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## **A researcher and activist in the Mexican borderlands.**

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**Abstract:** Dual roles of activist and researcher in a collective social movement highlight conflicting research needs for objectivity and subjectivity that may be reconciled through self-conscious critique. This was demonstrated during a study of a collective workers' rights movement on the U.S.-Mexico border in 1996.

John <sup>(1)</sup> drove the rental car while Maria pointed out sights that might interest us. In the back, I sat on the hump between two labor union activists: one American and one Canadian. Maria spoke Spanish, and John attempted to maneuver the busy Juarez streets and translate at the same time. "There are many labor attorneys' offices on this street, she's saying." Maria pointed and John made his way over to the left. "They set up their offices near the factories so the workers will have easy access" (tr) <sup>(2)</sup>.

We drove past a deserted gate house onto a wide avenue. The median strip was grassy and planted with trees and shrubs. There were landscaped gardens on either side of the road, in front of clean and modern looking buildings. "This is an industrial park where many of us work" (tr). Most buildings had high fences around them, some with barbed wire at the top.

Beyond a stoplight, we continued another block up a hill and turned onto a narrow packed dirt road with small concrete and makeshift wooden structures crowded together on either side of the road. "They build the factories near the colonias (neighborhoods) to have access to available workers. Sometimes, they build them right on top of the colonias and people have to move" (tr).

We met other visitors in front of a concrete house with pieces of wood and rusted metal in piles around the dirt yard. John entered the house while we gathered on the road. Some of the Americans took out their cameras while the rest of us stared at the ground uncomfortably. John eventually motioned for us to join him at the door. Behind him stood Irma, the occupant of the house.

I was one of the first people to enter Irma's home. It was a four-room concrete structure with no glass in the windows nor door in the doorway. The walls had been painted several times before, but the paint had all but chipped away. There were exposed wood beams on the ceiling and a dusty concrete floor. As I stepped tentatively over the door sill, John moved aside and Irma came forward to embrace me, smiling widely. "Bueno!" I continued into the kitchen to make room for the rest of our party. As Irma welcomed the next visitor, I smiled at Jolanda, a neighbor of Irma's. Jolanda shyly smiled back.

The kitchen contained a jagged wooden table with two rusted and splintered folding chairs. The weathered cupboards displayed a motley array of plastic and glass jars, cups, and plates. There was a stand-alone gas stove in the corner of the kitchen. There was no sink, because Irma's home had no running water.

When we were gathered inside, John said, "Now you may ask Irma questions." There was a silence broken only by the click and whir of a camera, during which I watched and waited for the lengthening ash on another visitor's cigarette to break and fall to the floor. Irma smiled encouragingly and some of us began to relax. She told us she had worked in the factories in Juarez for twelve years. She liked living in the colonia because of the community that had developed among her neighbors. We also shared stories about ourselves and our homes.

As we prepared to leave, I hugged the two women. Jolanda told me privately that she would have invited us to her home, but she had only one small room in which she and her four children lived. "I came with my children from the South four years ago, with only the shirts on our backs. I didn't know anything. People here helped me a lot. If you return, I would like you to visit my home" (tr).

Giroux, Shumway, Smith, and Sosnoski (1985) wrote, "The intellectual is more than a person of letters, or a producer and transmitter of ideas. Intellectuals are also mediators, legitimators, and producers of ideas and practices; they perform a function eminently political in nature" (p. 478). They proposed that researchers should be "resisting intellectuals" who must:

"..engage in projects which encourage them to address their own critical role in the production and legitimation of social relations. Such projects are necessary not only to fight against conservative intellectuals and the multiple contexts in which legitimation processes occur, but also to broaden the theoretical and political movements outside the university." (p. 480).

If one engages in activist research that falls outside reward systems that protect and perpetuate the status quo, the question becomes how *best* to engage in this research. The researcher's role is complicated, as I discovered during the study. I observed two dimensions that determined my own position as an actor in the research project: my actions and the participants' expectations. As I began to interact with the activists, they frequently commented on their perceptions about the practices and role of academicians in general. I felt I needed to maintain at least some objectivity, but I also needed to understand the worker's native view. In developing empathy, I felt the urgency of participants' demands from the system to which I, too, belonged. Ultimately, I was stymied by questions like: "What am I doing here, anyway?" and "Who do I think I am?"

Participatory research is one critical research method in which both researchers and participants take active roles in the design and implementation of the project (Sohng, 1995). It is informed by the experiences and needs of the participants, promotes empowerment through the development of a true consciousness about the dominant ideological system, and recognizes that action without critical reflection may be disastrous while theory without collective social action is meaningless idealism (Freire, 1974).

If we view participatory research projects positioned somewhere between those that contain little opportunity for system members to participate in design and implementation and those that are conducted with participants fully engaged in the effort, we find a researcher's role also falling into place along a spectrum between two roles that I term as "Know-it-all" and "Peer Participant." Know-it-all researchers encourage little input from participants, while Peer Participant researchers encourage and facilitate full project involvement from participants.

Know-it-alls may view reality through a filter constructed of their own experiences. For example, some North Americans enter border activism without understanding the minds of Mexican workers regarding working conditions.

...They hear about the maquilas <sup>(3)</sup> and they think that that's the only thing that's going on in the border area... And they're so focused on that; they have such a concept of what it is... yet when you go into Mexico you realize that... the maquiladores are not necessarily this great exploiter in the first way that the Mexican might think of it.

North American researchers may impose their cultural orientation to material wealth as a symbol of individual capability. Lynn, an American labor union activist, said, "Sometimes it's real easy for people on this side (of the border) to say, 'How can those people live in those conditions?' " Albert, an Hispanic-American labor leader, also cautioned, "You can't go into the situation with (the) kind of attitude that you're just helping the poor people."

There's always that tendency – I talked about the colonias and how even though I consider them disgusting and rundown – people that live in them are very proud of what they've been able to accomplish. I mean, they build homes out of practically nothing -- a couple of cement blocks, cardboard -- and they're very proud of the fact that they have a home...

A particular brand of Know-it-all is the Protagonista. Protagonistas are so enthusiastic about correcting social ills that they become the focus of their activism, rather than attending to those they are trying to help. "To protagonize means you want to... be the person that is the hero of the story. And that's... I think that's a danger of organizers anywhere. It doesn't have to be cross-border organizers, there's a temptation to want to do that in many situations."

Researchers may become so enamored with themselves and their research that they tend to highlight their own role in the collective social movement. For example, an American researcher described his efforts to a group of Mexican workers: "*I spoke, I presented, me, my mouth, to (a large corporation) and presented a request for them to do a... study... I did the presentation (at the meeting), I was great (emphasis added)!*"

We must understand that participants are the ones who know their own lives best and can be a great resource, not only in providing information, but in bringing to light the most interesting

problems and the most feasible approaches to those problems. "Worker input is crucial. Workers need to know their roles and feel comfortable. They will bring the issues that rise to the top."

A more positive role for the researcher is Peer Participant. This person encourages participation in the design and implementation of the project. Most Mexican activists and workers voiced a desire for researchers and organizers to include workers in decision-making processes ( "We must correct ourselves.").

As opposed to playing the Know-It-All role, researchers and activists should "try to do the kind of organization that's really empowering, that's not just coming in to say 'we have all these answers, you should do this...'" Angela, a worker in Ciudad Acuña, expressed her interest in self-determination, "I think that (we) are (all) really concerned with transforming the systems in which we exist" (tr).

Participants want to be included in the research design; at a minimum they want to understand why the research is being done. Paco, a Mexican-American activist, asked a researcher about an economic study:

Would it be important to know some of those things that affect the pricing? Besides the lack of justice?... (M)aybe the common people would like to learn that... Because I think that if I was gonna (help with the study), I'd want to know why ... I think it's important for people to say "I don't have a job." But it's more important for people to say "Why I don't have a job. Why is it?"

At the heart of the Peer Participant role is a respect for people:

I think that... anybody who's ever been successful has only been successful if they've had a respect for the basic dignity of people and realize there's a lot of people out there who live in what we would consider inhuman conditions but that's what they've had to deal with and they make the best of it that they know how, and provided that we can help them get information... We can help empower them. They can then take up their own fight. And, you know, they know how to do that best.

Researchers who actively engage in the role of Peer Participant recognize that the work they do is not about *them*, but about the communities and individuals among whom they have the privilege to work. They act strategically, yet self-consciously, and with a measure of humility. "They're not about credit, you know, they just do the work..."

The researcher's role is not always fully self-determined. Participants' expectations can also impact the researcher's identity and effectiveness. Activists discussed researchers who were "Political Tourists" who came to look but did not contribute to participants' immediate well-being. "Even though one has experienced empowering cognitive and behavioral changes, it is

difficult to argue that one is empowered as long as those personal and interpersonal changes have no impact on socially unjust situations which affect one's life" (Breton, 1994, p. 31).

Mexicans are sensitive to American observers in part because "many times Mexicans' only contacts with the gringos are at the bridge or at tourist sites..."

Additionally, more than one participant pointed out that cross-border organizing activities have become fashionable, in a sense.

It's like the in thing to do, go down there, visit the colonias and go home and talk about how terrible it is. And that's it. ... They're (just) political tourists and they come down and they look... They go back to their homes and their comfortable lifestyle and they forget about it.

The expectation that researchers on the border are Political Tourists may influence their role and effectiveness in the social movement. Activists who have previously had a negative experience with researchers may be less inclined to cooperate. Researchers who address these concerns by assuming a defensive Know-it-all role may be less effective in generating mutual understandings. On the other hand, researchers who assume an exaggerated role of Peer Participant, guiltily stumbling along, may be unable to make strategic project decisions.

There is also an expectation among activists on the border that researchers will be "Legitimizers" who bring credible information and lend credibility to the movement simply because they are academics. Studies were frequently quoted to illustrate and prove various assertions. "A questionnaire is a tool that can help us to orient and understand the tendencies that exist. It helps us to reflect" (tr).

Knowledge generated in research studies is used for conscientización of workers and activists. Conscientización is most closely translated as critical consciousness raising: raising people's awareness of oppressive relationships that exist in their lives. The Mexican activists and workers frequently analyzed complex situations where oppressive conditions exist in order to understand how the situation developed and decide the best way to change it. "We need to understand what's happening in this structure that we're living in... We're more concerned about the daily violence that the worker lives. We have to redesign relationships because they destroy peoples' lives" (tr).

Albert pointed out that American workers can be transformed through open communication and solidarity as well:

... Even some of the non-Hispanics begin to see that these guys are just trying to make a living. Trying to feed their families in the same fashion that we're trying to feed our families here in the U.S. and they are real genuine people, and not these monsters that will take your jobs as a lot of people have a tendency to believe when we talk about Mexico.

Open dialogue is fundamental to conscientización, and researchers must understand this when they do work on the border. A researcher who can help keep the dialogue open, especially a researcher with an understanding of both North American and Mexican culture, will gain trust and cooperation from participants.

...What makes it successful is having somebody there who is sufficiently aware of the experiences of both sides – to be able to interpret their realities when people get together to meet. You go into Mexico, it's a different world. What you see is not necessarily what's going on. So sometimes it's helpful for somebody to sort of facilitate in that coming together.

On the other hand, expectations that researchers will add good information and legitimacy to a project is balanced by the sobering recognition that they have other goals besides the improvement of the participants' lives.

...Academics have to produce academic work and so forth, so they have a need to get their subjects and do a study and extract information, it almost becomes an extracting industry, like mining. It's a resource, people and their experience and their sufferings. And...we have to be conscious of that.

The researcher who conveys a sense of legitimacy (i.e., being an expert) must also convey a sense of humility. A Know-it-all researcher may alienate system members whose participation is necessary for the completion of the project. On the other hand, a Peer Participant researcher who promotes participation may gain the trust of system members, but may also have a more difficult time staying focused on the goals of the research for fear of displeasing anyone. Finally, a researcher must be sensitive to the immediate needs and feelings of the participants. A Political Tourist will not gain trust or cooperation from system members in the long run.

So where does this leave researchers, pulled and pushed on all sides by differing cultural contexts, perceptions, and behaviors? The researcher treads a narrow and difficult path in order to gain and maintain the needed trust and cooperation of participants, and at the same time generate interesting knowledge.

Conscientización can assist researchers studying in an activist context. We should engage in self-conscious critique of our actions and interactions with study participants, maintaining as balanced a perspective as possible. We should analyze our responses to the perceptions and demands of participants, to ensure that these responses are consciously critical, rather than unconscious and uncritical.

...Any time you're not a Mexican worker, you're involved in a different dynamic, you all of a sudden have something that you're trying to do. Which is not exactly what the worker's trying to do. And it's not to stop yourself from doing it, but it's helpful ...to

analyze what we're doing because it affects how we make decisions.

An indication that self-conscious critique was working for me was when a Mexican activist said to me, "I do not know you, but I feel you are kind" (tr).

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- (1) All names of people and organizations have been changed to protect anonymity.
  - (2) The abbreviation (tr) means the speaker's words were translated from Spanish to English, usually by a third party interpreter.
  - (3) "Maquila" and "Maquiladora" are terms for foreign-owned assembly factories in Mexico.

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