this respect, Flack evoked the existence of a 'moral dimension' to the study of social movements and social change efforts, meaning an ethical obligation on the researcher to enable the groups under scrutiny to use the results, especially when it comes to relatively powerless and disadvantaged groups (Flacks, 2005)—a point we already made under the 'sharing and transparency' rubric. The purpose of the transfer of data and findings is to 'provide movement activists with intellectual resources they might not readily obtain otherwise' (Flacks 2005, pp. 7-8).

But accountability means also measuring disclosure against potential dangers associated with full disclosure. A researcher should protect the privacy and anonymity of her sources. She should avoid releasing sensitive information about actions and strategies that might put organized collective action at risk. Personal relations and opinions expressed towards other peers should also be hendled with care, as they are are likely to hamper trust within a community. One should always ask to the benefit and to the detriment of whom do we disclose data and findings. Research should by no means facilitate repression or surveillance, or contribute to increase the animosity between activists' groups (it is not rare that during interviews personal opinions are expressed towards peers, both on and off record). That is deemed particularly important especially when conducting research with brand-new networks, for example in post-conflict societies, where ties and social fabric are still weak, the level of trust low, and the social sphere still fragmented. An experienced researcher should also weight and contextualize disclosure decisions, also when data are public (like social media data), as there is a difference between scattered raw data and analyzed data.

In our view, accountability should go hand in hand with reciprocity, which may translate in the participation of a researcher as an external supporter. As a token for participation, the researcher might earmark an amount of financial resources to be awarded to activists projects, or reserve some time to be devoted to activities able to support activism on the ground (for instance, translations or copy-editing), or writing statement in support of vulnerable groups under threat. One of us, for instance, happened to write a journalistic article in support of the main Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) rights group of Bosnia Herzegovina after it had been victim of a homophobic attack at a Queer Festival organized in the capital back in December 2013.

P for Power: Addressing power imbalances

A closer look at community-research interactions reveals a set of divides that concern differences in organizational cultures and routines, in motivations and values, and in the potential gains and possible losses of the research for each side. These differences can be subsumed under the notion of power, which in turn speaks to the unbalanced relation between the subject and the object of research. The question of power plays a role in particular in the phases of methods selection and data gathering, in recognition of these phases being those when the researcher directly interfaces with the research subjects. It is a matter of relationality and reciprocity, and it entails considering the 'unfolding of obligations and limitations developing from the relational dimension of the interaction. This requires one's own position of power, security or vulnerability to be open to analysis and contest' (Chesters, 2012, p. 155). The question of power becomes even more crucial for those doing research on indigenous communities (Lewis, 2012), or historically disenfranchised groups who might have suffered from adverse ontological elaborations put forward, among others, by academics. As Ryan and Jeffreys acknowledge, 'In settings in which communities have endured periodic research infestations with little ostensible gain, scholars may need to engage in prolonged dialogues and experiments with activist partners to clarify the value of scholarly research' (2008, p. 16).

Whereas academia is an individualized endeavor, with individual researchers typically working on their own research projects and developing an individual reputation for themselves, community action and activism are typically based on a collective approach. As a way of addressing the individual vs. collective tension, and of safeguarding the collective nature of community initiatives and activism, one can bring back to the center of the research design the community under scrutiny. This has implications for the broader nature of researcher-activist interaction and understanding. But it may also have very concrete methodological implications. As one of our interview partners once noted, Internet activist groups 'are collective enterprises', and addressing individuals within the group means 'breaking down the collective dimension of the group'. Consequently, we privileged online asynchronous interviews (Kivits, 2005) involving the whole group over one-to-one email exchanges, considerably extending the duration of the data collection phase. As Hine writes, 'Social research methods have always had to be adaptive. Methods, after all, are not neutral devices' (Hine, 2005, pp. 2–7). Rather, they have to be adjusted to the ways 'in which social practices are defined and experienced' (p. 1). In other words, researchers must act in accordance to the rules of interaction typical of the environment under study. Creating connections, situating oneself in the community or local environments, and relating to the activists' value systems can lead to adopting the activists' communication practices, including styles and jargon. In addition, as collaborating with communities typically implies an imbalance in both the investment in, and the material gains from, one should explicitely discuss with interview partners the potential gains and outcomes for each side.

Bridging the gulf that might exist between researchers and activist groups requires a serious effort to build a research relationship based on clarity, reciprocal respect, and trust. As Kvale (1996) noted, an interview should be seen as 'inter-view', that is, an 'interchange of views between two people conversing on a theme of mutual interest'. This is deemed valid for participant observation as well. In both instances of qualitative data collection, it appears to be crucial to remember that the Latin meaning of 'conversation' is 'wandering together with': hence, creating an equal and mutually comfortable ‘wandering’ circumstances is essential. As interviews, and to a lesser extent participant observation, imply unequal relations, with the interviewer creating and controlling an artificial situation and defining topics and questions, particular efforts are needed on the side of the researcher to mitigate this asymmetric exercise of power. In the process of negotiating access to the field and in situating themselves in the middle of action, researchers might find useful the classification of field-roles by Snow, Benford, and Anderson (Snow et al., 1986). The three scholars have identified four archetypical fieldwork roles, namely the ‘controlled skeptic’, the ‘ardent activist’, the ‘buddy-researcher’, and the ‘credentialed expert’. Each field-role yields to a certain type of information. The buddy-researcher position, for example, fosters a ‘blending of the role of researcher and friend” which “entailed receiving as well as giving’ (Snow *et al.*, 1986, p. 384)—and as suc is the field-role most congruent with engaged research.

Finally, building a trusted relationship means to allow for extended exchange before data collection interview starts and way after it ends. This (often virtual) exchange can last for weeks or even months before data collection can begin; same goes for the cases in which the connection is kept alive by some form of collaboration between researcher and activists that might have emerged in the course of fieldwork. However costly, these exchanges are vital for researchers to establish themselves as trustworthy interlocutors; face-to-face meetings and participant observation at activist gatherings help to forge meaningful connections, as it does being responsive and collaborative also after the end of the research project. More often than not, however, the challenge is not the lack of normative ideas and good intentions, but the ability to implementing them in practice, due to a combination of personal and institutional factors, including the life cycle of research funding and publishing. The creation of a cycle of dialog, action and reflection as proposed by Jeffrey and Ryan (2008) provides a pathway to solving this problem—one however that entails a change in perspective and a long-term commitment from both sides.

Conclusions

As Paulo Freire once wrote, ‘The neo-liberal wave withdraws from men/women—as social beings having diversity of interests, opinions and wills—the right and the power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis’ (1994, p. 12). We believe that researchers can and should help to reverse this trend. This chapter has presented the STRAP framework, a set of practical questions that any researcher should take under serious consideration if willing to involve in her research communities as active agents with their own values, modes of interactions, and needs. We have offered some ideas on how to involve communities as skilled learners, and how to promote cycles of dialog, action and reflection throughout the project, and after its conclusion. We have proposed acknowledging and addressing the power inequalities that permeate social relations, and the academia vs. CDSC field in particular. We have suggested revising research approaches to include disenfranchised communities and their needs from the very start. We have invited fellow researchers to create learning communities able to engage in and reflect on practices, and to integrate *by design* our learning into future change efforts. We would like to conclude with a reflection on ethics as it pertains to research, which has been a ghostlike presence throughout the chapter.

Ethics calls into question the concepts of right and wrong (research and engagement) conduct.

It intersects morality, as some have claimed. Flacks, for example argued that ‘if your research was focused on the relatively powerless and disadvantaged, you had an ethical obligation to enable them to use the results (…) the study of social movements ought to provide movement activists with intellectual resources they might not readily obtain otherwise’ (Flacks, 2005, p. 7-8). The issue of ethics goes beyond the boundaries of the public function of research often conducted with public funding, and into an uncharted land where not all researchers might want to wonder. Without invading the private sphere of individual motivations, it might be useful to think about the presupposed moral dimension of social movement research in the guise of an ethical obligation on the researcher to provide knowledge that is both useful to and respectful of social actors, and away from its ancient Greek meaning of ‘norms guiding individual conduct’—which in turn seems to imply some erroneous superiority of the academic knowledge over activist or community knowledge. We believe that the field of communication for development and social change currently calls for a moral positioning of epistemologies and methodologies, as a way to counteract certain tendencies in the field we have highlighted in the introduction, such as the shaping role of the industry.

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