

Collaborative Ethnography With Social Movements: Key Dimensions and Challenges

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Key words:

collaborative
ethnography;
social movement
studies;
movement-
relevant theory;
co-analysis; co-
theorization;
research
collaboration;
knowledge co-
production;
engaged research

Abstract: In this article, I explore collaborative ethnography as a means to bridge theory and practice, knowledge and action, in social movement research, and to produce knowledge that is relevant and useful both inside and outside academia. For this purpose, I will present a group of interconnected dimensions and challenges that shape the practice of research collaboration with social movements: a situated, artisanal and experimental ethos regarding method and outcomes; elements of shared authority, co-decision, co-analysis, and co-theorization in fieldwork; the decentered role of scholars; the tension between academic and extra-academic relevance; the link between trust, access, and collaboration; epistemic and methodological questions of writing and representation; the significance of time for weaving and sustaining collaboration; and the ways in which the actors involved relate to knowledge-practices and theory production. These eight dimensions illustrate how ethnographic collaboration takes place (or fails to materialize) in actual research projects, highlighting elements that will facilitate or hinder the co-production of knowledge with our co-researchers.

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1. Introduction: The Threefold Goals of Collaborative Ethnography

In this article, I portray collaborative ethnography as the process of working and thinking together with social movement activists as co-researchers around jointly established agendas or problems. This preliminary definition raises several questions that will be addressed through the paper. Can research projects be designed around the topics, concerns, and needs posed by social movement organizations, instead of (solely) around disciplinary interests? Is it possible to bridge theory and practice in/through research? Can researchers foster a dialogue between different types of knowledge, and between academic and non-academic knowledge producers? What ethical and methodological challenges arise in this engagement? [1]

The goals of collaborative research are threefold. First, in scholarly terms, ethnographic collaboration generates empirically grounded analysis, conceptual and theoretical innovation that will advance our understanding of the topic of study, as well as providing novel insights and questions for future research. Thus, in the project I undertook with the Network of Offices for Social Rights (ODSs), a network of urban activists organized around issues of precarity and migrant struggles, the process of engaging in critical dialogue with the activists as co-researchers and creating mechanisms for co-analysis and co-theorization, allowed me to explore the emerging logic and practices of collective action, producing a detailed ethnographic account of the redefinition of grassroots political activism in Spain (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2018a, 2020). Likewise, a more recent research project designed and undertaken with the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies (PRATEC), and the Andean Nuclei for Cultural Affirmation (NACAs), a Peruvian community-based network devoted to Andean cultural affirmation and the revitalization of Andean-Amazonian knowledges and ways of knowing, allowed me to rethink critically and to produce new empirical knowledge—from the point of view of the communities themselves, thinking *with* them—in relation to notions and practices of interculturality, epistemic diversity and Andean and Amazonian educational cultures (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2021). [2]

Secondly, collaborative research makes social science directly relevant and useful for the social movements or communities we work with. Knowledge co-production incorporates those actors usually targeted as informants into the joint design and implementation of the research project/process, which will therefore respond to their own questions and challenges, aims and interests. Through practices of collective deliberation and reciprocity, co-analysis and co-theorization in fieldwork, these undertakings bring forth different types of outputs that our co-researchers will be able to use as they see fit to advance their own projects and struggles, e.g., informing future actions of the movement, helping restructure its internal organization, redefining its strategies and alliances, generating new campaigns, and so forth (JURIS, 2007). Thus, the fact that research collaboration operates "simultaneously on the political level and at the level of ethnographic analysis" (RAPPAPORT, 2008, p.4) explains why and how our academic research can become relevant and productive for social movements, building "re-enchantment bridges" (RAHMAN & FALS BORDA, 1991, p.32) between research

and action and between academic and non-academic knowledges and knowledge producers. Hence, collaborative research—engaged qualitative research in general—allows scholars to explore and emphasize the contribution of social science to popular struggles and social movements, as well as the contribution of social movements and popular struggles to the formation of new social science knowledge. I will later explain how *relevance* materialized in my work with PRATEC and the ODSs. [3]

Finally, collaborative research projects often engage with salient epistemic and methodological debates in social science, specifically in relation to the ethics and politics of knowledge production and validation. Cultivating "Collaborative Analytics" (BOYER & MARCUS, 2020) may contribute to rethinking and reshaping sociological or anthropological thought and practice. As an example of this kind of intra-disciplinary intervention, together with colleagues from the University of Veracruz, Mexico, and the University of Granada, Spain, I co-edited a volume with 14 chapters written by scholars based in universities and research centers in the United States, Mexico, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Spain, who work with social movements employing collaborative ethnography, decolonial approaches, feminist methodologies, or participatory action research (ÁLVAREZ VEINGUER, ARRIBAS LOZANO & DIETZ, 2020). The process of putting this volume together, which was published in open access by the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), created the space for researchers from these different epistemic, theoretical, and methodological traditions to listen to each other; to discuss how they problematize and challenge more traditional understandings of knowledge production; to explore what they share and what is particular and distinctive in each case; as well as to reflect on the possibilities for cross-fertilization between them as a way to expand the creativity and relevance of our work beyond academic settings. [4]

Certainly, collaboration between scholars and their research partners is not new to social science, let alone in ethnographically informed projects. As I will further elaborate in this article, what is distinctive today is the resignification of collaboration in research, its renewed centrality as a means to reimagine and redefine knowledge-making in qualitative social science. There is an *amplified understanding of collaboration* (LASSITER, HOEY & CAMPBELL, 2020) that changes profoundly the purpose and nature, the imagination and materiality of the fieldwork encounter. [5]

In this context, drawing upon my own research experience and a critical reading of existing literature, and keeping in mind the threefold goals of collaborative frameworks outlined above, in this paper I systematize eight core dimensions, eight ideas/coordinates that need to be considered by scholars wishing to explore the opportunities and challenges as well as the promises and pitfalls of research collaboration with social movements. The systematization that I propose and discuss here is a key contribution to ongoing academic debates about collaborative frameworks. [6]

For this purpose, I begin with an overview of the changing landscape of research collaboration in academia today (Section 2). After that, I bring collaborative ethnography with social movements into dialogue with other well-established traditions and genealogies of engaged research; I will also elaborate on the question of relevance in social movement research, as well as on the challenge of generating movement-relevant theory (Sections 3-4). I then put forward the eight dimensions/coordinates which, without claiming to be exhaustive, summarize the grammar of collaboration in research. Through these dimensions I will illustrate how ethnographic collaboration takes place (or fails to materialize) in practice, also highlighting the elements that facilitate or hinder knowledge co-production with co-researchers (Section 5). This discussion, which I consider to be the major contribution of this paper, will be followed by a conclusion (Section 6). [7]

2. Delimiting Research Collaboration

Collaboration is everywhere in contemporary academia. There is an expanding "enthusiasm for collaboration" (RILES, 2015, p.148), to the extent that it is often unclear what this ubiquitous concept of *collaboration* might mean anymore. I am aware of its polysemic and sometimes problematic character. I cannot elaborate here on the different understandings and modes of collaboration being articulated in universities today, encouraged by research funding policies: bringing together scholars across disciplinary boundaries, and/or from different countries; or involving non-academic partners and communities (BOYER & MARCUS, 2020; CORNISH, ZITTOUN & GILLESPIE, 2007; LAMPHERE, 2004; VON KÖPPEN, KÜMPERS & HAHN, 2022). [8]

Today, collaboration is deliberately and explicitly explored at every point in the ethnographic process, from formulating problems to the dissemination of findings; together, scholars and research-subjects/collaborators define what knowledge should be produced, how and for what purposes, and they carry out collective analysis and theorization. Along these lines, according to Douglas R. HOLMES and George E. MARCUS (2008, p.86),

"[w]e have no interest in collaboration as a 'division of labor' among the investigators who control the design of a project, or as the basis for blending academic expertise, or as a gesture to a canonical interdisciplinarity. The point is, again, to integrate fully our subjects' analytical acumen and insights to define the issues at stake in our projects as well as the means by which we explore them." [9]

As mentioned earlier, I understand collaborative research as the process of working and thinking together *with* our co-researchers—in my case, social movement activists—around jointly conceived agendas, bridging knowledge co-production and social movement action, and articulating research in ways that can be relevant and useful within and beyond academia. *Thinking together with* our co-researchers means that their questions, concerns, reflexivity, and knowledge-practices will be fully integrated into the design and the implementation of the research project, process, and products. This converts

fieldwork from a time/space of data collection to a time/space for cultivating processes of *co-analysis*, *co-conceptualization*, and *co-theorization* (RAPPAPORT, 2008). For this purpose, collaborative research requires creating and nurturing an ecology/assemblage of—often experimental—relationships of sustained dialogue, negotiation, and mutual learning at every stage of the process. [10]

Ethnographic collaboration is always in the making. It must be understood as an open-ended dialogue of reflexivities, *a recursive chain of interconnected conversations* (RAPPAPORT, 2016) distributed across fieldwork/time/people in which adjustments to the project, and further interpretation and analysis, are continuously taking place. This process allows scholars to move away from the mindset and practices of "Epistemic Extractivism" (GROSFOGUEL, 2020), and towards relations of care, reciprocity, and shared authority in research—healing research relations and purpose; and healing communities in/through research as well, including the academic community itself, often cynical and damaged, who will surely laugh at this idea. Again, the goal is to create knowledge that will be empirically grounded, conceptual and theoretically innovative, and most importantly, valuable for both the scholars and the social movements, communities, or organizations involved (ESCOBAR, 1992; SPEED, 2008; ARRIBAS LOZANO, DIETZ & ALVAREZ VEINGUER, 2020). [11]

The bridge between knowledge/research and social transformation underlying this proposal is clear. I have emphasized elsewhere the limitations of traditional understandings of public sociology; in particular, the need to move beyond a dissemination model of public sociology, the unidirectional diffusion of "expert knowledge" to extra-academic audiences, and towards a more collaborative understanding of knowledge production (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2018b). My argument is that, for knowledge/research to matter, it must be connected to (embedded in) actual collective struggles and/or movements for social justice. The notion that scholarship in and of itself, if sophisticated and critical enough, will have an effect on reality—the illusion of the knowledge effect—is untenable. Isolated from larger social agency, the analysis of the logic and mechanisms of domination, injustice and violence, the "sociology of outrage" (COX, 2014, p.956), becomes futile. If the multiple manifestations of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism/racism could be dismantled by denunciation, they would have disappeared long ago—"barbarism doesn't fear critique" (STENGERS, 2015, p.110). *Sociological imagination* and *political imagination* need to be combined and nourished by connecting our research to the collective efforts undertaken by social movements, organizations, and communities. [12]

However, I am equally critical of superficial notions of horizontality in research, celebratory accounts that overlook the complexities of knowledge co-production with social movements. Within collaborative frameworks, the many tensions and contradictions that arise in/through research are neither denied nor disregarded; instead, they are directly dealt with in dialogue with our collaborators (HALE, 2008; LEYVA & SPEED, 2008). Furthermore, tensions are conceived of as a constitutive dimension of the analytical process; every agreement or solution is

understood to be, by definition, temporary, provisional, always open to further negotiation. [13]

3. Collaborative Ethnography as Part of an Ecology of Action Research Methodologies

Collaborative research is part of, and builds on, a larger project in the social sciences, past and present (LASSITER, 2008). Collaboration belongs to a heterogeneous tradition/lineage, a community of ideas and *ways of doing qualitative research*, pioneered by scholars from a broad range of backgrounds: participatory action research (FALS BORDA & RAHMAN, 1991; HALL, 1992, 2005; RAPPAPORT, 2020); indigenous and decolonial methodologies (CHILISA, 2012; ESPINOSA, GÓMEZ & OCHOA, 2014; KOVACH, 2009; SMITH, 1999); feminist research (HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1987; NAPLES, 2003; STANLEY, 1990); community-based research (CAINE & MILL, 2016; DOSSA & GOLUBOVIĆ, 2018; ISRAEL, SCHULZ, PARKER & BECKER, 1998); and activist or militant ethnography (GRAEBER, 2009; HALE, 2008; JURIS & KHASNABISH, 2013; SHUKAITIS & GRAEBER, 2007), among others. [14]

In this sense, collaborative ethnography needs to be located within this ecology/tradition of engaged research possibilities. It is part of what Jenny PEARCE (2008, p.2) termed "the participatory methodologies family and their epistemological quest," an ecology/family whose members "share much in common, despite distinct starting points and origins" (2008, p.3). Certainly, these epistemic and methodological traditions are not identical. Historically they emerged from particular genealogies, territories and bodies/communities. They are connected to and deal with specific sets of social problems and struggles. They have produced distinctive theoretical and conceptual contributions, and they exist at different levels of institutionalization and professionalization within academia. It is beyond the scope of this article to spell out these differences; however, it is crucial to emphasize that the components of this ecology/family are not interchangeable. That means that neither feminist nor collaborative frameworks are necessarily decolonial or that collaborative research is not always activist/militant, and so forth. [15]

Nevertheless, while being distinct, researchers working within these traditions and practices have at least six significant elements in common:

1. They problematize the politics of knowledge production, destabilizing and transforming the definition/classification of what counts as valid knowledge and theory;
2. they place methodological debates within larger epistemic considerations, and this process, as Patricia Hill COLLINS (2019, p.142) has argued, "makes the relationship of epistemology, methodology, and power relations more transparent";
3. they raise critical questions about what the purpose of research is, who it is useful for, whose knowledge is taken seriously, and who we write for and how;

4. they are grounded in dialogical and reciprocal engagements with the research subjects as collaborators/co-researchers, whose concerns, questions and reflexivity inform the research design and implementation;
5. they undertake methodological innovation/experimentation as a way to achieve their objectives; and,
6. they are driven by a commitment to social transformation. [16]

Scholars working within this ecology of action research methodologies, these engaged frameworks of thought and research, have much to offer as well as to learn from each other. As an example, PEARCE (2008, p.6) argued that researchers using methodologies that emerged in the Global South—participative action research (PAR), participatory rural appraisal (PRA), or participatory learning and action (PLA)—aptly challenged the Eurocentrism of many Northern scholars involved in different forms of action research. In turn, feminist researchers North and South challenged many PAR/PRA/PLA scholars to acknowledge and address their own sexist bias. Likewise, Southern and decolonial feminists continue problematizing many theoretical and conceptual elements of mainstream/Northern feminist approaches. [17]

How can scholars craft relationships of trust and mutual learning between these epistemic, theoretical, and methodological traditions? Are we willing to relearn, and transform our ways of doing research in conversation with each other? The goal of the cross-methodological conversation and bridging that I am proposing here is not to create a reductionist general theory of engaged research, nor to promote some sort of mixed-method approach, but to *learn from each other's struggles, insights, challenges, and desires*. A dialogue between these scholars and traditions should pay special attention to what they share, without denying, threatening, or dismissing what is singular and specific about them. It should be an opportunity for them to further explore the questions of *knowledge for what, for whom, and with whom*; and to advance "their quest for a distinctive epistemological foundation" (PEARCE, 2008, p.4). [18]

A fundamental goal of researchers working within this heterogeneous *ecology of action research methodologies*, including collaborative ethnography, is precisely "to affirm and nurture other knowledges and other ways of producing knowledge" (ARRIBAS LOZANO et al., 2020, p.13), widening what is thinkable and feasible, the limits of imagination and praxis in research. [19]

4. The Question of Relevance in Social Movement Research

The relevance of academic work to our research subjects is a recurring concern for many, certainly not all, social movement scholars. What does it mean today, in practical terms, to generate movement-relevant theory? Allegedly, "relevance" was a key driver for the articulation of social movement studies (SMS) as a field of study in the first place. The genealogy of the canon-building US perspective, which would eventually become hegemonic, is well known. Activists involved in different social movements during the 1960s and 1970s—civil rights movement, anti-war and anti-imperialist movements, student and feminist movements—entered academia challenging the dominant analysis of collective action, understood at that time primarily as a sign of social anomie and/or individual deviation (McADAM, 2003). For these scholars, academic work was somehow a continuation of political commitment; it was a particular type of political engagement in itself. [20]

However counterintuitive this may seem today, SMS emerged out of the messy connection, rather than separation, between theory and practice, the fertile tension between knowledge production and activism. It was only later, in line with the changes taking place in many other dimensions of social and academic life in the US and beyond, that most scholars working in the field started to lose this connection to reality and retreated into scholastic forms of representation. In this process, "the issue of relevance receded for many practitioners, and a much more 'professional' and 'disciplinary' definition of purpose came to the fore" (FLACKS, 2004, p.136). [21]

As a result, but also a precondition, of its increasing professionalization, SMS scholars gradually disconnected themselves from dialogue with social movements, ruling out the exploration of jointly defined questions and problems. This process gave way to what Alberto MELUCCI (1989, p.195) termed "the world academic market in the field of social movement research" with its gatekeepers and challengers, power relations and disciplinary closure mechanisms, and the struggles over the definition/classification of what counts as proper knowledge and valid theory. Scholarship, particularly in the Global North, became largely self-referential, framed primarily around sub-disciplinary questions and debates between and within contending theoretical paradigms (COX & FLESHER, 2009; CROTEAU, HOYNES & RYAN, 2005). Social movement scholars started speaking to and writing for other academics, producing theory that, for the most part, "converts activism into yet another deactivated intellectual product" (GREENWOOD, 2008, p.333), and that tends to be perceived by movement participants as trivial, distant, and irrelevant (BEVINGTON & DIXON, 2005; MEYER, 2005). [22]

At this point, I think that some clarification is needed. The field of SMS is an atypical academic space. There are specialized academic journals; international networks and conferences; to some extent a recognizable history/genealogy; resources and grants to undertake research; university departments and academic programs; shared (or contested) concepts, evolving paradigms, and

sophisticated approaches; and a rich body of literature on social movements past and present. However, at the same time, social movement research takes place across a multiplicity of academic (as well as non-academic) sites beyond the disciplinary borders of SMS taken as a field (COX, 2018), often showing a greater disposition to dialogue and exchange between scholars and activists, a major centrality of activists' interests and needs, and a more explicit concern for relevance. [23]

In other words, actual social movement research is widespread, and exceeds—cannot be contained within—the canon-building space of Social Movement Studies. Many social science scholars, including those involved in the ecology of engaged research methodologies that I mentioned in the previous section, work and do research with (and for) social movements, but they are unlikely to consider themselves SMS scholars in a narrow disciplinary way. [24]

This was a confusing situation for me when I initiated my academic career. I remember how, during my PhD research with activist networks in Spain, at a point when I was reading as much canonical SMS literature as possible, one of my supervisors, a prominent feminist scholar and activist working in a social anthropology department, insisted that there were better ways for me to use my time, and far more significant literature to engage with, *especially* if I intended my project to be relevant and useful for the activists I was working with. [25]

Many social movement studies scholars have emphasized the importance of ethnography in the analysis of contentious politics (AUYERO, 2006, 2021; PLOWS, 2008; SALMAN & ASSIES, 2010; SCHATZ, 2009; TILLY, 2006). However, the questions that guide SMS ethnographic research are the "What, How, and Why" (FU & SIMMONS, 2021, p.1695) of collective action. Through these questions, researchers seek to respond to the intra-disciplinary problems and debates that structure the field, and to advance or modify existing theoretical or analytical frameworks. Within this context, the issue of extra-academic relevance is secondary¹. [26]

Meanwhile, collaborative ethnographers, and engaged researchers at large, often located outside or on the margins of SMS disciplinary borders, prioritize the questions of *knowledge for what, for whom, and with whom* (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2018a, 2018b), and organize research around the problems, questions, and interests posed by their co-researchers. Certainly, engaged scholars address the *what, how, and why* dimensions of collective action, but they do so from a different angle, always in connection to their primary concern, trying to generate a

1 The lack of relevance is not the only critique made of SMS. There is a growing concern that SMS remains primarily modeled on the historical experience of collective action in the West, the post-industrial liberal democratic societies in which its dominant paradigms originated. Northern-centric approaches are ill-equipped to grasp the specificities of social movements rooted in the Global South, where colonialism and post-colonial state-formation influenced the emergence of particular forms of social mobilization (FADAE, 2017), cultures of activism, and distinct "social movement landscapes" (VON HOLDT & NAIDOO, 2019, p.170). Furthermore, the Global North constitutes the epicenter of SMS scholarship (MacSHEOIN, 2016), which fails to engage and integrate conceptual and theoretical innovations being produced by Southern scholars (ALTMANN, DEMIRHISAR & MATI, 2016).

"movement-relevant approach to theory that puts the needs of social movements at its heart" (BEVINGTON & DIXON, 2005, p.186; see also CHESTERS, 2012; HALE, 2008). [27]

As an example, I am currently involved in the Movement Learning Catalyst (MLC) project, created as a collaboration between three pan-European activist training networks—the ULEX Project, the European Community Organizing Network, and European Alternatives—, and activist scholars and researchers from the National University of Ireland Maynooth. The goal is to produce research leading to the design of a formal year-long training course, as well as open-access learning resources for activist communities, civil society organizations, and popular educators across Europe. [28]

The MLC involves extensive research on social movement learning needs, which will be developed between all the partners involved. This will include secondary data analysis; interviews and focus groups with experienced activists and educators across the continent; and a "community of inquiry" with external advisers helping us think through this project/process and contributing to shape the research itself in a dynamic way. These elements will feed into the remaining elements of the project: the elaboration of a competency framework, the knowledge and skills to be acquired by activists; a curriculum, translating those knowledge and skills into something learnable in a systematic way; resources for blended learning, working within popular, participatory, and community education frameworks; and finally, a year-long blended learning pilot course, residential and online, with 50-60 participants, which is both part of the research and also a concrete project outcome enabling practical learning. The resources produced within the MLC will be made available open-access for social movements' use. The course will offer space for activists to reflect on their own movement and its practice; training will be geared towards developing strategic thinking and the skills needed for cross-movement, transversal/intersectional, and translocal/transnational alliance building. [29]

To conclude this section, I would like to emphasize that there is no extra-situational definition of "relevance," a notion which can mean different things for different social movements and scholars. What counts as useful or relevant in any given research situation must be mutually defined, and recursively discussed, among all parties involved in a research project/process. There exists a wide diversity of ways in which scholars can contribute to social movements, from attracting funding to participating in training activities, strategic litigation, networking, and so forth. However, throughout this paper I focus on the contributions that may emerge in the process of collective analysis and knowledge co-production itself, proposing collaborative frameworks as a privileged way to address the question of relevance in social movement research. [30]

5. Key Dimensions and Challenges in Collaborative Research

I will now outline eight dimensions that, without claiming to be exhaustive, systematize the main elements/challenges/tensions which need to be considered when embarking on research collaboration. These dimensions are interconnected, they are closely intertwined in practice, and must be understood and explored in relation to each other. The aim of this section/systematization is to help scholars develop a richer and more complex analysis of collaborative research methodologies, highlighting key elements that will facilitate or hinder the co-production of knowledge with our co-researchers. [31]

Rather than conceptualizing collaboration as a programmatic ideal, I think we should pay more attention to how it takes place, or fails to take place, in and across actual research situations, exploring both their achievements and the limitations faced along the process. Thus, instead of presenting decontextualized celebratory (or derogatory) accounts of collaborative research, it is important to make explicit how some undertakings go further than others in terms of co-definition of the research project, or regarding the process of co-analysis and co-theorization; how projects manage to combine collaborative and conventional moments and techniques; the tensions caused by the diverging expectations coming from the academic field and the research collaborators; or the multiplicity of forms in which collaboration, whether successful or not, is currently being shaped in real fieldwork encounters. [32]

5.1 Collaboration, experimentation, and research as an artisanal and situated praxis

The first element that must be mentioned is that collaborative social science research is a contextual praxis, not a normative one. How does collaboration materialize in practice? How are project-related decisions made, negotiated, and rearranged between scholars and their collaborators? How can research goals be jointly defined and reformulated? What methods or techniques are being designed, tested, and implemented to facilitate collaboration? Comparing responses to these questions across collaborative projects, moving from case study description to a more analytical standpoint, we observe that a key element shared in practice is, precisely, the inclination towards methodological experimentation. These undertakings seek to engage in and respond to the particularities (tensions, challenges, and opportunities) of the diverse contexts in which they are rooted. As a result, every research situation will demand and produce its own methods. [33]

Collaborative research with social movements is an artisanal, situated, slow, messy, dynamic, and creative engagement/relationship with our partners for the co-production of knowledge. Since every project is unique, the method is never given in advance, it is assembled and reassembled in dialogue, not always smoothly, in/through the fieldwork encounter. There is therefore no room for pre-existing standardized procedures, no rule or recipe book to be generally applied as the "right" way to collaborate in research. This will allow us to see more clearly

the relative *messiness and heterogeneity of research practices* (LAW, 2004) beyond official—hygienic, reassuring, neat, coherent, sanitized—accounts of method. When it comes to specific methods, techniques, and tools to be deployed, *the research situation is sovereign* and must be understood and attended to correspondingly. [34]

Within this framework, some projects will resignify and rework/adjust existing ethnographic methods, e.g., in-depth interviews, participant observation, or focus groups, as part of the process of collaboration and knowledge co-production, often combining both conventional and experimental techniques along the process (ÁLVAREZ VEINGUER, GARCÍA & OLMOS, 2022; DIETZ & MATEOS CORTÉS, 2020). Other projects, however, innovate by creating opportunities for collaboration around ad hoc "Fieldwork Devices" (ESTALELLA & SÁNCHEZ CRIADO, 2018), from digital archives to co-analysis workshops, comics, radio soap operas, collective writing groups, critical cartographies, media labs, or other digital or physical infrastructures, to be shaped by the circumstances of each collaborative endeavor. [35]

Experimentation is central to a collaborative imagination and praxis. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that research collaboration with social movements is not a matter of creativity and innovation in method alone. What is most important in any collaborative project is to find (to adapt or invent) the methods—the relationships—that will help the actors involved *to think and work together*; that is, the techniques that will create appropriate conditions for co-analysis, co-conceptualization, and co-theorization to unfold, within the time and space of fieldwork, around jointly defined research problems and questions. [36]

5.2 On power and (a)symmetry: Towards logic and practices of co-decision

Collaborative knowledge production is built upon and rooted in relationships of shared authority and co-decision through the research process. A key goal is therefore *to disperse power across the fieldwork encounter*, to get it distributed among all the actors involved instead of keeping it concentrated primarily in the person of the academic researcher. [37]

Working and thinking together with our collaborators in jointly designed explorations implies challenging the hierarchy between "researcher" and "informant." In collaborative projects, scholars and co-researchers together define, and recursively negotiate and reassemble, what knowledge is to be produced, how, and for what purposes, as well as how its outcomes will be disseminated in various registers and for different audiences/communities. Hence fieldwork turns from being a time/space for data production, prior to and separated from the moment of analysis (an analytical step to be carried out by scholars alone), into a time/space for collective thinking, analysis, and theory co-production. [38]

Creating spaces/relations for co-decision and shared authority through the entire process means that academic researchers will have to lose/devolve/distribute a

significant share of their own control over the project; research will shift out of the hands of scholars and into the collective sphere built between scholars and co-researchers working together. As PEARCE (2008, p.18) argued,

"[c]o-production of knowledge is a less certain and controlled methodology than traditional research. This is a strength. It celebrates contingency and the unexpected, as these are indicative of a robust, sincere and democratic engagement between researcher and researched. It is not always comfortable, as planning and certainty are much more reassuring methodologies for the researcher [...] However, co-production retains the freshness of messy social reality. Researcher and the research participants embark on a journey together in which knowledge is continuously exchanged and practice developed along new lines." [39]

Academics involved in research collaboration should take this loss/redistribution of control as an opportunity rather than as a problem or a threat; shared authority and reciprocity are preconditions to substantive collaboration. Collaborative fieldwork will not prosper, regardless of our own intentions and efforts, unless research is appropriated by the social movements and/or communities we work with. As discussed above, collaboration is often an experimental, uncertain endeavor. The process of "appropriation" does not guarantee in and of itself that a project will be successful, whatever might be imagined as success in each context; but if some degree of appropriation does not take place, it will be impossible to sustain and advance collaborative proposals. [40]

This notion of appropriation may sound counterintuitive; it tends to generate strong resistance among social scientists who fear that connecting, and sometimes even subordinating, their work to the goals, interests, and demands of the "research subjects" will erode academic autonomy and analytical independence. This is a legitimate concern. However, the departure point for collaborative frameworks is precisely that shared authority, co-decision, co-analysis, and co-theorization will enrich both the social relevance and the interpretative power of our research projects. [41]

Within this approach social actors, such as the social movements I work with, participate in designing a research project that concerns them, and which they will be able to use for their own purposes, co-define its goals and methodology, and get involved in its implementation as well as in the analysis and theorization of the data produced. In this sense, the process of shared analysis and knowledge co-production will be meaningful and relevant for them, but it will also help scholars advance a richer and more complex understanding of the topic under study (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2018a; GREENWOOD, 2000). [42]

5.3 The art of decentering oneself: The role of the scholar in collaborative projects

Cultivating a relationship of shared authority, co-decision, and reciprocity across fieldwork with research partners (knowledge producers in their own right) will fundamentally transform the role of the scholar. The notion of *thinking together* around jointly defined problems seeks to capture this reality, in which the academic will move from "expert" to facilitator, translator, or other possibilities to be delimited in each research project; experts immersed in a field of experts, who learn and unlearn by accompanying their collaborators, and by being accompanied by them, in a context of dialogical reflexivity and experimental collaboration for knowledge co-production. Within this context, scholars operate as *rearguard intellectuals* (SANTOS, 2018), constantly translating and generating connections between academic and non-academic knowledges. [43]

In this sense, for collaboration to be possible and real, the role/position of *the scholar needs to be decentered*. Navigating collaborative projects, collective undertakings which are not just "ours" anymore, requires a particular disposition, attention, sensibility, imagination, ethos—a specific way of inhabiting research. It is crucial to overcome the fiction that academics are the only actors invested with the skills, knowledge, and authority—the expertise—needed for the systematic and complex analysis and representation of contemporary worlds. Thus, scholars must be willing to question their methodological and analytical automatisms, and to unlearn/undo their academic authority and privilege, in order to negotiate, modify, and—when necessary—subordinate their own goals, plans, and expectations to those of their co-researchers. [44]

For scholars trained to believe that their disciplinary/scientific knowledge is more valid and true than other types of knowledge, the idea of decentering oneself generates anxiety. It opens a space of vulnerability that the fiction of being "the expert" somehow managed to hide. However, as I mentioned above, the *appropriation* of the project by the co-researchers, together with the *decentering* on the part of the scholar, are precisely the processes that will allow for collaboration to take place in research contexts. [45]

Within collaborative projects, scholars are likely to feel out of joint. Vulnerability and anxiety are common tropes when it comes to the emotions that can arise for researchers in/through the experience of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork (BEHAR, 1997; DELLA ROCCA, 2019; MEADOW, 2018). I believe, however, that research collaboration triggers specific forms of vulnerability and anxiety, linked first and foremost to the notions and practices of co-decision, co-analysis, and co-theorization. [46]

Often, when discussing collaborative frameworks, I have encountered the idea—put forward by different groups, mostly, but not only, by less experienced scholars—of "disappearing" as researchers. This image comes up sometimes as a normative ideal, the goal to be accomplished in/through "truly" engaged research: becoming *equal* to our collaborators, being seen/considered as *just one of them*.

In other occasions, such an image emerges as the fear of losing autonomy, the unwelcome possibility that our intellectual contribution will be restrained, limited, repressed, or denied by our partners. I find both positions problematic. [47]

My argument is that the fact that scholars need to decenter themselves, does not mean that they should *disappear* as researchers. Rather, we must imagine and test situated practices of *co-presence* (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2020) together with our research collaborators. This *co-presence* will be shaped in different ways according to the characteristics of each project, generating in turn new, more creative, possibilities for collective thought and action. [48]

5.4 Scales of relevance and responsibility: Standing inside/outside academia

This dimension encourages scholars to discuss the contribution of collaborative projects inside academia, the ways in which existing knowledge advanced through conceptual and theoretical innovation, as well as outside academia, the relevance to the goals and concerns of our co-researchers. What form did *relevance* take in each project? How was it negotiated and transformed along the process? Were there any tensions/contradictions between academic and non-academic demands? What does it mean for a collaborative project to be successful, or to fail? Who should assess the quality and impact of research collaboration? [49]

Collaborative research speaks simultaneously to communities located inside and outside academia, being accountable to both contexts. Facing the diverging, sometimes contradictory, expectations and demands coming both from the academic field and from our co-researchers, including the different types of validation involved, engaged scholars usually find themselves in an awkward position. For instance, those of us doing sociological work know only too well how disciplinary closure mechanisms privilege professional sociology over other types of sociological praxis; knowledge co-production with non-academic actors is received at best with skepticism, regarded in advance as *never good enough* social science. For this reason, a more fluid dialogue and greater complicity are needed across different traditions of engaged research. Alliances, expanded communities, and kinder/safer spaces need to be built inside, and outside, academia if we aspire to affirm, create, and nurture *other knowledges and other ways of producing knowledge*. [50]

In a previous section, I provided the example of the 'Movement Learning Catalyst' project, illustrating what such safer spaces for collaboration between academic and non-academic actors (and knowledges) may look like in practice. Regarding the relevance of collaborative research to the social movements/communities we work with, I would like to emphasize again that the meanings and materializations of *relevance* cannot be defined outside each particular/concrete/situated project. There is no standardized overarching approach to relevance. Collaborative undertakings rooted in different contexts, and involving distinct actors, will generate specific responses. Moreover, what is conceived as *relevant* within a

project is likely to change as the research unfolds. The forms of relevance are to be collectively defined, negotiated, and reassembled between all the actors involved. [51]

In the work I did with PRATEC, *relevance* materialized mainly through the elaboration of a non-academic open-access publication based on my research (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2021), a material currently being used by PRATEC in workshops and other teaching and learning activities they carry out across the Andean region. I also participated, and continue participating, in many in-person and online workshops with PRATEC and the NACAs; furthermore, I have kept collaborating with them in a number of ways after the completion of my project. However, the publication mentioned above is a most important element in relation to the purpose of this article; several PRATEC members—former PRATEC presidents, Jorge ISHIZAWA and Gladys FAIFFER; and one of the founders of the organization in the 1980s, Grimaldo RENGIFO—kindly guided me through the process of translating academic results into non-academic registers. They *peer-reviewed* the whole manuscript in order to ensure that this material would be useful for non-academic audiences, in particular for community-based and civil society organizations and school teachers involved in intercultural education programs. [52]

In my project with grassroots social movement networks in Spain, the ODS activists put forward two distinct understandings and levels of relevance: on the one hand, the *research taken as a product*, the opportunity to systematize and disseminate the project findings as a text, or a group of texts, about the experience/history/memory of this political community; on the other hand, *research taken as a process*, which refers to the daily implementation of the project, the actual unfolding of collaboration. Here, the activists pointed to different elements, ranging from the reflective moment afforded by in-depth ethnographic interviews, taken as a much needed pause in the frantic rhythm/urgency of grassroots activism, to the possibility of circulating all project-related materials inside the network, so that each node could use them for its own purposes, or to the joint design and implementation of the co-analysis and co-theorization workshops that were eventually conducted across the network (ARRIBAS LOZANO, 2018a). [53]

5.5 Who wants to collaborate in research? Proposal, trust, access

To build and sustain a collaborative project/process, there must be a relation of mutual trust between the actors involved. Trust may emerge from long-term involvement or rootedness, or a solid partnership with a network, organization, or community (RAPPAPORT, 2008). Trust can also be based and built upon a sense of shared objectives, and a common or convergent agenda, between scholars and co-researchers. However, these two elements, long-term relationships and a shared agenda, are not always the starting point for our projects. [54]

How did our collaborative project begin? Who took the initiative to set up collaboration in research? Did scholars first approach the social movement or community, or was it the other way around? Schematically, it can be said that there are four models which tend to overlap and become more complex in practice, in/through which collaboration is currently being put to work in research. [55]

First there are non-academic actors who, as part of their own projects and struggles, autonomously conduct research on their own terms, knowledge-practices of various types, and who invite a scholar (or group of scholars) they already know/trust to work with them around a particular problem or question. The social movement or community actors take the lead, inviting the academic researcher to work with them—to think together—in a project/process that emerges directly connected to their needs and goals. Scholars will become immersed in a reflexive endeavor that was already in progress, contributing their knowledge and skills to a collective undertaking. In other words, academic researchers put themselves at the service of the social movement/community within a context of critical dialogue, shared authority, and joint analysis and theorization. To a great extent, this is the ideal collaborative situation. [56]

Second, the initiative can come from scholars rooted in a social movement or community, who decide to carry out a research project useful to their partners' organizational efforts. Though the idea comes from the academic researcher, every aspect of the project will be negotiated and agreed, jointly designed, and implemented together with the non-academic actors. In this sense, knowledge co-production will be easier when scholars have "an organic relationship, prior histories, and prior trust" with the co-researchers (PEARCE, 2008, p.19). [57]

Third, scholars approach social movements or communities with the intention of undertaking a conventional/traditional project, and the non-academic actors "appropriate" the project and force, or invite, the scholar to articulate a more collaborative process that might be relevant and beneficial for their own organizational purposes. In this case, projects will not progress unless the scholars are willing to decenter themselves and to connect their goals to those of the non-academic actors (ESTALELLA & SÁNCHEZ CRIADO, 2020). This is an increasingly common situation; today, those actors usually conceived as "research subjects" expect, and explicitly demand, greater control over the purpose, the process, and the products of research. [58]

Fourth, scholars who are not rooted in, and have little (if any) previous relation with a social movement or community, approach non-academic actors with a more or less elaborate proposal to carry out a collaborative research project. In this scenario, the relationships and trust required for knowledge co-production must be built from scratch. Here, the scholar needs to convince the social movement or community to "appropriate" a project that is not initially connected to—and therefore, does not respond to—their organizational goals, needs or concerns. Along these lines, Dani Wadada NABUDERE has pointed to the fact that many organizations, social movements, and communities develop a deep mistrust, a sort of *research fatigue* because,

"[t]hey had seen researchers come and go while their own conditions had steadily worsened. This suggested to them, with some justification, that the researchers were part of their problem. To what extent could 'activist researchers' be trusted to be different from earlier researchers who had established a relationship of domination over them and had expropriated their knowledge?" (2008, p.79) [59]

Is it possible *to work and think together* when there is no prior relationship of mutual trust, when scholars are not rooted in, or do not share objectives with, the communities with which they want to do research? Can collaboration be activated—can a "collaborative turn" take place—in research situations in which this was not initially a shared purpose, horizon, imagination? [60]

5.6 On representation: Who eventually gets to write about whom?

Explorations in knowledge co-production often trigger experimentation in writing, authorship, and dissemination, bringing forth a multiplicity of creative arrangements, in a variety of genres, registers, and channels/media, directed to distinct audiences inside and outside academia, and grounded in the specific characteristics of each research situation. [61]

Collaboration between academic and non-academic actors—our co-researchers—inspires and prompts a plurality of ways of "writing" ethnography beyond standard scholarly articles or monographs. Depending on the specific goals of a project, research findings (either in a final version, or as a work in progress, a prototype) may translate into audio-visual materials, radio programs, popular theater, workshops, training programs, community maps and/or calendars, critical cartographies, music, photographs and exhibitions, institutional innovations, graphic stories, media labs, communal museums, public policy recommendations, collective archives, murals, poetry, curriculum materials and other educational resources, and so forth. It is noteworthy that most of these examples come from the research projects included in the volume mentioned previously (ÁLVAREZ VEINGUER et al., 2020). [62]

This multiplicity of ways of "writing" research highlights the artisanal, situated, and dialogical dimension of collaborative undertakings, bringing together collective imagination, thought and action. Whereas academic systems of knowledge production turn knowledge into a form of "property" owned by the researcher and, most often, by the *publishing* industry, in collaborative projects the actors involved will determine not only what knowledge is to be produced, but also what knowledge can (or cannot) be disseminated and used, by whom, for what purposes, and how (FALS BORDA & RAHMAN, 1991; NABUDERE, 2008). [63]

In collaborative research, the elaboration of these non-academic products is conceived as a key part of the process/relationship of knowledge production. It is not simply a matter of reporting or devolving the research results in more creative or accessible ways. Rather, the collective thinking and doing that takes place, for instance in/through defining the roles and the plot in a graphic story or a theater play, in systematizing the information to be included in a community map or

calendar, or in navigating together the process of taking and selecting the pictures for an exhibition, are understood as a fundamental dimension of research (VASCO URIBE, 2011). [64]

It is generally understood, and agreed upon as part of the process, that any collaborative research will generate different outcomes aimed at different contexts. Not every research outcome can be expected to be useful for all the actors involved. In my own experience, my academic articles were of little use to the activists I worked with. In turn, these activists used the research materials (i.e., the transcriptions of interviews and co-analysis workshops) for their own purposes, in ways and situations in which I was not involved at all, and that cannot be easily translated into academic logic. However, there are also projects in which the main academic outcome is itself collaboratively created. This is the case of monographs where scholars and co-researchers work together intertwining different contributions, experiences, voices and formats, giving rise to polyphonic representations that address both academic and non-academic audiences (FIELD, 2008; LASSITER et al., 2020). [65]

5.7 Diverging temporalities: The art of weaving and sustaining collaboration

This dimension is almost self-explanatory; it does not need much elaboration, yet it is crucial. It poses a twofold challenge. On the one hand, collaborative research needs time. It demands a strong commitment to long-term dialogue that is not always possible for scholars (RAPPAPORT, 2008)—the slow unfolding of collaboration fits uneasily into the accelerated pace of neoliberal academia and funding agencies. Time is needed to build a relationship of trust and complicity among the actors involved; to co-define the purpose and the structure of the project; to nurture and sustain dialogue and collaboration at every step of the process; to listen carefully to each other, and to learn to think and work together; to co-create the methods to be implemented, and to reassess and modify them when necessary; to adjust to unexpected biographical or contextual/societal events; to craft the moment and rhythm of co-analysis and co-theorization; to negotiate the expected outcomes, and to decide how best to present and disseminate them; to digest potential conflicts that may arise, and to celebrate those occasions when everything turns out well. [66]

Research collaboration cannot be rushed. This is a process-oriented, artisanal, experimental, non-linear, slow social science. It takes time for collaboration to unfold properly, a time that cannot be defined or controlled in advance. For this reason, not all projects can be collaborative; we must explain to our students, and sometimes also to our colleagues, that if they only have six months to undertake a project, then collaboration is not the right choice—no matter how enthusiastic they might feel about it. [67]

The point that I am trying to make here is not that longer periods of time will allow for better, more intense collaboration. Rather, my argument is that the timeline of collaborative projects cannot be determined in advance. In most approaches to qualitative research, scholars hold a great deal of control over the whole project

design, including the definition of deadlines for planned activities and expected outcomes. Thus, within the limits set by the research funding agencies, scholars get to decide what to do and when to do it. There is always room for minor adjustments along the way, but it takes a major contingency—for instance, a global pandemic—for research plans and timelines to be modified in any substantive manner. [68]

Conversely, within collaborative frameworks, due to the characteristics detailed throughout this article, academics will not be able to unilaterally predefine the timeline, the core activities, or the expected outcomes of a project. These elements—provided that collaboration is taken seriously—have to be collectively defined along the research process. Also, the fact that every dimension of a project is open to further assessment, negotiation, and reshaping between all the actors involved, means that research plans can, and surely will, undergo substantive changes along the way—modifying existing provisional timelines. As a consequence, it is never clear when collaboration will end. Thus, scholars involved in collaborative ethnography must often find a way to sustain research collaboration, and continue working together with the co-researchers, once external funding has stopped (ÁLVAREZ VEINGUER et al., 2022). [69]

On the other hand, a second challenge concerning the link between time and collaborative research is the fact that academic and non-academic actors face, and need to respond to, their own different, often divergent, time demands and constraints. For instance, working with social movements, there is often a mismatch between the urgency of activism, the need to respond immediately to rapid changes in a given situation (evictions, the passing of a law, deportations, police violence; or, more optimistically, the unexpected outburst of a wave of mobilization and protest), and the slower, hesitant pace of academic research, collaborative or otherwise. Frequently, social movements would like to see results much faster than what scholarly research can yield. Conversely, the undisciplined nature of social movements is often a concern for scholars when it comes to research planning and resource management, deadlines set by funding agencies, or university internal guidelines, [70]

5.8 Is it possible to collaborate with every kind of actor/group/community?

According to Joanne RAPPAPORT (2008), good collaborative research largely depends on three factors. I have already mentioned two of them: a degree of mutual trust between the actors, and the researcher's commitment to long-term dialogue. On top of these, following RAPPAPORT, research collaboration demands a group of interlocutors who can, and who are willing to, take the lead in the co-analysis and co-theorization process. [71]

Thus, it will be easier to articulate collaborative relationships when we work with subjects that are constituted as a group/organization prior to the research, and when these actors operate (at least, to some extent) as reflexive/epistemic communities, collectively producing knowledge based on their own experience and practice. Although this is not always the case, because different actors have

distinct relations to knowledge, many contemporary social movements understand and conduct research, broadly conceived, as a key element of their praxis, using approaches and tools which resemble, and creatively adjust, those of social science scholars. They exercise what HOLMES and MARCUS (2008, p.82) termed as "para-ethnography," rich and critical registers, descriptions, and explanations of their own worlds and organizational cultures. [72]

This was the case in the research projects I undertook with urban social movement networks in Spain, and with Andean and Amazonian community-based organizations in Peru. Both actors, despite their many differences, understood collective reflection and analysis, research, and the production and dissemination of knowledge, as key elements of their praxis. They generate knowledge that 1. is based upon their own experience, lives, and struggles; 2. is the product of collective doing, thinking, and learning; and 3. seeks to open new possibilities for thought and action, virtuous cycles between practice and theory to further transform/recreate praxis. Working with this kind of actors, who autonomously advance their own knowledge-practices, may facilitate the process of *thinking together*, as well as the *collaborative analytics* that characterize this framework. [73]

Nevertheless, research collaboration can also thrive in other contexts, and with very different actors. For instance, Angel L. LARA (2018) worked with Mexican women who migrated to New York in a collaborative ethnography that revolved around the collective creation of a radio soap. These women did not constitute a group before the project, and as a result, they were not a reflexive/epistemic community either; however, through fictional storytelling, the scholar and the co-researchers have been able to explore, analyze, and subvert, mainstream representations of Mexican female migration in United States. Here, the research process itself created both the group and the possibility for thinking together—a situation which presented its own challenges with regard to building and sustaining collaboration. As I emphasized throughout this article, each project is unique, and must be imagined and engaged accordingly. [74]

6. Conclusion

Not all research has to be collaborative; different kinds of knowledge, and different approaches to knowledge production are relevant for certain circumstances, and not for others. The various dimensions presented in this article are chosen, precisely, to facilitate an empirically grounded, non-normative, and non-dogmatic debate/dialogue on the challenges and opportunities of research collaboration. [75]

For this purpose, I have shared my own research experience, in conversation with other studies, highlighting several elements that may facilitate or hinder collaboration in research, and that must be taken into account by those scholars interested in exploring collaborative frameworks: questions of writing and representation; the role of the scholar in collaborative projects; the experimental and contextual ethos regarding methods and outcomes; the significance of time;

elements of power, shared authority and co-decision in/through research; the tension between academic and extra-academic relevance; the characteristics of the actors we work with, and their connection, or lack of it, to knowledge production; the connection between trust, access and collaboration; or dialogue and cross-fertilization among traditions of engaged research. Exploring these dimensions, and the relations between them will help scholars transform their ethnographic imaginations and practices—learning with and from other social actors. [76]

Social scientists need to rethink *what for, how, for whom, and with whom* we do research. My argument is that a collaborative framework/horizon is worth exploring if we aspire to create *social movement research that might matter* beyond academic sites and communities (MEYER, 2005). Exercising this imagination/sensibility and connecting research to existing collective struggles will not only enhance the "political" relevance of academic work. The long-term dialogical engagement implied in collaborative undertakings will also advance scholarly knowledge in significant, often unexpected, ways. Let us not forget that the aim is to generate knowledge that will prove to be relevant for both the scholar and our research partners. These different elements are combined within the framework of collaborative research: an open-ended process, always in the making, in which the co-production of knowledge will inform new action that will, in turn, activate new waves of collective analysis, novel questions and research agendas. [77]

The fact that we do not impose disciplinary categories and questions on our collaborators, but instead we accompany them—we *think and work with them*—as they create, deploy, and transform their own maps, concepts, and analyses, as they collectively assess and redefine their own practices, will allow us to develop a more complex understanding of dimensions of contemporary collective action that would otherwise remain unobserved. We will be immersed in the time and space, the messy and heterogeneous texture and rhythm of *collective action in the making*, its process of formation and change, its continuities and discontinuities. Moreover—and this is a distinctive contribution of research collaboration—we will be able to generate conceptual and theoretical work of a completely different order through co-analysis and co-theorization in fieldwork. We will not simply see how social movements "pose new problems and questions, and invent and test new answers" (MELUCCI, 1989, p.208). We will be part of this very same process. [78]

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Citation

Arribas Lozano, Alberto (2022). Collaborative ethnography with social movements: Key dimensions and challenges [78 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 23(3), Art. 13, <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-23.3.3908>.