

# Activist communication: A critical reflection on an ethnographic research project

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## Abstract

*Critical scholars have questioned the widespread assumption that public relations' focus is solely on achieving corporate goals, arguing that this perspective does not only undermine the standing of public relations as a critical scholarly discipline in its own right, but furthermore limits the understanding and value of professional communication in general. This argument is highlighted in the discipline's focus on activist communication, which has developed into one of the largest bodies of knowledge in public relations research. However, despite extensive scholarly interest, spanning over more than three decades, to date little emic research has been conducted to provide insight into activist communication. This paper has a methodological focus and consists of a review of and critical reflection on a postgraduate research project that set out to address this existing gap, by studying one of the currently most active activist groups in Australia: the WA anti nuclear movement. Using ethnographic techniques, the author conducted semi-structured interviews, undertook participant observation at a range of activist events and spent time at the movement's umbrella organisation's offices. This paper discusses challenges and benefits of the research experience so far, by engaging with ethnographic and social movement literature as well as by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity. The author concludes by suggesting that public relations as a discipline can be enriched by research that departs from a corporate perspective, to one that focuses on alternative voices and viewpoints.*

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## Introduction

Two police officers approached on bikes. I was watching with unease, unable to decide what was more unnerving, the fact that our small group of protesters was about to be questioned by police, or that a local reporter had started taking photos of the peaceful demonstration outside the offices of one of the country's biggest mining companies. Having recently embarked on the final phase of data collection for my doctorate, I started to question my decision to increasingly move from my position as 'outsider', predominantly focused on interviews and note taking from the sidelines, to a more active, involved and engaged role. My discomfort appeared to originate in the different roles we tend to enact in our professional and private lives. I am a representative on the State's public relations council, an educator, a student – and now I was becoming an activist. Whilst trying to act calm, smiling at passers by, I was acutely aware that many of my former students had since embarked on successful careers inside the building in front of which I was now distributing

information flyers. Why was I almost certain that most of them would not perceive this small group of 'active citizens' as communicators in their own right, but rather as 'trouble makers', acting in contradiction to what modern public relations stands for?

This paper provides a critical reflection on the emotional 'rollercoaster' and methodological challenges experienced whilst conducting primary research into activist communication. There are compelling reasons for the choice of study focus, most notably that over the past three decades, activism research has developed into one of the largest bodies of knowledge in public relations scholarship. However, to date the research agenda has been largely corporation-centric, whilst insight into activist communication from an emic perspective remains limited. As a result, critical scholars have increasingly emphasised the need to broaden the PR research agenda by conducting research inside activist organisations.

In contrast to the prevailing functionalist paradigm throughout PR literature, ethnographically inspired research has been widely embraced by social movement scholars (see e.g. Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002), who have emphasised the value of participant observation as a tool to gain insight into the everyday meanings of 'doing social activism' (e.g. Lichterman, 1998; Lichterman, 2002). Here, exploratory and qualitative approaches are recognised as valuable in enabling researchers to glean insight into and gain understanding of previously largely unstudied phenomena and publics. However, qualitative scholars are confronted by significant challenges when investigating public relations in cultural and societal contexts that are 'foreign' to their own. Whilst the researcher is embarking into unfamiliar and largely uncharted territory, a number of decisions have to be made to ensure the quality of the research outcome. I argue that this is particularly relevant when studying activist organisations, which are traditionally characterised by a lack of resources and the fluid, dispersed nature of group membership. Additionally, as I was quickly to experience myself, 'public relations' is a loaded term within this context (Demetriou, 2006), with connotations for activists as a self-serving capitalist activity. Consequently, gaining and particularly maintaining access may represent a major challenge for any primary study into activist communication.

This paper has a methodological focus. My aim is to highlight and discuss both challenges and benefits of conducting ethnographic research in activist organisations, which cannot only be described as 'foreign' cultural contexts, but furthermore settings, which have traditionally been excluded from the public relations domain. Specifically, I will examine how the fluid nature of the West Australian anti nuclear movement has affected and shaped my decisions in regards to methodology, data collection and overall research design during the early stages of this PhD project.

## A brief literature review on activism research

Activist communication and the evolution of the field of public relations have been inherently intertwined (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). As corporations have become more aware of the importance of reputation and image management from the mid 20th century onwards, activists have increasingly been perceived as obstacles, or barriers, to achieving their corporate goals. From this perspective, activists justify the existence of the corporate public relations function, by creating the need for corporate issues management and damage limitation programs (e.g. Grunig, 1986). This in turn illustrates why scholarly research into activism spans over more than three decades and represents one of the largest bodies of knowledge in public relations literature to date. As a result, despite the strong scholarly interest in activist communication, research has to date been largely limited to the corporate perspective, motivated by a focus on issues management and damage limitation (Bunting & Lipski, 2001; Deegan, 2001; Grunig, 1992; Illia, 2003; John & Thomson, 2003; Turner, 2007).

In modern western society, why is greater credence given to corporate messages than to activist communication, as evidenced in the existing research agenda and the overall focus of the public relations profession? This worldview depicts public relations as a self serving, capitalist activity, limited to the resource rich and already powerful elements within society (e.g. Beder, 2002; Burton 2008; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). However, over the past decade a critical perspective has emerged, highlighting the need for a move away from the prevailing corporation-centric, industry serving, functionalist paradigm (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Henderson, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2002; L'Etang, 2005; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Motion & Weaver, 2005). Critical scholars question the widespread assumption that public relations' focus is solely on achieving corporate goals, arguing that this perspective not only undermines the standing of public relations as a critical scholarly discipline in its own right, but furthermore limits the understanding and value of professional communication in general.

A number of authors have argued that the current research agenda on activism is inherently flawed, as it largely ignores the unequal distribution of power in the activist-organisation relationship (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). To counteract this, a critical perspective on activism has slowly been emerging, with a number of scholars calling on activists to be recognised as communications experts in their own right (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Coombs and Holladay (2007) argue that activism can not only "be seen 'as' modern public relations" (p. 52), but that activists have essentially been practicing public relations for hundreds of years, long before large corporations existed (see e.g. the Heath & Waymer, 2009, case study about the Anti-Slavery Movement). By ignoring this rich history, PR scholars not only gain an incomplete understanding of activist communication, they are essentially ignoring the *public* in public relations (Karlberg, 1996).

Given the growing recognition of the one sided nature of the current activism research agenda, this project set out to address the gaps outlined above by providing rich insight into activism communication from an activist organisation's point of view, namely that of the Western Australian Anti Nuclear Movement (WA ANM). Whilst the overall research question is concerned with how the

WA ANM frames the uranium debate and ensures their voice contributes to public debate, the focus of this paper is on issues of access, ongoing data collection and the tensions frequently experienced in the role as participant observer. However, before moving on to discuss ethical and methodological considerations, I will be providing a brief justification for the choice of research site. This case emerged as a result of a formative study into activist communication in Western Australia, identifying the anti nuclear movement as one of the currently most active and visible groups in the State. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this:

## The research site

Western Australia's economy is largely driven by the extraction and processing of mineral and petroleum commodities, which makes not only a major contribution to the country's economy (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), but also has a flow on effect on its population. WA's gross state product per capita (A\$70.009) is higher than that of any other state, and well above the nation's average (\$A58.606). As a result, West Australians like to refer to their state as the *powerhouse* of Australia and the major contributor that ensured the county remained largely unaffected by the 2007- 2010 global recession.

Currently, Australia has no nuclear power stations. However, uranium mining represents a major income stream. During the year 2008-2009 Australia exported over 10,000 tons of uranium oxide, with a value of over A\$1 billion (World Nuclear Association, 2010). The industry's potential is even greater, as Australia is widely recognised as possessing the world's largest uranium reserves, estimated at 23% of the known recoverable resources (World Nuclear Association, 2010). Once presumed 'dead', the nuclear industry has recently gained renewed attention, strategically positioning nuclear energy as a low carbon solution in the fight against global warming. In Western Australia, the uranium mining debate has recently gained new momentum, due to a temporary downturn in traditional mining sectors (such as iron ore and aluminium), a reversal of the long-held uranium mining ban in Western Australia in late 2008 and an increasingly pro-mining Federal Labor government. To date, Western Australia has not mined any uranium. However, changes in legislation have attracted much interest from local and international investors, resulting in Australia's activist community describing Western Australia as the *frontline* in their battle against uranium mining.

The Western Australian anti nuclear movement (WA ANM) has been a prominent voice in Australian politics and social commentary over the past four decades and has now reformed with new energy, currently representing one of the most visible and outspoken social movements in Western Australia. Whilst the current political environment and the prominent re-emergence of the anti nuclear movement arguably justify the choice of study focus, methodological decisions had to be made that suited the nature of the movement, as well as ensured the quality and rigour required for a postdoctoral thesis. This paper discusses the methodological decisions that have been made during the first stages of data collection; a series of interviews with activists in early 2009, followed by a week-long participant observation in the movement's umbrella organisation, as well as continuing

participation in demonstrations, information events and other public *actions*. In doing so, the author draws on Bourdieu's notion of *reflexivity*, thereby aiming to overcome the ongoing tension between the dual role as participant and researcher. The resulting reflection has provided further direction for the final phase of data collection for this PhD project.

## Methodology

To overcome the scarcity of existing knowledge and insights into activist communication (particularly within the West Australian and anti nuclear context), a single case study approach was selected, with the aim "to collect 'rich', detailed information across a wide range of dimensions" (Daymon & Holloway, 2010, p. 115). The resulting study is of exploratory nature, based on predominantly ethnographic techniques, with the aim to provide emic insights into the anti-nuclear debate, and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the movement's communication efforts. A grounded theory approach was chosen for this study, as it is considered as particularly suitable for the exploration of social organisations from the participants' point of view (Glaser, 1998), in this case, through the eyes of the WA anti nuclear movement.

This research project draws on the French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1977), ideas on power and emphasis on reflexivity. Bourdieu's work was originally selected as theoretical framework for this study, due to his expanded meaning of capital, recognising other forms of power permeating cultural exchanges, such as knowledge and networks, beyond the traditional focus on money and property. Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1977), Western Australia can be described as a *field of struggle*, in which actors (activists, corporations, politicians) compete to maintain or challenge the status quo; in this context the perception of and attitude towards uranium mining.

Towards the end of his career, Bourdieu's interest shifted increasingly towards ethnographic methods and "everyday suffering", most notably in *La Misere du Monde* (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1993) (published in English under the title *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999)). Here he criticises the kind of complicity that is arguably present in public relations scholarship, reflected in the implicit assumption of an equal playing field, where the notion of a compromise or 'win win situation' is not only achievable, but also desired. (see e.g. Grunig, 1992a). According to Bourdieu, by ignoring the power and most importantly resource inequalities between activists and corporations, the researcher would be of guilty of an implicit complicity, essentially misleading readers and the wider community.

However, what has most inspired the methodological design of this study is Bourdieu's strong advocacy for the use of rigorous 'self reflective' techniques. The notion of reflexivity is at the heart of Bourdieu's work (Deer, 2008). It is a phenomenologically inspired inquiry of knowledge creation, executed via the continuous questioning of whether, how and to what extent the research process allows the subject of knowledge (i.e. the researcher) to grasp the object of his or her study in its essence (Deer, 2008).

## The research project

### *Initial considerations*

Participant observation projects, as popular amongst social movement researchers, are traditionally associated with prolonged periods of deep immersion in a usually unfamiliar research setting (Bryman, 2008; Tedlock, 2005). However, social movements are characterised by their fluid shape and heavy reliance on volunteers. This is particularly evident in the context of the WA anti nuclear movement, which has a limited number of paid activists (1.2 full time equivalent) and continuously changing key organisers. Additionally, many anti nuclear activists are involved in a range of other, frequently connected causes, which results in varying levels of commitment and participation. During the early stages of this study I spent a week within the movement's umbrella organisation, but shortly after funding for the two campaign positions ran out and the office has since remained largely unused. Confronted by a perceived lack of structure and absence of a *base* or *home* for WA's anti nuclear activists, semi structured interviews (both with key organisers and those at the fringes of the movement) were identified as a preferred data collection method.

However, I recognise that there may be inconsistencies between what participants say they do, and what they *actually* do as part of their involvement in the anti nuclear movement. This is not necessarily a result of their secretive nature, but rather a result of limited time for reflection. Social movement researcher Lichterman (1998) illustrates, based on his own extensive research experience, how many insights can easily be misinterpreted or crucial information overlooked, if they are lacking periods of immersion in the culture of activist groups under study. In order to limit this danger and furthermore allow triangulation of results, participant observation at public *actions* (i.e. gatherings, demonstrations, events) was chosen as additional data collection method, supported by qualitative document analysis of activist documents (flyers, posters, websites, information brochures, stickers), industry publications (research reports, websites, information brochures) and media reports (on and offline, including comments in response to online news articles).

### *Becoming active*

It soon became obvious that in order to gain meaningful insight into to movement's activists, I would have to shift the focus of my data collection techniques. Although the movement does not set out to be exclusive, its dispersed, fluid nature results in information being restricted to a core group. This makes the recruitment of appropriate, potential interviewees impossible without the support of internal 'sponsors'. If I was to gain an understanding of activist communication from an emic perspective, I had to move my focus towards participant observation and become an insider within the WA ANM network, thereby shifting my role from removed observer at public events to active participant in planning meetings and often spontaneous public 'actions'.

My positivist colleagues would argue that by changing my status from subject to object of this study I essentially *tainted* my data, thereby devaluing my results due to limited objectivity. However, it is only on reflection, by sitting down to write this paper, that I have become fully aware of how limited and distorted my understanding of the movements' efforts was, before I became an active

participant in its activities. In the words of Tedlock (2005): “culture is emergent in human interaction rather than located deep inside individual brains or hearts” (p. 470). Interviews alone would not have been able to capture the richness of the ANM WA’s language and rituals, the diversity of their activities and the extent of its local, national and international networks. Much of the internal knowledge is absorbed or passed on during informal conversations.

Bourdieu specifically emphasised the challenges involved in participant observation projects, due to the sometimes artificially close familiarisation between researcher and the *foreign* social environment. In recognising the underlying tension as participant observer, a position where the researcher is forced to be both object and subject of the study, he emphasised the epistemological importance of what he coined *participant objectivation* (Bourdieu, 2003). Bourdieu argued that this type of reflexive approach would enable researchers to both control and most crucially limit the influence of their own presence on the object of their research, for example by avoiding the danger of unconscious projection of his or her own worldview onto the understanding of the social practices that are being studied (in this case activist communication). In applying Bourdieu’s ideas of reflexivity throughout this study, it is important to emphasise that he cautioned the scholarly community not to confuse the *device of reflexivity* with what he labelled “self absorbed, narcissistic reflexivity”, which he accused a number of his (postmodern anthropologist) peers to indulge in (Bourdieu, 2003).

## **Building and maintaining trust**

In his widely referenced classic “Tales of the Field”, Van Maanen (1988) compares the fieldwork experience to a self imposed exile. One of the key challenges for the inexperienced postgraduate researcher is to learn how to move amongst strangers and handle a wide range of feelings, from embarrassment and isolation, to warmth, enjoyment and even a sense of adventure. *Trust* emerged as a crucial factor in ensuring the quality and ultimately the success of this research project. Whilst social movements like the WA ANM are generally welcoming, accepting and highly tolerant of cultural and socioeconomic differences, my role as researcher and professional association with a resources industry aligned university resulted in some level of suspicion by participants. Additionally, my working background in public relations and prominent involvement with the national public relations institute equally raised some questions (and potentially concern) amongst activists, based particularly on the loaded nature of the term ‘public relations’. Corporate infiltration of activist organisations is not uncommon (see e.g. Burton & Hager, 2000; Stokes & Rubin, 2010) and consequently the perceived threat of infiltration by corporate *spies* was raised - although never directly aimed at me - on a number of occasions. As most activist actions are public events, limited access and lack of trust would not automatically exclude me from observing activist activities in public spaces. However, the time sensitive, often disruptive nature of public actions denotes that acts of public disobedience are not advertised publicly. Instead, notification is restricted to a core group of activists. Without internal support and WA ANM sponsors, access to regular planning meetings, workshops and even public *actions* could be limited or nonexistent. As a participant

observer it has been crucial for me to belong to the relevant mailing lists and social media information outlets. However, once obtained, access is not guaranteed. During the past two years of data collection WA ANM key organisers have changed frequently as activists move interstate, take up other positions or simply decrease their level of involvement. Consequently, trust needs to be re-established over time. Simultaneously, any doubt about the genuine nature of my research focus may at any time result in immediate withdrawal of access by means of my removal from the organisation's internal information networks, or in Van Maanen's (1988) words "possible deportation".

As much information is direct and increasingly via electronic media (e.g. emails, text messages, social media) the question that arises is: As researcher, would I actually know if I had been excluded from some conversations? It may not be obvious to any bystander or complete outsider, but after months of involvement I have come to realise that as a researcher I will never be able to become a *true* insider. I might be on the right mailing list, but I will always remain positioned slightly off centre. This casts doubt on the premise that even a highly engaged participant observer may ever be able to glean a complete picture of a research setting. All I can realistically aim for is a snapshot of this particular activist subculture at the time of data collection.

## Obtaining consent

As required by institutional research approval processes, the ethical framework for this study was aligned with the Australian Research Council's (ARC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, which requires researchers to reflect upon potential risks to participants. The national guidelines are published on the website of the National Health and Medical Research Council, which illustrates the document's focus on clinical research methods. Qualitative research methods are addressed separately, covering approximately three of the 98 pages in the document. The fluid structure of social movements, and in particular the flat, dispersed nature of the ANM WA, provide a number of challenges when aiming to meet requirements by largely positivistic orientated institutional and national research guidelines. For example, the university's ethics committee required written endorsement of my project by a decision maker, who was impossible to recruit, as the ANM WA is a collective of individuals, which has historically relied on consensus based decision making.

My research proposal was discussed in length at one of the weekly *action meetings* and verbally endorsed, based on trust in both my intentions as researcher and movement participant, with the unspoken knowledge, that this could be withdrawn at any time. Aware of the dilemma I was confronted with, the minute taker eventually offered to sign off on the record of the meeting. Despite its positivistic focus, the ARC's National Statement acknowledges that "in some circumstances consent may be implied by participation" (Australian Government, 2007, p. 28). The UK Economic and Social Research Council takes this idea further, by noting that in some participatory research "formalised or bureaucratic ways of securing consent should be avoided in

favour of fostering relationships in which ongoing ethical regard for participants is to be sustained” (2005). This recognises that in some circumstances it can be challenging, or arguably even counterproductive, to obtain written consent. During the early stages of this project my main focus was on gaining an understanding of activism in WA, to establish trust and recruit potential participants, who could help shape the design of the overall study. Interpretive researchers (e.g. Daymon & Hodges, 2009) have emphasised that this involvement in and familiarisation with the field is crucial to the overall success of a scholarly study. Particularly during this period I noticed that many conversations emerged serendipitously at public actions, which made it impossible to distribute information sheets. Many activists were enthusiastic to engage and share their ideas, but appeared to shy away from the formalised interview process, concerned about time implications and doubt about the value of their potential contribution. Ethics guidelines fail to acknowledge this perceived risk of *losing face* and the extent to which research procedures may disadvantage already resource (particularly time) poor social movements. This experience further directed my increased focus on participant observation and informal conversations in a relaxed atmosphere, such as at actions and before/after meetings,

## **When friendship gets in the way**

As my involvement intensified, I got to know individual activists and consequently engaged in many conversations that became increasingly private. I started to care about people, became interested in their personal lives and on a number of occasions felt myself slipping into a position where I was enjoying myself as member of a dynamic, enthusiastic and caring community, as opposed to remaining the objective researcher who is neutrally observing events from the sidelines. As participant I became involved in administrative duties, distributed information flyers during demonstrations, contributed to planning meetings and dressed up as part of public actions. This tension between my role as insider and research commitment as outsider increased as the study progressed.

Angrosino (2005) argues that membership orientated researchers are by definition intrusive, which does not have to be negative per se. However, I cannot pretend that I am not impacting on the research setting. Essentially, I am no longer the subject, but have started to become an object of my own study. Intensified personal involvement meant that I wanted to offer in exchange for the time and access I had been provided with. As lecturer in public relations it is only natural for me to provide advice in regards to media relations, event planning and creative execution. Without undervaluing activists’ expertise, my involvement in shaping the direction of WA ANM activities – however small my contributions may have been – raises concern of how much I – as participant observer – am influencing the actual outcome of my own study.

## From observer as participant to participant observer

Gold's (1958) classic typology identified four participant observer roles, however, I found that as researcher I was not strictly limited to one of these, but instead adopted different roles at different times. Whilst I set out as *observer as participant*, I increasingly felt myself moving into a *participant as observer* role. As I continued to subscribe to movement newsletters, follow activists' updates, reflections and commentary on social media and particularly during periods of intense observations, I found it gradually more difficult to exclusively focus on my professional role as researcher. I needed to strike a balance, in what Thome (1979) describes as problematic: "a dialectic between being an insider, a participant in the world one studies, and an outsider, observing and reporting on that world" (p. 73). Finding this balance is fundamental for the collection of rich data in social movement research (Blee & Taylor, 2002), avoiding what Bryman (2008) refers to as "going native" (p. 412), i.e. facing the risk of gradually acquiring the same worldview as participants.

On one hand, I was engaging in a conversation, keen to provide the other person with my full attention. However, my role as researcher required me to simultaneously store facts and quotes for my reflective memos, scan the environment for other noteworthy occurrences or insights, and possibly take mental notes of body language. Whilst doing this, I had to ensure to be an engaging conversationalist, keeping the conversation going and provide intelligent responses. At times I found it difficult to pay attention to what was being said, feeling myself drifting away, absorbed in my mental notes.

## Autobiographical reflections

Bourdieu questioned the notion of objective ethnography, arguing that as researchers we always bring elements of ourselves into the study. He therefore highlighted the need to clarify the researcher's own thoughts, positioning and practice in relation to the field of study (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1988). In the context of this study, his notion of *participant objectivation* encouraged me to reflect on my own relationship to the subject of study, i.e. the anti nuclear movement. The focus for this study was initially chosen based on my scholarly interest in activist communication, coupled with identifying the WA anti nuclear movement as a *hub of increased activity* during an early formative study into activism in Western Australia. However, on reflection I noticed that as I became involved, engaged in *actions*, conducted interviews and established friendships, I increasingly overlooked my own background, education and worldview, which I was inevitably drawing on to make sense of the research setting. As Rabikowska (2010) concluded at the end of her research into street life in London: "the presence of the researcher and her own autobiography affect the results of research [.....] articulation as much as execution of research is always subjective" (p. 58).

My education and background emerged as key factors that impacted on both my study design and interpretation of findings. Despite working in a largely positivist-orientated business faculty, my undergraduate education in media, cultural and communication studies influenced the

methodological choices as well as my interest in the activist perspective. At the same time, my industry experience in public relations tempted me to underestimate the movement's communication and strategic abilities, predominantly based on their lack of subject specific terminology and sophisticated tools. Based solely on interviews and observation of public events, I would have been tempted to dismiss the notion of activists as communication experts in their own right. The complexity of their actions only emerged as the results of intense participation and reflection on my experience within the movement.

An invitation to "share my story" about 12 months into my study unexpectedly made me aware that my connection to the movement may have been stronger than initially anticipated. Growing up in 1980s Germany, I had witnessed the widespread fear that drifted across Europe as a result of the 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant explosion in the Ukraine that eventually resulted into the emergence of a very vocal German anti nuclear movement. As such, I arguably had been in closer contact with the nuclear industry than most Australians, a fact that I remained unaware of for a crucial part of my data collection.

## **Discussion**

The social movement scholar Lichterman (1998) described the participant observation process as an opportunity to "get to experience the same exhilaration, frustration, and awkwardness as activists we study" (p. 401). The participation element has kept me motivated; however, it is also an easy distraction. So far, the research experience has been equal to a rollercoaster ride of emotions, but as you make friends and become committed it becomes increasingly difficult to 'jump off', complete the data collection phase and move on to the analysis.

Despite the limitations discussed over the previous pages, the participant observation experience has provided me with unique insights. A number of working hypotheses that I developed as a result of my interviews were challenged during informal conversations and observations during events. Trust has emerged as a crucial factor in not only ensuring the quality of this study, but in gaining and maintaining access. I believe that the focus on relationship building and largely informal research approaches during the first two data collection phases have enabled participants to build a level of trust in me as a researcher, my project and ultimately my intentions, which will hopefully impact on the quality of insights gained during the final phase of data collection.

However, based on my continuous observation and reflection, I question if any researcher will ever be able to claim a position as a genuine and fully respected participant. As participant observer I have been constantly drawn between my role as committed, immersed and engaged insider and the professional pressure to act as an objective, observant and dispassionate outsider. I furthermore question if a participant observer would always know if he or she was excluded from selective information. This tension, alongside the underlying fear of (sudden) access withdrawal, has been a constant companion throughout the research journey to date. As raised by Daymon and Hodges

(2009), I query if despite the best intentions, relationships between researchers and participants can ever be *wholly genuine*, or if they always remain “somewhat instrumental and exploitative” (p. 432).

In echoing Rabikowska’s (2010) observations, I argue that any research project - interpretive or positivist - is always influenced by the presence of the researcher’s past. However, as scholars we rarely take the time to reflect on why we chose a particular topic, perspective, method or approach to analysis. During the course of this study I have worn numerous *hats*: I am a lecturer at a resources orientated university, who has seen many of my past students move into roles in the profitable mining industry. I am a former PR practitioner, consultant and active member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia. I am a PhD student and researcher. However, I am also a daughter and wife. I may enact different roles at different times, however, I will never be able to evade my subconscious past.

It took Bourdieu much of his professional career to master the concept of participant objectivation. Eventually, he criticised many of his own earlier attempts, raising the question if true objectivation can be achieved alone. This highlights the importance of academic supervisors, relationships with participants and discussions with peers, who can help postgraduate students to questions presumptions and predispositions, as well as overcome personal challenges associated with the research experience.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the benefits and discussed the challenges of an ethnographic inspired public relations research project, as well as highlighted the potential advantages of using less formalised approval processes, particularly during the early stages of an exploratory study. The dual role as researcher and participant can be challenging, but equally rewarding. By exploring the insight of an activist organisation, I have been able to gain rich, unique insights into and understanding of communication that are impossible to gain from the corporate perspective that characterises much of public relations research to date.

The notion of reflexivity has been largely ignored in PR scholarship. Despite the unquestionably close relationship between researcher and participants in interpretive studies, I argue that it is impossible for any researcher – interpretive or positivist – to fully dismiss the (unconscious) influence of his or her past and its influence on methodological, design and interpretive decisions. By reflecting on my own experience, background and knowledge, as well as the objectives of this research project, I query if relationships between researchers and participants can ever be described as entirely *genuine*. This is an aspect I aim to explore further during the next phase of this study. Like any ethnographic project, this study can only ever aim to be authentic in that the researcher stepped out of day to day role as lecturer into self imposed exile amongst a group of previously unknown activists in an attempt to shine light on an *alien community*. Despite increasingly active participation in the anti nuclear activist community, there is an ever present risk of applying my own worldview, experiences and background, as ultimately I lack the extensive history and long standing

involvement to be classified an insider or 'native'. As Van Maanen emphasises in his classic *Tales of the Field* (1988), culture does not exist in a vacuum, it is intangible. Equally, activist culture only becomes visible via engagement and the researcher's writing process. Despite taking precautions like continuing to draw on Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity, to increase the accuracy and worth of the findings, I have to acknowledge that the final results of this study will only ever be one version or way of interpretation. The author therefore encourages the use of more ethnographic projects within the activism communication context, therefore enabling researchers to compare insights, discuss interpretations and exchange theories.

Whilst the fluid, dynamic nature of the WA ANM guided my methodological choices and the design of this study, I recognise that research decisions are frequently driven by institutional preferences and industry demands. However, as scholars we are not only effectively ignoring the public in public relations (Karlberg, 1996), we are also gaining a very limited, one sided understanding of communication practices, in this case, activist communication. Social scientist (e.g. Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999; Tedlock, 2005) have embraced ethnography from a humanistic perspective, grounded in a commitment to serve the communities in which their research is being carried out, whilst the majority of public relations scholars appear to continue the focus on the corporation centric agenda. I therefore encourage PR scholars to shift the boundaries of public relations research by undertaking more research from within organisations, thereby revealing alternative communication practices and challenging community perceptions of the profession's role in society.

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