‘Alongside but not in front’
Reflections on engagement, disengagement
and ethics in action research with workers

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**ABSTRACT**
This article starts by summarising the history of socially-engaged research on disadvantaged groups, pointing out that many of the social research methods currently in use in the field originated outside the academy, carried out by protagonists with a mission to draw attention to injustices and bring about social change. It then discusses the often-problematic relationship between researchers and the people whose working lives they research, especially in situations where the researchers are actively engaged in the struggles of their research subjects, for example when using methods such as workers’ inquiries or forms of action research. Two experienced researchers who have also themselves been active in workers’ organisations reflect on these issues in the form of a dialogue, a dialogue to which some workers who have been on the receiving end of such research respond. The article concludes by raising some further questions for future debate.

**KEY WORDS**
Action research, ethics, workers’ inquiries, history of social research

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Introduction

History of social research – enquiry driven by political concern

Although now established within the academy as a distinct branch of social science, social research, and the methods it uses, originated elsewhere. With diverse roots, including in journalism, political campaigning and parliamentary inquiry, its history is one not so much of detached investigation as of a search for evidence by protagonists with a mission to draw attention to injustices and bring about social change.

We may look, back, for example, to the meticulous work of the Reverend Peter Gaskell (1833) whose report to the British Parliament on *The Manufacturing Population of England*, which so impressed the young Friedrich Engels, was based on hundreds of carefully documented interviews, many of them with children. A decade later, this was followed up by a similar report, using similar methods, by Richard Henry Horne (1842) on the *Condition and Treatment of the Children Exploited in the Mines and Collieries of the United Kingdom.*

By the middle of the 19th century there was considerable public interest in the living conditions of the poor, but this was often catered to through journalism and fiction, such as the novels of Charles Dickens, in a manner that sometimes seems to have been motivated as much by voyeurism as truth-seeking. Indeed, some of these depictions come perilously near to what might today be termed ‘poverty porn’ (Jensen, 2014; Huws, 2015). Something of an exception to this was Henry Mayhew, who, although starting out as a journalist and writing for personal gain, developed what has been termed by one scholar as ‘a fusion of different discourses which, in the end, produced a novelty: an early form of urban ethnography’ (Münch, 2018:56) in his 1851 magnum opus *London Labour and the London Poor.*

Mayhew’s methods deserve scrutiny because in some ways they foreshadow approaches adopted by much later academic counterparts. His main interest was in particular occupational groups, with whom he carried out in-depth interviews which explored their biographies and what Bourdieu (1968) would, over a century later, have called their ‘habitus’, as well as collecting practical information about their labour processes, earnings and working hours, information that was supplemented by what we would now categorise as key informant interviews and secondary analysis of documentary sources.

Unusually, he also supplemented these one-to-one interviews with collective meetings where large numbers of workers from the same occupation were brought together. In one of these, in 1850, he addressed an audience of costermongers (street traders), making his political motivation explicit in the words ‘I assure you my only motive is to hear your hardships, and to place them before the world, that the higher classes may know something of the miseries endured by people of your class . . . We shall then arrive at something that may tend to alleviate your hardship’ (Münch, 2018:61). Munch goes on to describe how ‘The event evidently turned out to be a success and brought Mayhew to the idea, as he states, to establish a mutual society for costermongers. The association – consisting of “gentlemen” as well as street traders – met several times, organized a charity ball and published a policy paper’ (Münch, 2018:62). This looks very much like an ancestor of modern forms of action research.
However, the lessons from history do not stop with the development of particular methodologies. Mayhew provides us with a very rare instance where the voices of the researched can be heard responding to that of the researcher. Those costermongers were literate and when Mayhew’s book was published the following year and serialised in Reynold’s Newspaper (a publication aimed at working-class audiences) they read it and took objection to the way they had been depicted. The newspaper later published

*four letters penned by one George Martin, the so called ‘Secretary to the Street Traders’ Protection Association’, a society established for the sole purpose of defending the traders against Mayhew... Mayhew is said to have exploited them for journalistic purposes and, worse, his portrayals were highly distorted: ‘Mr. Mayhew had thought fit to treat them as the pariahs of society, having no claim to the respect of their fellow-men’. (Münch, 2018:63)*

Whatsoever Mayhew’s motivation, it clearly went beyond mere scientific curiosity.

Political concern for the betterment of the lives of the poor also underlay the novel development of social mapping by Charles Booth (1886–1901) in his Poverty Maps of London and of the survey method by Joseph Seebohm Rowntree (1901) whose fieldwork was carried out in York, also in the UK.

Further innovations emerged in the USA where Jacob Riis pioneered the use of documentary photography to draw attention to the appalling housing conditions in New York in his (1890) *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. Even more innovative was the use of systematic secondary analysis of newspaper reports by Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1899) in support of a campaign against the atrocities of lynching in her (1899) *Lynch Law in Georgia*.

Numerous other examples could be cited. What is apparent is that very many of the research methods that now constitute standard practice in social research have their origins in forms of inquiry that were strongly motivated by a search for social justice. Although striving to present evidence that would convince politicians of their truthfulness, the people who carried out this socially engaged research did not, we must presume, necessarily regard themselves as impartial or as scientists. These methods therefore carry with them a hidden freight of epistemological and ethical tensions and dilemmas which, we argue, remain unresolved even though the field of social research has now moved inside the academy, where it is has the status of a distinct disciplinary profile and is subject to oversight by ethics committees, peer review and other forms of scientific scrutiny.

Open questions remain. On what basis does the reader trust the voice of the researcher? How can the findings be verified? Even if they are verifiable, how do we know how representative they are? Might other, contrasting voices have been silenced? How do we know whether the views of the research subjects have been interpreted in ways that make sense to them? What distortions appear, advertently or inadvertently, in the processes by which their words are edited, interpreted and translated from one idiom or language to another? Where political demands have been formulated, to what extent do these articulate the expressed needs of the research subjects and to what extent might they have been imposed by the researcher?

To these epistemological and political questions must be added the questions that are regularly raised in formal ethics reviews but, arguably, not always addressed there with the rigour they deserve: How has the consent of research subjects been obtained?
In providing that consent, how aware were they of what the consequences might be? Even if their individual identities are kept secret, how might they be affected by the ways in which they are represented collectively? If their behaviours and political actions are described publicly, how can they be protected against adverse reactions to these (for instance retaliatory action by employers or landlords)? What are the risks that their experiences will be appropriated, even if not for financial gain, for furthering the career and reputation of the researcher? Might these research subjects feel let down and betrayed if they see no positive result from the research and, if so, what responsibility, if any, does the researcher have for taking up their time and attention without delivering any benefits? If the research subjects have been chosen because they are actively engaged in struggle, what is the role of the researcher: to lead, to support or to observe? Such questions become especially problematic when the researcher identifies with the community that is being researched and shares some characteristics with them. In such cases, how can the individual voice be distinguished from the collective one?

**Anthropology and the development of ethnographic method**

In the 20th century, when social research began to enter academic departments on a significant scale, many of these questions were first raised in the field of anthropology. There is no scope in this short introduction to do justice to the vast literature on this topic. Not only were there major political debates concerning the colonial origins of the discipline and its tarnished history of association with violence to and denigration of indigenous peoples; there were also deep divisions among followers of the French structuralist tradition, associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the more inductive approaches adopted in the Anglo-Saxon world. Narrowing our focus to specific research methods, and their accompanying ethics, we discuss here only the research practices developed in the latter group that have come to be known as ethnography and, more specifically, the practice of ‘participant observation’. Here, the leading early exemplar, who exercised a major influence on later scholars, was Bronislaw Malinowski.

Malinowski paid attention to the relationship between the researcher and the people who were researched and was probably the most important proponent of practices such as keeping a research diary, in which researchers reflect on their own experiences of the research process, as well as noting down field observations. Despite this, Malinowski was sometimes regarded as ‘a fraud, a man who preached the gospel of “participant observation” but did not practice it’ (Edmund Leach, quoted by Stocking, 1992:124). However painstakingly detailed the field diary might have been, its presence did not overcome the problem that the reader had to trust the word of the anthropologist, with no independent means of verifying the observations or of hearing the voices of the research subjects unmediated by this anthropologist. The emerging orthodoxy in the practice of anthropology continued to be challenged by people involved in anti-colonial struggles, feminists and others who felt themselves to be objectified and silenced by such methods.

**The emergence of action research**

By the 1970s, a generation shaped by anti-colonial movements, as well as the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement and the student protests of the late 1960s, began to raise such questions more insistently both within university social
sciences departments and outside them. Outside the academy, a particularly important influence was the work of Paolo Freire (1970) whose Pedagogy of the Oppressed emphasised the importance of respect for the prior knowledge of research subjects and proposed that the role of the intellectual was to give them the skills to do their own research and communicate in their own voices.

Drawing on a range of research experiences by and with subordinated groups, the idea of ‘action research’ took shape, with aims that were perhaps most succinctly defined by Rhona Rapoport (1970:499) as ‘Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.’ The concept of action research has now become sufficiently mainstream to be included in standard research methods courses and textbooks (e.g. Somekh, 2005) and to be discussed in relation to particular research areas (e.g. Stringer, 2014). Nevertheless, this definition contains tensions within it, particularly in relation to the balance to be struck between the ‘practical concerns of people’ and the ‘goals of scientific research’, and the concept continues to be elaborated in the light of ongoing debates.

In many of these discussions, the requirement for reflexivity on the part of the researcher plays a prominent role, leading to the renaming of the method by some as ‘critical participatory action research’ (Kemmis, 2011). Other practitioners place greater emphasis on researchers’ direct involvement in struggle, in the form of practices such as ‘workers’ inquiries’ (Ovetz, 2020; Hoffman, 2018). During a period when major restructuring is taking place in labour markets globally, accompanied by new forms of worker organisation and heightened industrial conflict, action research in the field of labour has acquired a renewed topicality and its tensions and contradictions are once again the subject of debate both inside the academy and across social and labour movements.

This article aims to contribute to these discussions, drawing on the past and current experiences of two practitioners. It takes the form of an interactive dialogue, conducted by email, between Ursula Huws, the editor of Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation, who has been carrying out various forms of action research since the 1970s, and Todd Wolfson, co-director of the Media, Inequality and Change Center at Rutgers University and the University of Pennsylvania. Wolfson combines research on social movements and labour activism and has been a founder of community-based movement organisations in Philadelphia as well as President of Rutgers AAUP-AFT, which represents faculty, graduate workers, post-doctoral researchers and counsellors. Wolfson is also one of the lead organisers of Higher Ed Labour United, which is a national coalition of over 100 higher education labour unions in the United States representing over 500,000 workers.

Having acted both as trade union representatives and as researchers, Wolfson and Huws are in a position to reflect on the tensions between these two roles as they have been played out in a variety of different settings and to draw conclusions that relate to the ethical and scientific problems that arise in practice. Because of the impossibility of anonymising this conversation, this article was not subjected to the journal’s normal double-blind peer-review process but was reviewed in a non-anonymised form. The reviewers included not only a range of academic researchers and ethicists but also representatives of workers who had been on the receiving end of academic research. Among these were James Farrar, General Secretary of the App Drivers and Couriers
Union (ADCU) which represents over 5,000 driving and delivery workers in the UK working for online platforms and Yaseen Aslam, the union’s president. Farrar and Aslam were also the plaintiffs in a long-running series of legal disputes with Uber, culminating in a unanimous judgment by the UK’s Supreme Court that Uber drivers have the status of workers, rather than ‘independent contractors’, and are therefore entitled to benefits such as paid holidays, the right to the minimum wage and pensions. In order to give a rounded view, their comments have been added to this discussion. We also include comments from another worker, who wished to remain anonymous, about the personal impacts on workers of being on the receiving end of academic research.

The conversation

TODD WOLFSON: How did you first become involved in social research?

URSULA HUWS: In the early 1970s I was working as a researcher producing content for television programmes, books and filmstrips for children and young adults, many of which were on ‘current affairs’. However I was also very actively involved as a trade union organiser, initially in the book publishing industry which was at the time unorganised, with a very low-paid and largely female workforce. Becoming involved in the union (which was very male-dominated) went hand-in-hand with becoming involved in the women’s movement. Although I had, through my work, developed a range of research skills, I did not connect the idea of ‘research’ with my political praxis. It was only after 1976, when I moved to an industrial city in the North of England, that I began to take an interest in finding out what was happening to workers outside my own field of media, publishing and print workers. There, I joined a group setting up a Trade Union and Community Resource and Information Centre and, once we had raised the funds to establish it, went to work there full-time in 1978, giving up my job in publishing. That was when I first started giving serious thought to research ethics. Those of us who worked in the Centre or were involved in its management had fierce debates about the role of intellectuals in relation to other people’s struggles. For example, what right did we have to tell workers to take industrial action when it was their jobs on the line, not ours?

I would be interested to know how you first came to do research on social movements. Which came first: your own political praxis or the research that you did as part of your paid job?

TODD WOLFSON: It is so helpful to hear about the grounded experiences that led to both your political praxis and corresponding research compass. I had a slightly different but adjacent path to my political and research commitments. I came to my research through a series of experiences that forced me to reckon with, and deepen, my worldview. For instance, I lived overseas in Namibia for multiple years in the 1990s, and in that process, I saw first-hand the deeply problematic nature of international development. I then returned to graduate school to study and understand development and was forced to question the role of a white male academic from the USA writing on development in Africa. I then pivoted towards researching social movements, as I believed they were the only vehicle towards real societal transformation. At the same time, I was becoming a leader in my grad worker union, and these experiences helped to establish my beliefs both
at the intersection of social movements and labour and around engaged scholarship. This outlook was further clarified as I was working on my dissertation research on the Global Justice Movement in the early 2000s. While I was developing that research, I was collaborating with a bunch of organisers and activists to establish our own social movement organisation in Philadelphia. The organisation, Media Mobilizing Project (now Movement Alliance Project), was a response to some of the critical questions we saw with respect to the role of media in building social and political power.

My commitments to the research, therefore, were informed and shaped by my organising work in Philadelphia. Moreover, my commitment to research never superseded my commitment to movement work. What this meant in practice is that the movement and movement actors helped shape my research agenda, and they were thus invested in that agenda as it would have material impacts on our organising work. When I think about research and research ethics, I always think through who I am accountable to, and through what mechanisms of accountability. If my research on social movements or labour struggles is not accountable to those struggles and is merely a function of my desire to publish, then the work is often extractive as opposed to symbiotic.

Ursula, you touched a bit on journey to the scholar you are today, but I would love to hear more.

** Ursula Huws: ** I find your distinction between ‘extractive’ and ‘symbiotic’ very interesting. I guess one of the challenges of being a paid academic researcher is how to hold the line between them – to meet the standards required to publish (including making sure that this is done with honesty and integrity) without betraying the trust of the workers one has been researching. It seems to me that you have a high level of reflexivity and vigilance that enables you to avoid the risks of ‘extraction’ in your own practice. But I wonder how you manage to communicate these standards to others.

One of the problems I struggle with is related to the fact that we do not work in isolation but as part of a broader research community and one that is, at present, increasingly crowded and competitive, due to the spread of neoliberal corporate values in academia. These issues are not new, of course, but seem to have intensified in recent years.

Back in the 1970s there was already quite a bit of ‘extractive’ research in labour studies, much of it running in parallel with a kind of voluntary activism (by people who were not, at least yet, paid academics) whereby educated middle-class people went to work in factories (especially auto factories) to report on the conditions of the working class and, quite often, attempted to foment revolution amongst the people they studied. This led (on the political left) to the sorts of debates I mentioned earlier about the rights and obligations of intellectuals in relation to workers’ struggles.

Although I was not so closely involved in them at the time, I believe there were also debates within academia about the role of the participant observer in research, which later led to the sorts of ethical codes of practice we are now familiar with. The ethical concerns were mainly to do with political risks – that workers might be led into battles that they would lose, or might lead to them being individually victimised, and a more general worry that their experiences were being appropriated to boost the political credentials of the researcher without any benefit accruing to them.
By the 1980s (at least in the UK, where Thatcher had declared ‘there is no such thing as society’ and social science departments were being savagely cut) another factor began to creep in: competition for external research funding. This led to somewhat different ethical concerns. I was working as an independent researcher during that period, mainly doing research on homeworkers and clerical workers, and found that the ethical dilemmas I increasingly faced were not so much in relation to my own practice but in drawing boundaries around it to fend off other researchers whose practices seemed to me to be more dubious, with the potential to put the people I had been researching at risk.

Teleworking became a fashionable topic and, as one of the first people to publish about it, I found myself having to deal with incessant demands from other researchers (and sometimes from funders) to give them access to the people I had interviewed. Sometimes this was done with the ostensible excuse that it would help publicise their cause, but it invariably meant a breach of confidentiality. Even when workers’ anonymity was ensured, the naming of the employer was enough to set a posse of other researchers onto them, looking for ways they could replicate what I had done or turn it into a ‘case study’.

Some of these were opportunist copycat researchers. Others were genuine scholars asking new questions. But as far as the workers were concerned there was no real way to distinguish amongst us. It was I suppose an example of what is now called ‘contamination of the field’, but I found it increasingly uncomfortable to have to identify myself as part of this collective body of researchers, not all of whom shared the same values. Twenty years later, to address this problem, I set up a project to develop some ethical codes for social research at a European level – the RESPECT project.

Now that platform work has become topical in the same way, it seems to me that some of the same competitive pressures and mixed standards are still there, albeit in a form that is relatively more policed by such bodies as university ethics committees. I am wondering if this has been your experience and, if so, how you deal with it. Is it possible to be part of a community of scholars with a collective interest in studying platform workers (or, indeed, any other vulnerable group) when not all of these scholars adhere to your ethical standards? And, if not, what can be done about it?

TODD WOLFSON: The history you shared, about the way researchers engaged with workers in industrial factories in the 1970s, is very instructive. There has always been a tension between scholars that want to ground themselves in struggle and write for and about that struggle, and scholars that want to extract from struggles for their own grandeur and vanity. And often, the line between the two is complex and hard to define. Much like the 1970s, today it often looks like a form of ‘substitutism,’ where the researcher substitutes themselves for the worker.

From my vantage point, one way to mitigate for this is through real systems of accountability. Who are we accountable to in our work and research? Are we accountable to ourselves or a broader movement? In academia, as you note, it is crowded and competitive. On top of that I would layer the individuation and corresponding isolation of scholars. In academia, we are pushed to work alone and achieve success and promotion alone, and this creates downward pressure and a lack of solidarity. Thus, while I agree that our scholarship must have integrity, scholarship that is focused on labour struggles must also be connected to movements or workers.
At the same time, I really appreciate your question about whether I see myself as part of a ‘community of scholars with a collective interest in studying platform workers’. While I do not always agree with how other scholars approach the question of platform work and platform workers, nor do I agree with how they engage with platform workers, I see no choice but to count myself as a part of a community of researchers. Let me take a minute to explain. If we choose not to see ourselves as part of a community, that route is quite liberating, as we are not responsible for breaches in ethics, but it allows us to shirk the responsibility we should shoulder around policing the politics and ethics of our research.

As you mentioned, today we have universities with ethics boards that are meant to create the rules of the road, around how we do research. That said, these ethics boards or Institutional Review Boards (IRB), as we call them in the United States, are rarely concerned with ethics around subjects and research. The primary concern of IRBs is a desire to avoid lawsuits and unwelcome PR. So, while there are some checks in place, they are not the checks we need to actually safeguard workers and movement actors from unethical behaviour. So then, a community of scholars must hold one another accountable in our research ethics, particularly when researching precarious workers or vulnerable communities.

Along these lines, I see at least two parallel mechanisms for challenging extractive research. The first mechanism is that researchers should be in a relationship with the workers or movements they wish to study, in a manner that allows for integrity, but foregrounds accountability to those movements. A second mechanism, as you suggest, is a community of scholars holding the line and forcing collective accountability on unethical research. An example of this second mechanism was a letter that about 100 scholars signed in the spring of 2020. The letter was titled, Open Letter and Principles for Ethical Research on the Gig Economy,¹ and the signatories questioned the ethics of research from the School of Labour and Industrial Relations at Cornell University, which was carried out in partnership with Uber and Lyft.

Given the breadth of your experience as both a unionist and a scholar, what do you see as some of the solutions to this problem? What other fault lines do you think we need to navigate as scholars committed to worker-led movements and structural transformation?

**URSULA HUWS:** You raise some really important and challenging questions. I am not sure there are easy answers. Some of them bring to mind the thinking behind the EU-funded RESPECT project I put together back in the early 2000s to look at ethical and professional issues in the conduct of social research in the (then relatively new) context of digitalisation. We had an interesting international team including academics who did both qualitative and quantitative research, the Social Research Association (a UK-based professional body for researchers including not only academics but people involved in things like market research) and some experts on intellectual property law (to address issues like plagiarism) and on data protection law.

We analysed a wide range of ethical codes of practice developed within different disciplines and national contexts and also analysed the labour processes of different members of research teams to see what people are actually doing when they carry out research and who

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is responsible for what, so we could identify where and by whom the decisions are made which might have ethical consequences. And of course we also spent a lot of time interviewing representatives of various different bodies and organising consultation exercises and so on.

One striking finding was what different perceptions there were about ethics, some seemingly shaped strongly by national traditions. For instance countries with a Protestant tradition, such as Sweden (and to a lesser extent Canada and the UK), tended to have very explicit ethical codes of practice for each discipline, often policed by a professional body, with a big emphasis on the personal responsibility of the researcher (with an implied underpinning that was quite instrumental: it is in our collective interests as a profession to retain public respect so we will hold individuals to account so as not to bring the profession into disrepute). In countries with a more Catholic tradition, such as France, the codes tended to be couched in much vaguer deontological language and one got the distinct impression that at least some of our interviewees thought that ethics should be considered a private matter between a researcher and his or her confessor and really nobody else's business, although of course it would be dishonourable to be caught doing something bad. In the former communist countries in Eastern Europe the inherited codes of practice were largely silent about the actual stuff of research and focused on things like the health and safety of research workers. Another difference was between countries with a democratic history, where there was a fairly unproblematic relationship between researchers and national institutions, and those with a Nazi or fascist political history, where many researchers were deeply mistrustful of any intervention by the state in the conduct of research.

After a lot of deep, and sometimes difficult, discussion, we managed to put together a code of conduct that everybody could agree to, but this took a rather different form from most of the check-lists we see today emanating from university research departments. Key to our approach was a recognition that there can be no universal set of one-size-fits-all rules. On the contrary, carrying out research ethically involves finding a balance between principles that may conflict with each other. In the final analysis, this means that researchers have to be alert and well-informed and to be equipped with the skills and resources to make what may be difficult decisions. It is, we concluded, the responsibility of their employers and their research funders to give them these resources and of their trade unions and professional bodies to represent them where necessary. We identified three key principles which can come into direct conflict with each other and give rise to these dilemmas that researchers face.

The first of these principles is not to falsify evidence knowingly. This had to be phrased negatively because, in a lot of fields, especially those involving quantitative research or experimentation in the ‘hard’ sciences, there is a strong positivist tradition that can speak comfortably about ‘the facts’, whereas many researchers from more qualitative traditions, such as anthropology, think there is no such thing as a fact and that any results we conjure up from our research are social constructs – insisting on the importance of interpretation. It is nevertheless the case that, following this principle, however broadly and negatively defined, may conflict with other imperatives. For example, releasing a lot of data indiscriminately might lead to the identification of individuals, or publicising a correlation between two variables could give rise to an interpretation that might lead to the scapegoating or stigmatisation of certain social groups.
The second principle is not to break the law. This could apply to a wide variety of laws. There are, however, a number of situations where it may come into conflict with other principles. What if the research concerns drug dealing or people trafficking or police corruption? Or, as we were constantly reminded by colleagues from Austria, Germany, Spain and Portugal, what if the laws are themselves unjust? We realised that this is a very tricky area – for example, it is apparently a standard excuse given by people arrested for circulating illegal pornography that they were ‘just doing research’. It is clear that any research project likely to run into such dilemmas should set up clear protocols in advance.

The third, and perhaps most important ethical principle is to avoid causing social or personal harm. This is of course the central issue in most existing ethical codes in the social sciences (based as they usually are on medical codes) but actually it can also be very problematic. The issue of ‘informed consent’, for example, is in practice utterly different if you are interviewing, say, the CEO of a company than if you are interviewing a vulnerable worker, and so is the negative consequence of revealing that person’s identity.

I could go on about this at length, but I won’t. The point is that (like a game of rock, paper, scissors) each of these principles can come into conflict with the other two and it is the researcher who is left with the problem of how to resolve these conflicts. We hoped that by raising these issues in the RESPECT project we could encourage ethics committees and other bodies to debate them seriously. Since the project ended, in 2004, there have certainly been a number of positive developments, at least in Europe. Ethical issues are addressed much more systematically when research proposals for EU funding are being evaluated now, and there is a general recognition that research ‘involving human subjects’ raises broader issues than simple medical ones. Nevertheless, constant vigilance is needed to avoid these things becoming formulaic.

Universities have had to respond to such new concerns. However, as you intimate, this response has not, on the whole, been dictated by any real wish to make research better but by the bureaucratised risk-averse strategies of neoliberal managers, with an emphasis on standardisation, form-filling and ensuring (in a classic responsibility-without-power pattern) that, although the university will take credit for any successful research outcomes (especially those that can be monetised), it will be deemed to be the researcher’s personal responsibility if anything goes wrong. The box-ticking approach that they adopt fails to take account of any of the contradictions or conflicts we identified. Neither does it recognise any distinctions between the differing power relations between researchers and the human subjects they are observing or interviewing.

We clearly need another way of addressing these dilemmas. I sometimes wonder if there might be a role for the trade unions that represent academic workers to play some part in this, but – even where these unions are strong and recognised, which is by no means always the case – it is difficult to imagine how in practice this might work. I guess I am partly attracted to this idea because, as a member of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in the UK, back in the 1970s, there were initiatives, some of which I was involved in, to develop guidelines for non-racist reporting, and for avoiding

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2 The latest version of these guidelines can be found at: https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/race-reporting-guide.html (accessed 12 January 2022).
sexism in book publishing,3 as well as a broader revision of the NUJ Code of Conduct,4 that did have some (albeit limited) success in creating mechanisms whereby individual members could be challenged if they were in breach of these codes. But this was at a time when the vast majority of journalists, especially in printed newspapers, were union members, and the sanction of being expelled from the union had some real traction. This is hardly the case now among academic researchers.

There are other solutions it might be possible to adopt in projects we are ourselves in control of, for example, setting up advisory boards that include representation from the communities we are researching. But what if we think a colleague working on another project is acting in an unethical way? I guess that brings me back to the earlier question. Any ideas?

TODD WOLFSON: Before I respond I want to revisit the stakes of this question. Last year at my alma mater, University of Pennsylvania, we learned that the anthropology department collected the bones of African American children murdered in the controversial MOVE bombing instead of returning the remains to their families. While I won’t go into detail about the MOVE bombing in 1985, it is important to note that the City of Philadelphia dropped a bomb on a house in West Philadelphia during a standoff with members of MOVE, an African American political organisation. The Philadelphia fire department allowed the fire to burn out of control, killing six adults and five children. Subsequently, the University of Pennsylvania’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology kept the bones for teaching and research purposes. The scandal was reported in the news last year, leading to an outcry around the University’s deeply unethical behaviour.

Or take the case of anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and geneticist James Neel. While never confirmed, Chagnon and Neel were accused of either infecting, or refusing to treat, thousands of South American Indians with measles (hundreds died), in order to test theories of natural selection in ‘primitive society’. Stories like this of deplorable ethical transgressions by academic researchers are legion. And they are not always as clear cut. In the United Kingdom, researchers focused on workers in the gig economy have been accused of extractive and unethical behaviour towards those workers. The point here is that it is incumbent upon us to get this right.

To that end, the story you share about the work of RESPECT offers a path forward. It is clear that we have to figure out how to forge ethical research norms that are enforceable and operate beyond the narrow purview of our current university ethics boards. The idea of labour unions playing this role at the national level is an interesting approach. However, unlike the UK, in the USA many faculty are not unionised and those that are unionised are spread across multiple parent unions. Another approach in the USA would be to work through the professional association for all professors, the American Association of University Professors. I imagine there is an equivalent organisation in the UK. The problem, as ever, is not the creation of ethical guidelines, but rather real enforceability. And since our universities have been captured by

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neoliberal logics, there is no way they can lead in this space. Which is why I like the idea of our professional associations.

That said, until these broader organisations are willing to lead, we have to create band-aids, and this is where projects like RESPECT are so important. And alongside these field-specific projects, as faculty we must help police the boundaries. If we know of faculty that are acting unethically or have an extractive approach to their subjects, it is critical that we speak out. I wish I had a more creative idea, but this is clearly a work in progress.

**URSULA HUWS:** This brings us back to the 'Mayhew question' raised in the introduction. It does look as if, despite the considerable progress that has been made in the last 175 years, we are still struggling to find a way in which the voices of the researched can be heard alongside that of the researcher. In a world in which the individual achievement is rewarded, we surely need something stronger than that researcher's individual conscience to ensure that the interests of vulnerable research subjects are protected and their views represented.

This of course raises larger questions about relationships between ‘intellectuals’ and workers in the contemporary context. With universities and the publishing and broadcasting media (including online social media platforms) increasingly dominated by the interests of global capital, it is ever more difficult for those conducting critical research to find places where their work can be published in a such a way that it is intelligently curated and edited and presented respectfully. There are strong temptations to turn to alternative forms of publishing, sometimes difficult to distinguish from self-publishing, where the chance to speak without self-censorship may come at the price of addressing a vanishingly small audience, in a space in which so many voices are clamouring to be heard it is difficult for any one to stand out. This can lead to forms of self-promotion that are the publishing equivalent of shouting, leading to an oversimplification of the message and drowning out opposing or critical views. There are also few checks on plagiarism or other forms of dishonesty or misrepresentation.

Simultaneously, many intellectual workers themselves (including precariously employed adjunct professors, researchers on temporary contracts and freelance writers, photographers and film-makers) can themselves be counted among the ranks of vulnerable workers. This blurs the boundaries between their own situations and those of others they may choose to write about, making it unclear where the ‘I’ ends and the ‘we’ begins.

This situation has been further complicated in the UK by the requirements by universities that scholars should demonstrate that their research has ‘impact’ under the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This has led to a rather contradictory situation whereby scholars who in the past might have downplayed their pro-worker politics and associations with trade unions are now forced to trumpet them so they can show that their research is really shaping policy development in the real world. Their managers might hate these politics, but are nevertheless obliged to showcase them in ‘impact case studies’ so they can compete for government research funding. This can also have the perverse effect that ambitious academics who are not in actual fact particularly progressive may present themselves as such so that they can claim to have influenced policy developments relating to workers’ rights and representation.

Up until December 2020, when the deadline closed for submissions under the last REF, this created something of a quagmire in which it was very difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the bogus when UK academics participated in labour
organisations. In some cases, participant observers even stood for office in trade unions, raising questions of who was being represented by whom.

In such a context, if, for example, a PhD student takes a job working for an online platform and gets involved in organising efforts, how are we to judge his or her account of the workers’ struggle at the time, or, more importantly, five or ten years down the line when that PhD student may be a tenured professor? It seems to me that we need to draw some sort of distinction, even if this is a fuzzy one, between the observer and the observed, in the recognition that some people, however precariously employed at any given time, have different life chances and options for mobility compared with others, for example those from a more privileged education or class background, and we should be alert to the ways in which situations that might present such people with new opportunities could constitute a threat to those who have no obvious escape routes from their current situation. It is easy to put your job at risk if you know you have the option of searching for an alternative one or returning to live with your parents for a while; less so if you have dependants to support or uncertain citizenship status and are entirely reliant on the income for survival.

In short, this is a discussion we need to continue. Do we need to revisit Gramsci’s (1992) idea of the ‘organic intellectual’ to make sense of all this?

AN ANONYMOUS WORKER: There is one thing you do not mention here which in my experience is very important, but painful and difficult to write about. This is the emotional impact on workers of broken promises from researchers and the loss of trust that ensues. I personally felt very betrayed and ripped off by an academic who stole some of my own research without acknowledging it and then badmouthed me in public when I challenged this behaviour. This had a serious impact on my social and family life and on my mental health. For many months I really struggled to hold myself together, and this was of course combined with the stresses of the job itself, which was already precarious but became a lot harder to manage during the pandemic. I felt betrayed politically and personally. I think you should point out to academic researchers that they do not just have a responsibility to preserve the privacy and data security of workers in struggle but also to consider their mental health and well-being.

JAMES FARRAR AND YASEEN ASLAM: Thanks so much for this and it is so interesting to read. I am not sure how we can add to this other than to share reactions to it.

On the observer/participant/extractor dilemma, I guess one way to think about this is being clear about what your objectives are – is it to win a campaign or to complete academic research? Sometimes it can be both but my concern is that the desire to produce unique academic research could consciously or unconsciously start to influence events and to drive campaigns in a certain direction even if only to prove a negative hypothesis. I agree with Todd and the Tony Benn test of power: what power do you have; where did you get it; in whose interests do you exercise it; to whom are you accountable; and, how can we get rid of you? (Nichols, 2014).

We also want to say that as activists we recognise that scholars can have a very important positive influence on events by shaping our understanding of them. They can change the conceptual weather but only if they do not get too directly involved. I have a feeling that contemporary legal scholars helped guide the received understanding that eventually shaped the wonderful Supreme Court ruling we got here in the UK. Judges in the common law
system have to learn, understand and contextualise before applying the law. They take direct
evidence from us. They then carry out legal analysis to understand the meaning of our case
relative to the leading authorities (case law) and when they reach a decision, they are setting
case law that will in turn be applied in future. I have no illusion that this all happens in a
vacuum. After the ruling I remember feeling incredibly grateful for and moved by the quiet
work of these scholars. Most of them I’ll never know their names or read their works but I
know they helped move us out of the margins of precarity and into the protection of the law.

We also want to point out that academics have worked for the other side too. There are
many examples of scholars at prestigious universities carrying out research on the platform
economy. For instance, Alan Krueger of Princeton University co-published an academic paper
on the labour market for Uber drivers with an Uber executive in 2015 (Hall & Krueger, 2015).
Thor Berger of Lund University and Carl Benedikt Frey of Oxford University co-authored a
paper with two Uber executives on the pay and well-being of Uber drivers in the UK even as
our claim against Uber for failure to pay the minimum wage was before the courts (Berger
et al., 2018). Alex Rosenblatt, author of Uberland, critical of algorithmic manipulation of Uber
drivers, now works for Uber as Head of Marketplace Policy, Fairness & Research.5

We’re not experts on research ethics but cannot understand how it can be ethical for
academic researchers to collaborate with Uber management to publish on contentious
areas of Uber’s business such as worker rights while the company is in live dispute with the
workforce on such matters. The conflict of interest is quite obvious and, in my opinion,
there should be rules against it – or at least a requirement to declare an interest clearly.

But as much as I want there to be rules about academics pulling for Uber, I have to accept
likewise there will need to be rules about academics pulling for us. Even here the platforms
have the advantage. It seems that they get to choose the academics they want to work with ‘on
their team’ but workers do not have such a choice. The platforms have all the soft power and
slushy resources to shape the research outcomes and how they are represented.

Sometimes academic researchers over-sell us on their skills and qualifications which
sets up unhealthy expectations. As campaigners we are led to believe that we might be able
to tap into their considerable knowledge base to benefit our campaigns directly. We give
them our valuable time and open our movement to them. They harvest a lot of information
and then, too often, we never hear from them again. Actually this is probably how it needs
be. It is just that the informal contract needs to be a lot, lot clearer in advance than it usually
is at present for academic involvement in our struggles.

Both sides need to understand and accept certain realities about the relationship.
Academics need to do a better job of explaining their work and the limitations of the benefit
of our engagement. Activists need to understand that in the long run we are better off when
we allow academics access to research so they can build that bigger understanding which
can change the weather in the way legal scholars do. As activists we must accept that is a
long-term play and we should not look for a short-term transactional gain.

Everyone involved in a struggle needs to be honest about the power they seek to input
and extract as well as their legitimate stake in the fight, but this is especially critical for
academic researchers. For me this is the very essence of what solidarity means. In the

5 See https://www.inputmag.com/culture/leading-uber-critic-hired-to-teach-the-company-that-drivers-are-people
newer independent union movement, we have seen a lot of new energy, but on the flip side too often we see a lot of privileged young people who have come in to join the ‘struggle’ for their own purposes, a struggle that is often not their own. It is a struggle in someone else’s workplace they seek to organise. Many of these activists are more focused on mirroring the political process, to consolidate power and to take positions within unions. It becomes an exercise in preaching to other people who are literally fighting for their working lives when they have no legitimate stake in this struggle at all. When we enter someone else’s fight, we need to work side by side in true solidarity.

In our movement we have seen examples of academics standing for office in some of the new unions set up to represent precarious workers. We have seen political activists taking up employment as ‘organisers’ – a much abused occupational label. As a result, the valuable work of workplace organising of workers themselves becomes influenced and diverted by a different type of political/academic organising. I have no doubt that those involved believed they were doing the right thing, but more care and consideration could yield a better result in building real power for workers in their workplace. Any additional resources are welcome in the fight, but when the resources come from outside the struggle what is the cost in terms of accountability and focus?

I have become deeply uncomfortable when some of the academics who have taken office in independent unions have published research about the work of these unions and then failed to disclose their interests. To my mind this is potentially just as damaging to our cause as Uber executives collaborating in the co-publication of academic papers. If their research is exposed as biased or unethical because of their direct involvement in the struggle and failure to disclose their interests, then we suffer a loss also. To the extent that our campaign message is carried through their work, our message can be discredited when it ought not to be.

There is a risk also that academics directly involved in independent unions can cause damage to the broader trade union movement as well. Independent unions can bring energy quickly to a cause but that comes at a cost because of the lack of bargaining power that might be available to more traditional trade unions. There is a scale versus agility conundrum at play in modern trade union organising and we need good, independent academic research which can be obscured when researchers do not declare their interests.

Finally, there is the forever problem of selective attention. Because academic and political leaders and bureaucrats are naturally more focused on their own careers and objectives rather than the daily experience of a worker in the fight, the real workers’ struggle can too quickly be abandoned for the next most attractive area of organising and the headlines that go with it. Academics can move to the next theatre. Workers are stuck with what they’ve got.

Another obvious point of ethical tension maybe is the weakening effect of academic objectivity. As activists, we are not objective. We do not want to be, we want to maximise our position. How do academics balance their professional duty to be objective with our goal of maximising our position? Will they betray us with their objectivity?

I like to think there is a role where academics can work with the workers in their struggle, side by side, in solidarity. However, doing so demands complete honesty and transparency. In the inspiring words of Susana Benavides, from United Voices of the World (a union that represents low-paid migrant cleaning workers in London) it requires the academics ‘to march alongside us but not in front of us’ (Benavides, 2021).

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REFERENCES


